

A Feast in Carthage: Testing the Limits of ‘Secularity’ in Late Antiquity*

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ABSTRACT

A now conventional model, developed by Robert Markus, sees late Roman cities as fundamentally secular landscapes. Focusing on Augustine’s sermon against a feast of the genius of Carthage (Sermo 62), this article argues that narratives of ‘secularity’ have neglected pagans’ own attitudes and the circumstances that drove ordinary Christians’ participation in civic rites. Behind Augustine’s charges of ‘idolatry’ lay the religious convictions of the feast’s non-Christian sponsors and behind their expectations of Christian attendance lay the recent destruction of a pagan shrine on church property. For Augustine’s listeners to construe the feast as religiously irrelevant was an expression not of routine social solidarity, but of fear before powerful patrons. What was ‘secular’ was open to doubt and negotiation, both here and in empire-wide celebrations such as the Kalends of January; the boundary between the ‘pagan’ and the ‘secular’ can be located only with careful attention to the diversity of opinions about each particular rite.

Keywords: secularity; Roman religion; Carthage; Augustine; paganism; religious conflict; religious identity

I THE LIMITS OF RELIGION: ROBERT MARKUS’ CONCEPT OF THE ‘SECULAR’

In a series of publications, Robert Markus painted the late Roman city as a basically ‘secular’ landscape, in which pagans and Christians shared customs, festivals and even what might once have been seen as cults.¹ As he put it in *The End of Ancient Christianity*:

Around 350 very little separated a Christian from his pagan counterpart in Roman society. Dancing, rowdy celebrations, especially those connected with cemeteries, the theatre, games, resorting to baths, a variety of magical practices and the like, often aroused suspicion and provoked denunciation by bishops; but they were part of that vast ‘shared territory’ which Christians inherited from the pagan past.²

After the emperors had banned sacrifices, civic festivals remained pagan only in the eyes of bishops. The reality, revealed in occasional acknowledgements in otherwise rigorist sermons, is that there was no substantial religious content to the festivals, which the

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¹ Ideas present *in nuce* in Markus 1985, elaborated in 1990; with revisions in 2006; 2010.

² Markus 1990: 27–8.

bishops were endeavouring to ‘paganise’.³ The two centuries from Augustine to Gregory the Great saw the expansion of a specifically Christian sacred and concomitant ‘drainage of secularity’ from both Christian discourse and the surrounding world.⁴

Markus’ vision of a ‘secular’ late Antiquity has exercised great influence, not least through its elaboration by Claude Lepelley and by Peter Brown, whose early work had deeply influenced Markus.⁵ By the 380s, pagan devotion had disappeared from official inscriptions erected in African cities, but Christianity remained totally absent. These trends seemed to Lepelley to confirm the religious neutrality of civic culture.⁶ Brown, in turn, has referred to the ‘massive middle ground that could hold the hearts of pagans and Christians alike. ... Sacrifice was not central to all pagan rituals ... In a late Roman city ... the venerable town hall, the Forum, the circus, and the triumphal avenues that passed beneath ancient arches could be the scene of ceremonial occasions quite as heavy with the thrill of worship as was any Christian basilica.’⁷

Framed against proper Christian belief or practice, the idea of ‘secularity’ can both include and exclude aspects of traditional, polytheistic religion. Like ‘paganism’ itself, the ‘secular’ is, in any of its varying formulations, a modern concept that imperfectly systematises the often inchoate ways in which ancient Christians thought and talked about human beings and the world they inhabited.⁸ For Augustine, in whom Markus found both a critic of contemporary mores and a proponent of a relatively broadminded Christian ideal, the *saeculum* was ‘the world’, often in the negative sense of 1 John 2:15 or James 4:4, or the present ‘age’.⁹ Even a career ‘in the world’, though allowed to Christians, might not be fully innocent; thus, one of Augustine’s close colleagues describes a young man, who had been working on the proconsul’s legal staff, as ‘sinking in the world’ before he entered the monastery.¹⁰ Though it did not bear connotations of the worship of ‘pagan’ gods, the *saeculum* was not a neutral sphere shared by pagans and Christians (as in *The End of Ancient Christianity*) or the present state of ‘mixture’ of the earthly and heavenly cities (as in Markus’ earlier, equally influential monograph, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine*).¹¹ For Augustine, it was all that belonged to this world, and not the service of God. ‘Secular’ is, however, also an empirical description of a late Roman society in which traditional cult had, by

³ Markus 1997: 39, ‘De cette façon on paganisa une grande partie de ce qu’on n’avait pas contesté au paravant’ (‘In this fashion, they paganised a great part of that which had not hitherto been contested.’) Cf. recently Grig 2017: 245, who points to Peter Chrysologus, *Serm.* 155.5 (CCSL 24B: 964), ‘Sed dicit aliquis: non sunt haec sacrilegiorum studia, uota sunt haec iocorum’ (‘But someone says, “These are expressions not of zeal for sacrifice, but of a desire for good times.”’)

⁴ Markus 1990: 226.

⁵ Markus 1990: 27 n. 1, citing Brown 1961 as ‘a pioneering study to which I owe much’; the book was dedicated ‘To Peter Brown ὡς διδασκαλῶ’. Brown 2001 voices reciprocal appreciation. For general overviews of ‘secularity’ informed by recent scholarship, see Lim 2009 and the introduction to Rebillard and Sotinel 2010: 1–14.

⁶ Lepelley 2002b; cf. 2009, a detailed survey of the epigraphic evidence.

⁷ Brown 2012: 103. On the differences between Brown’s conception (in Brown 1995: 1–26, changed only in nuances in Brown 2012) and Markus’, see the reflections of Rebillard 2013b: 10–11. For another perspective highlighting the nuances of Markus’ ‘secular’, this time by comparison with Cameron 2011, see Cooper 2014: 230–1.

⁸ On modern systematisation of ‘paganism’ and its ancient antecedents, see Gassman 2020: 10–12, 76–106, Van Nuffelen 2011.

⁹ See Griffiths 2012: 33–4, and especially Van Oort 1991: 151–3 on the disjunction between Markus’ ‘secular’ and Augustine’s *saeculum*.

¹⁰ Evodius of Uzalis, *ap. August., Ep.* 158.1 (CSEL 44: 488), ‘hunc iam in saeculo mergentem – nam scholastico proconsulis excipiebat – per meam eruit deus humilitatem’ (‘God rescued this fellow, when he was already sinking in the world – for he was making excerpts for the proconsul’s lawyer – through my humble person’); on the licitness of a public career, see August., *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 61.8 (CCSL 39: 778).

¹¹ Markus 1988: 69–71 (first edition 1970). In the crucial book, *De civ. D.* 19, Augustine uses *saeculum* to refer only to the present (evil) or the future (blessed) ‘age’.

the early fifth century, been extensively curtailed.¹² To study the ‘secular’ is thus to get at real social changes through the thinking of late antique authors who understood them in different terms.

In this paper, I suggest that Markus and his successors have drawn the sphere of the ‘secular’ too widely and too starkly. One consequence has been a relative neglect for the attitudes of convinced non-Christians and for the fears and ambitions that could shape Christians’ approaches to civic tradition. As Markus recognised in one of his last articles, his concept of ‘secularity’, which had taken on subtly different nuances over the years, was coherent from ‘the Christian and perhaps the Jewish perspectives’, but not necessarily from those of others, such as ancient polytheists.¹³ There were, after all, people who wanted to maintain the worship of the gods despite imperial hostility, and these, the remaining pagans, might, as Markus once remarked, still have taken part in ‘festivities to express their own religious loyalties through them’.¹⁴

To point out this gap is not simply to suggest, with Claire Sotinel, that a ‘neutral’ civic space could be filled with different meanings by different actors.¹⁵ It is to challenge a growing body of scholarship that has seen the ‘pagans’ of Christian preaching and apologetic as rhetorical constructs, mirrors for Christian self-definition and tools by which to denigrate diverse local traditions and ordinary, but in fact Christian, behaviour.¹⁶ If (as Markus thought) there was nothing substantively ‘pagan’ about civic life, we can never be sure whether a reference to a thing or person as ‘pagan’ was not, in fact, a slur against Christians who deviated from their bishops’ expectations. To deal with every aspect of a vast and ramifying scholarly literature would be impossible.¹⁷ A question nonetheless remains, even when one has called the language of the ‘secular’ into doubt: where did Augustine, or his interlocutors, put the boundary between pagan religion (‘idolatry’) and mere ‘worldliness’, and what do their perceptions tell us about the cultural meaning of civic rites in a Christianising Roman Empire? As I will argue through a targeted study of an Augustinian sermon, a festival that can appear, at first glance, to have been unproblematically ‘secular’ could still form a part of pagans’ own inherited worship, of what they themselves saw as the traditional rites of their city. To define proper Christian behaviour was at least sometimes, therefore, to demarcate it from a living, distinctively traditionalist alternative.

II ‘IT’S NOT A GOD, BECAUSE IT’S THE GENIUS OF CARTHAGE’

In a sermon delivered before a feast of the genius of Carthage, Augustine gives his most sustained homiletic treatment of the dangers of civic ‘idolatry’.¹⁸ He also sketches a

¹² Bradbury 1995 and Cameron 2011: 65–7 focus too narrowly on blood sacrifice (cf. Schultz 2016), yet they do show real changes in inherited custom.

¹³ Markus 2010: 357. Perhaps his very last: the only later work listed by *L’Année philologique* is Damien Kempf’s French translation of *The End of Ancient Christianity*, published by the Presses universitaires de Lyon in 2012. The same article confesses, at 357 n. 12, to never quite ‘arriving at a satisfactory formulation’, even in Markus 2006.

¹⁴ Markus 1990: 115.

¹⁵ Sotinel 2010: 322.

¹⁶ Recent examples from quite different perspectives in Kahlos 2020: 92–104, Frankfurter 2018: 7–15; cf., for a comment on Markus’ ideas, Soler 2010: 274 n. 4.

¹⁷ For a brief but more general discussion, see Gassman 2020: 5–13, which adumbrates some of the points developed here. Kelly 2015 surveys Augustine’s preaching on pagans.

¹⁸ As I explain below, Augustine in fact said ‘genium’, not ‘genius’, in this sermon, for reasons now obscure. To write *genium* would be pedantic, as the neuter holds no obvious significance, but *genius* (in italics) comes too close to implying that that form is to be found in the Latin of *Serm.* 62. I compromise by ordinarily writing ‘genius’ in Roman type.

layman's perspective that seems, at first glance, to approximate to the 'secularity' Markus thought typical of ordinary Christians. Placed in April 399, just after an imperial ban on idolatry at Carthage, *Sermo* 62 stood at a vital juncture in Markus' narrative of changing Christian attitudes toward the secular.¹⁹ 'A masterpiece of crowd management', in which Augustine defused mounting tensions within the congregation, it marked the point at which Augustine began (or so Markus thought) to take a newly hard line against festivals he had once tolerated.²⁰ Denouncing a feast that had 'lost most of its religious associations',²¹ the sermon showed Augustine, who had once articulated something near to Markus' 'secular' regard for civic life, both acknowledging the 'secular' mentality of many Christians and turning toward a lastingly rigorist attitude.

The narrative is compelling, but does not withstand scrutiny of the underlying chronology or of the sermon's content. The dating to April 399 is little more than an educated guess. Scholars have ordinarily put *Sermo* 62 in 398 or 399, depending on whether they think it must predate or soon follow the arrival of the imperial *comites* Gaudentius and Jovius in Carthage on 19 March 399 to 'overthrow the temples and break the images'.²² Augustine, however, only insinuates in passing that sacrificing might take place during the feast,²³ and, though cult-images were supposed to be removed after 399 and temples closed, he acknowledges that the genius could be considered a civic 'ornament'.²⁴ That could have spared the image of the Carthaginian genius from destruction, since the emperors approved of statues' 'ornamental' quality and were favourable to feasts.²⁵ The concluding sections presuppose landholders' control over shrines on their own estates; a plausible, but not a certain, *terminus ante quem* is thus a law, posted in Carthage on 5 June 408, that commanded every altar to be destroyed.²⁶

Even more importantly, the sermon is unrepresentative of Augustine's preaching, before or after 399 (some 800 sermons in total, though still only a fraction of those preached).²⁷ Though Augustine often condemns as demonic or idolatrous the consultation of diviners, astrologers and other magical specialists, he still distinguishes such acts from the worship of idols in pagan temples.²⁸ They may all be idolatrous, but they do not present exactly the same problem. Civic festivals, by contrast, he may call 'pagan' or criticise for their worldliness, but (as we will see in a few particularly revealing examples below) he almost never suggests that they are meant to honour pagan gods.²⁹ Even in a sermon on John, for example, where he warns against participation in a traditional rite whose focus on blood bears (to him) a suspicious resemblance to Christian teaching on Christ,

¹⁹ Text at CCSL 41Aa: 296–314.

²⁰ Markus 1990: 112–14.

²¹ Markus 1990: 131 (comparing the Lupercalia, as celebrated in Gelasius' Rome, with the feast. See now McLynn 2008 on this later rite).

²² *De civ. D.* 18.54 (CCSL 48: 655). Before the new measures: Kunzelmann 1931, 493–4; also Franz Wehreich in CSEL 43: vi. The early dating has recently been revived, with new arguments, by Rebillard 2013c; 2013d rightly questions the scope of the *comites*' actions. Arguing for 399: Perler 1969: 225–6; La Bonnardière 1965: 162–3; cf. B. Coppieters 't Wallant, L. De Coninck and R. Demeulenaere in CCSL 41Aa: 292–4.

²³ Augustine speaks only of 'wanting' to sacrifice ('ut non tantum ibi manducare sed et sacrificare desideret', *Serm.* 62.7), and he could make balder insinuations as late as 408 ('cum his uictimas immolant', *Ep.* 91.5 (CCSL 31A: 156)). I thus doubt, *pace* Rebillard 2013c: 61, that the reference points to a date before 399.

²⁴ *Cod. Theod.* 16.10.18; *Serm.* 62.10.

²⁵ Lepelley 1994; *Cod. Theod.* 16.10.17.

²⁶ *Constitutiones Sirmondianae* 12, excerpted in *Cod. Theod.* 16.10.19.

²⁷ Drobner 2012: 98–9 estimates loss of around 90 per cent of the sermons delivered. For those on pagans, see esp. Kelly 2015.

²⁸ See esp. August., *In Evang. Iohan.* 6.17 (CCSL 36: 62), *De doctrina christiana* 2.20.30, 23.36 (CCSL 32: 54, 58–9). For a survey of Augustine's condemnations of magic and its practitioners, see Dolbeau 2003.

²⁹ This rule has held true even after the discovery of several new or expanded sermons, the most noteworthy gathered in Dolbeau 1996.

his chief worry is about divination and magical cures.³⁰ In *Sermo* 62, by contrast, he frames the feast – and only the feast – as an act of worship for a pagan divinity.

Sermo 62 was the second element in a homiletic campaign of at least two parts. Augustine had come from Hippo Regius to Carthage and preached at the Mappalia, the church located at the burial-site of St Cyprian.³¹ Evidently a blast against idolatry, this sermon, now lost, had centred on a text that he quotes, with imprecision, from Deuteronomy: *When the land has been given into your power, you will destroy their altars, cut down their groves and break up all their epitaphs.*³² Later, in another church at which some of the same congregants were present, he delivered *Sermo* 62, which, though it began with what seems a routine exhortation to humility (*Sermo* 62.1–6), turned soon to idolatry. Some of the Christians of Carthage have been invited to attend a feast in honour of the city's genius, and Augustine is intent to dissuade them (*Sermo* 62.7–16). This, he warns his listeners, is what St Paul had in mind when he warned against 'reclining at an idol' in 1 Cor. 8:10–11. In a fictive dialogue, Augustine rebuts the arguments that might encourage Christians to attend, above all, that they are only trying to please their superiors and do not mean to worship anything. Finally, he turns, in a sudden about-face, to pagan anxieties over Christian hostility toward their cult-images, citing the Deuteronomic text on which he had preached at the Mappalia and warning the congregation against destroying the idols of those who have not yet converted (*Sermo* 62.17–18). Now, he reveals that the church of Carthage had, in fact, destroyed a shrine on a recently donated estate, unnerving local pagans.

The line of argument that Augustine's sermon appears to be following thus shifts twice. The first shift is smoothly orchestrated, the second abrupt. Similar manoeuvres occur in other sermons that blend topical exhortation with devotional and theological edification. It was, perhaps, an attempt to conciliate an audience before hard words, but also a mark of Augustine's improvisational method.³³ Augustine's listeners, aware of local politics, might have anticipated both shifts. To the modern reader, the second, in particular, is startling. I will thus track the sermon's flow until section 16, the conclusion of Augustine's exhortation not to attend the feast, before discussing the political and cultural background, to which the final two sections offer important clues.

For the first third of the sermon (62.1–6), Augustine expounds the intertwined needs to have humility and a heart receptive to Christ. Neither his opening words ('We heard, when the Gospel was read, that our faith is praised in humility') nor the day's text – Matt. 8:5–13, the pericope of the centurion and his servant, to which Augustine adds the parallel Luke 7:1–10 and surrounding passages – hints at the feast or the problem of idolatry.³⁴ They do, however, introduce the theme of proper *potestas*, which will recur throughout the sermon, and allow Augustine to introduce an idea programmatic for his exhortation against idolatry: only those who have made proper room for Christ, by humble submission to him, will be saved. In the centurion and the woman with the flow of

³⁰ *In Evang. Iohan.* 7.6–7 (CCSL 36: 69–71); discussion in Sanzo 2017.

³¹ For which, see Ennabli 1997: 21–4.

³² The sermon is mentioned at *Serm.* 62.17. The text, 'cum data uobis fuerit terra in potestatem, aras eorum destruetis, lucos eorum comminuetis et omnes titulos eorum confringetis', is a loose blending of Deut. 7:1–2 (quoted more accurately at *Quaestiones in Heptateuchum* 6.21.2 (CCSL 33: 325–6)) and a shortened and imprecise quotation of Deut. 7:5 (cf. the identical Ex. 34:13, quoted more accurately at *Serm.* Dolbeau 24.11 (= *Serm.* 360A.11 (Dolbeau 1991: 52–2)). In *potestatem*, which Augustine repeats for emphasis, represents *in manus*, as at *Locutiones in Heptateuchum* 1.145 (CCSL 33: 395). *Titulos*, which I have rendered 'epitaphs', represents *στήλας* in the Septuagint, properly 'pillars' (Muraoka 2002: 523, s.v. *στήλη*).

³³ For which, see Harmless 2012. Cf. *Serm.* Denis 17 (= *Serm.* 301A (*Misc. Ag.* 1: 81–9)), discussed below, or 302 (*PL* 38: 1385–93), which moves from the contrast between love of the earthly life and of eternal life to the violent murder of a corrupt local official (Magalhães de Oliveira 2004).

³⁴ *Serm.* 62.1. The only Gospel passage in this sermon not from Luke 7–9 or Matt. 8–9 is Luke 19:1–10, the story of Zacchaeus.

blood, who was healed when she touched the fringe of Christ's garment (Luke 8:43–8; cf. Matt. 9:19–22), Augustine finds a type of the gentile church. He also marks another, more troubling divide. 'For the faith of the few touches it [that is, Christ's body], the crowd of the many presses it. That the body of Christ is the church, its sons, so to speak, you have heard and know; and, if you will, you yourselves are they.'³⁵ Augustine's listeners are the gentile church, those summoned 'from east and west' to the table of Abraham, but they must guard their humility and will to obey God.³⁶

'Pay attention therefore, brothers!' Augustine says.³⁷ To touch the fringe and be healed – from the 'flux', that is, 'of carnal pleasures' – is to heed the words of 'the newest and least' of apostles: *For if someone sees him, who has knowledge, reclining at an idol, will his conscience, since it is infirm, not be built up for eating things sacrificed to idols? And, brother, the infirm, for whom Christ died, will perish in your knowledge* (1 Cor. 8:10–11). In the words of Paul, Augustine finds a starkly literal, present-day referent, as he turns at last to the feast of the genius. 'How', asks Augustine, 'do you think that men can be deceived by images, which they think are honoured by Christians? But, says someone, "God knows my heart."' It is the answer one would expect, after Augustine's preparation, and, of course, he has a reply: 'But your brother does not know your heart!' The danger, he warns, is grave, as the 'infirm' brother will be led to want 'not just to eat there, but also to sacrifice'.³⁸ Those who fail to heed Augustine's words and, after reclining at an idol, return to the church, will destroy the faith of their fellow Christians. "But I am afraid", you will say, "to offend a superior", a *maior*.³⁹ Augustine approves the principle: 'Certainly, do not offend a superior; this rule is laid on you.' But, he says, one must consider the hierarchy of superiors. Your parents are your first *maiores*, but God is still greater, and so, even, is your *patria*. He hints, therefore, at the feast's purpose – celebration of the greatness of the city of Carthage – but shies away before naming it.

The danger, Augustine suggests, is not just to fellow Christians. 'We want the remaining pagans to be gathered up; you are stones in their path; wishing to come, they stumble and go back. After all, they say in their hearts: "Why should we leave behind our gods, whom the Christians themselves worship with us?"'⁴⁰ But, Augustine acknowledges, his listeners are not actually worshipping a pagan divinity. "Far be it from me", Augustine imagines one saying, "to worship the gods of the nations. I know, I understand, I believe."⁴¹ Yet, Augustine answers again, the 'infirm' person does not. Before, the *infirmus* was the feast-goer's Christian *frater*. Now, Augustine applies the word to the pagans who would, absent the heedlessness of the Christian listeners, be converted. The weak would-be Christian and the weak Christian blend together, in Augustine's rhetoric as for a long tradition of scholarship that has sought to explain the behaviour of half-converted pagans or semi-pagan Christians, or whichever categories seem most apt.⁴²

Having blurred the lines, Augustine now draws them more sharply again: 'Do you dare to deny that Christ is God? Do you learn anything else, when you recline at an idol? Their teaching does not admit the teaching of Christ. Ask where you have learned that Christ is

³⁵ *Serm.* 62.5.

³⁶ *Serm.* 62.6.

³⁷ *Serm.* 62.7.

³⁸ *Serm.* 62.7, 'ut non tantum ibi manducare sed et sacrificare desiderent'.

³⁹ *Serm.* 62.8, "Sed timeo", inquires, "ne offendam maiorem." For this sense of *maior*, *TLL*, s.v. *magnus*, 8:131.62–132.19; none of the evidence collected suggests reference to a more precise office.

⁴⁰ *Serm.* 62.9. For the sentiment, cf. *Serm.* Dolbeau 25.28 (= *Serm.* 360B.28 (Dolbeau 1991: 77)).

⁴¹ *Serm.* 62.9, "Absit a me", inquit, "ut ego deos gentium colam! Noui, intellego, credo." The final words may belong instead to Augustine's own voice, as Rebillard 2013e: 139 n. 195 suggests.

⁴² Guignebert 1923 is foundational; see also Bonner 1984, and other permutations in Kahlos 2007: 31 ('*incerti*', a concept cast into doubt by Kahlos 2020: 99–100; see also the criticisms of Rebillard 2012: 94–5 and Cameron 2011: 176–7).

not God: pagans are accustomed to say this.’ The feast-goers will, Augustine asserts, hear their fellow attendees talking about idols and questioning Christ’s deity, in a scene not unlike the dinner-party depicted in the famous letter sent, after Alaric’s sack of Rome, by the pagan aristocrat Volusianus to Augustine. There, a nameless friend questioned whether Christ’s deity was compatible with his incarnation as a baby, in the womb of a virgin left intact by the birth.⁴³ Augustine’s imagined pagan party-goers are blunter, pointing to the crucifixion to deny Christ’s deity at its (to human eyes) weakest moment.⁴⁴ To go and ‘learn this from pagans’ is to ‘lose salvation’; the cure, to ‘touch the fringe in this situation also’.

Augustine repeats the Christian feast-goer’s response: “It is not a god”, he says, “because it is the genius of Carthage.”⁴⁵ Here we have slight puzzle. Throughout the sermon, Augustine uses the neuter ‘genium’, a form attested on rare occasion from the first century onward. When rebutting Varro’s theological ideas in *City of God*, however, Augustine uses the ordinary ‘genius’.⁴⁶ Why he adopts the neuter here, he does not explain, and such parallels as there are shed no light.⁴⁷ It is, however, noteworthy that the first instance is in the voice of the Carthaginian layman. Perhaps the neuter acknowledges the ordinary Christian’s desire to downplay the divinity’s personality; perhaps it makes clearer, for a general audience, the learned bishop’s identification of the genius with a (neuter) *daemonium*;⁴⁸ perhaps, more simply, it reflects current colloquialism in Carthage. Whatever nuance the unusual gender imparts (if any) must be slight, as Augustine does not mark the form as salient. The key point would hold good, whether Augustine had spoken of a ‘genius’ or a ‘genium’: the Christian conviction that the city’s guardian spirit is not a god does not mean that others do not think it a god. ‘As if’, Augustine exclaims, ‘if it were Mars or Mercury, it would be a god!’ He homes in on the practical sociology of pagan cult: ‘But pay attention to how they consider it, not to what it is. For I also know, with you, that it is a stone. If the genius is a kind of ornament, let the citizens of Carthage live well, and they themselves will be the genius of Carthage! If, however, it is a demon, you have also heard there, *What the nations sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God*’ (1 Cor. 10:20).⁴⁹

If Augustine were offering a learned critique of pagan beliefs, as in *City of God*, he might have extrapolated from Apuleius’ identification of a human’s mind, his *genius*, as a *daemon* to an identification of the city’s spirit as a similarly demonic power.⁵⁰ If Augustine were a modern historian searching for a contemporary parallel, he might have quoted Symmachus’ defence of the Roman priesthoods in *Relatio* 3, sent to Valentinian II at Milan in 384: ‘the divine mind has distributed to the cities various guardians, their cults; as souls to those being born, so the *genii* of destiny are imparted to peoples.’⁵¹ Augustine was a preacher, seeking an argument persuasive to a general audience, and so

⁴³ August., *Ep.* 135.2 (CCSL 31B: 250–2). On the social context of the letter, see McLynn 1999.

⁴⁴ On pagan theologising at banquets, see further Rebillard 2015: 287–8; Clark 2009: 131 is right, however, to see ‘heavy irony’ in *Ep.* 91.5 (CCSL 31A: 156), the one text that appears to suggest that such talk ever developed into anything even loosely analogous to Christian preaching. For pagan critiques in Augustine’s works, see still the impressively thorough catalogue by Courcelle 1958.

⁴⁵ *Serm.* 62.10, “Non est”, inquit, “deus, quia genium est Carthaginius.”

⁴⁶ *De civ. D.* 7.13 (CCSL 47: 196–7).

⁴⁷ Citations, collated in *TLL*, s.v. *genius*, 6/2: 1827.5–16, include medallions of Agrippina the Elder and Vespasian (Cohen 1880–1892: 1.232 no. 8, 1.382 no. 200), one inscription (*CIL* 3.4401), and a few instances in grammarians and glossaries and, most relevant to Augustine, in later Christian authors (Venantius Fortunatus, *Carmina* 2.9.18, 5.15.3 (ed. M. Roberts, *Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library* 46, Cambridge, MA, 2017), and manuscripts of Cassiod., *Var.* 6.5.4, 8.10.1).

⁴⁸ Cf. *TLL*, s.v. *genius*, 6/2: 1827.5.

⁴⁹ *Serm.* 62.10.

⁵⁰ Apul., *De deo Soc.* 15.150.

⁵¹ Symm., *Relat.* 3.8.

he pointed, as Honorius would in the law promulgated in Africa in June 408, to the statue's cultic setting.⁵² Augustine says:

That, after all, these people consider it a divinity and take that statue for a divinity, the altar testifies. What would that altar be doing there, if the genius were not taken for a divinity? Let no one say to me, 'It is not a divinity, it is not a god!' I have already said: would that they all knew this, as we all know it! But what they consider it, for what manner of thing they take it, what they do there, that altar testifies.⁵³

'What they do there': *quid ibi faciant*. Augustine has already suggested that a weak Christian might be tempted not just to eat, but to sacrifice. This is the closest he comes to making the same accusation a second time. The altar, and pagan talk, are all that he points to with any conviction. The danger, one infers, lies not in a particular practice, since sacrificing is probably absent and moderate dining not a problem in itself, but in the commitments and beliefs attendance would express. To go is to accept (or at least seem to accept) that the genius is indeed, as the pagan sponsors think it, a divinity. 'Would, brothers, that the body of Christ were to be pressed by pagans, by whom it is used to being pressed; let Christians not press the body of Christ!'⁵⁴ *Pressura*, by which Augustine elsewhere denotes the strain brought by the many disasters of the early fifth-century Roman world, refers here to the religious 'pressuring' of Christians.⁵⁵ To convert the pagans, he says, 'desert their festivals, desert their trifles; and, if they do not agree with our truth, let them blush at how few they are'.

It is a hopeful thought, in the mouth of a Christian bishop.⁵⁶ Augustine does not dwell on it. 'If the one who is over you is good, he is your nourisher; if he is bad, he is your tempter.'⁵⁷ The Christians, he says, are to be like gold in the fire, not chaff that burns away; to be rich from God, in the age to come. Now he works his way back around to the problem that sparked off the imagined dialogue: the Christian's duty to his *maior*.⁵⁸ It is not pride, he says, that he is counselling, a contempt for rightful *potestas*, but rather a proper appreciation for the hierarchy of powers: one does not obey a *curator* over a proconsul, or a proconsul over an emperor, and God is to be obeyed above all.

'But a powerful man plots against you ... he has sharpened his razor, to shave your hair, not to cut off your head.'⁵⁹ An allusion to the day's Psalm (51:4 LXX), it is also a recognition that no one was going to die for resisting modern-day pagans. The danger, which Augustine elaborates at length, is that the angered *maior* will destroy the Christian's financial well-being. 'He removed your poverty; does he also remove your riches?' The martyrs, Augustine reminds his listeners, held even this present life 'superfluous'. Shall Christians really 'fear the injuries of Christian times'? The pagan's

⁵² *Constitutio Sirmondiana* 12 (excerpted in *Cod. Theod.* 16.10.19), 'Simulacra, si qua etiam nunc in templis fanisque constunt et quae aliquem ritum uel acceperunt uel accipiunt paganorum, suis sedibus reuellantur, cum hoc repetita sciamus saepius sanctione decretum' ('Statues, if they are even now standing anywhere in temples and sanctuaries and either have received or do receive some rite of the pagans, are to be torn up from their place, since we have very often decreed this by repeated sanction').

⁵³ *Serm.* 62.10, 'Nam et illi quod numen habeant et pro numine accipiant illam statuam, ara testatur. quid illic faciat ara, si illud non habetur pro numine? Nemo mihi dicat: "Non est numen, non est deus!" Iam dixi: utinam sic ipsi norint hoc, quomodo nouimus omnes nos! Sed quid habeant, pro qua re habeant, quid ibi faciant, ara illa testatur.'

⁵⁴ *Serm.* 62.11.

⁵⁵ For example, *Serm.* 81.7–8 (*PL* 38: 503–4), after the sack of Rome.

⁵⁶ Cf., for example, *Serm.* Dolbeau 26.9 (= *Serm.* 198aug.9 (Dolbeau 1992a: 97)) and *Serm.* Denis 17.7 (*Misc.* Ag. 1: 88); there, however, pointing to the many Jews and pagans of Carthage to shame the Christian majority of Bulla Regia.

⁵⁷ *Serm.* 62.12.

⁵⁸ *Serm.* 62.13.

⁵⁹ *Serm.* 62.14.

wiles are now indirect. ‘He does not say openly, “Come to an idol.” He does not say openly, “Come to my altars; feast there.”’ Nor, when the Christian has refused, does he put his real complaint into a lawsuit: “He was unwilling to come to my altars, he was unwilling to come to the temple which I venerate.”⁶⁰ No, says Augustine, no one ‘dares to say this’; instead, ‘he works other things deceitfully’. But what of it? A thief, a burglar, a brigand, a fever, a scorpion, a poisonous mushroom – all of them can bring a person’s life to an end. Why fear a powerful man, therefore? Those tempted by the feast have gained their money ‘with great labour’; coming to ‘eternal life’ will also require ‘great labour’, and, if they find their earthly possessions dear, how much more the life that will last forever?⁶¹

One could make more observations about the fine details of Augustine’s arguments. It is the overall tenor of the sermon that is most striking, especially when it is set alongside the sermon that has become, since publication of its full text in 1992, Augustine’s most famous homiletic critique of pagan thought and Christian misbehaviour. Delivered in opposition to the ongoing New Year’s celebrations of, most likely, the year 404, the massive *Sermo* Dolbeau 26 begins, after a brief address to the congregation, with a full-bore assault on the ongoing festival of the Kalends of January.⁶² Again and again, Augustine bids that congregation – Carthaginians again, probably – be separate from the *gentes*.⁶³ ‘You are going to celebrate gift-giving today with a pagan, you are going to play dice with a pagan, you are going to get yourself drunk with a pagan: how do you believe something else, hope for something else, love something else?’⁶⁴ In its vigorous rebukes, *Sermo* Dolbeau 26 resembles those sermons in which Augustine attacks the immoralities of his listeners or of absent ‘bad Christians’, which form as high a barrier to their salvation as does the worship of demons or idols.⁶⁵ Illustrative examples include *Sermo* Denis 17, delivered at Bulla Regia to oppose a theatrical performance that featured mimes and prostitutes, and *Sermo* 9, which exhorts the men of Chusa to leave behind their habitual adultery and fornication.⁶⁶ All of these sermons show the preoccupation with a worldly sinfulness that is typical of Augustine’s criticism of civic life.⁶⁷ Not so *Sermo* 62, where the only hint of moral impropriety comes in a few bland allusions to ‘carnal pleasures’ and sinful ‘luxuries’.⁶⁸ In other expositions of the story of the woman with the flow of blood, Augustine finds vices, alone or together with the religious errors of the gentiles before their calling by Paul.⁶⁹ In *Sermo* 62, by contrast, Augustine focuses on one particular, present festival at Carthage, eschewing general accusations of both immorality and idolatry.

⁶⁰ *Serm.* 62.15, ‘Non dicit aperte: “Veni ad idolum”; non dicit aperte: “Veni ad aras meas, ibi conuiuare.” Et, si dixerit et nolueris, hoc conqueratur, hoc in postulationem, hoc in querimoniam deponat: “Noluit uenire ad aras meas, noluit uenire ad templum quod ueneror.”’

⁶¹ *Serm.* 62.16.

⁶² Greatly expanded from its previous publication, in Migne, *PL* 38: 1024–6, as *Serm.* 198, the text may be found at Dolbeau 1992a: 90–141. On the festival, see Scheid 1998.

⁶³ *Serm.* Dolbeau 26.1–2 (Dolbeau 1992a: 90–2), invoking the Psalm for the day (105:47 LXX): ‘Salua nos, domine deus noster, et congrega nos de gentibus, ut confiteamur nomini sancto tuo’ (‘Save us, Lord our God, and gather us from among the nations, that we might confess your holy name’). Carthage: Dolbeau 1992a: 76.

⁶⁴ *Serm.* Dolbeau 26.2 (Dolbeau 1992a: 90–2).

⁶⁵ Cf. the shrewd remarks of Sotinel 2010: 348.

⁶⁶ *Serm.* Denis 17 (*Misc. Ag.* 1: 81–9), *Serm.* 9 (CCSL 41: 105–51). Chusa is unknown; Duval 1998: 173 suggests La Kessera.

⁶⁷ In the theatrical performance attacked by *Serm.* Denis 17 (*Misc. Ag.* 1: 81–9), there is, *pace* Kahlos 2020: 98, no hint of paganism; the suggestion of Hugoniot 1994: 135–7 that the target was the Floralia was shaky, and has been ruled out by the chronological revisions of Hugoniot 2002: 2072–3.

⁶⁸ The church, or the Christian, is healed from ‘carnalium uoluptatum fluxu’ (*Serm.* 62.7) and from ‘luxuriae et pannos peccatorum’ (62.8).

⁶⁹ *Serm.* Morin 7.3 (= *Serm.* 63B.3 (CCSL 41Aa: 346)), Mai 25.2–3 (= *Serm.* 63A.2–3 (CCSL 41Aa: 337–8)).

Not even the exhortation against idolatry at the opening of the great sermon on the Kalends offers a real parallel for what Augustine is doing in *Sermo* 62. Leaving behind the celebrations that preachers such as Peter Chrysologus found a pageant of idolatry,⁷⁰ he dwells on a philosophical paganism that seeks another mediator with God than Christ.⁷¹ Though he associates the Kalends festival with pagans, he does not make it an occasion for worship, except in a transferred sense. He glosses Paul's saying, *What the nations sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons and not to God; I do not want you to be associates of demons* (1 Cor. 10:20), as a condemnation of the raucous excitement and partisan rivalries of the theatre, the circus and the amphitheatre. 'Those who do these things offer incense, so to speak, to the demons from their hearts' – not, signally, on actual altars.⁷² Even that accusation is a rare deviation from his ordinary practice.⁷³ He had left the spectacles of theatre, amphitheatre and circus out of the 'arts marked by trifling or noxious superstition' in *De doctrina christiana*, treating the theatre, with mythology, as one of the 'superfluous and luxurious' institutions of mankind.⁷⁴ In his sermons, he treats absorption in beast fighting or chariot racing as disordered love: damning, yet not worship in any ordinary sense.⁷⁵ Though he might remind converts in passing, as he does in his instructions for the deacon-catechist Deogratias, that the theatrical *ludi* took place on pagan holidays, and could say that spectacles made their watchers 'similar to demons', he ordinarily did not place the theatre within pagan religion proper, as he would in *De ciuitate dei* 2.⁷⁶ Other festivals he will call 'pagan', even 'superstitious', yet he has little to say about the worship of gods or idols by the participants.⁷⁷ In *Sermo* 62, by contrast, Augustine quotes 1 Cor. 10:20, the same passage he had used in *Sermo* Dolbeau 26, to prove that the genius, whose statue is still accompanied by an altar, is in fact a demonic power to which the pagans are offering their worship.⁷⁸

The difference from the regular pattern of the sermons is a serious problem for a 'secular' interpretation of *Sermo* 62. By Markus' reading, Augustine's views were hardening at precisely this moment. Even if one calls the dating into question, a scholar suspicious of bishops' rhetoric, as many have been, might still see the charge of 'idolatry' as a tool of control or (more positively) of moral suasion, a way to 'paganise' the worldly living of their congregations and so render it unacceptable. Augustine does make accusations of idolatry regarding divination and 'magical' rites. He does not

⁷⁰ Peter Chrysologus, *Serm.* 155–155bis (CCSL 24B: 961–5, 967–9); cf. Catarinella 2014: 510–11.

⁷¹ Improper forms of Christian veneration are also important: *Serm.* Dolbeau 26.10–13 (Dolbeau 1992a: 97–101), with Brown 1998. The Kalends appear briefly at *Serm.* Dolbeau 26.43, and the concluding paragraph makes a nod, though they are now absorbed into generalised 'fallaces uanitates illecebras' (*Serm.* Dolbeau 26.63 (Dolbeau 1992a: 141)). Christ's mediation: Dodaro 1998, Pépin 1998.

⁷² *Serm.* Dolbeau 26.3 (Dolbeau 1992a: 92), 'Quae enim immolant, inquit, gentes, daemoniis immolant et non deo. Nolo uos fieri socios daemoniorum. ... ista facientes quasi tura ponunt daemonibus de cordibus suis.'

⁷³ Weismann 1972: 167 n. 280, Rebillard 2015: 289, 'Only two sermons associate spectacles and religion in very general terms.' One is *Serm.* Dolbeau 26; the other, *Serm.* 51.2 (CCSL 41Aa: 12), makes a bland reference to the Devil as a *uenator*, and might be excluded as in fact too general. A third, *Serm.* 311.6 (PL 38: 1416) describes *ludi* as demon-worship, but is aimed at dancing, not spectacles.

⁷⁴ *De doctrina christiana* 2.23.36, 2.25.38–9 (CCSL 32: 58–60) with Markus 1990: 112, 121.

⁷⁵ For example, *Serm.* Dolbeau 11.9–11 (= *Serm.* 90A.9–11 (Dolbeau 1992b: 64–6)), *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 33/2.6 (CCSL 38: 286).

⁷⁶ *De catechizandis rudibus* 25.48, 16.25 (CCSL 46: 171–2, 149–51). To *De civ. D.* 2, cf. the briefer and earlier *De consensu euangelistarum* 1.33.51 (CSEL 43: 55–7), *Ep.* 91.5 (CCSL 31A: 156): polemic differs, perhaps, from intra-Christian exhortation. For comments, see Lugaresi 2008: 629, 647.

⁷⁷ Esp. *Serm.* Frangipane 8.5 (= *Serm.* 293B (*Misc. Ag.* 1: 231)), which speaks of the 'remnants of sacrilege', the 'pursuits and jests of vanities', being done 'not indeed now in honour of demons, but nonetheless still after the fashion of demons' ('Cessent reliquae sacrilegiorum, cessent studia atque ioca uanitatum; non fiant illa quae fieri solent, non quidem iam in daemonum honorem, sed adhuc tamen secundum daemonum morem'). Cf. *Serm.* 196.4 (PL 38: 1021), Morin 1.4 (a post-sermonic address attached to *Serm.* 279; *Misc. Ag.* 1: 592–3), which likewise discourages participation in festivities coincident with the feast of John the Baptist.

⁷⁸ *Serm.* 62.9.

normally do so when warning lay Christians against the moral dangers of civic festivals. A different conclusion is therefore possible: that this feast, if not others, was still a rite of what the pagan grandees of Carthage saw, and practised, as their ancestral *religio*.

III PAGANS AND PATRONAGE: THE DESTRUCTION OF A LOCAL SHRINE

Even if the feast had religious overtones, ‘pagan’ was (virtually) no one’s self-description. In worrying about the hostility of ‘pagans’, was Augustine simply warning against a rhetorical bogeyman? Scepticism about the durability and importance of pagan devotion extends beyond the ‘secularity’ model, and has endured even in the most thoroughgoing critique of ‘secularity’ to emerge in recent scholarship. Drawing on sociological studies of ethnicity, Éric Rebillard has argued that ordinary Christians in Antiquity had many overlapping identities, and sometimes ‘activated’, sometimes switched off, their ‘Christianness’. By this view, Christians and pagans wished to express their civic allegiance and mutual respect by attending the feast, which, if not necessarily ‘secular’, need not have had much to do with religion.⁷⁹ Rebillard’s emphasis on the flexibility of individual attitudes and the possibility of inconsistent behaviour is an important refinement to Markus’ ideas.⁸⁰ He nonetheless reads against the grain of Augustine’s rhetoric in much the same way that Markus does. For Markus, the Christian feast-goer has a clear conscience, and ‘might ... plead that the festivities are harmless’; for Rebillard, he may not view the feast as ‘a secular event’, but is nevertheless unconcerned about God or gods, wishing chiefly to celebrate his city.⁸¹ The bishop, Augustine himself, remains the protagonist, the laymen are active chiefly in their resistance to his entreaties, and the opinions of the third party, the great pagan men of Carthage, are either pushed to the side or assumed to be innocuous to ordinary Christian sensibilities.

This is not quite right, I think. Augustine, by referring to ‘pagans’ without further qualification, is glossing over important differences among non-Christians.⁸² Under other circumstances, those differences could be more salient even for him. In *City of God*, for example, he draws a programmatic distinction between people who worship the gods for temporal success and people who worship them for immortal blessing.⁸³ Still, it is clear from his correspondence that there were devoutly non-Christian, even anti-Christian, traditionalists to be found in the cities of North Africa. Maximus, the grammarian from Madauros who extolled public sacrifices and insulted the martyrs, is a case in point.⁸⁴ Longinianus, the only man to call himself *paganus homo*, is another. Priest, theurgist and worshipper of gods he identifies with Christians’ angels, he was confident in his traditions but laudatory of Augustine himself as a man striving toward the Creator.⁸⁵ We can, therefore, imagine many shades of conviction or flexibility behind Augustine’s undifferentiated *pagani*. However, the really important question, in matters like the feast, is not religious ‘identity’, the sense of belonging to one group of worshippers or another. It is whether the actions of particular persons were motivated by what they thought about God or the gods (or their desire to worship them and see them worshipped). To apply Rebillard’s framework to sentiments, rather than identities: at the feast of the genius, were the pagans ‘activating’ a piety that fused the civic and the religious, as traditional piety long had?

⁷⁹ Rebillard 2012: 76–7, with 1–5 on ‘identities’ and ‘activation’.

⁸⁰ For criticism of the language of the ‘secular’, see Rebillard 2012: 95–6.

⁸¹ Markus 1990: 113; Rebillard 2012: 76–7.

⁸² A persistent problem in ancient Christian talk of ‘pagans’; see the remarks of McLynn 2009: 573.

⁸³ See, for example, *De civ. D.* 6.1 (CCSL 47: 164–5).

⁸⁴ *Ep.* 16–17 (CCSL 31: 38–43), with Gassman 2018.

⁸⁵ *Ep.* 233–5 (CSEL 57: 517–23); on this exchange, see Tornau 2016.

It is a problem in two parts. First, is Augustine's construal of the feast as an occasion for worship of a pagan divinity, a *numen*, coherent with what we know about contemporary polytheistic religion, and, second, are his insinuations of pagan hostility plausible? The first question is easier to answer. The crucial moment comes in section 10, where Augustine imagines the laymen saying, 'It is not a god, because it is the genius of Carthage.' They were wrong. As I have already noted, one of the few Latin works by a late antique pagan on his own religion, Symmachus' *Relatio* 3, identifies the worship of *genii* with the inherited polytheistic religion of the world's many cities. Though we know little about the *genius Carthaginis*, it must have been worshipped since the re-foundation of the city as *colonia Concordia Iulia Carthago*.⁸⁶ Abundant inscriptions attest to the worship of civic *genii* in Africa, and to their identification with great gods such as Hercules, Mercury and Caelestis.⁸⁷ Augustine does not suggest such an identification here, but, as he objects, it would not matter for his purpose anyway: Mars and Mercury are not gods from a Christian perspective, either.⁸⁸ One inscription, from a city to the south of Carthage, records the establishment of a fund that would disburse interest to the city's decurions on the 'birthday' of the genius (that is, the anniversary of the colony's founding).⁸⁹ That city was the *colonia* of Sufes and its genius, the god Hercules. In roughly the same period in which Augustine delivered this sermon, its rioting citizens would, to the acclaim of its city council, massacre sixty Christians for destroying the god's statue.⁹⁰

In early fifth-century North Africa, therefore, pagans did rank *genii* among the gods of their cities. The worship of all such gods, however, was being confined within narrow limits. As I suggested when discussing the sermon's dating, both the genius of Carthage and this particular feast fell into a legal grey area. In August 399, Honorius reiterated long-standing provisions authorising civic festivals, including feasts, so long as they did not involve sacrifices or *superstitio*.⁹¹ 'Superstition', however, meant more to a Christian such as Augustine than just sacrifice: it was, as the apologist Lactantius had put it nine decades before, 'worship of the false', in all its permutations.⁹² How Augustine's pagan contemporaries reshaped their religious beliefs, let alone their practice, to suit the new situation is less clear. The core claim of *Sermo* 62 is simply that pagans did want to see one of their gods honoured at this particular festival. An altar and image were symbols and, perhaps, objects of their devotion in what might, to evade laws against temples, have been an open-air precinct.⁹³ The incident at Sufes and a parallel, less violent, conflict over a statue of Hercules at Carthage confirm pagan regard for statues in an Africa where sacrifices, at least those held in public, were disappearing.⁹⁴

While it is clear, therefore, that there was a distinctly non-Christian devotion to the gods (especially, but not exclusively, the divine personifications) of North African cities, the ritual outworking of that devotion can no longer be seen. What is on occasion evident, as at Sufes, is the potential for pagan attachment to the symbol and guardian of a city to harden into overtly anti-Christian fervour.⁹⁵ In *Sermo* 62, Augustine suggests that it

⁸⁶ Lepelley 1992: 135 n. 52.

⁸⁷ Lepelley 1992 gathers and discusses the evidence.

⁸⁸ The Carthaginian genius was perhaps an Apollo: see Gros and Lepelley, as n. 108 below.

⁸⁹ *CIL* 8.11430, with Lepelley 1992: 131–2.

⁹⁰ A strange event known only through Augustine's furious letter to the city's leaders, *Ep.* 50; an attempt at reconstruction in Gaddis 2005: 118–19. The date is usually given as 399, but only to synchronise with the imperial measures in that year.

⁹¹ *Cod. Theod.* 16.10.17.

⁹² Lactant., *Div. inst.* 4.28.11; cf. August., *Ep.* 102.18 (CCSL 31B: 19).

⁹³ Lepelley 1992: 135; Augustine does speak, in general terms, of the *templa idolorum* in *Serm.* 62.7

⁹⁴ *Serm.* 24, on which Kelly 2015: 155–61 offers a circumspect discussion, with prior literature. For the decline of public sacrifices, see *De diuinatione daemonum* 2.5 (CSEL 41: 601–2), of c. 406–410 (den Boeft 1999: 519).

⁹⁵ That such hardening is only occasional is rightly stressed by Rebillard 2012: 86–91.

could do so, in a more muted way, if his listeners did not attend the feast of the genius of Carthage. Is it plausible, however, for him to assume that the feasts' sponsors would construe Christian failure to participate as an insult against their gods, and not just themselves? The vengeance he imagines them taking is at least within the politically possible, unlike the martyrdom he envisions in a sermon on Ps. 96 (LXX).⁹⁶ In *Sermo* 62, he hints only at veiled enmities, a career ending rupture in the bonds of *amicitia* that enabled capable but ill connected men, like his younger self, to rise in the world.⁹⁷

In these enmities, historians have been reluctant to believe. Alan Cameron is blunt: bishops' assertions 'that Christians were "forced" to take part' in civic banquets were 'absurd'.⁹⁸ Granted, not all laymen will have welcomed Augustine's strictures. Yet if one did agree with the visiting bishop, he might well have seen his patron's invitation to the feast as a burden on his piety toward God. Every indication is that Augustine is speaking to men of substance, but less wealthy than the feast's sponsors. They are *maiores*, the Christians lesser men, clients who owe their elevation out of *paupertas* – a condition, like that of Augustine's own father, more genteel than 'poverty' – into real wealth.⁹⁹ Even if the meal was restricted, as Lepelley has suggested, to the decurions of Carthage, the distance in status among them is unambiguous,¹⁰⁰ and the Christians are thus in a delicate position between bishop and non-Christian betters. A devout pagan, after all, might not be expected to have much liking for a bishop (nor, one supposes, for the Christians who followed a bishop's strictures too religiously). Thus Symmachus notes, in a letter to his brother, the *pontifex* Celsinus Titianus, that Celsinus might be surprised to find him recommending a bishop, but he has done so out of respect for the man's patriotism, not his religion.¹⁰¹ The question is not, then, whether a Christian would feel under unwanted pressure to go, but whether Augustine is right in making that pressure an expression of pagan devotion, rather than an innocently non-cultic expression of ordinary civic pride.

The final two sections may hold the key. 'Do not believe their words', Augustine says, 'do not be afraid. They call us enemies of their idols. If only God would offer and give all of them into our power, as he gave what was broken!'¹⁰² He exhorts the congregation not to take the destruction of more shrines into their own hands, as the 'crazy circumcellions' do, but reminds them of his sermon on Deuteronomy at the Mappalia and bids them only act when they have the proper *potestas*. 'We act first', he says, 'to break the idols in their hearts. When they themselves have also been made Christians, either they invite us to so good a work or they anticipate us. Now, we need to pray for them, not get angry at them.'

Augustine portrays an unholy 'unity' of 'heretics, Jews and pagans' standing against the 'unity' of the Church, in their shared anger over the laws that have been advanced against them.¹⁰³ But 'we', the Christians, are not to break the idols, though 'the places are before

⁹⁶ *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 96.16–17 (CCSL 39: 1367–9), which contains no convincing link to *Serm.* 62, *pace* La Bonnardière 1965: 162–3.

⁹⁷ Late antique *amicitia*: Brown 2012: 100–3, Matthews 1974, on Symmachus, with the moving thanks for Augustine's own former patron at *C. acad.* 2.2.3 (CCSL 29: 19–20).

⁹⁸ Cameron 2011: 785, referring to *Registri ecclesiae Carthaginensis excerpta* 60 from the synod of 16 June 401 (CCSL 149: 196–7).

⁹⁹ Cf. Chadwick 1985: 8 n. 12 (it goes too far, however, to infer that the *pagani* were senators). On Augustine's background, *C. acad.* 2.2.3 (CCSL 29: 19–20) and *Conf.* 2.3.5 (CCSL 27: 19), with Shaw 1987: esp. 8–9, Lepelley 1987. Augustine's pronounced insistence on the poverty of his background in the late *Serm.* 355.2, 356.13 (*PL* 39: 1570, 1580), may reflect church affairs at Hippo at the time of his semi-retirement in 426 (Leyser 2005; cf. Shaw 1987: 9 n. 12).

¹⁰⁰ Lepelley 1992: 135.

¹⁰¹ Symm., *Ep.* 1.64, 'commendari a me episcopum forte mireris. causa istud mihi, non secta persuasit' ('You might perhaps wonder that a bishop is receiving my recommendation. His case, not his religion, has won me over').

¹⁰² *Serm.* 62.17.

¹⁰³ *Serm.* 62.18. For a few instances of such "unity" working in practice, see Bradbury 1996: 56.

us, in which they are ... because God has not given them into our power'. Idols were standing, he says, on a property belonging to the church (*in re ecclesiae*). 'Brothers, behold what displeases the pagans. It is too little for them that we do not remove them from their villas, that we do not break them; they want them to be preserved in our villas, too! Against idols we preach, from their hearts we lift them; we are persecutors of idols, we profess it.'

The transition is abrupt. But *potestas*, appearing in slightly different guises across the sermon, gives its superficially disparate subsections a deep thematic unity.¹⁰⁴ Read as a genuine conclusion to the first sixteen paragraphs, the final two help to explain Augustine's approach to the intertwined issues of the feast and of Christian duty. Not only has he tiptoed, over the first third of the sermon, toward the feast of the genius, he has avoided mentioning, until he has done his best to persuade his listeners to do what he sees as their duty toward God, just what might have given a Christian cause to fear the wrath of a powerful pagan, were he not to show up at the feast. If Augustine really is speaking in the aftermath of the destruction of a pagan shrine – or at least of the images held within the shrine, as 'idols', not a building, seem to be the main concern – then the leading pagan men of the city have received a stark reminder of the vulnerability of the traditions they held dear.¹⁰⁵ 'They call us', Augustine says, 'enemies of their idols': not, presumably, in those words, any more than they were going to complain in like terms of a Christian who refused an invitation to a grand meal, but it would still be clear, in the pressure of the moment, who had taken which side. Whether planned for the purpose or not, the feast of the genius – unambiguously divine, yet no easier for a Christian to attack openly than the personified *Victoria* had been in Symmachus' Italy in the turbulent early 380s – was an excellent opportunity to make those sides apparent.

I use the language of confessional opposition, but that implies too neat a symmetry between Christianity, which required formal religious adherence through enrolment in the catechumenate and, eventually, baptism, and the varied devotion to the gods of city, family, empire and personal predilection that modern scholars often, and ancient Christians only rarely, call 'paganism'. Some pagans might have been understanding. The key point, and for Augustine's laymen the overriding worry, was that some were not. Indeed, the proportion of such people among the feast's sponsors is secondary: the inflexible conviction of a few can often draw the less rigorist after them, as ancient bishops knew so well.¹⁰⁶ The feast was an opportunity for good civic men to see whether Christians, whose bishops and scriptures commanded them to place something else above city and tradition, would prove themselves, as Symmachus once said of a bishop, 'praiseworthy in the estimation of all sects'.¹⁰⁷ Augustine's prototypical Christian listener, then, is under pressure, not simply to make his neighbours happy by proving himself a good sport, as at the Kalends, but to show that he is the kind of person who can live and let live, who is willing to let old traditions be his own, whatever a bishop might say, and who will nod when a cultured man muses about the incongruities of Christian doctrine, beneath the handsome face of the city's divine ornament.¹⁰⁸ The Christian's participation is not, as John North has said of the offering of sacrifices under Decius, 'an act of pagan profession', but a recognition that ties to

¹⁰⁴ *Serm.* 62.4, 13, 17–18; *pace* Riggs 2006: 302 n. 18, who suggests that the conclusion originally came from another sermon.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Rebillard 2013c: 63.

¹⁰⁶ Witness, for example, Augustine's exhortation to *patres familias* to encourage their friends, scold their wives and beat their maids into staying sober at celebrations of the martyrs (*In Evang. Johan.* 10.9 (CCSL 36: 106)).

¹⁰⁷ *Symm., Ep.* 7.51, 'fratrem meum Seuerum episcopum omnium sectarum adtestatione laudabilem'.

¹⁰⁸ For the bust of the genius of Carthage identified by Gros 1997: 343–4, see the reprinting of Lepelley 1992 (2001: 53), with a photograph on the collection's frontispiece.

patron and *patria* – ties still bound up, for the pagan, with his ancestral forms of worship – mattered as much as the claims of the Christian's God, in whose name a shrine had just been destroyed.¹⁰⁹

What Augustine is doing, therefore, is not denying the obvious, accepted 'secularity' of the feast, but denying that his Christian hearers are acting responsibly in treating it as 'secular' (the term, as always, is ours, not his or theirs). It has religious meaning, not for them or for him, but for the pagans and, Augustine suggests, for many other Christians. The laymen's desire to participate is not a sign that they simply found their Christian adherence irrelevant to participation in the feast (as Rebillard, for example, suggests despite his criticisms of 'secularity'), or so Augustine's prolonged exhortation to resist the fear of powerful pagans makes it clear that he believed.¹¹⁰ Rather, the laymen were caught in a web of social obligations that bound them to please their social superiors by honouring the city's spirit, in a feast still marked by the material inheritance of the genius' ancient, now-restricted worship. To adapt Rebillard's language again, they were 'activating' their civic piety not innocently, as an allegiance alternative and parallel to their Christianity, but under duress.¹¹¹ The feast's non-Christian organisers would have agreed with Augustine that it honoured a superhuman power. Whether or not the destruction of the shrine motivated their invitation to their Christian subordinates, it had disturbed them enough that those subordinates' absence from the feast could well seem a declaration of hostility toward the traditions, and the gods, that they venerated.

IV BEYOND SECULARITY?

An exceptional sermon cannot offer a new vision of late Roman culture as a whole, nor do I suggest it should. However, it does allow us to calibrate our sense of the 'secular' against Augustine's sense, only implicit in most sermons, of what was and was not idolatrous. Revealing how both pagans and Christian laymen thought about an inherited custom of one of the Empire's great cities, it allows us to move closer to recapturing the fine gradations of local, even individual, experiences of religious change. As Markus recognised, the task of the historian of late Roman religion is not just to gauge the grand scale transformation, across two centuries, in the religious climate of Roman society and politics, but also to chart the ever shifting microclimates of belief and practice, of which that transformation was woven.¹¹² Augustine himself had come to see ordinary civic festivals as distinct from pagan religion. To call his default conception of Roman society 'secular' is fair, though he did not use the word in quite Markus' sense. To generalise from Augustine's example would, however, be a mistake: as he reminded his Carthaginian laymen, they knew the gods to be nothing, but others did not. As a bishop, he can be found not just trying to convince Christian laymen to acknowledge the spiritual dangers of a pagan feast, but also counselling a rural landholder not to worry too much about the spiritual dangers of pagan sacrifices that he has no power to stop.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ North 2010: 44.

¹¹⁰ Rebillard 2012: 77.

¹¹¹ I would thus extend to Augustine the critique advanced for Rebillard's treatment of Tertullian and Cyprian by Clarke 2013: 771–2.

¹¹² Markus 1990: 110, calling for 'searching investigation of what exactly the celebration of such traditional festivals involved, and what those – pagans as well as Christians – who took part in them thought they were doing, and what those who tried to prohibit participation in them accused them of doing'.

¹¹³ *Ep.* 46–7 (CCSL 31: 198–208) to Publicola, on which see Bodin 2012–2013; Lepelley 2002a. The diversity of Christian attitudes is brought to the fore by Frankfurter 2018: 18; Kahlos 2020: 177; cf. Rebillard 2013c: 140–1. I

A similar diversity of attitudes can be glimpsed in the empire-spanning ceremonies that are the main focus of the ‘secularisation’ narrative. Famously condemned by pre-Nicene apologists for their connection with the worship of the gods, the public *ludi* are criticised by later Christians chiefly for encouraging vice and distracting from the worship of God.¹¹⁴ The difference need not involve a change over time: that implies that the ‘real’ problem underlying the apologists’ attacks was sacrifice, when they were concerned about the games’ names and origins, as well. The learned were still aware of both. In 342, a law of Constans referred to an otherwise unattested connection between public festivals and the temples outside the walls of Rome;¹¹⁵ and a calendar commissioned by a Roman senator for 354 listed an abundance of pagan holidays.¹¹⁶ Even in the 440s, the two perspectives can appear side by side. In his account of the sins for which God brought the barbarians upon the Roman world, Salvian of Marseille refers first to the offering of games as the ‘custom of the ancient pagans’, who ‘used to believe’ them pleasing to their gods, then accuses Christians of offering superstitious honours to the gods in whose ‘festivities’ they participate.¹¹⁷ Decades before, Augustine himself had, when apologetic strategy demanded, departed from his ordinary homiletic practice to underscore the historical connection between theatrical *ludi* and Roman religion.¹¹⁸ That does not overthrow the basic ‘secularity’ of his approach, since the contention of *City of God* 2 is not that the theatre has to do with paganism and is therefore evil, but the reverse. Only wicked, demonic gods could demand something so corrupt.¹¹⁹ It is doubtful, therefore, whether we can trace any arc of evolution, across the fourth century or across Augustine’s career, in Roman attitudes toward the games. Nevertheless, those who ignored the games’ religious associations had better cause. In the multitude of letters by which Symmachus arranged his son’s games, he showed himself concerned chiefly (as Alan Cameron put it) ‘to make a splash’.¹²⁰ Symmachus, a *pontifex* who left letters on the operations of his college, including sacrifices, a public festival and the oversight of the Vestal virgins, did not treat the games as an act of worship.¹²¹

The Kalends of January offer a contrasting example. Enfolded, with wide swaths of ancient life, in the sin of idolatry by Tertullian, they were denounced by a host of later Christian writers.¹²² Peter Chrysologus, for example, condemned the mummers’ parades as a continuation, by Christians, of an idolatry that ought to have died out long-since. He recognised, however, that his congregants did not mean to engage in pagan worship, while Augustine, as we have seen, locates the festival’s danger in love of the world, figured as inner worship of demons.¹²³ In turn, the orator Libanius, who saw no more religion in the games than Symmachus did, praised the Kalends in terms congruent with Markus’ vision of a ‘secular’ civic culture: through gift-giving and relaxation, they bring

would, however, discard the assumption that (in Kahlos’ words) ordinary Christians ‘would have had no scruples if bishops had left them to continue their celebrations in peace’.

¹¹⁴ Tert., *De spect.*; Novatian, *De spect.*; Lactant., *Div. inst.* 6.20.34–6, with Hugoniot 1994: 127–9, Lim 2009: 498–502, Sotinel 2010: 327–8.

¹¹⁵ *Cod. Theod.* 16.10.3, with Behrwald 2009: 63, 107.

¹¹⁶ This section of the so-called *Chronograph of 354* may be found in *Inscr. Ital.* 13.2.237–62. For discussion, see Burgess 2012 and Salzman 1990.

¹¹⁷ *De gubernatione dei* 6.22 (referring to the ‘morem ueterum paganorum’), 59–61 (*SC* 220: 374–6, 400–2).

¹¹⁸ See n. 76 above.

¹¹⁹ Esp. *De civ. D.* 2.29 (*CCSL* 47: 63–5).

¹²⁰ Cameron 2011: 790.

¹²¹ Symm., *Ep.* 1.46, 1.49, 2.36, 9.147–8.

¹²² Tert., *De idololatria* 14.4 (*CCSL* 2: 1114). Surveys in Grig 2017: 238–9; Catarinella 2014 (483–93 on Augustine); Meslin 1970: 95–118.

¹²³ Peter Chrysologus, *Serm.* 155.5, 155bis.2 (*CCSL* 24B: 964, 968–9); Catarinella 2014: 510.

happiness and harmony to all.¹²⁴ However, Libanius' oration begins by calling the Kalends the 'festival of the great *daemon*' – possibly a reference to the emperor, but in decidedly un-Christian terms – and ends by recounting, wistfully, how the sacrifices, now banned, had once joined the gods, too, in celebration.¹²⁵ The Kalends were not, for Libanius and presumably also for other pagans, devoid of religious meaning, even if the full ritual enactment of that meaning was now and for the foreseeable future a memory.

Sermo 62, which has helped to frame the narrative of 'secularisation' and episcopal efforts at 'de-secularisation', is in fact a particularly vivid testimony to the malleability and contingency of the 'secular', as well as the durability of religious conviction, in late Antiquity. Some festivals were now devoid of religious freight for most people, most of the time. Others, such as the feast of the genius of Carthage, held more ambiguous connotations, which could be 'activated' (to adapt Rebillard's language again) both by rhetorical effort and by the pressure of contingent circumstances, for example the expectations of bishops, friends and patrons or the concerns of ordinary Christians anxious to know what was pagan and what was not. Christian laity and devout traditionalists were not simply resting, confident, in their shared culture. They, like the bishops, were negotiating what that culture would mean, for themselves and for others, and had to reckon both with the inheritance of ancient, polytheistic religion and with opinions still vigorously opposed to their own.

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¹²⁴ Or. 9. On the 'secularity' of the games at Antioch, see Hahn 2018.

¹²⁵ Or. 9.1, 18. Graf 2012: 178: 'the 'mighty daimon,' ... could be either Jupiter or the emperor or both at the same time'.

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