

## Augustine Shutte: A Tribute

Augustine Shutte was a member of the Philosophy Department at UCT for some 60 years. You will be pleased to hear that I don't propose to spend quite as much time as that eulogising his achievements. However, it is fitting that at this Departmental prize-giving we should do something to celebrate Augustine's substantial and sustained contribution to philosophy, here and elsewhere, in the course of a long and well-lived life.

Describing his early life, Augustine said of himself that he always thought of himself as an outsider. I can think of three ways in which this is not only true, but also intimates something of the heroic quality of his whole life: he was a brave and highly thoughtful outsider in philosophy, in theology and in education.

Having studied philosophy here under Martin Versfeld, the highly eccentric but much-loved Afrikaner Catholic Professor of Ethics, he found himself studying theology, first, at Oxford with a view to becoming an Anglican priest; then, after converting to Roman Catholicism, as a Dominican monk in Stellenbosch. At the Stellenbosch Priory, however, an extraordinary thing happened which was perhaps not so extraordinary given that this was the sixties and their aftermath. A senior monk, the great Aquinas scholar and Computer Scientist, Timothy McDermott, discovered the joys of pulchritude, aka sex, and left the order to get married. After which, all the other monks, including Augustine, had a similar epiphany and applied for dispensations from their vows to get married. Unfortunately, this left them quite literally outsiders as priests in the Roman Catholic Church. They were consequently without visible means of support so Martin Versfeld employed them as temporary junior lecturers in the Philosophy Department here. Unfortunately, such was Martin's dislike of paperwork, that he never got round to filling in the forms that would have enabled any of them to be appointed to permanent positions. When in 1976, Martin was succeeded by a proselytising, quasi-Protestant "Oxford" analytic philosopher, chaos ensued - during which Augustine uniquely behaved with great decency, dignity and calm and was alone amongst the ex-Dominicans in finally getting tenure. The Department was, however, now overwhelmingly staffed from the Anglo-Saxon analytic school whose philosophical education had taken them from Aristotle to Descartes, bypassing the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages entirely, dismissing Hegel, and remaining mostly pretty indifferent or hostile to the notion of taking religion seriously. Augustine thus found himself and remained something of an outsider in philosophy.

His colleagues, including me, found Augustine somewhat baffling as a philosopher not because of his religious beliefs but because of his enthusiasm for continental philosophy, and his apparent indifference to the importance of conceptual clarity and logical rigour: he found our pre-occupations with these things trivial. I think, though, that we all loved him and certainly we recognised him as a highly effective and much loved-teacher. At

first, this sense of being an outsider in his own Department encouraged Augustine to indulge his theological passions and disseminate his reflections on religion through the Catholic teaching Institution, Kolbe House of which he became the Director, and through extra-mural classes. Gradually, however and to a considerable extent through Augustine's efforts, bridges were built within the Philosophy Department which was consequently enriched by a much broader mutual understanding, without compromising anyone's intellectual integrity.

However, he soon found himself again pretty much an outsider in the Catholic Church whose more traditional members, like the philosophers, loved him but were baffled by his unorthodoxy – claiming for example that euthanasia might be a deeply Christian act and repudiating any notion of papal infallibility or the inerrancy of tradition – particular as this applied to women. This was something he came to feel so strongly about that towards the end of his life he joined an excommunicated congregation called “Roman Catholic Women Priests” – women who felt overwhelmingly called to preach the Gospel and administer the sacraments whatever the old men in Rome might say – and have been saying about women for nigh on two thousand years. He never, however, abandoned his faith in a God of perfect love nor, I think, his conception of Jesus as at least one manifestation of that perfect love.

Finally, of course, Augustine was an outsider as a liberal, white, English-speaking South African living under Apartheid and its aftermath. This, however, prompted him not, as too many such people did, to engage in strident anti-apartheid rhetoric which achieved very little beyond reinforcing a collective sense of self-righteousness. Instead, he took practical steps and not only worshipped at a congregation in the township where he was again much cherished and in whose activities he participated fully. He also famously set about trying to discern what African culture could teach about, as well as learn from philosophy, particularly in its understanding of communitarian ethics. His book on this subject continues to be regarded a seminal. In retirement Augustine also became a poet and in my last conversation with him a week before he died we agreed that as we got older we were both inclined to move all but a very few items of religious and metaphysical belief from the box marked “literal and historical” to the box marked “mythopoeic”.

There is another phrase that Augustine used about himself which characterises his lifelong philosophical work and indeed his lifelong manner of living. He described himself as a very young man as an atheist but a “questing” atheist and, though he soon abandoned the atheism, the rest of his life and thought would retain the character of an ongoing quest for answers to the very biggest questions of philosophy: what is the ultimate truth about the universe and our place within it and how should we live in our relations with the world and with one another. It must have pleased Augustine that these questions about the human predicament have again become central to the concerns of at least some important philosophers, not least here in Cape Town. This was not the case in the earlier part of Augustine's teaching career when metaphysics and

even trying to answer substantial moral questions tended to be dismissed as pretentious nonsense.

The Philosophy Department at UCT has evolved from a state of tragi-comic chaos when I first joined it into a Department which is both extraordinarily admired and enjoyed by its students, and which punches hugely above its weight in the global philosophical community. This outstanding achievement is down to all of you and – at least we here would I hope all agree – down to the outstandingly intelligent and extraordinarily courageous leadership of David Benatar. But in effecting this transformation, Augustine’s endless quest, especially as a perennial outsider, to discover and disseminate the truth about himself, about the world, about others and perhaps, above all, about the phenomenon of human loving – this too has made a major, lifelong and heroic contribution to the Department’s present success. So it is fitting that at this happy prize-giving, we make the equivalent of a “special lifetime achievement award” to Augustine Shutte and say “ Thank you very much, Augustine, for everything, wherever you are.”

Peter Collins

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