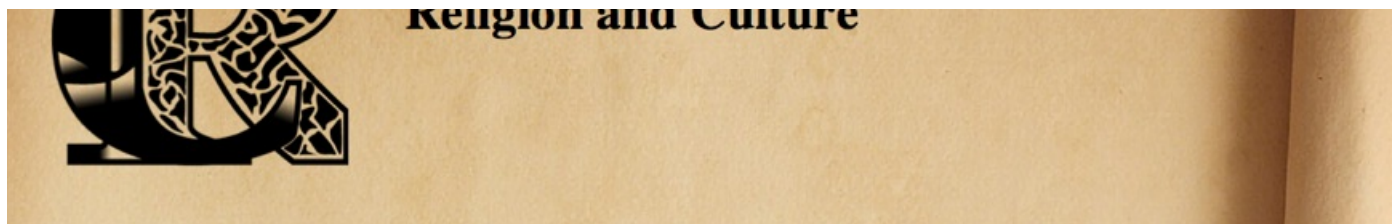


Augustine and Dante's Inferno: Depicting Hell



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Abstract

In Book II of *On Christian Doctrine*, Augustine of Hippo emphasizes that attributing religious value to iconographic representations of Christ and holy figures is scripturally unfounded and a conventionally inappropriate institution. According to the early Christian bishop, images—understood as signs—hold little religious significance. While Augustine's original theory of language and signs in *On Christian Doctrine* is foundational for biblical interpretation and interpreting Christian iconography within Western Christianity, his arguments could not contain currents of cultural and linguistic change that generated uncountable new conceptions of textual and visual meaning over time.

One fascinating example of the limitations of Augustine's theory of signs comes almost a millennium after his lifetime. The critical philosopher and poet, Dante Alighieri, presents a problematic scenario when considering Augustine's organization of language, text and symbols. This is because Dante's famous poem, *The Divine Comedy*, re-appropriates canonical scripture by creatively interpreting the ambiguity of the Bible and medieval Catholic doctrine. More specifically, Dante re-presents Hell (in *Inferno*) through textual imagery and rhetorical ability rather than visual depictions.

This essay thus considers to what extent Augustine would have praised Dante for his personal, artistic talent as a poet, while critically questioning Dante's poem for instigating subversive mental images that signify a nonexistent reality within Christian canon. To this end, I wish to explore Augustine's theory of signs in order to compare and contrast Hell in Dante's *Inferno* with a potential Augustinian response to the infernal imagery that arose thereafter. If Augustine rejected veneration of religious images, or religious education through iconography, then I wish to consider: how would Augustine have responded to Dante's poem and would he have blamed the medieval Italian for the literal implications Hell would come to designate?

References

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Rebacks

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