

Augustine of Hippo

LIFE AND SOURCES

Augustine was born in 354 in Thagasta (in what is now Algeria), the son of a Christian mother and a pagan father in North Africa. He studied rhetoric in Carthage, acquiring a profound knowledge of classical Latin literature, especially Cicero and Virgil. He became a gifted teacher of literature in Carthage, Rome and Milan. From 373 onwards, Augustine, "living outside of himself," alienated from God who was "more inward than his most inward part," as he recalled later in his *Confessions* (*Confess.* III.6 [II]), was drawn into the circles of Manichaeism. The term Manichaeism is derived from Mani (AD 216–76), a Persian, who founded this Gnostic religion. It was an extremely dualistic world-view with a very negative evaluation of matter, body and sexuality. The followers of the Manichean religion were divided into two classes: the elect, who had to remain celibate, and the auditors (or hearers) who were allowed sexual intercourse as long as it did not lead to offspring (for procreation contributed to the imprisonment of souls into the physical world). Augustine became an auditor in the Manichean religion, much to the heartbreak of his mother. After nine years, Augustine grew disillusioned with Manichaeism. In 383 he travelled to Rome, and it was here, at the age of thirty, that he gradually abandoned Manichean views, lapsing into a period of skepticism (*Confess.* V.10 [19]).

While in Milan, Augustine was to encounter a person who left an indelible mark on him: St. Ambrose, the local bishop. It was Ambrose who was to draw Augustine closer to the Catholic faith. What was of particular significance, Augustine informs us, was the ways in which Ambrose interpreted the Scriptures. Once Ambrose demonstrated that difficult passages from the Old Testament can be legitimately interpreted figuratively, one of the main objections Augustine had harbored for so long against the Catholic faith vanished. He then decided to become a catechumen in the Catholic Church. It was at this time that Augustine, still

searching for truth, discovered Neoplatonic philosophy. This, too, was to have a major formative impact on Augustine's intellectual outlook.

Neoplatonism is a philosophy which revived Platonist tendencies in philosophy from the third to the sixth centuries AD. The major figures are Plotinus (c. 205–70) the founder of the school, Porphyry (c. 232–301), and Proclus (410–85). Augustine must have read (in translation) some extracts from Plotinus' main work, *The Enneads*, and a number of works from Porphyry. In Neoplatonism we discern the following characteristics: first, there is a strong emphasis on the One, the Absolute or the Good from which all things emanate through a hierarchy. This Absolute principle is beyond being and thought. Within the divine realm there is a hierarchy: the One is absolute and transcendent; it is supreme goodness. Somewhat lower there is Mind or *Nous*; finally, there is Soul, which has the power to produce matter. The emphasis upon hierarchy within the Godhead distinguishes the Neoplatonic understanding of the divinity from the Christian view of God as three equal Persons in the one Godhead. From the divine realm the material world flows or emanates. In the process of emanation there is gradual loss, for every effect is slightly inferior to its cause (the higher level is the cause of whatever is immediately lower). Again, this is different from a Christian understanding, in which God directly creates all things out of nothing rather than through an elaborate hierarchy. Human beings have to transcend the multiplicity of the material world to achieve union with the One. This entails a practice of purification and introversion. This union with the One is being achieved in transient ecstasy (e.g., *Enneads* 6.9.9).

Plotinus' mysticism is private and individual. It is also fairly intellectual. Christians will correct this view by emphasizing the role of grace and community. Despite the important differences between Neoplatonic philosophy and Christianity (above all its emphasis upon the reality of the Incarnation), Neoplatonism was to exert a lasting influence upon Augustine. A number of aspects need to be mentioned.

First, the emphasis upon the utter transcendence of the One was to further strengthen apophatic approaches to the Christian understanding of God (itself heir to Hebrew emphasis upon the unknowability of God).

Secondly, it contributed to an exemplarist metaphysics. This warrants some clarification. Plato, the father of Western philosophy, had struggled with the problem of how we can attain certain knowledge in a changeable and material world. As is well known, the Greeks had made significant progress in the area of mathematics and geometry. Taking his cue from the certainty we can attain in the immaterial, theoretical world of mathematics, Plato had argued that all things (a tree, a dog, a woman, legal system)

participate in a transcendent, ideal world of spiritual forms. Our material world is therefore a mere reflection of this perfect world of forms. (Incidentally, Aristotle accepted the notion of forms but he claimed that these forms only exist in material things, rather than in a transcendent realm – a view Thomas Aquinas was to adopt.) The spiritual forms or Ideas (the perfect, spiritual archetypes, models or exemplars of things) *in-form* the world: a dog is a dog, and not a tree, because its matter is “in-formed” by the Idea of “caninehood”. These forms shape all things in the world, and are the foundation of our certain knowledge of them. Now Plotinus had claimed that the divine ideas are to be found in the *Nous*, or the divine Mind, the second hypostasis within the Divinity. For Augustine, the divine ideas, models or exemplars (*aeternae rationes*) of all created things, are contained in the Word, the second person of the Trinity: “there is but one Word of God, through which all things were made (John 1:1–6), which is unchanging truth, in which all things are primordially and unchangingly together, not only things that are in the whole of this creation, but things that have been and will be” (*De Trin.* IV.3). This doctrine of exemplarism allows later theologians to connect theology of the Trinity (especially the generation of the Word from the Father) with theology of creation. It will assist them in seeing the whole of creation as a marvellous reflection of the beauty of the divine Word.

Another important view which Augustine inherited from “the Platonists” (Neoplatonism is, of course, a modern scholarly term) is the notion that evil is absence of goodness. Evil is a defect of being and goodness, the way that natural evil (e.g., blindness) is an absence of goodness (e.g., sight) (cf. *Confess.* VII.12.18 and *De Civ. Dei* XI.9 and 22: “evil” is merely a name for the privation of good.”) Given the fact that everything God created is something (good), God is not directly responsible for the evil in this world. Augustine was to use this doctrine to explain how evil which occurs in this world, is not caused by God. This proved important for his departure from Manichaeism. Finally, there is a strong sense of longing for the immaterial, transcendent realm and for fulfilment beyond the material world – a longing which strongly appealed to Augustine.

During this time Augustine also submerged himself in the Scriptures. One day, sitting in the garden of his house in Milan he heard a child singing *Tolle et lege*, “Pick up and read.” Augustine opened St. Paul's letters and his eyes fell on Rom. 13:13–14, in which St Paul admonishes his readers to abandon their orgies and drunkenness, requesting them to put on the Lord Jesus Christ. At that very moment all the shadows of doubts were dispelled (*Confess.* VII.12 [29]). He gave up his worldly career and started writing his

first works, including the *Soliloquies*. Sometime later, during the Easter Vigil of 387, Augustine was baptized by Ambrose. He returned to North Africa where he was ordained in 391. Five years later he became bishop of Hippo until his death in 430. Apart from the *Confessions* his most important works are *The City of God* (*De Civitate Dei*), *The Trinity* (*De Trinitate*), *On Christian Doctrine* (*De Doctrina Christiana*), *Faith, Hope and Charity* (*Enchiridion*), sermons, a range of anti-Pelagian, anti-Manichaeist and anti-Donatist writings, commentaries on Scriptures, including on St. John, Genesis and the Psalms, i.e., *Expositions of the Psalms* (*Enarrationes in Psalmos*).

THE RELATION BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY, REASON AND FAITH

In his search for truth, Augustine engaged deeply with the philosophy of Antiquity. This was to shape the way he viewed the relation between faith and reason, and theology and philosophy. Philosophy, which to him is a way of life rather than a discipline, is important as a *praeparatio evangelica*, a preparation for the Christian religion. Christianity is, however, the *vera philosophia*, the true philosophy. Again, although reason has its part to play in helping us to understand our faith, it is the total relation to the soul which interests Augustine. Thus, it is not possible to separate Augustine's theology from philosophical considerations, and vice versa. The attempt to attain fulfilment by merely relying on an independent philosophy would have struck him as undesirable.

His views on faith and reason have acquired a new relevance in our post-modern times, now that the modern Cartesian understanding of reason in terms of utter autonomy has been questioned. In a short treatise, *Faith in the Unseen*, he criticizes those people "who maintain that the Christian religion should be despised rather than embraced, because what it presents is not something tangible but something that demands faith in matters which lie beyond human vision." In the treatise, Augustine refutes this positivistic view by pointing out the fiduciary nature of human rationality and society. In *The Advantage of Believing*, 12.26 he states that absolutely nothing in society would be safe if we decided not to believe anything that we cannot hold as evident. How can we procure convincing evidence of genuine love or friendship between people? The consequence of a radical positivistic stance would be "that human relationships are thrown into chaos" (*Faith in the Unseen*, 2.4). Radical skepticism is equally untenable: it is, after all, impossible to doubt everything, for when we doubt we always

presuppose something as given. In a passage that may have inspired Descartes' *Meditations* who, however, used it for radically different purposes, Augustine argues:

If you are not sure what I am saying and have doubts about whether it is true, at least be sure that you have no doubts about having doubts about this; and, if it is certain that you do have doubts, ask where this certainty comes from . . . Everyone who understands that he has doubts is understanding something true, and he is certain about this thing that he understands. He is certain therefore about something true. So then, everyone who has doubts whether there is such a thing as truth has something true in himself about which he cannot have any doubts, and there cannot be anything true except with truth. And so, one who has been able to have doubts about anything has no business to have doubts about truth.¹

Augustine developed the same theme in *De Civitate Dei* XI.26, in language that clearly influenced Descartes ("If I am mistaken, I exist'. A non-existent being cannot be mistaken; therefore I must exist, if I am mistaken.") For Augustine radical skepticism – universal doubt – is impossible. Every doubt is predicated on accepting something as true. It is intellectually incoherent to claim that we can doubt everything. Similarly, radical positivism, which only accepts those elements to be true which can be empirically shown to be true, is not a viable intellectual or existential option. The two extremes of radical skepticism and positivism have in common that they both deny important fiduciary aspects of the human search for meaning and truth.

In this context it may prove useful to draw attention to a distinction Augustine makes between reason and understanding or intellect (*intellectus*). It is characteristic of the human being to reason; however, the knowledge acquired by reason, and the glimpse of truth thus gained, is understanding. This distinction between reason and understanding or intellect will prove highly influential in later thinkers.

GRACE AND OUR SEARCH FOR GOD

Augustine was deeply aware of his powerlessness in turning towards God. He felt that only God could (and eventually did) pull him out of the abyss of sin. Sinful human beings, subject to selfishness from the earliest moments of infancy, are the prisoners of habits that become second nature. Only grace can restore authentic freedom. According to Augustine, Adam and Eve initially enjoyed the divine assistance of grace and justice. However, when

¹ *True Religion* (*De Vera Religione*), 39 [73], trans. Edmund Hill as *Saint Augustine. On Christian Belief* (New York: New City Press, 2005), 78–79.

they sinned and turned away from God, they lost this divine assistance. Henceforward, human nature becomes "fallen." It is not utterly corrupt, but it has lost its initial focus and original justice. Because every member of the human family shares in Adam's human nature, all of humanity shares in the consequences of this Fall. We are all in need of the aid of divine grace to restore us to our pristine condition, and without this free gift of grace (which has become available in Christ's saving work) we cannot be redeemed.

Given the fact that some people die as unreconciled sinners Augustine takes for granted that not all will be saved; only some belong to the elect. Initially, such as in his *Propositions on Romans*, §60, he taught that God freely bestows his grace upon those who would put it to good use. Given God's foreknowledge, he elects those whom he foreknew would believe in him. But then he realised that this view effectively made God's grace dependent on the response of human beings to it – and this he felt to be unacceptable. So he later revised his teaching, and argued that God freely bestows his grace upon some (and thereby will save them) and not upon others, and no reason can be given for this choice. This is the teaching of predestination.

Augustine's views hardened through his dispute with Pelagius, a British lay theologian who had a more positive understanding of human nature. Pelagianism refers to the doctrine that human beings are able to achieve their salvation by their own powers. Original sin was no more than Adam's bad example, which can be nullified if we follow the example of Christ. Original sin refers to the universality of sin which results in a social habit after Adam had set a bad example. Death, for Pelagius, was a biological necessity, not a punishment from God. Against these views Augustine argued grace is needed, even just to turn our will away from evil towards God. Original sin refers to an inherited defect which impairs the freedom of the will. Death is a punishment for sin. No pain or loss is undeserved. All of us are guilty of sin, and all of us therefore stand under judgement. In Augustine's analysis the issue is not why God fails to save all. Rather, the issue is: why does God bother saving some? Infant baptism illustrates that people are in need of grace even before they commit actual and deliberate sins.

Some readers might perhaps be forgiven for thinking that Pelagius' views appear at first more attractive, perhaps even more "modern." They seem to safeguard human freedom more than Augustine's. Moreover, can it not be argued that Augustine's God is somewhat arbitrary, electing some and not others?

A number of points need to be made to avoid a simplistic interpretation. To appreciate Augustine's views it may be useful to remember that

Christianity sees the relationship between God and humanity in terms of love. Now nobody is entitled to the love of anybody else. You cannot force the other person to love you. Love has to be freely given, and the same applies to God's grace: it is, quite literally, something that is given gratuitously. As he puts it in *De Trin.* IV.2: grace is "not paid out as something earned but is given gratis; that is why it is called grace." Similarly, faith is a gift from God. It is not something we can attain by our own efforts. Moreover, as Luther realized, the notion that we cannot merit God's favor by our own initiative is not an infringement of human freedom; it is actually liberating. Pelagianism puts a terrible burden on the human person, impossible to meet. Finally, we need to be careful about what exactly we mean when talking of human freedom. Augustine distinguishes between the freedom of choice (*liberum arbitrium*) and genuine freedom (*libertas*). Freedom of choice is not freedom in the full sense of the word. The latter freedom (*libertas*) refers to our orientation towards God through the enabling operation of divine grace upon our will. This *libertas*, or God-given freedom, is not a diminishment of our human freedom but a restoration and fulfilment. It was this kind of freedom, not the freedom of choice, that Adam lost in the Garden of Eden, and which Christ has restored.² It can be argued that the problem of a tension between grace and freedom does not exist for Augustine. As he sees it, grace does not diminish human freedom but actually enables it. True freedom for man is God-given freedom. In comparison, freedom of choice is but a pale privilege. In short, Augustine's pessimism – or realism? – in relation to the impotence of fallen humanity to effect its own salvation is counterbalanced by a profound sense of God's powerful grace.

Even when we take into consideration Augustine's analysis of the gratuity of God's operation in us as existentially valid, I suspect most readers may still harbor a number of reservations. The key issue is predestination of some, and not others:

God almighty, the supreme and supremely good creator of all beings, who assists and rewards good wills, while he abandons and condemns the bad . . . surely did not fail to have a plan whereby he might complete the fixed number of citizens predestined in his wisdom, even out of the condemned human race. He does not now choose them for their merits, seeing that the whole mass of humankind has been condemned as it were in its infected root; . . . each person can recognize that his deliverance from evils is due to an act of kindness freely granted, not owed to

² See Mary T. Clarke, *Augustine of Hippo* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 50, with a reference to *Contra duas epistolas Pelagianorum ad Bonifacium Papam*, I.25.

him by right, when he is exempted from sharing the final destiny of those whose just punishment he had shared. (*De Civ. Dei* XIV.26)

All of humankind shares in original sin through Adam, the “infected root.” Therefore, all deserve to remain separated from God. However, God bestows his grace upon some, and not others. When we seek to fathom why mercy is given to some we cannot say. For the gratuitous nature of grace precludes the view that this bestowal is based on any prevenient merit. As Augustine had argued in *Letter* 194: when we seek to know how mercy is deserved we find no merit because there is none: grace would be made void if it were not freely given but awarded to merit. Of course, only God knows who the chosen few are. In my view the key problem is not the abolishment of human freedom, as is often alleged, but rather Augustine’s view that God’s predestination is not universal. Undoubtedly, Augustine did consider this kind of reservation foolish: “Who but a fool could think that God is unfair, whether he passes adverse judgment on one who deserves it or shows mercy to one who is unworthy?” (*Enchir.* 25 [98])

In Scriptural terms, Augustine can appeal to the favoritism Yahweh shows towards some, and not others (e.g., Jacob over Esau, cf. Mal. 1:2–3 and Rom. 9:13). In the NT, too, there are a number of texts which also seem to support Augustine’s views on predestination, such as Rom. 8:28–30 and Eph. 1:4. On the other hand, at times Augustine has to do violence to the natural meaning of the text to maintain his teaching. He interprets 1 Tim. 2:4 (“God wants everyone to be saved”) to mean that “nobody is saved except those whom he wills to be saved” (*Enchir.* 27 [103]). As we will see, in the ninth century a major controversy broke out over the issue of predestination, with Gottschalk claiming that Augustine had taught a double predestination, one towards heaven, and another one towards hell. Calvin, too, later developed these ideas even further in his theory of double predestination. Augustine’s view also entails that unbaptized babies are condemned because they share in the collective alienation which originated with Adam. This view, considered problematic, forced the Church in the Middle Ages to develop the doctrine of limbo.

AUGUSTINE AND THE BIBLE

We have already touched upon the topic of Augustine’s interpretation of the Scriptures. There are aspects of Augustine’s approach to the Scriptures which may strike us as quite modern. For instance, he expresses his annoyance at Christians who mistake what the Scriptures may say about a

certain topic, with solid, scientific knowledge. It is “quite disgraceful and disastrous” he writes, when non-Christians hear Christians talk nonsense about scientific topics, unjustifiably claiming the authority of the Scriptures for their erroneous views: “what is so vexing is not that misguided people should be laughed at, as that our authors should be assumed by outsiders to have held such views, and, to the great detriment of those about whose salvation we are so concerned, should be written off and consigned to the waste paper basket as so many ignoramuses” (*The Literal Meaning of Genesis* I.19 [39]).³ The Scriptures are not manuals on cosmology or science. But there are also ways in which Augustine’s views on the Scriptures are rather different from ours, and this is where he can begin to challenge ours.

For Augustine, the Scriptures are the word of God. They form a coherent whole, and he is not shy about using one passage to throw light on an entirely different passage. He also resists an exclusively literal reading of the Scriptures, happily espousing allegory and typology. In *Enarr. in Ps.* 103 (Expos. 1.13) he defines allegory as follows: “Something is said to be an allegory when one meaning seems to be conveyed by the words, and a different meaning is symbolised for our minds.”⁴ A number of examples will clarify this. In his book *The Literal Meaning of Genesis* I.6 [12], Augustine comments on the opening verse of Genesis (“In the beginning (*In principio*) God made heaven and earth . . . And the Spirit of God was being borne over the waters.”). Augustine takes “principium” (“the beginning” but also: “the principle”) to refer to the Word, in whom God the Father creates all things, while the Spirit is, of course, taken as a reference to the third Person of the Trinity. As long as interpretations are in accordance with the Rule of Faith they are legitimate (*De Civ. Dei* XI.32) and not arbitrary. For Augustine the Bible is not primarily a historical book, although it does contain a lot of historically accurate accounts. The Scriptures are designed to nourish devout hearts. Just as the created world reveals, and points to, its Creator, so too the words of the Scripture are deeply symbolic, referring to a more profound reality. As Augustine knew from his own journey: a literal interpretation of the Scriptures often stands in the way of faith.

In his disputes with the Manicheans, Augustine explains that many of the OT events prefigure Christ and his Church. This is typology. An obvious example is how Adam prefigures Christ, and Eve the Church:

³ All translations by Edmund Hill from Saint Augustine, *On Genesis* (New York: New City Press, 2002).

⁴ All translations by Maria Boulding from Saint Augustine, *Exposition of the Psalms*, 6 vols. (New York: New City Press, 2000–2004).

Adam was a type of the one who was to come, and when Adam slept, Eve was formed from his side. Adam prefigured Christ, and Eve prefigured the Church, which is why she was called the mother of the living (cf. Gen. 3:20). When was Eve fashioned? While Adam slept. And when did the Church's sacraments flow forth from Christ's side? While he slept on the Cross. (*Enarr. in Ps.* 40:9 [10])

As Eve was formed from the side of sleeping Adam (Gen. 2:21), so too the Church was formed from the side of Christ (cf. John 19:34). In a commentary on one of the verses from the Psalms, Augustine draws on Genesis and John's Gospel to weave an intricate and suggestive tapestry of theological interpretation. Again, this is not an arbitrary move: it is a Christocentric hermeneutic that remains faithful to the Rule of Faith.

CHRIST, SALVATION AND CHURCH

Augustine develops a number of soteriological themes. One of these is the release from Satan's bondage, explored in *De Trin.* XIII.16–18 and elsewhere. Augustine explains that by divine justice the human race was handed over to the power of the devil. Christ's humility neutralized the pride of sin, and as Christ had not committed any sin, and yet was killed, the devil had to release humanity from his captivity. Anselm of Canterbury was to take issue with this account. It is, however, not all that important in Augustine's understanding of how Christ effected our salvation. Of much greater significance is the way we become incorporated into Christ and emulate his humility.

The theme of the humility of God (*humilitas Dei*, in *De Trin.* IV.4) runs throughout Augustine's oeuvre. Probably reflecting his own journey, Augustine is very much aware that there is something deeply humbling about having to accept that the transcendent God became human and died for us on the Cross. In this context, Augustine adopts the patristic theme of exchange: "becoming a partaker of our mortality he made us partakers of his divinity" (*De Trin.* IV.4).⁵ Another theme he develops, and one which resonated with the early Edward Schillebeeckx, is the notion that Christ is the sacrament of our salvation (*De Trin.* IV.6). Christ's death and resurrection draw us towards a transformation which shares in, and is made possible by, his saving activity. The death of Christ can refer, in a symbolic way, to our death to sin, that is: repentance over our sins. In a more literal sense Christ's death can assist us in approaching our own sufferings and death as a participation in those of Christ. Again, Christ's resurrection can

⁵ All translations by Edmund Hill, Saint Augustine, *The Trinity* (New York: New City Press, 1991).

refer to our inner resurrection, i.e., our inner spiritual renewal. It also prefigures and pledges our own bodily resurrection. In *Enchir.* 52 we read: "just as he suffered a true death, in us there is true forgiveness of sins, and just as his resurrection was true, so also is our justification true."⁶ Thus, the life and death of Christ is existentially relevant for us here and now: Christians are called to "live within these mysteries" (*Enchir.* 53).

A particularly fruitful theme – and a very Biblical one – in Augustine's soteriology is that of sacrifice (*De Trin.* IV.15–19 and *De Civ. Dei* X). It is worthwhile to elaborate on this, as it also has profound implications for Christian spirituality.

In *De Civ. Dei* X.5 Augustine argues that God does not require sacrifices for his own gratification ("it is man, not God who is benefited by all the worship which is rightly offered to God").⁷ Quoting Ps. 16:2, he argues that it would be foolish to assume that God needs our sacrifices: it is we who benefit from the worship that is offered to God, not God. The purpose of past and present offerings is that "we may cleave to God and seek the good of our neighbour for the same end. Thus the visible sacrifice is the sacrament, the sacred sign, of the invisible sacrifice" (*Sacrificium ergo uisibile inuisibilis sacrificii sacramentum id est sacrum signum est*). God does not want the sacrifice of a slaughtered animal but he does desire "the sacrifice of a broken heart" (cf. Ps. 51:17), and this is the invisible, inner sacrifice Augustine has in mind. "Thus," Augustine writes, "the true sacrifice is offered in every act which is designed to unite us to God in a holy fellowship, every act, that is, which is directed to that final Good which makes possible our true felicity" (*De Civ. Dei* X.6). True sacrifices are "acts of compassion, whether towards ourselves or towards our neighbours, when they are directed towards God."⁸ In offering our sacrifices "we shall be aware that visible sacrifice must be offered only to him, to whom we ourselves ought to be an invisible sacrifice in our hearts."⁹ So what matters, is the intention with which we make our offerings. Clearly, Augustine has a very broad understanding of the notion of sacrifice: in that sense, our body can be a sacrifice, when we discipline it for the sake of God. Even more so, the soul can be an instrument of sacrifice, when it offers itself up to God, abandoning worldly desires and becoming transformed in submission to God (*De Civ. Dei* X.6).

⁶ Translation by Bruce Harbert from Saint Augustine, *On Christian Belief* (New York: New City Press, 2005).

⁷ *De Civ. Dei* X.5, trans. H. Bettenson as *St Augustine. The City of God* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984).

⁸ *Ibid.* X.6. ⁹ *Ibid.* X.19.

The true nature of sacrifice can only be properly grasped from the perspective of the Cross and its re-enactment in the Eucharist:

The whole redeemed community, that is to say, the congregation and fellowship of the saints, is offered to God as a universal sacrifice through the great Priest who offered himself in his suffering for us – so that we might be the body of so great a head – under the form of a servant. For it was this form he offered, and in this form he was offered, because it is under this form that he is the Mediator, in this form he is the Priest, in this form he is the Sacrifice . . . This is the sacrifice which the Church continually celebrates in the sacrament of the altar, a sacrament well-known to the faithful where it is shown to the Church that she herself is offered in the offering which she presents to God. (*De Civ. Dei* X.6)

This is a dense quotation, as it weaves together Christological, Eucharistic and ecclesiological themes. A key aspect of the argument is the living link between Christ and his Church. For Augustine, Church refers to the community of the believers. This community is the body of Christ (cf. Rom. 12:3 ff.). This intimate union between Christ and his Church is established in and through the Eucharist, which re-enacts the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. Thus, on the Cross, Christ is the priest who makes the offering, and the offer itself (*oblatio*). The daily sacrifice of the Church – the Eucharist – is the sacramental symbol of this (*cuius rei sacramentum*), and the Church, being the body of Christ, learns to offer itself through him (*De Civ. Dei* X.20).

It has become clear that Augustine establishes a close link between the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, the Eucharistic sacrifice, and the community of the Church. These three themes are connected by the notion of the Body of Christ. This notion can refer to the body of the Incarnate Word, the historical Jesus. It can also refer to the Eucharistic body of Christ. Finally, it can refer to the community of the believers who are vivified by the Holy Spirit. In *Sermon 272*, preached to newly baptized Christians who are about to receive the Eucharistic bread for the first time, Augustine put it memorably: “Be then what you see and receive what you are.” Through partaking in the body and blood of Christ we ourselves become the one body of Christ. As Christ addresses Augustine in the *Confessions*: “you will not change me into you like the food your flesh eats, but you will be changed into me” (*Confess.* VII.x [16]).

The spiritual implications of this theology are significant, for it allows us to consider our own afflictions as a participation in the redemptive suffering of Christ. More specifically, given the intimate link between Christ and his Church, Augustine makes the radical claim that the risen Christ continues to suffer in his members:

If he is the head, we are the limbs. The whole Church, spread abroad everywhere, is his body, and of that body he is the head . . . Accordingly, when we hear his voice, we must hearken to it as coming from both head and body; for whatever he suffered, we too suffered in him, and whatever we suffer, he too suffers in us. Think of an analogy: if your head suffers some injury, can your hand be unaffected? Or if your hand is hurt, can your head be free from pain? . . . When any one of your members suffers, all the other members hasten to help the one that is in pain. This solidarity meant that when Christ suffered, we suffered in him; and it follows that now that he has ascended into heaven, and is seated at the Father’s right hand, he still undergoes in the person of his Church whatever it may suffer amid the troubles of this world, whether temptations, or hardship, or oppression. (*Enarr. in Ps.* 62:2)

In *Enarr. in Ps.* 61:4, drawing on Col. 1:24 Augustine makes the same point: our own sufferings can be interpreted as contributing to the universal passion of Christ: “He suffered as our head, and he suffers in his members, which means in us.” This theology does not legitimize our sufferings but it allows us to see them in a different light: as somehow sharing in Christ’s saving activity. These soteriological ideas were to influence many key authors after him, such as Anselm, Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas and others.

TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

Augustine’s work *De Trinitate*, consisting of fifteen books, is his most original and searching contribution to the understanding of the Christian God: “Nowhere else is a mistake more dangerous, or the search more laborious, or discovery more advantageous” (I.5). The work, one of the most genial theological books in history, can be roughly divided into two halves: Books I–VII, and Books VIII–XV, with Book VIII as an important transitional chapter.¹⁰

In *De Trin.*, Augustine propounds many original theses that left a deep imprint on later theological thinking in the West. Indeed, it is fair to say that Trinitarian theology in the West is but a footnote to Augustine’s seminal work. Key questions that are being addressed in the book are: how can we claim that the three Persons are distinct when the Trinity works inseparably in everything that God does?¹¹ How can there be

¹⁰ When this book was going to press, the study by Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge University Press, 2010) had just appeared. The book should be regarded as the classic study of Augustine’s Trinitarian theology for many years to come.

¹¹ Augustine clearly states that “just as Father and Son and Holy Spirit are inseparable, so do they work inseparably” (*De Trin.* I.7). This view safeguards monotheism. It does not, however, exclude the three Persons from acting inseparably in *distinct* ways (as for instance in the Incarnation).

distinction between the three Persons given the oneness of God? How are Son and Holy Spirit distinct from one another? How can there be equality between the three Persons given the fact that the Father is the origin of the other Persons? How can we square texts in the NT that seem to suggest the inferiority of Christ with his supposed equality with God the Father – an issue which was of particular importance given the Arian challenge.

The last question can be relatively easily answered. Appealing to Phil. 2:6, on the self-emptying of the Son, Augustine argues that “in the form of a servant which he took he [= the Son] is the Father’s inferior; in the form of God in which he existed even before he took this other [form] he is the Father’s equal” (*De Trin.* I.14). In short, distinguishing between the human and divine natures of Christ (as the Council of Chalcedon was to do in AD 451) Augustine argues that texts that seem to attribute inferiority to the Son, should be understood as referring to the human nature of Christ, not to his divine nature. This takes the sting out of the Arian critique. This allows Augustine to speak, for instance, of “a crucified God” (*deus crucifixus*), “owing to the weakness of flesh, though, not to the strength of godhead” (*De Trin.* I.28).

Books II–IV are mainly concerned with the divine missions, the sendings of Son (Incarnation) and Holy Spirit (such as at Pentecost). This brings us to Augustine’s first, major contribution to later theology of the Trinity. For Augustine, everything we say about the inner nature of the Trinity has to be based on how the triune God reveals himself in the history of salvation, namely in the sendings of the Son and Holy Spirit. In Rahner’s terms: the economic Trinity reveals the immanent Trinity. This is why Book IV contains an extended soteriological discussion, which illustrates how the mission of the Son reveals the eternal generation of the Son within the Trinity.

Books V–VII deal with linguistic difficulties we encounter when speaking of the Trinity. Here we find elaborate discussions of the notion of “Personhood” for instance. Augustine puts a distinct emphasis upon divine simplicity. In Aristotelian language: there is no distinction in God between his essence (what he is), and his “accidents”. When we call something “simple” we are effectively saying that there is no difference between what it *is* and what it *has* (cf. *De Civ. Dei* XI.10). Whereas goodness, wisdom, justice and other attributes do not belong to our essence as human beings – we may have them as attributes – in God they do.

But then the question arises: how can we square divine simplicity with a distinction between the three Persons? Augustine’s answer is to distinguish the Persons from one another in terms of their relationships: “although

being Father is different from being Son, there is no difference of substance, because they are not called these things substance-wise but relationship-wise” (*non secundum substantiam dicuntur sed secundum relatiuum*) (*De Trin.* V.6). Although the Cappadocians had developed similar ideas Augustine was the first in the West to introduce this notion. In this view, God is utterly “simple”; his being is identical with his attributes. Only the relations in which each of the Persons stands to the others is distinct. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one God, but the Father is not the Son, and neither of them is the Holy Spirit (*De Civ. Dei* XI.10; *De Trin.* V.9).

The Arian critics had argued that the distinctions within the Godhead were either of substance (which would mean there are three gods) or accidental or non-essential (which would imply that there is no real distinction between Father, Son and Spirit). Against this, Augustine argued that the divine Persons were subsistent relations, i.e., Father, Son and Spirit are relations in the sense that whatever each of them is, he is in relation to one or both of the others. “Father” and “Son” are co-relative terms, “opposites” in relational language. Only the mutual relations allow you to distinguish between the Persons within the Godhead: the Father is distinguished as Father because he begets the Son, and the Son is distinguished as Son because he is begotten. The Spirit, similarly, is distinguished as he is “bestowed” by them; he is their common gift, being a kind of communion of Father and Son.

It is clear that neither the Son nor the Holy Spirit is the Father, as there is a distinction between being an originator, and being originated from. But how do we distinguish the Son from the Holy Spirit, seeing that the Spirit, too, comes forth from the Father, as it says in the Gospel (John 15:26) (cf. *De Trin.* V.15)? Augustine’s answer, which was to shape the whole of Latin theology – and cause a rift with the Eastern Orthodox Church – was that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and from the Son* (*Filioque*). Augustine can undoubtedly appeal to the Biblical witness to make this case. His espousal of the *Filioque* follows from his key presupposition that whatever we say about the inner Trinity has to be based on the revelation of the Persons in the history of salvation. Given the fact that there are scriptural texts that indicate that the Son, too, sends the Holy Spirit, it stands to reason that, within the inner nature of the Trinity, the Son, too, is involved in the spiration of the Holy Spirit.

In talking about the Persons of the Trinity we need to make an important distinction between those words that are relationship-words, and hence can only be said about one of the divine Persons, and words which can refer to the divine being, the whole Trinity. For instance, only the Second Person of

the Trinity can be called "Son," or "Word." These are what we would call "personal names," as they are used relationship-wise (*relative intelligitur*) while other terms, such as "wisdom" or "goodness," are said about the divine being (*essentialiter*) (*De Trin.* VII.3). In later terminology we would say that calling the Son "Wisdom" is a case of appropriation. Word and Wisdom are closely related in meaning. Only "Word" is a relationship word, i.e., it contains an intrinsic reference to one of the other Persons (the Son is the Word of the Father), while the whole Trinity is wise (*De Trin.* VII.3). As Augustine explains: Father and Son are together one wisdom and one being, because of divine simplicity (in which "to be" is the same as "to be wise"); they are not, however, both together Word or Son. Only the Second Person is Son, which is a term of relationship (*relative dici*).

What about the word "Person" itself? "Person" is clearly used for all three within the Trinity. It is therefore not a relationship-word. When we call the Father a "Person," he is so called "with reference to himself, not with reference to the Son or the Holy Spirit" (*De Trin.* VII.11). In that sense the word "Person" is like the word "God" – another non-relationship-word. And yet, the word "Person" is used for Father, Son and Holy Spirit each as the only term to denote what the three are in their distinctiveness. Hence we speak of three Persons, not three Gods. Augustine concludes that we retain the word "Person" for each of the divine three, so "as not to be reduced to silence when we are asked three what" (*De Trin.* VII.11).

The second part (Books IX–XV) treats of the image of Trinity in the human soul. This too is a major innovation, although it was often misunderstood in the later tradition, such as by Peter Lombard (I *Sent.* d.3.2), whose interpretation was in turn rectified by Thomas Aquinas (*STI.* 93.7 *ad* 2). What Augustine tries to do in *De Trin.*, is "to see him by whom we were made by means of this image which we ourselves are, as through a mirror." (*De Trin.* XV.14). Thus, he tries to find traces of the Trinity in the human person, so as to assist him in penetrating deeper into the mystery of the triune God. In his search a number of different analogies are being reviewed. In Book VIII he mentions the Trinitarian character of charity: "you do see a trinity if you see charity" (*Immo uero uides trinitatem si caritatem uides*) (*De Trin.* VIII.12). After all, when we love somebody, we also love the love with which we love. And of course, God is love (1 John 4:8). Hence our love in its threefold dimension (the lover, what is being loved, and love) discloses something of the mystery of the Trinitarian God (*De Trin.* VIII.12–14). Augustine did not develop this analogy of love in any

greater detail but his hints proved a fruitful inspiration for the Trinitarian theology of Richard of St. Victor.

Another analogy he develops (*De Trin.* X.17–19) is that of memory (*memoria*), understanding (*intellegentia*) and will (*voluntas*). These three form one mind (*mens*), are equal to one another, and therefore suggest a promising avenue to explore the mystery of the Three in One, especially if we construe it in dynamic terms (i.e., as acts rather than as static faculties), thus mirroring the divine processions. For whenever we use our intellectual powers (for instance, when I think about the city walls of Rome) a mental word (*verbum mentis*) is issued from the storehouse of *memoria*. The *verbum mentis*, or inner word, is a "word" before it is spoken aloud. It is even pre-linguistic. (The linguistic expression of the inner word Augustine compares to the Incarnation of the Word (*De Trin.* XV.20)). As E. Hill explains in his outstanding translation of *De Trinitate*: this mental word is "a mentally visible replica or image of the object of understanding latent in the memory. It can thus be regarded as an offspring (*proles*) conceived from the parent memory" (p. 266; cf. *De Trin.* IX.12). But it requires an act of will to continue to think about something. He concludes: "And so you have a certain image of the Trinity, the mind itself and its knowledge, which is its offspring and its word about itself, and love as the third element, and *these three are one* (1 John 5:8) and are one substance" (*De Trin.* IX.18).

Thus, Augustine draws a comparison between the inner workings of the mind, and the Trinity. As an inner word is generated from memory, and the will rejoices in this knowledge (rather than eliciting it), so too the Word is generated from the Father, and the Holy Spirit is the bond between the Word and the Father.

Now this may be a useful comparison but Augustine's main aim is to disclose how we can participate in the life of the Trinity, become transformed and thus become a real image of the Trinity ourselves (*De Trin.* XIV.11). The mind is God's image "insofar as it is capable of him and can participate in him; indeed it cannot achieve so great a good except by being his image" (*De Trin.* XIV.11). In short, at the heart of *De Trinitate* is an existential call for renewal, to become more God-like through faith and love, and in pursuing this call we will develop a better understanding of the Trinitarian God – insofar as this is possible in this life. This is why the second half of the book contains large excursions on sin, faith, salvation and other key theological themes.

Finally, this explains why, for Augustine, the real image of the Trinity in us is not to be found in the mind remembering, understanding and loving

itself (cf. *De Trin.* XIV.9) but rather in it remembering, understanding and loving God: "This trinity of the mind is not really the image of God because the mind remembers and understands and loves itself, but because it is also able to remember and understand and love him by whom it was made . . . Let it then remember its God to whose image it was made, and understand and love him" (*De Trin.* XIV.15). Actualizing the image-character within us is a lifelong process which will only come to full fruition when we meet God face to face (*De Trin.* XIV.23–25).

Augustine's achievement in *De Trinitate* is outstanding; he clearly argued that the historical missions of the Son and Spirit reveal something of their inner processions within the Trinity; he explained the dogma of the Trinity in terms of subsistent relations; he developed the psychological analogy to the Trinity; he is responsible for the *Filioque*; and, finally, he developed a beautiful spirituality of the image: the soul reflects and reveals the Trinity best when it knows and loves God. Thomas Aquinas was to develop these ideas in greater detail.

AUGUSTINE'S SPIRITUALITY: THE FRUITION OF GOD

"It is our great misfortune not to be with him without whom we cannot be" (*Magna itaque hominis miseria est cum illo non esse sine quo non potest esse*) (*De Trin.* XIV.16). Our discussion of Augustine's soteriological and Trinitarian views has revealed that his theology is inextricably wound up with a profound and multifaceted spirituality. One of the ways in which Augustine tried to express his view that God should be our ultimate concern in all our activities (intellectual or practical) is by his often misunderstood distinction between enjoyment of God (*frui*) and use of things (*uti*). Augustine illustrates this distinction between enjoyment (*frui*) and use (*uti*) by referring to somebody who while travelling to his homeland has to make use of different instruments to reach it. This kind of person should not abandon his final goal, which is the sole source of his fruition and fulfilment; if he does abandon his goal by treating the means as an end, he will never reach his homeland. What Augustine attempts to make clear is that only God should be our ultimate concern; no created being should be considered as the ultimate. Having distinguished between things that are to be enjoyed and things that are to be used, Augustine goes on to identify those things that do both the enjoying and using, saying (in *De Doctr. Christ.* I.3): "We ourselves, however, both enjoy and use things, and find ourselves in the middle, in a position to choose which to do. So if we wish to enjoy things that are meant to be used, we are impeding our progress, and

sometimes are deflected from our course, because we are thereby delayed in obtaining what we should be enjoying, or turned back from it altogether."¹² He then goes on to define enjoyment. It consists "in clinging to something lovingly for its own sake." Use consists in "referring what has come your way to what your love aims at obtaining, provided, that is, it deserves to be loved" (*De Doctr. Christ.* I.4). Everything we "use" needs to be referred back to our ultimate concern: God as the object of our fruition. Other human beings are not really to be enjoyed (as in *De Doctr. Christ.*) or, if we are willing to concede that they can be enjoyed, they should only be enjoyed "in God" (*De Trin.* IX.13).

It may seem to modern commentators that the notion that only God is to be enjoyed, necessarily implies an instrumentalization of creation, including human persons. I would argue with Augustine and the medieval tradition after him, that the opposite is the case: Augustine's radical theocentric focus – only God is to be enjoyed – is exactly what keeps us from either idolizing creation, or contemptuously disregarding it. For only when our desire is immediately focused on God, and only indirectly on created beings, can we attribute intrinsic meaning to created beings. An analogy with friendship may clarify this: you can only reap the benefits of friendship (such as mutual support, consolation) if you do not directly aim for these benefits. If you target them immediately you cease to be a friend (you may perhaps become a "social networker"). Similarly, when our desire is first focused on God, we can then, indirectly, treat created beings with the reverence that is due to them, without subjecting them to a calculative or instrumentalizing approach.¹³ In other words, "enjoying God only" does not imply, for Augustine, that we cannot consider created beings as having intrinsic value.¹⁴ In short, the distinction between *frui* and *uti* allows Augustine to make clear how everything we do should be focused on God, or have God as its ultimate reference. This is a key theme which runs throughout medieval theology, as we will see.

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The critical edition of key works by St. Augustine has been published in the *Corpus Christianorum* Series (Turnhout: Brepols).

¹² All translations from *De Doctr. Christ.* are taken from E. Hill (trans.), *St. Augustine. Teaching Christianity* (New York: New City Press, 1996).

¹³ For a fuller statement of this argument, see Rik Van Nieuwenhove "The Religious Disposition as a Critical Resource to Resist Instrumentalisation," *The Heythrop Journal* 50 (2009): 689–96.

¹⁴ This is why he can invite us in *Enarr. in Ps. 0* (4) no. II: "Learn not to love, so you may learn to love; draw back, so that you may turn [to the Lord]; empty yourself, so you may be filled" – a passage Meister Eckhart was later to quote with approval in his *Book of Divine Consolation*.

The Augustinian Heritage Institute is producing some excellent translations (some of which I have used in this chapter), such as *The Works of St. Augustine. A Translation for the 21st Century*, edited by John Rotelle and published in New York by New City Press. I have used Saint Augustine, vol. 1/5 *The Trinity*, translated by Edmund Hill, New York: New City Press, 1991; vol. 1/11 *Teaching Christianity (De Doctrina Christiana)*, translated by Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 1996); vols. 11/15–20: *Exposition of the Psalms* in 6 vols., translated by Maria Boulding (New York: New City Press, 2000–4; vol. 1/8: *On Christian Belief* (including: *True Religion (De Vera Religione)*, translated by Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 2005); vol. 1/13: *On Genesis*, translated by Edmund Hill (New York: New City Press, 2002). For the translation of the *Confessions*, I have used: Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford University Press, 1992). For *De Civitate Dei*, see the translation by Henry Bettenson, St Augustine, *Concerning The City of God against the Pagans* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984).

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