

Augustine's New Trinity

The Anxious Circle of Metaphor*

by

Eugene Webb

University of Washington

Augustine of Hippo (354–430) would hardly have been pleased to hear himself described as an innovator. Like any other Church leader of his time, he would certainly have preferred to be thought of as a voice of the Church's tradition rather than an originator of any aspect of it. Recent scholarship, however, has come increasingly to see him as the source of some of the most distinctive features of the Western Christian tradition. He is now recognized not only as the originator of the doctrine of Original Sin and the peculiarly western interpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity, but also as a major force in shaping for subsequent generations of Christians the relationship between the Church's spiritual role and its role as a power in the social and political world.

With this recognition of the innovativeness of Augustine's thought has also come the question of how his original contributions are to be evaluated. How well, for example, did he understand the tradition he was trying to interpret? How well considered were his innovations? Did they introduce not only new perspectives, but perhaps also distortions of the tradition? Elaine Pagels, for example, in her recent book, *Adam, Eve, and The Serpent*, has said, regarding the influence of his doctrine of Original Sin: "Augustine would eventually transform traditional Christian teaching on freedom, on sexuality, and on sin and redemption for all future generations of Christians. Where earlier generations of Jews and Christians had once found in Genesis 1–3 the affirmation of human freedom to choose good or evil, Augustine, living after the age of Constantine, found in the same text a story of human bondage."¹ She describes this as a "cataclysmic transformation in Christian thought" (Ibid.) and suggests that it is time Augustine's distinctive contributions in this area were reexamined and reevaluated. "Since graduate school," she says, "I had taken for granted. . . the conventional orthodox view of Pelagius and his followers as superficial rationalists who stubbornly and inexplicably resisted the deeper truths of Augustinian theology. But after inves-

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¹ New York: Random House, 1988, p. 97.

tigating Augustine's views in the Pelagian controversy and those of his opponents, I concluded. . . that even his admirers would do well to reassess and qualify Augustine's singular dominance in much of Western Christian history."

The present essay will concentrate primarily on an area of Augustine's thought that Pagels did not take up but which may be considered equally in need of reassessment and which is, I would like to suggest, more closely connected than it might at first appear with the issues at stake in his doctrine of Original Sin: his approach to the doctrine of the Trinity by way of an analogy to the structure of the human mind. This "psychological analogy," as it is commonly called, is also coming to be recognized as a distinctly innovative approach which led to a radically original interpretation of that doctrine. Augustine's own subsequent tradition denied that originality, of course, since it claimed that his version of the doctrine of the Trinity was merely a clarification of prior Trinitarian thinking, and even historical scholars tended until recently to give credit to the earlier Latin thinker, Marius Victorinus (fl. 361), for developing the psychological analogy in trinitarian speculation. More recent historians, on the other hand, are inclined to credit Augustine with radical originality here as well,² even if that originality may be due in part to failures of understanding.³

Since this essay is intended as a contribution to a volume on the nature of religious innovation, and therefore, to a certain extent at least, on the nature of originality in religious thinking, it will be appropriate to begin with a few observations regarding some of the ways innovations in religious thought can be said to take place. One way is by reflection on experience: through a genuinely new interpretation of familiar human experience or through reflection on experience that is perceived as being distinctively new in some way. Another is by reflection on the gradually unfolding implications of

² Peter Manchester, for example, has said that Augustine perhaps did not even know, and in any case did not understand Victorinus's conception of the Trinity. "The Noetic Triad in Plotinus, Marius Victorinus, and Augustine," in *Neoplatonism and Gnosticism*, ed. Richard T. Wallis and Jay Bregman, Studies in Neoplatonism: Ancient and Modern 6 (New York: SUNY Press, forthcoming).

³ Of course the romantic tradition which has taught us to speak about "originality" as a virtue, in a way that would have been repugnant not only to Augustine but also to most other thinkers before the modern period, has also made it difficult for most people to associate the idea of originality with failures of understanding, even if such an association has become a major theme of recent literary theory. See, for example, Harold Bloom, *A Map of Misreading* (1975), and *Poetry and Repression* (1976). Bloom suggests that since all thinking takes place in a context of interpretation of inherited meanings, and since originality in such a context requires deviation from standard interpretations, the main road to originality is a more or less willful process of misinterpretation—even if the willfulness involved may often be largely unconscious, as it must certainly have been in Augustine's case. Bloom thinks that the important distinction is not between accurate and inaccurate interpretation but between "strong" and "weak" misinterpretation or, as he terms it, "misprision"—strong being that which expresses an effective will to power (behind Bloom's thinking lie both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche). Augustine, who succeeded in imposing his framework of thought indelibly on Latin Christianity, would seem a good example of strong misprision.

the symbols and concepts that have subsequently been used to express and interpret such experience.

Augustine's innovations were of the latter sort. His doctrine of Original Sin, for example, was a theory that interpreted in a new way what he believed to be the implications of the sin of Adam and Eve and their expulsion from Eden. His version of the doctrine of the Trinity was similarly an attempt to explain the meaning of ancient Biblical images: the images of God as Father, of the Son of God, and of the Holy Spirit. These images had already taken on a trinitarian meaning earlier in the fourth century in the thinking of such figures as Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa, and the trinitarianism they developed was declared dogma by ecumenical councils whose authority Augustine accepted. He came to interpret them, however, in a radically new manner: he gave the doctrine a new meaning, attributing to the Trinity as such a fundamentally different structure from that which it had had for the Greek Christian thinkers who originated the doctrine.⁴ Also, by centering his thought not on Christian experience of relationship with God but rather on speculative metaphors, he gave preference to a mode of interpretation that implied the impossibility of individual Christians thinking for themselves about theology with any genuine personal authority. This had the effect of making them radically dependent on the pronouncements of ecclesiastical authorities—one of the most important of whom for future generations in the West would, of course, be Augustine himself.

Before moving directly to the discussion of the trinitarian doctrine, therefore, it will be helpful to take a moment to consider briefly the originating experiences out of which pre-Augustinian theological reflection seems to have developed. Pagels has especially emphasized the new sense of moral freedom the early Christians felt. The trinitarianism of the tradition preceding Augustine grew out of the same experiential root. For the earliest Christians one of the striking features of the teaching of Jesus was the special sense of intimate relationship to God that he indicated by his frequent use of the word "Abba,"⁵ an intimate and familiar term in Aramaic for "father," which

⁴ Stephen McKenna, "Introduction," p. x: "His psychological study of the Trinity. . . has no parallel in the history of Patristic literature." Cf. also George L. Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1952), p. 236: "The wisest of the Latins were fully conscious that the Greek doctrine of the Trinity was essentially different from their own."

⁵ On the theological significance of this linguistic usage see, for example, William M. Thompson, *The Jesus Debate: A Survey and Synthesis* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), pp. 185–87, and James D. G. Dunn, *Jesus and the Spirit: A Study of the Religious and Charismatic Experience of Jesus and the First Christians as Reflected in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975).

he declared to be a possibility for all who heeded his message and responded to the fatherhood of God.

A similar sense of “sonship” is reflected in the epistles of Paul as well, as when, after speaking of how a Christian shares the life and therefore presumably the experience of Jesus (“. . . the life I now live is not my life, but the life which Christ lives in me” [Gal. 2:20]), he describes that shared experience in the language of sonship and animation by the Holy Spirit: “To prove that you are sons, God has sent into our hearts the Spirit of his Son, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’ You are therefore no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then also by God’s own act an heir.” (Gal. 4:6–7).⁶ A major implication of this image of sonship for Paul was the sense of moral freedom indicated by the contrast between “son” and “slave” in this passage. As Pagels points out, this was to become a central theme of Greek patristic reflection. She says that for the Christian tradition before Augustine, the idea of *autexousia* or the moral freedom to govern oneself was “virtually synonymous with ‘the gospel’” (p. 99). Augustine’s rejection of this in favor of a belief that all humanity, Christian and non-Christian alike, was irreversibly enslaved to sin in this life was, therefore, a radical innovation.

Pagels considers this innovation to have been closely linked to “the evolution of the Christian movement from a persecuted sect to the religion of the emperor himself” (p. 97). She does not go into the exact nature of the linkage, but she does suggest that the reason Augustine’s originally controversial denial of moral freedom came to be so widely accepted in the West after the Council of Orange in 529 was that “Augustine’s theology of the fall made the uneasy alliance between the Catholic churches and imperial power palatable. . . for the majority of Christians” in that it explained why the exercise of coercion among both Christians and non-Christians alike was not only justifiable but necessary (pp. 125–6).

This is probably true as far as it goes, but there seem to have been other important factors as well that produced the special linkage between ecclesiastical and imperial power in the mind of Augustine, and there is good reason to suppose that his doctrines of Original Sin and the Trinity were both closely bound up with them. One such factor that has perhaps not been sufficiently appreciated in reflections on the history of theology is the role of metaphors in the formation of ideas.

⁶ It should be noted that the capitalization of “Son” and “Spirit” here reflects a later theological tradition of interpretation; the original Greek text, which dates from centuries before Byzantine scribes had developed lower case letters in Greek, made no orthographic distinction between the word “sons” as referring to Christians generally and the word “son” as referring to Jesus. The later tradition came increasingly to emphasize the uniqueness of Jesus and his sonship in a way that made his experience of relation to God as father seem radically different in kind from that of his followers, but that is not an assumption necessarily implied in the letters of Paul. Biblical passages are quoted from the New English Bible translation.

Metaphor can function in thinking in a variety of ways. It can be used, for example, to represent in objectivizing language or in terms of objective imagery what is itself intrinsically subjective or spiritual. Bondage and freedom, Father, Son, and Spirit, are all metaphors in this sense. Without metaphor it would be impossible to find voice for the spiritual dimension of experience, and by use of it one hopes to suggest at least indirectly to others the possibility of noticing features of that dimension that would otherwise be incommunicable and would perhaps remain unnoticed and unreflected upon. In this aspect, metaphor is important for theology because it can serve to evoke and to guide individuals and communities toward possibilities of existence of which they might otherwise remain unaware. Used in this manner, metaphor can serve as what Eric Voegelin called “primary symbolism,” symbolism, that is, that gives expression to a genuine insight into concrete experience.⁷ As a primary symbolism, metaphor functions in the manner of a lens, directing attention through itself toward something that it represents analogically.

Metaphor can also function in a quite different way, however, when it ceases to be transparent and to direct attention to something in experience other than itself. Under such circumstances, the outward form of the metaphor will draw attention to itself and begin to precipitate speculations about possible meanings that could be attributed to it. If the metaphor was once used to express something in someone’s actual experience, but the sense of what was referred to is lost, then it falls into the mode of what Voegelin called a “secondary symbolism,” giving rise to new meanings associated with experiences possibly quite different from those that originally gave rise to it.⁸ Augustine’s interpretation of the doctrine of the Trinity seems in relation to its Biblical and Greek Patristic background a classic example of a secondary symbolism in this sense.

There is still another way in which metaphor can function in the development of thought. That is as an unconscious influence on the trend of thinking. In both of the ways just mentioned above the role of metaphor is conscious; one thinks about the metaphor and its meaning and one hopes to be guided by it toward noticing or understanding something. In this third way, on the other hand, it is scarcely noticed at all as such, and yet it directs thought by establishing the implicit framework within

⁷ On primary and secondary symbolism in Voegelin see, *Order and History*, 4: *The Ecumenic Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), pp. 56–58, and Eugene Webb, *Eric Voegelin: Philosopher of History* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1981), pp. 181–84.

⁸ It is also possible, of course, that a metaphor might be produced in some quite different manner that had nothing to do with the expression of experience, as in the case of a “poetry wheel,” for example. In this case, precipitating speculations would be its whole purpose, and there would be no question of anything having been “lost” in the way of meaning or transparency. 5

which experience can be conceived of as intelligible or by establishing fundamental attitudes and expectations.

This aspect of the influence of metaphor in Augustine's thinking and that of his heritage was probably closely connected with the Christian movement's evolution from a marginal and persecuted sect to the official religion of the Roman Empire. For Augustine and many of those who came after him, the image of empire seems to have powerfully gripped and guided their imaginations with what could be called a virtual force of enchantment. William Clebsch has described the enduring power this image had in the later European imagination:

The ancient Roman imperium could not be forgotten any more than Charlemagne's brief decades of hegemony in the west. The Holy Roman Emperors identified with Charlemagne by being crowned and holding court at Aix-la-Chappelle, a center of political unification.

The symbols of spiritual energy still radiated over western Europe from Rome, domiciling the most vivid western reminders of the founding of Christianity. . . . Moreover, Rome continued to haunt Europeans with reminders that it had achieved the grandest ecumenic empire ever. Otto III as emperor and Gerbert of Aurillac as Pope Sylvester II were claiming (by 1000) that they together re-embodied the imperium of Octavianus, the Augustus chosen by God to make last-minute preparations on earth for Christ's incarnation.⁹

Clebsch is speaking here of the medieval survival of the image of the Roman empire as a metaphor for the kingdom of God and for the Church, but the same metaphor was just as important a force in the shaping of the Christian tradition in late antiquity once the conversion of Constantine and his Christianization of the empire had made it available for Christian appropriation, and Augustine was one of the most important agents in this process.

The role of such images, and of the institutions associated with them, in forming religious traditions has become more widely appreciated since they began to receive attention from sociologists of knowledge, such as Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann¹⁰, and from cultural anthropologists, such as Clifford Geertz. "Whatever the ultimate sources of faith of a man or group of men may or may not be," says Geertz, "it is indisputable that it is sustained in this world by symbolic forms and social arrangements. What a given religion is—its specific content—is embodied in the images and metaphors its adherents use to characterize reality; it makes a great deal of difference whether you call life a dream, a pilgrimage, a labyrinth, or a carnival. But such

⁹ *Christianity in European History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 135–36.

¹⁰ See for example Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, New York: Anchor, 1969) and Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books 1967).

a religion's career—its historical course—rests in turn upon the institutions which render these images and metaphors available to those who thus employ them.”¹¹ In the development of the Catholic Christian tradition the image of empire was one of the most important of these. “It is really not much easier to conceive of Christianity without Gregory [Bishop of Rome, 590–604] than without Jesus,” Geertz adds.

Nor, of course, would it be any easier to conceive of western Christianity without Augustine, who prepared the ground in the fifth century for what Gregory was to undertake in the sixth, and who not only contributed to that tradition the theory of hereditary sin and of the need of all human beings, including Christians, for stern discipline and therefore for powerful institutions of the sort Gregory forged, but who also originated a distinctive theory of the Trinity that eventually split Christendom into what have remained two irreconcilable halves and that was, I would like to suggest, equally connected with the assimilation of ecclesiastical authority to a conceptuality and symbolism of power cast in the imperial mold. The trinitarian symbolism is also equally pertinent, as I hope will become clear, to the theme of moral freedom that Pagels considers to have been so central to early Christianity, and Augustine's revision of it was another major factor in the shift from the earlier belief in moral freedom to that in moral bondage.

I will not attempt here a specific analysis of the controversy over the *filioque*, the phrase “and the Son” which the West, following Augustine's lead, eventually added to the Nicene Creed and which became the immediate occasion for the controversies that produced the enduring schism between Eastern and Western Christendom. Rather I will be concerned primarily with the underlying pattern of thought of which it became a crystallizing expression. As a theological conception, the interpretation of the Trinity by way of an analogy between God and the structure of human existence may not have been completely original to Augustine, but the crucial idea of the double procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father *and the Son* was strictly his own. Marius Victorinus had suggested that the idea of the Trinity could best be understood by thinking of God as like a union of Being (Father), Living (Son), and Thinking (Spirit). He did not, however, think of the relations among these as involving the possibility of there being any other source of existence than the Father alone, and in this he remained in accord with the Greek tradition of Trinitarian reflection. Rather, for Victorinus the generation of the Son was to be understood as a single movement producing both Christ and the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit did not “proceed from”

¹¹ *Islam Observed: Religious Development in Morocco and Indonesia* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), pp. 2–3.

Christ but was “engendered within” him¹²—an image that is actually rather close to what for the Eastern, non-filioquist tradition is the classic formulation by John of Damascus in the seventh century, who interpreted the Orthodox faith of the Greek Fathers and ecumenical councils as believing that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father, and abides in the Son.”¹³

In his *De Trinitate* (ca. 399–415) Augustine worked multiple variations of his own on the possibilities of trinitarian analogy, such as: lover, beloved, and love; the mind, the mind’s knowledge of itself, and its love of itself; the eye of the mind, its expression as word, and the will that produces that expression; object, vision, and attention; memory, inner vision, and will; memory, understanding, and love, and so on. He favored especially those triads involving mental faculties and activities, since he thought the human mind, as the highest aspect of the human being, was the closest analogue to the God who made man in his image. It was evidently this that led him to advocate the idea of the procession of the Holy Spirit from both the Father and the Son, as a function of the association of the Son with intelligence and the Spirit with love or will. “The mind cannot love itself,” he said, “unless it also knows itself, for how can it love what it does not know?”¹⁴

The reason I say “evidently” is that Augustine himself did not explicitly link his assertion of the double procession to this analogy. His explicit arguments for the double procession are stated in the last book of the work and are rendered rather tentative by the fact that he realizes that a strict application of the analogy of the Son to wisdom and the Spirit to love would imply that the Son alone was wise, and not the Father or Spirit, and that the Spirit alone was loving, and not the Father or Son. There he introduces the topic by saying rather tentatively, “We have spoken sufficiently about the Father and the Son, insofar as we have been able to see through this mirror and in this enigma. Now we are to speak about the Holy Spirit, insofar as God the Giver shall permit. According to the Sacred Scriptures, this Holy Spirit is neither the Spirit of the Father alone, nor of the Son alone, but the Spirit of both, and, therefore, He insinuates to us the common love by which the Father and the Son

¹² Pierre Hadot, Introduction to Victorinus, *Traité théologique sur la Trinité*, Latin text edited by Paul Henry with introduction, French translation, and notes by Pierre Hadot (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1960), p. 81. Far from interpreting the Holy Spirit as depending on the Son’s causation, Victorinus emphasized that their relationship is reciprocal, even to the point of saying in “Adversus Arium,” 1, 56–58, that the Holy Spirit is the “mother” of Christ and as the “thinking” of God constitutes the “first interior movement” (*motus primus intus*) within God that in its exteriorization (*foris effectam*) engenders the life of the Son (*Traité théologique*, p. 364–68).

¹³ John of Damascus, *On the Orthodox Faith*, 1, quoted in Thomas Hopko, *The Spirit of God* (Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse-Barlow, 1976), p. i.

¹⁴ *The Trinity*, trans. Stephen McKenna, C.S.S.R. (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1963), 9, 3, 3, p. 273. 8

mutually love each other.”¹⁵ “And yet,” he goes on to say, “it is not without reason that in this Trinity only the Son is called the Word of God, and that only the Holy Spirit is the Gift of God, and that only He, of whom the Son was begotten, and from whom the Spirit principally proceeds, is God the Father. I have added ‘principally,’ therefore, because the Holy Spirit is also found to proceed from the Son. . . .If, then, any one of these three is to be especially called love, what more fitting than that this should be the Holy Spirit?”¹⁶

The tenuousness of Augustine’s line of analysis can be seen in the way he moves by barely perceptible shifts from the idea that the Holy Spirit is “of” both the Father and the Son, which in itself could mean simply that the Son is endowed with the Spirit which is “from” the Father (as the tradition in both East and West generally agreed), to the idea that the Spirit is not just “engendered within” or “abides in” the Son but is *produced by* the Son as a distinct source of the Spirit’s very being. It can also be seen in the way his thought has to twist to get around the obvious counterargument that he summarizes as: “If, then, the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, why did the Son say: ‘He proceeds from the Father?’” (John 15:26).¹⁷ The reasoning of Augustine’s answer is patently tortuous:

Why do you think, except that He usually referred even what was His to Him, from whom He Himself also is? And for this reason He also says: “My teaching is not my own, but his who sent me.” If, therefore, His teaching is understood here, and yet He did not call it His own but His Father’s, with how much greater reason ought we to understand that the Holy Spirit also proceeds from Him in that place where He so says: “He proceeds from the Father,” as to avoid saying: “He does not proceed from me.” But He, from whom the Son has that He is God (for He is God of God), from Him He certainly has that the Holy Spirit also proceeds from Him, and, therefore, the Holy Spirit has from the Father Himself, that He also proceeds from the Son, just as He proceeds from the Father.¹⁸

The last sentence of this passage restates an equally tortuous and tenuous argument from the immediately preceding section that culminated with the obvious non-sequitur: “For if whatever He has, the Son has from the Father, then certainly He has from the Father that the Holy Spirit also proceeds from Him.”¹⁹

Clearly Augustine had a little difficulty rendering his thinking on the Trinity logically coherent. The question of the clarity of his conceptualization or the cogency of his logic is not, however, the primary issue here. Rather the questions of interest

¹⁵ *The Trinity*, 15, 17, 27, p. 491.

¹⁶ *The Trinity*, 15, 17, 29, pp. 493–44.

¹⁷ 15, 27, 48, p. 518.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 518–19.

¹⁹ 15, 27, 47, p. 517.

from the point of view of an inquiry into this episode as an example of religious innovation are those of what kind of innovation it represents, what factors went into it, and what its effect on the developing tradition was.

In attempting to answer these questions, it will be helpful to begin with some consideration of the type of discourse Augustine's book on the Trinity represents and what it tells us about the assumptions it gives expression to regarding the nature of faith, of theology, of the church, and of authority. The discourse is clearly speculative; it is emphatically not an attempt, as in the Greek trinitarian tradition, to find a language for what was thought to be the believer's actual experience of the inner life of the Triune God. Rather it is an attempt to speculate about the possible meanings of metaphors that must always remain remote from the theological reality they are supposed to refer to. For the earlier Greek Christian thinkers, trinitarian thinking was an attempt to explicate what they considered the experience of redeemed humanity, of sonship and freedom, which was conceived of as an immediate involvement in the life of the divine Son by way of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, who, as we saw John of Damascus put it, "proceeds from the Father and abides in the Son."

For Augustine, on the other hand, even redeemed humanity remained mired in sin and therefore cut off from any actual experience of this sonship and its freedom. For him, redemption was rather a promise for the next life than a reality concretely experienced in this one. He declares, therefore, again and again that in this life no one can really know what the doctrine of the Trinity means. Rather one believes it on the authority of scripture and of the Catholic tradition: "This is also my faith, since it is the Catholic faith."²⁰ And yet it is a tough nut to crack and troubling for faith: "Therefore, I have undertaken this work by the command and with the help of the Lord our God, not for the sake of speaking with authority about what I know, as to know these subjects by speaking of them with reverence."²¹ He believed the doctrine himself, that is, not as one who understands its truth on the basis of his own reflection on experience but on the basis of a command imposed on him and his readers by the tradition.

Augustine's enterprise was rendered all the more speculative by the fact that the authorities he refers to as enjoining this belief were themselves elusive for him, as he indicates in several places. We saw above how he claimed that the double procession was the teaching of scripture but could offer no passage as evidence and had to argue against a straightforward reading of the one text (John 15:26) that addressed the

²⁰ 1, 4, 7, p. 11.

²¹ 1, 5, 8, p. 13.

question directly. At the beginning of his Book 2, he spoke of how difficult it is to get a straightforward answer from scripture on these matters: “When men seek after God and direct their mind to the understanding of the Trinity, according to the capacity of human weakness, they learn by experience of the wearisome difficulties that this requires, whether from the eye of the mind trying to look into the inaccessible light, or from the manifold and various modes of speech in the sacred books (where our soul, it seems to me, is only being sorely tried in order that it may find sweetness after it has been glorified [i.e., in the next life] by the grace of Christ). . . .”²² Regarding other sources of authority, he acknowledged at the beginning of Book 3 that the post-scriptural, primarily Greek sources of Catholic tradition regarding the doctrine of the Trinity were not very accessible to him either: “. . . the writings which we have read on these subjects have not been sufficiently explained in the Latin tongue, or they are not available, or at least it was difficult for us to find them; nor are we so familiar with Greek, as to be in any way capable of reading and understanding such books on these subjects in that language, although from the few excerpts that have been translated for us, I have no doubt that they contain everything that we can profitably seek.”²³

His discussion, therefore, clearly had the character of a speculation in the dark. Why, then, undertake it? Because, as he said in the quotation above, it was “by the command” of God—by which he evidently meant that as a Catholic bishop he was responsible both for adhering to and also for promulgating the required faith to all who were obliged to believe it. Before exploring further the implications of the differences between Augustine’s conception of the doctrine and that of the Greek Fathers, therefore, it will be worth taking a few moments to consider the pattern of his thought regarding the character of the Church’s authority and his own as a bishop.

It is no accident that Augustine would speak of his enterprise here as a matter of “command.” It is especially in this aspect of his thought that the role of metaphor in unconsciously guiding the trend of thinking can be seen at work. I earlier quoted Geertz as saying that “[w]hat a given religion is—its specific content—is embodied in the images and metaphors its adherents use to characterize reality” and Clebsch as speaking of the power of the image of “the Roman imperium” in Christian thought in the Middle Ages. I also said that that this image was no less powerful in the thought of Augustine. The image of imperial order was clearly paradigmatic for Augustine, a

²² 2, Pref., p. 51.

²³ 3, Pref., p. 95.

major example of what Geertz refers to as those “public, historically created vehicles of reasoning, perception, feeling, and understanding—symbols in the broadest sense of the term” that “give form to experience and point to action.”²⁴ This image, I would like to suggest, carried all the more force for Augustine because his increasing rejection in principle of any authority based on the individual believer’s spiritual experience left the authority of divine command the only kind with any genuine applicability for the Christian bishop and his flock.

If one dips into Augustine at any point, one finds his thinking pervaded by the metaphor of empire. In the East, where it was colored by associations with divine kingship and the idea of the court as the image of heaven, this metaphor carried somewhat different connotations from those that it did in the West. In the orbit of Byzantium it tended to be linked with the general Eastern Christian emphasis on the ideas of incarnation, deification (*theiosis*), and divine-human participation as the central metaphors for the life of the Church. In Augustine’s Africa, on the other hand, the image of *imperium* was still primarily a military one, and what it connoted above all was command and obedience.

It is true that Augustine’s *Civitas Dei* (ca. 413–426) can be read as a radical critique of the dying empire, but what is important is that it looked upon the mundane empire as in the process of being superseded by the superior *imperium* of God. This is indicated by the book’s very title and central metaphor: the *civitas* of God. That book was occasioned by the impact that the sack of Rome by Alaric the Goth in 410 had on Augustine’s imagination and that of his countrymen,²⁵ but he had already for some time been thinking of the Church as a kind of *civitas* and of his own role of bishop as that of a functionary in its system of command, rather like a provincial governor representing a heavenly *Imperator*. In 408, for example, he wrote in a letter to Paulinus of Nola of how his duties as bishop weighed on him, saying that “it seems to me that the uncertainty and difficulty that we encounter, springs from the one fact that in the midst of the great variety of men’s habits and opinions. . . we are having to conduct the affairs of a whole people—not of the Roman people on earth, but of the citizens of the Heavenly Jerusalem.”²⁶

²⁴ *Islam Observed*, p. 95.

²⁵ Cf. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 288–89.

²⁶ Epistle 95, 5, quoted in Brown, *Augustine*, p. 287. Cf. Peter Brown, “Religious Coercion in the Later Roman Empire,” *History* 48 (1963): 284: “. . . in North Africa in the age of St. Augustine, who was bishop of Hippo from 396 to 430, the structure and ideals of both the Church and the Empire were being transformed in the course of a long period of symbiosis.”

In this role Augustine saw himself as an enforcer of divine decrees—hence his advocacy of the use of state power in the persecution of non-Catholics such as the Donatists. This was itself a major innovation in Christian thinking, as many of his contemporaries were quick to point out on the occasion of the imperial Edict of Unity of 405. This “new policy had to be defended, aggressively,” writes Peter Brown, “against a coherent and easily-understood battery of criticism. . . that it was unheard-of for a Christian to advocate a policy of persecution. . . .”; and so, “Augustine, in replying to his persistent critics, wrote the only full justification, in the history of the Early Church, of the right of the state to suppress non-Catholics.”²⁷ This, suggests Brown, was in keeping with his theory of Original Sin and his general view of the Church as an agent of divine *disciplina*: “Augustine’s view of the Fall of mankind determined his attitude to society. Fallen men had come to need restraint. Even man’s greatest achievements had been made possible only by a ‘strait-jacket’ of unremitting harshness,” by “the awesome discipline of God, ‘from the schoolmaster’s canes to the agonies of the martyrs,’ by which human beings were recalled by suffering, from their own disastrous inclinations.”²⁸

It was similarly in keeping with this general way of thinking about the relation between man and God that Augustine would interpret the sack of Rome by way of the same sort of imagery: “His reaction to the catastrophes of 410 reveals the elemental bedrock of the ideas that he had crystallized in justifying the ‘controlled catastrophe’ of the coercion of the Donatists: the human race as a whole needed discipline, by frequent, unwelcome impingements; and so his God is a stern father, who will ‘*scourge the son he receives*’: ‘And you, you spoilt son of the Lord: you want to be received, but not beaten.’”²⁹ In a commentary on some sermons of Augustine’s from 410 in which he explains why it is “his duty to pasture his sheep ‘with discipline,’” Brown says, “In this way we can sometimes glimpse our abstract categories of ‘Church’ and ‘State’ as living factors in forming the character of a sensitive man determined to be a slave to his own exercise of power.”³⁰

Such considerations add a further dimension to the contrast between Augustine’s thought on the Trinity and that of his Greek predecessors. Greek trinitarian thinking, of which Augustine was largely ignorant, developed essentially, as was mentioned earlier, out of reflection on the sense of renewed moral freedom symbolized by the image of sonship and of a spirit of sonship that leads one to cry “Abba!” to God

²⁷ Brown, *Augustine*, p. 235.

²⁸ Brown, *Augustine*, p. 238.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 293. Brown’s quotations from Augustine here are from *Civitas Dei*, 1, 10, 32, and *Sermones*, 296, 10.

³⁰ “Religious Coercion,” p. 293, commenting on Sermon 46, 23.

as a father. The doctrine of the Trinity that took shape in the early fourth century and was made official by the Council of Constantinople in 386 was understood in the Greek Christian tradition as the logical unfolding of the implications of the images used in the first century to express what to at least some early Christians seemed their experience of freedom and sonship in relation to God. This way of thinking about the relation between God and man went hand in hand in the East with the idea of *theiosis* or “deification” of believers by participation in the sonship of Christ and with the correlative idea that genuine knowledge of the mysteries of the faith is only possible from the point of view of the experience of that deified life. To be the Son, in other words, is to be one in whom the Spirit of sonship and filial love abides, and there is no other way for the believer concretely to know either the Father or the Son than by way of the presence of that Spirit in his or her own life as well.³¹ Genuinely to understand the meaning of such images as Father, Son, and Spirit, from this point of view, one must participate in the filial mode of existence that the images speak of.

Augustine’s theological epistemology, on the other hand, was entirely different. Metaphors that for the earlier tradition had seemed transparent, became in Augustine’s thinking opaque. For him, concrete knowledge of the Trinity was, as we saw above, impossible in principle for human beings. Rather, as he conceived it, one can only speculate abstractly about the meaning of the trinitarian doctrine, and one believes it not because its imagery speaks to one of experience that is personally recognizable, but because one is commanded to do so by the authority of the ecclesiastical institution.

Belief that is grounded in willed obedience rather than reflection on experience, however, can easily, as numerous thinkers in the Christian tradition as well as outside it have observed, become a source of anxiety and compulsiveness. Søren Kierkegaard, for example, spoke of how, “[a]n adherent of the most rigid orthodoxy may be demonic. He knows it all. He genuflects before the holy. Truth is for him the aggregate of ceremonies. He talks of meeting before the throne of God and knows how many times one should bow. He knows everything, like the man who can prove a mathematical

³¹ For a further discussion of this approach to the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, see Eugene Webb, “The Hermeneutics of Greek Trinitarianism: An Approach Through Intentionality Analysis” in *Religion in Context: Recent Studies in Lonergan*, ed. Timothy P. Fallon and Philip Boo Riley (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1988), pp. 141–58. Also pertinent is Eugene Webb, “The Pneumatology of Bernard Lonergan: A Byzantine Comparison,” *Religious Studies and Theology* 5, 2 (May 1985): 13–25.

proposition when the letters are ABC, but not when the letters are DEF. So he becomes anxious whenever he hears something that is not literally the same.”³²

Kierkegaard’s point here is of the first importance: those who can follow a tradition by the letter only and have lost a sense of its spirit suffer anxiety, and their anxiety can become a demonic force that seeks to protect tradition by rigidifying it, even at the risk of thereby turning it into a prison for each of its inhabitants. As Kierkegaard analyzed it, what gives rise to anxious compulsiveness in religion is lack of the kind of “certitude” that is founded on what he called “inwardness” (p. 140) or concrete “subjectivity” (p. 141).

Kierkegaard’s use of the term “certitude” closely parallels that of his British near-contemporary, John Henry Newman, who discussed certitude in his *Grammar of Assent* as experientially grounded understanding that provides genuine satisfaction to the reflective intellectual conscience. Both Kierkegaard and Newman contrasted such experientially grounded understanding with the abstractness of speculation uprooted from experience. Such “abstract subjectivity,” to use Kierkegaard’s phrasing again, becomes anxious and compulsive precisely because of its abstractness—because, that is, whereas rational assent can proceed naturally and spontaneously from critical reflection on the interpretation of experience, when experience is lacking, critical reflection has no material to look to as the ground of interpretation and so cannot confirm it and thereby experience the intellectual satisfaction that springs naturally from such confirmation. In this case one’s own assent becomes forced, and from there it is a small step to the attempt to coerce the assent of another. As Newman put it, certitude is “tranquil enjoyment” of truth, an experience of intellectual satisfaction and repose that results from the genuine completion of a process of inquiry, while its opposite is “intellectual anxiety,” which produces such symptoms as going over and over arguments as if to conclude what was already supposed to be conclusive and “our unnecessary declaring that we are certain, as if to reassure ourselves, and our appealing to others for their suffrage in behalf of the truths of which we are so sure; which is like asking another whether we are weary and hungry, or have eaten and drunk to our satisfaction.”³³ A person whose belief grows out of reflection on his or her experience may come to rest in the “tranquil enjoyment” of concrete knowing

³² Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, edited and translated with introduction and notes by Reidar Thomte in collaboration with Albert B. Anderson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 139–40.

³³ *An Essay in Aid of A Grammar of Assent* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co.), 1947, p. 152.

that constitutes certitude, but one who tries to force assent on some other basis will go round and round the issue compulsively.

Augustine's *De Trinitate* shows the marks of thought that lacks certitude in this way. We saw how he began the book with an expression of hope that he might in writing it come "to know these subjects by speaking of them with reverence." The book was sixteen years and over five hundred pages in the writing, during which he tried one version of the psychological analogy after another in the effort to find a satisfactory formulation. And at the end of all that time, he brought the book to a close, as we saw, with arguments so loose in their logic that they could hardly have been satisfying even to him. He also ended it with expressions of inadequacy that might be interpreted as signs of humility, but which also have the ring of real despair:

Directing my course according to this rule of faith, insofar as I could, and insofar as You made it possible for me, I sought You, and desired to see with my understanding that which I believed, and I have argued and labored much. O my Lord, my God, my only hope, hear me lest through weariness I should not wish to seek You, but may ardently seek Your face evermore. . . . Deliver me, O God, from the multitude of words with which I am inwardly afflicted in my soul; it is wretched in Your sight, and takes refuge in Your mercy. For I am not silent in my thoughts, even when I am silent in my words. . . .³⁴

Clearly Augustine's approach to understanding the Trinity by way of metaphorical speculations had not brought his mind to rest in the "tranquil enjoyment" of the experience of intellectual satisfaction and repose that can grow out of seeing concretely how one's interpretation of one's experience gives adequate expression to it in language. But then, how could it, if, as he insisted, the doctrine of the Trinity that he thought he and other Christians were obliged to believe had nothing to do with any experience accessible to actual human beings? Augustine emphasized that both the birth of the Son and the procession of the Spirit must be thought of as taking place strictly "apart from time."³⁵ The procession of the Spirit from the Son as he conceived it is not to be confused with what is usually called the "temporal mission" of the Spirit, that is, the gift of the Spirit by Jesus to his followers (e.g., John 20:22), which might not necessarily be closed off in principle from an experientially grounded understanding.³⁶ Rather Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity with its double procession has to do with how, in a way that he himself thought clashes with human

³⁴ *The Trinity*, 15, 28, 51, pp. 524–25.

³⁵ *The Trinity*, 15, 26, 47, p. 517.

³⁶ The confusion of the *filioque* with the idea of the temporal mission of the Spirit is fairly common. See for example, James A. Carpenter, "The Filioque: Why be hasty?" *The Living Church* (May 30, 1982), p. 9; William Temple, *Readings in John's Gospel (First and Second Series)* (London: Macmillan, 1952), pp. 275–76; Alan Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Harper and Row, 1958), p. 122.

understanding, there can be three of something within the inscrutable absolute unity of the one God.

No matter how many analogies he could use to suggest the threeness of the triune God they could not help but fail to image the absolute unity he also considered himself obliged to affirm. If one begins thinking with Augustine's assumptions and one is as honest as he was, one must end, as he expressly did, with the realization that one has not arrived at a concrete understanding of what one is talking about when one speaks of the Trinity: "But I venture to acknowledge openly that I have said nothing worthy of the ineffability of that highest Trinity, among all these many things that I have already said, but confess rather that its sublime knowledge has been too great for me, and that I am unable to reach it."³⁷ Augustine's psychological analogy turned out in the final analysis not to be an analogy in the sense of a comparison of two things that are discernibly alike, but rather an unverifiable and ultimately unintelligible comparison of something known to something not only unknowable but not even genuinely conceivable.

This, however, did not deter Augustine from insisting that the doctrine must be believed and from arguing right to the end of his treatise that it must be believed in the form in which the psychological analogy that he had taken up led him to conceive of it: in terms of the double procession of the Spirit from the Father and Son as a feature of an inscrutable inner life of God "apart from time," totally removed from human experience and thought, except as an obligatory abstract formula. The entire process of Augustine's thought on the Trinity constituted a vicious circle in which the metaphor of the Kingdom of God as a divine *imperium* led to the belief that he and other Christians were commanded by God to believe and demand of others a belief that could not be understood except by way of a further metaphor that itself could only be believed on command—a fact which could only heighten further the anxiety with which he clung to the belief and to the system of command that remained its only ground.

This approach to the doctrine of the Trinity proved to be an innovation with far-reaching consequences. One of these was, of course, the eventual rupture between Eastern and Western Christendom that took place in the Carolingian era after the new version of the Nicene Creed with the Augustinian *filioque* added was made dogma in the West. Another important consequence of the West's appropriation and assimilation of Augustine's anxious circle of metaphoric thinking was that in cutting off theological reflection on one of the central points of the faith from any possible ground

³⁷ *The Trinity*, 15, 27, 50, p. 521.

in the concrete experience of Christians, it made belief paradigmatically a matter of obedience and submission rather than of recognition or realization.

This in turn may well have contributed to the tradition of religious coercion and persecution that became such a prominent feature of Augustine's heritage. We saw how Newman spoke of the anxious mind's concern with unanimity as a kind of "appealing to others for their suffrage in behalf of the truths of which we are so sure." Peter Berger also, in his discussion of "plausibility structures" as buttresses of belief, has described the tendency of cultures and religious systems to seek unanimity as a means of keeping uncertainty and anxiety at bay, especially when the beliefs are such that critical reason is unable to contribute to their support.³⁸ One can detect a note of just this sort of anxious concern with unanimity, and fear of competing viewpoints, in a sermon of Augustine's from 410: "You must know, my friends, how the mutterings [of the pagans] join with those of the heretics and the Jews. Heretics, Jews and pagans: they have formed a unity over against our Unity."³⁹

Ironically, Augustine's own approach to theology was precisely of a sort to undermine the possibility of the uncoerced and uncompulsive kind of unanimity that could at least in principle develop as a community's mutual understanding of shared experience. By interpreting the symbols of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in a way that would make it impossible to approach the symbol of the Trinity as an explication of the Christian's experience of participation in the filiality of Christ, Augustine was creating for the tradition that followed him a major source of uncertainty and consequently of the kind of anxiety that would inevitably link authority with command and coercion in the generations and centuries that followed.

Jacques Lacan could well have been speaking of the hold of such thought as Augustine's on the imagination of western Christendom when he said of the psychological force of dominant images in our lives, "Symbols in fact envelop the life of man in a network so total that they join together, before he comes into the world, those who are going to engender him 'by flesh and blood'; so total that they bring to his birth, along with the gifts of the stars, if not with the gifts of the fairies, the shape of his destiny; so total that they give the words that will make him faithful or renegade, the law of the acts that will follow him right to the very place where he *is* not yet and even beyond his death; and so total that through them his end finds his meaning in the last judgment. . . ."⁴⁰ Whatever one may believe about the theological reality of

³⁸ *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, New York: Anchor, 1969), pp. 40, 45.

³⁹ Sermon 62, 18, quoted in Peter Brown, "Religious Coercion," p. 285.

⁴⁰ *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977), p. 68.

Original Sin itself, Augustine can be seen to have created a cultural reality of equivalent force and effect in the web of metaphor that he wove with his formulations of the doctrines of Original Sin and the Trinity and of his conception of ecclesiastical authority. Western Christian thinking has been tangled in that web ever since.