

St Augustine's *De Trinitate*

The doctrinal significance of its structure

Augustine's distinction as a theologian, in my opinion, is shown chiefly in his sense of the dramatic quality of the Christian revelation and religion. I might perhaps have called it a sense of the historical quality of Christianity, except that I do not think he qualifies as a historian, in the modern understanding of history, any more than most of his contemporaries. We may combine the two ideas by saying that he saw Christianity as a historical drama and not as mythological one, like pagan religion with its dramatic myths. It may be felt that there does not seem to be anything very distinguished about that, since all theologians from the apostles on have assumed and asserted the historicity of Jesus Christ and of his Israelite background. But the common tendency, which was particularly strong in Augustine's own day, has been to enfold the Christian history in some kind of world view or metaphysical system. And one would have expected Augustine, with his neo-platonic intellectual background and his strong philosophical interests, to follow this tendency. I am suggesting that his distinction lies in his letting his dramatic sense, in the course of his theological career, override this background and these interests.

This dramatic sense is most clearly exhibited in his two great masterpieces, the *Confessions* and the *City of God*, respectively presenting his own personal drama and the drama of the Church. It is my contention that the *De Trinitate* is a comparable dramatic presentation of the mystery of God, and incidentally a greater masterpiece than either of the other two more famous works. The dramatic form it takes, from the point of view of the writer and reader, is that of a quest, a search for God. The theme song, you could say, is provided by *Ps* 105 (104) : 3, 4 : « Let their heart rejoice who seek the Lord ; seek the Lord and be strengthened ; seek his face always ». These verses are quoted at three key points of the work ; at the beginning of the quest, I, III, 5 ; at the crucial turn it takes half way through, where he begins looking for the image of the Trinity,

IX, 1, 1 ; and at the end, where he is about to declare the quest a magnificent and most successful failure, XV, 11, 2. This drama of the quest on the part of the writer and his readers is enacted in response to the drama of revelation on the part of the subject, or subjects, of the work — that is of God, or of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is this double drama, or this dramatic confrontation between God revealing and man seeking, that is carried by the structure of the work, and this structure we must now examine.

I. *The Circumstances of Composition, and Evidences for the Author's Plan*

Doubts might well be cast on the *De Trinitate* having any but the most ramshackle and disorderly structure by the manner in which it was written. In a short letter to bishop Aurelius of Carthage (*Ep.* 174) which he requested to have placed as a preface to the whole work, he states that he began it as a young man and only published it as an old man. It seems he began it shortly after 400 AD, and only completed and published it some time after 420 AD. For the first 16 or so of those years he had been continually interrupting his composition of it because of more pressing demands on his pen ; until eventually, when he was in the middle of the twelfth book, some of his friends lost patience, pinched what he had already completed and published a 'pirated' edition. This made Augustine so angry that he refused to continue with it, until eventually Aurelius persuaded him to finish it, which he did. But he declares that his unfortunate history made it impossible for him to revise what he had written as he would have wished. He also makes it clear that finishing the work meant adding some introductions to some of the earlier books, as well as writing the last three and a half books.

Modern scholars have come forward with critical analyses of the text and the ideas in the *De Trinitate* to suggest an even more ragged history of composition. Thus Eugene TeSelle in his, generally speaking, useful book *Augustine the Theologian*¹, chapters 4, section 3, and 5, section 3, adopts the chronology proposed by Irénée Chevalier², and suggests that bks I-IV, less the long introductory section of bk II, and also bk VIII, were written between 400 and 406 AD, whereas bks V-VII were not written until 413 or 414 AD. I find their arguments often weak, and their references four times erroneous³. The most rigorous work done ont

1. London (Burns et Oates) 1970.

2. *S. Augustin et la pensée grecque : les relations trinitaires*. Fribourg, 1940.

3. TESELLE, *op. cit.* gives three curious references on p. 294. He writes : « In a letter at the end of 413 (*Ep.* 151) Augustine said that he intended to read ecclesiastical writers on the topic of divine relations, and in another letter written in 413 or 414 (*Ep.* 148) he mentioned that he had already read opuscula by Ambrose, Jerome, Athanasius and Gregory ».

Now *Ep.* 151 is all about the execution of Marcellinus ; all it says, of any possible relevance to our subject, in para. 13, is that Augustine intends as far as possible to

the dating of the various books of the *De Trinitate* is that of Mlle La Bonnardière⁴, and her researches on the whole serve only to give precision to what Augustine himself says about the composition of the work. But even granted that the work was written in the piecemeal fashion suggested by the severest critics, the *prima facie* case for its having a coherent and logical structure rests on evidence provided by the writer himself. What made him particularly angry about the pirating of the work before he had finished it was not merely that it was thus presented to the public without that revision and final polish which meant much to the professional pride of so stylish an author, but that he considered the work to be one which should be read as a whole, a logical and coherent whole : « I had decided to publish all the books together » (and not, therefore, in serial form), « because the ones that follow are tied to the ones that precede them by the progress of the search », '*inquisitione proficiente*' — notice how he describes the whole operation as an *inquisitio* (*Ep.* 174). Towards the end of the work itself, XV, III, 4 et 5, he summarises the course of the argument or search through the previous fourteen books ; a summary which I think will be found to correspond on the whole to the formal structure or pattern which I will be suggesting for the work in a moment.

But I must admit that this summary does not explicitly draw attention to the formal connections between the parts of the work which give it the structure and pattern that I think can be discerned in it. Augustine does not explicitly state my case for me ; if he did, there would be no need for me to do it myself ! And elsewhere in the course of the work he states his intention in a manner that can be misleading, and has in fact misled. He says at the beginning (I, II, 4) that it is his intention to give reasons, *reddere rationem* for the one and only and true God being a trinity or a three, reasons that are demanded by an immature and perverse love of reason which he has been busy castigating in the first pages, and which I think we are meant to understand as being the mark of the Arian

devote himself *labori studiorum ad ecclesiasticas litteras pertinentium*, in the hopes that he may thereby produce something useful to posterity. Not a word about divine relations.

The author continues : « During the next few years he worked through these insights and extended them in a study of the psychological analogies to the Trinity in man, and in 416 or 417 at the latest he sent the first twelve books to Aurelius of Carthage (*Ep.* 173) ».

The letter referred to is in fact *Ep.* 174 ; and how TeSelle can construe it as referring to the first twelve books only, and not to the whole work of fifteen, I do not understand, especially if it is read in conjunction with *Retractationes*, II, xv.

Chevalier, on p. 26 of his book refers to *Ep.* 173, not indeed meaning *Ep.* 174 like TeSelle, but describing it as a letter written to Deogratias, and quoting from it the words *De Trinitate libros, quos in nomine Domini edere jamque dispono*. *Ep.* 173, however, is written to a Donatist, Chevalier is, indeed, referring to *Ep.* 173A, which is published in *CSEL* 44, pp. 648-650.

When Chevalier does refer to *Ep.* 174 he interprets it in the same curious way as TESSELLE.

4. A.-M. LA BONNARDIÈRE, *Recherches de chronologie augustiniennne*, Paris, 1965.

beast. But before he does this he must show from scripture whether the Christian and catholic faith is like this — namely that God is a trinity or a three. He must start from faith, and only then go on to reason. You must first believe if you would understand.

Now this statement of method has been taken, not unnaturally, as indicating in broad outline the design of the whole work ; first a scriptural establishment of faith, to be followed by a rational or philosophical attempt to understand, or even to ' prove ' what we believe ; and as the whole *De Trinitate* is fairly obviously divided into two parts, with a second part beginning at bk VIII or IX (it is not entirely clear precisely where to draw the *caesura*) and containing the Augustinian doctrine of the image which everyone is interested in ; and a first part containing in bks V-VII some technical logic which only a few dry old-fashioned theologians are interested in, and in bks I-IV some extraordinary exegesis of scripture which no one is interested in ; well, it seems clear that bks I-VII (VIII) are busy establishing his starting point of faith, the *initium fidei*, and can be comfortably ignored, while bks IX (VIII)-XV are giving reasons for this faith and contain something of interest for teachers and students of Christian doctrine, or even of the history of philosophy.

But this does not fit the facts of the text. Bks V-VII are so different from bks I-IV, and are so explicitly engaged in a rational argument with the Arians, that Augustine's intention, as stated in I, II, 4, would have been amply accomplished had he ended the work with bk VII ; bks I-IV prove the doctrine from scripture ; bks V-VII defend it by rational arguments, largely based on Aristotle. And bks VIII-XV do not easily fit into this statement of intention and method at all.

They are in fact governed by another rubric, given at the beginning of VIII. In the prologue to this book he summarises what has been said in the previous three (the highly rational and logical anti-Arian section), but still expresses a certain dissatisfaction ; he cannot consider the quest, the *inquisitio*, concluded, because for all his exercise of *ratio* in bks V-VII he still does not ' perceive with the mind the essence or being of truth ' — that is of God. So he says, in effect, « Let us go over the same ground all over again, but *modo interiore*, in a more inward manner, while sticking to our good old rule of not giving up our faith simply because we do not happen to understand ».

So the last half of the work, plus bk VIII, is going to be occupied with the same search, but more ' inwardly ' ; in fact with a search through the ' Image ', through the inwardness of man ; in fact, to borrow from Lewis Carroll, with a search through the looking-glass — and that Augustine was for the most part thinking of a reflection in a glass and not of a statue or picture when he talked about the divine image in man, is to my mind beyond doubt. His frequent use in bk XV of the text ' in a glass darkly ', ' *per speculum in aenigmate* ', with reference to his whole image enterprise makes this evident.

This brings me to my own analysis of the structure, which I will have to offer without providing much, if any, of the evidence for it. First, then, for the formal structure or pattern of the whole work, and then for its material structure, or the movement and coherence of thought from its beginning to its end, the progress of the search, of which the author spoke in his letter to Aurelius ; and which the formal structure is designed to carry.

2. *The formal Structure*

The work consists of XV books ; this is not easily divisible by two, as the hesitation about which half we should assign bk VIII to has indicated. Bk VIII is in fact crucial ; it is the key-stone of the bridge ; it does not belong to either half, but binds the two halves together. The pattern formed by the two halves, held together by bk VIII, is parabolic, — I believe the more favoured term is chiasmic. Each half of seven books is divided into three sections, of one, three and three books respectively ; only in the second half they are of three, three and one respectively, thus matching the first half in inverse order. Bk I is matched by bk XV ; bks II-IV by bks XII-XIV ; and bks V-VII by bks IX-XI ; bk VIII, of course, stands by itself at the centre. This is, to be sure, an artificial structure. But one indication that it is an artifice intended by Augustine is the division of the material in bks V-VII, what I have called the rational anti-Arian section, into three books. As far as the material in it is concerned, there is no reason at all to divide VI from VII. Taken together they are no longer bk I and considerably shorter than bk XV ; and by itself bk IV is ridiculously short. But the division is required by the formal structure.

Flesh is easily put on this structure by constructing a title-page for the work. I call book I ' The absolute equality of the divine persons ', an accurate enough description of its contents. At the end of the title page is bk XV, which answers to bk I by treating of ' The absolute inadequacy of the perfected image '. Bks II-IV may be classified together as dealing with ' Missions ', the sendings of the divine persons. They are thus essentially historical, or as I prefer to put it dramatic, in content. Bks XII-XIV I label collectively as ' Man's case history ', and they are concerned with the drama of the fall and redemption, that is to say of the ruin and the restoration of the divine image — also eminently dramatic. Bks V-VII I entitle together ' Linguistic and logical ' ; they are altogether undramatic, a rational analysis of language. Indeed, it might be more accurate to talk of a rational construction of language in the course of adapting it to the unique case of the divine mystery. Corresponding to this section in the first half are bks IX-XI in the second, which I label collectively as ' Psychological ', and in which we have a rational analysis, or better still a rational construction, of psychological functions to provide an image in the human *mens* of the divine mystery. Finally, I call bk VIII,

the centrepiece of the arrangement, anachronistically, but not I think without justice. 'Through the looking-glass'.

The symmetry of this structure is, as I have remarked, artificial, and would be inartistically and irritatingly mechanical if it were rigidly pursued. But it is alleviated by some slight but unmistakable asymmetries. Thus the division between bk I and bks II-IV in the first half is nothing like so clear-cut as that between bks XII-XIV and bk XV in the second; while on the other hand the division between IX-XI and XII-XIV in the second half is much more blurred than that between II-IV and V-VII in the first. Indeed, the six books IX-XIV could reasonably be divided otherwise, with the three books, IX, X, and XIV devoted to the construction of the perfected image, and interrupted by bks XI-XIII, which introduce the subject of the turbulent history of this construction or creation.

3. *The Movement of Augustine's Thought*

As for the material structure, or the movement of Augustine's thought in the *De Trinitate*, I can be much more brief. He begins, as we have seen with a consideration of the equality of the divine persons, because that was, after all, the point at issue between the orthodox and the Arians. But then he shows his originality by leading from that point into a discussion of the missions, instead of diving, as he well might have done in the context of the 4th century theological debate, into the problems of *homoousios*, *hypostasis*, and so forth. The lead-in to the subject of missions from book I is the suggestion that for the Father to send the Son is for him to manifest a superiority over the Son — a very reasonable suggestion too, and Augustine has to meet it. But his real concern in bks II-IV is to investigate when and how the mystery of the Trinity was revealed. His eventual answer is that it was revealed by the missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit, as they are presented to us in the New Testament. The climax of this examination of the missions comes in IV, xx, 29, where he writes: « As being born means for the Son being from the Father, so being sent means for the Son his being known to be from the Father. And as being the gift of God means for the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father, so being sent means for the Holy Spirit his being known to proceed from the Father ». Thus he distinguishes mission from procession (a linguistic decision of considerable importance, that no one had taken so clearly, as far as I know, before him), and sees the temporal, historical and visible missions of the Son and Holy Spirit as revealing their eternal and invisible processions.

It is these processions that constitute the inner heart of the divine mystery, and so the goal of Augustine's quest. But in the next three books he does not in fact reflect on the eternal processions, but rather on the relationships arising from them; and this in a linguistic and logical manner; he is sorting out the language we use in order to talk about this

divine mystery ; he is not talking about the Trinity in bks V-VII, so much as talking about talk about the Trinity ; and all in the ' rational ' or metaphysical terms set by the Arian and semi-Arian controversies of the 4th century.

When he has completed this part of his programme, he may well be said to have completed the task he set himself at the beginning, of first establishing the faith (showing that it has been revealed as such — his discussion of the missions), and then giving reasons (showing that it is not contrary to reason and logic, and can be expressed rationally and logically). But he can scarcely think he has completed his *quest*. Hence his feeling at the beginning of bk VIII that he has only scratched the surface, and that the whole thing must be gone over again *interiore modo*. Having discussed missions and relationships, in other words, he is now going to go on to investigate, to search out and try and comprehend, the divine processions. And that is what the theology of the image in bks IX-XIV is all about. He cannot take a look into God himself to see the eternal processions at work (so to speak) ; he professes to make the attempt to do this in bk VIII and fails ; so he has to go through the looking-glass and see the divine image at work. And what he is really interested in, as he constructs and examines his mental image of the mind's self-memory, self-understanding and self-willing or self-loving⁵, is the way in which these mental acts *proceed* one from the other, or are *generated* and conceived one by the other.

But these last books of the *De Trinitate* make it clear that Augustine's quest is not just an intellectual or academic one. It is a quest that involves discovering the subject as well as the object. The image he is investigating is this questing subject. The searcher can only hope to find the triune God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit in their unity and their ' processional ' distinction from each other, if he finds and realises their image in himself. And this can only be done by conversion and faith in the incarnate Word and the redemption he achieved, and in a prior confession of the defilement of the original image and the need of divine help for its remodelling. Thus he necessarily brings into this second half a dramatic element, corresponding to the drama of the missions in the first half. Only this time it is a double drama, the drama of man's fall (bk XII, roughly speaking), and of his redemption (bk XIII).

Finally, in bk XV Augustine admits in effect that this quest has failed — as he knew all along it would and must before faith gives way to sight, and as long as we are confined to looking for God and at God *per speculum in aenigmate*. To sum up his material plan very briefly : he proceeds *a posteriori*, from effects to cause, from missions, through relationships and kindred topics such as ' person ' and ' substance ' and

5. The final and most authentic image he constructs, in bk XIV, is of the mind's God-memory, God-understanding, and God-loving. These acts constitute the image's real and conscious contact with the divine exemplar.

'hypostasis' words, to processions. It is notable that Aquinas in his treatise works percisely in the opposite direction, *a priori*, from processions, through relationships, to an unimportant little appendix on the divine missions — and relegates his treatment of the image to a different sector of his work altogether.

4. *The Doctrinal significance of the Structure*

This brings me to the doctrinal significance of Augustine's method and structure. For I cannot help being of the opinion that Aquinas' contrary method and structure has contributed more than somewhat to the tradition of sublime irrelevance which has afflicted the doctrine of the Trinity, a tradition shared, I rather gather, by Protestants equally with Catholics. Contemporary theologians who are interested in the doctrine — I am thinking in particular of Karl Rahner — see the root of the trouble in the separation of what Rahner conveniently but inelegantly calls the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity⁶, and the remedy as lying in the demonstration of their identity. I would say myself that the trouble lies in the almost total disappearance of the economic Trinity below the theological horizon from the time that theologians stopped bothering about Augustine's discussion of the missions in bks II-IV of his *De Trinitate*, and so lost their one remaining link with the ante-Nicene fathers, from Justin to Tertullian, who had approached the Trinity as a 'mystery of the divine economy'.

Well, my proposition is that the importance of Augustine's *De Trinitate*, and indeed of its structure, is that it does provide that link. Augustine was at pains to criticise the older economic theologians, rather than simply to ignore them; and thereby he was able to save what was valuable in their insight, namely that the mystery of the Trinity was entirely relevant to the economy of salvation, and hence to the practical Christian life. The weakness of their approach, from the point of view of Nicene orthodoxy, was that it resulted in formulations of the doctrine which give the impression of God becoming a Trinity in the course of and with a view to his carrying out of the economies of creation and redemption; or, more accurately, of God (that is the Father) producing the Trinity, that is evolving the other two persons in the course of, or with a view to these operations. This is certainly the impression I get of Tertullian, the most advanced of this line of theologians, and the one, almost certainly, with whom Augustine would have been most familiar. Now this weakness of subordinationism, of the Son to the Father and of God to the historical process of creation and redemption, was really inherent in the economic theology method, invented by Justin and inherited by his successors. This was the method of proving the 'pre-existence' of Christ, of the

6. *Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise « De Trinitate »*, in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, p. 87.

Logos, by pointing to a whole series of old testament theophanies, from the creation to Sinai and beyond, as manifestations of the Logos. The result was, in effect, to push the incarnation back in time, to assume that the Logos or the Son is the visible member of the divine triad, to blur any distinction between the divine generation of the Son and the incarnate birth of Jesus Christ.

Now Augustine, in his discussion of the divine missions, goes over all these old testament theophanies, one after the other, just as Justin and Irenaeus and Tertullian had done ; only he does it to demolish their thesis that all these were appearances, or sendings of the Son. From the exegetical point of view, he insists, you cannot tell which divine person was being manifested in these instances, once you drop the assumption that the Son is inherently more visible than the Father. As a good Nicene « Immancunist », abhorring either of the two kinds of subordinationism we have mentioned, he does of course insist that it be dropped, because it is inconsistent with any authentic notion of the divine nature — as indeed those subordinationists would agree who denied authentic divinity to the Son.

By means of this criticism of the economic theology Augustine in fact made it possible for the now dominant immanent theology to keep its link with the economy, with the history of salvation — though unfortunately this immanent theology was to ignore the possibility he offered. He managed to re-affirm a number of vital distinctions without turning them into separations and contradictions. He re-affirmed the distinction between the divine order of eternity and the created order of time, but without separating them. Thus he could insist that God is immune from the created order, but of course the created order is by no means immune from God. The economists had rather blurred this distinction. He re-affirmed the distinction between the old and the new testaments without separating or contrasting them like the Gnostics. The economists reacting against the Gnostics, had blurred this distinction too, and rather tended to dissolve the uniqueness of the incarnation and the Christ event. And as we have remarked already, Augustine almost invented the distinction between missions and processions.

In virtue of these distinctions, and especially the last one, he was able to save the link between the transcendent divine mystery and the economy of salvation in a way that did not subordinate the being of God to temporal created developments. The mystery is revealed by the economy — the eternal processions of the divine persons by the temporal missions of the divine persons. But these missions in turn are strictly new testament events—or at least only of the new testament events can it be unequivocally asserted that in them the Son and the Holy Spirit were sent. Thus the divine missions in fact constitute the very form of the economy of redemption. God is not constituted a triad by the economy, as the older economic theology found itself saying ; he is revealed as a triad by the economy, because in fact the eternal divine triad unfolds the

saving economy according to a triadic pattern. So the mystery of the Trinity is of the essence of our redemption.

The same inescapable relevance of the mystery of the Trinity is driven home when Augustine goes looking for the eternal processions through the image. Now one may have all sorts of reserves about the mental image of the Trinity which Augustine constructs. But if one observes its place in the structure of his whole work ; and if one thus notes the dramatic quality of his treatment of it, in terms of the fall and of the redemption, as an image that is defaced and then refashioned ; then one must grant that he is marking the divine mystery relevant to the Christian life. He is presenting the image of the Trinity in man, not just as a model or analogy, a globe on which to study the divine geography ; but much more as a programme for Christian living. He is saying that if you are interested in looking for God and finding him, as Father Son and Holy Spirit, you must look within, in yourself, through the looking-glass. You must in fact also be engaged on a quest for your true self. And conversely, your only hope of finding your true self is in finding — or at the very least in continually seeking — the true God, who is eternally Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And what could make the doctrine of the Trinity more relevant, more significant, than that ?

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