

AUGUSTINE, HEIDEGGER, AND BULTMANN
for
Icon or Taboo—Probing Augustine in the 21st Century
at St Andrews University, Scotland, May 19 & 20, 2006

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps because I am a determined Nova Scotian first educated in and then teaching at a university founded by Scottish Calvinists, and because my first and inescapably influential master in philosophy was a Nova Scotian descendent of those same Calvinist Scots, and because the theologian from whom I learned most when a student was a living exemplar of the highest form of the species, magnificently occupying a Chair at *Knox* College Toronto, my arrival at St Andrews feels like a homecoming. I cannot recollect having heard anything about Dutch Calvinism from my two Scottish teachers but I am certain that neither of them would identify themselves with the hermeneutical principles by which James Smith interprets Augustine, my topic for today. Dr Smith and John Milbank agree that these are rooted in his identification with “the Dutch Calvinist tradition from Kuyper to Dooyeweerd.”¹ My Scottish teachers both held contrary views about the nature of philosophy and theology and about their relations to those of Dr Smith and my philosophical father James Doull thought about Augustine in the entirely opposite way.² Smith’s views come out in two recent books.

Two years after his *Speech and Theology: Language and the Logic of Incarnation*, which was published in the Routledge Radical Orthodoxy Series in 2002,³ this young Canadian evangelical, now a member of the Philosophy Department of Calvin College, Michigan, brought out *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology*, accompanied by a foreword by John Milbank. Milbank attests to “Smith’s evangelical-Dooyeweerdian reception” of Radical Orthodoxy.⁴ He goes on to affirm the common ground between Radical Orthodoxy and “the Dutch Calvinist tradition from Kuyper to Dooyeweerd.”⁵ That space is philosophy deprived of any natural integrity and subordinated to religion. As Smith writes in response to me:

I would argue on Augustinian grounds that the different directions of divergent philosophies stem from fundamental (though different) *religious* commitments. So, ... the difference between Platonism and Christianity is not one of lack, but is *directional* (that is, ultimately religious), and that therefore, at the most fundamental level, the relation between the two is *antithetical*. As Pascal, ... a kind of radical Augustinian, asserted: the god of the philosophers is not to be identified with the God of Jesus Christ. My “deconstruction” of Augustine operates in that vein of radical antithesis. While this may require rejecting the letter of Augustine’s own understanding of Platonism, it does not entail a rejection of philosophy *as such*. And this, I would argue, is a project that is Augustinian in spirit. For just as Augustine asserted that there can only be authentic justice where there is true (Trinitarian) worship, so there can only be authentic wisdom where there is true worship. On this account, the problem with Platonism is *not* that it is “philosophy,” *nor* a mere lack or insufficiency, but rather that it is oriented in a fundamentally different *direction* which...is aimed at different gods, and hence idols.⁶

Smith’s Augustinianism not only subordinates philosophy to religion, but finds as many philosophies as “religious commitments.” There is no philosophical truth except that

deriving from the true worship of the true god. This is not how Augustine in the *Confessions*, any more than Aquinas or Descartes treated philosophy and its relation to religion.

I shall speak about Dr Smith's treatment of Augustine in: "*Confessions of an Existentialist: Reading Augustine After Heidegger*."⁷ We agreed in 2003 that I would respond to his essay and that he would reply to my response.⁸ The passage which I have just quoted concludes his reply to my essay which I called "Bultmann Redivivus Radicalised: Augustine and Jesus as Heideggerian Existentialists." I shall give you its argument modified in the light of Smith's reply and what he has written since.

Since my response, at least two considerations from within Radical Orthodoxy of my treatments of their Augustine have appeared: Smith's *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy* and Michael Hanby's *Augustine and Modernity*.⁹ Their general line can be summed up in two points. First, Charles Taylor, Stephen Menn, and myself are criticised for seeing any continuity between the *cogito* of Augustine and that of Descartes, any community between Augustine's Christian theology and modernity's philosophical foundations. There may be a plurality of philosophies but no plurality of Augustines is allowed. Permitting that Aquinas or Descartes produced authentic Augustinianisms would be to allow Christianity to be compatible with or even productive of a neutral, objective, and universal secular reason—a very bad thing.¹⁰ The total opposition between these is the second point.¹¹ The construction of a Western theological tradition from the time of its Hellenic foundation to the present must be demolished and, in the Heideggerian manner, the incompatibility of the Hebrew *theos* and the Greek *logos*, must be made the principle of a series of discontinuities. There can be no real communication across religious differences nor any common reason between them. On this account Smith prefers Augustine to Aquinas as he understands the first and as I represent the second. He writes:

The Reformational tradition, in rejecting the notion of a neutral, secular reason, subscribes to the epistemological account offered by RO. But precisely for this reason, the Reformed tradition has been consistently critical of Aquinas's model [in which there are two theologies natural and gracious generically different] and has opted for the Augustinian paradigm. As Hankey... suggest[s], RO's reading of Aquinas tends to be a re-creation of Aquinas in Augustine's image. But Hankey... [is] wrong in thinking that Aquinas's assertion of an autonomous philosophy is a virtue of his thought.¹²

Seeing Smith's project in this light makes clear why he begins his essay with the words: "Our task is to read Augustine *after* Heidegger."

I. SUPPOSITIONS OF BULTMANN'S HEIDEGGERIAN READING

In his "Remythologizing Heidegger: A Response to Hankey" Smith specifies that this "opening is not intended as some kind of hermeneutical categorical imperative, but rather [as] a qualified task, taken up with particular interests in a particular context." Nonetheless, we must ask what such a demand brings with it. Few have given a more distorted and reductive history of Western metaphysics generally and of Platonism specifically than Heidegger.¹³ If Augustine is in a significant way a Christian Platonist, then the Heideggerian opposition between the Hebrew *theos* and the Platonic *logos* will not illuminate the structure of his thought. Indeed, this seems to be the reason for Smith's hermeneutical choice; his aim is "radical antithesis" between Augustine's Christianity and his Platonism.

The “*Confessions Of An Existentialist*” reveals that Smith is moved by a spirit congenial with the one possessing many Christians in the last two hundred years who rejected their doctrinal tradition, namely, the quest for the historical Jesus.¹⁴ German philosophy and the historical scholarship serving its theological projection enabled them to meet the authentic Jesus by way of the critical study of the New Testament. Now Smith arrives at the same end by way of a de-Platonised Augustine. In his case, as also for Rudolf Bultmann before him, Heidegger delivers up true Christianity as an existentialism which must be separated out and rescued from the Hellenic metaphysics, conveyed through Platonism, which hid it for millennia and threatens to obscure it still. Laurence Hemming, who also works—but more critically—on the periphery of Radical Orthodoxy’s postmodern collapse of philosophy into Christian theology, gives the essentials of a radicalised return to Bultmann in his *Heidegger’s Atheism*.

For Hemming the doctrinal Christianity developed by the Church in the Patristic period by the unification of revelation and metaphysics is dead. The nineteenth-century deconstruction of the doctrinal theology of the tradition is assumed; existential self-involvement takes its place. Heidegger, Hemming writes, refused to theologize, “refused to objectify his faith into objects of knowledge.”¹⁵ After Heidegger, for Hemming, as with Smith, self-involvement, not doctrine, is the essential. Being is only an usher to myself:

being’s refusal to be thematized has been what beckons theologians to re-engage with Heidegger. Being, therefore, has no meaning: rather Heidegger thought all over again how meaning might be. ... Final resolution, on the other hand, is what theology as metaphysics has always attempted. There is no final framework for faith except itself: no set of principles, neither canons nor dogmas nor doctrines which will resolve every demand. Rather, I, as the demand that is ushered in by being, must learn theologically to reflect on faith, perhaps assisted through canons and dogma and the carefully sedimented memory of my forefathers that goes under the protective title of tradition, but nevertheless resolutely, I must, in believing, face the question of myself that being opens up.¹⁶

Hemming knows that the dogmas of the metaphysical Christianity of the Church are most *unlikely* to “assist” the kind of encounter with myself which Being emptied of meaning “opens up.” Such an opening requires a stripping away. Heidegger helps complete in the twentieth century what the war of nineteenth-century Biblical scholarship against metaphysical Christianity began: the stripping away of doctrine so that the New Testament will deliver Jesus as the self I wish to find. Smith is using Heidegger to the same end by way of Augustine.

Hemming describes how “Rudolf Bultmann’s engagement with Martin Heidegger in Marburg in the years 1923-29... allowed him to raise hermeneutical theology to an entirely new level.”¹⁷ Heidegger enables the “setting apart of theology and philosophy” permitting us to hear again the New Testament *kerygma*. For Smith, by the *espolio* of Augustine’s Platonism, Heidegger reveals a existentialist who is thereby also shown to be a true follower of Jesus.

II. A HEIDEGGERIAN AUGUSTINE

Dr Smith concludes that, having taken Heidegger’s “*Daseinanalytik* as the hermeneutical situation for our reading of Augustine,” he has actually found in Augustine’s *Confessions* “the confessions of an existentialist.” This required “a certain ‘deconstruction’ of Augustine ... reading the existential (and Christian) lines of his thought against its Neoplatonic

elements.”¹⁸ Smith notes Heidegger’s judgments that “one cannot simply strip away the Platonism in Augustine; and [that] it is a misunderstanding to believe...authentic Christianity...can be reached through Augustine.”¹⁹ The reason Heidegger provided matches Smith’s demand for an antithesis between Christianity and Platonism. Heidegger remarked: “Overall, the explication of the experience of God in Augustine is specifically ‘Greek’ (in the sense that our philosophy is always already ‘Greek’).”

Hellenism is indeed inescapable for Christians. To begin, the specific Christian Scripture is Greek, indeed, the version of the Jewish Scripture mostly used by the Patristic Church was Greek, and as Jaroslav Pelikan puts it:

It remains one of the most momentous linguistic convergences in the entire history of the human mind and spirit that the New Testament happens to have been written in... the Greek of Socrates and Plato... As a result of this convergence, every attempt to translate the New Testament...has on encountering any term, been obliged to consider all its previous career in the history of the Greek language; and that was a problem of natural theology no less than a problem of philology.²⁰

Nonetheless, using Heidegger to reach beyond what the Mystic of the Black Forest regarded as possible, Smith’s method is to “follow Heidegger’s *Destruktion* of Augustine’s Neoplatonism which attempts to retrieve the elements of ‘primal Christianity’ still resounding in Augustine under the layers of Greek philosophy.”²¹ According to Heidegger, what Augustine “appropriated from Plotinus and the Neoplatonic tradition” is “incongruous with the originary Christian elements of Augustine’s thought.” It is “thus subject to *Destruktion*.” When the “Neoplatonic layer” is “stripped away,” we will “retrieve Augustine’s analysis of the factual Christian ‘struggle’ and ‘trial’ (*tentatio*) of being-in-the-world.”²²

We may wonder why such a route back to “primal Christianity” should be undertaken. Surely, it will be even more difficult to find the primitive deposit through someone who confessed that he could not understand the Scriptures without a *Preparatio Platoniorum* than it has proved to find it directly under the Greek text of the New Testament. Despite asserting (without providing evidence) that “for Augustine, the question of *who* I am is *answered* in the person of Christ,”²³ Smith reverses Augustine’s *ordo inveniendi*. He presents Augustine as an existentialist and discovers the existential Jesus through him, rather than understanding the saint through his own model.

When he responded to me Smith distinguished his quest from that of Bultmann who is possessed by the evil secular spirit:

As I tried to show in *The Fall of Interpretation*,²⁴ Bultmann was working with a thoroughly modernist epistemology... in order to carry out what was an essentially *apologetic* project: seeking to disclose the core truth of the New Testament in terms that were accessible more universally (apart from faith), Bultmann took Heidegger’s philosophy to be a neutral but true account of human existence. Insofar as the New Testament understanding of human existence *matched* the analytic of Dasein, Bultmann took this as rational confirmation of the (demythologized, existential) truth of the New Testament. But as recent research has made clear, the reason that Heidegger’s *Daseinanalytik* converged so well with the New Testament was because it was itself a *formalization* of Augustine and the New Testament: a filtering or screening of the robust, contentful vision of the Gospel to produce a thinner, formal account of human existence—a kind of secularization of the New Testament.²⁵

Smith asks us to believe that Heidegger's questioning of being exposes the authentic existential Augustine—and through him the authentic existential Jesus—because, in opposition to all the intervening Augustinianisms which he rejects, Heidegger thinks from within a secularized version of Augustine and the New Testament. It is unclear to me that Heidegger's stance is secular and why Smith embraces Heidegger's secular existentialism and rejects Bultmann's. Leaving those questions aside, my problem with these enterprises is that I see no basis for confidence either in Bultmann's or Smith's methods for producing a distant past which looks like the present. It makes no difference if the means is a present result of that past allowing us to leap over and reject the intervening moments. To have faith in their methods we must believe that the philosophies which have determined the theological enterprises of our centuries are closer to the mentality of Patristic Christianity than was the philosophy enabling its formation and propagation.

Crucially, we must also accept that philosophy in Antiquity had the same relation to experience as that posited by the most anti-metaphysical philosophies of our own time. A successful retrieval will require that Ancient philosophies are mere conceptual structures which neither give nor imply an experience of being. Without this externality of philosophical form and experiential content, we will not be able to reach what underlies. Despite the well-established scholarly judgment that religion and philosophy are bound together in the Patristic period²⁶ and what the texts themselves teach, the anti-metaphysical and anti-doctrinal theological project requires that these philosophies can be put on or taken off by an independently established religious experience in a way comparable to our changing coats.

To discover his existentialist and therefore Christian Augustine beyond the limits he assigns to Heidegger's own analytic, Dr Smith first ascribes to Heidegger a naïve opposition between philosophical "categories" and "Christian experience": "the problem from Heidegger's standpoint is the fact that Neoplatonic categories are inadequate and inappropriate for the explication of the Christian experience of God."²⁷ Then, having himself generalized the opposition to one between Augustine's Christian experience and "*all* conceptual frameworks" which only involve a "battle of words"—and improbably ascribing this opposition to Augustine—, Smith asserts: "Augustine was simply employing the conceptual categories which were available to him at the time, explicating an experience which resisted and pushed the boundaries of those categories." In the accompanying note what is ascribed to Augustine's relation to Platonism is transferred to "the old and analogous question of Aquinas as an 'Aristotelian'."²⁸

Smith's Heideggerian *espolio* of Augustine's Neoplatonism, leaving us with the naked purity of his existentialist Christian experience, thus depends on two oppositions. The first is between Platonism as a conceptual framework, "simply" employed as an external means for explicating something else, "Christian experience," possessed independently of the Platonic categories. The second is between philosophical concepts and religious experience. Happily, if we wish to preserve the real conditions for understanding Augustine's Christianity as the *Confessions* represents them, Smith is not consistent in maintaining these oppositions. He writes of "an ultimate incommensurability between Greek philosophy (which is always already *religion*) and Christian faith." This implies that philosophy is not a conceptual framework which may be employed in opposition to religious experience, but rather it contains religious experience. Again, Smith writes that "In Book VII we see the beginning of Augustine's conversion (or *another* conversion for those who are counting; cf. Bk III) and the experiences which precipitate his return." In a note he explains:

Unlike, for instance, St. Paul, Augustine's conversion is not constituted by a single, cataclysmic event, but rather involves a process: a conversion to the search for Wisdom through reading Cicero's *Hortensius* (Bk III); a conversion to Neoplatonism through the 'platonic books' (Bk VII), and finally the "climax," according to his account, in the garden in Milan, through the reading of Paul...which effect his conversion to Christian faith.²⁹

Here, Smith gives us many "conversions": to philosophy, to Platonism, to Christian faith, and, crucially, all the conversions *may* include experience. Augustine himself represents them all as really involving experience, and indeed in such a way that the Christian experiences and doctrines depend upon the philosophical experiences and concepts. My response examines what Augustine wrote in the *Confessions* about the philosophical conversions in order to show that the kind of oppositions Smith makes between Platonism and Christianity, and between philosophy as conceptual framework and Christian experience, are not Augustine's. The "books of the Platonists" taught a way to ascend from proud assertion of independence to union with ever higher levels of divinity. What Augustine imbibes from them does in fact educate him in a way of ascending to God. They are not a mere "*occasion*" for his Christian conversion. Instead, the doctrine, the conceptual content, and the spiritual method which he learned are both the *sine qua non* condition of his Christian conversion and also give his Christianity essentials of its spiritual method and of its experienced and conceived content.³⁰

III. WHAT AUGUSTINE REQUIRES FROM PHILOSOPHY

Augustine's conversion to philosophy as he represents it in *Confessions* III unites reading with real transformation of the mind and experience, on the one hand, and religion with philosophy, on the other. Augustine says that he did not read the *Hortensius* to refine his style or expression but for its content and that Cicero's "exhortation to philosophy" "changed my feelings." It changed his experience, religious practice, values, and desires in respect to God himself: "It altered my prayers, and created in me different purposes and desires." Inflamed by philosophy, he repented his vain hopes; now instead "I lusted for immortal wisdom with ardour of the heart." This philosophical moment begins his Platonic and Christian conversion, which he represents in Neoplatonic language as the return to the divine source: "I began to rise up so that I might return to you."³¹

Augustine describes his new love, philosophy, the love of wisdom, the wisdom which itself is God, in the language of passionate feeling: "How I burned, my God, how I burned."³² Hardly language anyone would use about adopting a contentless categorical framework which one will "employ," this representation of himself as an erotically inflamed lover of philosophy is not one which Augustine will repent later. When in Book VIII he is about to describe the *Tolle lege* conversion, he recollects the conversion to philosophy which enabled and will be completed by the decisive new movement of his will in the Milan garden. He writes that he had been "excited" to the study of wisdom by reading the *Hortensius*.³³ What lies between the conversion of Book III and that of Book VIII is a long philosophical journey culminating in the Platonism described at the center of the *Confessions*. This journey unified a division created by the conversion to philosophy. This division stems from a *failed* attempt to read another text, an essential *locus* of Christian experience, the Scriptures.

Augustine tells us that, although delighted by Cicero's exhortation "so that his words excited me, set me on fire, and enflamed me," one thing held him back from total enthusiasm: he did not find the name of Christ among them. Having taken in that name with his mother's milk, no book lacking it could "totally captivate" him.³⁴ In consequence he turned to the "holy Scriptures." These, however, proved unsatisfactory to his newly sophisticated mind because he lacked a hermeneutic rightly interpreting what Platonism will later enable him to regard as metaphors. Augustine did not possess that by which "the sharp point of my mind could penetrate...[the] interiority" of the Scriptures.³⁵

Augustine always thinks within the mutual connection of the subjects and objects of knowledge which Plato's analogy of the line images and which the Neoplatonists elaborate. In consequence, reaching the spiritual interior of Scripture where God is known as incorporeal substance depends for him on discovering his own interiority. This discovery is not only (1) the finding of a spiritual method, it is also (2) the discovery of a positive philosophical conception, one which will enable him to understand (i) his own nature and (ii) the nature of God, (iii) the nature and cause of evil, (iv) human freedom, and (v) his responsibility for his sins. In Book VII he tells us that he owed the method and the concept to what he found in the "books of the Platonists."

By their means we conceived incorporeal substance and attained knowledge of "what truly is."³⁶ Neoplatonism provides a philosophical method and positive doctrine unlocking the knowledge both of true being and of his own being, and enabling him to have an orthodox Christian experience when he reads Scripture—precisely because in Plotinian Neoplatonism interior experience and conceptual content are united in a profound, exemplary, and original way.³⁷ Without this Neoplatonism Augustine confessed: "I did not know that God is spirit, not a body whose members have length and breadth."³⁸ Until its method and doctrines can break down his externality, he dwells outside himself and sees only with the eye of the flesh.³⁹ In that subjective externality, he supposes that the words of Genesis depicting the human as made in the image of God require God to be "confined in a bodily form and to have hair and nails."⁴⁰ As long as he has a corporeal conception of God and of himself and lacks the method of interior introspection, Augustine's limited philosophy holds him to the heretical Christianity of Manicheism. Its dualist and corporeal amalgam of philosophy and religion possesses Augustine until he arrives at the Skepticism which is the antechamber to Platonism for himself, for Plotinus, and for their followers like Descartes.⁴¹ The philosophical steps carrying Augustine out of Manicheism to the brink of orthodox Christian experience occur in Book V.

The beginning of Augustine's escape from Manicheism is the philosophical study of nature. He describes a movement like that in Plato's *Timaeus* which having begun with fables about the gods and the universe arrives at "probabilities as likely as any others." The Platonic *Physis* urges that we mortals must accept in respect to the knowledge of nature no more than "a probable myth"⁴²: opinion reigns in respect to the realm of *genesis*. Nonetheless, it is crucial that Augustine finds the stories told about nature within the philosophical disciplines to be *more* probable than the fables of the Manichees. Augustine tells us that he "read many works of the philosophers" and having compared them to the "long fables of the Manichees," he judged what the philosophers said "seemed more probable to me."⁴³ By "their own minds and ingenuity" given them by God, the natural philosophers "have found out much." Augustine follows Paul in Romans I when juxtaposing their ingenious ascent to knowledge with their retreat from God "through impious pride" in an irreligious quest.⁴⁴ The *spirit* with which the scientific quest is undertaken and its successes received is the religious matter here. The "mundane things

themselves” have nothing to do with religion, indeed it was sacrilegious for the Manichees to mix them up.⁴⁵ Augustine has found a kind of philosophy which is authoritative in its own sphere but must be confused neither with the content, nor the dignity, nor the certainty of what religion knows. Nonetheless, this mundane philosophy has religious consequences insofar as it leads him to Skeptical suspense.

Skepticism, as Augustine represents it, requires not “making a judgment but rather doubting everything and fluctuating between all.” In his soft Skepticism, which remains a position within the Platonic school, arriving at the required suspension of judgment demands that something positive be set against his negative opinion about the Manichee account of nature.⁴⁶ This positive experience is his encounter with the Platonic interpretation of Scripture by Ambrose of Milan. The attractions of the Bishop were many, and it took some time before Augustine began to pay attention to the content of what he was teaching. Then, however, he confesses: “I heard first one, then another, then many difficult passages of the Old Testament interpreted figuratively. ... After many passages of these books had been interpreted spiritually, I now found fault with that despair of mine caused by the belief that there was nothing at all to counter the hostile mockery of the Law and the Prophets.”⁴⁷ In sceptical suspense between these negative and positive experiences, Augustine could not continue anything as definite and partisan as his identification with the Manichees. Consistently with his scepticism, he also refused to take positive steps; he will not even identify himself with the Sceptics as a school. He will not entrust himself to these philosophers whom he preferred to the Manichees because, like Cicero, these philosophers were “without the saving name of Christ.” Nor, at the same time will Augustine move from his state as a Christian catechumen to baptism. What would a genuine positive movement take? Augustine tells us: “conceiving spiritual substance.”⁴⁸ Book VII reveals how he conceived incorporeal and true being by way of reading the Platonic books.

IV. THE PLATONISM WHICH ENABLES AND FORMS AUGUSTINE’S CHRISTIANITY

Augustine’s conversion to Neoplatonism coincides with another maturation: he ceases to be an adolescent and reaches young manhood. The continuing imbecility of his mind “dwelling outside in my corporeal eye,”⁴⁹ becomes an embarrassment. The greater his age so much the greater his shame that he is not able to think any substance which he cannot see with his eyes.⁵⁰ At the start of Book VII after reminding us that his incapacity to think incorporeal substance is the fundamental problem upon which all the others depend, he elaborates the problems and the problematic. By this deepening of the drama, Augustine leads us to the critical moment when he read “certain books of the Platonists.” Having reached that point, he confesses that he “read there not the same words but entirely the same content” of the greatest part of the Prologue of the Gospel of John, and indeed that he read “the same” together with the addition of “many and various reasons by which to be persuaded” of the common doctrine.⁵¹

What problems will this reading solve? After having set the problematic of Book VII in terms of how he should conceive God,⁵² Augustine links his inability to conceive the divine to his lack of self-knowledge and puts the problem in terms of the familiar Platonic conformity of subject and object: “I was so gross of mind and I was so completely unable to see clearly into my own self that I thought that whatever was not extended in space ... was nothing at all.”⁵³ Next Augustine brings us back to the question of evil which up until now, following the Manichees, he had also dealt with in terms of bodies. Having left them, he now has “no clear grasp of the cause of evil.”⁵⁴ He “has heard its cause is in the free choice of the will,” but he has not acquired the metaphysics allowing such an explanation to work.

For this explanation to succeed he will need to think that the soul is superior to the body and to corporeal things generally. In the superiority of the soul as incorporeal lies her freedom in respect to bodies, both his own body and those of the external world.⁵⁵ Before he can get the cause of evil into the will he must get it out of bodies and, in order to make bodies objects of the will, he must find the goodness of their cause and of them. Although Augustine continues to find elements of the solution as he moves step by step toward Platonism, he cannot put the parts together rightly for the ever-persistent reason, the philosophically discerned correspondence of knower and known: “I sought the origin of evil, but I sought in an evil way, and I did not see the evil in my own search.”⁵⁶ Without the knowledge of himself as incorporeal he cannot rightly understand God or evil. In consequence, until his reading of the Platonists: “I sought the source of evil and I found no way out of the problem.”⁵⁷

The exit is through the Platonic books and their doctrines *idem omnino* with the Gospel.⁵⁸ Because of the persuasive reasonings with which philosophy accompanies its teachings, Augustine is led by them to the concepts, to the experience, as well as to the method for attaining both, which will enable him to become an orthodox Christian. Therefore the absolutely critical transforming event constituted by reading those books and attaining sight must be, in the eyes of Augustine, a work of God’s good providence. Before confessing the gracious event, he represents it as such: “By inward goads you continually stirred me, so that I would be restless until you would become certain to me by way of interior sight.”⁵⁹ This representation of what the Platonic books gave and how he was brought to them from sceptical restlessness immediately precedes his account of their conformity with the Prologue to John.

Both the Prologue of John and the books which teach the same doctrines give a positive conceptual knowledge of God. How else are we to represent one of these truths?: “before all times and above all times your only begotten Son immutably abides coeternal with you.”⁶⁰ This proposition is easily identified as a statement about the Plotinian *NOUS*; an identification confirmed by how it goes on: “because souls receive of its fullness they are happy, and because by participation in wisdom abiding in them they are renewed to be wise.”⁶¹ Augustine is confessing what amounts to a sketch of *NOUS*, of its relation to the One, and of the role it plays as source and illuminating power of the rational soul. His sketch is *simultaneously* a conceptual map of the spiritual cosmos and Gospel truth. How is it known?

What he discovered in the Platonic books “admonished me to return into myself, and I did enter into my inward self.”⁶² Thus Augustine begins one of the many accounts of mystical ascent in the *Confessions*.⁶³ They are all importantly modified reworkings of Plotinus.⁶⁴ In general, the modifications belong in the direction Plotinus is given when transmitted by Porphyry and Victorinus, i.e. there is a trinitarian reduction of the One toward *NOUS* and Being. *Vis-à-vis* his Plotinian source, Augustine intellectualises 1) the ascent, 2) the experience of the Principle, and 3) the self which experiences God.⁶⁵ Rather than seeking union with the radically other, i.e. the One Non-being, Augustine is in search of self-subsistent Intellect and Being. He finds a trinity of aeternal being, truth, and love (*O aeterna ueritas et uera caritas et cara aeternitas.*) Concluding the first inward and upward ascent is a vision of Being: “When I first came to know you, you raised me up to make me see that what I saw is Being (*esse*), and that I who saw it am not yet Being.”⁶⁶ He goes on to name God through Exodus 3.14: “Now I am who I am.”⁶⁷ This intuition, conceiving, and naming of God in terms of *idipsum esse* accords with how Augustine treats God elsewhere.⁶⁸ He has attained the very knowledge of himself and of the divine he had confessed himself to be in need: “I entered and with the eye of my soul, such as it was, I saw above the same eye of my

soul the immutable light higher than my mind.”⁶⁹ This is a mental experience of intelligible non-corporeal realities. As a result Augustine solves the intellectual problems for which he needed answers; the subsequent chapters of Book VII manifest the consequent solutions.

Augustine moves Neoplatonic theology decisively toward its kataphatic pole.⁷⁰ In accord with this move to the affirmative way, union is represented as what human effort can attain and, precisely because it is only what the human can attain, it is also what human effort must lose. Because the transcendence sought by Augustine is reduced as compared with what pagan Neoplatonists sought, Augustine speaks of union, although only instantaneous, as our own work in a way the pagan Neoplatonists themselves cannot allow.⁷¹ In a way characteristic of Christian polemic in this period, Augustine projects human pride onto the mystical ascent, and then denounces what he represents. His initial words about the source of the decisive philosophical books are typical of follows: for Augustine the grace he receives by way of the Platonists comes from “a man swollen up with the most enormous gigantic god-defying pride.”⁷² With such rhetorical overload, no one can miss the polemical point.

Augustine’s intellectualization of the soul which seeks, of the means she employs, and of the goal she attains, and his drawing of the ascent more within human power does not eliminate such essential elements of Plotinian mysticism as transcendence,⁷³ love,⁷⁴ step-by-step movement through hierarchically graded forms of apprehension,⁷⁵ union in an instant which carries us out of time,⁷⁶ touch,⁷⁷ self-transcendence and self-forgetfulness.⁷⁸ The same texts in which Augustine describes what is common also present what contrasts. Augustine writes “In the flash of a trembling glance it [our power of knowing and judging] arrived at that which is.”⁷⁹ In that flash, receiving what Romans 1.20 concedes to philosophy, he saw the invisible things of God, but confesses that “I did not possess the strength in the pinnacle of my mind to hold on, and in my weakness I returned to the banal.”⁸⁰ Things turn out the same way in the vision at Ostia. Mother and son sigh, they touch the pinnacle slightly by a moment of total concentration of the heart and then fall back to time and the realm of human noise.⁸¹

The Plotinian descriptions of how the human soul experiences the One differ significantly from Augustine’s mystical ascents. In *Ennead* 5.3, we find Plotinus’ last description of illumination by the One.⁸² He tells us that the one who knows himself is double. One of our selves is reasoning, having knowledge according to soul: “Another one is up above this man. He knows himself according to Intellect because he has become that intellect; and by that Intellect he thinks himself again, not any longer as a man.”⁸³ When we mount beyond Intellect to the One, the language is denuded of any rational self-elevation.⁸⁴ Then Plotinus speaks of faith: there is a “sudden reception of a light” which compels the soul “to believe” that “she is from Him, she is Him.” There is a breaking in; the illumination “comes.”⁸⁵ With this arrival of the “true end of the soul,” she “contemplates the light by which she sees,” but the soul is no longer operating by a power over which she has control.⁸⁶ Pierre Hadot’s analyses of Plotinian mysticism clarify this loss of a self-possessed power: “into the soul’s consciousness irrupts an activity of which it was unconscious.”⁸⁷ Plotinus’ mystical experience is an overthrowing of our being because it is of a completely different order from the preparations by which we dispose ourselves for it. Our preparations cannot suffice to bring about the union. The experience is a gift not given to all.⁸⁸ The irruption in the consciousness “effects a kind of explosion of the consciousness ... one has the impression of participating in another.”⁸⁹ As Jean-Marc Narbonne puts it: “Philosophy in Neoplatonism leads to her own proper self-suppression and must bow before a higher form

of experience for which she prepares but for whose strangeness nothing can prepare her, because the One does not come in the way for which we await it.”⁹⁰

Ennead 5.3 is dependent on Plato’s *Alcibiades*, which the Neoplatonists made the first book read by their students; it is very clear about our need for God’s aid in any successful ascent.⁹¹ Plato first demonstrates the necessity of self-knowledge and then shows that knowledge of ourselves is attained only in and through the knowledge of God.⁹² At the conclusion of the dialogue, Alcibiades suggested that it would be by the will of Socrates, assisting him to self-knowledge, that he would achieve virtue. Socrates insists that this is not well said. Rather Socrates is adamant that virtue requires “that God will it.”⁹³ Self-knowledge goes with “temperance.” Thus, in fact, Plato in the *Alcibiades* agrees with Augustine that, as Dr Smith opines, “Continence is a gift.”⁹⁴ In judging what Christians owe to Hellenism, philosophy, and Platonism, it is appropriate to conclude by reminding ourselves of that upon which pagan and Christian Platonists would insist: Augustine’s Platonic self-knowledge and its co-relative knowledge of God come to him only by God’s gracious leading.

We may conclude our dialogue with Dr Smith with the hope that we shall follow Augustine’s practice in our own reading of his texts. Augustine was conscious of the religious divide between himself and the authors of the books by which he learned to know and to love God. Their doctrines were like the riches God commanded his people to steal from their Egyptian masters.⁹⁵ Despite their origin, by God’s leading he entered deeply into them as spiritual guides. Philosophy was not for him religiously sectarian, and he used no hermeneutical sophistication to keep it distant. If our hermeneutical sophistication prevents our acquiring as he did the disciplines of contemplation, we will always remain outside Augustine’s texts, mind, and ultimate love.

WAYNE HANKEY
MAY 10, 2006

¹ Milbank, “Foreword,” in James K.A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-secular Theology* (Grand Rapids / Milton Keynes: Baker Academic / Paternoster Press, 2004), 12 and see Smith at 25–28 and idem, “Remythologizing Heidegger: A Response to Hankey,” note 3.

² See J.A. Doull, “What is Augustinian *Sapientia*?” *Dionysius*, 12 (1988): 61–67 and W.J. Hankey, “Neoplatonism and Contemporary Constructions and Deconstructions of Modern Subjectivity,” in *Philosophy and Freedom: The Legacy of James Doull*, edited by David G. Peddle and Neil G. Robertson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 250–278.

³ James K. A. Smith, *Speech and Theology: Language and the Logic of Incarnation* (London & New York: Routledge, 2002).

⁴ Milbank, “Foreword,” in Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 12.

⁵ Ibid. 13.

⁶ Smith, “Remythologizing Heidegger: A Response to Hankey.”

⁷ It was sent to me in August 2003. Smith seems to have published it elsewhere; he lists an article with the same title as published in *New Blackfriars*, 82 (2001): 123–139.

⁸ Written in December 2003 and March 2004 respectively.

⁹ Michael Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, Radical Orthodoxy (London & New York: Routledge, 2003).

¹⁰ Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 50–54, 90–91; Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity*, 11–12, 144–146.

¹¹ Hanby’s criticism that I want to force a choice between what we may call the medieval religious Augustine unified with Proclus, on the hand, and a Cartesian philosophical Augustine on the other (see 12) is simply wrong as my “Between and Beyond Augustine and Descartes: More than a Source of the Self,” *Augustinian Studies* 32:1 (2001): 65–88, especially 86–88 to which he refers and my “Neoplatonism and Contemporary Constructions” which he could not have known, both show. I advocate just the opposite.

¹² Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy*, 165.

- ¹³ See Jean-Marc Narbonne, *Hénologie, ontologie et Ereignis (Plotin-Proclus-Heidegger)*, L'âne d'or (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2001) and my "Why Heidegger's 'History' of Metaphysics is Dead," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 78:3 (2004): 425–443.
- ¹⁴ See my "The Bible in a Post-Critical Age," in *After the Deluge, Essays Towards the Deseccularization of the Church*, ed. W. Oddie (London: SPCK, 1987), 41–92.
- ¹⁵ Laurence Paul Hemming, *Heidegger's Atheism. The Refusal of a Theological Voice* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002) 266.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Ibid. 21. Bultmann's works became staples of English Protestant theology, e.g. *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, by Rudolf Bultmann and Ernst Lohmeyer et al. (New York: Harper Torchbooks. 1961), Rudolf Bultmann, *Jesus and the Word* (New York: Scribner's, 1958), Karl Jaspers and Rudolf Bultmann, *Myth and Christianity: An Inquiry into the Possibility of Religion without Myth* (New York: Noonday Press, 1958), *Existence and Faith. Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann*, selected, translated and introduced by Schubert M. Ogden (New York: Living Age, 1960).
- ¹⁸ James A.K. Smith "Confessions Of An Existentialist: Reading Augustine After Heidegger" note 11
- ¹⁹ Ibid. note 38.
- ²⁰ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995) 3.
- ²¹ Smith "Confessions Of An Existentialist," note 11.
- ²² Ibid. note 28.
- ²³ Ibid. note 23. There is nothing to justify Smith's use of the word "person" to translate Augustine's text at *Confessions* 10.5.7 as he does in what precedes this note in his article.
- ²⁴ See James K.A. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2000), 104–113.
- ²⁵ Smith, "Remythologizing Heidegger: A Response to Hankey."
- ²⁶ For example Pierre Hadot, "La Fin du paganisme," reprinted in Pierre Hadot, *Études de philosophie ancienne*, L'âne d'or (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1998) 341–74.
- ²⁷ I shall not endeavour to judge whether Smith's representation of Heidegger is correct what interests me is what he does with Heidegger as he understands him.
- ²⁸ Smith "Confessions Of An Existentialist," note 40.
- ²⁹ Ibid. note 51.
- ³⁰ Augustinus, *Confessions*, ed. L. Verheijen, *Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* 27 (Turnhout 1981) 7.9.13; best on the unity of spiritual method, doctrine, and content and how Augustine acquires them from Plotinus is Stephen Menn, *Descartes and Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) on which see my "Self-knowledge and God as Other in Augustine: Problems for a Postmodern Retrieval," *Bochumer Philosophisches Jahrbuch für Antike und Mittelalter* 4 (1999): 83–123 and "Between and Beyond Augustine and Descartes: More than a Source of the Self," *Augustinian Studies* 32:1 (2001): 65–88.
- ³¹ *Confessions* 3.4.7.
- ³² Ibid. 3.4.8.
- ³³ Ibid. 8.7.17.
- ³⁴ Ibid. 3.4.8.
- ³⁵ Ibid. 3.5.9.
- ³⁶ Ibid. 3.7.12.
- ³⁷ See for example, Stanislas Breton, "Actualité du néoplatonisme," *Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie* 5 (1972) reprinted in *Études néoplatoniciennes* (Neuchâtel: La Baconnière, 1973): 110–26 at 110–111; A.H. Armstrong, "Tradition, Reason and Experience in the Thought of Plotinus," reprinted in idem, *Plotinian and Christian Studies* XVII (London: Variorum, 1979).
- ³⁸ Ibid. 3.7.12.
- ³⁹ Ibid. 3.6.11.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid. 3.7.12.
- ⁴¹ See my "Self-knowledge and God as Other in Augustine": 111–22; "Between and Beyond Augustine and Descartes": 77–80; Dominic J. O'Meara, *Plotinus: An Introduction to the Enneads* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) 39–41 and *La Connaissance de soi: Études sur le Traité 49 de Plotin*, sous la direction de Monique Dixsaut, avec la collaboration de Pierre-Marie Morel et Karine Tordo-Rombaut, Tradition de la Pensée classique (Paris: Vrin, 2002).
- ⁴² Plato, *Timaeus* 29d2.

-
- ⁴³ *Confessions* 5.3.3.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 5.3.4.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 5.5.8; A judgment to which Galileo referred during his struggles with the Church.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 5.14.25.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 5.14.24.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 5.14.25.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 3.6.11 and 7.1.1.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 7.1.1.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.* 7.9.13.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*
- ⁵³ *Ibid.* 7.1.2.
- ⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 7.3.4.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 7.4.5.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 7.5.7.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 7.7.11.
- ⁵⁸ For a partial history of how the problem of evil is dealt with in the Hellenistic schools see Proclus, *On the Existence of Evils*, translated by Jan Opsomer and Carlos Steel, *The Ancient Commentators on Aristotle* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2003), Introduction 10–45.
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 7.8.12.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 7.9.14.
- ⁶¹ This would be confirmed by many passages from the *Enneads*; a sceptic might look at 5.1 which scholarship generally judges Augustine read.
- ⁶² *Ibid.* 7.10.16.
- ⁶³ Others begin at 7.17.23, 9.10.23, 10.6.9, 10.40.65; this is not a complete list.
- ⁶⁴ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, translated with an Introduction by Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) 123.
- ⁶⁵ See W. J. Hankey, “Ratio, reason, rationalism (ideae),” in *Saint Augustine through the Ages: an Encyclopedia*, edited Allan Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 696–702.
- ⁶⁶ *Confessions* 7.10.16, Chadwick’s translation.
- ⁶⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁸ See for example my “Self-knowledge and God as Other in Augustine”: 85 note 10 and *De trinitate* 1.1.2, 1.8.17, 2.16.27, 2.18.34, 3.2.8, 5.2.3, 7.5.10.
- ⁶⁹ *Confessions* 7.10.16: *intraui et uidi qualicumque oculo animae meae supra eundem oculum animae meae, supra mentem meam lucem incommutabilem.*
- ⁷⁰ See my “Self-knowledge and God as Other in Augustine”: 116–22; from the immense scholarly literature I mention only these recent efforts all of which emphasise (and even sometimes overemphasise) these features: D. Bradshaw, “Neoplatonic Origins of the Act of Being,” *Review of Metaphysics* 53 (1999): 383–401; R.D. Crouse, “*Paucis mutatis uerbis*: St. Augustine’s Platonism,” *Augustine and his critics*, edited R.J. Dodaro and G.P. Lawless, (London and New York: Routledge, 1999) 37–50; Phillip Cary, *Augustine’s Invention of the Inner Self: The Legacy of a Christian Platonist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- ⁷¹ For the relative places of grace and nature in pagan Neoplatonism and pre-modern Christianity see my “Philosophy as Way of Life for Christians? Iamblichan and Porphyrian Reflections on Religion Virtue and Philosophy in Thomas Aquinas,” *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 59:2 (Juin 2003): 193–224. On Plotinus see H. Duméry, *Phenomenology and Religion: Structures of the Christian Institution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975): “Plotinus seeks salvation only through the mediation of the intellect, and yet he demands that the intellect declare itself dependent and insists that attaining the intelligible is only a stage, although an indispensable one, on the journey toward the One, toward ecstasy. And since the One is transcendent, the final ecstasy presupposes a grace. As Jean Trouillard observes, only those who link “the idea of grace to that of contingency” can dispute the fact that Plotinus professed a mysticism of divine gratuitousness and liberality. Once the transcendence of the One is admitted, the Plotinian ecstasy must be understood as a religious experience beyond the intelligible order.” Much could be adduced from Proclus to a similar effect.
- ⁷² *Confessions* 7.9.13: *per quendam hominem immanissimo typho turgidum.*
- ⁷³ *Ibid.* 7.10.16: *supra mentem meam lucem incommutabilem*; 9.10.24: *transcendimus.*
- ⁷⁴ *Ibid.*: *caritas novit eam.*
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid.* 7.17.23.

- ⁷⁶ Ibid.: *in ictu trepidantis aspectus*; 9.10.24: *remeauimus ... ad ubi uerbum et incipitur et finitur*.
- ⁷⁷ Ibid. 9.10.25: *atingimus aeternam sapientiam*.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid.: *ipsa sibi anima sileat et transeat se et non se cogitando*. This is a very incomplete list.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid. 7.17.23: *peruenit ad id quod est*.
- ⁸⁰ Ibid.: *inuisibilia tua per ea quae facta & aciem figere non enalui et repercussa infirmitate reditus solitis*.
- ⁸¹ *Confessions* 9.10.24: *atingimus eam modice toto ictu cordis*.
- ⁸² Ham in Plotin, *Traité 49 (V.3)*, Introduction, traduction, commentaire et notes par Bertrand Ham, Les Écrits de Plotin publiés dans l'ordre chronologique (Paris: Cerf, 2000) 17.
- ⁸³ *Ennead* 5.3.4 lines 8–12, (Loeb Armstrong, p. 82).
- ⁸⁴ See Ham's comments at Plotin, *Traité 49*, 274.
- ⁸⁵ See Ph. Hoffmann, "La triade Chaldaïque ερος, αληθεια, πιστις de Proclus à Simplicius," in *Proclus et la Théologie Platonicienne. Actes du Colloque International de Louvain (13-16 mai 1998) en l'honneur de H.D. Saffrey et L.G. Westerink*, éd. A.Ph. Segonds et C. Steel, Ancient and Medieval Philosophy De Wulf-Mansion Centre Series I, XXVI (Leuven and Paris: Leuven University Press and Les Belles Lettres, 2000) 459–489 at 469.
- ⁸⁶ Plotin, *Traité 49*, 17 and 29–38; *Ennead* 5.3.17 lines 28–38 (Loeb Armstrong, p. 134).
- ⁸⁷ Plotin, *Traité 9: VI, 9*, Introduction, traduction commentaire et notes par Pierre Hadot, Les Écrits de Plotin publiés dans l'ordre chronologique (Paris: Cerf, 1994) 43.
- ⁸⁸ Ibid. 45.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid. 48. See also his Plotin, *Traité 38: VI, 7*, Introduction, traduction commentaire et notes par Pierre Hadot, Les Écrits de Plotin publiés dans l'ordre chronologique (Paris: Cerf, 1988).
- ⁹⁰ Jean-Marc Narbonne, "EPEKEINA THS GNWSEWS, le savoir d'au-delà à savoir chez Plotin et dans la tradition néoplatonicienne," *Metaphysik und Religion: Zur Signatur des spätantiken Denkens. Akten des Internationalen Kongresses vom 13.-17.Mars 2001 in Würzburg*, Herausgegeben von Theo Kobusch und Michel Erler (München – Leipzig: K. G. Saur, 2001) 477–490 at 488 see also idem, *Hénologie, ontologie et Ereignis*, 274–275.
- ⁹¹ On the history of the reception of the dialogue, see Plato, *Alcibiades*, ed. Nicholas Denyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 14–26 and Platon, *Alcibiade*, présentation par J. -F. Pradeau (Paris: GF Flammarion, 1999) 22–29 & 219–220. For a comparison of Augustine and Iamblichus on grace see Hans Feichtinger, "Oudeneia and humilitas: Iamblichus and Augustine on Grace and Mediation," *Dionysius* 21 (2003): 123–160.
- ⁹² For the doctrine of the dialogue and its place in the history of the *Gnothi seauton* see Ham in Plotin, *Traité 49* 15–20 and W. J. Hankey, "'Knowing As We are Known' in *Confessions* 10 and Other Philosophical, Augustinian and Christian Obedience to the Delphic *Gnothi Seauton* from Socrates to Modernity," *Augustinian Studies* 34:1 (2003) 23–48 at 40.
- ⁹³ Plato, *Alcibiades* 135D6 see also 127E5. I use Denyer's text.
- ⁹⁴ *Alcibiades* 133C18.
- ⁹⁵ *Confessions* 7.9.15.