

St Augustine on the Trinity—II

EDMUND HILL, O.P.

In his introduction to the *De Trinitate*, Augustine stated his plan, as we saw in the first article,¹ of beginning by establishing what he calls the *initium fidei*, the starting-point of faith, which he does by showing that the mystery is revealed in Scripture; and then of going on to give reasons for—*reddere rationem*, which is better translated, perhaps 'to account for'—the one true God being a Trinity, and for the rightness of saying that Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are of one substance or essence. It has been commonly held that the first part of this programme occupies Bks I-VII, in which the dogma is discussed, and that the second part is undertaken in Bks VIII-XV, in which Augustine is thought to look for a sort of proof of the mystery in the created image of the Trinity which is man.

It is indeed true that the whole work divides itself obviously into two parts, Bks I-VII and VIII-XV. But in my opinion it is doubtful whether this division is the one Augustine indicates in his introduction. The assumption that it is seems to arise from a misunderstanding of his distinction between faith and reason. It is most important to realise that it is not at all the same distinction as the one scholastic theologians make between faith and reason. The distinction we have grown used to is a distinction between truths of faith and truths of reason; between what we could not know unless God revealed it to us, to be taken on faith, and what we can learn for ourselves by the use of our unaided reason; between theology and all the natural sciences, between theology and philosophy.

St Augustine made no distinction between theology and philosophy. He distinguished between the true philosophy, which is orthodox Christianity, and what he often called false *theologies* such as the doctrines of the Platonists and other pagan philosophers. And it was only the true philosophy that he was interested in, the truth without further qualification. It was with respect to this truth, the truth of the Christian religion, that he made his distinction. His point is that this truth can never be *understood* unless it is first *believed*. His distinction between faith and reason is really one between faith and understanding. These are not

¹*Life of the Spirit*, June, 1961.

parallel attitudes of mind towards distinct objects, but successive, or rather progressive attitudes of mind towards one object, divine truth.

Thus in the present instance, he is not saying that first we must establish that the mystery of the Trinity has been revealed and is therefore an object of faith; and that then we will go on, for the fun of it, to see whether it is not also something that we can work out for ourselves without recourse to revelation, as an object of natural reason. He is not wondering whether besides a theology of the Trinity we may not also construct a philosophy of the Trinity. He is saying that some people—meaning the Arians, principally—construct theories about the Trinity which purport to give a rational explanation of the mystery, without considering sufficiently that it is a mystery which Scripture has proposed for our *belief*. They neglect the starting-point of faith. St Augustine wholeheartedly approves the intellectual urge to try and understand the mystery, but he is adamant that it cannot be achieved independently of faith, which accepts the revelation of Scripture. For him Scripture is always very precisely the corollary of faith.

Thus the plan he announces at the beginning of the *De Trinitate* does not take him out of the field of what we nowadays call theology at all. It simply states his theological procedure; first the starting-point of faith, that is a detailed examination of the scriptural revelation of the dogma; then reason, that is the attempt to give a logical, conceptual expression to the dogma, and also to show that it is not at odds with the demands of reason. It is this that he goes on to undertake in Bks v-vii. And it is significant that he concludes Bk vii, after a long and difficult discussion of the word 'person', as follows: 'If this cannot be grasped by understanding, let it be held by faith, until he shines in our minds who said by the prophet, "Unless you believe, you shall not understand".' This is St Augustine's favourite quotation from the Old Testament; it is a mistranslation, from the Greek version, of Isaiah 7. 9, one of the most inspired mistranslations that have ever been perpetrated.

Also towards the end of this Bk vii Augustine begins to introduce references to the image of the Trinity in man, thus preparing the way for the second half of the great work in Bks viii-xv. It might be objected that on the interpretation here given of the plan he announced at the beginning of Bk i, these last eight books are left with the rather unsatisfactory status of an afterthought. Well, in a work that took the author the best part of twenty years to complete, it is always possible that they were. But their construction harmonizes with that of the first

part, reflecting it, as in a mirror, in reverse; for he begins in Bks VIII and IX with rational arguments and considerations, that follow on naturally from the previous books in tone, and then he returns once more to what scripture has to say, this time about man as made 'to our image and likeness'. This brings me to my last objection to the alternative interpretation of Augustine's faith-reason plan, which is that the last books of the *De Trinitate* are quite as full of scriptural revelation, quite as dependent on the authority of the Bible as the first four. St Augustine is not looking for a proof of the Trinity by speculation that will perhaps bypass revelation and make faith unnecessary. He is examining *in extenso* another datum of revelation, namely that man is made after God's image and likeness, to see what light it throws on the principal truth of revelation that the one God is a Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. The light it does throw is considerable, but he never for one moment supposes that it is adequate and comprehensive.

This may all seem a disproportionately long discussion of a very small point. But for a proper understanding of what St Augustine has to say to us it is necessary to realise that the perspective, the point of view from which he looked at our common religion, was very different from the point of view bequeathed to us by the scholastic tradition. Indeed the chief value of Augustine is that he shows us that there is another point of view, another perspective. In substance what he says in Bks V-VII is the same as what current manuals of theology say about the dogma of the Trinity. Indeed they derive from St Augustine *via* St Thomas. (What he has said in Bks I-IV finds next to no place in current manuals at all). But the way he looks at it is different. He does not regard the matter of these books as setting out the dogma of the Trinity, the object of our faith. It is scripture that does that, and the conciliar definitions which formulate the revelation of Scripture and the faith of the Church. Having displayed that revelation and vindicated that faith in the first four books, he goes on to show, against the Arians, that it is not contrary to reason, and to discuss the ever-so-complicated question of how we are going to talk about it. Thus what for current theological text-books is the exposition of the mystery and dogma of the Trinity, is no more for Augustine than a logical and linguistic supplement to his exegetical statement of the scriptural revelation of the mystery; an important, indeed indispensable supplement, but still only a supplement. He does not consider, in these Bks V-VII, that he is talking about the Trinity but only that he is talking about talking about the Trinity.

Thus to say that there are three divine persons tells us nothing, in Augustine's opinion, about God. For the word 'person' in this matter is nothing more than a word; the most convenient—or rather the least inconvenient—word for marshalling and ordering the words in which revelation speaks to us about God. To say that there is one God, that the Father is God, and the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God, and that the Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Father and the Holy Ghost is neither the Father nor the Son—these statements do tell us something about God. They state the object of our faith. But it is only when they have already been made and accepted that the statement 'There are three persons in the one God' has any meaning, and can be taken as equivalently, by a convention of theological language, saying the same thing. For the word 'person' is nothing more than a device. Scripture tells us about a certain three, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. We ask the question 'Three what?', and we are stuck for an answer, such is the inadequacy of human speech for expressing our inadequate thoughts about divine things. Eventually we say 'Three persons', not, as Augustine enigmatically but profoundly remarks, in order to say just that, but in order not to say nothing at all.

We might indeed just as well have said 'Three substances', which is in fact what the Greeks do say and with perfect orthodoxy; they say 'three *hypostaseis*', the Greek word *hypostasis* being the exact linguistic equivalent of the Latin *substantia*. The fact that the Greeks say, equivalently, 'One essence, three substances', while the Latins say, 'One substance, three persons', shows that we are concerned immediately with words only, talking about talking, and only at one remove with the reality, talking about the triune God. And these linguistic-device words, 'person', 'substance', 'essence', are introduced in the course of our discussion, not of the divine mystery itself, but of the reality-words, 'God', 'Father', 'Son', 'Holy Ghost', etc., with which we talk about the divine mystery directly. The importance of this discussion is that unless we examine critically the language in which we talk about God, it will seduce us into misbelief about God. For instance, if we assume that words mean exactly the same thing in exactly the same way when used of God as when used of men or other creatures, we will have a false idea of God as a sort of super-man. We will think of God as anthropomorphic, because the words we use about him normally have anthropomorphic associations. Because there are no words we can use about God which have not previously been used about men and creatures, which have not indeed been formed in order to talk about men and creatures,

there is no avoiding anthropomorphic *language* about God (unless indeed you wish to substitute chemico- or physicomorphic language, and talk about God in terms of energy or atoms, which does not seem much of an improvement on talking about him in terms of man and morals); but by examining that language—and distinguishing, for example, between its natural and its artificial meaning, or between its use in plain statements and in metaphors—we can avoid falling into anthropomorphic *belief*.

The Arians, who were the misbelievers Augustine had in mind, were far too sophisticated to make this mistake. They were trapped by a valid, indeed central theological axiom which however is not so absolute as they thought it—no axiom ever is. This principle declares that whatever can be said or understood about God does not say accident but says substance (the Greek for 'substance' in this case would be 'essence'). We are here talking in terms of Aristotle's categories, which were his analysis of language. When we say 'Mr Krushchev is a man', or 'Mr K. is human', which means the same thing, we are saying substance, because such words as 'man' and 'human' in this context signify quite simply what the thing you are talking about is, not *what-like* it is, how it is, how big, where, when, why, whence, or *whither*; but simply *what*. It is a man, not a horse, a demon, or a dinosaur. But when we say 'Mr Khrushchev is a Russian, a communist, intelligent, ugly, powerful', we are saying accidents, we are saying qualities of various kinds that belong to, but are not the substance of, this *man-substance*. They go with him, or happen to him, which is why they are called accidents, from the Latin word 'to happen'. 'Mr K. is short and fat' also says an accident, the accident of quantity. And other things we can say about him say what he does, what he undergoes, how he behaves, etc., all saying various accidents about the one *substance*. All these accidents are variable within certain limits, without affecting the identity of the substance. Thus this and any other *human substance*, any material substance, is both complex and changeable, in virtue of its accidents.

But God is neither complex nor changeable. Nothing happens to him, and he has no quality, quantity, position, place, or time. Thus when we say things about God which when said of any other subject would imply variability and complexity, which normally in fact signify accidents, we have to trim their signification to this unique subject and say that in this case they do not say accidents, because nothing can happen to or be added to or taken away from God. They do not say

accidents, they say substance. We say that God is good and wise and just, but these are not qualities which he has, as they are in the case of a good and wise and just man. God is wisdom and goodness and justice, he is his attributes. He is also his actions, his knowledge and will, his knowing and loving, his speaking and listening, his punishing and forgiving.

Now on the basis of this axiom the Arians argued as follows: Everything that can be truly said of God says substance; 'being unbegotten' can be said of the Father, and 'being begotten' can be said of the Son. But 'begotten' and 'unbegotten' are different and mutually exclusive; therefore the Father and the Son are different and mutually exclusive substances.

Augustine's answer is that there is a third possibility. He grants that nothing that can be said of God says accident, but he affirms that not everything that can be said of him says substance. Scripture uses some words about God, of which 'Father' and 'Son' are the obvious examples, which say not substance but relationship, reference to another. Such words only have meaning with reference to an opposite term of reference. When applied to human subjects such words do in fact say accidents, because they necessarily imply change, development, time. A man *becomes* a father at a certain point of time; the fact that he is and always has been a son is as much as to say that he had a beginning in time. But no such change, no such beginning in time is implied when we call God Father and call God Son, for the divine begetting and being begotten is eternal and from eternity.

So the distinction in our divine vocabulary is not one between words that say accidents and words that say substance, since no words in this matter say accidents. The only distinction we have is between words that say something of the subject in itself and those that say something of it with reference to another. It is only as signified by this second class of words that Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are really distinct from each other. The Father, as father, cannot be identical with the Son, because it is meaningless to call the two opposite terms of a relationship identical—it dissolves the relationship. But as signified by the first group of words, such as 'God', 'good', 'wise', 'loving', etc., Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are identical; they are each and they are all the one God, the one divine goodness, wisdom, love. They are, in the language of theological convention, one substance, one essence. So we can call the distinction in our divine vocabulary one between substance words and relationship words.

Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one substance and three—what? Persons, we say. But¹ we can now begin to see the problematical nature of this word. For as we normally use it, it signifies its subject in itself, and not with reference to something else. To say 'Mr K. is a person' tells us nothing whatever of his relationship with others. And indeed we talk about God, with impeccable orthodoxy, as 'a person'. Our God is a personal God, we say, and we are not usually thinking about God as three when we say it, but about God as one. And yet we say 'three persons', because we have to say three something, in order to affirm our faith in the real and not merely conceptual distinction between the divine three.

A grasp of the distinction between substance words and relationship words is essential for any understanding—and it can never be more than pitifully inadequate—of the mystery of the Trinity. But to make the distinction is only to raise yet more baffling problems about the words in which the revelation is couched which will have to be deferred until the next article. Meanwhile it will be well to close with a repetition of Augustine's words at the end of Bk VII: 'If for the sake of carrying on discussion we wish to admit the use of the plural, and to say three persons or three substances (in the Greek terminology), in order to have some answer to the question "three what?", let us avoid ever thinking in terms of bulk and spacial intervals and qualitative differences of even the least degree; let there be neither confusion of persons nor any such distinction as implies any inequality. And if this cannot be grasped by understanding, let it be held by faith, until he shines in our minds who said through the prophet, "Unless you believe, you shall not understand".'

Reviews

EACH HIS OWN TYRANT, by Wingfield Hope; Sheed and Ward, 8s. 6d.

The two case-histories presented in this book are typical of people we must have all come across; 'Alice' who fails to enter into adult relationship with others because she was starved of love in childhood, and 'Hugh' who finds an otherwise happy marriage threatened by the tensions he introduces, unconscious that he is still reacting against the over-protective mother of his earlier years.