ST. AUGUSTINE, THE PLATONISTS AND KNOWLEDGE OF THE HOLY TRINITY

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Abstract

This article treats the rapport between St. Augustine and the Platonic philosophers in relation to knowledge of the Holy Trinity. The Platonic school of thought was considered both by ancient Christianity and St. Augustine alike to have been the closest to the Christian teaching, such that elements of its thought system have been used by some Church Fathers to systematize or articulate some biblical and doctrinal teachings. However, could the Platonic First Principles be considered the philosophical ontological articulation of the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity? St. Augustine was categorical to say that, while the Platonic philosophers may have been able to come to know God [the Father] and His Word [the Son] through human reasoning, they couldn't have known God as Trinity. This latter knowledge can only come to man through divine revelation, which is given to us only through Jesus Christ. Therefore, since these philosophers do not accept Christ and plainly rejected Christianity, they could not have known the essence of God as Trinity.

Keywords: Augustine, Divine revelation, First Principles, Holy Trinity, Platonic philosophers.

Introduction

The debate about the presence of the Platonic thought system in St. Augustine's theological reflections as well as the degree to which this philosophical system played a role therein is an idea that comes up every now and then. In fact, Andrea Milano has no doubts that the Platonic philosophical system does not refuse Christianity. He goes on to say that St. Augustine recognized a twofold authority in the search for the truth - one in Plato and the other in the Sacred Scriptures. Therefore, Augustine recognized the Holy Trinity in the Neoplatonic philosophy and coated it with the garments of Christianity.[1]

This article will try to show that this was not the case in St. Augustine's theology of the Holy Trinity.

St. Augustine and the Platonic philosophy

No doubt the exchange between ancient Christianity and the Platonic philosophy (Platonism, Medioplatonism and Neoplatonism) was a very important dialogue both in terms of content as well as the articulation of concepts to think of the data of faith. Hampton and Kenney tell us that one of the elements that remained constant and fundamental was the commitment of Platonism towards transcendence, its

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[1]Cf., A. MILANO, *Quale verità. Per una critica della ragione teologica*, Bologna, 1999, 102, 103 e 110, et passim.

adherence to an ontology that gives form to an existence of a higher level of reality that goes beyond the visible image of the physical world. It is precisely for this reason that Platonism remained the most powerful tradition of realism and anti-materialism in the Western history of thought. This became the beginning of the fascination of Platonism to Christians since antiquity because it offers a conceptual language through which the more profound realities of God, of Christ, and of the human person could be articulated in a manner that was more systematic than what could be found in the Sacred Scriptures.[2] One of the strongest points of this philosophic system was the affirmation of an on tological transcendence of the Good beyond and above every other thing and thefirst Principle of everything. This contrasts with the co-eternal spirit-matter orgood-evil dualism, the equal but opposite powers which are eternallyat war with each other as we can find in other thought systems of that time.

In this article while, on the one hand, we do not want to give a too simplistic judgement of St. Augustine's thoughts regarding Platonism,[3] on the other hand, we cannot but give a bird's eyeview which resumes the various opinions expressed by different authors on this aspect. We want to avoid getting lost in

[2]Cf., J. B. HAMPTON, and J. P. KENNEY, *Christianity and Platonism*, in *Christian Platonism: a History*, Cambridge University Press, 2021, 4.
[3]We will speak sometimes of Platonism andother times ofNeoplatonism. This distinction did not exist forSt. Augustine. He refers to these schools of thought under the name of the "Platonists" and, therefore, he means the line of thought thatbegan with Plato and was carried on bythe other exponents up to the time of the closureof the school: Platonism, Medioplatonism e Neoplatonism with some slight differences in thoughts as developed by the various disciples who further developedthis philosophical system like Porphyry, Numenius, Giamblicus, Apuleusandothers.

the vast amount of materials or possible ways of looking at the issue. We think it is best that the same Father of the Church give us a better idea of his assessment of this philosophical system, more than what we can glimpse from our own analysis of his first writings in which he dealt more with philosophical issues. St. Augustine is convinced that the philosopher Plato knew the Old Testament and that he could also have met the prophet Jeremiah and listened to him speak,[4] just as it is known that the famous founder of the Neoplatonic school, Ammonius Sacca, was once a Christian, who eventually left to adhere to paganism after his contact with philosophy.[5] Even Plotinus himself knew Christianity and was in dialogue or in polemic with them, particularly with the Gnostics.[6] Therefore, it is not surprising that there are aspects of this philosophic thought which is close to the Christian religion. According to some Fathers of the Church, elements of Christianity that are found in philosophy are considered as a confirmation of the Christian message, like in the Fathers of Alexandria (Clement or Didymus), who also tried to Christianize some philosophical elements. Even Origen was, probably, a disciple of the school of Ammonius Sacca and a younger contemporary of Plotinus.[7] On the Western or Latin axis we know of the Milanese Circle that had adhered to Platonism and read it from a Christian point of view. The

[4] Cf., AUG., *Ciu. dei* 8,11, CCSL 47, 227-228.
[5] Cf., G. REALEand D. ANTISERI, *Plotino e il Neoplatonismo*, vol. I, Editrice La Scuola, Brescia, 2010, 255.
[6] Cf., M. FATTAL, Du Logos de Plotin au Logos de Saint Jean: Vers la solution d'un problème métaphysique?, Cerf, Paris, 2014, especially 99-107.
[7] Cf., G. REALEand D. ANTISERI, *Plotino e il Neoplatonismo*, 255.

Milanese Circle was the intermediary of Platonism for St. Augustine. He was presented with books on Platonism translated into Latin (*libri platonicorum*) by a man *"puffed up with an overblown pride"*, [8] which he read together with other Christian authors and with the sacred Scriptures. Some modern scholars do not hesitate for a minute in finding Platonic concepts and ideas in St. Augustine or, at least, in the young, philosophical Augustine and author of the *Dialogues*.The young Augustine did not know only the Platonic philosophical school, but he also read Aristotle, he knew the Stoics and he was in polemic with the Academics. Nevertheless, the Platonic presence in Augustine and the influence which it had on him needs to be put into context.[9] Where many scholars tend to accentuate the dependence of St. Augustine on Neoplatonism for some ideas and conceptual resemblances, Nello Cipriani points out that there is no direct literary dependenceof St. Augustine on Plotinus but, rather, on the Milanese Circle (Ambrose, Simplician and Marius Victorinus). Where it seems that St. Augustine was inspired by Neoplatonism, this could be due to doctrines which have already been Christianized

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[8] *quendam hominem immanissimo typho turgidum quosdam Platonicorum libros ex graeca lingua in latinam uersos*: AUG., *Conf.* 7,13, CCSL 27, 101. These translationswere made by Mario Vittorino. Cf. alsowhat Augustine said: *commemoraui legisse me quosdam libros Platonicorum, quos Victorinus quondam, rhetor urbis Romae, quem christianum defunctum esse audieram, in latinam linguam transtulisset*: AUG., *Conf.* 8,3, CCSL 27, 114.
[9] Cf., for example., the reinterpretationmadeby C. T. Gerber to the firstAugustinian attempts on the Trinitarian theology and, especially, onPneumatology: C. T. GERBER, *The Spirit of Augustine's Early Theology: Contextualizing Augustine's Pneumatology*, Burlington, Ashgate, 2012, 5, footnote 12, for a bibliographic review.

in greater part by the same Marius Victorinus. [10] At the beginning of his literary activities St. Augustine was writing as a philosopher and drew from other Christian writers before him like Tertullian, Cyprian, Hilary, Marius Victorinus, Ambrose, Ambrosiaster, Tyconius, and also from the Nicene faith professed by the Church. However, after his priestly ordination, with an even greater mastery of sacred Scriptures, he gradually and consistently began to put aside this kind of language and began to be more and more biblical.

In the *Confessions* St. Augustine rejoiced that he first read these Platonic books before he began to read the sacred Scriptures because, in this way, these Platonic books could not have become pitfalls which would have undermined his faithin the Words of life.[11] While Augustine praised thePlatonists for having helped himto think about God in an immaterial way against the difficulties posed by Manicheism (even here this help was partially and indirectly brokered by the Milanese Circle), nevertheless he did not fail to note the grave inadequacies that he discovered in this philosophical system regarding some very important themes relating to the Christian faith. Goulven Madec was able to pick out an apologetic tone in St. Augustine on his refusal of this philosophic system which, as time passed by gradually, was becoming even more polemical. Madec cites the already mentioned passage

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[10] Cf., N. CIPRIANI, *Le fonti cristiane della dottrina trinitaria nei primi Dialoghi di s. Agostino*, in *Augustinianum* 34 (1994), 253-312; IDEM, *Le opere di sant'Ambrogio negli scritti di sant'Agostino anteriori all'episcopato*, in *La Scuola Cattolica* 125 (1997), 763-800.

of the *Confessions* (7,13-14), where St. Augustine contrasts Christianity with Platonism with the parallelism, *"ibi legi... non ibi legi"*specifically in reference to the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word, which is a central themein the Prologue of the Gospel of St. John.[12]

The Trinitarian question

Regarding the subject of the Trinity, we should pose the question about the Neoplatonic conception of the triad of the first Principles since St. Augustine does not accept that the Platonic philosophers had any knowledge of the Trinity. The Neoplatonic system, being rigorously monistic, was essentially metaphysical, and purely metaphysical. Nevertheless, it was an eclectic system which embraced elements from other philosophical schools and religious elements both from Christianity and from Middle Eastern religions as much as it owes to the Chaldean Oracles. [13] The concept of the processions from the first Principle in Neoplatonism is different from the concept of generation from the Father in Christianity. Plotinus describes this act of the procession from the first Principle, the One, in this way:

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[12] Cf., G. MADEC, *La Patria e la Via: Cristo nella vita e nel pensiero di sant'Agostino*, (translated by
  G. LETTIERI – S. LEONI) Roma, 1993, 274-275.
[13]Cf., A. VERRA, *Neoplatonismo*, in Enciclopedia Garzanti di filosofia, Mondolibri, Milano, 2002, 785.

How then could the most perfect remain self-set- the First Good, the Power towards all, how could it grudge or be powerless to give of itself, and how at that would it still be the Source? If things other than itself are to exist, things dependent upon it for their reality, it must produce since there is no other source.[14]

Even though he possess absolute liberty, the One creates out of necessity, "it must produce"another self (autocreation). Plotinus saw it also as a desired necessity, which produces la second hypostasis of the *Nous* or Spirit. In an analogous manner the *Anima* or Soul proceeds from the *Nous*. These three principles are hierarchically ordered and the successive principle is inferior to the preceding one in a certain form of impoverishment of the precedent. The One produces everything remaining unmovable and, remaining, it generates. His generating does not impoverish nor condition him in any way; what is generated is inferior to the one who generates and is of nouse to the one who generates.

If we may ask, what did St. Augustine read exactly from those Platonic books? What did he find in them?

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[14]PLOT., Enneadi V4 1,30-35.

In the first placethe holy Doctor of Hippo narrates to us in *Conf*. 8,3, his visit to Simplicianus, who*"congratulated me that I had not fallen upon the writings of other* philosophers, which were full of fallacies and deceit, a f t e r the rudiments of the world, whereas they, in many w a y s , led to the belief in God and His Word15."

It was Simplicianus who helped him to realize that in these philosophers many things about God and His Word are implied through many reasoning. More specificallyin *Conf.* 7,13.14 St. Augustine precises what he found in those philosophers:

> And there in I read, not indeed in the same words, but to the selfsame effect, enforced by many and various reasons, that, In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God…

In like manner, I read there that God the Word was born not of flesh, nor of blood, nor of the will of man, nor of the will of the flesh, but of God… For I discovered in those books that it was in many and various ways said, that the Son was in the form of the Father, and thought it not robbery to be equal with God, for that naturally He was the same substance… For that before all times, and above all times, Your only-begotten Son remains

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[15]*gratulatus est mihi, quod non in aliorum philosophorum scripta incidissem plena fallaciarum et deceptionum secundum elementa huius mundi, in istis autem omnibus modis insinuari deum et eius uerbum*: AUG., *Conf.*, 8,3, CCSL 27, 133.

You; and that of His fullness souls receive, that they may be blessed; and that by participation of the wisdom remaining in them they are renewed, that they may be wise, is there…. [16]

Therefore, he admits to have found in them that the Word was born of God, that is, he found the divinity of the Word and His eternity with God in these books and that the Platonists were able to discover this by their inquiry through reason. But what didn't St. Augustine find and what was missing in these philosophers?

In the first place he did not find any discourse regarding the Incarnation and the mysteries of the redemption:

But that He came unto His own, and His own received Him not. But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe in His name. This I did not read,

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[16]*et ibi legi non quidem his uerbis, sed hoc idem omnino multis et multiplicibus suaderi rationibus, quod in principio erat uerbum et uerbum erat apud deum… item legi ibi, quia uerbum, deus, non ex carne, non ex sanguine non ex uoluntate uiri neque ex uoluntate carnis, sed ex deo natus est… indagaui quippe in illis litteris uarie dictum et multis modis, quod sit filius in forma patris non rapinam arbitratus esse aequalis deo, quia naturaliter id ipsum est… quod enim ante omnia tempora et supra omnia tempora incommutabiliter manet unigenitus filius tuus coaeternus tibi et quia de plenitudine eius accipiunt animae, ut beatae sint, et quia participatione manentis in se sapientiae renouantur, ut sapientes sint, est ibi*: AUG., *Conf.* 7,13.14, CCSL 27.

there....
>   But that the Word was made flesh, and dwelt
>   among us, I read not there...
>   But that He emptied Himself, and took upon Him
>   the form of a servant, and was made in the
>   likeness of men... those books have not.
>   But that in due time Christ died for the ungodly,
>   and that You spared not Your only Son, but
>   delivered Him up for us all, is not there.[17]

But, above all, for that which concerns the Trinity, he did not find there written in those books any discourse regarding the Holy Spirit and they did not mention Him in any way. Rather, St. Augustine, much later, says explicitly in *Conf.* 7,27 that

>   This those writings contain not. Those pages
>   contain not the expression of this piety — the
>   tears of confession, Your sacrifice, a troubled
>   spirit, a broken and a contrite heart, the
>   salvation of the people, the

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[17]*quia uero in sua propria uenit et sui eum non receperunt, quotquot autem receperunt eum, dedit eis potestatem filios dei fieri credentibus in nomine eius, non ibi legi... sed quia uerbum caro factum est et habitauit in nobis, non ibi legi... sed quia semetipsum exinaniuit formam servi accipiens, in similitudine hominum factus... non habent illi libri... quod autem secundum tempus pro impiis mortuus est et filio tuo unico non pepercisti, sed pro nobis omnibus tradidisti eum, non est ibi*: AUG., *Conf.* 7,13.14, CCSL 27, 101-102.

espoused city, the earnest of the Holy Ghost, the cup of our redemption.[18]

Knowledge of the Holy Spirit or the discourse on the third Person of the Trinity was among the things St. Augustine did not find in these Platonic books. These chapters of the *Confessions,* on the other hand, speak only of knowledge in these philosophers of the first Principle (the Father) and of the second (the Word).

Furthermore, St. Augustine says tha thow much of truth he had read in those philosophers, here in the sacred Scriptures was said with the assurance of grace, that is, of divine revelation.[19] Therefore,for St. Augustine there exists a clear difference between the Christian faith and the [Neo] Platonic philosophy both on the level of its content and concerning the assurance of what is known.

A rather common tendency among the ancient Greek philosophers was their inclination towards a tripartite division of things. Referring to one of these St. Augustine speaks of the tripartite division of philosophy put in relation to knowledge of the Trinity on the part of the philosophers. He says that,

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[18] *non habent illae paginae uultum pietatis huius, lacrimas confessionis , sacrificium tuum, spiritum contribulatum, cor contritum et humiliatum, populi salutem, sponsam ciuitatem, arram spiritus sancti, poculum pretii nostri*: AUG., *Conf.* 7,27, CCSL 27, 111.

[19] *et coepi et inueni, quidquid illac uerum legeram, hac cum commendatione gratiae tuae dici*: AUG., *Conf.*, 7,27, CCSL 27, 111.

> As far as one can judge, it is for the same reason that philosophers have aimed at a three fold division of science, or rather, were enabled to see that there was a three fold division (for they did not invent, but only discovered it), of which one part is called physical, another logical, the third ethical… Not that I would conclude that these philosophers, in this three fold division, had any thought of a trinity in God. [20]

Therefore, St. Augustine does not accept that these philosophers knew God as Trinity, [21] precisely because they made no reference to the Holy Spirit: *"the greatest of the pagan philosophers, from what we learn from their writings, philosophized without making any allusion to the Holy Spirit, even though they did not fail to speak of the Father and the Son."* [22]

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[20] *quantum intellegi datur, hinc philosophi sapientiae disciplinam tripertitam esse uoluerunt, immo tripertitam esse animaduertere potuerunt (neque enim ipsi instituerunt ut ita esset, sed ita esse potius inuenerunt), cuius una pars appellaretur physica, altera logica, tertia ethica… non quo sit consequens, ut isti in his tribus aliquid secundum deum de trinitate cogitauerint*: AUG., *Ciu. dei* 11,25, CCSL 48, 344. Sabine MacCormack recalls our attention to the sense of *"secundum"* (*secundum Deum, secundum imaginem eius, secundum imaginem Dei* and *secundum aliam creaturam, secundum corpus motuum, secundum animum*, ecc.), an expression which St. Augustine uses innumerable times both while citing Scriptural passages where this expression appears (especially in St. Paul) as well as when he explains in his own words and according to the Christian usage. Cf., S. MACCORMACK, *Augustine on Scripture and the Trinity*, in *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. M. VESSEY, Oxford, 2012, 410.
[21] For example, in *Ep*. 11,4, St, Augustine affirms: *quod factum est per illam suscepti hominis dispensationem quae proprie filio tribuenda est, ut esset consequens et ipsius patris*: AUG., *Ep*. 11,4, CCSL 31, 28.
[22] *commendatur enim fortasse trinitas et, quod verum est, summi philosophi gentium, quantum in eorum litteris indagatur, sine spiritu sancto philosophati sunt, quamvis de patre et filio non tacuerint*: AUG., *Quaest. in Hept.* 2,25, CCSL 33, 80. (Translation is mine). The Father which is spoken of by the philosophers and his Son correspond to the two Principles of the One and of the Intellect, which are ontological principles. Nevertheless, where faith in the Incarnate God does not exist, that is, of the historical Christ, one cannot have knowledge of the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ such as was revealed within the context of salvation history. Salvation history, certainly, includes also the mission of the Holy Spirit. St. Augustine has a strong expression regarding this *mitti est cognosci - to be sent is to be known* (cf. *Trin.* 4,29 (CCSL 50, 199, lin. 102). The Son and the Holy Spirit are known to us because they were sent to us within the context of the salvation history.

To buttress this point further we see in the City of God (Ciu. dei 10,23), where St. Augustine was in polemic against Porphyry, that he makes us understand that Porphyry spoke of "one in between the Father and his intellect":

> And what he as a Platonist means by principles, we know. For he speaks of God the Father and God the Son, whom he calls (writing in Greek) the intellect or mind of the Father; but of the Holy Spirit he says either nothing, or nothing plainly, for I do not understand what other he speaks of as holding the middle place between these two. [23]

Let it be understood clearly that the holy Doctor of Hippo affirms with disapproval when he says, *"I do not understand what other he speaks of as holding the middle place between these two."* Therefore, it cannot be taken as a tacit concession of the knowledge of the Holy Spirit, but rather as a defect, that is, the absence of any discourse on the third Person of the Trinity. Furthermore, what Porphyry was saying does not correspond either to the teachings of Plotinus as the Augustinian polemic continues:

> For if, like Plotinus in his discussion regarding the three principal substances,

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[23] AUG., *Ciu. dei* 10,23, CCL 47, 296.

he wished us to understand by this third the soul of nature, he would certainly not have given it the middle place between these two, that is, between the Father and the Son. For Plotinus places the soul of nature after the intellect of the Father, while Porphyry, making it the mean, does not place it after, but between the others.

So also in the other passage of the City of God 10,29 where St. Augustine says: *"You proclaim the Father and His Son, whom you call the Father's intellect or mind, and between these a third, by whom we suppose you mean the Holy Spirit, and in your own fashion you call these three Gods,"* [24] he was actually moving on the grounds of hypothesis and was looking for a middle point or common language with which to carry further his polemics with Porphyry. In fact, the context in which these words are found shows that St. Augustine does not make an affirmation regarding the knowledge of the Holy Spirit on the part of Porphyry, rather, he excludes it. [25] Infact, our holy Father Augustine disapproves of this mode of the philosophers which creates confusion and does not fear to make offensive affirmations:

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[24] *praedicas patrem et eius filium, quem uocas paternum intellectum seu mentem, et horum medium, quem putamus te dicere spiritum sanctum, et more uestro appellas tres deos*: AUG., *Ciu. dei* 10,29, CCSL 47, 304.

[25] Lewis Ayres, on his part, affirmsthatthis was the first time that St. Augustine attributesto a Neoplatonic author belief in three divine realities, nevertheless, he explains that St. Augustine does not see it as a parallel to his narration of the Holy Spirit as *vinculum*(bond or communion). He insists that St. Augustine does not present the Neoplatonic positionon the Holy Spirit in the affirmative, but rather as a hypothetical concession. Cf., L. AYRES, *Augustine and the Trinity*, Cambridge, 2010, 39, footnote 95. Cf., also N. CIPRIANI, *Rivelazione cristiana*, 479.

> For philosophers speak as they have a mind to, and in the most difficult matters do not scruple to offend religious ears; but we are bound to speak according to a certain rule, lest freedom of speech beget impiety of opinion about the matters themselves of which we speak. [26]

Not only that St. Augustine does not admit knowledge of the Holy Spirit to the [Neo] Platonics, but also the way in which the philosophers themselves conceive of the first Principles or of the divine Personsis different. Between them and St. Augustine there is a great divide. Although the philosophers spoke of the first Principles, they did not express them with terms in which Christians know them. That is to say that in their conception there is the notion of a degrading of the Principles where the successive is inferior to and different in essence with regard to the one that precedes it, just as we saw in Plotinus (cf. Enn. V). the three Neoplatonic principles are, in fact, not of the same essence.

For St. Augustine, instead, there is no degeneration nor diversity between the Father and the Son because they are of the same substance and they are equal. Infact, he cautions that:

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[26] *liberis enim uerbis loquuntur philosophi, nec in rebus ad intellegendum difficillimis offensionem religiosarum aurium pertimescunt. nobis autem ad certam regulam loqui fas est, ne uerborum licentia etiam de rebus, quae his significantur, impiam gignat opinionem*: AUG., *Ciu. dei* 10,23, CCSL 47, 297.

But when He says, "He shall receive of mine, and shall show it unto you", listen thereto with Catholic ears, and receive it with Catholic minds: For not surely on that account, as certain heretics have imagined, is the Holy Spirit inferior to the Son; as if the Son received from the Father, and the Holy Spirit from the Son, in reference to certain gradations of natures. Far be it from us to believe this, or to say it, and from Christian hearts to think it. [27]

Thus, where the Ciu. deiis considered one of the most mature works of St. Augustine, written towards the end of his life, the *On the True Religion (Ver. rel.)* was among the first works of the young Augustine. He demonstrates, right from his first literary endeavors, the awareness that the Word of the Father does not know any degradation in nature or essence, but is equal to the Father *"in so far as He is like Him in all parts, He is called His image and likeness, since He comes from Him; therefore, we also adore in Him and with Him the same Truth, which is like Him in everything."* [28]

Therefore, there is a difference in the mode of conceiving the One and the Word, most especially

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[27] *quod autem ait: de meo accipiet, et annuntiabit uobis [Io 16,14], catholicis audite auribus, catholicis percipe mentibus. non enim propterea, sicut quidam haeretici putauerunt, minor est filio spiritus sanctus, quasi filius accipiat a patre, et spiritus sanctus a filio quibusdam gradibus naturarum. absit hoc credere, absit hoc dicere, absit a christianis cordibus cogitare*: Aug., *Io. eu. tr.* 100,4, CCSL 36, 590, linn. 1-7.
[28] *quae nulla ex parte dissimilis, similitudo eius dicta est et imago, quia de ipso est; ipsam quoque ueritatem nulla ex parte dissimilem in ipso, et cum ipso ueneremur*: AUG., *Uer. rel.* 81.113 (Translation is mine).

regarding their equality. The Neoplatonists conceive the first Principles in hierarchical order, while St. Augustine, right from the beginning, has shown the Christian mode of conceiving the Trinity maintaining that the Father and the Word are equal in all things. In this way he had the intention of counteracting the notion of the Platonists. [29]

Still on the Plotinian conception, the One (the first Principle) is beyond the other beings and outside of them, while the first being is the *Nous* (that is, the second Principle). St. Augustine does not accept this idea. For him the first Principle (the Father) is not beyond and outside being, but is the first, the first Principle. In this aspect he differs from Plotinus. It is true that Porphyry modified the Plotinian concept in this sense, retaining the One asthe first being. Nevertheless, St. Augustine has Marius Victorinus as his reference author in calling the first Principle the first *essentia* or the supreme being. Both Marius Victorinus and Simplicianus and those who were part of the Milanese Circle, had already Christianized some of these ideas which St. Augustine received, but not without criticizing and correcting them.

Neoplatonism could not have conceived the three hypostasisas "only one principle" in the sense in which the Christian Trinitarian theology can affirm that

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[29] St. Augustine also wanted to correct the mistakes of Catholic thinkers like Simplicianus, Marius Victorinus and also the heresies of the Arians.

the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are "only one God." The Plotinian triad is not the Nicene faith professed by St. Augustine nor by the holy Fathers of the Church. It is not for nothing that St. Augustine says that these philosophers do not reason secundum Deum, that is, not rightly and not with a Godly sense because they do not have the right conception of God nor of the Holy Trinity given that they teach that one has to sacrifice to many Gods. [30]

As a consequence of the Plotinian theory of the processions, there is no idea of creation (not even to talk of *creatio ex nihilo*!), to which St. Augustine constantly referred toin the first *Tractates.* Neoplatonism with its emanations and processions does not clearly delineate the difference between the divine nature and the material as much as the Christian doctrine of creation teaches. Infact, in the Christian doctrine of creation there is no intermediate nature! In the Neoplatonic system , instead, there is an innate pantheism – there is a spark of God in everything that exists. Even though the One is completely transcendent and totally beyond every other being, in the end, paradoxically, there is no difference between the world and the first Principle where matter is at the extreme opposite end of the One, from whom every succession of the processions begins. The postulation of the intermediate hypostasis could be seen as an

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[30] Cf., AUG., *Ciu. dei* X.

attempt to be coherent with the conception of the transcendence of the One above and beyond every being and, in the highest form of metaphysics, to preserve his uncontaminated state from matter.

These were the ideas of that philosophical system which St. Augustine knew, with which he dialogued,which he had to confront himself and against which, in the end, he had to fight. He was categorical in refusing the Platonic triad as an equivalent of the most Holy Trinity because it does not correspond to the data of biblical revelation. Even though he read in their writings similar things to what he was able to read in the Prologue of the Gospel of John, nevertheless, they did not have the same conception of God – the Platonic triad was not the Christian Trinity.

Conclusion

St. Augustine was correcting himself and making progress as he was writing and, while writing, he was making progress: *"In fact reading those modest works of mine in the order in which they were written, perhaps one would discover how I gradually made progress while writing"; "I therefore confess that I make effort to be among the number of those who make progress by writing and, by writing, make progress."* [31]

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[31]Cf. AUG., *Retract.*, I prol. 3, CCSL 57, 6-7; *Ep*. 143,2 (Translation is mine).

He does not hesitate to ask his readers to help him note his errors:

> Further let me ask of my reader, wherever, alike with myself, he is certain, there to go on with me; wherever, alike with myself, he hesitates, there to join with me in inquiring; wherever he recognizes himself to be in error, there to return to me; wherever he recognizes me to be so, there to call me back: so that we may enter together upon the path of charity, and advance towards Him of whom it is said, *"Seek His face evermore."* [32]

He regrets to have praised these philosophers excessively. [33] While composing the *Tractates* St. Augustine had already reached a refusal of this philosophical system because it is precisely against it that the true faith needed to be defended: *"avoid those also as a still more insidious pest than the others."* [34] Besides not being able to bear with them because a knowledge that is accurate (on the spiritual nature of God) is not useful if one is not united with Christ, Augustine also accuses them of teaching another

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[32] *proinde quisquis haec legit ubi pariter certus est, pergat mecum; ubi pariter haesitat, quaerat mecum; ubi errorem suum cognoscit, redeat ad me; ubi meum, reuocet me. ita ingrediamur simul caritatis uiam tendentes ad eum de quo dictum est: quaerite faciem eius semper*: AUG., *Trin*. 1,5, CCSL 50, 32.
[33] *laus quoque ipsa qua Platonem uel platonicos siue academicos philosophos tantum extuli, quantum impios homines non oportuit, non inmerito mihi displicuit, praesertim contra quorum errores magnos defendenda est christiana doctrina*: AUG., *Retract*. 1,1,4, CCSL 57, 10.
[34] *tamquam pestem insidiosorem ceteris fugite*: AUG., *Io. eu. tr.* 98,7, CCSL 36, 580.

doctrine, another Gospel and of not respecting the norms of faith, from which they draw even further. In the *Retractations* St. Augustine affirms:

> Not without reason that I was also displeased to have praised Plato orthe Platonists (or Academics as one may please to call them) in a measure that does not befit them and surely as thinkers guilty of impiety, given that it is especially against their grave errors that the Christian doctrine needed to be defended. [35]

At this point the break with philosophy has reached its completion! The young Augustine had a fairly clear idea of the Trinitarian doctrine according to the Nicene faith even though he had a long way to go to reach his more erudite exposition as we will find in the *De Trinitate.*

The highest knowledge to which man can desire and aspire is that which has God as the object of its search, to know the essence of God - to know Him as He truly is. The Incarnate Word, which was made manifest in the history of salvation in the Person of Jesus Christ is, for St. Augustine, the fundamental event and the highest moment of the revelation of the Christian

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[35] *laus quoque ipsa qua Platonem uel platonicos siue academicos philosophos tantum extuli, quantum impios homines non oportuit, non inmerito mihi displicuit, praesertim contra quorum errores magnos defendenda est christiana doctrina*: AUG., *Retract.*1,1,4, CCSL 57, 10 (Translation is mine).

Trinitarian God: *"He Himself has told us: No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is Himself God and is at the Father's side, has made Him known."* [36]

To as much height of reflection that the philosophers could have attained, St. Augustine does not admit that they could have known God as Trinity.

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[36] *ipse enim dixit: deum nemo uidit umquam, nisi unigenitus filius qui est in sinu patris, ipse enarrauit*: AUG., *Io. eu. tr.* 47,3, CCL 36, 405. Cf. anche AUG., *Io. eu. tr.* 3,17, CCL 36, 27: *in secreto patris, qui patrem nouit, ipse enarrauit. Nam deum nemo uidit umquam. ipse ergo uenit, et narrauit quidquid uidit.*

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