

ONCE AGAIN *CAELUM CAELI*

IS AUGUSTINE'S ARGUMENT IN *CONFESSIONS* XII CONSISTENT?

Augustine devotes two books of his *Confessions* to the explanation of the first verse of Genesis. Book XI deals with the expression *In principio*, Book XII with *caelum et terram*. It is evident that these words about the beginning of things fascinated him greatly. And he was not the first Christian thinker who occupied himself with them. The question of the origin of the world, that central problem of the Greek philosophy, had been discussed by all major Christian thinkers before him (and earlier than them by Philo of Alexandria). The meditations in *Conf.* XI-XII may be considered as a comprehensive survey of these discussions, to which the bishop of Hippo added his own views on the subject.

The obvious sense of the words 'God created heaven and earth' is, of course, that God created the totality of the visible world; 'heaven', the highest element, and 'earth', the lowest, embrace, so to speak, the totality of the visible creation. But was the visible world the only thing that was created? Was there not a spiritual world, too? And was that perhaps indicated by 'heaven'? Moreover, when the earth was said to be 'invisible and without order', was that perhaps an indication of formless matter, that central idea in Greek philosophy? And, in the light of the distinction between matter and form introduced by Neoplatonist thought also in the spiritual world, could it be the case that the idea of spiritual matter was to be located in the darkness above the abyss of Gen. 1: 2? All these speculations are reflected in book XII of Augustine's *Confessions*. Particularly the Plotinian distinction between spiritual matter and form appealed to him: when the mind is turned away from the One, it is formless; it becomes formed by turning itself to the One (ἐπιστροφή). Translated into Augustine's terms this means that, as long as the spiritual creature is not turned to its creator, its life is formless, but by turning itself to him, it receives form and comes to its perfection (cf. *De Genesi ad litteram* I, 3: *tenebrosam abyssum intellegamus naturam vitae informem, nisi convertatur ad creatorem, quo solo modo formari potest*).

The argument of *Confessions* XII

Confessions XII consists of three main parts: 1. chs. 1-13, in which Augustine gives his own interpretation of 'heaven and earth'; 2. chs. 14-25, in which he deals with his opponents in relation to this interpretation and sums up the different opinions which they put forward; he also draws the limits within which an acceptable interpretation should move; 3. a final part in which he, *inter alia*, brings the opinions of his opponents which he considers acceptable and his own view together.

ad 1. The 'heaven' about which Gen. 1: 1 speaks, Augustine affirms, is not the heaven, the firmament, which we see with our eyes, but the *caelum caeli* of which Psalm 105, 16 speaks: *caelum caeli domino, terram autem dedit filiis hominum*. That means: the heaven of Gen. 1: 1 is a spiritual reality, a spiritual creation, which Augustine indicates by a series of names: *caelum intellectuale, caelum intellegibile, spiritualis vel intellectualis creatura, sapientia, domus dei*, etc.

In 1953 J. Pépin published a famous article on this concept of the *caelum caeli*, entitled 'Recherches sur le sens et les origines de l'expression *caelum caeli* dans le livre XII des *Confessions* de s. Augustin'¹). With regard to the *sense* of this expression he comes to the conclusion that it indicates the spiritual creation *in its formless state*. He admits that some texts in book XII seem to point in another direction, but a clear statement in the second chapter of *Conf. XIII* compels him to take this position. Augustine's argument in *Conf. XII* is, in his view, far from ideal, as appears from his conclusion: «Voilà l'exégèse que les *Confessions* proposent de *caelum* et de *caelum caeli*, telle qu'on a essayé de la systématiser à partir d'éléments épars, parfois contradictoires, exprimés avec plus de lyrisme que de clarté» (p. 204).

Twenty years later, in the *Festschrift Waszink*²), I contested this opinion and defended the view that, according to Augustine, the 'heaven and earth' of Gen. 1: 1 indicated the *formed* spiritual creation on the one hand and the *formless* corporeal (matter) on the other; in other words, 'heaven and earth' indicate the extremities of the created

¹) *Archivum Latinitatis Medii Aevi* 23 (1953), p. 185-274;

²) *Romanitas et Christianitas*, edd. W. den Boer *alii*. Amsterdam-London, North Holl. Publ. Comp., 1973. «The Early Christian Exegesis of 'Heaven and Earth' in Gen. 1: 1»; esp. p. 378-380.

world, embraced by the highest spiritual and the lowest corporeal creature, or, to express it with Augustine's own words: *duo quaedam, unum prope te* (= God) *alterum prope nihil, unum, quo superior tu esses, alterum, quo inferius nihil esset* (*Conf.* XII 7, end), and, in even clearer terms: *duo haec, primitus formatum et penitus informe* (*Conf.* XII 13).

In 1977 Pépin re-edited the above mentioned article, together with some other studies on philosophic themes in Augustine³). In the introduction to this collection he took the opportunity to answer his critics. Concerning the nature of *caelum caeli* he stuck to his earlier opinion, viz. that in *Conf.* XII Augustine interprets the 'heaven' and 'earth' of Gen. 1: 1 as representing the spiritual and corporeal matter and thus understands *caelum caeli* as the spiritual creature in its formless state. He knew quite well that this interpretation had several inconvenient aspects: a) there are statements in Augustine's argument which seem to contradict this view (Pépin speaks of «*un gauchissement dans l'attitude d'Augustin*», 'Recherches', p. 199); b) this opinion appears to be one of those ascribed to his opponents («*il compte en gros quatre interprétations défendables, en y comprenant d'ailleurs celle que l'on a reconnue plus haut pour la sienne*; *ibid.*, p. 202, cf. also p. 203, n. 4); c) he also admits that the name *caelum caeli* fits better with a formed nature, and adds that *sometimes* Augustin does indicate the formed spiritual nature by that term (*ibid.*, p. 201; he cites *Conf.* XIII 5, a text which will be discussed below); but notwithstanding all that he continues to maintain that in Augustine's view *caelum caeli* should be understood as the spiritual creation in its formless state.

The deepest reason for this uncomfortable position lies, if I am not mistaken, in the fact that Pépin does not see how the following two theses are compatible: (a) in the spiritual creation Augustine discerns two phases, a formless and a formed one; in other words the spiritual creation has a hylemorphic structure; and (b) Augustine interprets 'heaven' and 'earth' in Gen. 1: 1 as 'the *formed* spiritual creation' and 'the *formless* corporeal creation'. Now it is evident that Augustine takes the position sub (a); Pépin stresses it again and again: «*qui fait*

³) «*Ex Platoniorum persona*». *Études sur les lectures philosophiques de saint Augustin*, Amsterdam, Hakkert, 1977. In his most recent comment on *Confessions* XII (*Le Confessioni di Agostino d'Hippona. Lectio Augustini. Settimana agostiniana Pavese*, 4. Edizioni Augustinus, Palermo, 1987, p. 67-95: 'Le Livre XII des *Confessions* ou exégèse et confession'). Pépin leaves the present problem aside (p. 67). Those who wonder how the exegesis of this biblical text fits into his 'Confessions' will find an answer in this article.

clairement état de *deux stades* dans l'histoire de la créature spirituelle» ('Recherches', p. 200); «La créature spirituelle est susceptible d'une double condition» (*ibid.*); «... était susceptible de *deux états*, l'un informe, l'autre formé» (*ibid.*, p. 201); «structure hylémorphique» (*ibid.*, p. 202). Thus he has to reject the position under (b) and to accept the problems to which this leads. In my previous article I stated that these two theses are not irreconcilable, but my view was insufficiently elaborated and probably for that reason failed to convince.

There is, I submit, a possibility of explaining Augustine's argument in such a manner that there is no question of contradiction, not even of inconsistency. One is thus obliged to take his explanation in *Conf. XII* chs. 1-13 at face value and to assume that he understands *caelum caeli* as 'the spiritual creature in its formed state' (cf. *primitus formatum*, mentioned above). We now follow first his argument in chs. 14 ss.

ad 2. After discussing with his imaginary opponents the opinion defended in chs. 1-13, Augustine puts the following words in their mouth: *quamvis vera sint haec, non ea tamen duo Moyses intuebatur, cum revelante spiritu diceret: in principio fecit deus caelum et terram* (*Conf. XII 17*). Thus the opponents concede that what Augustine says is not untrue, but they claim that Moses did not mean 'these two'. And what he means by 'those two' Augustine explains in the following words: *non caeli nomine spiritualem vel intellectualem illam creaturam semper faciem dei contemplantem significavit, nec terrae nomine informem materiam*. Thus Augustine explicitly states that in chs. 1-13 he defended the thesis that 'heaven' in Gen. 1: 1 means 'that spiritual or intellectual creation which always beholds the face of God'. Now this is an other way of stating that heaven indicates the spiritual creature in its formed state, since the spiritual nature is formed precisely by its conversion to (= contemplation of) God.

Having formulated his own opinion once again in this way, Augustine sums up the interpretations of his opponents (ch. 17). Although he does not endorse them, he does not regard them as impossible.

There is first the opinion of those who understand 'heaven and earth' as indicating the totality of the visible world. 'God created heaven and earth' means 'God created the whole visible world' (*totum istum visibilem mundum*). This is a simple, 'unphilosophical' interpretation, whereby the text of Gen. 1: 1 becomes a kind of title or heading, in which the contents of the following chapter is shortly indicated

(*universaliter et breviter significare voluit*). There then follows an enumeration of the possible 'philosophical' interpretations: 'heaven and earth' indicate either the visible creation *only* or the visible (corporeal) and the invisible (spiritual) creation; in both cases there are again two possibilities: 'heaven and earth' indicate the creation concerned either in its *formed* state or in its *formless* state.

For our purpose the last possibility demands attention: 'heaven and earth' indicate the visible and the invisible (spiritual) creature both in their formless state. According to Pépin, this opinion, ascribed to the opponents here, would coincide with Augustine's own view in ch. 1-13. However, this is in flagrant contradiction with Augustine's words at the beginning of ch. 17, quoted above ('not those two'). If one assumes that Augustine opted for a position which is different from those of his opponents, viz. that 'heaven' means the spiritual creature in its formed state and 'earth' the corporeal creature in its formless state, the argument becomes consistent. The third part of *Conf. XII* will confirm this view.

ad 3. In one chapter of this final part (ch. 28) Augustine gives a survey of the possible interpretations of Genesis 1: 1. In this survey the following passage is important for our purpose: *Atque in eis, qui intellegunt in principio, quod in sapientia fecit caelum et terram, alius eorum ipsum caelum et terram, creabilem materiam caeli et terrae, sic esse credit cognominatam, alius iam formatas distinctasque naturas, alius unam formatam eandemque spiritalem caeli nomine, aliam informem corporalis materiae terrae nomine.* The latter opinion is evidently the one defended by Augustine himself in the first part of *Conf. XII*. It is worthwhile to observe that in *De Genesi ad lit.* one finds a similar survey of possible opinions with regard to the interpretations of Gen. 1: 1; there, too, he first sums up the interpretations ascribed to the opponents in *Conf. XII* 17 (*De Gen. ad lit.* 1, 2) and then continues as follows: *An caelum intellegendum est creatura spiritualis, ab exordio quo facta est perfecta et beata semper, terra vero corporalis materies adhuc imperfecta ...?* Here, too, one finds the formed spiritual creature put together with the formless corporeal. At any rate it must be clear that Augustine's argument in *Conf. XII* is consistent.

What, then, about *Confessions* XIII?

As was said above, Pépin was aware of the fact that his interpretation compelled him to ascribe to Augustine some serious inconsistencies, but felt he could not avoid this, because *Conf.* XIII 2 did not admit another solution. There Augustine says: *Quid te meruerunt spiritualis corporalisque natura, quas fecisti in sapientia tua, ut inde penderent etiam inchoata et informia quaeque in genere suo spiritali vel corporali euntia in immoderationem et in longinquam dissimilitudinem ... nisi per idem verbum revocarentur ad unitatem tuam et formarentur.* From this text it is clear that in the spiritual creation there are two phases, a formless and a formed one, in other words, that the spiritual creatures have a hylemorphic structure. I agree with Pépin in this respect. But on the other hand it is evident that in the whole argument of *Conf.* XII Augustine understands 'heaven' in Gen. 1: 1 as 'spiritual creature in its formed state'. How do these two theses go together?

I think that Augustine's interpretation could be paraphrased as follows: «God created heaven and earth» means: God created all that has being, from the highest spiritual creatures in their formed state (= *caelum caeli*) to the lowest corporeal creation (= *terra*). This statement is, so to speak, the title or heading above the creation story, which then begins as follows: «The earth was invisible and without order and darkness was above the abyss». This means: in both the corporeal and the spiritual creation one discerns a formless phase: it does not mean that there was a time in which this formless situation existed, but it is rather a reference to the hylemorphic structure of the whole creation.

This interpretation is confirmed by another text of *Conf.* XIII, where Augustine says: *et multa diximus de caelo caeli et de terra invisibili et incompressa et de abyso tenebrosa secundum spiritualis informitatis vagabunda deliquia, nisi converteretur ad eum, a quo erat qualiscumque vita, et inluminatione fieret speciosa vita, ut esset caelum caeli* (XIII 5). Here one finds the two clearly put together: the dark abyss as the spiritual formlessness and *caelum caeli* as the life of the mind turned to God, which is the spiritual creature in its formed state. (One should notice that the formless spiritual creation becomes *caelum caeli*: one finds the same idea in *Conf.* XII 21: *hoc totum, quod caelum et terra appellatum est, adhuc informis et tenebrosa materies erat, unde fieret caelum intellegibile, quod alibi dicitur caelum caeli.* With regard to *Conf.* XIII 5, quoted just now, Pépin stated that Augustine

sometimes indicated the formed spiritual creation by this term. In my view, this 'sometimes' is out of place. *Caelum caeli* always refers to the spiritual creation in its formed state. Hence it was called, as was mentioned above, 'nearest to God (*prope te*) and 'first formed' (*primitus formatum*). It was also called '(created) *sapientia*' (*Conf.* XII 15). How could the mind in its formless state, *i.e.* being turned away from God, be said to be 'wise'?

Therefore, one cannot but conclude that:

1. the spiritual creature indicated by *caelum caeli* has a hylemorphic structure; but the name *caelum caeli* is only applicable to that creature in its formed state.
2. Augustine's argument in *Conf.* XII is consistent. To show that this is indeed the case was the main purpose of this small contribution. For to me it was inconceivable that his argument on a subject-matter which he discussed so many times and which obviously fascinated him so much, could have been seriously inconsistent.

Leiden

Jacobus C.M. VAN WINDEN