

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON AUGUSTINE ON LAUGHTER

1. Three theories of laughter

'You are better off when people laugh at you than when they weep about you' – a Dutch expression sometimes addressed to someone close to tears. The words are meant to console and soften the blow dealt out by a third party who has laughed at the victim. This form of laughter – the laughter of derision, laughter that hurts – is explained by the superiority theory. This theory is one of three theories developed by modern scientists to explain the phenomenon of laughter. According to the superiority theory laughter is used to establish the laughing person's dominance by intimidating others, acting aggressively towards them, ridiculing them or expressing glee at their misfortune.¹ Besides the superiority theory the relief theory has been developed.² This theory explains laughter by pointing out that it causes relief to the person who laughs. So according to the first theory the person who laughs causes tension with the person who is the object of laughter, but according to the second theory laughter relieves tension for the person who laughs. Tension generally leads to dissatisfaction and sadness (resulting in weeping), and relief leads to contentment and joy (resulting in laughter). The Latin tongue as used by ancient Christian writers uses the word 'ridere' (γελάω, to laugh) for laughter in both the tension-inducing and the tension-reducing sense. Ridere is not or rarely used to indicate the kind of laughter that stems from humour.³ We shall therefore pass by that form of laughter in this article.⁴

According to modern researchers such as the American scholar John Morreall, the laugh of superiority is in fact the only form of

¹ John MORREALL, *Taking laughter seriously*, New York 1983, 4-14; Ingvild Sælid Gilhus, *Laughing gods, weeping virgins. Laughter in the history of religion*, London/New York 1997, 5.

² MORREALL 1983, 20-37; Gilhus 1997, 5.

³ For the incongruity theory, see MORREALL 1983, 15-19; Gilhus 1997, 5. This theory explains laughter as a response to stimulating contrasts.

⁴ Nevertheless, research has established that there are definitively instances of humour in the Bible.

See Jakob JÓNSSON, *Humour and irony in the New Testament, Illuminated by parallels in Talmud and Midrash*, Reykjavík 1965. It is also clear that Augustine was quite aware of the possibilities of humour in his discourses. See Joost van Neer, *Didactically responsible use of humour in St. Augustine's Sermo 53,12-14*, in: *Augustiniana* 54 (2004), 551-588.

laughter to appear in the Bible and in the writings of the ancient Christian authors.⁵ At any rate, other forms of laughter have not or rarely been observed by modern researchers. But has this conclusion not been drawn too quickly? I believe it has. Firstly, it is quite possible to point out an important form of the laughter of superiority unnoticed by Morreall which occurs regularly throughout these works: unconscious derision. Secondly, the Bible and the ancient Christian writings also clearly evidence the use of the laughter of relief. What is more, the most important kind of laughter – that is: the kind of laughter that ultimately proves to be the most significant – is the laugh of relief.

In order to substantiate these assertions, I shall concentrate on several passages from the Bible and from the writings of Augustine. I mean to show that laughter in all cases must be seen from the contrasting perspectives of the present (life below on earth) and the future (life above in heaven) – the eschatological perspective. Nevertheless, some distinctions must also be made. Separating the two situations is the Last Judgment, which will bring a radical and definitive reversal. Both situations consequently have their own kind of laughter and their own kind of weeping. Ultimately, my intention is to shed further light on Augustine's thinking on laughter.

2. Scripture

Forms of the word *ridere* occur in thirty-nine instances in Scripture: thirty-six in the Old Testament and three in the New Testament.⁶ This numerical difference is striking. Moreover, a closer study of all the instances involved reveals immediately that not only the superiority theory applies, but also the relief theory. That is to say that both the laughter that causes tension and the laughter that relieves tension occur. The superiority kind is represented in no less than thirty-one instances. The relief kind comes second place with eight quotations.

In the Bible laughter occurs with two objects: to intimidate others or to express joy. The first form of laughter clearly does not

⁵ MORREALL 1983, 9: "[The laugh of derision] is almost the only kind of laughter found in the Bible"; 86: "In the Bible (...) laughter has negative connotations. It is seldom mentioned, but when it is, it is almost always the laugh of derision". Immediately following this quotation, Morreall illustrates the Church Fathers' attitude with a rather sardonic passage from John Chrysostom.

⁶ Paul TOMBEUR, *Cetedoc Library of Christian Latin Texts (CLCLT-3)*, Turnhout 1996. I have only considered the simple verb *ridere* (γελάω) and have disregarded the compound verbs (such as *deridere* or *irridere*).

benefit anyone, neither the person who laughs nor the person who is the object of derision. The person who laughs does not contribute to the improvement of his character and the person who is laughed at is forced into the role of victim. But is the second form of laughter any better? It is clear that this form of laughter is not only performed by the person who laughs, but also exclusively concerns him. This kind of laughter bears no influence on others and does not harm them. But is it always a good thing? In order to answer this question we must address another issue in the context of the Bible: is laughter the result of true joy? At this juncture we see the distinction between earth and heaven emerge. People can experience joy at earthly things and heavenly things. Joy at heavenly things, which are lasting and unchangeable, is good, but joy at earthly things, which are ephemeral and changeable, is not. Lasting, unchangeable joy is true joy; ephemeral and changeable joy is false joy. Satisfying the desire for money, for instance, certainly provides relief and, consequently, joy; but not for long. The possessor of money will shortly desire more money, and must live in constant fear of losing what he has. Augustine does not avoid a discussion of this problem. In both cases laughter provides relief, but only the heavenly laughter is good.

The distinction between earthly and heavenly laughter is clearest in Lk 6:21 and 6:25. These two verses are taken from the Sermon on the Plain, where Jesus addresses a large group of disciples and sympathetic Jews and Gentiles who have come to listen to Him.⁷ In the first of these verses, Jesus pronounces a beatitude, in the second he gives an admonition. The first verse is: "Beati, qui nunc fletis, quia ridebitis", the second: "Vae vobis, qui ridetis nunc, quia lugebitis et flebitis". Both verses refer to Ps 125 (126): 5-6 and they are quoted in Jm 4:9.

A reading of both passages from Luke immediately reveals the contrasts that are at stake. There are three. Firstly, there is the contrast between two modes of time, between present and future. This contrast is expressed by the combination of the adverb *nunc* and the use of the indicative of the present tense and the future tense respectively. Corresponding to this is the contrast between two modes of space, between earth and heaven. Thirdly, there is a contrast between the two conditions. The combination of present and earth (the present life here below on earth) is related to grieving (*lugere*) and weeping (*flere*), and the

⁷ The Sermon on the Mount can be found in Lk 6:20-49. It consists of three parts (20-26, 27-38 and 39-49). The first part (exordium) contains the beatitudes (6:20-23) and admonitions (6:24-26).

combination of future and heaven (the future life up above in heaven) is related to laughing (*ridere*). Thus the beatitude in Lk 6:21 clearly has an eschatological dimension. True joy will bring true laughter with it.⁸ He who goes against this notion is admonished (Lk 6:25): false joy leads to false laughter – a phenomenon that betrays folly.⁹ As was mentioned above, the material for these verses can be found in Ps 125 (126): 5-6, where the present life here below on earth is contrasted to the life hereafter in heaven using metaphors from the agricultural world, a world obviously familiar to many people at the time. The text of the Psalm is: “Qui seminant in lacrimis, in exsultatione metent. Euntes ibant et flebant, mittentes semina sua. Venientes autem venient cum exsultatione, portantes manipulos suos”. The farmer who sows (*seminare*, *mittere semina*) represents the combination of present and earth, the farmer who brings in the harvest (*metere*, *portare manipulos*) that of future and heaven. In the first case, the aspect of going (*ire*) is paramount, in the second the aspect of coming (*venire*). Sowing involves weeping (*lacrimae*, *flere*), reaping the harvest involves joy (*exsultatio*). Apparently the Psalmist wants to strongly emphasise the difference between the pains of sowing and the buoyant mood that accompanies the harvest by introducing a series of contrasts. It appears from Jm 4:9 that jubilation (*exsultare*) may be equated with laughter (*ridere*). The text is: “Miseri estote et lugete et plorate; risus vester in luctum convertatur et gaudium in maerorem”. The author juxtaposes the aspect of weeping (*miser esse*, *lugere*, *plorare*) with the aspect of laughing (*risus*). He thereby concurs with the admonition in Lk 6:24 as regards the content of his assertion. Similarly, the beatitude in Lk 6:21 concurs with Ps 125 (126):5-6.

Two kinds of laughter appear in the verses quoted. Earthly laughter (in Lk 6:25 and Jm 4:9) is not true laughter, but indicates a superiority which may be caused by aggression, or by folly. This kind of laughter will change to weeping on the Last Day. True laughter is heavenly laughter (in Lk 6:21, referring to Ps 125 (126):5-6), which marks the definitive end of weeping on earth. Earthly laughter is the expression of an erroneous sense of superiority (which manifests itself in the laugh of derision or in glee at another's misfortune) or – on the same level – of folly (which manifests itself in irrational laughter). Others may find the self-confidence exuding from this kind of folly restraining or even intimidating, leading to tension. Seen in this light,

⁸ Joseph A. FITZMYER, *The Gospel according to Luke*, New York 1981, 630; 634.

⁹ FITZMYER 1981, 636.

this kind of laughter may well be interpreted as a form of the laughter of superiority.¹⁰ Both kinds are experienced by people as threatening. This proves that the laughter of superiority is represented in Scripture by two forms, both of which clearly arise from superiority, both of which create tension with the other party involved and neither of which has anything to do with relief. Heavenly laughter on the contrary is an expression of joy (*exsultatio*); it clearly results from relief, it involves only the person laughing and it has nothing to do with superiority. This type of laughter causes elation, good humour and relief. This proves that besides the laughter of superiority, the laughter of relief also occurs in Scripture.

3. Augustine

Augustine's thought is formed by Scripture. It is no surprise, then, to find that he holds the same views as the Bible when it comes to laughter and weeping. However, his translation of these views to his own system of thought is in many ways original. As in Scripture, Augustine associates weeping with the present life here below on earth, and laughter with the future life up above in heaven. We weep on earth and laugh in heaven, or to put it differently: there is no laughter on earth and no weeping in heaven. Now there is no doubt as to the truth of the latter assertion – there is no weeping in heaven. But what about the former? Surely we can easily establish that there is a lot of laughing in everyday life on earth. There must therefore be two kinds of laughter, an earthly and a heavenly kind. The earthly kind concerns ephemeral and changeable things and cannot therefore be true laughter. By contrast, the heavenly kind concerns lasting and unchangeable things and is consequently true laughter. This line of reasoning strikes us as rather Platonic. Augustine speaks of hope (*spes*) and reality (*res*). This present life here below on earth is constantly subject to change and is therefore not real. On earth we can hope for no more than something we will only possess in reality later in life, when we are above in heaven for eternity.¹¹ However, the same word (*ridere*) is used to indicate these two kinds of laughter, which do not correspond in any

¹⁰ This type of laughter was noted before, but was never recognised as a form of laughter explained by the superiority theory. For an account of its occurrence, see Teodor BACONSKY, *Le rire des Pères, Essai sur le rire dans la patristique grecque*, Paris 1996, 44-49 (Le rire de l'insensé).

¹¹ *Enarratio in Psalmum* 92,1: "(...); et requies illa in spe est, nondum tenetur in re".

other way. Needless to say, this point of view has no bearing on Augustine's use of and way of thinking about humour.

Augustine addresses the issue of the contrasts between laughing and weeping, between earthly and heavenly laughter and the different forms of joy (*gaudium*) that accompanies them several times. In his *Enarratio in Psalmum* 125, he asserts that on earth – or rather: concerning earthly things – weeping is more appropriate than laughing.¹² Living proof of this claim is his observation that a newly-born infant does not laugh but weep at his arrival in the present life here on earth.¹³ This condition persists throughout his entire life. The seed of mercy (*miseriordia*) is sown in tears (*in lacrimis*) and with anxiety (*in ista aerumna*) on the field of the Church, according to Augustine – with a clear reference to Ps 125 (126):5-6. We will reap the harvest not now, but later, in the future life up above in heaven; a harvest consisting of peace (*pax*, see Lk 2:14) and resurrection (*resurrectio mortuorum*). We may not expect the harvest in the same season that we have sown.¹⁴ Augustine believes this is only for the best, since otherwise we would perhaps not be prepared to make the effort at all.¹⁵ The connection between sowing and reaping lies in the seed (*semina*). It consists of good works (*opera bona*), works of charity (*opera misericordiae*), almsgiving (*eleemosynae*) and good will (*bona voluntas*, see Lk 2:14).¹⁶ Put differently: the connection lies in the concept of hope.¹⁷ We weep in the hope of joy.¹⁸ Augustine gives a new and original dynamic to the contrasts which arise from Scripture and which at first sight seem rather static and therefore lacking the power to give hope to our experience of everyday life. This new dynamic lifts the

¹² *Enarratio in Psalmum* 125,10: "Nolite seduci gaudio rerum humanarum; flenda in rebus humanis advertite".

¹³ *Enarratio in Psalmum* 125,10: "Quare [puer qui nascitur] a fletu incipit vivere? Ridere nondum novit. Quare plorare iam novit? Quia coepit ire in istam vitam". See also *Sermo* 60,2: "Dura causa est vita mortalis. Quid est aliud hic nasci, nisi ingredi laboriosam vitam?"; *Sermo* 167,1: "Nascitur, et statim plorat: post nescio quot dies ridet. Quando plorabat nascens, propheta suae calamitatis erat: lacrimae enim testes sunt miseriae. Nondum loquitur, et iam prophetat".

¹⁴ *Sermo* 11,3: "(...), ut seminationis nostrae mercedem, non isto tempore quo seminavimus speremus"; *De nuptiis et concupiscentia* 1,13,15: "(...) qui flent tristitia praesentis mali, gaudeant spe futuri boni, (...)".

¹⁵ *Enarratio in Psalmum* 92,1: "Opera bona nostra (...) quasi cum labore sunt; et requies illa in spe est, nondum tenetur in re; et nisi esset in spe, deficeremus in labore".

¹⁶ See *Enarratio in Psalmum* 125,11.13.14.

¹⁷ *Enarratio in Psalmum* 118,1,3.

¹⁸ *Sermo* 47,1: "Sumus in hac vita sperantes aliam vitam, plorantes in spe, immo plorantes in re, gaudentes in spe".

'impasse' and presents a middle course. In his view, the prospect of something in fact already constitutes a kind of possession of it.

I would like to comment on two examples more extensively, *Sermo* 175 and *Sermo* 31.

4. Augustine on Luke 6:21 – the physician (*Sermo* 175)

In *Sermo* 175,² Augustine addresses the contrast between weeping and laughing derived from Lk 6:21 in the context of another expressive contrast which he uses frequently: that between health and illness.¹⁹ In doing so he fully exploits the semantic range of the words used to describe these conditions. Augustine's sermon employs the same basic contrasts in time (present – future), space (earth – heaven) and conditions (weeping – laughing) as the Bible. In heaven there is only laughter and no weeping. In heaven, laughter is a sign of health and weeping a sign of illness. But what about laughter and weeping on earth? Judging from Luke we would have to expect unceasing weeping on earth, and no laughter at all. In fact, according to Augustine, the opposite of the situation in heaven is the reality: on earth weeping is a sign of health, and laughter a sign of illness. However, even a random inspection of the world around us will reveal that there is not merely weeping, but also laughter on earth – much laughter and also loud laughter. The only conclusion that we may draw from putting this observation together with Augustine's assertion is that there are not only healthy, but also ill people on earth. Augustine takes this earthly laughter as a sign of pride and consequently associates it with illness (*aegrotare*). By contrast, to weep on earth proves one's humility, and signifies health, in the sense of creating fertile soil for life in heaven.

The new and original contrast is therefore that between health and illness. Augustine uses the word *sanus* for health, but not the neutral word *insanus* (or, for instance, *aeger*) for the opposite. The word he has chosen to use, *phreneticus*, indicates a much graver kind of disease. *Phreneticus* is derived from Greek and means insane. Augustine apparently does not wish to point to physical illness, but to a disease of the mind.²⁰ The mind has been affected by fevers (*febres*) and has become overheated. This causes deliriums. Later on in his sermon

¹⁹ For an extensive treatment of this theme, see P.C.J. Eijkenboom, *Het Christus-Medicusmotief in de preken van Sint Augustinus*, Nijmegen 1960.

²⁰ Apart from midriff, the Greek *φρίν* means heart (the place where feelings are situated) or mind (where thought is located).

Augustine speaks of amentia, meaning that the sick person has completely lost his mind. He does not even realise anymore that he is ill, and has consequently landed in a situation far worse than that induced by an ordinary disease. From this position Augustine can explain why the Lord had to be killed. He can designate the guilty one and simultaneously free him of guilt. Augustine thus places the strong term phreneticus over against sanus in his explanation of the contrast between the two conditions. Similarly, in his description of the conditions themselves (laughter – weeping) he has used a much more forceful word to emphasise the difference. He has chosen not the neutral term ridere as the opposite for flere, but the word cachinnare. Just like phreneticus this word is of Greek extraction. It is an onomatopoeia expressing the loudness, exuberance and the long duration of a laugh, indicating that the person who is laughing has lost control of himself.²¹

The question facing Augustine at this point is whether it is possible to be cured of this disease, and if so, how. Physical diseases are combated by first ascertaining how they were contracted, and then by consulting a doctor and following his advice. Diseases of the mind can be fought in the same manner, but with one difference. We can tackle many physical illnesses by ourselves, perhaps aided by the assistance of a physician. But this is not possible with this disease of the mind. We always need help there, and not any physician's help, but the help of the Physician. This illness has entered the world through the sin of one man, Adam (unus peccavit), and can only be combated by one other, Christ (unus venit sine peccato).²² For Christ has come to set free and to cure (Lk 19:10; 1 Tm 1:16). Provided that we accept this; because besides those who follow the counsels of their physician, there are always people who ignore them. Both groups of people are ill, but the believer, who perceives that he is ill and who follows the counsel of his physician, is in a better state than the unbeliever, who does not.²³ For the believer – enlightened by the Scriptures – chooses (eligere) the way to joy.²⁴ And redemption only takes place if it is chosen. The believer lives, because he remains level headed in his knowledge of his illness, and thus the way to recovery is opened.²⁵ On the contrary, the

²¹ The Greek καχάζειν means laughing loudly, roaring with laughter. An audible series of breaths disturbs the quiet which is characteristic of true joy.

²² *Sermo* 175,1.

²³ For a full discussion of this idea, see for instance *Sermo* 80,4.

²⁴ For the aspect of choice, see also *Sermo* 150,10.

²⁵ In *Iohannis evangelium tractatus* 7,2: "(...); sic et nos, carissimi, si recepimus medicinam de caelo venientem, quia et nos omnes phrenetici eramus, tamquam salvi facti, quia ea quae diligebamus, non diligimus, (...)".

unbeliever thinks that he is healthy and therefore does not seek the intervention of a doctor, or even resists it. Consequently, he closes off the way to recovery for himself and remains ill. But matters can be worse still.

5. Augustine on Psalm 125 (126) – good works (*Sermo 31*)

In *Sermo 31* Augustine discusses the purport of Lk 6:25 in the light of Ps 125(126):5-6, which is the main subject of his sermon. The line of argument that he takes is as follows. Firstly, he inquires into the meaning of the contrasts evinced by the Psalm (to go – to come, to sow – to harvest, to weep – to laugh). What do going and coming mean? What is sowed and harvested? He explains 'going' as going into death (in mortem ire), as being born (nasci), as the beginning of the way that is life. He interprets 'coming' as coming from death (a morte venire), as rising to life (resurgere), as the end of the way that is life. Good works (bona opera) are sowed, and the eternal reward (merx aeterna) is harvested.²⁶ Going, sowing and weeping are thus on a level with each other, and all take place in the present life here on earth. Coming, harvesting and laughing are equally connected, and all three take place in the future life up above in heaven. The question remains as to how sowing and weeping may be linked. This question is especially urgent since Paul writes that God loves the cheerful giver (hilaris dator) (2 Co 9:7). He who sows, weeps, but he who gives, is cheerful. How is that possible?

At first view, it seems impossible. But if we are prepared to think about it further, we may find an acceptable solution to the problem.²⁷ He who sows good works, weeps; he who gives good works, is cheerful. Cheerfulness (hilaritas) is not the same thing as joy (gaudium). It is not equivalent to joy, but it is its preparatory stage; and as such may be regarded as a stepping stone to true laughter. On earth there are righteous and unrighteous people, homines iusti and homines iniusti. Both kinds of people laugh (ridere) and both kinds of people weep (plorare). But there is a difference between the laughter and the weeping of these two groups. The unrighteous weep on account of diverse earthly things, that is to say: things that are of no value (plorare steriliter, inaniter), which entails their ruin (malum suum). They

²⁶ In *Enarratio in Psalmum 125*, 14 Augustine uses the terms "fructus seminis", and "corona gaudiorum et exultationis".

²⁷ See also *De civitate Dei* 14,9.

laugh on account of things that in fact merit weeping. The righteous weep on account of the unrighteous. That means that their weeping is real (*plorare veraciter*). They do not laugh.

This last conclusion – the righteous do not laugh – is quite compatible with the idea that they weep. But what about the aspect of cheerfulness? Weeping is made manifest by the shedding of tears (*lacrimae*), and tears are good works (*bona opera*). Tears are ‘loose’ drops, small units that form an unmistakeable whole when they flow together.²⁸ The same goes for good works. Laughter can relieve tension – so can weeping. For the righteous, weeping means relief of tension in the present life here on earth. And the discharge of tension by definition involves relief and cheerfulness. Doing good works for others and praying to God result in cheerfulness. This means that it is possible in the present life here on earth to obtain an advance on the joy of the future life up in heaven. Cheerfulness is not the same as joy, it is the collective term for a number of small and brief fragments of joy that make life on earth bearable and that give the courage to persevere. Cheerfulness may be compared to the preparations for going on a holiday trip. If we wish to make a journey, we will have to make certain arrangements beforehand – things that are not pleasant in themselves (such as packing bags and doing shopping). Nevertheless we undertake these activities cheerfully with the prospect of the destination, where pleasurable anticipation will change into joy.

Does this mean that there is no true spiritual joy on earth? Since everything on earth is in a permanent state of change, there can be no constant joy, no state of joy. ‘True’ earthly joy is like all things earthly: subject to the limitations of time. It lies in the doing of good works and it is a foretaste of and a stepping stone to the true, heavenly joy. This true, heavenly joy may occasionally be reached for an instant on earth, such as when Augustine and his mother were allowed to gaze upon wisdom for an instant once in Ostia.²⁹

6. Conclusion

It is clear that both the Bible and Augustine know two types of laughter: the laughter of superiority and the laughter of relief.

²⁸ Augustine uses the same metaphor in a different context: *Sermo* 77B,7. There the drops signify the minor sins that must be baled out daily in order to prevent the ship from sinking. The baling out signifies the doing of good works.

²⁹ See *Confessiones* 9,10,23-25.

The laughter of superiority in its turn appears in two different forms. It has the ability to cause tension in two ways. It can either appear aggressive or intimidating and thus overstep limits. Or it can overstep limits through foolishness. In the first case, the laughter of superiority is a crime; in the second case it is a disease of the mind. In both cases people may feel harassed by it. Now, as a matter of fact all people are ill, but at the same time all have the choice to follow the advice of their Physician and be healed. There are people who choose to do this, and there are people who choose not to, or not yet to do this. The first group is conscious of its situation in all humility, and weeps. The second group is blinded by its pride, has become unaware of the condition it is in and laughs. The first group lives in comparative health and need not worry about the Last Judgment. The second group is ill and does not even consider the Last Judgment.

Augustine interprets weeping and laughter in their biblical sense. In the present life here on earth – life before the Last Judgment – laughter is a sign of illness and weeping a sign of health. The true laughter may not yet be known here on earth. In the future life up above in heaven – life after the Last Judgment – laughter will be a sign of relief and health. Since all tension will then have fallen from our shoulders, there will be no more weeping. Weeping has been reserved for those who are condemned, and they will not be in heaven. The present life here on earth stands in the light of the future life up above in heaven, and forms a preparation for it. In order to be able to laugh there – that is: to experience the true joy – we have to weep here – that is: to do good works: to sow in tears, to free ourselves of our burden of sin by asking for forgiveness, to pray. An effort is accordingly required, albeit one that enthuses and then liberates. We must choose the difficult way, not the easy way. The way of activity rather than the way of passivity, the way of humility in stead of pride – in a word, an awakening of our consciousness that leads to a responsible choice. Only then will Christ's burden become light. Only by letting go of earthly strivings can we become free to consider heavenly strivings. We must not find joy in obtaining ephemeral and changeable things, but in obtaining lasting and unchangeable things. That is the true, perfect, unadulterated joy, the eternal reward, life everlasting.³⁰

Is there then no joy at all in the present life here on earth? There certainly is. We still always possess hope.³¹ Augustine first selects passages from Scripture with sharp contrasts such as present-future and

³⁰ *Sermo* 108,6.

³¹ *Enarratio in Psalmum* 83,12: "(...); et si aliquantum gaudendi, sed adhuc in spe".

earth-heaven (the quotations from Psalms and Luke). His second step is to point out a viable road between the two poles. It is important to him that we are not discouraged by a contrast that seems too forbidding. It might make us uninterested in choosing the right path, or too fearful to do so. That is the purpose of Augustine's exegesis. What seems static at first sight, he makes dynamic, he breaks open. On the journey from earthly weeping to heavenly laughter there are many possibilities to experience a foretaste of what is to come. The tears we shed are the good works that we do and enjoy doing. Weeping is beneficial. We may experience those tears – drops of authentic joy, however small and short-lived – whenever we do good works. Not only do they make life bearable, but they make it worthwhile living.

JOOST VAN NEER