

arbitrarily. Rather, they are clustered around one sign, the humanity of Christ (...) The incarnated Word leaves no gap between the sign and the signified, for Christ signifies himself" (p. 240). Thanks to his humanity, Christ is the "signifier", and thanks to his divinity, He is the "signified". In other words, He is both the *via* and the *patria* (cf. *doc. chr.* 1,11,11), and because of that He constitutes "the transcendental possibility for the scriptures to linguistically signify the spiritual realities" (p. 241).

Toom's reconstruction of the theological/Christological approach adopted by Augustine in his theory of biblical hermeneutics is convincing. We cannot but agree with him that Christology appears to be the key to the correct understanding of *doc. chr.* We would simply add that this scope was already clear in Augustine's mind even before drawing his hermeneutical *praecepta*. Not only would the immediate precursors of *doc. chr.* (*Contra Academicos* and *De magistro*) hint at that (let us think of Augustine's "illumination theory"), but the Bishop of Hippo's very biographical *parcours* – of which the Milanese "conversion" signs a point of no return – explains the centrality of Christ the Saviour in his life, thought and work.

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Paul van Geest, *The Incomprehensibility of God: Augustine as a Negative Theologian*, Late Antique History and Religion 4, Peeters, Leuven-Paris-Walpole MA, 2011, ISBN 978-90-429-2473-4, XII, 262 p.

In this book Paul van Geest traces throughout Augustine's corpus the recurring emphasis to be found within it on the mystery of God. Taking a chronological approach, the book examines works which "contain passages representative of Augustine's discourse about God during a certain period", and more specifically, "passages in which Augustine himself made *the way of speaking about God* an object of reflection" (p. 18). In reading Augustine as 'negative theologian' van Geest responds to a widespread reception of Augustine as a 'positive' theologian who developed and provided for later Christian tradition precise and definite ways of speaking about the God of salvation and all that that entailed doctrinally speaking. He thus contributes to a small but growing literature on Augustine's 'negative discourse about God' (p. 9), bringing the latter into the limelight by showing how an awareness of God's unknowability pervades Augustine's

works, being sharpened at key junctures within his theological development. One of his aims in doing so is to demonstrate the relevance of Augustine to a contemporary culture which holds in suspicion religious discourse that is too robust or dogmatic, preferring an emphasis on the inadequacy of any one conceptualisation in the face of pluriform religious experience. If a rediscovery of apophysis within Christianity can speak to this post-Christian religiosity, then Augustine is a key resource, argues van Geest (pp. ix-x, 8-9).

In this review, rather than giving a blow-by-blow account of the book (whose structure is not so much where the interest lies), I will bring out what I see as its key results. In particular, I will highlight four important insights that are articulated within the book, after which I will invite further possible, fruitful developments of these insights.

1. Van Geest offers an analysis of *In epistolam Johannis ad Parthos* which displays Augustine's development of the *via amoris* (found already in *De doctrina christiana*) in complementary relation with the *via negationis* (Chapter 5). He shows that, for Augustine, the way to 'seeing' God, by contrast with bodily sight, is love. The implication, by extension, is that God can be 'known' while his cognitive unknowability remains intact. Van Geest shows how the link between the two *viae* is intensified insofar as love is, for Augustine, as incomprehensible as God himself (p. 105).

2. In his analysis of *De diversis questionibus ad Simplicianum* van Geest draws attention to the fact that one of Augustine's aims was 'the formation of people'. In particular, "Augustine's appeal to God's inscrutability was part of his endeavour to advocate humility and uncertainty as salutary attitudes to life" (pp. 66-67). This brings out a side to Augustine's doctrine of predestination which is often overlooked: its directedness to the continual undercutting of pride, and more generally its pastoral motivation. Van Geest returns to the Augustinian note of humility in his treatment of Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings (Chapter 10), where again Augustine harnesses an acknowledgment of the inscrutability of God's judgments for the inculcation of humility – and at one point accuses Julian of lacking it (p. 207). Such an emphasis fleshes out, in one particular way, the *via amoris*, thereby developing the insight that knowledge of God is to be had not conceptually in the abstract, but concretely in the action of humble love (see p. 222).

3. The way of humility is drawn out further and more specifically in relation to the incarnation: for Christ is, quintessentially, the 'humble doctor' (p. 188). Van Geest draws out the implications of this in his exposition of *sermo* 117, in which Augustine answers the

question of how human beings can approach God if God is incomprehensible. The answer lies in the incarnation: if the Word cannot be grasped in divine form, then it must be listened to in human form. And this means following the way of the incarnation, which is the way of humility (pp. 186-188). Van Geest has already drawn attention to the presence of this motif in *De Trinitate* (p. 150). In each case, 'grasping' the mystery of God is linked, not with cognitive straining, but with a transformed way of life.

4. Finally, these insights are drawn together in van Geest's insistence that the genre of Augustine's writings must be taken into account when appraising them. He makes this point specifically in relation to *Ad Simplicianum* (p. 65), but it is a point which bears generalisation. In particular, it might allow for a more sustained acknowledgment of Augustine's pastoral aims: that his theological constructions are not intended merely as part of an abstract edifice of truth, but (in many cases) for the drawing of his audience into deeper encounter with the unknowable God. Van Geest thus speaks of Augustine as a 'mystagogue' (e.g. p. 65).

These four interconnected insights are rich and compelling, and might be taken as an invitation to pursue the following avenues of development in future book projects.

1. Van Geest claims in relation to the *via amoris* that "[a]lthough [love] was the ultimate moment of knowledge, Augustine denied...that love makes God's being completely comprehensible" (p. 107). And in discussing the way of humility he refers to "a humility which stemmed from the insight that humankind cannot fathom much of God's being and activity" (p. 208). These phrases might be taken to suggest that God's incomprehensibility is a matter of degree, and that knowing God is still essentially a matter of cognition. But might the *via amoris* be interpreted rather as suggesting that knowledge of God, as a matter of love, is less a cognitive matter than a relational or participatory one (which does not involve God's being reduced to an object of cognition)? This reading would cohere well with the apophatic spirit of van Geest's interpretation of Augustine insofar as it holds inseparably together an affirmation and a denial: on the one hand God is said to be unknowable (cognitively), and on the other hand God is said to be knowable (by love). More pithily still, God is said to be 'non-cognitively knowable'. If cognition is taken to be definitive of human knowledge, then we have here an oxymoron, pointing to God's transcendence of the human distinction between knowledge and lack of knowledge. To sum up: love knows God in God's incomprehensibility.

2. Van Geest remarks on how apophatic theology became conflated in the West with negative theology (p. 37), while making clear that originally it was rooted in the belief (as articulated by Pseudo-Dionysius) that all language fails – both affirmative and negative (p. 36). In his analysis of Augustine, van Geest seems at times to assume the conflation. However, his conclusions might be given even more reach if the Pseudo-Dionysian account were held to more precisely. Specifically, on this account the potential apophasis in Augustine could be widened from his overtly negative speech to any form of speech which displays language's failure to grasp God. And given that the *via amoris* contains an implicit critique of cognitive attempts to grasp God, this will extend to any form of speech which contributes to the knowledge of God through humble love, a knowledge which preserves intact the incomprehensibility of God. An analysis of these different forms of speech in Augustine (ranging from his pastoral to his polemical works) would be an excellent agenda for a further study.¹

3. Van Geest claims that "the measure in which Augustine emphasized God's incomprehensibility appears to have depended on the measure in which he believed that the unity of the church was at peril" (p. 192); and further (with reference to the Pelagian controversy), that "too great an emphasis on God's incomprehensibility would have made Augustine vulnerable" (p. 198). This was a time when certainty not reticence was needed, van Geests suggests. While he goes on to show that an apophatic tenor is still present in Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings, he retains an implicit opposition between polemical certainty and apophatic reticence. In keeping with van Geest's above insights, could it be argued that this opposition is not necessary? Might polemic be a genre in which a certain kind of clarity can serve to debunk accounts of God which have precisely undermined God's incomprehensibility? In this way Augustine's robust discourse might be understood to be precisely in aid of reasserting God's incomprehensibility and indeed pinpointing it very specifically (e.g. in the inscrutable judgments by which he bestows grace upon some and not others). Thus clarity can be seen to be in direct, not inverse, proportion to mystery. Such a conclusion would nicely consolidate van Geest's overall thesis. As he shows, Augustine's anti-Pelagian emphasis on grace is constantly directed

¹ In 'A Performative Reading of Augustine's Doctrine of Predestination', forthcoming in *Studia Patristica* (2011), I explore in this vein the pastoral impetus of Augustine's works against the so-called 'Semi-Pelagians' (and in particular of *De dono perseverantiae*), showing how the doctrine of predestination is taught so as to foster prayer and humility.

towards the inculcation of humility (p. 206). As such, it is also thoroughly in keeping with the apophatic recognition that God is not known by cognition but on the way of humility.

Van Geest's study of the apophatic tenor of Augustine's writings thoroughly succeeds in redressing the assumption that his robust and clear development of doctrine necessarily implies a robust and clear knowledge of God from which it follows that God is perfectly humanly comprehensible. What I have suggested above are various ways in which van Geest's interpretation of Augustine might be pursued further – and I hope will be – in future monographs.

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Short Notices

Jason David BeDuhn, *Augustine's Manichaean Dilemma, I: Conversion and Apostasy, 373-388 C.E.*, Divinations. Rereading Late Ancient Religion, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2009, ISBN 978-0-8122-4210-2, 408 p.

Jason BeDuhn plans to describe Augustine's lifelong entanglement with Manichaeism in a three-volume series of monographs under the title *Augustine's Manichaean Dilemma*. BeDuhn sets out to show that Augustine's life and thinking from the point of view of his dealings with the Manichaean doctrine is not a history of sudden changes or ruptures, but is on the contrary continuous, as a process of a lifelong conversion. The first volume studies the episode of Augustine's first contact with, adherence to, disappointment and gradual rupture with Manichaeism, and his subsequent conversion to Catholic/Nicene Christianity, more or less the period of his life described in his *Confessiones*. BeDuhn attempts to historical-critically reconstruct this period in Augustine's Manichaean involvement, making abstraction of Augustine's later – somewhat ideologically coloured – account of it. As such, *conuersio* – the way in which Augustine understood and experienced this – is a central focus of research in this monograph. BeDuhn has made an elaborate and well substantiated beginning of an intriguing aspect of Augustine's life, proving that he not only knows both the sources and the scientific research of them but also that he is a didactic and compelling narrator.

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