

## Patristic Pramā and Pramāṇa

*Augustine and the Quest for Truth*

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### 5.1 Introduction

Our work on the idea of truth across religious cultures has revealed, once again, a wide-ranging variety of concepts, practices, and presuppositions together with certain resonances in the conceptualization of truth between different combinations of cultures brought into comparison. Thus, both Hinduism and Buddhism share a highly developed epistemological tradition (truth, *pramā*, embedded in an articulate theory of what constitutes valid knowledge, *pramāṇa*); Chinese and Jewish religion, an emphasis on doing and practice (divination of the dao; *h'lakāh*); Christianity and Islam, an embrace of revelation and consequent deemphasis, in their mystical manifestations, on intellection. These pairings could be reconfigured and other commonalities named: *sharī'a* (Islam) and *h'lakāh* (Judaism) both foreground practice, how one lives, as part and parcel of seeking after truth/the Truth (God); Hinduism and Christianity, the ways that embodiment impedes perception and reception of truth; Buddhism and Daoism, a sense that the true, deep-structure of Reality is fluid, ever-changing.

For this chapter on the idea of Truth in Christianity I have chosen to focus on Augustine. Augustine commends himself to our attention not

only because of his authority and influence on the subsequent Western tradition, but also because he himself viewed his own Christianity as his commitment to the quest for Truth. Standing as he does at the tumultuous confluence of post-classical notions of knowledge, intra-Christian debates on the nature of God, cosmos, and humanity, and huge changes in Roman imperial power, he was compelled to articulate his own religious epistemology as a means of expressing his definitions of religious truth and its significance for church and society. And while we see his own construction of his quest for truth in the *Confessions*, we have as well his application of the theological points of principle given in his self-portrait to the much larger canvas of world history—pagan, Jewish, and Christian—in the *City of God*. The breadth of his vision allows us that much more opportunity for comparison with the other traditions in our purview.

I propose, then, to retrace Augustine's steps as he presents them in the *Confessions*, paying particular attention to his idea of truth, his retrospective analysis of his false starts and mistaken premises, and his imaginative psychology, spelled out particularly in Books 10 (on memory) and 11 (time as a function of soul). I will analyze these according to the three broad categories that we have worked with for this volume: practical or embodied truth (which emphasizes behavior); scriptural or revelatory truth (which foregrounds semiotics and interpretation); and epistemological truth (which emphasizes thinking, knowing, and how we think we know). I will then turn to his broader application of these ideas to history and society, finally drawing more pointed comparisons with specific aspects of cross-cultural concepts of truth as they have emerged in my colleagues' presentations.

## 5.2 The One, the Many, and the Problem of Evil

Truth for Augustine means above all correct knowledge about God. But because he stands within biblical tradition, correct knowledge about God for him necessarily entails, as well, correct knowledge about man (made in God's image) and the universe (God's willed creation and, thus, a medium of his revelation). Further, because his historical neighborhood was the "theological bear-garden" (Peter Brown) of late Roman antiquity, Augustine confronted at close quarters various contestants for the construction of "true Christianity": Manichees, Donatists, African and Italian Catholics. He himself had lived on both sides of several of these patrolled borders.

In light of the cognitive dissonance generated by this intense inter-communal conflict, *epistemological truth* loomed especially large for

him.<sup>1</sup> Its *pramāṇa* always lay in conforming to the authoritative teaching of the Church. Embodied truth (truth-in-practice) and revelatory truth (truth-in-scripture) also open up onto his framing of divine, human, and cosmic *pramā*: sexual renunciation and biblical hermeneutics are two of the grand themes in Augustine's presentation of his quest for truth in the *Confessions*. But these are subsumed there to the tangled tale of his epistemological history: *How can he know God? "Grant me, Lord, to know and to understand* (Psalm 118) which comes first: to call upon you or to praise you, and whether knowing you precedes calling upon you. But who calls upon you when he does not know you? . . . *They will praise the Lord who seek him* (Psalm 21:27)," (*Confessions* 1.1).

The *Confessions* presents in a narrative triptych his answer to this question of how to know God. Books 1–9, a sort of intellectual history from birth up to his conversion in 386, present his different efforts at knowing truth as a series of seismic reorientations: rhetorical education (3.1.1–4.7); Cicero (3.4,8); Scripture (read, evidently and significantly, in private rather than in community, 3.5,9) and, immediately following, the Manichees (3.6,10–7.9 and passim); the Skeptics ("They taught that everything is a matter of doubt, and that an understanding of truth lies beyond human capacity," 5.10,19, through 5.14,25); the Platonists (7.9,13); Ambrose and allegorical interpretation (6.4,6).<sup>2</sup> Book 10, centerpiece of the work's argument, investigates thought, the role of memory in knowing, and how the mind recognizes Truth. Books 11–13, finally, ostensibly an interpretation of the first several verses of Genesis, explore the concepts of time and eternity, the types of knowing and being fitted to each, and the role of Christ, scripture, church, and sacrament in mediating divine truth to humans awash in the sea of time.<sup>3</sup>

What then for Augustine is Truth, and how in his view do humans find it? I propose that we begin to answer this question by following the story he tells in the *Confessions*. But to understand it, we need to be aware of the two alternative views of truth that at different times commanded his allegiance and thus affected, whether negatively or positively, his later formulation: Manichaean Christianity and Plotinian Platonism, both of which he knew only in their late Latin avatars.

## 5.3 Mani and Plato

Augustine wrote the *Confessions* in 397. It represents his retrospection, ten years after the fact, on the spiritual and intellectual process by which he came to convert to Catholic Christianity in 386, in Milan. The seriatim conversions shaping the first eight books—to philosophy (via

Cicero's *Hortensius*) and to Manichaeism (via the Bible), which mark his university years at Carthage; and his subsequent intellectual conversion to late Platonism in Milan—seem to stand in a developmental trajectory propelling him ever closer to (Catholic) truth. In fact, however, they each represent incommensurate models of reality—of God, man, and the universe—that hit him with the disorienting force of shifting paradigms.

The combat of their competing epistemologies shaped Augustine's ultimate position on Truth and how one grasps it. Cicero's call to Wisdom broke him away from the purely utilitarian benefits of the rhetorical education meant to train him to be a "handler of words" and, ultimately, a lawyer (so that "the less honest I was, the more famous I should be," 3.3.6). The *Hortensius* changed Augustine's priorities, redirecting his thinking (or, as he characteristically put it, his *affectum*: on this more below) about what was important, turning him from "vanity" to love of Wisdom, *philosophia*. Yet raised as he had been in a Catholic household, and by an extremely devout Catholic mother, Augustine could not rest with Cicero because "the name of Christ was not contained in the book."

For with my mother's milk my infant heart had drunk in and still retained . . . the name of your Son, my Savior; and whatever lacked that name, no matter how *learned and excellently written and true*, could not win me wholly (3.5.8).

Accordingly, Augustine moved on to a study of the scriptures. Their prose style suffered in comparison to Cicero's; their seeming simplicity offended his pride;<sup>4</sup> he was repulsed. His narrative subtly introduces here several major points that he will later develop systematically: (1) that truth, tantamount to the correct reading of scripture, can be found only within and by the authority of the Church (communally and within tradition's hermeneutic, as opposed to individually, as here, through private endeavor); (2) that nothing blocks apprehension of the divine like pride (hence his description of himself here as "inflated [by] conceit," "disdaining to be a beginner," "swollen with pride"); and (3) that words obscure as well as reveal, and thus that even the words of Holy Scripture itself, though uniquely and divinely sanctioned conduits of truth, are themselves only contingently related to that truth. In 373, however, the moment he describes here, his quest for Truth necessarily linked with the "name of Christ" led him to give himself over, for almost a decade, to a church that forever after stood for him as the embodiment of falsehood, religious perversion, and pride:

I fell in with a sect of men talking high-sounding nonsense, carnal and wordy men. The snares of the devil were in their mouths, to trap souls with an arrangement of the syllables of the names of God the Father and of the Lord Jesus Christ and of the Paraclete. . . . These names were never absent from their lips; but it was no more than sound and noise with their tongue. Otherwise their hearts were empty of truth. They cried out, 'Truth! Truth!' and they were forever uttering the word to me; but there was never any truth in them. They uttered false statements not only about You, who really are the Truth, but also about the elements of the world, your creation. . . . O Truth, Truth: how inwardly did the very marrow of my soul pant after you, whenever I heard them sound your name. But it was all words—spoken words, words written in huge tomes . . . Emptiness (3.6.10).

Augustine became a Manichee.

Like their spiritual ancestors the Gnostics, Western Manichees based their rejection of the Old Testament on their highly polarized reading of the apostle Paul, with his rhetorically charged pairing of Law and Gospel, Works and Grace. They focused especially on the problem of evil as a standing challenge to any monotheist construction of Christianity: no single, all-good, all-powerful deity, they urged, could be the ultimate source of such a morally damaged humanity, or such a flawed universe. Appealing to the ethos of physical (and particularly sexual) asceticism abroad in late antique culture generally, the Manichees preached a stern, mystical ethic of renunciation enacted by the men and women of their elite stratum, the *electi*, admired by the broader support-stratum, the *auditores* ("hearers"). Finally, against a fundamentalist Catholicism that both they and even the newly Catholic Augustine characterized as *superstitio*,<sup>5</sup> the Manichees renounced arguments from authority, claiming that they could persuade others of the religious truth of their claims through an appeal to reason alone. It was the appeal of this promise—that the exercise of reason would lead to apprehension of Truth—that struck the older Augustine as their chief attraction to his younger, philosophically charged self: "I fell among these people for no other reason than that they declared that . . . they would by pure and simple reason bring to God those who were willing to listen to them."<sup>6</sup>

Their own sacred writings, the five books of Mani, together with copies of the letters of Paul purged of what they held to be later judaizing interpolations, served as the literary foundations of Manichaean truth claims. The Old Testament they subjected to a withering literalist and ascetic critique: If man is in God's image, does God also have fingernails and hair? Would a moral God order the destruction even of babies in Sodom? Insist upon blood offerings? Condone and even encourage sexual intercourse and procreation? The truth about God, they urged, the

truth about man and about the universe revealed through their own esoteric wisdom, was that two moral powers, Good and Evil, instantiated in two material forces, Light and Darkness, stood locked in combat.<sup>8</sup> Their battleground ranged from the astral planes of the upper cosmos (evinced in such phenomena as the waxing and waning of the moon, and solar and lunar eclipses) to the two souls contesting for moral control within man. This dualism spoke to both the ethical and the cosmic dimensions of the problem of evil, while preserving God/Good/Light from any compromising causal involvement. Evil was its own independent force.

Augustine stayed with this sect throughout his early adulthood, roughly from the ages of nineteen to twenty-nine. Increasingly suspicious of their reconstruction of Paul (5.11.21), alienated by their elaborate mythology and their scientific fundamentalism (which emerged in the comparison of their celestial mythology with the star charts of the more scientific pagan philosophers, 5.3.4-6), flirting briefly—perhaps out of spiritual fatigue—with the radical skepticism of the New Academy (5.10.19), Augustine did not radically change his way of thinking until he encountered, in translation, some works of Porphyry and Plotinus once he was in Milan.

For Augustine, as for many Catholic intellectuals of his age, the Platonists represented the next closest thing to themselves: in them, "God and his Word [i.e., Christ] are everywhere implied" (8.2.1). They broke him out of his philosophical materialism, teaching him to conceive of evil not as some sort of malevolent substance, but rather as the privation of Good. This fundamental reorientation changed everything of Augustine's former views on God, man, and the universe. Material reality, for example, once seen as evil because of its corruptibility, Augustine could now see, for the same reason, as good: that it could be corrupted attested to its essential or natural goodness (since if it had not begun as good, it would not have been capable of corruption, 7.12.18). No moral complications stood in the way, then, of the Good God's authorship of material reality. And God himself was nonmaterial, spiritual, just as the process of thought itself. Manichaean jibes about God's fingernails and hair lost their power, since the text of Genesis, understood correctly, showed that the divine image was in the mind, a spiritual function rather than a physical resemblance: God's image resided in the intellectual powers of the soul (cf. 3.7.12).

This intellectualist construction of the fundamental relationship between God and man will always remain determinative in Augustine's theology, his ultimate dissatisfactions with Neoplatonism notwithstanding. Knowing Truth, knowing God, believing: all have to do, profoundly, with *thinking*. To believe, he later writes, is to "think with assent," for while "not all thinking is believing . . . all believing is thinking (*cogitare*)."<sup>9</sup>

To apprehend the truth, for Augustine, is always and primarily to *know* it. But—true again to the Platonic tradition in which his Christianity stands—this knowing has an erotic quality. We know by loving; in knowing the truth, we love it. Hence Augustine's report of his early encounter with Cicero's *Hortensius* as altering his *affectum*: we could equally well translate "it changed my way of thinking" and "it changed my way of feeling." And this erotic dimension of knowledge will likewise affect Augustine's formulation of the relation of knowing and doing, especially knowing and doing good—and, more pointedly, knowing the good but doing evil. Our moral choices, he will argue, depend less on what we know than on how we feel; and what we do not love we can neither know nor do.

With this historical preamble behind us, let us examine Augustine's views on the nature of knowledge, particularly true knowledge of God.

#### 5.4 The Knower, Knowing, and the Known

Manichaean anthropology posited man as a bicameral creature, an individual instance of the intercosmic battle between light and darkness, good and evil.<sup>10</sup> Man was at once the object, the stage, and the agent of this battle. Accordingly, knowledge of the cosmos, especially the celestial cosmos, as well as mastery of elaborate food and other physical disciplines, situated the believer more securely in his immediate (i.e., corporeal) environment: all the elements of the universe came into play. Neo-Platonic anthropology also posited man as a sort of double creature, having a contingent, historical, individual soul (the mean term between mind or spirit and the historical, contingent, fleshly body), and an interior, transcendent true self, the Higher Soul, which exists, impersonal and eternal, close to the divine Intellect (*Nous*). The goal of philosophy was finally to "know God" by effecting a union with the One: the philosopher, turning inward and upward away from the distractions of sense and the time-bound self, would merge with the true divine Self.<sup>11</sup>

Elements of these two systems, whether negatively or positively, reappear in Augustine's anthropology and epistemology too. Augustine defines the human being as "a rational animal subject to death" (*de ordine*) or as "a rational soul using a mortal and earthly body" (*de mor. eccl.*). Flesh and soul, though united in one person (and in a way more immediate and essential than pagan Platonists could countenance), are of two different substances, one material and fleshly (in both senses of *carneale*), the other immaterial and spiritual. Against both Manichaeism and Neoplatonism, Augustine insists that man's soul is not itself divine, nor does it participate substantially in the divine. And while the "inner man"

(a Pauline locution), the highest part of the soul, man's *ratio*, is said to be in the image of God, it is also the site of an inherited disability, the divided will, that affects man's ability both to know and to love. On account of this divided will with its consequently misdirected loves, man's soul is also properly said to be "carnal."

This divided nature of the human knower in turn affects the nature of knowledge. Higher and lower knowledge are determined not only by their objects, but also by the orientation of the knower's desire or *amor*. Love of self (*amor sui*) leads to *cupiditas*; knowing (*scientia*) motivated by such love is often about and because of vanity: it is *curiositas*. Properly oriented love, *amor dei*, leads to knowledge of Truth (a synonym for God), appropriate love for God's creatures (*caritas*), and true wisdom (*sapientia*, also a name for Christ). Knowledge of the intelligible world is not available through the senses, though sense knowledge can be a valuable step along the path to knowledge of and love of God through Creation (the argument of *Confessions* 10.6). This higher knowledge is available rather through the divine illumination of the mind through the mind's participation in the Word of God, God's interior presence in the mind.<sup>12</sup> Hence rational knowledge does not enter the mind from outside, but somehow is already present to it.<sup>13</sup>

The keystone of the self and the site of the mind's illumination, for Augustine, lies in the memory, the subject of Book 10 of the *Confessions*. Memory for us means something like the recollection of the past. But for Augustine, *memoria* serves as the interior capacity of the mind by which he can know Truth, know God.

Let me know You, You who know me, let me know You even as I am known. O You, power of my soul, enter into it and fit it for yourself. . . . For behold, You have loved the truth, and he that does the truth comes to the light. I want to do the truth, in my heart, before You, in confession; in my writing, before many witnesses (10.1, 1).

Mounting beyond sense knowledge and "all the things that throng about the gateway of the senses" (6.9), Augustine turns in toward himself, acknowledging the inner man, his reason, who knows things "through the ministry of the outer man." But since God is incorporeal, things of sense that, because created by God, provide the readiest analogies, cannot, by their very nature, finally reveal or contain Truth. Moving from there beyond "the topmost part of my soul," past even that presiding part of the soul that judges sense perceptions, Augustine at last enters "the fields and vast palaces of my memory" where immaterial images of recollected experience are stored—where, indeed, Augustine meets himself. The vastness

and power of memory—"a spreading limitless room within me"—overwhelms Augustine: it is the seat of self-transcendence, despite being exactly that part of the soul where the individual is most deeply his or her individual self. "Who can reach memory's utmost depth? Yet it is a faculty of my soul and belongs to my nature. In fact, I cannot totally grasp all that I am. The mind is not large enough to contain itself" (8, 15).<sup>14</sup>

More than a warehouse of images and past feelings, *memoria* also serves an essential cognitive function: it is the seat of a *priori* knowledge.<sup>15</sup> The mind, through memory, recognizes truth. When such truths were formulated for him, asks Augustine, "how did I recognize them and say, 'Yes, that is true'? The answer must be that they were already in my memory, but remote and pushed back . . . as if in most secret caverns" (10, 17). Through memory, too, language is processed, because the sounds of words only signify the things to which they point—in this particular case, ideas without sense-referents—yet Augustine had understood them. The Augustinian *memoria* thus functions much as does the Platonic *anamnesis*, though whereas in the pagan system this capacity points toward the life of the soul prior to its existence in the body, for Augustine it points to a preconscious intuition of the mind, implanted through Christ, on account of which the soul instinctively yearns to know God, the ultimate object of its love.<sup>16</sup> In this last sense, *memoria* provides the readiest analogy to the sort of unmediated apprehension by which God knows us, and with which humans, eschatologically, will know both themselves and God: "When I remember memory, my memory is present to itself by itself" (16, 24).

Yet even animals have memory. Human knowledge of God calls for something even greater. Accordingly, Augustine urges himself onward, inward, upward:

What am I to do now, O my true life, my God? I shall mount beyond this power of memory, I shall mount beyond it, and come to you, O lovely light. . . . I shall pass beyond memory to find you; but where will I find you? If I find you beyond my memory, then I shall be without memory of you. And how will I find you if I am without memory of you? (10, 17, 26)

This indwelling memory of God, through which the soul's innate desire for happiness orients it toward God, may go back, Augustine conjectures, to humanity's primal parents (20, 29). With this allusion to Adam Augustine invokes, as well, the Fall, for he characterizes Adam as "that man who first sinned, in whom we all died" (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:22). From this point on, Augustine's meditation grows increasingly elegiac: themes of the ubiquity and subtlety of sin, of the moral ambiguity of sexual desire

experienced in sleep, of the dangerous manyness into which the soul, slipping into love of creature rather than Creator, can dissipate itself, sound increasingly. Hence, argues Augustine, the necessity of sexual continence that God commands, "for by continence we are collected and bound up into unity within ourselves, whereas we had been scattered abroad in multiplicity" (29,40).

In the last three books of his *Confessions*, Augustine strains against the fraught disunity of man's existence, distended in time. The nature of time itself underscores and feeds this distension. Time, he maintains, is a psychological function: it exists only within the soul, in the infinitely ungraspable, elusive *punctum* of the present. Man's consciousness, his memory, his entire ability to grasp truth exists within and is described by this razor-thin slice of reality, suspended between two infinitely receding types of non-being, the Past (which has no existence, since it no longer is) and the Future (which has no existence, since it has not yet come to be).

Not even one day is entirely present. All the hours of the day add up to twenty-four. The first of them has the others in the future, the last has them in the past. . . . A single hour is itself constituted of fugitive moments. . . . If we can think of some bit of time which cannot be divided into even the smallest instantaneous moments, that alone is what we call "present." And this time flies so quickly from the future into past that it is an interval with no duration. Any duration is divisible into past and future: the present occupies no space (11.15,23).

This distension in time constitutes the great measure of difference and distance between our mode of consciousness and that of God in eternity. God knows all things instantaneously, as do the angels who dwell in the heaven of heavens, "the intellectual, non-physical heaven where the intelligence's knowing is a matter of simultaneity—not in part, not in an enigma, not through a glass, but complete total openness, 'face to face' (1 Corinthians 13:12) . . . concurrent, without any temporal successiveness" (12.13,16). Man's existence in time distends apprehension, complicating his search for truth because meaning must be mediated—through memory (the means of the soul's contact with time, since memory, to function, functions only in the present), images, signs, words. And just as time is not the same as the units we measure it by, so meaning is not the same as those words we use in our attempts to convey it. Even the words or "signs" in Scripture, God's mode of revelation, are infinitely interpretable (12.23,32), capable of sustaining a diversity of truths whose validity cannot be limited by the historically contingent intentions of their original

authors (12.23,32–30,41). The only rock of certainty to which man can anchor himself is the Church, divinely established and authorized to mediate God's word through "the ministry of mortal men" (13.15,16).

Can man, then, in this life, know Truth? In any unambiguous way, no. His soul "is like a waterless wasteland before You (Psalm 142:6)," without power to illuminate itself. The knowledge of Truth that man is built to crave, the love of Truth intrinsic to the human soul, are frustrated by man's existential, historical circumstances—circumstances that, though ameliorated by God's grace, were brought about by the fall of Adam. Until such time as God brings time to an end, this disorientation and distension are man's lot. At the end, restlessness will give way to peace. Man will rest, finally, in God (cf. the book's opening, 1.1,1); "there also will you rest in us" (13.37,52).

## 5.5 Some Comparisons

### 5.5.1 Embodied Truth-in-Practice

Every tradition we have examined has a set of physical enactments or disciplines by which the participant lives out the truth of the tradition—yoga, food disciplines, scripted prayer practices, and so on. The measure of the tradition's overachievers—holy men, saints, bodhisattvas—can be glimpsed in their embodied expertise.

Christianity too has this dimension, that truth is measured and even perceived in somatic phenomena. Thus, true sanctity frees the martyr from feeling pain when persecuted; holy men and women fast for enormous periods of time without ill effect; in saints' legends, holy infants refuse to nurse during Lent (thus presaging their adult careers); and the flesh of the holy dead—particularly the flesh of virgins—remains miraculously incorruptible, attesting to their moral and physical integrity.

Certain physical practices also embody truth and in a sense enact it. Augustine, as we have seen, advocates the practice of sexual continence as a way to shore up the soul against the distractions of living in time. He, too, practiced various food abstinences. But both his social context and the personal context of his own theology attenuate the import of such disciplines. Sexual renunciation and prolonged fasting were ubiquitous expressions of piety in virtually all forms of Western fourth-century Christianity. Indeed, in much of his polemic against other churches Augustine immediately concedes the existence of "their" virgins, "their" martyrs, "their" religious elites. The situation drives him to emphasize internal orientation against external appearance. By definition, only a

member of the True Church (i.e., for Augustine, the Catholic church<sup>17</sup>) can be a true Christian, thus a true virgin, and so on.

This is not to say—to come to my second point, his own theology—that all Catholic virgins were “true” virgins. Here we see the full import of Augustine’s emphasis on interiority, on the individual as receptor of grace given, from our point of view mysteriously, solely at divine initiative. Practice guaranteed nothing. For example, if one were rigorously ascetic and self-disciplined, the credit (so Augustine) was God’s, who enabled that person to act in that way. And so unstable and shifting is the interior world of habit, impulse, desire, memory, love, that the person can change in the twinkling of an eye; or, indeed, be enmeshed in more subtle versions of the sins he ostensibly, through practice, avoids.<sup>18</sup>

The only absolutely secure embodiment of truth, for Augustine, is the Catholic Church itself, abstractly or eschatologically conceived. While not everyone inside the Church is holy, no one outside the Church can be. As she exists in time, the Church must be, therefore, a *corpus permixtum*, containing both sinner and saint. Only at the endtime, when God has redeemed his people, will she be *sine macula*, without spot or wrinkle, the pure bride of Christ.

### 5.5.2 *Scripture, Authority, Interpretation*

This question of the Church leads us immediately into questions of authority; of canonicity (text as a particular embodiment of truth) and authoritative interpretation; and of ultimate meaning, the unmediated apprehension of Truth.

Authority for Augustine is always exercised through *disciplina*, a word that has both instructional and coercive connotations (connotations in fact drawn from the late Latin schoolroom). Discipline is less a category of internal or personal character (cf. the sage of Eastern traditions) than an external corrective for the perennially errant human heart. Parents and teachers discipline; the Church—after 399 and again after 405 enabled through the power of the Roman state—disciplines, especially schismatics and heretics; and those doing the disciplining model themselves on humanity’s ultimate disciplinarian, God, who “breaks bones asunder with the rod of [his] discipline.”<sup>19</sup> As with “true virgins” or “true ascetics,” so also with discipline: it is the interior moral orientation of the agent (Moses, say, or Pharaoh) that determines the actual truth status of the action or activity. (Both coerced Israel, but Moses did it out of love, therefore only his actions were truly disciplinary; Pharaoh’s were merely abusive.) So too, Augustine argues, with the Donatists, whose situation was not the same as that of those Christians who suffered the Empire’s

coercion before Constantine. Now, the State coerces at the behest of Church unity; and the church directs the effort out of love for the sinner, not love of power.

Canonical scripture—those books sanctioned by the authority of the Church—is the physical expression, thus embodiment, of the Word of God.<sup>20</sup> But again, Augustine’s awareness and interpretation of time and its effects on human apprehension complicate his approach to the biblical text. The Bible is mediated through and made up of words; and words have as their context particular, historically contingent languages. To recall Augustine’s famous abreaction to Scripture the first time he tried to read it, between his inspiration by Cicero and his seduction by the Manichees: the unloveliness of translation compromised his ability to see, to hear the truths that Scripture contained (3.5.9). Two linguistic removes from the original (in the case of the Latin OT); ad hoc, local, anonymous; current in “innumerable varieties” (*de doctrina christiana* 2.11.16), the Latin biblical text, in Augustine’s day, was a mess. And by the fourth century, the discrepancies between the Septuagint translation and the Hebrew original were well known.

Augustine’s response to this predicament both relativizes the text of Scripture and absolutizes revelation. His semiotics and epistemology link up here: words point toward their referent meaning, but a gap between word and meaning always exists, and in that space interpretation does its work. Various interpretations can all be, variously, true, provided they do not contradict the teaching of the Church; and as we have seen, even authorial intention cannot legitimately limit scriptural interpretation (*Confessions* Bk. 13).

Biblical multiplicity and multivocality do not in the end perturb Augustine, because any text, even the original, is by his terms already, itself, a translation, from the eternal timelessness of God’s existence to the mediated, temporally linear world of men. Words point to but cannot contain truth: their very existence is evidence of the dislocation of our consciousness, of the ways in which our consciousness is divided up in time. Yet Augustine’s stance also allows for a surprising dimension of continuous revelation. Explaining the differences between the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible, he posits God as the author of the consequent changes in meaning. The Hebrew revealed what it was supposed to reveal in its own time to Israel; the Septuagint (LXX) prepared the biblical text for the Gentiles by reformulating (in Greek) revelation appropriate to that much later time period (*de civ. Dei* 18.43).<sup>21</sup> Augustine’s sense of the fluidity of both text and revealed truth thus seems to contrast sharply with the posture toward sacred texts which we have seen in other traditions—rabbinic Judaism’s story, for instance, that among the other things he was doing

while Israel wandered in the desert, Moses wrote out individual *sifrei torah* so that all the tribes would have identical copies; or Daoism's and Islam's, that earthly Scriptures have a cosmic counterpart in the heavens.

### 5.5.3 *Science, Government, Healing, and the Disenchantment of the Universe*

God's truth utterly transcends human truths; yet, Augustine argues, religious claims cannot be true if they are contradicted by scientific, empirical truths. The Manichees' inability to negotiate the gap between their revealed cosmic knowledge and the eclipse tables of Graeco-Roman science considerably diminished their hold on the young Augustine. Thus though religious truths might vary between each other and yet all still be true, they *cannot* vary from science and still be true. For Augustine, the laws governing the physical operation of the universe stem from the same source as true revelation—God—and thus these two cannot contradict each other.

If the Church is the sole location of God's people in time on earth, does the government's allegiance to that church in turn give the government itself any particular religious status? Eusebius, enamoured of the Constantinian revolution, said yes: the *Pax Romana Christiana* was the messianic peace foretold by Isaiah; Constantine, rebuilder of Jerusalem, was God's viceroy, his *christos* on earth. Augustine, in the days of much more greatly involved imperial government with Theodosius II and after, said no. If ideas can have opposites, then the Daoist idea that, with government in harmony with heaven, peace and prosperity result for the kingdom, is utterly opposed to Augustine's. His thought here is un sentimentally secular.<sup>22</sup> Kingdoms whether pagan or Catholic are simply large robber bands, built on a system of exploitation and power; robber bands are simply small kingdoms. The opacity of man's experience in time accordingly carries over to his experience of government, which can never correspond to Heaven. The Kingdom of God, for Augustine, always remains an austere eschatological concept.

So too healing. Scientific medicine (such as it was in his day) may or may not ameliorate sickness and suffering; but true healing is always a miracle, an intrusion or explosion of heaven into the earthly realm. Unlike the Daoist tradition, where correct ritual and the right word at the right time can activate the powers of heaven, for Augustine such healings are utterly unorchestrated explosions of grace, historical anticipations in the present of the final reintegration of spirit and flesh awaited at the End-time resurrection.<sup>23</sup> Miracles are not magic.

### 5.5.4 *Flesh, Bodies, and the Reception of Truth*

Augustine's acute awareness of the drag mortal flesh imposes on the soul, the ways in which it cooperates in the soul's defection from higher to lower goods, bears some superficial resemblance to Hinduism. There, the superimposition of the body through the process of reincarnation limits the persons' sense of who he is, hobbling him with a congenital desire reinforced in each birth. In this sense, fleshly embodiment compromises knowing.

Augustine would agree up to a point. For him, humanity after Adam is born carnal both in its flesh and in its soul. But reading Genesis as he does *ad litteram*, interpreting as he does the significance of Christ's incarnation and resurrection, Augustine holds that at the final redemption, when the saints enjoy the unmediated apprehension of the divine, they will do so in their fleshly bodies. Since God is the author of flesh, since he created bodies and souls joined together when he made Adam and Eve and pronounced them good, then souls and bodies belong together. It is Sin, not Flesh, that compromises man's capacity for Truth.

What, finally, of the relationship between Truth, knowledge, and reason? We have seen how their appeal to reason without authority attracted the young Augustine to the Manichees; later, Platonism freed him from them by providing him with a better way to think about God, spirit vs. matter, and evil. In the writings done immediately after his conversion, Augustine still champions the independence of the mind if it would know truth. Thus, at Cassiciacum he designates authority and reason as two separate and distinguishable ways to God or Wisdom: "In point of time, authority is first; in order of reality, reason is prior."<sup>24</sup> To sin, he argues early on, is fundamentally "to stray from education."<sup>25</sup> *Solus igitur sapiens non peccat*—only the wise man, he argues, does not sin; the wise man does not fear but even welcomes death as the liberation of the soul from the mortal body.<sup>26</sup>

In his mature writings, from the period of the *Confessions* on through the *City of God*, Augustine executes a full reversal on these issues. Identifying what man loves, not what he knows, as the reason why man does or does not sin, Augustine derides his own earlier enthusiasm for education as a way to know the truth: such a position would require that the man "who had a keen mind, or who was cultivated in the liberal arts" have the best chance at salvation. "But if I set up this standard of judgment, *he will laugh me to scorn* who has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the strong, the foolish to confound the wise."<sup>27</sup> The unlettered Monica moves throughout his autobiography as a prime exemplum of the



good and faithful Christian who is awarded—no less than her intellectual, well-educated son—a glimpse of divine being through mystical experience (9.10,23–24). Finally, arguing late in his life against the Pelagians, Augustine holds that even those most excellent servants and conduits of Truth, the apostles themselves, were no more free of the troubling sollicitations of concupiscence and the fear of death than the most abject sinner or—his old measure of excellence—the most educated wise man.<sup>28</sup>

We conclude then that for Augustine, human reality after Adam's sin is so constituted that the individual—even the individual believer within the sole legitimate (i.e., true) church; even the heroic, most excellent believers as exemplified by the apostles themselves—can have only a very attenuated grasp of truth. Even once truth is in some sense known, or received, fear, its opposite, always remains. His insistence on this point—remarkable within a tradition emphasizing the degree to which it embodies revelation—gives his theology its poignancy. Truth is absolutely necessary for the soul's happiness; nevertheless, in this life, it remains systematically elusive. It is belief in the promise of one day knowing the truth, seeing Truth, hearing Truth “not through the tongue of flesh, nor through the voice of an angel, nor through the sound of thunder, nor through the obscurity of symbolic utterance” (9.10,24) but immediately, that constitutes, for Augustine, the essence of faith.

#### Notes

1. So Peter Berger in seminar, 11 October 1997.
2. P. Courcelle attempts to reconstruct much of Ambrose's sermons can be dated to Augustine's stay in Milan, *Recherches sur les Confessions de S. Augustin* (Paris: Editions E. de Boccard, 1968), 93–138.
3. For the English I draw on two translations: Frank W. Sheed, *The Confessions of Saint Augustine* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1944); and Henry Chadwick, *Saint Augustine, Confessions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). The Latin text is James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1992), vol. 1.
4. His critique of his own pride, he says frankly here, stems only from his later perspective. “What I am now saying did not then enter my mind when I gave my attention to the scripture. It seemed [then] to me unworthy in comparison with the dignity of Cicero,” (3.5,9). Copies of scripture were hard to come by, and in antiquity rarely was the entire collection of books bound together (cf. 7.21,27 and 8.6,14; Paul's letters are in their own volume): we do not know what Augustine, age 18, read in this first encounter.
5. By the Manichees, *de utilitate credendi* 1,2; by Augustine, newly associated with the erudite, platonizing Catholicism of Ambrose's Milan, in *de beata vita* 4, one of his first writings after his conversion in 386.

6. *ut. cred.* 1,2; on their claim to superior rationality more generally, *de moribus ecclesiae* 2.2,3; *beata vita* 1,4; *c. Faustian* 20,3; *c. epistolam Fund.* 13; 15.

7. *Confessions* 3.7,12. Later, in Rome and Milan, though skeptical of much of their mythology and their theory of interpolations, Augustine was still held by the force of their criticism of OT anthropomorphism (5.10–11).

8. “When I wanted to think of my God, I knew of no way of doing so except as a physical mass. Nor did I think anything existed which is not material. . . . And for the same reason, I also believed that evil is a kind of material substance with its own foul and misshapen mass . . . a malignant mind creeping through the earth” (5.10,19–20).

9. *de praedestinatione sanctorum* (2.5).

10. See, most recently, G. G. Stroumsa and Paula Fredriksen, “The Two Souls and the Divided Will,” *Self, Soul and Body in Religious Experience*, ed. A. I. Baumgarten (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1998), 198–217, esp. 198–208.

11. See, for an excellent overview of these ideas, chapters 14–16 on Plotinus by A. H. Armstrong in *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy*, ed. idem (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 222–63.

12. Hence Augustine's lament to God in *Confessions* when describing his quest for Truth that “I was without and You were within.” The idea of Christ as the interior teacher dwelling in the mind (developed in his early post-conversion writing *de magistro*, “The Teacher”) has obvious similarities with the Plotinian idea of the interior divine Higher Self through which one can participate in the One.

13. See esp. R. A. Markus, “Augustine: Reason and Illumination,” *Cambridge History of Philosophy*, 362–73.

14. Cf. 4.14,22: *grande profundum est ipse homo*: “Man is a vast deep. The hairs of his head are more easily numbered than are his feelings and the movements of his heart.”

15. Such as mathematical principles and other kinds of abstract thought, 10,17–11,19.

16. Again, the thought is similar to that of Plotinus, *Ennead* 6.7.23–4, who speaks of the soul's rest in the One; cf. *Confessions* 1.1.1, “You have made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You.”

17. That is, the Catholic Church as *he construes it*: Pelagius, Julian of Eclanum, and other anti-Augustinians during the Pelagian controversy (411–430) were equally members of the same Catholic church (Julian was a bishop): but Augustine argued that their theology in effect disenfranchised them.

18. Cf. Augustine's own admission, in the *Confessions*, that his watching a fly struggle in a spider's web, or a dog chasing a hare across a field, touches upon the same perverted enjoyment of the pain of another as fuels the *habitués* of gladiatorial fights.

19. These images, through which Augustine retrospectively describes his depressions and spiritual aridity in his youth and early adulthood, run throughout the *Confessions*.

20. Cf. his discussion in 13.15,16 of the Bible: "Who but You, O God, has made for us a solid firmament of authority over us in your divine scripture? For 'heaven will fold up like a book' (Isa 43:4) and now 'like a skin it is stretched out' above us (Psalm 103:2)."

21. "Anything in the Hebrew text that is not found in that of the seventy translators (= LXX) is something which the Spirit of God decided not to say through the translators but through the prophets. Conversely, anything in the LXX that is not in the Hebrew text is something which that same Spirit preferred to say through the translators."

22. The burden of R. A. Markus's classic study *Saeculum: History and Society in the Thought of Saint Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

23. This is one of the closing discussions of *de ciu; Dei* 22.

24. *de ordine* 2.9,26, written the summer following his conversion in 386. In the background of this claim must lie not only Augustine's enthusiasm for the Neoplatonic philosophy by which he had finally come round to Catholicism, but also his sensitivity to the Manichaean critique of the orthodox *superstitio* that had little use for reason whatsoever.

25. *de libero arbitrio* 1.1,2, written c. 388.

26. *de utilitate credendi* 12,27.

27. From the finale of the *ad Simplicianum* 1.2,22, just before he examines God's strong-arming of Saul as an example of the exercise of sovereign divine authority.

28. On Paul's still suffering the ill effects of concupiscence even after his conversion—the point of Augustine's reading Romans 7 as Paul's autobiographical statement as a "wretched man" even after the reception of grace—c. ii *ep. Pelagianorum* 1.8,13–14.

## The Taxonomy of Truth in the Islamic Religious Doctrine and Tradition

S. Nomanul Haq



### 6.1 Introduction

It should be recognized at the outset that the threefold categorical scheme collaboratively identified for discussing truth in various religious systems—namely, the nature of truth in its epistemological, ontological, and cosmological dimensions; expressions and representations of truth; and cultivation and embodiment of truth—is vague enough to provide a fairly fruitful analytical framework when employed for the treatment of Islamic religious data. Of course, an analysis of this kind might frequently become highly problematic in that it may isolate elements that would break down upon isolation. Also, this analysis, as it stands in its neat conception, may sometimes appear to be a *post hoc* exercise, something which the tradition itself will not recognize. It would be noted as we proceed that all this happens to be true in the case of Islam; and yet what is also true is that the analysis in terms of the threefold scheme illuminates and explains a great deal, and does cast the treated data in a perspective that renders them amenable to a comparative examination.