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Review of:

Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), xii + 360 pp.

Lewis Ayres, Bede Professor of Catholic Theology at the University of Durham since 2009, has extended his previous work on Augustine's Trinitarian thought with this new study. It is largely a close reading of Augustine's *De trinitate*, with attention to the sources and 'layers' of Augustine's theological development, but it also traces the origins of his Trinitarian thought in earlier writings. As in Ayres' previous work, there is an emphasis on fourth century Latin pro-Nicene theology as the chief context for understanding Augustine's thinking. He deals briefly with the now discredited argument of Olivier Du Roy from the 1960s, which saw Augustine as initiating a disastrous trend in Western Christian thought by likening the Trinity to the unity of human consciousness – a critique also found in the work of scholars such as John Zizioulas and Colin Gunton. This older reading has not been extensively defended in the scholarly literature for several decades, but it remains the background against which Ayres structures his overall argument. In the first five chapters, he argues against the view that Augustine was naively Neoplatonic, by examining his use of both Christian and non-Christian Neoplatonic sources; and he opposes the view that Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity lacked Christian sources by assessing his relation to Latin theology, both in his opposition to the anti-Nicene Homoians, who were Arian-style subordinationists, and in his dependence on influences such as Tertullian, Novatian, Hilary and Ambrose. Ayres points out a distinctively Christian reliance on scripture lies at the heart of Augustine's theology of the Trinity.

These insights are brought to the interpretation of Augustine's magisterial work, *De trinitate*, written between about 400 and 427, and this occupies most of the book. Having located the origins of Augustine's Trinitarianism in the Western Catholic tradition, Ayres approaches the text as a work of 'faith seeking understanding', beginning with a reasoned clarification of the (mostly scriptural) language of faith in the Trinity (*De trinitate* Books 1-7) and then moving 'inwards' to the Trinitarian analogies in the human mind made in the image of God (*De trinitate* Books 8-15). His central argument is that this process is a Christological epistemology (ch. 6). That is to say, Augustine moves from the outward words of teaching on the Trinity to the inward structure of the mind as part of a journey of faith in Christ, where Christ joins the material creation to the divine indwelling, so that our knowing can move, in relation to Christ, from the outward words of faith to participating immediately in the divine presence of the Father with the Son. A typically Neoplatonic dialectical process is involved, between that which joins us to God's presence and that which distances us from it, but it is a Christological one, not only of intellectual realisation but of moral purification and formation, through love and against sin. This argument allows Ayres to give a rich treatment of the role of the image of God in the second half of *De trinitate*, not merely as a static analogy for the Trinity taken from observations of the human mind, but as a 'practice' for the reader which moves the attention from the words of the Trinity to the divine source of the reader's own engagement with God.

Ayres supports his argument with a close reading of *De trinitate* and Augustine's other Trinitarian texts, quoted and expounded at length, so that it is possible to follow Augustine's thoughts in detail. There is also a good apparatus of footnotes and bibliography, with extensive references to Augustine's wider corpus and the secondary literature, for the scholar to pursue. Ayres points out that he is not providing a full commentary on *De trinitate* – though none exists and the gap needs filling – but it is nevertheless the case that this book provides valuable clues for a detailed reading of Augustine's text. There has always been a problem over how to understand a work that has not one main line of argument but at least three in combination, which compete for the reader's attention and make it hard to interpret. At once, it is both a doctrinal treatment of the Trinity, concerning the language of relations, persons, equality, unity and so on; and a theology of the human mind made in the image of God, concerning the human capacity to know and experience God directly; and a transformative text designed to move the reader from present faith towards the face to face vision that is to be attained in heaven. How exactly these elements should be reconciled and held together has puzzled commentators throughout history and especially in the modern period. As I have noted, Ayres' Christological focus shows how the outward words of the Trinity belong with the inner life of the Trinity, in relation both to Christ's person and to the image of God in every human person, and how therefore the reader's journey of faith in relation to Christ, through the image of God in the mind, is included in the discussion, as an analogical practice of gradual transformation into the inner life of the Trinity. In bringing these connections to light, Ayres enlarges our understanding of Augustine's psychological analogies in Books 8-15 in a way that goes beyond previous studies; and he shows up the poverty of readings of *De trinitate* which speak of the image of God in the human mind only as a static and distant model of the Trinity, without adverting to the dynamics of the inner search for the divine presence.

While Ayres presents his case clearly and in detail, there were places where his interpretation could have been taken further. In the Introduction, he makes a distinction between Augustine's arguments on the 'Trinity itself' and on what is now termed 'selfhood', saying that he prefers to keep his attention on the former (p. 7). But in the light of his argument about the inner connections between the human mind and the Trinity, this distinction is hard to sustain. If Augustine is concerned with a personal participation in the divine presence, questions about the Trinitarian image in the mind inevitably are also those of the self in relation to God – that is, of a mind which is personally engaged in this active relationship, rather than only seen from a distance and in the abstract. Perhaps Ayres is forced to make the distinction merely for reasons of space, so that he can concentrate on the doctrinal questions. In addition, he seems unduly reserved about the theme of contemplation and its possibility in this life, for Augustine. He reasons that moral and intellectual failure are more central to Augustine's anthropology than success, so that the image of God is to be associated with hope more than present achievement (e.g., p. 289). While this has the advantage of picking up the anti-Pelagian element in Augustine's thought, which was indeed increasingly present in *De trinitate* as compared with earlier works such as the *Confessions* – where, for instance, he was more positive about the possibility of direct vision of God in this life – he still has a positive anthropology of knowledge of God in *De trinitate*, according a real capacity to know and feel the immediate divine presence to memory, intellect and will. Even if there is always some way to go to reach face to face vision, the anthropological structures of contemplation are in place, and could be given more attention by Ayres. Anyone interested in the subsequent role of the text as a major influence on mystical writings in the medieval period – for instance in William of St. Thierry, John Ruusbroec and John of the Cross – will want to know how Augustine treats this theme in more depth than is offered here. These, however,

are criticisms amounting only to a demand for more, provoked by the stimulating and rich argument of the book. It is a dense and difficult read, but a highly rewarding one.

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Publisher: Cambridge University Press; 1 edition (December 13, 2010).^Â Thus, Ayres argues that Augustine used a number of non-Christian sources ranging from Platonic to neo-Platonism; therefore, a 1:1 parallel between Augustine and Plotinus is unwarranted, or so Ayres argues. Ayres continues with a Latin context for Augustine, and here we are treated to some excellent expositions of Hilary and Ambrose.