

THE ASCENT OF THE IMAGE IN *DE VERA RELIGIONE*

Gerald Boersma

Abstract

In *De uera religione* Augustine articulates a theology of ascent in the context of a Plotinian metaphysic of the return of an image to participate most fully in its source. However, unlike Plotinus, Augustine insists that a successful ascent of the image is predicated on the grace of the initial descent of the *imago dei* in the Incarnation. This article argues that *De uera religione* 12.24 is a critical passage in Augustine's early theology of the ascent of the soul as *imago* to participate in the Trinity. This passage contains the nucleus of the central themes to be developed throughout *De uera religione*, namely, the ascent from the many corporeal changing things to the one supreme, incorporeal good – the Holy Trinity. *De uera religione* 12.24 also demonstrates that Augustine's enthusiasm regarding Platonism has its limits already in this early work: Platonic *κάθαρσις* proves to be insufficient to overcome the fallen human condition. At this point, Augustine's theology augments and transforms his Platonic proclivities: it is the grace of God made present through the Incarnation that restores the soul to health.

Key Words

De uera religione, *imago dei*, ascent, Plotinus, incarnation.

De uera religione is the high-water mark of Augustine's early theology prior to his ordination in 391.¹ In many ways, this book expresses his early exuberance regarding the place of Platonic philosophy, particularly its notion of ascent, within the Christian faith. Among Augustine's early works, it is *De uera religione* that most clearly demonstrates how, as a young theologian, Augustine envisioned the relationship of the Catholic faith to Platonic philosophy. His theological presentation of the soul's participation as image in Christ is built on

¹ Frederick Van Fleteren considers *De uera religione* to be "a kind of capstone to Augustine's philosophical and theological speculation during 386-391." Frederick Van Fleteren, *Background and Commentary on Augustine's "De Vera Religione," De Utilitate Credendi,* "De Fide Rerum Quae Non Videntur," in *Lectio Augustini* 10 (Pavia: 1994), 34.

the Platonic edifice of the soul's return and ascent to God. *De uera religione* speaks repeatedly about the refashioning and reshaping of the intellect and the will to reflect more accurately the image of God. Although the language of ascent and return to God is unabashedly Plotinian, this ascent is achieved not so much with a Plotinian method of κάθαρσις and θεωρία as it is received as gift. Thus, a rich theology of grace undergirds the ascent and return of the image; the ascent is predicated on the prior descent of Christ, the divine image.²

Augustine addresses *De uera religione* to his generous patron Romanianus, whose son Augustine had educated. The immediate context of the short work is an apologetic appeal of the *intellectus fidei* to Romanianus, who had followed Augustine into the Manichaean sect, to enter into the Catholic faith.³ Thus, the treatise is an attempt to save his friend from Manichaean teaching; perhaps Augustine felt a degree of guilt for initially enticing his friend into the Manichaean fold.⁴ *De uera religione* presents a two-step argument. First, Augustine argues that Manichaean dualism contains a logical fallacy in the order of being. Evil, maintains Augustine, is the ill use of free will – one might do or suffer an evil, but no subsistent reality is an evil.⁵ On the contrary, all being is good inasmuch as it derives from God and is upheld by God. Augustine naturally proceeds to the second step: the nearer the soul is to God, the more it is like God and participates in his life and goodness. In short, *De uera religione* counters Manichaean dualism with a Platonic account of participation and an invitation to ascend in Christ to the God in whom is perfect life and goodness.

I will make clear that *De uera religione* 12.24 is a critical passage in Augustine's early theology of the ascent of the soul as *imago*

² I have used the translation by Edmund Hill in *On Christian Belief*, WSA I/8 (2005).

³ A critical study of the textual reception history and manuscript tradition of *De uera religione* has been presented by Klaus-Detlef Daur, "Prolegomena zu einer Ausgabe von Augustins *De vera religione*," *Sacris erudiri* 12 (1961), 313-365. Daur intends this article to be preparatory to his critical edition of *De uera religione* in the *Corpus Christianorum*, Series Latina 32 (Turnholt: Typographi Brepols Editores Pontificii, 1962). Daur comments on the state of all the major manuscripts, the textual families, and the Latin editions up to his time.

⁴ The apologetic character of *De uera religione* has been pointed out by Joseph Pegon: "Peut-être est-ce là que l'on peut le mieux voir la méthode apologetique proprement dite de saint Augustin," in *La Foi chrétienne. De vera religione. De utilitate credendi. De fide rerum quae non videntur. De fide et operibus*; texte latin de l'éd. bénédictine, ed and trans. Joseph Pegon, Bibliothèque Augustinienne; Œuvres de saint Augustin, 8 (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1951), 465.

⁵ *uera rel.* 20.38-39 (CCSL 32, 210-211).

to participate in the Trinity. This passage has received little scholarly attention, and yet it contains the nucleus of the central themes to be developed throughout *De uera religione*, namely, the ascent from the many corporeal changing things to the one supreme, incorporeal good – the Holy Trinity.⁶ *De uera religione* is an exploration of how the faith and the good will necessary to make the ascent are obstructed by intellectual *falsitas* (33.61-34.67) and moral *cupiditas* (37.68-54.106). It turns out – and this is the main point I will argue in this article – that Augustine’s enthusiasm regarding Platonism has its limits already in this early work: Platonic *κάθαρσις* proves to be insufficient to overcome the fallen human condition. At this point, Augustine’s theology augments and transforms his Platonic proclivities. The grace of God made present through the Incarnation restores the soul to health, so that its innate desire can be fulfilled in union with God – to return from “the many (*a multis*) things that change to the one (*unum*) unchanging good.”⁷ The one good, *De uera religione* 12.24 continues, is participation in the Holy Trinity. Thus, the ascent is “to the One ... through Wisdom ... to enjoy God through the Holy Spirit, who is the gift of God” (*ad unum ... per sapientiam ... fruiturque deo per spiritum sanctum, quod est donum dei*).⁸

My argument regarding the ascent of the soul as image to the Holy Trinity will proceed by way of four steps. First, I will consider the Platonic milieu within which *De uera religione* functions, by focusing on Plotinus’s account of the image’s “return” to its source. Second, I will consider the intellectual and moral obstacles that according to *De uera religione* obstruct the ascent. Third, I will describe Augustine’s theology of grace; it is grace that comes to aid and heal the image for its ascent. Lastly, I will consider the *terminus ad quem* of the ascent by discussing how Augustine speaks of “enjoying” God.⁹ In analyzing Augustine’s theology of ascent in *De uera religione*, I build especially on the scholarship of Frederick Van Fleteren, Olivier

⁶ This passage is quoted by Frederick Van Fleteren’s study but he does not develop the themes contained in this passage, except to note the Trinitarian reference. Frederick Van Fleteren, “Augustine’s *De vera religione*: A New Approach,” *Augustinianum* 16 (1976), 482.

⁷ *uera rel.* 12.24 (CCSL 32, 202).

⁸ *uera rel.* 12.24 (CCSL 32, 202).

⁹ My argument in this article is in line with Frederick Van Fleteren and disagrees with Josef Lössl’s understanding of *De uera religione*: “[T]he term ‘ascent’, [Van Fleteren] suggested as a guiding concept, is not very prominent in the text and expresses mainly its anagogic dimension leaving the ontological and epistemological parts of its first half uninterpreted.” Josef Lössl, “‘The One’: A guiding concept in Augustine’s *De vera religione*,” *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 40 (1994), 102.

du Roy, and Josef Lössl. What I am proposing as new to this discussion, however, is the significance of a Plotinian account of image to Augustine's theology of ascent. Indeed, proceeding from *De uera religione* 12.24, I will argue that a theology of image is foundational to understanding the theme of ascent in *De uera religione*.¹⁰

The Plotinian Metaphysic of Image

Prior to launching into an analysis of the ascent of the *imago* in *De uera religione*, I will recapitulate the central movements of the ascent and the return of the image in the Plotinian metaphysic – the philosophical *Weltanschauung* within which Augustine penned *De uera religione*.¹¹ Plotinus asks, “What is it, then, which has made the souls forget their father, God, and be ignorant of themselves and him, even though they are parts which come from his higher world and altogether belong to it?”¹² Evil, he answers, has its origins in self-will and in “wishing to belong to themselves.”¹³ Moving farther and

¹⁰ Image theology is once again an important locus of discussion in Augustine studies. See Lydia Schumacher's recent publication linking divine illumination with the restoration of the effaced *imago dei*. Lydia Schumacher, *Divine Illumination: The History and Future of Augustine's Theory of Knowledge* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

¹¹ Olivier du Roy devotes a chapter of his *magnum opus*, *L'Intelligence de la foi en la Trinité selon saint Augustin* (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1966) to *De uera religione*. He is particularly interested in redaction questions regarding the *Enneads*. In addition to the obviously anti-Manichaean context, du Roy contends that there is also an anti-Porphyrrian narrative that runs through *De uera religione*. Du Roy, *L'Intelligence*, pp. 309-88. I am inclined to agree with the assessment of Josef Lössl: “We ... cannot try to tell exactly which texts are Porphyrian. We cannot even properly distinguish anti-Manichaean and anti-Porphyrian sections; for both have similar functions.” Lössl, “‘The One’”, 102. For different divisions of *De uera religione*, see H. Dörrie, “Neuplatonischen und Christlichen in Augustins ‘De vera religione,’” *Zeitschrift für neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 2 (1924): 64-102; W. Theiler, “Porphyrios und Augustin,” *Schriften der Königsberger Gelehrten Gesellschaft, Geisteswissenschaft Kl. 10* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1933); P. Rotta, *Agostino, La vera religione*, ed. P. Rotta (Torino: Paravia, 1938); W. Thimme, *Augustinus: Theologische Frühschriften*, ed. W. Thimme (Zürich: Artemis, 1962); W. Desch, “Aufbau und Gliederung von Augustins Schrift ‘De vera religione,’” *Vigiliae christianae* 34 (1980), 263-77. The many different attempts at subdividing *De vera religione* are summarized in an excellent manner by Josef Lössl, who then gives his own understanding of the structure of the text based on the theme of “the One,” which he demonstrates is operative throughout *De uera religione*. Cf. Josef Lössl, “‘The One’”, 79-103.

¹² Plotinus, *Ennead*, V.1.1.

¹³ Plotinus, *Ennead*, V.1.1.

farther away from its origin with the Divine, the soul forgets its own dignity. The first step, then, in the “return” is to become aware of the value of the soul, maintains Plotinus – to understand how near it is to God.

By growing in the knowledge of the Divine and by participating in and possessing the “memory” of one’s origin, one matures in the likeness of Intellect.¹⁴ Plotinus describes the movement of return (ἐπιστροφή) through this memory as follows:

So we must ascend again to the good, which every soul desires. Anyone who has seen it knows what I mean when I say that it is beautiful. It is desired as good, and the desire for it is directed to good, and the attainment of it is for those who go up to the higher world and are converted and strip off what we put on in our descent; ... until, passing in the ascent all that is alien to the God, one sees with one’s self alone That alone, simple, single and pure, from which all depends and to which all look and are and live and think: for it is cause of life and mind and being.¹⁵

Three items in Plotinus’s injunction to ascend come to the fore also in *De uera religione*. First, there is an innate desire for the ascent. The soul naturally longs to return to its primordial goodness and beauty. Although the *Enneads* warn of the many distractions which, hindering the soul’s ascent, cause it to obsess about terrestrial realities lower than itself, there remains the possibility to divest oneself of “sense perception and desires and passions and all the rest of such fooleries, [which] incline so very much towards the mortal.”¹⁶ A thoroughgoing confidence that the human soul is able to return to God thus underwrites Plotinus’s invitation to ascend.

A second observation is related: the ascent is a *return*. The invitation to ascend is warranted since the soul naturally desires the One, due to the fact that the soul has its origins in that higher place and has a “memory” of it. Plotinus encourages the soul to divest itself of all the material baggage and diversions that hinder it and cloud its vision of contemplation. He uses the analogy of those who go up to celebrate rites of purification and strip themselves naked to receive unencumbered the mysteries of purification. In the same way the soul that desires the “simple, single and pure” must become like the object of its desire; stripped of all material distractions in order to be purified for θεωρία. Only after this purification can one begin the ascent to

¹⁴ Plotinus, *Ennead*, V.3.8.

¹⁵ Plotinus, *Ennead*, I.6.7.

¹⁶ Plotinus, *Ennead*, V.3.9.

the realm of light: "What remains of soul is this which we said was an image of Intellect preserving something of its light, like the light of the sun which, beyond its spherical mass, shines around it and from it."¹⁷ The return, then, is not to something external; rather, after purification the human soul returns to share more perfectly in that which has always existed as its centre and origin. Hence, the return or ascent of the soul is to become more clearly what it already is by turning within.

Lastly, the natural desire to "return" to the "memory" of the soul is desire for the beautiful, which is desired as a good. Thus, elation and ἔρως accompany the ascent: "If anyone sees it, what passion will he feel, what longing in his desire to be united with it, what a shock of delight!"¹⁸ Plotinus insists that despite his sensual language, he is describing a spiritual reality; he writes as a mystic: "[H]e who has seen it glories in its beauty and is full of wonder and delight, enduring a shock which causes no hurt, loving with true passion and piercing longing."¹⁹ Things of spiritual, immaterial beauty are perceived not by sense, "but the soul sees them and speaks of them without instruments."²⁰ This contemplation of immaterial beauty remains foreign to one who has not experienced it, just as sight is foreign to one born blind.²¹ Everyone is born with the ability to turn and gaze at immaterial beauty, but few use it.²²

How does one arrive at this beauty? It is already present in everyone. "Go back into yourself and look."²³ The soul must be trained and shaped, so that it may become beautiful, and then one can turn to the beautiful within. Hence Plotinus's celebrated injunction: "[N]ever stop 'working your statue' till the divine glory of virtue shines out on you."²⁴ When one's soul is at last made beautiful and fit for introspection and contemplation, one can shut one's eyes and "wake to another way of seeing."²⁵ By returning into oneself with the eye of the soul, one can see great beauty: "No eye ever saw the sun

¹⁷ Plotinus, *Ennead*, V.3.9.

¹⁸ Plotinus, *Ennead*, I.6.7.

¹⁹ Plotinus, *Ennead*, I.6.7.

²⁰ Plotinus, *Ennead*, I.6.4.

²¹ Plotinus, *Ennead*, I.6.4.

²² Plotinus, *Ennead*, I.6.8.

²³ Plotinus, *Ennead*, I.6.9.

²⁴ Plotinus, *Ennead*, I.6.9: "[J]ust as someone making a statute which has to be beautiful cuts away here and polishes there and makes one part smooth and clears another till he has given his statue a beautiful face, so you too must cut away excess and straighten the crooked and clear the dark and make it bright."

²⁵ Plotinus, *Ennead*, I.6.8.

without becoming sun-like, nor can a soul see beauty without becoming beautiful. You must become first all godlike and beautiful if you intend to see God and beauty.”²⁶ By contemplation, the soul makes its ascent, returns to the One, and becomes that which he contemplates.

De uera religione adopts and reworks many of Plotinus’s themes regarding the soul’s ascent. Like Plotinus, Augustine locates evil not in a subsistent reality, as did his erstwhile co-religionists the Manicheans, but in the perversity of the will.²⁷ In choosing evil, a good is chosen outside of its proper order; temporal good is preferred to eternal good. But the soul by nature loves the highest good more than the lower goods to which it has fallen. Augustine writes, “The fault in the soul, therefore, is not its nature but against its nature.”²⁸ And so the ascent “is not a matter of indulging idle curiosity ... but of setting up a ladder to things that are immortal.”²⁹ The soul desires eternal goodness and beauty as something proper to it, and so the ascent is, like that of the *Enneads*, properly speaking, a “return.”

The soul fell from its intimacy and union with God, explains Augustine, not in an eternal battle between a good substance and an evil substance.³⁰ Rather, the soul fell on account of its own evil will. And so, life, which is from God and in God, when it turns from him, “tilts towards nothingness.”³¹ Life becomes “fleshly” and “earthly”; it loves what is less than life and falls away from the source of life. In all this there is a lack, a privation. The expulsion from paradise was not a movement from good to evil (for, as Augustine specifies repeatedly, there is no such thing as a subsistent evil) but a fall “from eternal good to time-bound good, from spiritual good to flesh-bound

²⁶ Plotinus, *Ennead*, I.6.9.

²⁷ Van Fleteren maintains that the neo-Platonic character of the “Milanese Catholicism,” to which Augustine was beholden during the composition of *De uera religione*, was particularly useful for his rebuttal of Manichaean theology. Van Fleteren, *Background*, p. 45.

²⁸ *uera rel.* 23.44 (CCSL 32, 215).

²⁹ *uera rel.* 29.52 (CCSL 32, 221).

³⁰ The fall of the soul in Augustine’s early theology is a debated topic. Cf. Robert O’Connell, *Saint Augustine’s Early Theory of Man, A.D. 386-391* (Cambridge, M.A.: Harvard, 1986), 144-83; idem, “Augustine’s rejection of the Fall of the Soul,” *Augustinian Studies* 4 (1973), 1-32; and idem, “Pre-existence in the Early Augustine,” *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 26 (1980), 176-88; Gerald O’Daly, “Did Augustine Ever Believe in the The Soul’s Pre-Existence?” *Augustinian Studies* 5 (1974), 227-35; Richard Penaskovic, “The Fall of the Soul in Saint Augustine: A *Quaestio Disputata*,” *Augustinian Studies* 17 (1986), 135-45. A response to O’Connell’s thesis is found in Ronnie Rombs, *St. Augustine and the Fall of the Soul: Beyond O’Connell and his Critics* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America, 2006).

³¹ *uera rel.* 11.21 (CCSL 32, 200).

good, from intelligible good to sensuous good, from the highest good to the lowest good.”³² The relation between goodness and being is what makes Augustine so intent on affirming that the image remains in the human person after the fall. As a rational creature, he is ordered to God – there is a “return” inscribed on his soul.

So far, I have argued that Augustine’s account of the ascent of the *imago* in *De uera religione* is framed within a Plotinian understanding of “return.” It is important to note, however, that, although he does not abandon this Plotinian metaphysic, Augustine gives a distinctly Christian, and indeed a Nicene shape to the injunction to ascend. At this point, therefore, I will dissect *De uera religione* 12.24 and consider each of the constitutive parts of this paragraph in light of the treatise as a whole. The blueprint to *De uera religione*, I want to suggest, is found in 12.24:

If the soul, however, while engaged in the stadium of human life, beats those greedy desires it has been cherishing in itself by mortal enjoyments and believes with mind and good will that it has been assisted in beating them by the grace of God, then without a doubt it will be restored to health and will turn back (*reuertetur*) from the many things that change to the one unchanging good, being reshaped (*reformata*) by the Wisdom that was never shaped but gives its shape to all things, and will come to enjoy God through the Holy Spirit, which is the gift of God.³³

The soul for Augustine is the primary locus of the *imago dei*. Underlying the *reuertetur reformata* of the image’s ascent and return is a Plotinian account of *κάθαρσις* of both mind and will. The exercise of “mind and good will” is something we might expect to find in Plotinus, as for example in his injunction already quoted, “[N]ever stop ‘working your statue’ till the glory of virtue shines.”

A considerable portion of *De uera religione* is devoted, however, to an explanation of the condition of human brokenness, particularly the intellectual *falsitas* (*uera rel.* 33.61–34.67) and moral *cupiditas* (*uera rel.* 37.68–54.106), which, quite simply, leave the human soul incapable of making the ascent. Augustine’s theology lacks confidence

³² *uera rel.* 20.38 (CCSL 32, 210).

³³ *uera rel.* 12.24 (CCSL 32, 202): *Si autem, dum in hoc stadio uitae humanae anima degit, uincat eas, quas aduersum se nutriuit, cupiditates fruendo mortalibus et ad eas uincendas gratia dei se adiuuari credat mente illi seruiens et bona uoluntate, sine dubitatione reparabitur et a multis mutabilibus ad unum incommutabile reuertetur reformata per sapientiam non formatam, sed per quam formantur uniuersa, frueturque deo per spiritum sanctum, quod est donum dei.*

in human nature's ability to reform itself, a confidence that is integral to Plotinian philosophy. Thus, the necessity of grace for human reformation introduces a theological *nouum* to what would otherwise be a standard neo-Platonic philosophy of ascent. The grace of God allows for the *reuertetur reformata* of the image, so that it can turn from "the many (*a multis*) things that change to the one (*unum*) unchanging good."

Intellectual and Moral Obstacles to the Ascent of the Image

At this point, it is necessary to analyze Augustine's account of the ascent of the image, outlined in *De uera religione* 12.24, in light of the entire treatise, by looking at three elements: first, the intellectual and moral distractions that obstruct "a believing mind and good will"; second, the place of grace in the restoration of the image; and, finally, the Trinitarian terminus of the ascent.

Thirteen times variations of the word *imago* occur in *De uera religione*. Augustine uses the word with both a positive and a negative connotation.³⁴ The positive sense adheres closely to the participatory metaphysic operative in his broadly Platonic worldview. Every image is understood to be derived from and revelatory of the One. Among these images, however, human beings are unique, maintains Augustine, because they are made according to the image of the eternal Son of God; they are made "through this form in such a way as also to be *to* it."³⁵ Because of their rational and intellectual nature,

³⁴ Significant literature regarding the theology of "image" in Augustine's thought includes Gerhart B. Ladner, "St. Augustine's Conception of the Reformation of Man to the Image of God," *Augustinus Magister. Actes du Congrès international augustinien* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1954), vol. II, 867-78; John Heijke, *St. Augustine's comments on "Imago Dei" (an anthology from all his works exclusive of the De Trinitate)* (Worcester, Mass: Holy Cross College Press, 1960), 1-95; Robert Markus, "'Imago' and 'similitudo' in Augustine," *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 10 (1964), 125-43; Thomas A. Fay, "'Imago Dei.' Augustine's Metaphysics of Man," *Antonianum* 49 (1974), 173-97; Gerald Bonner, "Augustine's Doctrine of Man: Image of God and Sinner," *Augustinianum* 24 (1984), 495-514. Adalbert-Gauthier Hamman, *L'homme, image de Dieu. Essai d'une anthropologie chrétienne dans l'Église des cinq premiers siècles* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1987), 238-77; Isabelle Bochet, "Le Statut de l'image dans la pensée augustinienne," *Archives de Philosophie* 72 (2009), 249-69.

³⁵ Of course, Augustine's Latin text of Genesis 1:26 states that people are created to the image and likeness of God. *vera rel.* 44.82 (CCSL 32, 241): *ad ipsam etiam sint*.

human beings are “rightly said to have been made to the image and likeness of God.”³⁶

De uera religione is clear that the eternal Son of God is different from all other images, including those of a rational and intellectual nature. Here Augustine breaks with the Plotinian metaphysic in which an image is always ontologically inferior to its source because it derives and emanates from that source. In describing the second Person of the Trinity, Augustine uses the term *imago* in a distinctly Nicene fashion. He writes, “[T]he Father of Truth is supremely the One, the Father of his own Wisdom, which is called his likeness, in no respect at all unlike him, and his image because it is from him.”³⁷ Augustine uses “image” language here to bespeak both the Son’s derivation from the Father and his ontological equality with the Father. All other images, explains Augustine, are “through him,” and only the Son is said to be “from him.”³⁸

A second, negative, sense of “image” is also operative in *De uera religione*. This sense has the connotation of a “false image” or an idol. *Imago*, in this sense, is often found near its synonym, *simulacrum*.³⁹ It connotes an excessive attachment to corporeal reality. Augustine describes a “cult of images” in which people “worship their own fancies” and their own mind’s “imaginings.”⁴⁰ In this context, “image” implies a certain element of deceit; this sense is

³⁶ *uera rel.* 44.82 (CCSL 32, 241-242): *Horum alia sic sunt per ipsam, ut ad ipsam etiam sint, ut omnis rationalis et intellectualis creatura, in qua homo rectissime dicitur factus ad imaginem et similitudinem dei.* The Platonically informed participatory metaphysic that sustains this understanding of image as revelatory and derivative of its source – sharing something of its being and life – is likewise present in *uera rel.* 45.85 (CCSL 32, 243): *Habet enim hoc animi nostri natura post deum, a quo ad eius imaginem factus est; uera rel.* 46.88 (CCSL 32, 244): *si natura nostra in praeceptis et in imagine dei manens; uera rel.* 47.90 (CCSL 32, 246): *id est creaturam dei ad eius imaginem factam.* This participatory account of image is also operative in the distinction between the “image of the earthly man (*terreni hominis imaginem*)” and the “image of the new people (*imago noui populi*).” *uera rel.* 27.50 (CCSL 32, 219). In describing the ascent of the soul to God in seven stages, Augustine explains that the sixth stage occurs when the soul has been “perfected in the form and shape which was made to the image and likeness of God (*quae facta est ad imaginem et similitudinem dei*).” *uera rel.* 26.49 (CCSL 32, 219).

³⁷ *uera rel.* 43.81 (CCSL 32, 241): *quia summe unus est pater ueritatis, pater suae sapientiae, quae nulla ex parte dissimilis similitudo eius dicta est et imago, quia de ipso est.*

³⁸ *uera rel.* 43.81 (CCSL 32, 241): *Itaque etiam filius recte dicitur ex ipso, cetera per ipsum.*

³⁹ *uera rel.* 37.68 (CCSL 32, 232).

⁴⁰ *uera rel.* 38.69 (CCSL 32, 232): *Est enim alius deterior et inferior cultus simulacrorum, quo phantasmata sua colunt, et quidquid animo errante cum superbia uel*

frequently employed when describing material reality deceiving the mind. Augustine speaks reverently of Plato, who taught that the greatest obstacle to contemplation was a life betrayed by such “images.” The chief hindrance to grasping truth, for Plato, was “a life given over to greed and lust and the deceitful images of material things, which are stamped on our minds from this material world through the body.”⁴¹

The problem with this second, negative sense of image is that it absolutizes material, temporal existence. Here, “image” no longer functions in the positive sense, as something revelatory and participatory of its source, which is anagogically operative; rather, this image clouds the mind’s ability to contemplate and to see through the material and temporal the immaterial and eternal as an image should. In this case, the created object becomes an image in the negative sense – a false image, an idol. Vision is limited to seeing with the “flesh” the “images of visible things ... circumscribed within definite limits.”⁴²

To move from a negative account of image to a positive one is to make the ascent that *De uera religione* enjoins. However, this is not easy: “O obstinate souls, give me someone who can see, without imagining any flesh-bound things seen.”⁴³ The intellectual and moral *divertissements* that obstruct the ascent are the many material changing goods that claim totality for themselves. *De uera religione* describes them as not translucent to the eternal goodness and beauty that they participate in, but as, instead, immanent to themselves; as images they function by way of dissemblance rather than resemblance. Correct “judgment” regarding the nature of material and temporal existence is requisite to overcoming the intellectual *falsitas* and moral *cupiditas* that cloud our vision.⁴⁴ Correct judgment, explains Augustine, recognizes the participatory and image-like nature of created existence.

tumore cogitando imaginati fuerint. Similarly, uera rel. 55.108 (CCSL 32, 256): cum falsa imaginatur, colere non debemus.

⁴¹ *uera rel. 3.3 (CCSL 32, 188-189): ad quam percipiendam nihil magis impedire quam uitam libidinibus deditam et falsas imagines rerum sensibilium, quae nobis ab hoc sensibili mundo per corpus impressae uarias opiniones errores que generarent.*

⁴² *uera rel. 20.40 (CCSL 32, 212): usque ad uisibilia rerum imagines peruenit et lucis huius, quam certis terminis circumscriptam uidet.*

⁴³ *uera rel. 34.64 (CCSL 32, 228): O animae peruicaces, date mihi, qui uideat sine ulla imaginatione uisorum carnalium.*

⁴⁴ Joseph Pegon again notes the Platonic subtext to the intellectual and moral *katharsis* necessary to make the ascent: “C’est le rôle que le néoplatonisme assigne à la philosophie et veut réaliser dans la contemplation de la vérité, rendue possible par un certain ascétisme intellectuel et moral.” Joseph Pegon, *Foi Chrétienne*, 472.

Falsitas pertains to the misappraisal of images, which are given totality, eternity, and absoluteness in themselves, failing to admit their character as image. The deception of *falsitas* lies in the fact that their participatory ontology is not recognized. The many material images in the world, restates Augustine, are good insofar as they are. Indeed, inasmuch as they are a passive participation in God they are a shining refulgence of the presence of God, meant to lead the human mind back to the Divine. Thus, the *falsitas* that *De uera religione* contends obstructs the ascent is not the material reality that lies and deceives, but the human mind that wrongly judges the resemblance as the reality and the partial goodness as the ultimate Good: "For it is trying to understand the things of the flesh and see things of the spirit, which cannot be done."⁴⁵

Rightly judging the nature of material beauty and goodness as a participation in their eternal forms is a theme that runs throughout Augustine's early works. In *De uera religione*, he recycles many of the examples used in the *Soliloquies* and in his correspondence with Nebridius, to explain how an image participates in and reflects its form. In *Epistula* 7 to Nebridius Augustine explains that the image of the city of Carthage in the mind is not the same as the city in reality, and in the *Soliloquies* he uses the example of an oar that looks bent in the water but in reality is not so. Both of these examples are present in *De uera religione*: the city of Rome, existing in the mind, is a "false image" because it is not the city located on the Italian Peninsula.⁴⁶ Likewise, one wrongly judges an oar to be bent when it looks so in the water.⁴⁷ These examples attest to a dominant motif throughout Augustine's writings, namely, the place of judgment: the requirement of the mind to judge the truth of what the eyes see.⁴⁸ Material reality is to be judged by something higher – namely the mind – and this judgment must be in accordance with the eternal form that is still higher and more eternal than the mind and is that in which the mind participates. Thus, right judgment of the multiplicity of material being

⁴⁵ *uera rel.* 33.62 (CCSL 32, 228).

⁴⁶ *uera rel.* 34.64 (CCSL 32, 229).

⁴⁷ *uera rel.* 33.62 (CCSL 32, 228).

⁴⁸ Cf. Jean-Marie Le Blond, *Les Conversions de saint Augustin* (Paris: Aubier, 1950), 121 and 209. Bernard Lonergan's perspicacious work on this aspect of Augustine's thought is germane. In his great work *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), Lonergan considers human knowing as it moves from experience to understanding, and finally to judgment. By concluding the triad with judgment, Lonergan asserts the power and certainty that human understanding can have about reality.

according to the standard of unity that the mind knows through participation is propaedeutic to forming the “mind and good will” enjoined by *De uera religione* 12.24 and to overcoming intellectual *falsitas*.

Falsitas is the intellectual malaise that, for Augustine, prevents the human person from making the ascent through the material to the immaterial and from the temporal to the eternal. *Falsitas* is wrongly judging the lower as higher.⁴⁹ Human beings, maintains Augustine, ought in this life to be able to participate already, to a limited degree, in the unified vision of God. The task of true philosophy then, is to judge all material images in light of this unity. Augustine writes, “That light is true by which you come to realize that these things are not true. It is by this light that you see that One, by which you judge that whatever else you see is one and yet that whatever you see to be mutable is not what that One is.”⁵⁰ Contemplation is the means through which the human mind can participate in the vision of God and rightly judge material being.⁵¹ As Augustine puts it, “We are certainly seeking the One, than which there is nothing more simple. So then, let us seek simplicity of heart. *Be still*, he says, *and acknowledge that I am the Lord* (Ps 46:10) – not with the stillness of sloth but with the stillness of reflection, so that you may be free of places and times. For their swollen and fleeting fancies do not allow us to see the unity that is constant.”⁵² Contemplation, maintains Augustine, is the recognition of the soul that it is constituted in relation to God, that by nature it desires his unity, and that because of the soul’s likeness to him, it inclines towards him. Contemplation is the ability to judge all

⁴⁹ *uera rel.* 34.63 (CCSL 32, 228): “Let us then not seek the highest things among the lowest, and let us not look askance at the lowest either. Let us make a proper judgment of them, in order not to be judged with them; that is, let us attribute to them only as much as their outermost look deserves, or, while we are seeking the first things among the last, we may find ourselves numbered among the last.”

⁵⁰ *uera rel.* 34.64 (CCSL 32, 229). Gerard O’Daly notes that in *De uera religione* the source of *falsitas* “is said to reside neither in the objects themselves nor in the senses ... but in the mind’s mistakes.” Gerard O’Daly, “Error, *falsitas*,” *AugLex* (Basel/Stuttgart: Schwabe, 1986).

⁵¹ At the time of writing *De uera religione*, Augustine thought that with the help of God’s grace a vision of God can be attained in this life. In the *Retractationes* 1.2 he criticizes himself for this position articulated in *De beata uita* 4.25.

⁵² Augustine continues, “Places offer us things to love, times snatch away things we do love and leave behind in the soul a crowd of jostling fancies to stir up its greed (*cupiditas*) for one thing after another. In this way the spirit is made restless and wretched, as it longs to lay hold of the things it is held by.” *uera rel.* 35.65 (CCSL 32, 230).

material reality as lower than the soul that judges and to judge the soul as lower than the standard by which it judges.

Cupiditas is the moral corollary to intellectual *falsitas*. While distinguished in *De uera religione*, *cupiditas* and *falsitas* function nearly synonymously for Augustine; both are an absolutizing of temporal, material existence, failing to recognize the participatory status of created, contingent matter – the erecting of an idol. Thus, in addition to the *falsitates* that cloud the intellect so that it cannot correctly distinguish the One Good from lesser material goods, there are also the moral *cupiditates* that obstruct the will from carrying out the desire of the intellect. Forms of the word *cupiditas* occur eleven times in *De uera religione*; each time in the context of describing temporal, material, or earthly lust and greed.⁵³

The triad of pleasure, pride, and curiosity, found frequently in Augustine's corpus, are the major obstacle also in *De uera religione*, hindering the soul in its ascent.⁵⁴ Pleasure, pride, and curiosity take what is relatively good and beautiful and endow it with the significance reserved for the ultimate good and beauty; as such, they are a form of idolatry – a false likeness or image claiming to be that which it is not. In each of the *cupiditates* Augustine sees a vice trying to imitate and image a virtue.⁵⁵ Thus, pleasure abuses the virtue of desiring. The soul wrongly judges that which is lower than itself to be higher than itself. It desires in temporal and carnal bodies the eternal

⁵³ To take but one example: "Such is the life of human beings living from the body and wrapped up in greed and longings focused on time-bound things (*cupiditatibus rerum temporalium colligate*)." *uera rel.* 26.48 (CCSL 32, 218). Four times forms of the word *cupiditas* are found in *uera rel.* 41.78 (CCSL 32, 238-239) in the context of subjugating temporal desires in service of Christ.

⁵⁴ *vera rel.* 38.69 (CCSL 32, 232): *Seruiunt enim cupiditati triplici uel uoluptatis uel excellentiae uel spectaculi*. This "three-fold greedy longing," maintains Augustine, is the three vices listed in the first epistle of John: "*uitia ... uel libidine uel superbia uel curiositate*" *uera rel.* 38.70 (CCSL 32, 233). Christ conquers this "triple temptation." When tempted by the Devil to change stones into bread, Christ taught "that the lust for pleasure (*cupiditatem uoluptatis*) had to be tamed," Christ trampled on pride (*ita calcata superbia est*), by not bowing to the Devil in exchange for the kingdoms of the world. Lastly, Christ overcame curiosity (*curiositatis*) by not testing God on the temple peak. *uera rel.* 38.71 (CCSL 32, 233). Willy Theiler sees in this triad of vice both the influence of Porphyry and the more patent presence of 1 John 2:15-16. *Porphyrios und Augustin* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1933), 37-40.

⁵⁵ Van Fleteren points out that Augustine follows a schema used in Plato's *Republic* to link each virtue with a corollary vice (*Republic* IV.439d-e). Frederick Van Fleteren, "Augustine's '*De uera religione*': A New Approach," *Augustinianum* 16 (1976), 491-92. Vice as an imitation of virtue is also a theme in *Confessiones* II, in which vices are seen as perverse imitations of God.

beauty and happiness that cannot be found in the temporal order.⁵⁶ Pride wrongly applies the virtue of courage; it wishes to conquer all things and make them subject to itself. Augustine describes pride as a “kind of appetite for unity and omnipotence.”⁵⁷ However, pride tends towards things of the temporal order, and so the good of freedom and control, which it desires, passes away like a shadow, leaving true freedom unattained. Lastly, curiosity has the corollary virtue of rationality. Rather than using the intellect to see and understand God in and through the material and thereby to ascend to him, curiosity does not move beyond temporal and material knowledge. In summary, *falsitates* are understood by Augustine as erroneous attributions or wrong judgments of eternal good to temporal objects, and thus they constitute epistemological errors, while *cupiditates* are the moral evils involved in these erroneous attributions. In other words, they are not two different evils, but two angles from which to look at the same problem.

Significantly, *cupiditas* also makes an appearance in the passage under consideration (*De uera religione* 12.24). In this paragraph the soul is called to beat “those greedy desires (*cupiditates*) it has been cherishing in itself by mortal enjoyments (*fruendo mortalibus*).” The soul that is “restored to health,” which with “mind and good will” is reformed by grace to overcome *falsitas* and *cupiditas*, “will come to enjoy God (*fruetur deo*).” *Cupiditates* are overcome, explains *De vera religione* 12.24, by rightly judging their material and temporal nature. “In this way,” explains Augustine, “you become spiritual, judging all things, being judged by none.”⁵⁸ The fascinating use of the verb *frui* in *De vera religione* 12.24 is hardly accidental. Indeed, “enjoying” God is at the heart of Augustine’s theology and is important already in this early work. In this section, Augustine uses the verb *frui* twice, and in contrasting ways: it is wrong to “enjoy” mortal goods precisely because they are *mortal* and ought instead to be “used,” so that one may arrive at what is really to be enjoyed: *frui deo*. The important Augustinian distinction between *frui* and *uti* is given shape in *De vera religione*.

Judgment allows one to distinguish rightly what ought to be used and what ought to be enjoyed. For example, Augustine writes that by not “enjoying (*fruebatur*)” God, but wishing instead to “enjoy bodies (*frui corporibus*)” the soul “tilts towards nothingness.”⁵⁹

⁵⁶ *uera rel.* 45.84 (CCSL 32, 243).

⁵⁷ *uera rel.* 45.84 (CCSL 32, 243).

⁵⁸ *uera rel.* 12.24 (CCSL 32, 202): *Ita fit homo spiritualis omnia iudicans, ut ipse a nemine iudicetur.*

⁵⁹ *uera rel.* 11.21 (CCSL 32, 200).

Wrongly judging the material and temporal nature of created goods leads to evil, sin, and pain: “And what is the pain of the spirit but the lack of those changeable things it used to enjoy or had hoped it would be able to enjoy?”⁶⁰ It is on this account that the Devil fell. Rather than enjoy God’s greatness (*fruuntur maiestate ipsius*), the Devil wanted “to enjoy what was less” – his own pride – and thereby “enjoy his own power more than God’s.”⁶¹ It is not that temporal and material goods are evil; rather, their image-like nature needs to be rightly judged. The good of the body remains a good, explains Augustine, but it is lower than spiritual goods, and so “it is shameful to wallow in the love of this last and lowest of good things when you have been granted the privilege of cleaving to and enjoying the first and highest.”⁶²

Judging rightly between *frui* and *uti*, then, is essential to the ascent of the image.⁶³ In *De uera religione* 47.91, Augustine considers what we love in another human being.⁶⁴ he makes the initially striking claim that we ought to “use” another human being. Here he follows the eudaemonian ethics of Aristotle and the Stoics, maintaining that there is “correct use” that befits the nature of any thing or person.⁶⁵ When someone is loved *in deo* he is rightly “used.”⁶⁶ The person who

⁶⁰ *uera rel.* 12.23 (CCSL 32, 202): *Quid autem dolor qui dicitur animi, nisi carere mutabilibus rebus, quibus fruebatur aut frui se posse sperauerat?*

⁶¹ *uera rel.* 13.26 (CCSL 32, 203): *quia eo quod minus erat frui uoluit, cum magis uoluit sua potentia frui quam dei.*

⁶² *uera rel.* 45.83 (CCSL 32, 242): *cui primis inhaerere fruique concessum est.*

⁶³ Henry Chadwick notes, “In ‘correct use’ there is an implication of reflective detachment, whereas by contrast what is enjoyed is all-absorbing. In Augustine the content of *frui* is love.” Henry Chadwick, “Frui-uti,” *AugLex* (Basel/Stuttgart: Schwabe, 1986). Relevant literature on this subject includes Ragnar Holte, *Béatitude et Sagesse: Saint Augustin et le problème de la fin de l’homme dans la philosophie ancienne* (Paris: Études Augustiniennes, 1962), 200-78; William Riordan O’Connor, “The Uti/Frui Distinction in Augustine’s Ethics,” *Augustinian Studies* 14 (1983), 45-62; Oliver O’Donovan, *The Problem of Self-Love in Augustine* (New Haven: Yale, 1980); idem, “*Usus* and *Fruitio* in Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* I,” *Journal of Theological Studies*, 33 (1982), 361-97; John Rist, *Augustine. Ancient Thought Baptized* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 159-68.

⁶⁴ The discussion here follows a trajectory similar to the more developed and well-known presentation in *De doctrina Christiana* 1.3-40.

⁶⁵ Another important touchstone for the discussion is *De diuersis quaestionibus octaginta tribus* 30. There Augustine more explicitly aligns himself with Cicero’s distinction between *honestum*, that which is desired for itself (*propter se petitur*), and *utile*, that which is desired for secondary reasons. Augustine adopts Cicero’s terminology and asserts that *honestum* is the eternal good to be enjoyed and *utile* all temporal and material goods to be used to arrive at the eternal good.

⁶⁶ The phrase *frui in deo* comes from Paul’s letter to Philemon verse 20: “*Ego te fruar in Domino.*”

loves the image of God in the other, writes Augustine, “makes use of friends for practicing gratitude, makes use of enemies for practicing patience, makes use of whomever he can for showing kindness, makes use of everyone for showing good will.”⁶⁷ Temporal use, for Augustine, finds its right moral ordering in relation to eternal enjoyment of God.

De uera religione thus presents an account of love of God and neighbor that is non-competitive. In loving one’s neighbor as oneself, love is elevated from the temporal and material to the eternal and so can partake in the “ascent” that *De uera religione* enjoins. Another human being ought not to be loved as a mule or a bath or a peacock, that is, as “some temporal enjoyment or advantage.”⁶⁸ Indeed, Augustine continues, the other should not even be loved on account of personal relation – loved as a brother, sister, or spouse – for even this love is temporal and material; it is to love not what belongs to God but to you, maintains Augustine; such love is “personal and private to you and not what is common to all.”⁶⁹ Rather strikingly, Augustine asserts, “We hate time-related kinsfolk and connections, then, if we are on fire with charity, the love of eternity.”⁷⁰ To love one’s neighbor as oneself is to love what is eternal in him: not loving his possessions or his body but the *imago dei* in him.⁷¹

In short, *De uera religione* suggests many of the issues surrounding the *uti-frui* distinction that Augustine will address shortly afterward, and in more detail, in the first book of *De doctrina christiana*. William O’Connor rightly concludes that Augustine values the human person in light of the *imago dei* and that this is the theology that undergirds the *uti-frui* distinction: “Augustine has consistently maintained that purely temporal relationships, and the temporal aspects of the human being, are not to be enjoyed.”⁷² In not *enjoying* “time-bound things,” the correct *use* of temporal and material reality is discovered – it can function as “a ladder to things that are immortal”⁷³ and so aid one in his ascent to “return” to God.

⁶⁷ *uera rel.* 47.91 (CCSL 32, 246-247).

⁶⁸ *uera rel.* 46.87 (CCSL 32, 244).

⁶⁹ *uera rel.* 46.88 (CCSL 32, 245).

⁷⁰ *uera rel.* 46.89 (CCSL 32, 245).

⁷¹ *uera rel.* 47.90 (CCSL 32, 246).

⁷² William Riordan O’Connor, “The Uti/Frui Distinction in Augustine’s Ethics,” *Augustinian Studies* 14 (1983), 56.

⁷³ *uera rel.* 29.52 (CCSL 32, 221).

The Necessity of Grace in the Ascent

De uera religione 12.24, which I am arguing contains the blueprint to the entire treatise, shows Augustine's deep awareness that a pure "mind and good will" is insufficient for the fallen person to overcome the intellectual *falsitas* and moral *cupiditas* to make the ascent.⁷⁴ Human beings are often unable to judge what is to be used and what is to be enjoyed. In this, Augustine differs sharply from Plotinus. For Augustine, to return and be reformed (*reuertetur reformata*) necessitates the grace of God. Grace must assist (*adiuuari*) the intellectual and moral weakness of the human person. Augustine writes in *De uera religione* 12.24 that when the soul overcomes the *cupiditas* of "mortal enjoyments" by the help of "the grace of God, then without a shadow of a doubt it will be restored to health and will turn back."⁷⁵ Augustine's attempt to unpack how the grace of the incarnate Christ serves to aid the ascent of the image makes up a substantial part of the treatise.

Augustine's disillusionment with a Platonic philosophy of ascent is well known. In Book VII of the *Confessions* he remarks on the lack of humility in Platonic narratives of ascent, which despised the humility of the Incarnation and the humility requisite to accept such grace.⁷⁶ These criticisms are suggested already in *De uera religione*. While embracing the participatory metaphysic espoused by Plotinian philosophy, Augustine expresses less optimism with regard to the ability of the human image to arrive at its goal through a Platonic mode of *katharsis*, because of his awareness of intellectual *falsitas* and moral *cupiditas*. Throughout *De uera religione* there remains an ineluctable tension between a Platonic account of image and its "return," on the one hand, and the recognition of the danger of self-assured pride in the idea that such a "return" is possible for fallen man, on the other hand.

⁷⁴ Joseph Pegon notes that Augustine's "ascent" mapped in *De uera religione* is much different from that of the Platonic tradition. It is not a goal that one conquers but one that is received. Pegon writes, "Le terminus ad quem du retour chez Augustin prend ainsi un caractère personnel qui ne semble pas exister dans le néoplatonisme." Joseph Pegon, *Foi Chrétienne*, p. 480. Thus, Pegon goes on to explain that the ascent is not solely a human effort. Rather, with mercy Christ comes to span the vast abyss between the human person and God; grace comes by way of descent. Le Blond has also noted the Pauline theology of grace present in Augustine's theology of ascent. Le Blond, *Les Conversations*, 46.

⁷⁵ *uera rel.* 12.24 (CCSL 32, 202).

⁷⁶ In *Conf.* VII.9.14 Augustine writes, "[T]hat 'the word was made flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1: 13-14), I did not read there."

Some of Augustine's most effusive praise for Platonic philosophy comes from *De uera religione*. He writes that "with a few changes here and there in their words and assertions, [the Platonists] would have become Christians."⁷⁷ In the same passage, however, he remains critical of the duplicity inherent in their philosophical system. Why, despite having rival philosophical schools, did the philosophers share common temples? They proclaimed to the people their adherence to the pagan gods and offered sacrifices in public, but privately they disputed among themselves about the nature and even the very existence of the gods. It was out of civic duty rather than doctrinal conviction that they offered their sacrifices.

The philosophy and the religion of the Platonists were at odds, maintains Augustine; their philosophy was not amenable to οἱ πολλοί, and as a result the philosophers tolerated lies and myths for the religious lives of their people. Augustine remonstrates, "[T]hey upheld one thing publicly in religion with the people at large and defended quite a different position privately."⁷⁸ Augustine argues sharply against such bifurcation: "[W]e must repudiate all those who neither philosophize about sacred matters nor attach sacred rites to philosophy."⁷⁹ In particular, Augustine lambasts the cult of the angels and the superstitious fortune-telling practices and augury promoted by Porphyry.⁸⁰ Thus, neo-Platonic religious praxis is emblematic of the separation of faith and reason: "[T]here is not one thing called philosophy, that is devotion to wisdom, and another called religion."⁸¹ The dualism in Platonic philosophy between reason and faith as well as between doctrine and cult reserved the "return" of the image to the spiritual élite. In contrast, salvation offered in the Christian faith, while it is an ascent in wisdom, is not divorced from the sacramental

⁷⁷ *uera rel.* 4.7 (CCSL 32, 192): *paucis mutatis uerbis atque sententiis Christiani fierent.*

⁷⁸ *uera rel.* 1.1 (CCSL 32, 187).

⁷⁹ *uera rel.* 7.12 (CCSL 32, 196).

⁸⁰ Augustine refers to those who "gape open-mouthed over the dregs of yesterday's drinking bout and scrutinize the entrails of dead beasts for divine oracles." *uera rel.* 3.5 (CCSL 32, 192). This is direct satire of Porphyry's followers, who were given to such forms of divinization. Porphyry is mentioned by name alongside these practices in *De ciuitate dei* X.9-11. Likewise, in what du Roy sees as the anti-Porphyrian conclusion to *De uera religione*, Augustine dismisses obsession with placating angels, whether good or bad, for, he argues, the good ones will not be slighted with the honour going to God, nor will the bad ones have power to vent their anger. *uera rel.* 55.111 (CCSL 32, 259).

⁸¹ *uera rel.* 7.12 (CCSL 32, 196).

practice of every Christian.⁸² To all people, explains Augustine, the Catholic Church “offers the possibility of sharing in the grace of God.”⁸³ The harmony of faith and reason, for Augustine, entails an economy of grace and an ascent in wisdom that is not the preserve of the cultured élite.

In what is perhaps the most rhapsodic part of *De uera religione*, Augustine declares that the Catholic faith supersedes Platonic philosophy. The Christian approach unites religion and philosophy, faith and reason. It offers a universal way of salvation, available to all. Indeed, if the ancient Platonists were alive today and could see ordinary people believing divine mysteries, witness “whole countries enlightened by the doctrine of salvation,”⁸⁴ and see that by the blood of the martyrs churches are being erected in previously barbarous nations,⁸⁵ if they could see thousands renouncing marriage for the kingdom, once desolate islands and empty deserts being filled with those “forsaking the riches and honors of this world, [who] wish to dedicate their whole lives to the one supreme God,”⁸⁶ and if they could observe that now throughout the entire world the whole human race says in one voice, “we have lifted up our hearts to the Lord,” then surely they would with the change of a few words become Christians (*paucis mutatis uerbis atque sentiitiis Christiani fierent*).⁸⁷

It is precisely the universality of the Christian faith – its insistence that wisdom descends to the many – that constitutes its apologetic leverage. Salvation, maintains Augustine, is for the entire human race, which is being refashioned and prepared for eternal life.⁸⁸ The soul, which is for Augustine the locus of the image, is so “bundled up in its sins” that it is unable to “return,” to “stride up to a likeness of God from its earthly life.”⁸⁹ Grace must assist the intellectual and

⁸² *uera rel.* 5.8 (CCSL 32, 193). Augustine contrasts the sacramental discipline of the Catholic Church with the ecumenism of the philosophers who would worship at the same temple as those with whom they disagreed about the nature and existence of the gods. While the Platonists separate philosophy and religion, writes Augustine, “those whose teaching we do not approve of are not even admitted to share the mysteries with us.” *uera rel.* 5.8 (CCSL 32, 193).

⁸³ *uera rel.* 6.10 (CCSL 32, 194).

⁸⁴ *uera rel.* 3.4 (CCSL 32, 190).

⁸⁵ *uera rel.* 3.5 (CCSL 32, 191).

⁸⁶ *uera rel.* 3.5 (CCSL 32, 191).

⁸⁷ *uera rel.* 4.7 (CCSL 32, 192). Cf. Goulven Madec, “Si Plato uiueret... (Augustin, *De uera religione*, 3.3),” in *Néoplatonisme. Mélanges offerts à Jean Trouillard*, ed. Jean Trouillard (Fontenay-aux-Roses: École normale supérieure, 1981), 233-47.

⁸⁸ *uera rel.* 7.13 (CCSL 32, 196).

⁸⁹ *uera rel.* 10.19 (CCSL 32, 199).

moral weakness of the human person. It is grace that makes possible the ascent: "God's inexplicable mercy comes to the rescue both of individuals and of the whole human race by means of a creature subject to change and yet obedient to divine laws, to remind the soul of its primal and perfect nature."⁹⁰ This "creature," is, of course, the Son of God, and the Incarnation signals the economy in which God's grace is diffused to the many.

De uera religione 12.24 makes clear that it is the "grace of God" that assists the soul to overcome moral *cupiditas* and intellectual *falisitas* to "return" to the Holy Trinity. Grace, for Augustine, is fundamentally the person of Christ, who diffuses his own goodness. He is presented in *De uera religione* both as eternal Wisdom and as the incarnate Christ. Augustine writes, "[T]he grace of God (*gratiam dei*) ... came through the very Wisdom of God taking to itself the man by whom we have been summoned into freedom."⁹¹ *De uera religione* 16.30-32 presents a consideration of what is achieved through the Incarnation. Christ's Incarnation is a moral pedagogy consonant with the student, namely, "the fleshly-minded."⁹² Christ came in a manner adaptable to human sense, and he taught by the example of his own life. His poverty, chastity, and obedience were the transvaluation of prevailing values: where people were running after riches and pleasures, he chose to be poor; where they chose honor and power, he refused to be crowned a king; where they valued children of the flesh, he scorned marriage. For the sake of truth, he chose to suffer the injustice and pain from which human beings naturally shrink.⁹³ Augustine concludes, "So the whole of his life on earth, then, as lived by the man he had the goodness to take to himself, was a lesson in morals."⁹⁴

Christ's life provides the moral example of the ascent precisely in the humility that Augustine finds absent in Platonic accounts of ascent. Self-assured Platonic philosophies of "return" taught that some among the fallen human race could avoid entrapment in the *falisitas* and *cupiditas* of their present condition and ascend back to the One. This was not, however, an option available to the masses. This, explains Augustine, is why they created a bifurcation of reason and faith, of philosophy and cult. *De uera religione* insists that the Incarnation offers a universal way of "return." The Incarnation is a

⁹⁰ *uera rel.* 10.19 (CCSL 32, 199).

⁹¹ *uera rel.* 17.33 (CCSL 32, 207).

⁹² *uera rel.* 16.30 (CCSL 32, 205).

⁹³ *uera rel.* 16.31 (CCSL 32, 206).

⁹⁴ *uera rel.* 16.32 (CCSL 32, 207).

testament to the humility of Christ, who stoops to take human life upon himself, to teach the “fleshly-minded” the way of ascent. Christ’s entire human life was a divine pedagogy – leading the human person by the hand in his “return.” The soul is set free from corporeal, mortal enjoyments by “the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”⁹⁵ The Incarnation is also a testament to the reality that grace is not something extrinsic to the human person but comes to inhere properly in the human soul and transform his human, embodied existence. As such, the Incarnation does not remain a remote pedagogical life lesson; instead, as we will see, the operation of the Spirit in the life of the Christian allows the ascent to become an experienced reality.

Ascent to the Holy Trinity

The terminus of the “return” is, as *De uera religione* 12.24 states, to be reshaped by Wisdom (*reformata per sapientiam*) to enjoy (*fruetur*) God through the Holy Spirit, who is the gift of God (*donum dei*). For Augustine the Holy Trinity is not only the goal of the ascent but is also the means through which this ascent is made possible. Through Christ, the Wisdom never shaped but giving shape to all things, and the Holy Spirit, the gift of God, the human person is able to ascend once again to him who fulfils human nature. The Trinitarian formula in *De uera religione* 12.24 makes clear how Augustine’s Plotinian proclivities find their fulfillment in Nicene Trinitarianism. At this point, then, I will consider each of these references to the three Persons of the Trinity in turn (*unus*, *sapientia*, and *donum dei*).

In the Platonic mindset, multiplicity is a falling away from primordial unity, so that the restoration of the soul is posited as a movement *a multis ad unum*.⁹⁶ The Fall, for Augustine, is the loss of the innocence of paradise; his description, however, is given Platonic dress: the Fall drove “man away in all directions from the unity of God.”⁹⁷ Return to unity, which is the aim of the ascent to God, is the drive of *De uera religione*. This unity is that of the Holy Trinity, but it is the Father who is primarily understood as the “One.” Indeed, the

⁹⁵ *uera rel.* 53.102 (CCSL 32 253).

⁹⁶ Cf. Miguel Ángel Álvarez Miñambres’s insightful article on the ascent of the human soul to the unity of God in *De uera religione*: “Unidad y Unicidad de Dios en *De vera religione* de San Agustín,” *Religion y Cultura* 50 (2004): 653-86.

⁹⁷ *uera rel.* 21.41 (CCSL 32 212-213).

treatise concludes that all things “have been made by the One and direct themselves towards the One.”⁹⁸ The return to unity occurs by the refashioning of the image from the “old man” to the “new man.” To describe this process, Augustine mentions in *De uera religione* 26.49 the same seven stages of restoration that he also discusses in *De quantitate animae*. The steps describe the ascent from changing, temporal, and material loves to unchanging, eternal, and immaterial loves; it is a gradual acclimatization to the things of the Spirit, through what Augustine describes as “setting up a ladder to things that are immortal.”⁹⁹ In the sixth step, the human person is “perfected in the form and shape which was made to the image and likeness of God” for the vision of God.¹⁰⁰ These steps of ascent are the process of exchanging “the image of the earthly man” for “the image of the new people.”¹⁰¹ All things, maintains Augustine, “have an appetite for unity.”¹⁰² They desire to “return” to their source, of which they are the image. They discover in unity the “rule or form or example” from which they have received a likeness.¹⁰³

Augustine identifies “wisdom” (*sapientia*) with the Son, who recreates the fallen image after his perfect image. “Wisdom” is traditional anti-Arian terminology, which Augustine inherited.¹⁰⁴ Using explicitly Nicene language, *De uera religione* 12.24 identifies Wisdom as the one who formed creation, while being herself unformed (*non formatam, sed per quam formantur uniuersa*). As the exact *similitudo* of the Father, Wisdom fashions the image according to herself, judging according to the standard she herself is. Augustine thus understands the role of Wisdom by the correlative actions of “judgment” and

⁹⁸ *uera rel.* 55.113 (CCSL 32, 260). Here Josef Lössl’s analysis regarding the motif of “the One” is particularly germane. He notes that there are over 400 references to *unus* in *De uera religione* and that Augustine successfully aligns biblical monotheism with Platonic philosophy. “The One,” maintains Lössl, is a theme able to make sense of the text as a unit both doctrinally and structurally.” Josef Lössl, “‘The One’”, 79–103.

⁹⁹ *uera rel.* 29.52 (CCSL 32, 221).

¹⁰⁰ *uera rel.* 26.49 (CCSL 32, 219).

¹⁰¹ *uera rel.* 27.50 (CCSL 32, 219).

¹⁰² *uera rel.* 31.58 (CCSL 33, 225): *Omnia enim, quae appetunt unitatem.*

¹⁰³ *uera rel.* 31.58 (CCSL 33, 225): *hanc habent regulam uel formam uel exemplum uel si quo alio uerbo dici se sinit, quoniam sola eius similitudinem, a quo esse accepit, impleuit.*

¹⁰⁴ The term “Wisdom” for the Son was claimed by both Arians and Nicenes in the context of the Son’s role in creation, the former famously insisting that Proverbs 8:22 favored their case. By associating “Wisdom” with the adjective “unformed” Augustine links himself with the Nicene tradition.

“formation.”¹⁰⁵ Augustine also attributes the refashioning of the image to Wisdom, after whom the soul was originally fashioned, so that recreation follows the pattern of creation. Here again, Augustine takes up the theme of judgment. It is the mark of the higher to judge the lower according to the standard or measurement that the higher knows. Eternal Wisdom is alone in not being judged, since of her “not even the Father makes judgments, for she is not less than he is.”¹⁰⁶ Wisdom is the perfect resemblance of the One and is, therefore, in perfect unity with it. The wise soul judges all things by knowledge or participation in eternal Wisdom, who fashioned all things. Judging “the way something ought to be” is the mark of wisdom; it demonstrates the soul’s conformity in judgment to a higher standard; it demonstrates its participation in Wisdom.¹⁰⁷ Eternal Wisdom is not judged but is rather the standard or measure that judges and forms all created existents.¹⁰⁸ In *De uera religione*, Wisdom creates and recreates judging according to its own form or likeness, which it does on account of its perfect union with the One.

Du Roy notes that in Augustine’s corpus, the title *donum dei* for the Holy Spirit makes its debut in *De uera religione*; this is also the first time the Spirit is identified as the means through which God is enjoyed (*fruetur*).¹⁰⁹ Earlier in the same work, while arguing from the unity of operations in the creation narrative to the one nature of God, Augustine also uses the term *donum*: “[E]ach and every nature has been made simultaneously by the Father through the Son in the Gift of the Holy Spirit (*dono spiritus sancti*).”¹¹⁰ *Epistle 11*, which was

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Marie-Anne Vannier, “*Creatio*”, “*conversio*”, “*formatio*” chez S. Augustin (Fribourg: Éditions universitaires, 1997).

¹⁰⁶ *uera rel.* 31.58 (CCSL 32, 225).

¹⁰⁷ Augustine explains that judgment is different from knowledge. Knowledge is the ability “to see that something is or is not such-and-such.” Judgment, on the other hand, introduces an “ought”: “[I]t ought to have been such-and-such (*ita esse debuit*).” In judgment, the mind adverts to a higher standard than the object immediately in question; the higher standard is the eternal law in which the wise person participates. *uera rel.* 31.58 (CCSL 32, 225).

¹⁰⁸ *uera rel.* 31.57 (CCSL 32, 224).

¹⁰⁹ Du Roy, *Intelligence de la foi*, 320. Du Roy goes on to explain that the very first Trinitarian schema in Augustine’s corpus occurs in *De beata uita*. In this work, the Spirit introduces one to the Truth. Enjoying this Truth, the soul is united with the Supreme Measure, the Father. In *De moribus* the Spirit comes as Charity to unite the human soul with God. Thus, there is a gradation of precision in language with respect to the role of the Holy Spirit in the early works, culminating in *De uera religione*, where the Spirit is the gift *through whom* we enjoy God.

¹¹⁰ *uera rel.* 7.13 (CCSL 32, 196): *simul omnia et unamquamque naturam patrem fecisse per filium in dono spiritus sancti*.

penned during the same time period, also uses the term *donum* for the Spirit. Du Roy suggests that Augustine inherits the language of *donum* to describe the Spirit from Hilary of Poitiers's *De Trinitate* II.1. Thus, Augustine's use of the term *donum* for the Spirit would indicate that the young theologian was familiar with this treatise already in 391.¹¹¹ Du Roy's hypothesis is not beyond the scope of possibility; however, there are few clear indicators that verify it.¹¹² The application of Ockham's razor might lead one to conclude that *donum* as a term for the Spirit was simply common Christian vocabulary inherited from the New Testament and not necessarily proof of Augustine's early knowledge of Hilary.¹¹³ Regardless, the growing confidence in Augustine's early theology that the Holy Trinity is "enjoyed" through the Holy Spirit, the gift of God, is expressed with precision in *De uera religione*.

Augustine concludes *De uera religione* by stating, "That is why it is incumbent on us to worship and confess the very Gift of God (*donum dei*), together with the Father and the Son unchanging – a Trinity of one substance, one God from whom we are, through whom we are, in whom we are, from whom we have departed, whom we have become unlike, by whom we have not been allowed to perish; the Source to which we are retracing our steps."¹¹⁴ The Triune terminus of the ascent is emphatically articulated, as Augustine recapitulates the central terminological references to each Person of the Holy Trinity. This quotation is representative of the treatise as a whole. The

¹¹¹ Du Roy, *Intelligence de la foi*, 321. There is no doubt that at some early point Augustine read Hilary's work on the Trinity. Lewis Ayres demonstrates that Augustine's use of *aeternitas* already in *De moribus* I. 30.62 (CSEL 90, 65-66) is evidence of the young African theologian's knowledge of Hilary, who alone in the Latin tradition describes the Holy Trinity as "infinity in the eternal (*aeternitas*), the form in the image and the use in the gift." Lewis Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 58. The seed of this Trinitarian theology (*aeternitas, imago, donum*) has germinated from its original presentation in *De moribus* to its flowering in *De uera religione*.

¹¹² Du Roy notes the use of *aeternitas* in *De uera religione* and *De moribus* to describe the Father, as well as the use of *munus* and *donum* in *De uera religione* to refer to the Spirit. Further, Du Roy points out that *munus* and *donum* as terms referring to the Spirit are present in the contemporaneous *Epistle 11*. Du Roy concludes, "On trouve donc dès l'époque du *De uera religione* les trois titres donnés par Hilaire et rapportés par le *De Trinitate* d'Augustin." Du Roy, *Intelligence de la foi*, 321.

¹¹³ Cf. Acts 2:38; Acts 10:44; Romans 5:5.

¹¹⁴ *uera rel.* 55.113 (CCSL 32, 260): *Quare ipsum donum dei cum patre et filio aequae incommutabile colere et tenere nos conuenit: unius substantiae trinitatem unum deum, a quo sumus, per quem sumus, in quo sumus, a quo discessimus, cui dissimiles facti sumus, a quo perire non permissi sumus, principium, ad quod recurrimus.*

Father is identified as *unus*, the Son as *forma* and *similitudo*, and the Spirit as *donum dei*. The entire movement is presented in the Platonic philosophical garb of *exitus* and *reditus*; a participatory metaphysic comes to the fore in Augustine's insistence that all created existence originates from, is held in being by, and returns to its source, so that the image, which has fallen from its likeness (*dissimiles facti sumus*), is refashioned according to its form. Significantly, however, Augustine's Platonic proclivities are augmented and transformed by means of Christian content: the terminus of the ascent is the enjoyment of the Holy Trinity.

Conclusion

The ascent of the *imago* in Augustine's early writings finds its most precise and developed presentation in *De uera religione*. Augustine's injunction to ascend is, in many ways, quite similar to that of Plotinus: Augustine urges an intellectual and moral *κάθαρσις* so that the soul can share in what is proper to it. The ascent is, therefore, properly a "return" – the soul has a "memory" of its origin and an innate desire to return whence it came. Like Plotinus, Augustine understands the ascent to involve a purification of the senses, which consists in the recognition of the "image-like" quality of all created objects that are to be passed through to the reality itself. Correct judgment is the *sine qua non* to overcoming the intellectual *falsitas* and moral *cupiditas* that obstruct the image's return.

I have argued that *De uera religione* 12.24 constitutes the heart of the treatise. Proceeding from this paragraph I have proposed a new reading of *De uera religione*, which takes into account the significance of a Plotinian account of image for Augustine's theology of ascent. However, in so doing, I have made clear that Augustine's enthusiasm regarding Platonism has its limits, already in this early work. In this short paragraph of *De uera religione*, Augustine expresses the *terminus ad quem* of the ascent and the requisite steps to arrive at the goal – "setting up a ladder to things that are immortal."¹¹⁵ Thus, while in some important ways Augustine adopts his Platonic background, he also transforms it significantly. *De uera religione* is a theological account of how Christ's grace given in the Incarnation serves to properly inhere in the human soul, so that "with mind and good will"

¹¹⁵ *uera rel.* 29.52 (CCSL 32, 221).

turned back “from the many things that change” it can ascend to the one Holy Trinity of which it is an image. Frederick Van Fleteren rightly notes that *De uera religione* 12.24 “places the Trinity in the economy of creation and personal salvation: Through the unformed wisdom of God (Christ) and through the gift of God (the Holy Spirit), man will enjoy (*frui*) God.”¹¹⁶ The theology of ascent in *De uera religione* revolutionizes the philosophy that Augustine had received from the *Enneads*. While it still involves a return *ad unum*, in Augustine’s approach, the return becomes a return to the unity of the Holy Trinity professed at Nicaea. The refashioning of the “new man” is the work of the unformed Wisdom, who refashions the human person according to the standard of her own perfect likeness and unity with the Father. Lastly, the Holy Spirit as *donum dei* allows the human person to “enjoy” God. The verb *frui*, used in precise theological distinction from *uti* in *De uera religione*, expresses the particularly Augustinian insight that all created existence is to be “used” for the ascent to the Trinity. For Augustine, one ought never to rest content “enjoying” material and temporal goods, for this would be to create an idol. The distinction between *uti* and *frui*, then, is integral to Augustine’s theology of return. An ersatz “enjoyment” of temporal goods falls prey to the dissemblance of created goods – claiming totality for them and failing to recognize their participatory character. *De uera religione* proposes the “use” of created existence as a ladder on which to make the ascent or as a transitory image through which one may see a resemblance of the eternal – the *terminus* of the image’s return.

Gerald Boersma
Assistant Professor of Theology
St. Bonaventure University
gboersma@sbu.edu

¹¹⁶ Van Fleteren, “Augustine’s ‘*De vera religione*’”, 482.