CHAPTER I

Introduction

This book is not written for scholars of medieval theology. It is written for anybody who is new to the field, and who wants to find out more about the ideas of some of the major theologians of the medieval period. Rather than offering a survey of a myriad of theologians I have decided to focus on a limited number of key thinkers, and expound their ideas in some depth. I opted for a text-focused approach, often quoting from primary texts, thus allowing the authors to speak for themselves as much as possible. I have also incorporated some brief comments on the historical and cultural context of each period, which will assist the reader in contextualizing the authors we discuss.

This book, however, aims to be more than a survey. It is an invitation to *think along* with medieval authors. As a matter of fact, I wrote this book because I am firmly convinced that theology in the twenty-first century has a lot to learn from medieval authors. In a post-modern climate, in which the modern views on "autonomous reason" are increasingly being questioned it may prove fruitful to re-engage with pre-modern thinkers who, obviously, did not share our modern and post-modern presuppositions. Their different perspective does not antiquate their thought, as some of the "cultured despisers" of medieval thought might imagine. On the contrary, rather than rendering their views obsolete it makes them profoundly challenging and enriching, perhaps more so than any post-modern critique of modernity could possibly be. For the post-modern, as a mirror image of the modern, is still determined by key assumptions of the modern. Indeed, it could be plausibly argued that the post-modern critique is part and parcel of the history of modernity itself.

Medieval theology is radically theocentric, and God, for medieval theologians, is of course the Trinitarian God. This may not sound particularly surprising but it is fundamentally different from those theologians who operate in the shadow of Schleiermacher (and his "anthropological turn" in theology), as well as from those who react against this anthropological turn

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by espousing a radical bibliocentric approach (the revelatory positivism of some of Karl Barth's followers). This radical theocentric focus is both strengthened and exemplified by how medieval theologians conceived of human rationality. For them, human intelligence encompassed much more than reason. It also involved intellect. Indeed, for them, reason, informed by faith, has an inner dynamism towards self-transcendence. If reason is to be rational it has to have an openness towards that which transcends reason; and reason transcends itself by becoming intellect. This is a key theme to which I will allude throughout this book.

Medieval theologians were desirous for God. Their whole thinking reached out towards the divine. There is a profound thrust towards the transcendent in medieval theology. In order to illustrate this I will pay particular attention to how they conceived of the Christian life, paying particular attention to their understanding of faith and love, two of the theological virtues. I also hope to show that the theocentric focus at the heart of medieval theology introduces an element of gratuity in the medieval mindset which is totally at odds with modern notions of instrumentalization and functionalization. From Augustine's invitation to "enjoy God solely" (*frui Deo*) to Meister Eckhart's notion of detachment, the medieval period contains rich resources to critique modern utilitarian and instrumentalizing perspectives on the world.

Thomas Aquinas wrote that there are two central mysteries in the Christian faith: the mystery of the Trinity, and the mystery of the Incarnation. The mystery of the Trinity is at the heart of medieval theology, and broad-sweeping and often repeated claims about the alleged emphasis upon the divine unity in Latin theology at the expense of a true Trinitarian understanding of God are to be discarded as scholarly untenable. Indeed, the mystery of the Trinity shapes every aspect of the theology and spirituality of most of the figures we will discuss.

While the patristic period witnessed major debates on the nature of the Person of Christ, medieval theology was drawn more towards soteriological questions. Here Anselm's analysis, often caricatured in modern scholarship, looms large. It is another aspect that will retain our attention.

Discussions of the nature of the relation between faith and reason; the mystery of the Trinity; soteriology; Christian love; and the transcendent thrust of medieval thought will run like a thread throughout our discussions of the authors I have selected. I hope that focusing on these themes will provide the book with a measure of cohesion and unity.

Any selection of authors to be included is somewhat arbitrary. The first major author is St. Augustine. It is hardly an exaggeration to describe

medieval theology as a footnote to Augustine. In line with the overall aims of the book, other patristic authors, such as Boethius, John Cassian and Pseudo-Dionysius receive a more cursory treatment.

It is probably true to say that Gregory the Great's ideas were not all that original. Of course, and revealingly, originality was not considered a virtue in its own right by medieval scholars. Gregory merits inclusion for the specific way he appropriates Augustinian views and adapts them for a more monastic setting. With Augustine, he shaped monastic theology well until the eleventh century and beyond.

The Carolingian renaissance witnessed renewed theological activity in the West. One theologian stood out amongst his peers, if only because he devised a daring synthesis of Augustinian and Greek theology. An engagement with the thought of John Scotus Eriugena is therefore well justified even if his influence on later medieval thought was admittedly somewhat limited.

Undoubtedly, one of the towering figures of medieval theology is St. Anselm. His *Proslogion* (and its famous "ontological argument"), as well as his soteriology, will be discussed at some length.

The twelfth century is one of the most creative eras in the cultural history of the West. This is the era of Abelard and Heloise, the Cistercian revolution (Bernard of Clairvaux) and the School of St. Victor in Paris. The theology of Peter Abelard, Hugh and Richard of St. Victor will be discussed, as well one of the most influential works of the medieval period: the *Sentences* by Peter Lombard.

Peter Lombard paved the way for the great flowering of scholastic theology in the thirteenth century. The inclusion of Bonaventure, Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus does not need justification. The latter writes after the Condemnations of 1277, and it is from then onwards that the delicate balance between faith and reason becomes gradually eroded. While the impact of Duns Scotus' contribution to early-modern developments is a matter for debate, most scholars agree that William of Ockham's thought originated in an intellectual climate very different from that of the thirteenth century.

It is inaccurate to claim that scholasticism came to an end with the arrival of nominalism. It is, however, fair to say that the theological scene in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries is much more pluralist, skeptical, and divided, than before. Faith and reason, philosophy and theology, and even theology and spirituality are increasingly considered to be separate, and not just distinct, from one another. Two important authors of this period (Meister Eckhart and Ruusbroec) will be discussed to illustrate the ongoing vibrancy of medieval spirituality.

I am indebted to Russell Friedman, Lewis Ayres and Bernard McGinn for advice and support. I especially want to mention Jos Decorte (d. 2001) who first exposed me to medieval thought; his influence on the pages that follow is evident. I would also like to thank Anna Lowe, Assistant Editor at Cambridge University Press, for her patience and expert assistance.

This book is an exercise, not in theological nostalgia, but in retrieval for the sake of renewal. I dedicate it to my two beautiful daughters, Anna and Muireann. They have enriched both my own life and that of Rose, my wife, with their unconditional and generous love.

PART I

The legacy of the Fathers

CHAPTER 2

Augustine of Hippo

LIFE AND SOURCES

Augustine was born in 354 in Thagasta (in what is now Algeria), the son of a Christian mother and a pagan father in North Africa. He studied rhetoric in Carthage, acquiring a profound knowledge of classical Latin literature, especially Cicero and Virgil. He became a gifted teacher of literature in Carthage, Rome and Milan. From 373 onwards, Augustine, "living outside of himself," alienated from God who was "more inward than his most inward part," as he recalled later in his *Confessions* (*Confess.* III.6 [11]), was drawn into the circles of Manichaeism. The term Manichaeism is derived from Mani (AD 216–76), a Persian, who founded this Gnostic religion. It was an extremely dualistic world-view with a very negative evaluation of matter, body and sexuality. The followers of the Manichean religion were divided into two classes: the elect, who had to remain celibate, and the auditors (or hearers) who were allowed sexual intercourse as long as it did not lead to offspring (for procreation contributed to the imprisonment of souls into the physical world). Augustine became an auditor in the Manichean religion, much to the heartbreak of his mother. After nine years, Augustine grew disillusioned with Manichaeism. In 383 he travelled to Rome, and it was here, at the age of thirty, that he gradually abandoned Manichean views, lapsing into a period of skepticism (*Confess.* V.10 [19]).

While in Milan, Augustine was to encounter a person who left an indelible mark on him: St. Ambrose, the local bishop. It was Ambrose who was to draw Augustine closer to the Catholic faith. What was of particular significance, Augustine informs us, was the ways in which Ambrose interpreted the Scriptures. Once Ambrose demonstrated that difficult passages from the Old Testament can be legitimately interpreted figuratively, one of the main objections Augustine had harbored for so long against the Catholic faith vanished. He then decided to become a catechumen in the Catholic Church. It was at this time that Augustine, still

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searching for truth, discovered Neoplatonic philosophy. This, too, was to have a major formative impact on Augustine's intellectual outlook.

Neoplatonism is a philosophy which revived Platonist tendencies in philosophy from the third to the sixth centuries AD. The major figures are Plotinus (*c.* 205–70) the founder of the school, Porphyry (*c.* 232–301), and Proclus (410–85). Augustine must have read (in translation) some extracts from Plotinus' main work, *The Enneads*, and a number of works from Porphyry. In Neoplatonism we discern the following characteristics: first, there is a strong emphasis on the One, the Absolute or the Good from which all things emanate through a hierarchy. This Absolute principle is beyond being and thought. Within the divine realm there is a hierarchy: the One is absolute and transcendent; it is supreme goodness. Somewhat lower there is Mind or *Nous*; finally, there is Soul, which has the power to produce matter. The emphasis upon hierarchy within the Godhead distinguishes the Neoplatonic understanding of the divinity from the Christian view of God as three equal Persons in the one Godhead. From the divine realm the material world flows or emanates. In the process of emanation there is gradual loss, for every effect is slightly inferior to its cause (the higher level is the cause of whatever is immediately lower). Again, this is different from a Christian understanding, in which God directly creates all things out of nothing rather than through an elaborate hierarchy. Human beings have to transcend the multiplicity of the material world to achieve union with the One. This entails a practice of purification and introversion. This union with the One is being achieved in transient ecstasy (e.g., *Enneads* 6.9.9).

Plotinus' mysticism is private and individual. It is also fairly intellectual. Christians will correct this view by emphasizing the role of grace and community. Despite the important differences between Neoplatonic philosophy and Christianity (above all its emphasis upon the reality of the Incarnation), Neoplatonism was to exert a lasting influence upon Augustine. A number of aspects need to be mentioned.

First, the emphasis upon the utter transcendence of the One was to further strengthen apophatic approaches to the Christian understanding of God (itself heir to Hebrew emphasis upon the unknowability of God).

Secondly, it contributed to an exemplarist metaphysics. This warrants some clarification. Plato, the father of Western philosophy, had struggled with the problem of how we can attain certain knowledge in a changeable and material world. As is well known, the Greeks had made significant progress in the area of mathematics and geometry. Taking his cue from the certainty we can attain in the immaterial, theoretical world of mathematics, Plato had argued that all things (a tree, a dog, a woman, legal system)

participate in a transcendent, ideal world of spiritual forms. Our material world is therefore a mere reflection of this perfect world of forms. (Incidentally, Aristotle accepted the notion of forms but he claimed that these forms only exist in material things, rather than in a transcendent realm – a view Thomas Aquinas was to adopt.) The spiritual forms or Ideas (the perfect, spiritual archetypes, models or exemplars of things) *in-form* the world: a dog is a dog, and not a tree, because its matter is "in-formed" by the Idea of "caninehood". These forms shape all things in the world, and are the foundation of our certain knowledge of them. Now Plotinus had claimed that the divine ideas are to be found in the *Nous*, or the divine Mind, the second hypostasis within the Divinity. For Augustine, the divine ideas, models or exemplars *(aeternae rationes)* of all created things, are contained in the Word, the second person of the Trinity: "there is but one Word of God, through which all things were made (John 1:1–6), which is unchanging truth, in which all things are primordially and unchangingly together, not only things that are in the whole of this creation, but things that have been and will be" (*De Trin.* IV.3). This doctrine of exemplarism allows later theologians to connect theology of the Trinity (especially the generation of the Word from the Father) with theology of creation. It will assist them in seeing the whole of creation as a marvellous reflection of the beauty of the divine Word.

Another important view which Augustine inherited from "the Platonists" (Neoplatonism is, of course, a modern scholarly term) is the notion that evil is absence of goodness. Evil is a defect of being and goodness, the way that natural evil (e.g., blindness) is an absence of goodness (e.g., sight) (cf. *Confess.* VII.12.18 and *De Civ. Dei* XI.9 and 22: "'evil' is merely a name for the privation of good.") Given the fact that everything God created is something (good), God is not directly responsible for the evil in this world. Augustine was to use this doctrine to explain how evil which occurs in this world, is not caused by God. This proved important for his departure from Manichaeism. Finally, there is a strong sense of longing for the immaterial, transcendent realm and for fulfilment beyond the material world – a longing which strongly appealed to Augustine.

During this time Augustine also submerged himself in the Scriptures. One day, sitting in the garden of his house in Milan he heard a child singing *Tolle et lege*, "Pick up and read." Augustine opened St. Paul's letters and his eyes fell on Rom. 13:13–14, in which St Paul admonishes his readers to abandon their orgies and drunkenness, requesting them to put on the Lord Jesus Christ. At that very moment all the shadows of doubts were dispelled (*Confess.* VII.12 [29]). He gave up his worldly career and started writing his

first works, including the *Soliloquies*. Sometime later, during the Easter Vigil of 387, Augustine was baptized by Ambrose. He returned to North Africa where he was ordained in 391. Five years later he became bishop of Hippo until his death in 430. Apart from the *Confessions* his most important works are *The City of God* (*De Civitate Dei*), *The Trinity* (*De Trinitate*), *On Christian Doctrine* (*De Doctrina Christiana*), *Faith, Hope and Charity* (*Enchiridion*), sermons, a range of anti-Pelagian, anti-Manichaeist and anti-Donatist writings, commentaries on Scriptures, including on St. John, Genesis and the Psalms, i.e., *Expositions of the Psalms* (*Enarrationes in Psalmos*).

THE RELATION BETWEEN PHILOSOPHY AND THEOLOGY, REASON AND FAITH

In his search for truth, Augustine engaged deeply with the philosophy of Antiquity. This was to shape the way he viewed the relation between faith and reason, and theology and philosophy. Philosophy, which to him is a way of life rather than a discipline, is important as a *praeparatio evangelica*, a preparation for the Christian religion. Christianity is, however, the *vera philosophia*, the true philosophy. Again, although reason has its part to play in helping us to understand our faith, it is the total relation to the soul which interests Augustine. Thus, it is not possible to separate Augustine's theology from philosophical considerations, and vice versa. The attempt to attain fulfilment by merely relying on an independent philosophy would have struck him as undesirable.

His views on faith and reason have acquired a new relevance in our post-modern times, now that the modern Cartesian understanding of reason in terms of utter autonomy has been questioned. In a short treatise, *Faith in the Unseen*, he criticizes those people "who maintain that the Christian religion should be despised rather than embraced, because what it presents is not something tangible but something that demands faith in matters which lie beyond human vision." In the treatise, Augustine refutes this positivistic view by pointing out the fiduciary nature of human rationality and society. In *The Advantage of Believing*, 12.26 he states that absolutely nothing in society would be safe if we decided not to believe anything that we cannot hold as evident. How can we procure convincing evidence of genuine love or friendship between people? The consequence of a radical positivistic stance would be "that human relationships are thrown into chaos" (*Faith in the Unseen*, 2.4). Radical skepticism is equally untenable: it is, after all, impossible to doubt everything, for when we doubt we always