

A RESPONSE TO FRANCINE CARDMAN

PREFATORY REMARKS

On behalf of those assembled here, let me offer you a word of thanks, Francine, for your elegant and lucid remarks. In the last few months I have made an effort to acquaint myself better with North Africa in the fourth century. It has been a rewarding if brief study, confirming my efforts to read the texts of the first five centuries with the conviction that they are increasingly pertinent to the present condition of the church. I hope that my wanderings will succeed in also being a "wandering" among the reactions of our colleagues present this morning. I am indeed privileged to offer what is obviously only a first "response."

Since I am not an expert in Augustine, or ecclesiology, or the Donatists, my remarks will reflect only a novice's grasp of the technicalities of your paper. I do, however, regularly teach a course called "Comparative Doctrine," an historical and systematic study of doctrines in general, and also courses on theological methods and hermeneutics, all with an interest in the use of philosophy in theological texts. Thus I approach your paper as a "case study" for its implications beyond one theologian, one doctrinal area, or one historical period. I believe such broader implications were part of the intent of your paper. It is from this perspective and set of interests that I wish to review the five sections of your paper, wander a bit among their contents, offer a few parallel examples, and pose some general questions which, I hope, will stimulate further discussion. I will consider your paper in reverse order, beginning with the last section, and move towards the first, my remarks increasing in brevity.

PRAXIS

Your suggestion to alter the focus of a discussion of doctrine in relation to notions of the "church" from being "of" or "about" or "belonging to" the church, to a discussion of issues of doctrine as matters of "praxis" is entirely genial. Your caution is well taken, that when faith in doctrinal propositions becomes the prime ecclesiological virtue, then praxis might tend to be relegated to the periphery of Christian life. As with the Scriptures themselves, so also with the doctrine derived and dependent upon them, we come to think that we are in control of them, rather than patient upon them for the direction for our lives. Such a notion might seem counterintuitive. Modernity has exacerbated the human tendency to want to control both God and our facticity, and we might tend to imagine that our Christian task is to deconstruct and reconstruct doctrines, to "develop" them along "scientific" paths, thereby fulfilling the inner demands of

"faith seeking understanding." I realize all this sounds a great deal like Wittgenstein on the problems of modern philosophy, so I will own up to the fact that my remarks are inspired by the notion that doctrines are not primarily propositions, that none the less they can have ontological intent and make self-involving claims, but those two characteristics need not be bought at the loss of doctrine's essential force as "rules for living." Perhaps I wander too far afield and take your remarks where they may not want to go, so let me return to what I take to be your major point in the last section, namely the provocative suggestions that it is the history of "faith seeking praxis" that we need to explore to unfold what development is about.

CRITICAL TENSIONS

In this regard, your distinction between "faith as foundational" and "charity as formative" is equally genial, though three hesitations arise in me when I hear that formulation, wanting the two halves to be a bit more dialectical than oppositional. The first hesitation is to wonder whether the dominance of trinitarian and christological doctrines as the sole measure of faith might be specified as the twofold problem of the particular historical development (or lack, as the case may be) of Jesus' relation to the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit's relation to the everyday moral and liturgical life of the church. As Yves Congar labored to point out, our salvation is as Pentecostal as it is Paschal; and, as Franz Josef van Beeck has argued, the divine circumincession is mirrored in the equiprimordial character of cult, conduct, and creed.

The second hesitation concerns "charity as the preeminent ecclesiological virtue," again an entirely genial notion. I would like to explore further the interweaving of the three theological virtues, even while agreeing with the preeminence of charity, of infused love, by suggesting that it is as foundational as it is formative. Perhaps I needn't worry, but I must admit I do worry, that there might be a bit of slippage between the notions of "praxis" and "charity," such that the "infused" character of the fire of divine love might be obscured. However, if one is disposed towards a chastened discourse of "postmodernity," then Christian praxis as potentially ideological would always profit from a close companionship with charity as a gift along with faith and hope, with a certain emphasis on the transcending yet sacramental character of their presence and enactment.

And that leads to my third hesitation, if you will permit me to complicate the matter further. What needs to be added to our exploration is discourse about three aspects of the human response to divine initiative, namely imagination, memory, and will, or perhaps better, human agency. Though present inchoately in earlier texts, a theological anthropology is of particular importance in the Donatist controversy. Texts both condemning and defending the Donatists depended upon proposals for how imaginatively to construe the Scriptures so as to authorize an ecclesial practice, how a selective use of memory could produce

a legitimating tradition, and a theory of human agency and its relation to divine action authorized ecclesial practice.

In sum I am suggesting that the thematics of "one Lord, one faith, one Baptism" would be helpfully developed through a consideration of the systematic interconnection of the trinitarian shape of Christian life, as lived by the three theological virtues, through the employment of human capacities in response to the work of the Spirit.

I hope that in all this I am actually addressing threads of discourse that would not be strange to Augustine at all. Were I to have the leisure to do so, I would ground what I am suggesting in a textual study of the *De Doctrina Christiana*, where rules for life are rules for interpreting the Scriptures, where the journey that is life is the journey that is reading, where the same charity is at work in both, where *doctrina* is best translated "teaching" and teaching is rhetorical and empowering. Let me quote briefly from Chapter 38 of Book One:

But sight shall displace faith; and hope shall be swallowed up in that perfect bliss to which we shall come: love on the other hand, shall wax greater when these others fail. For if we love by faith that which as yet we see not, how much more shall we love it when we begin to see! And if we love by hope that which as yet we have not reached, how much more shall we love it when we reach it!

In *De Doctrina Christiana* there is a powerful sense of the work of the Holy Spirit, such that Augustine goes so far as to say that Christ and the Scriptures give way lest they impede our journey home to God; that the virtues of good reading and good living must be in harmony with one another. By contrast to Augustine's reactions as you have considered them, the *De Doctrina Christiana* does not propose fear as a primary hermeneutic principle, and the harmony of all things is clearly what awaits us beyond this life. We love by means of hope and faith: they cannot be separated.

AUGUSTINE AND COERCION

Investigating the actual and often messy development of thinking in one period or author leads to wonderment about the same dynamics in other periods. Thus your remarks on how Augustine changed his mind, as it were, about the use of coercion, about the relation of the state to the church, of how to deal with those who are outsiders from outside, and apparent outsiders even when within, leads me to reflect on a similar alliance of Christianity with forms of coercion in another period of its history. I am thinking of the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century when an extraordinary set of proposals were made for the "development of doctrine." The three paradigms for theology as suggested by Kant, Hegel, and Schleiermacher required a redefining of the three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity in concert with a redefinition of the basic doctrines of Creator, Savior, and Sanctifier in a manner in which there is a certain, albeit highly civilized, coercion of belief, with concrete social and ecclesial consequences. The role of this latter-day Donatist movement,

however, shifts between the actual church and its philosophical/theological revisers. I promise to descend into details for only a moment.

Kant believed that Christianity would survive only if it abandoned its claims to revelation, miracles, grace, and the religious experience of worship, so as to make room for modern faith—a chastened faith controlled by rationality. What he proposed was a merely formal savior-figure and a faith which, far from being infused in our souls, is indeed an attempted leap beyond our human limits, foreshortened no doubt, but a futile leap nonetheless. The faith which modernity finds embarrassing is a concrete, particular faith in just this man, Jesus, raised from the dead. Faith leads to, requires hope in, the resurrection and will not be coerced by living “within the limits of reason alone,” in an Enlightenment church that is true and pure.

Hegel presumed that Christianity would survive only if it abandoned its role as a mere “folk religion” and proved itself capable of being the driving force of every culture, of all of history, thereby proving itself to be the best of all possible modern hopes—not a pagan hope baptized, but Christian hope which is constantly being transformed into the contemporary agenda of human striving. Thus he found it necessary to pass quickly from the particularity of the representational to the universality of the conceptual and pneumatic. In his correspondence of 1816, for example, he is respectful of Roman Catholic specificity, but quick to say that the Protestant Christian has neither councils nor hierarchy. Instead, he asserts, “our universities are our churches,” it is in the animation of civil institutions that our hope lies. Perhaps less than Kant, or in a different manner, Hegel was struggling to find the true and pure church. The hope modernity finds embarrassing is a concrete, particular hope that in this “mean time” our business is not to construct ever new schemes of meaning but to faithfully perform what God has revealed there is to do.

Schleiermacher’s problem is the messy particularity of the embodied church as opposed to the comparatively pleasant and reassuring experience of religion. Of course, no mystic would affirm such Romantic naiveté of the first edition of the *Speeches* (and Schleiermacher himself undergoes a change of mind), but there can be little doubt that our contemporaries are tempted to search for such experience. Schleiermacher presumed that Christianity will survive only if the virtue of charity, the fire of love could resist the corruption of embodiment and rest in the unity with the “universe” which marks that interior moment which belongs to the “church of the triumphant.” Schleiermacher was correct to show disdain for the petty practitioners of a cautious and merely “practical” spiritual life. But the infused virtue of charity still drives the believer towards the inevitably messy business of the church, not indeed to “religion” but to the everydayness of the love of neighbor. And charity is that which will abide.

The contemporary temptation, the same at eighteenth and nineteenth and twentieth centuries’ ends, does produce a situation similar to the Donatist problems, rooted in a subtle but enduring form of coercion from the last centuries. It is not strange to me that a philosopher so concerned about both

tradition and praxis as Heidegger, borrowed from Kierkegaard and Augustine for his earliest project. Nor does it seem strange that the late twentieth century church exercises coercion of a sort in face of this inherited situation of "oppression," perpetuating violence with violence. I am aware that there is very real physical and emotional suffering which the church faces around the world, and my concern here pales by comparison with such suffering. Nonetheless, the resultant Donatist-like situation is no less real, and no less confusing. When and why do certain "local" churches or certain groups throughout the church become our new Donatists? How should we relate to them?

KEY FEATURES OF THE HISTORY AND THEOLOGY OF DONATISM

If I were to continue reading the actual history of the debate between Augustine and the Donatists as an instance of a perduring set of problems, along the lines you have suggested, in preparation for a more general consideration of the perennial problem of claims to being the "true" or the "pure" church, what more would I need to investigate? By way of concluding let me just list a few points which excite my curiosity:

1. How does establishing and maintaining the lines of inside/outside, true/false, pure/impure depend on but also generate a practice and theory of interpreting the Scriptures?

2. What are the actual forms of coercion involved, such as the passage from martyrdom, to persecutions, to financial and legal sanctions, to the more subtle forms of intellectual and social coercion?

3. What are the notions associated with a theory of human agency that are compatible with the requirements of sacramental theology and the notion of the infused theological virtues?

Once again, let me thank Professor Cardman for setting my mind on a path of new learning.

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