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To cite this article: Anthony Dupont (2018): Mystical Experiences and Mystical Theology in Augustine of Hippo? A Reconsideration of the Sources (conf. 9, an. quant. 33, doctr. chr. 2), *Medieval Mystical Theology*, DOI: [10.1080/20465726.2018.1472416](https://doi.org/10.1080/20465726.2018.1472416)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/20465726.2018.1472416>

Published online: 16 May 2018.

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Mystical Experiences and Mystical Theology in Augustine of Hippo? A Reconsideration of the Sources (*conf. 9, an. quant. 33, doctr. chr. 2*)

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ABSTRACT

The current article addresses the question concerning Augustine's mysticism from two perspectives: practice and theory. In the *Confessiones*, Augustine recounts how he reached an experience of God – the 'Ostia-ecstasy', shortly after his baptism. After an extensive state of the art on the debate of Augustine's mysticism, the first part of this article studies *Confessiones* IX, 23–6, in which Augustine describes his experience at Ostia. Next, this passage is compared with an experience of similar nature Augustine had in Milan, before his conversion (*Confessiones* VII, 16; 23; 26). The second part deals with Augustine's theories on the ascent of the soul, as he formulates them in *De animae quantitate* XXXIII, 70–6 and *De doctrina christiana* II, 9–11.

KEYWORDS

Augustine of Hippo (354–430); 'Ostia-ecstasy'; ascent of the soul; *Confessiones*; *De animae quantitate*; *De doctrina christiana*

It is not very clear whether Augustine was personally a mystic. The question has been hotly debated in a bewildering range of studies on this subject.¹ The following examples exemplify the various arguments and interpretations advanced in the debate.

Ephraem Hendrikx has contended that: 'Augustine was a great enthusiast but he was no mystic.' Hendrikx has pointed out that Augustine's quest for wisdom, although it was always reliant on God's grace, was unfailingly active, while mystical knowledge of God is essentially passive and a gift.² Frederick Van Fleteren has taken Jean Gerson's description of mystical theology (*De mystica theologia* 1.6.6) as knowledge of God through experience acquired in the embrace of unifying love as his starting point. On the basis of this definition, Van Fleteren has concluded that Augustine was not a mystic, because what others have described as Augustine's mystical experiences were in fact primarily intellectual. These experiences always sprang from the intellect rather than the will.³ Others, such

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¹There are three thorough overviews of this discussion: A. Mandouze surveys the discussion between 1863 and 1954: Mandouze, 'Où en est la question de la mystique augustinienne?'. E. Hendrikx deals with the 1936–1975 period: Hendrikx, 'Augustins Verhältnis zur Mystik'. Robert E. Wright's article goes up to 1999 and contains a list of recent secondary literature: Wright, 'Mysticism'. For a succinct overview of the various topics addressed within this debate, see van Bavel, 'Augustinus en mystieke ervaring'.

²Hendrikx, *Augustins Verhältnis zur Mystik*, 176.

³Van Fleteren, 'Mysticism in the *Confessiones*', 317.

as Hans Meyer, have concurred with this; they regard Augustine as an intellectualist and not as a mystic.⁴ Kurt Ruh, in his impressive four-volume study of mysticism, calls Augustine 'Ein Vater der Mystik' (a father of mysticism) but 'kein Mystiker' (no mystic). Although Augustine was an inexhaustible source for medieval mysticism and an unforgettable teacher of affective spirituality, Ruth does not think he had any mystical experiences himself.⁵

As Augustine's thinking is characterized by the awareness that there is a spiritual reality beyond the human consciousness, a reality with which individuals can commune in one way or other, Gerald Bonner has argued that Augustine may be called a mystic.⁶ Cuthbert Butler was even more emphatic:

Augustine is for me the Prince of Mystics, uniting in himself, in a manner I do not find in any other, the two elements of mystical experience, viz., the most penetrating intellectual vision into things divine, and a love of God that was a consuming passion.⁷

J.J. O' Meara has concluded:

Perhaps it might be true to say that Augustine, like many others, had many potentialities not all of which could be realized. If he had not been chosen – against his will – for the See of Hippo, a certain mystical vein in him might have made itself more manifest [see *conf.* 10.40.65]. For that there was a streak of mysticism in him can hardly be doubted.⁸

According to Anders Nygren, Augustine was a mystic – and therefore not a Christian. Nygren bases this view on his argument that Augustine's concept of love corresponds to Greek *eros* (the soul's selfish longing to reach God) and is devoid of Christian love, especially of biblical *agape* (the self-sacrificing love of the other).⁹ Nygren's argument has, however, been strongly contested by other Augustine scholars.¹⁰

What is striking about this debate about Augustine's possible mysticism is the diversity of definitions of mysticism that are used, and of the evidence from Augustine's writings that is produced. Despite the diversity of answers and their underlying methodologies, there is unanimous agreement on the fact that Augustine exercised an important influence on the history of Western theological thought during the thousand years that followed his death. His impact on the medieval mystics, for instance, is unmistakeable. John Burnaby has called Augustine 'the father of Christian Mysticism'.¹¹ Van Fleteren has explained this epithet:

Such an [apparent] influence on mystical literature is not surprising in view of Augustine's enormous authority during the Christian Middle Ages. All were followers of Augustine. To be Christian was to be Augustinian. Augustine was not in the mainstream; he defined the mainstream. In this sense, Augustine certainly was a 'founder' of medieval mysticism.¹²

⁴Meyer, 'War Augustin Intellektualist oder Mystiker?'.

⁵Ruh, *Geschichte der abendländischen Mystik*, Bd I, 86 and 117.

⁶Bonner, 'Augustine and Mysticism', 117.

⁷Butler, *Western Mysticism*, 20.

⁸O' Meara, *The Young Augustine*, 203.

⁹Nygren, *Eros et Agapè*.

¹⁰For an overview of the debate on Nygren's claim, see: Dupont, 'Using or Enjoying Humans'.

¹¹Burnaby, *Amor Dei*, 6.

¹²Van Fleteren, 'Editors' Conclusion', 552.

Thus, Augustine not only provided the mystics with a theological language but also with basic elements of theology that became the fundamental characteristics of mysticism in general, and of the writings of the Middle Dutch mystics in particular, such as Ruusbroec, Hadewijch, and Beatrice of Nazareth. Thus, Augustine and the Middle Dutch mystics shared a strong focus on Christology, on the Trinity, on the Eucharist, on *amor* (love) and *illuminatio* (inner illumination). Albert Deblaere has inventoried these fundamental characteristics of Middle Dutch mysticism.¹³ One of the main characteristics of Middle Dutch mysticism that appear on his list, however, is largely absent from Augustine's writings: bridal mysticism. Augustine was not overly interested in the Song of Songs. Whenever he does discuss this book of the Bible, he avoids a relational (erotic) interpretation of the Song of Songs (which sings the praises of the personal love between God and the individual human), which he must certainly have known from Origen and Ambrose, preferring an ecclesiological interpretation instead. For him, the bride of the Song of Songs invariably symbolizes the Church, often the Church menaced by the Donatists, and the love relationship of the Song of Songs is a symbol of the relationship between God and His Church in its totality.¹⁴

The current article will address the question concerning Augustine's mysticism from two perspectives: practice and theory. First, it lets Augustine himself speak. In the ninth book of the *Confessiones*, he recounts how, together with his mother, he reached a *visio Dei*, a viewing and touching of God. This first part quotes the relevant passage from *Confessiones* IX, 23–6, provides a brief commentary, and places it within the context of Augustine's biography and the history of his conversion, but without immediately applying to it any theoretical framework. That is the subject of the second part of this article, which deals with Augustine's own theories on the vision of God. Augustine gives a schematic treatise on this subject in *De animae quantitate* XXXIII, 70–6 and *De doctrina christiana* II, 9–11.

Augustine's own experience: *Confessiones* IX, 23–6¹⁵

Augustine, his mother Monnica, his son Adeodatus, and his two dear friends Alypius and Evodius departed from Milan in early September 387. Augustine's life had taken a decisive turn in that city. After a long quest for wisdom, he had found in Neo-Platonism and in the sermons of Ambrose answers that gave him the strength to convert to Christianity. He converted, was baptized, and established a kind of small religious community together with a few acquaintances and friends. Now that he had found God, a secular career no longer had any appeal for him. This made him ready to leave the Italian peninsula and to sail back to his native land, North Africa. He consequently undertook the long and tiresome journey across land to Rome, and then to Ostia, Rome's sea port on the mouth of the Tiber. In Ostia, the party waited to board a ship to Carthage, but a blockade of the harbour prevented their departure. The small group decided to take the opportunity to rest from

¹³Deblaere, *Altniederländische Mystik*, 111.

¹⁴Cf. La Bonnardièrre, 'Le Cantique des Cantiques dans l'œuvre de saint Augustin'.

¹⁵For a discussion of *Confessiones* IX, 10/23–10/26, see, for instance: Blanchard, 'Connaissance religieuse'. Coyle, 'In Praise of Monica'. Dobbins, 'Silence and Speech in the Ostia Experience'. Dupont and Strozynski, 'Augustine's Ostia Revisited'. Hattrup, 'Confessiones IX'. Henry, 'Die Vision zu Ostia'. Lancel, *Saint Augustin*, 169–74. Mandouze, *L'extase d'Ostie*. Quinn, 'Mysticism in the Confessiones'. Skutella, M. (tr.), Solignac, A. (intr. notes), *Les Confessions, Oeuvres de Saint Augustin 13–14*, Paris 1962, see especially the *notes complémentaires* concerning *Confessiones* IX in: vol. 14, 549–56. Torchia, 'Contemplation'. Vaught, *Encounters with God in Augustine's Confessiones*.

the journey from Milan to Ostia and to prepare for the voyage to Carthage. They retired to the calm of a villa. Mother and son were standing at a window with a view of the inner garden when they experienced a spiritual climax. Some 10 years later, around 397 (–401), Augustine wrote down this experience in the *Confessiones*, the story of the odyssey of his soul.

The house had an inner garden. Gardens are important places in the *Confessiones*.¹⁶ Thus, there is the orchard in Thagaste, where the young Augustine and his comrades stole pears from the trees (book II). For Augustine, this orchard symbolizes the garden of paradise, and the theft of the pears stands for the Fall of humankind. Adam and Eve lost their original innocence, their goodness and freedom in the garden of paradise. Augustine confesses that, in stealing those pears – an act for which he could think of no reason – he had chosen evil for evil's sake. This is the place where Augustine, according to his own description, distanced himself from God. He turned away from God and turned instead to earthly desires. The second garden is in Milan (book VIII). Augustine had reached the intellectual realization that the truth could only be found in Christianity, but he could not bring himself to actually convert. He sat under a fig tree in despair, until he heard a child's voice calling: 'take and read'. When he subsequently read the Pauline pericope from *Romans* 13: 13–14, this gave him such resolve that he gave up his old life and requested baptism. Thus the second garden is the garden of turning around and returning, the garden of recovery. The inner garden in Ostia is the third garden. It is not without significance that this is an *inner* garden, because this garden symbolizes a turning inwards, the entering into his own heart. This turning inwards, towards his own interior, will permit Augustine to touch God. In their hearts, Augustine and his mother return to their interior, transcend themselves and there discover God, the higher things. The garden is a sign of the final goal, the completion of human life, which is life together with God. The three gardens symbolize the three stages in Augustine's life, in every human's life: distancing/turning away, turning around/converting, and turning inwards/transcending.

XI, 23

But because the day when she was to quit this life was drawing near – a day known to you, though we were ignorant of it – she and I happened to be alone, through the mysterious workings of your will, as I believe. We stood leaning against a window which looked out on a garden within the house where we were staying at Ostia on the Tiber, for there, far from the crowds, we were recruiting our strength after the long journey, in preparation for our voyage overseas. We were alone, conferring very intimately. Forgetting what lay in the past, and stretching out to what was ahead,¹⁷ we inquired between ourselves in the light of present truth, the Truth which is yourself,¹⁸ what the eternal life of the saints would be like. Eye has not seen nor ear heard nor human heart conceived it,¹⁹ yet with the mouth of our hearts wide open we panted thirstily for the celestial streams of your fountain, the fount of life which is with you,²⁰ that bedewed from it according to our present capacity we might in our little measure think upon a thing so great.²¹

¹⁶See: Tavad, *Les jardins de Saint Augustin*.

¹⁷See Phil 3:13.

¹⁸See Jn 14:6; 2 Pt 1:12; *Enneads* 5.1.4.

¹⁹See Is 64:4; 1 Cor 2:9–10.

²⁰See Ps 35:10 (36:9).

²¹This article uses Maria Boulding's translation of the *Confessiones*: Boulding and Rotelle, *The Confessions*, 226–9.

For Augustine, this conversation in the garden is very important. The ninth book of the *Confessiones* recounts Augustine's first steps in the Christian faith, the period from his conversion up to his mother's death in 387. He hardly mentions his baptism and the preparation for it. The high point of this book is the conversation he had with his mother and his mother's subsequent death. The *Confessiones* are not strictly speaking a biography in the sense that Augustine runs over the historical facts. In the framework of the *Confessiones*, his baptism is a fact and nothing more. It is the factual expression of an inner reality. And this is precisely what the *Confessiones* are: a travel account of his inner quest. Augustine recounts the wanderings of his heart, and what is important from this perspective is how he came to his personal conversion (book VIII), the experiences he shared with his mother in Ostia, and the manner in which Monnica accepted her own death (book IX). These three events, these three experiences, constitute a milestone in Augustine's inner life. The Ostia experience and his mother's death are an inner confirmation of his conversion, and they strengthen him on his journey through the Christian faith, a journey he started at his conversion.

The aim of the *Confessiones* is to provide a lesson on the relationship between God and the human being, on how God is present in the life of a human being, on the workings of God's grace. Twice Augustine emphasizes this grace in the sentences that introduce his account of the events in Ostia. His mother lay dying, but God alone knew when she would die. Knowledge of Monnica's approaching death is entirely in God's hands, it is outside the realm of human knowledge. He also interprets the fact that he and his mother were standing alone at the window as the result of God's providence. God had ensured that they would be together at that time and in that place. In other words: God had made the experience of the mother and the son possible. Augustine places both his mother's death and their common experience in Ostia fully in God's hands.

Before Augustine had converted to Christianity, he had had a religious experience of a similar nature in Milan, after reading the books of the Neo-Platonists (386, *Confessiones* VII, 10, 16; VII, 17, 23; VII, 20, 26). These Neo-Platonists had taught Augustine to turn away from the world, to seek happiness within his own interior, and to find God there. There are similarities between the religious experience in Milan and here in Ostia: the distancing from the exterior world, the turning inwards to the soul, the progressing through the various levels of reality, culminating in an encounter with the Divine that lasts for just a moment. But there are also fundamental differences. The first experience helped him to convert to Christianity, but he had not yet converted at the time he experienced it. In other words, even though it may have been a 'religious experience', an experience of higher things, it was certainly not a Christian experience. As he wrote himself, Augustine had not yet obtained at that time the necessary Christian framework, nor, importantly, the Christian attitude (of humility) to be able to fully understand the experience that he was granted. A fundamental difference is that he had the first experience alone, whereas he lived the second experience together with his mother. The first experience shows that Augustine initially searched by himself and that he was convinced that he had reached God on his own. Gradually, Augustine learned to discover that this is impossible. This is why it is precisely only in a dialogue with his mother that he is able to experience God fully. Augustine regarded this first experience – wrongly as he later confesses – as the result of his own thinking, and therefore as proof of his intellectual superiority, as a

confirmation of his total autonomy. He fully ascribes his second experience to God, and confidently abandons himself to heteronomy.

As he continues his description, Augustine explains the nature of his experience of God more precisely. From the start he emphasizes that it is not a matter, of course, for a human, a changeable creature, to have experience of God, the unchangeable Creator: 'according to our present capacity we might in our little measure think upon a thing so great'. Human beings are limited, and cannot, therefore, reach the divine on their own. In other words, humans cannot do this without God's grace. Augustine then describes how he and his mother came into contact with the truth. This is not something that they did on their own strength, simply with the aid of their own capacities. Augustine writes that this conversation, which culminated in an experience of the truth, took place from the start 'in the light of the Truth' who is God. God was present from the start. From the beginning, it was, in fact, a conversation of three. Moreover, God as the Truth and the Word was the epistemological basis who enabled Augustine and Monnica to speak truthfully and to (be able to) discover God in this conversation. This is why Augustine calls God the 'source of life' here, the life-giving source of everything.

IX, 24

Our colloquy led us to the point where the pleasures of the body's senses, however intense and in however brilliant a material light enjoyed, seemed unworthy not merely of comparison but even of remembrance beside the joy of that life, and we lifted ourselves in longing yet more ardent toward *That Which is*,²² and step by step traversed all bodily creatures and heaven itself, whence sun and moon and stars shed their light upon the earth. Higher still we mounted by inward thought and wondering discourse on your works, and we arrived at the summit of our own minds; and this too we transcended, to touch that land of never-failing plenty²³ where you pasture Israel²⁴ for ever with the food of truth.

Life there is the Wisdom through whom all these things are made,²⁵ and all others that have been or ever will be; but Wisdom herself is not made: she is as she always has been and will be for ever. Rather should we say that in her there is no 'has been' or 'will be', but only being, for she is eternal, but past and future do not belong to eternity.

And as we talked and panted for it, we just touched the edge of it by the utmost leap of our hearts; then sighing and unsatisfied, we left the first-fruits of our spirit²⁶ captive there, and returned to the noise of articulate speech, where a word has beginning and end. How different from your Word, our Lord, who abides in himself, and grows not old, but renews all things.²⁷

Augustine and Monnica's religious experience took place in different stages. Son and mother traversed through the material world and transcended it step by step. Augustine admits that the earthly life, the physical, has beautiful, delightful, and enjoyable aspects. But Augustine goes even further. In a strongly philosophical way, he says that he progressed from beings to being itself: he progressed from the things that exist to the real foundation of their being. Augustine and Monnica transcended creation and thus

²²Ps 4:9(8).

²³See Ez 34:14.

²⁴See Ps 79:2(80:1).

²⁵See Prv 8:23–31.

²⁶Rom 8:23.

²⁷See Wis 7:27.

discovered the Creator. The act of distancing themselves from the physical, the material, the tangible, the sensory, goes hand in hand with a movement of turning inwards. They are distancing themselves from external reality. Turned inwards, they obtain a true conception of earthly reality, they obtain the insight that the earth is God's creation.

Turned inwards, they discover God in their own innermost being. The different steps in this specific experience correspond to the different steps in Augustine's conversion narrative in general. According to Augustine, conversion involves a threefold movement: a turning away from the lower things (of the world, the earthly things), a turning around that is both a turning inwards and a turning towards the higher things (God). Augustine describes in the *Confessiones* how this movement of conversion consists of three moments, three stages, three phases. (1) *External*: Augustine observes that God cannot be found in the world, in what is external, in everything that occurs outside and around humans. God cannot be found in the material or in the physical. (2) *Interior*: This observation causes Augustine to turn inwards. He goes in search of happiness and truth within his own being, in his own mental and emotional world. Given that God cannot be found outside, He must be found inside. Augustine begins an interior search for God. He describes this very succinctly: 'Lo, you were within, but I outside, seeking there for you' (*Confessiones* X, 27, 38). 'You were more intimately present to me than my innermost being, and higher than the highest peak of my spirit' (*Confessiones* III, 6, 11). (3) *The higher things, the highest*: During and through this interior search, Augustine discovers the higher things: that God is within the human being. God can be found inside, within human beings' innermost self. The Ostia experience too is constructed according to this threefold movement. What is more, we can state that what Augustine experienced in Ostia is the culmination point of the entire conversion process: turning away, interiorization, and transcendence find their (temporary) climax in the experience of God.

What is striking about the 'ecstasy of Ostia' (as it is often known) is the momentary nature of the climax of the contemplation. Augustine recounts how he came to touch God together with his mother during a conversation about eternal life. But this was a very fleeting moment, the duration of a sigh, one heartbeat. Thus, he writes in *Enarratio in Psalmum* 47, 7–10²⁸ that in this life we can sometimes grasp something of God's house, touch something that transcends our souls, see something unchangeable, even though this happens only in passing and briefly. This corresponds with what Augustine wrote previously about the limited human capacity to experience God – 'according to our present capacity'. As humans, as finite beings, he and Monnica are capable only to a very limited degree of experiencing the eternal God. Augustine states very explicitly that God is eternal, immortal, unchangeable. As long as human beings – who are mortal and transitory – are still on earth, they can experience God only in a fleeting way. The timeless 'enjoying of God' is reserved for the life that comes hereafter. The transitory human being can only experience God, who transcends time and space, in a transitory way. Because of the essential difference between humans and God, the difference between creature and Creator, there is always an essential difference between the soul and God. Monnica and Augustine touch the Wisdom, but they do not grasp her, nor are they grasped by her, and it is moreover a very momentary touch. Mother and son are not engulfed by God, their experience does not engulf them.

²⁸CCL 38, 543–6.

Augustine's Ostia experience was not a one-off event without consequences: 'we left the first-fruits of our spirit captive there'.²⁹ This explicit experience of eternal life created in Augustine a life-long desire for God and gave him the believer's hope that this would once become reality. What is more, it taught him that human beings in fact already dwell in God and God dwells in them, even though the full experience of this mutual indwelling will only come to them after their earthly life has drawn to a close.

IX, 25

Then we said,

'If the tumult of the flesh fell silent for someone,
and silent too were the phantasms of earth, sea and air,
silent the heavens,
and the very soul silent to itself,
that it might pass beyond itself by not thinking of its own being;
if dreams and revelations known through its imagination were silent,
if every tongue, and every sign, and whatever is subject to transience
were wholly stilled for him
for if anyone listens, all these things will tell him,
'We did not make ourselves;³⁰
he made us who abides for ever,'³¹-
and having said this they held their peace
for they had pricked the listening ear to him who made them;
and then he alone were to speak,
not through things that are made, but of himself,
that we might hear his Word,
not through fleshly tongue nor angel's voice,
nor thundercloud,³²
nor any riddling parable,³³
hear him unmediated, whom we love in all these things,
hear him without them,
as now we stretch out³⁴ and in a flash of thought
touch that eternal Wisdom who abides above all things;
if this could last,
and all other visions, so far inferior, be taken away,
and this sight alone ravish him who saw it,
and engulf him and hide him away, kept for inward joys,
so that this moment of knowledge -
this passing moment that left us aching for more -
should there be life eternal,
would not *Enter into the joy of your Lord*³⁵

²⁹The innermost and highest part of the human being, the place where God dwells in the human, Augustine calls 'the first-fruits of our spirit'. The human soul encounters God: *primitiae spiritus*. A comparable expression is *os cordis*, the mouth of the heart (IX, 10, 23), which he uses when he begins his description of the Ostia experience. Augustine often describes this highest function, place, act of the intellect, which is able intuitively to feel the highest Wisdom, with the technical term *acies mentis*. By using this term *acies mentis*, Augustine places himself in a tradition. Plato, Cicero, Plotinus, and Ambrose of Milan used the same term or related terminology (the eyes of the spirit, the eyes of the heart, the intellect: *oculus mentis*, *oculus cordis*, *intellectus*) to describe the highest part of the human intellect, that part of the soul that can directly sense the truth. Van Fleteren, 'Acies mentis', 5.

³⁰See Ps 99(100):3.

³¹See Sir 18:1; Ps 32(33):11; 116(117):2; Is 40:8; Jn 12:34.

³²See Ps 76:18(77:17); Ex 19:19; Jn 12:29.

³³See 1 Cor 13:12; Num 12:6-8.

³⁴See Phil 3:13.

³⁵Mt 25:21.

be this, and this alone?
And when, when will this be?
When we all rise again, but not all are changed?³⁶

‘Our heart is unquiet until it rests in you’ (*Confessiones* I, 1, 1). This is the confession that Augustine makes at the beginning of his *Confessiones*. Here in Ostia, his own experience confirms this. It is only when the soul becomes quiet that it can hear God. The surrounding world changes rapidly, constantly. People must constantly decide between a multiplicity of choices. According to Augustine, it is impossible to find rest in this abundance, speed, and changeability, to find God there. Humans can become open to God only in inner calm, and find rest only in God. By becoming quiet, humans will be able to listen to the real voice of creation, and this is the voice of the Creator which echoes in the work of his hands. God’s voice can be heard in human silence. Augustine and Monnica are conversing. In their conversation, they scrutinize the foundations of creation and thus they transcend their conversation and their own words, and are addressed by the Word who is God. Their dialogue leads them to the insight that creation points to God, is a sign of God. They then also transcend this insight: they reach God himself, unmediated and directly. They reach God no longer through the medium of creation, but they are in touch with Wisdom itself as the source and culmination of everything that exists.

Augustine realizes that he will never experience this again in this life. After this highest experience of the Word itself, he returns to the noise of his and his mother’s concrete voices. This return to contingency, to changeability, Augustine regards not as a fall, as a form of loss. He is mindful of the permanent difference between the divine and the physical. Instead, he regards this return as a turning point in his life as a believer, as the strengthening of a life-long desire. Some pages further in the *Confessiones*, Augustine writes two sentences that describe his experience of contemplation and of the return that always takes place afterwards:

Nowhere amid all these things which I survey under your guidance do I find safe haven for my soul except in you; only there are the scattered elements of my being collected, so that no part of me may escape from you. From time to time you lead me into an inward experience quite unlike any other, a sweetness beyond understanding. If ever it is brought to fullness in me, my life will not be what it is now, though what it will be I cannot tell. But I am dragged down again by my weight of woe, sucked back into everyday things and held fast in them; grievously I lament, but just as grievously am I held.³⁷

Whether Augustine is also describing any mystical experiences here – similar or not to the Ostia experience – has become the subject of intense debate.

The fact that he returned from the experience demonstrates once more that he was not engulfed by God in it. That he returned to the conversation with his mother also shows that he and his mother did not merge into each other during the experience. They stood before God together, but separately. They retained their identity, integrity, individuality in this experience. The return confirms once again that this experience of joy is not a lasting experience on earth, that it will only be so after the resurrection: ‘When we all rise again, but not all are changed.’

³⁶See 1 Cor 15:51.

³⁷*Confessiones* X, 40, 65.

IX, 26

So did I speak, though not in this wise exactly, nor in these same words. Yet you know, O Lord, how on that very day amid this talk of ours that seemed to make the world with all its charms grow cheap, she said, 'For my part, my son, I find pleasure no longer in anything that this life holds. What I am doing here still, or why I tarry, I do not know, for all worldly hope has withered away for me. One thing only there was for which I desired to linger a while in this life: to see you a Catholic Christian before I died. And this my God has granted to me more lavishly than I could have hoped, letting me see you even spurning earthly happiness to be his servant. What now keeps me here?'

Monnica initially wanted three things for her son: Augustine as the father of her grandchildren, with a professional career in a socially desirable marriage, and a convert to Christianity. By the time she is in Ostia, she has purified this desire. Her only wish at that point is that Augustine would be a Christian. After his conversion in Milan, Monnica's deepest wish had been fulfilled, and she considered her work on earth as complete. Now that she can love Augustine in Christ, she is ready to enter eternal life. Her religious experience in Ostia confirms this: Augustine has converted and she has encountered God. From that point on, the world means nothing to her anymore. Five days later she falls ill, and she dies shortly afterwards. The religious experience with her son deepened her faith. Although she had previously indicated that she wanted to die in Africa, and had made preparations to be buried beside her husband Patricius, she tells Augustine on her sickbed that this has become totally irrelevant to her. She no longer fears to die and be buried in Italy, as long as Augustine will pray for her. After her experience of the divine, she rejects all earthly cares, such as the choice of a burial place. Monnica is ready for the other journey, her true fatherland is not Thagaste in North Africa, but the heavenly Jerusalem.

Augustine is overcome with sadness after his mother dies. This is the second time in the *Confessiones* that we encounter a grieving Augustine. A very dear friend died when he had just become a professor. The sadness at this friend's death tormented him to such an extent that he had to leave Carthage because everything there reminded him of his dead friend (*Confessiones* IV, 4, 7–IV, 12, 19). His mourning for his dead friend, in the period before his conversion, differed from his sadness at the death of his mother, characterized as it was by his acceptance of the Christian faith. Augustine indicates in his *Confessiones* that his initial views on friendship were wrong: it was friendship that was not marked by God, a purely interpersonal relationship of common interests. What is more, not only had he been forgetful of God in this relationship, he had even put his friend in the place of God. He loved his friend as he should have loved God. This is why his friend's death left him inconsolable. He regarded death as his friend's final end. Later, when Augustine wrote the *Confessiones*, he realized that this was not 'true' friendship: friendship given by God. This also explains the difference in his experience of grief and sadness for his mother. He admits that he misses his mother too, the separation is just as hurtful to him as was that of his friend – particularly given that his mother had become so important in his life. The difference is, however, that he loves his mother in God. That permits him to entrust his sadness to God, to find rest in God through his tears. This is what he has learned in Ostia together with his mother: surrender and grace. Augustine incidentally also mentions this aspect of grace when he says he cannot remember the precise words of the conversation with his mother, but that God remembers them. On the one hand, this repeats his conclusion that what happened there cannot be expressed

in human language, transcends human language. On the other hand, by telling us that God will remember the precise words of that conversation, he once again places the conversation in God's hands.

Theoretical part

De animae quantitate XXXIII, 70–6

The texts from Augustine's oeuvre that are most frequently examined in the context of mysticism are often subdivided into two categories: (a) the autobiographical works, where Augustine recounts his own experiences and (b) the programmatic works, which contain more systematic and theoretical discussions on contemplation – the vision of God – and mysticism – the experience of God. (a) In *Confessiones* VII, 10, 16; VII, 17, 23; VII, 20, 26; IX, 10, 23–25; X, 40, 65 and *Enarratio in Psalmum* 134, 6 Augustine (very probably) describes his own experiences. (b) The second category consists mainly of early works, and they set the programme for the ascent of the soul: *De ordine* II, xi, 30–xx, 53; *De animae quantitate* XXXIII, 70–6; *De musica* VI; and the entire *De vera religione*. These texts perhaps contain an analysis of Augustine's own experiences, but they are not explicitly autobiographical, although they are written in the same style and vocabulary as the autobiographical texts.

One text fragment that is always mentioned in studies that address the question whether Augustine in any of his works describes a personal mystical experience, or whether he simply gives a general description of mystical theology, is *De animae quantitate* XXXIII, 70–6. Thus, Cuthbert Butler has regarded this passage as 'the nearest approach to a formulation of mystical theology'.³⁸ Augustine wrote this treatise in Rome, after his baptism, probably in 388. It is a dialogue with Evodius, later Bishop of Uzalis, in order to prove to the latter that the soul, although it has no physical quantity, is nonetheless a great reality.³⁹ The greatness of the soul is located not in its temporal or spatial extent, but in its strength and power, its *potentia*.⁴⁰

There are seven levels or steps – Augustine speaks of *gradus* – in the soul's power (*potentia*).⁴¹ The first three disclose the power of the soul in the body, the following two comprise the power of the soul with regard to itself, and the last two the power of the soul's presence with God.⁴²

On the first level stands the life-giving power.⁴³ This provides and sustains life. Humans share this power with plants.

³⁸Butler, *Western Mysticism*, 48.

³⁹*Retractationes* I, 8 provides a short summary of the content of *De animae quantitate*. Augustine wrote a dialogue with the following questions concerning the *anima*: id est, unde sit, qualis sit, quanta sit, cur corpori fuerit data, cum ad corpus venerit qualis efficiatur, qualis abscesserit. He does this: ut eam, si possemus, ostenderemus corporalis quantitatis non esse, et tamen magnum aliquid esse [...] (CCL 57, 21–33).

Evodius was from Thagaste and first met Augustine in 387 in Italy after the latter's baptism. At the time, Evodius himself was already a baptized Christian. *De animae quantitate* and *De libero arbitrio* represent a conversation between Augustine and Evodius.

⁴⁰*De animae quantitate* XXXIV, 77: 'animae vis ac potentia' (CSEL 89, 225). *De animae quantitate* XXXV, 79: 'animae potentia' (CSEL 89, 228).

⁴¹Augustine powerfully summarizes this a few lines further: *De animae quantitate* XXXV, 79: Ascendentibus igitur sursum versus primus actus, docendi causa dicatur animatio, secundus sensus, tertius ars, quartus virtus, quintus tranquillitas, sextus ingressio, septimus contemplatio (CSEL 89, 228).

⁴²*De animae quantitate* XXXIII, 70: quonam ille modo, quid anima in corpore valeret, quid in seipsa, quid apud deum [...] (CSEL 89, 217).

⁴³*De animae quantitate* XXXIII, 70: [...] corpus hoc terrenum atque mortale praesentia sua vivificat [...] (CSEL 89, 218).

The following *gradus* – which is higher than the first because Augustine invites Evodius: ‘ascende’ (‘ascend’) – is that of physical sensation.⁴⁴ This is the level of sensory perception: touch, sight, hearing, smell and taste. Sexual reproduction and care for offspring, as well as *memoria* (memory) in the sense of a certain habit of behaviour and a pattern of life, also belong to this step, which humans share with the animals. The first two levels, in other words, are the life-giving and sensory functions connected with the body, functions similar to the vegetative and animal spheres, respectively, of creation.

Higher up⁴⁵ are art and science, of which Augustine lists many examples. This is also where the abstracting *memoria* is situated, the capacity to recall things to mind, to remember things without requiring any concrete object to do so. In short, this is the location of human intellectual capabilities. This third level is unique to humanity, to the rational soul, although it belongs both to learned and/or good people and to unlearned and/or bad people.

Now the human can ascend⁴⁶ to the fourth *gradus*, where according to Augustine the good and the praiseworthy begin. It is the step of virtue, more specifically of purification. The soul detaches itself from the world, cleanses itself of all worldly blemish, and withdraws into itself. Only then does the soul realize that the good of the world is not its good, and only then is it able to distinguish its own beauty from that of the world, and even to despise the world.⁴⁷ When this happens, fear of death disappears. Augustine emphasizes that this work of purification is truly a *labor* (exertion, work, labour). It is only through the help of God’s grace that humans will succeed in seeing it through.

Once the soul has been purified of every stain, it possesses itself, is present in itself. This is the fifth stage: the state of constant and sustained purity, rest and stability. It is here that the soul truly realizes its own greatness. Once the soul has understood this, it moves confidently towards God, towards the contemplation of the truth, towards the highest and most hidden reward for all its work.⁴⁸

This desire to know and to realize what is truest and best is the highest, most perfect, and most ‘straight’ vision of the soul.⁴⁹ This is the sixth step: progress towards God. It is important to point out that Augustine speaks here of *aspectus*, aspect, regard, the result of human sight. The human soul is evidently capable of seeing the divine. This visual aspect is strengthened by the words that Augustine then uses: the eyes of the soul point to that which can be seen. In this context, truth is identified with *lux* (light) and untruth with *tenebrae* (darkness, night). If the attempt at contemplation comes too early, then the impure soul will be repulsed by the light of truth. Again divine help is indispensable in order to arrive at this step.

⁴⁴*De animae quantitate* XXXIII, 71: [...] ascende itaque alterum gradum et vide quid possit anima in sensibus [...] (CSEL 89, 218).

⁴⁵*De animae quantitate* XXXIII, 72: ‘adtollere’ (CSEL 89, 220).

⁴⁶*De animae quantitate* XXXIII, 73: ‘suscipe’ (CSEL 89, 220).

⁴⁷*De animae quantitate* XXXIII, 73: Hinc enim anima se non solum suo, si quam universi partem agit, sed ipsi etiam universo corpori audet praeponere, bonaque ejus bona sua non putare, atque potentiae pulchritudinique suae comparata discernere atque contemnere et inde, quo magis se delectat, eo magis sese abstrahere a sordibus totamque emaculare ac mundissimam reddere et comptissimam reddere [...] (CSEL 89, 220–1).

⁴⁸*De animae quantitate* XXXIII, 74: In hoc gradu omnifariam concipit, quanta sit; quod cum conceperit, tunc vero ingenti quadam et incredibili fiducia pergit in Deum, id est, in ipsam contemplationem veritatis, et illud, propter quod tantum laboratum est, altissimum et secretissimum praemium (CSEL 89, 222).

⁴⁹*De animae quantitate* XXXIII, 75: Sed haec actio, id est appetitio intelligendi ea, quae vere summeque sunt, summus aspectus est animae, quo perfectiorem, meliorem rectioremque non habet (CSEL 89, 222).

What is the correct translation of ‘rectior’ in this passage? As the comparative of *rectus* it can mean: that which is better, more just, more correct. It is tempting to opt for the translation: the more/most direct, which would imply immediacy and directness. But this translation would perhaps go too far and is not supported by other textual elements.

Finally, in this vision and contemplation of the truth, the soul advances to the seventh and highest step. It is not really a *gradus* but more a dwelling place (*mansio*) to which all previous steps lead. The term *mansio* suggests that it is of a permanent character.⁵⁰ The joy of enjoying the highest and true good has been communicated to us by certain great and incomparable souls,⁵¹ to the extent that they judged it right to say this.⁵² The previous levels are natural to humanity, and Augustine appears to believe that they are achievable for (most) people: the experience of reason, purification, moral goodness, and an approach to the highest truth. The last level, however, is seemingly not a general human phenomenon in Augustine's argument. The following sections of the text show that there is an eschatological turning point here.⁵³ The seventh level is the level of the contemplation of God, to the extent that humans can (in this earthly life) contemplate God.⁵⁴ Although Augustine insists that the vision of truth can only be partial and anticipatory in this life, he does bear witness to the (Neo-Platonic) confidence that perfection is possible here on earth when he says that some souls have been capable of this contemplation on earth.⁵⁵

In the closing exhortation which Augustine adds as a conclusion of the seven steps, he emphasizes once again that the human soul can only achieve these things with God's help, nourished by the mediation of the Church, which teaches us the truths of the faith, with Christ as the exemplary model.⁵⁶

Preliminary conclusions on the basis of *De animae quantitate* XXXIII, 70–6

It cannot be determined with certainty on the basis of this passage whether or not Augustine is analysing an experience he had personally.⁵⁷ The question is then whether

⁵⁰This suggests a more permanent character than the fleeting aspect of the Ostia experience (*Confessiones* IX, x, 24–5; CCL 27, 147–8).

⁵¹According to Roland Teske, these souls are Plato, some Neo-Platonists and possibly Paul. The notion that at least some people (Moses and Paul) can attain the vision of God on earth returns in the later writings. Augustine finds confirmation for this in Scripture. He will later come to deny, however, that this earthly vision of God is as permanent as the heavenly equivalent. Teske, 'St. Augustine and the Vision of God', 289. Van Bavel, T., *Als je hart bidt ... Augustinus' leer over het gebed*, Leuven 2001, 190–3.

⁵²*De animae quantitate* XXXIII, 76: Jamvero in ipsa visione atque contemplatione veritatis, qui septimus atque ultimus animae gradus est neque jam gradus, sed quaedam mansio, quo illis gradibus pervenitur, quae sint gaudia, quae perfructio summi et veri boni, cujus serenitatis atque aeternitatis afflatus, quid ego dicam? Dixerunt haec, quantum dicenda esse judicaverunt, magnae quaedam et incomparabiles animae, quas etiam vidisse ac videre ista credimus (CSEL 89, 223).

⁵³This seventh level: 'is not so much a step (*gradus*) as an abode (*mansio*) and as such it anticipates that which the blessed will enjoy in eternity'. Teske, 'St. Augustine and the Vision of God', 288–9.

⁵⁴*De animae quantitate* XXXIII, 76: Tanta autem in contemplanda veritate voluptas est, quantacumque ex parte eam quisque contemplari potest, tanta puritas, tanta sinceritas, tam indubitanda rerum fides, ut neque quicquam praeterea scisse se aliquando aliquis putet, cum sibi scire videbatur, et quo minus impediatur anima toti tota inhaerere veritati, mors, quae antea metuebatur, id est ab hoc corpore omnimoda fuga et elapsio, pro summo munere desideretur (CSEL 89, 225).

⁵⁵Augustine's thought has a holistic quality: everything is connected with everything else. Here, for instance, the theme of *contemplatio* is connected with that of *fruitio* (enjoyment), as both, having humans as their subject, may only have God as their object (humans may only enjoy God and nothing else). Augustine distinguishes between *uti* (using) and *frui* (enjoying). He contends that humans on earth may enjoy only God, while they must use the other things. Yet Augustine does allow in some texts that humans enjoy their fellow humans and other earthly things. This 'earthly enjoyment' must be understood as an inchoate anticipation of the enjoyment (by humans) of God in the hereafter: earthly things and fellow humans may only be enjoyed to the extent that this enjoyment points ahead to the enjoyment of God. *Contemplatio/visio Dei* here also has this meaning of a temporal and earthly anticipation of the eternal and the heavenly things.

⁵⁶Augustine states that people who mock the doctrine of the incarnation and the virgin birth must be regarded as foolish children. Without saying so explicitly, this is directed at the Neo-Platonists.

⁵⁷Gerald Bonner has applied this scheme from *De animae quantitate* XXXIII to the passage from the *Confessiones* VII, 17, 23 (CCL 27,107), where Augustine describes the ecstatic experience that he had in Milan before his conversion.

Augustine is describing a mystical experience in general. Butler is certain that this passage ‘unquestionably describes the act of religious contemplation and the mystic experience’.⁵⁸ I would hesitate, however, simply to adopt this conclusion. First I think it is necessary to examine a number of elements from *De animae quantitate* more closely. I will use Albert Deblaere’s description of mysticism as criterion: an immediate and passive experience of God’s presence.⁵⁹ Paul Mommaers has given a similar definition: ‘A mystic is someone who experiences, in an overwhelming way, the presence of something that transcends him and that is more real than anything that is normally regarded as real.’⁶⁰

What is certain is that the fragment from *De animae quantitate* does not simply describe reflective contemplation. Augustine speaks of ‘seeing’ and ‘enjoying’. In other words: it is not limited to intellectual argumentation. What is at stake is an experience of the truth which is totally different than the visible world. At first sight, Augustine may appear to be somewhat pretentious: he is able to reach God on the basis of the soul’s activity alone, without divine grace. More attentive readers will observe, however, that Augustine writes that the soul is unable to do this without assistance, in particular from God, the Church, and Christ. Moreover, Augustine suggests in his discussion of the final level that this experience is communicated to us by others. This means that the encounter with the divine is a mediated one. This does not, however, conflict with the ‘immediacy’ of the definition of a mystical experience adopted above. No (Christian) mystic will claim that he has obtained his mystical experience without the mediation of God, the Church, and Christ. It is necessary to achieve a balance between one’s own activity and passive receptiveness. ‘Immediacy’ here means ‘directly’ and ‘without preparation’.⁶¹ Augustine’s analysis does not totally conform to this aspect. I do think, however, that we are entitled to read the seventh step as direct contact with God, because Augustine speaks of a ‘dwelling’, a ‘being in God’. This is not far from the mystical experience of unity where the human becomes one and unites with God without losing his own identity. But reaching the seventh step requires training and asceticism. In this sense, it is not a matter of being suddenly and unpreparedly seized. It is a *labor*. The *visio Dei* appears more as the goal – a *praemium* (reward) – of a programme of study and the practice of virtue than as a gracious gift from God.

One characteristic of Christian descriptions of mystical experience is that they mention love: love leads to a loving union with God. This aspect is totally absent in *De animae quantitate*.⁶² It is on the basis of these elements that I contend that this text by Augustine

Chronologically, this contains the first six *gradi*. Bonner also notes, however, that Augustine in that autobiographical description did not reach the seventh level described here. Bonner, *Augustine and Mysticism*, 130.

⁵⁸ Butler, *Western Mysticism*, 43.

⁵⁹ Deblaere, ‘Témoignage mystique chrétien’, 117; ‘Christian Mystic Testimony’, 129.

⁶⁰ Mommaers, *Wat is mystiek?*, 25.

⁶¹ Augustine mentions three ecstatic experiences in the *Confessiones* that involve an ascent in several steps, preceded by a preparation and (largely) based on his own activity. Bonner has observed in this respect that:

The three experiences of Milan and Ostia have in common a sudden and instantaneous apprehension of reality, accompanied by a feeling of joy and happiness, such as have been recorded by believers of all religions and none, by the devout, by the unbelieving and by the indifferent. (Bonner, ‘Augustine and Mysticism’, 135.)

⁶² Augustine will write much about love later. Thus, he speaks of love as *pondus* (weight) (*Confessiones* XIII, 9, 10; CCL 27, 246–7), *pennae* (wings) or *alae* (sails) (*Enarratio in Psalmum* 103, 1, 13; CCL 40, 1487), *viscum* (bird glue) (*Enarratio in Psalmum* 140, 2; CCL 40, 2026) and *pedes* (feet) (*Sermo* 344, 1; PL 39, 1512). These physical metaphors symbolize the various motional aspects of love. Also in the context of the ascent of the soul towards God, Augustine sometimes speaks not so much of an intellectual quest but of a journey of love. (See the discussion of *De doctrina christiana* in this article, and also for instance *De gratia christi et de peccato originali* I, xx, 21–xxi, 22 (CSEL 42, 141–2) and *Enarratio in Psalmum* 9, 15 (CCL 38, 66).) It would be unfair, however, to insist in a footnote on adding this aspect of love to a text

does not refer to a mystical experience in the sense defined above. It is more the intellectual experience of a truth that transcends human beings and their earthly condition.

I am convinced, however, that *De animae quantitate* belongs within the framework of mystical theology. On the one hand, I mean that it is a theology that is oriented towards transcendence, towards the higher things that transcend humanity and the world. On the other hand, I say this to indicate that Augustine's theology already contains those elements that will become crucial to the thought and experience of the medieval mystics. Thus Augustine emphasizes that God and the experience of God cannot be expressed in words. God transcends human descriptions. In his concluding exhortation for instance, Augustine explains that God cannot be grasped by one name, such as Highest Cause, Highest Author, Highest Principle. Augustine is admittedly being intellectualistic here.⁶³ The seven steps, for example, can be plausibly interpreted as stages in every human being's mental progress: life, perception, habituation, moral life, trust in virtue, sense of reality, and the finding of truth. But perhaps this view of Augustine is due more to negligence on the part of contemporary readers of Augustine. We tend to read him from the perspective of the split between philosophy and theology, which only occurred after his lifetime. For Augustine, there is no such distinction. Thinking about the truth and speaking about God are identical in his view, just as thinking about God theoretically mutually implies loving God. As a schooled philosopher he is perfectly capable of describing and interpreting a 'mystical experience' on the basis of philosophical (Neo-Platonic⁶⁴) concepts.

In *De animae quantitate*, the soul passes through three stages: matter, spirit, and God. In other words: the soul moves. Despite the vocabulary of ascent that Augustine uses, I do not think that this simply means an upward movement; it is a deepening movement. What is at stake is the divine presence in each human soul. Augustine does indeed invite his audience to transcend the world, but in fact the purpose of doing this is that the soul may withdraw within itself. A better metaphor than that of seven ascending steps is the image of seven concentric circles. One Leitmotiv of the *Confessiones* is that ascent really means turning inwards, with Augustine lamenting the fact that he sought God outside and not inside, where He had always been from the start.⁶⁵ The comparison with seven concentric circles which move in a spiral that runs ever closer to the interior is not totally accurate. The innermost circle, God, is also the largest circle – in a comparative and superlative sense – because He fully encompasses and transcends humanity and reality. This once again confronts us with the impossibility of expressing the divine in human words, images, and experiences.

By way of a preliminary conclusion I would like to highlight three essential elements in Augustine's mystical theology: the ascent and inward movement of the soul leading to a contemplative and ecstatic experience of the divine presence, the possibility of this

where it is clearly not present. A more legitimate exercise is to point to a similar treatise that Augustine wrote around this time (Rome 387–8): *De moribus ecclesiae catholicae* I, xii, 21 (CSEL 90, 25–6). In this work, Augustine writes about the soul's turning away from earthly things and its return – through love (*dilectio*) – to its origin, to God.

⁶³In *De Ordine* II, xi, 30–xx, 53 he goes even further in this intellectual discourse by contending that the sequence in the discovery of the sciences defines the sequence that the soul seeking truth must follow (CCL 29, 124–36).

⁶⁴One of the many possible examples of the Neo-Platonic origins of Augustine's thought on the ascent of the soul is *Enneads* 4.7.1–11.

⁶⁵Cf. *Confessiones* I, 18, 28; X, 27, 38.

experience in the nature and capacities of human beings,⁶⁶ the role of Christ and the Church in reaching this.⁶⁷

It must finally be pointed out that *De animae quantitate* is no isolated case in Augustine's oeuvre. In *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* I, XXV, 43,⁶⁸ Augustine similarly devises a sevenfold scheme. He does this on the basis of an allegorical interpretation of the seven days of creation. On the first day, the human being receives the light of the faith (*lux fidei*). The next day, he distinguishes carnal things from spiritual things.⁶⁹ The third day, he purifies his soul from the stain of the passions (*temptationes carnales*). The day after, the human being distinguishes the spiritual truths. The fifth day he serves the well-being of his fellow humans through good works. The sixth day involves the subjection of the soul to the absolute rule of justice (*iustitia*) and reason (*ratio*). On the last day, the soul is permitted to enjoy eternal rest (*quies perpetua*). At first sight, this appears to be an entirely different scheme than that proposed in *De animae quantitate*, and careful comparison shows that they are indeed not entirely identical. The seven days of creation correspond to the seven *gradi* of the soul, but only from the fourth *gradus* onwards. The first four days of creation are all contained in the fourth *gradus* of the ascending soul, but the respective fifth, sixth, and seventh stages are substantively similar.⁷⁰

⁶⁶In Middle Dutch mysticism, this human capacity is linked to the fact that humans, as images of Christ, bear the likeness of God. In the passage discussed here Augustine does not refer to this notion. He does at the beginning of *De animae quantitate* II, 3. Augustine also speaks there of the *anima* as *similis Deo/ad similitudinem Deum* (CSEL 89, 133–4).

This concept of the *imago Dei* is derived from Gn 1:26 a: 'God said: Let us make man in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves' ('Faciamus hominem ad imaginem et similitudinem nostram'). For Augustine, the term *imago Dei* refers to the human soul. This notion is present throughout his oeuvre. He mainly elaborates it in *De Trinitate*. *De Trinitate* I, VIII, 18: Hoc est enim *plenum gaudium nostrum quo amplius non est, frui trinitate Deo, ad cuius imaginem facti sumus* (CCL 50, 52).

Augustine regards the *imago Dei*, the fact that humans bear the likeness of God, not as something static, but as something dynamic. It is the human calling to become ever more like to God. In this sense, human life is a pilgrimage from dissimilarity to similarity. This likeness to God is the true home of humanity (*Confessiones* VII, x, 16: [...] et inveni longe me esse a te in regione dissimilitudinis [...] (CCL 27, 103)). It must be said that, however, far humans progress along this journey, they always remain God's *impar imago*. Only Christ is God's equal *par imago*. (*De Trinitate* VII, VI, 12: Quae tamen imago cum alibi dicitur ad imaginem non quasi ad Filium dicitur quae imago aequalis est Patri; alioquin non diceret ad imaginem nostram. Quomodo enim nostram cum filius solius patris imago sit? Sed propter imparitatem ut diximus, similitudinem dictus est homo ad imaginem, et ideo nostram ut imago trinitatis esset homo, non trinitati aequalis sicut filius patri, sed accedens ut dictum est quadam similitudine sicut in distantibus significatur quaedam uicinitas non loci, sed cuiusdam imitationis (CCL 50, 267). *Enarratio in Psalmum* 49, 2 49, 2: Vnicus similis nascendo, nos similes uidendo. Non enim ita similes ut ille, qui hoc est quod ille a quo genitus est; nos enim similes, non aequales; ille quia aequalis, ideo similis (CCL 38, 576)). Our likeness with God increases through love, and love brings us closer to Him, although we will never become what He is (*De moribus ecclesiae catholicae et de moribus manichaeorum* I, XI, 18 (CSEL 90, 21–2)). Humans bear God's likeness. But bearing someone's likeness is not the same as being identical to the original. Only Christ is identical to the original. Humans can only (attempt to) approximate the original. In heaven, the *imago* will be perfected in the beatific vision of God. Here on earth, we see God through a mirror as a riddle. In heaven, we will see him face to face. *De Trinitate* XV, XXIII, 44: Per quod tamen speculum et in quo aenigmate qui vident sicut in hac vita uidere concessum est non illi sunt qui ea quae digessimus et commendauimus in sua mente conspiciunt, sed illi qui eam tamquam imaginem uident ut possint ad eum cuius imago est quomodocumque referre quod uident et per imaginem quam conspiciendo uident etiam illud uidere coniciendo quoniam nondum possunt facie ad faciem (CCL 50A, 522).

Sin and original sin have obscured this likeness, but according to Augustine, they have not removed it altogether.

⁶⁷In his history of Western mysticism, Bernard McGinn has dedicated an extensive chapter to mysticism in Augustine. He deals among other things with the ecclesiological and Christological aspects of the ascent of the soul in Augustine. McGinn, 49, 2 *The Presence of God: A History of Western Mysticism*, 248–51.

⁶⁸CSEL 91, 112–14.

⁶⁹*De Genesi contra Manichaeos* I, XXV, 43: '[...] discernit inter carnalia et spiritalia sicut inter aquas inferiores et superiores' (CSEL 91, 112).

⁷⁰Canisius van Lierde has observed parallels between the seven days of creation and the seven spiritual ages (periods in the life of the new, interior and heavenly man (in contrast with the life of the old, external, and earthly man)) in *De uera religione* XXVI, 49 (CCL 32, 218–19) and the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit throughout Augustine's exegesis of Is 11:2–3. Van Lierde, 'The Teaching of St. Augustine'.

De doctrina christiana II, vii, 9–11⁷¹

The passage from *De animae quantitate* discussed above and related texts give the impression that Augustine's 'seven-stage plan' had little to do with love. *De doctrina christiana* II, vii, 9–11 nuances this view. It is a text that is often overlooked in research of mysticism in Augustine.

To put it succinctly, *De doctrina christiana* is a manual for reading the Bible: how should Christians understand, interpret and explain the Bible, and transmit their insights into the Bible once they have acquired them.⁷² Augustine mentions in the *Retractationes* that he wrote *De doctrina christiana* in two stages. The first two books and the beginning of the third were written around the year (396–) 397, the start of Augustine's episcopate in Hippo.⁷³ The unfinished manuscript then lay on Augustine's writing table for a long time. Many people have speculated about the reasons for this interruption. What is certain is that Augustine found the unfinished work when he was going through his works in the course of writing the *Retractationes*, and that he decided at that point to finish it. He completed the third book and wrote the fourth. This was in 427, around the time that he was working on the *Retractationes*. The fact that Augustine returned to working on this book again after 30 years shows the importance that he attached to it.

De doctrina christiana is structured by three schemes, three divisions. The first division is based on the project of *De doctrina christiana* itself. Augustine's intention was to write a manual for the study of Scripture. He is convinced that the study of Scripture rests on two methods: acquiring understanding of the Bible and presenting this understanding.⁷⁴ These two methods divide *De doctrina christiana* into two parts. In books I, II, and III, Augustine discusses the *modus inveniendi* (inventing mode – how to find meaning in Scripture), in book IV, he explains the *modus proferendi* (mode of delivery – how to teach Scripture). Everything that can be discovered and learned in its turn can be divided into two categories: *res* and *signa*. This distinction is the second, more specific division. Book I deals with the *res*, things that have no need of further explanation and that are not used to signify something else. Books II and III discuss the *signa*. Signs (*signa*) are realities that refer to other realities. The third and most specific division is the distinction between *uti* and *frui*. Augustine will use this distinction to structure the *res*, the first book in other words. He will use these two concepts to divide these 'realities' into three categories on the basis of the attitude that humans must adopt towards them.

⁷¹CCL 32, 36–8.

⁷²*Retractationes* II, 4, 31, 1: Libros de doctrina christiana, cum imperfectos conperissem, perficere malui quam eis sic relictis ad alia retractanda transire. Compleui ergo tertium, qui scriptus fuerat usque ad eum locum, ubi commemoratum est ex evangelio testimonium de muliere, quae [...]. Addidi etiam novissimum librum, et quattuor libris opus illud implevi; quorum primi tres adiuvant ut scripturae intelligantur, quartus autem quomodo quae intelligimus proferenda sint (CCL 57, 92–3).

⁷³This is evident from the place which this work occupies in the (chronological) series of works that Augustine discusses in the *Retractationes*. In addition to this external indication for the date of the first part of *De doctrina christiana* there is also an internal indication. When Augustine sums up famous dead people in *De doctrina christiana* II, xl, 61, he does not include Ambrose in this list. This means that we can date the work to before April 397, the time of Ambrose's death (CCL 32, 74–5).

⁷⁴*De doctrina christiana* IV, i, 1: Hoc opus nostrum quod inscribitur De doctrina christiana, in duo quaedam fueram prima distributione partitus. Nam post proemium, quo respondi eis qui hoc fuerant reprehensuri, *Duae sunt res*, inquam, *quibus nititur omnis tractatio scripturarum: modus inveniendi quae intelligenda sunt, et modus proferendi quae intellecta sunt. De inveniendi prius, de proferendo postea disseremus*. Quia ergo de inveniendi multa iam diximus et tria de hac una parte volumina absolvimus, adiuvante domino de proferendo pauca dicemus, ut si fieri potuerit, uno libro cuncta claudamus totumque hoc opus quattuor voluminibus terminetur (CCL 32, 116).

The passage from this work that has been selected is a passage that deals with the study of the Bible, and comes from the second book, which examines the reading of the Bible. In this passage, Augustine places himself outside the second book as it were, and even outside his entire oeuvre. He places the subject, the study of Scripture, as a stage in the development of human life.

The first stage is that of the *timor Dei*. This is where the soul, prompted by the fear of God, turns towards learning to know God's will. This divine will incite the human being to reflect on his own mortality and death.

Subsequently, the human must come to accept the teaching of Scripture through piety (*pietas*). What is written there is more truthful than what we can know on our own.

That leads to the third *gradus: scientia*. This is the knowledge that teaches the soul that the human must wholly love God, and his neighbour as himself, and which gives him the insight that the love of himself and the love of his neighbour must always refer to God.

Thus, the study of Scripture causes the human to discover that he is entangled in the love of the world, which keeps him remote from the love of God and their neighbour, the love that Scripture commands. The human who realizes this, mourns and laments it. By praying zealously, humans can obtain divine assistance. This assistance from God ensures that the human being is not overcome by despair. This is the level of fortitude (*fortitudo*), where the human being hungers and thirsts for justice. This is also where he turns away from transient things and turns towards the love of the eternal, i.e. the unchangeable unity who is the Trinity.

Once the human spirit has seen the Trinity from afar and has realized that it cannot bear this sight (*aspectus*) on account of its own weakness, it purifies its soul of its striving for inferior things. This is the fifth stage, *consilium misericordiae* (the counsel, the advice, the plan of mercy), where the human trains and perfects himself in charity. This perfection will even lead him to love his enemies and to ascend to the next level.

That is the level where the human purifies his eyes (*oculum purgat*) so that those humans who, to the extent that this is possible, are dead to this world can see God. Although the light of the Trinity is already shining brightly, this seeing currently happens 'in riddles and in reflections in a mirror' (1 Cor. 13:12). In this stage, humans choose neither themselves nor their neighbour above the truth.

From this utter devotion to the truth, the human ultimately reaches wisdom (*sapientia*), where he enjoys rest and peace. The beginning of wisdom is the fear of the Lord (Ps. 110:10). The road runs from this fear, via the levels discussed, to wisdom.⁷⁵

⁷⁵There is a striking similarity with the sermon containing an exegesis of Is 11:2–3 mentioned above: *Sermo* 347, 2: Vnde ad nos exercitandos quibusdam doctrinae gradibus descendit Isaias a sapientia usque ad timorem, a loco scilicet sempiternae pacis usque convallem temporalis plorationis: ut nos in confessione poenitentiae dolendo, gemendo, flendo, non remaneamus in dolore et gemitu et fletu; sed ascendentes ab ista convalle in montem spiritalem, ubi civitas sancta Jerusalem mater nostra aeterna fundata est, imperturbabili laetitia perfruamur. Ergo ille cum praeposuit sapientiam, lumen scilicet mentis indeficiens, adiunxit intellectum; tanquam quaerentibus unde ad sapientiam veniretur, responderet, ab intellectu; unde ad intellectum, a consilio; unde ad consilium, a fortitudine; unde ad fortitudinem, a scientia; unde ad scientiam, a pietate; unde ad pietatem, a timore. Ergo ad sapientiam a timore; quia 'initium sapientiae timor Domini'. A convalle plorationis usque ad montem pacis (PL 39, 1525).

Is 11:2: 'On him will rest the Spirit of the Lord, the Spirit of wisdom and insight, the Spirit of counsel and power, the Spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord.'

Augustine's 'piety' is lacking in Isaiah's list. 'Counsel' in Isaiah is adapted by Augustine to *consilium misericordiae*. The 'purification' of the contemplative faculty on the sixth level in Augustine is an adaptation of Isaiah's 'insight'.

Preliminary conclusions on the basis of *De doctrina christiana* II, vii, 9–11

The seven levels in *De doctrina christiana* and in *De animae quantitate* largely correspond to each other as to substance, in particular from the third level onwards. *Scientia* corresponds to the *artes*. There is a common realization of human inferiority and of the turning away from earthly things in the fourth and fifth levels. Finally, there is a similar desire to find the divine truth and an identical final vision of this truth.

The greatest difference lies in the relation between the third and seventh levels of *De doctrina christiana*. This is where Augustine explains that ascending to God is not (only) a matter of scientific and academic knowledge. It is a kind of knowledge that leads to the love of God and one's neighbour. Rather than being an intellectual quest for God, this is a road of love that leads to God. Moreover, *scientia* (science) is only one step on the way towards *sapientia* (wisdom). This was not yet clear in *De animae quantitate*. The object of *scientia* is the temporal and changeable world. *Sapientia*, on the other hand, concerns the knowledge of the eternal and unchangeable truth.⁷⁶ These are two different – but not irreconcilable – tendencies. Augustine explains in *De doctrina christiana* that *scientia* and *dilectio* (love) are essentially connected with each other, are united in the one *sapientia*. Very implicitly, *De doctrina christiana* also contains a Christological foundation.⁷⁷ It is even possible to read in it a reference to the Trinity.

Once again it transpires that Augustine regards earthly things as inferior. He invites his audience to be dead to the earthly things. This Platonic thought could also be found in *De animae quantitate*. In *De doctrina christiana*, he explicitly attaches a consequence to this: it is precisely because humans live here on earth that they are unable to see God. What they can do on earth is to attempt to renounce the earthly things, but Augustine subtly remarks that this is not really possible for humans even here on earth. As a consequence, 'on our pilgrimage through life we walk more through faith than through sight (cf. 1 Cor 13:12, 2 Cor 5:6–7)'.⁷⁸ Augustine did not draw this conclusion in *De animae quantitate*: he thought at least some great and incomparable souls were able to see God in this life.

Does this amount to a direct and passive experience of God's presence? It clearly is an experience. Verbs such as 'fear', 'be sad', 'see', 'be courageous' indicate that. At first sight, Augustine in *De doctrina christiana* appears to be interested only in human activity and not in the passive reception of grace. But reading between the lines makes it clear that he is not blind to the essentially passive pole. Thus, he writes in the second stage that what the Scripture teaches is better than what we can know on our own. And in the fourth stage, he argues that *scientia* does make people arrogant. Moreover, it is the consoling God who at this time ensures that humans are not overcome by despair. Nevertheless, human activity is the central focus. According to Augustine's words, renouncing earthly things and training oneself in love to one's neighbour is something which

⁷⁶Later Augustine will describe *scientia* as indispensable for the practical life, for the preservation of life (*De Trinitate* XV, xii, 21). Augustine considers the contemplative life as higher than the active life (*Contra Faustum* XXII, 52). *Sapientia* has a higher goal: contemplation. It is higher because it involves the acquiring of human happiness. Only wise people who possess *sapientia* can be happy (*De libero arbitrio* II, xiii, 36).

⁷⁷Thus, Augustine writes that the *timor Dei* leads to a reflection on our mortality and death. According to Augustine, this thought drives a nail in our flesh and nails our arrogant feelings to the wood of the cross. This is obviously an allusion to Christ. It is also remarkable that Augustine regards the human who reaches the seventh level as a saint ('iste sanctus') and as a son ('talis filius'). The saints, children of God, share in the life of God.

⁷⁸*De doctrina christiana* II, 7: [...] quia magis per fidem quam per speciem ambulatur, cum in hac vita peregrinamur, quamvis conversationem habeamus in caelis (CCL 32, 38).

humans must do themselves. That Augustine is speaking of a direct experience can be seen from the description of the progress of the soul as the ever clearer seeing of God. On the basis of these elements, and given that Augustine does include the aspect of love in this passage, it may be concluded that this text can be called *more* 'mystical'.

Return to Ostia, outline of a conclusion

Did Augustine and Monnica have an immediate and passive experience of God's presence in Ostia? It was certainly an experience. Although it began in and through a conversation, this conversation was transcended by a religious experience. Augustine begins his account by speaking of 'the mouth of the heart'. In this sense, we can even speak of a certain 'spiritual tasting of God'. He also interprets it as being touched. This touch only lasted for a heartbeat. This is Augustine's way of saying that it was a very short experience. The mention of the heart can also indicate that it was an affective event. It lasted only for the duration of a sigh: again an indication of time that could also point to something else, for instance a sense of being unfulfilled, of regretting its passing. The experience was a temporary thing, it did not last, it was not permanent. Here Augustine and Monnica transcend human language, and reach the Word who is God; and this not through the word of a human, the voice of an angel, a voice from a cloud, not through a riddle or a parable. In short, it was a direct and immediate experience of God. This experience began in the active dialogue between Augustine and Monnica, but the moment of encounter with God is marked by human passivity. Ultimately, humans on their own are incapable of having such experiences, God's help is indispensable: as Creator, as Renewer, as Truth, God draws humans towards himself. Augustine does not deny that there is human activity in this, but human activity ultimately is insufficient, the last step belongs by right to God's initiative. Augustine formulates this in a passive sentence: his mother and he 'were sprinkled'. The activity of humans is to be silent so that God can act, so that He can speak. This silence is a form of purification, of detachment, of becoming attuned to the voice of God. To put it differently: action and contemplation go hand in hand. In the activity of their human and immanent conversation, divine transcendence breaks through, and Monnica and her son discover their essential passivity before the face of God. The final question that must be asked in respect of the mystical nature of the Ostia experience is whether it was an encounter with a personal God. Augustine and his mother encountered God, not the Son, but the Father in the form of the Divine Word. That this is nonetheless a thoroughly Christian experience, even though Christ is not the central focus, is evident from the fact that Augustine begins and concludes his account of what happened in Ostia with quotations from Paul (1 Cor. 2:9 ; 15:51), the apostle of the grace of Christ. The Christian character of this experience is also clear from the difference with the purely intellectual and rather solipsistic experience in Milan the year before. In Ostia, Augustine and his mother experienced an intense encounter with God. This unity with God did not, however, put a stop to their individuality. Despite the depth of their communal experience with God, the essential distance between Creator and creator remained intact.

A glance at Augustine's theoretical frameworks shows that he is not describing an intellectual train of thought, or reflective contemplation – a mere process of thought – but an experience. He does this from the perspective of a certain reflective distance, oriented

towards an audience that did not itself witness this experience. In doing so he is conscious that God is always more than what is and can be said about Him in human language. Yet Augustine wishes to give others insight, to show them how God can be reached. He is always cautious: it is not easy for humans to come to the vision of God. In between the lines he even doubts whether this is possible at all here on earth. Nevertheless, the texts discussed here do give the impression that he is proposing a seven-stage plan for the perfection of humanity. Augustine is offering training in preparation. Of course, this is related to the balance between activity and passivity. Although Augustine does not deny the receptive aspect, his main emphasis is nonetheless on human activity. In this context, Augustine confesses the limitations of human beings: humans are unable to detach themselves (fully) from the lower things. Implicitly, Christology is the underlying foundation for Augustine. Augustine does not develop this very much, but he does point to the essential nature of Christ's help. Knowledge and love are essentially connected, they stimulate each other. Augustine's primary starting point is knowledge, without forgetting the other pole altogether. For Augustine, Christianity is the *vera philosophia*, the true philosophy. The central focus of Augustine's texts examined here is a quest for *sapientia*. That is Augustine's intuition of the divine. Is Augustine being too intellectual here? No, in his work the intellect is always accompanied by love and vice versa, as two sides of the same coin. It is true that in some texts, such as *De animae quantitate* XXXIII, 70–6, he focuses more on one side of the coin. Moreover, he constantly emphasizes that humans will never, cannot, grasp God within the limitations of their own abstract and discursive reasoning.

Confessiones IX, 23–6 was written 10 years after the experience in Ostia. *De animae quantitate* XXXIII, 70–6 was written very shortly after the Ostia experience and may have been influenced by it. Yet *Confessiones* does not contain the seven-stage scheme. *De doctrina christiana* II, vii, 9–11, written at approximately the same time as the *Confessiones*, does. This means it is not easy to determine which text influenced which and to what extent specific experiences shaped theoretical frameworks. What is indisputable is that the experience at Ostia came first chronologically, before the two theoretical frameworks of *De animae quantitate* XXXIII, 70–6 and *De doctrina christiana* II, vii, 9–11, and that Augustine only wrote down his own experience afterwards in *Confessiones* IX 23–6. The experience came first and was perhaps channelled over the years by Augustine's life as a believer. In the decade that separated Ostia from the *Confessiones*, Augustine's knowledge of Christian doctrine grew, both through the study of Scripture and through his own life as a priest and a young bishop, while in Ostia he had only just stepped across the threshold of (Biblical/Catholic) Christianity. A number of similarities and differences can be observed. The three works have in common that they deal with a movement of turning inwards, a purification and ascent, where Augustine confesses the limitations of human nature and its need for God's help, and where Augustine seeks a balance between human activity and passivity. Turned away from the world, turned into themselves, humans achieve a higher insight: the world and human beings are creatures and refer to the Creator. Three times, the text focuses on ascent to an encounter with the Truth, the Wisdom, the Logos, who cannot ultimately be expressed in human thought and speech. The great difference has already been mentioned: *Confessiones* IX, 23–6 does not contain the seven-step structure.

Augustine himself frequently uses the terms *mysticus* and *mystice*, but stays close to the meaning of the original Greek root and the way in which the early Christian writers use it.⁷⁹ For Augustine, these words mean: ‘secret’ or ‘hidden’, and they refer to the inner meaning of something that is connected with the mystery of salvation.⁸⁰ According to this definition, *Confessiones* IX, 23–6, *De animae quantitate* XXXIII, 70–6 and *De doctrina christiana* II, vii, 9–11 can be regarded as mystical texts. They do not, however, (fully) satisfy the definition Deblaere’s description of mysticism suggested. Augustine’s texts confirm that, if Augustine was a mystic, he was not a mystic like Beatrice of Nazareth or Teresa of Avila. This does not mean, however, that he must be denied a place in the history of Western mysticism.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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⁷⁹Cf. Faesen, ‘What Is a Mystical Experience?’, 221–2.

⁸⁰Throughout his writings, for instance, he calls the deeper meaning of the Bible: ‘mystice dicta sunt’ or ‘mystica significatio’. In *De Trinitate* III, IV, 10 he calls the Eucharistic prayer a mystical prayer (CCL 50, 136–137). [Cf. *De animae quantitate* XXXIII, 74: ‘secretissimum praemium’ (CSEL 89, 222)].

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