

The Evolving View of the 'religion' in Augustine's Early Works

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INTRODUCTION

Not long after his return to Thagaste through Carthage in the autumn of 388, Augustine founded a small community in the company of his friends and disciples. His life at Thagaste was distinguished by the surrender of property and possessions, fasting, fraternity, dialogue, prayer, and scriptural reading. A central feature of the Thagaste community was, with his focus on the intellectual pursuit facilitated by religious practice, the emergence of a new type of literary works which intended to deal with Christian topics 'in the shadow of the organised life of the Catholic Church.' Shortly before the life in the community came to an abrupt halt because of his ordination to priesthood in 391, his last treatise as a layman — *De uera religione* (*On True Religion*) was written there in 390 or 391, which serves as a kind of synthesis of his philosophical and theological speculations in the Thagaste period.

In *De uera religione*, there exists a preview of some themes worked out in its consolidated form in his later works such as *Confessiones*, *Enarrationes in Psalms*, *De trinitate*, and *De ciuitate dei*. My concern in this paper is to examine the beginning of Augustine's reflection on the Christian religion in the history of salvation. Thus, I shall consider the issues as follows:

- (1) What is the central point of his explorations of Christian teaching? It is noteworthy that his claim to the historical and providential elements in Christian teaching stands with the theme of '*uera religio*'.
- (2) Augustine draws an interesting parallel between the divisions of human history and the seven stages of the ascent of the soul. What significance do these expositions hold for the reflection on the course of human history?

In the concluding remarks, I shall discuss the significance of the division of human race into two 'classes', which has just started to be used as the framework of his understanding of the human society.

AUGUSTINE'S APPROACH TO THE THEME OF *UERA RELIGIO*

At the very beginning of *De uera religione*, Augustine refers to the term 'true religion' (*uera religio*) and considers to be its essential features as follows:

The way of the good and blessed life is to be found entirely in the true religion wherein one God is worshipped and acknowledged with purest piety to be the beginning of all existing things, originating, perfecting and containing the universe. (*uera rel.* 1.1, trans. J. H. S. Burleigh (1953) 225)

We find here the conviction, given a detailed explanation through the preface of the work (*uia*: 1.1, 3.3, 3.5; cf. 53.103), that the 'way' (*uia*) to the blessed life is to be made by the 'true religion', is no second-best but actually more sustained, more consistent than the traditional 'way' in which, while having disagreements about their views of the nature of their gods, the ancient philosophers did not combine their views with what they engaged in with the people in religious rites: 'religion is not to be sought from them [sc. philosophers]'. (*uera rel.* 5.8, cf. 1.1) Despite their aspirations towards the truth, not only were there the diversity of teachings but they could not achieve harmony between their teachings and religious rites. The conviction that it is indispensable to receive the 'true religion' to attain the beatitude is, thus, based on the harmony created by the substance of Christian religion. Augustine suggests Romanianus, a dedicatee of the work, how these two items of the 'true' religion are superior to that of schools of the ancient philosophy.

(1) The true religion must worship the one God.

(2) All should acknowledge that God is the beginning of all natural things.

These items are scattered throughout *De uera religione*, often with the use of several adjectives applied to the term *religio* (such as *uera*, *catholica*, *orthodoxa*, *perfecta*, and *sacrosancta*). It may afford the readers more opportunities to explore his understanding of the 'true religion'. Then, how does Augustine approach to the substance of the 'true religion'? Or is there any aspect of the religion which comes to be important to him? As already seen by some scholars, worship seems to be crucial in his understanding of *uera religio*.

It is our duty to consider what men or what books we are to believe in order that we may rightly worship God, wherein lies our sole salvation. Here the first decision must be this: Are we to believe those who summon us to the worship of many gods or those who summon us to worship one God? (*uera rel.* 25.46, Burleigh 247)

Again in the conclusion of the work (55.107-113) Augustine poses the problem of what 'our religion' should worship and, after the recapitulation, rejects all candidates for the object of worship other than one God.

One God alone I worship, the sole principle of all things, and his Wisdom who makes every wise soul wise, and his Gift [*munus*] whereby all the blessed are blessed. (*uera rel.* 55.112, Burleigh 282)

Such is the way the correlation between these two items is seen at the centre of the 'true religion'. There is much which Augustine considers to have been united with the pursuit

of the religious life. In *De uera religione*, when he discusses what it is that he means by worship, the practice of adoring with religious rites (*uera rel.* 55.108, Burleigh 208) may include both the individual and corporate worship. But, Augustine does not proceed to the concrete explanations of the worship. He does not explicitly discuss the correlation between these practices. What are we led to the pursuit of the religious devotion? How does he secure the way to the 'good and blessed life'?

AUGUSTINE'S APPROACH TO THE HISTORICAL ELEMENT OF *UERA RELIGIO*

In this section, first I shall take into further consideration of the 'true religion' in the work, then disclose the correlation between the religion and its historicity, in which the proliferation of the religious practice would be realised with the aid of the temporal dispensation.

After the preface of the work, in which he delineates the item of the 'true religion' as the worship of one God, Augustine determines the subject of this work as follows:

In following this religion our chief concern is with the prophetic history of the dispensation of divine providence in time — what God has done for the salvation of the human race, renewing and restoring it unto eternal life. When once this is believed, a way of life agreeable to the divine commandments will purge the mind and make it fit to perceive spiritual things which are neither past nor future but abide ever the same, liable to no change. (*uera rel.* 7.13, Burleigh 232)

There may be philosophical arguments that the truth is seen by the pure mind, thereby allowing the soul attached to the truth to be made perfect. (Cf. *uera rel.* 3.3) But, Augustine have found the gulf that divides his thinking about its purification from that of the ancient philosophical tradition. Because he has gained full assurance in the practices of worship by which the purification would be realised. They belong to the mutable, human affairs, thereby not being appropriate to the nature of philosophical reasoning. Thus, while maintaining the aim of purifying the mind in order to attain the beatitude, the indication of his concern for the 'prophetic history of the dispensation of divine providence in time' is his insistence that its purification is well exploring here in this life. The constant theme of the 'true religion' is linked with the appreciation of the 'prophetic history of the dispensation'.

God in his ineffable mercy by a temporal dispensation has used the mutable creation, obedient however to his eternal laws, to remind the soul of its original and perfect nature, and so has come to the aid of individual men and indeed of the whole human race. That is the Christian religion in our times. To know and follow it is the most secure and most certain way of salvation. (*uera rel.* 10.19, Burleigh 235)

we must ask how it profits the human race that the divine providence has spoken to us by human rational and creatures who have been the servants of God. When we have come to know that one truth, all puerile impudence is drive from our minds and holy religion comes into its own. (*uera rel.* 50.99, Burleigh 276)

He is clearly conscious of a need to deliberate over the primacy of divine providence in the created world. The sequence of changes in the temporal realm has its origin in the creation of the world. The temporality was brought into existence with the creation of temporal things. Divine providence is, however, the medium through which, after Adam's primordial sin, God unfolds his plan for exercising his saving work. It is required for him to take an interest, not in a chain of past events which are nevertheless recorded and interpreted, but in the 'prophetic history' which tell us what significance the temporal things have within God's ever-present activity. Only the latter will offer the hints of what God has done for 'the aid of individual men and indeed of the whole human race'.

Apart from *De uera religione*, there are some occurrences of Augustine's indication to the term 'uera religio' in this period. Already in the *De animae quantitate* (387/388), which was completed before his return to Africa, Augustine spoke of the privileged position of the 'true religion' as the one 'by which the soul binds itself again to the one and only God and reconciles itself to Him from whom it had torn itself away, as it were, by sin.' (*an. quant.* 36.80, trans. J. M. Collier, ACW 9 (1950) 110; and 34.78) Shortly after his ordination to priesthood in 391, in the treatise entitled *De utilitate credendi* (391/392) again Augustine treats with the problem of the religion in the same way in which the 'true religion' is established only for the sake of the soul. However, despite the repeated references to the term in this period, the problem of the 'temporal dispensation' in which both the individuals and the human race would expect to realise their ideal way of life does not arise anywhere except in *De uera religione*.

TWO FOLD SCHEMES FOR THE HUMAN PROGRESS

In this section, I shall examine two fold schemes for his understanding of the realisation of the religious practices in this life. Of these schemes which are closely connected each other, one is concerned with the divisions of human history into 'ages', and the other with the ascent of the soul.

The division of the history into 'ages' appears repeatedly in his works. Augustine follows a traditional, schismatic, and typical understanding of the classical and patristic literatures. In the *De vera religione*, the explanation of its division appears as that of 'God's temporal dispensation and his providential care for those who by sin had deservedly become mortal.' (*uera rel.* 26.48, Burleigh 248) He clearly proposes the plan for salvific care in human history as the parallel stages of human growth from the birth to the death. These are summarised as follows:

1. The first age, infancy, is spent in receiving bodily nourishment.
2. The second age, childhood, starts to have some memories.
3. The third age, adolescence, is allowed to propagate offspring.

4. The fourth age, young manhood, must take part in public duties and labours.
5. The fifth age, old age, is given a little peace.
6. The sixth age, death.

After showing a brief sketch of human growth, Augustine divides the people living on earth into two different types of a way of life in the economy of salvation. So from the distinction he arrives at a parallel contrast between two classes under 'God's temporal dispensation and his providential care'

Some live thus from the beginning to the end of their days. But some begin in that way, as they necessarily must, but they are reborn inwardly, ... (*uera rel.* 26.49, Burleigh 249)

The former represents the life of 'the old, exterior or earthly man' divided into various successive ages (*vera rel.* 26.48). The latter, opposed to the former, denotes "the new man, the inward and heavenly man" by spiritual advancement (26.49). Of the latter he says that their lives are distinguished from the former, in relation not to their years in this life, but to their 'spiritual advance', and in answer to the problem how they can live as 'the new man' in this life, he refers to the traditional idea that the ascent of the soul represents the spiritual progress sought for the eternal rest.

The ascent of human soul, proceeding from the sensible things to the contemplation of God, appears repeatedly in Augustine's works. He shares the characteristics of the exhortation to spiritual ascensions with his biblical (Psalms 119-133), classical (Varro), and Plotinian (*Enneads*) predecessors. The descriptions of human ascensions towards God in *De uera religione* occur repeatedly within the latter half, though they differ from one another in details. Of these repetitions, we will consider one of the most distinctive and seven-stages ascensions. These stages are summarised as follows:

1. The soul is subjected to the authority of the scripture.
2. The soul tends towards divine things, forgetting human affairs.
3. The soul prevails over the passions in conflict with carnal appetites.
4. The soul accomplishes its perfection much more resolutely.
5. The soul has peace and tranquility inasmuch as the body has been subjected to reason.
6. The soul attains complete transformation into the eternal life.
7. Eternal rest and perpetual beatitude.

They clarify how the soul directs itself to God and seeks its own purification. Humbly subject to the law of God, soul undertakes the difficult task and ties the carnal appetite down to reason. In the process of purification, soul learns to penetrate spiritual realities

and trains its fortitude. With all the movements of the mind, soul finally approaches its purification and holds fast to the contemplation of wisdom.

With regard to the parallel between these schematic descriptions, Augustine feels need to point to their fixed starting-point dependent on the condition of their earthly birth. Although some of them are inwardly transformed into the 'new men' and continue to make the spiritual progress towards the wisdom, they are destined to associate with the 'old man'. And, his explanation goes, even in the case of the whole human race, it is 'arranged by the laws of divine providence that it appears divided among two classes' (*uera rel.* 27.50) This is the belief that God's purposes are made known not only to individuals 'as it were privately' but to the human race 'through history and prophecy', for finally it embraces all the members of the society living on earth. It is a belief which, like the emphasis on the parallel, is confirmed in order to divide the human race into two classes: one is the 'multitude of the impious who bear the image of the earthly man', and the other is the 'succession of the people devoted to the one God.' (*uera rel.* 27.50, Burleigh 250)

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Augustine's commitment to the *uera religio* shows that it is, among some explanations in his early works, the most comprehensive statement which provides the basis for the religious devotion as worship. Although he does not enter into a further analysis of the worship from the viewpoints of both its individual and corporate dimensions. Instead Augustine continues to consider the *uera religio*, and discloses the indispensable element of the temporal dispensation within the course of human history. Only does it hold the clue to what God has done for both individuals and the entire human race. The schematic understanding of human growth as the 'old man' enables him to divide people living in this life into two different modes of life under the temporal dispensation. However, it might be possible to advance into the 'new man', in so far as they are exhorted to realise the spiritual ascension towards the contemplation of God.

His insistence that the whole human race is divided into two 'classes' will take more clear form in his later thought. At this stage in *De uera religione*, he has already defined the 'multitude of the impious' as the society in this world.

This is called "the old man" and "the exterior or earthly man," even if he obtain what the vulgar call felicity in a well-ordered earthly city, whether ruled by kings or princes or laws or all of them together. For without these things no people can be well-ordered, not even a people that pursues earthly good. (*uera rel.* 26.48, Burleigh 249)

If he continues to have the understanding of human spiritual progress from viewpoint of the ascending imagery, this division of human race remains useful for explaining any society which would be discerned in its historical and/or real dimensions. But, the expectation of attaining the beatitude in this life will be replaced with the impact of his reading experiences in Pauline epistles. He will not hold a belief that enables him to

confirm the human effort to ascent through the well ordered stages. Despite the appearance of his understanding of human society, we find here the limitation of his early protreptic work.