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Doctrina sana id est Christiana

Augustine from the Liberal Arts to the Science of the Scriptures

Introduction

The long list of the problems that still today we tackle in Augustine's treatise *De doctrina christiana* (*DDC*) starts from the title itself, in particular from the word *doctrina*, on the exact translation of which the overall interpretation of Augustine's project depends. It is a well-known fact that this word has a great variety of meanings, which are often entwined with those of the term *disciplina*¹. This is the reason why any attempt at understanding Augustine's use of *doctrina* exclusively by means of a general comparison with classical Latin sources may result in a superfluous and even misleading undertaking. The only other known writing of Late Antiquity in whose title the word *doctrina* appears, is *De compendiosa doctrina* by Nonius Marcellus, a learned amateur who lived most probably in Numidia in the age of Constantine. He dedicated to his son this monumental treatise in twenty books, comprising a vast collection of lexicographical, morphological and antiquarian materials². It is unlikely that Augustine has ever known Nonius' work and that he planned to replace that pagan encyclopedia with his own Christian handbook. At any rate, due to the radical difference in content and scope, it seems obvious that Nonius' work cannot shed light on Augustine's choice of the word *doctrina*. From the methodological point of view, instead, I think it much more useful to investigate Augustine's use of the term within the treatise itself and, at most, in his other works of the same period. The fact that the word *doctrina* occurs fifteen times in *DDC* is not without significance for our research.

What does the word 'doctrina' mean in Augustine's 'De doctrina christiana'?

Right at the beginning of the first book, Augustine states that the subject of the work is the overall treatment of the Scriptures, and that this treatment has

¹ See for example, among many others, the contributions by H.-I. Marrou, «Doctrina et «disciplina» dans la langue des Pères de l'Église, *ALMA* 9 (1934) 5-25; A. Hus, «Docere» et les mots de la famille de «docere». Étude de sémantique latine, Paris 1965, esp. 277-332. A general survey in the article: *Doctrina* (C. Mayer), *AugLex* II,3/4, Basel 1999, 534-551.

² See R.A. Kaster, *Guardians of Language: The Grammarian and Society in Late Antiquity* (The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 11), Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1988, 417f.

two stages: first, the process of discovering what has to be understood, and then the process of communicating to others what has been understood³. *Doctrina christiana* has therefore to be taken as substantially equivalent to *tractatio scripturarum*, and Augustine could have legitimately entitled the entire treatise *De tractatione scripturarum*. Nonetheless, it is only in relation to the development on the *modus inveniendi*, which occupies the first three books⁴, that we meet for the first time a general definition of *doctrina*: *Omnis doctrina vel rerum est vel signorum*⁵. This means that, in Augustine's eyes, the *modus inveniendi* is nothing but a particular application of the universal category of *doctrina* to the Scriptures, and it is precisely because the *modus inveniendi* is a *doctrina*, that it has as its own specific objects both things and signs as every other *doctrina* does. Actually, in Book 1 Augustine deals with the things (*res*) which are objects of the Christian faith, while in Books 2 and 3 the discussion is respectively about the unknown (*incognita*) and ambiguous (*ambigua*) signs (*signa*) of the Scriptures⁶. In other words, for Augustine the investigation of the things and signs of the Scriptures, which constitutes the heuristic moment (*modus inveniendi*) of the handling of the Scriptures (*tractatio scripturarum*), is just a specific case of that universal cognitive, or scientific, activity of the human reason which is called *doctrina* and usually considers both things and signs. The word *doctrina*, therefore, fits in with the contents of the first three books of the treatise.

Shortly afterwards, however, Augustine claims that the teaching of Eph 1,23 on the Church as the body of the Lord is *apostolica doctrina*⁷. In Book 2 Augustine states that it is by the passage of time that the lesson (*doctrina*) of despising the temporal and seeking the eternal is brought home to us⁸. The other twelve occurrences of the term, partly in Augustine's own words, partly in biblical quotations, are all to be found in Book 4 with the meaning of the art of rhetoric⁹, the soundness of the Christian teaching of Cyprian¹⁰, and above all the sound teaching (*sana doctrina*) mentioned in the *Pastoral Epist-*

³ *DDC* 1,1 (the numbering is that of the edition by W.M. Green in CSEL 80, 1963): «Duae sunt res quibus nititur omnis tractatio scripturarum, modus inveniendi quae intellegenda sunt et modus proferendi quae intellecta sunt». See also *Retract.* 2,31. Rhetoric is the appropriate discipline to be used in communicating what has already been understood (*DDC* 2,133 and 4,4).

⁴ *DDC* 4,2: «Quia ergo de inveniendo multa iam diximus et tria de hac una parte volumina absolvimus ...».

⁵ *DDC* 1,4.

⁶ See *DDC* 1,96; 2,1; 2,152; 3,1-2; 3,135.

⁷ *DDC* 1,33.

⁸ *DDC* 2,63.

⁹ *DDC* 4,60: «... ea quae oratoria velut arte discuntur non observarentur et notarentur et in hanc doctrinam redigerentur nisi prius in oratorum invenirentur ingeniiis ...».

¹⁰ *DDC* 4,84: «... doctrinae Christianae sanitas ...».

les¹¹, that is, in those apostolic documents that must provide inspiration for all those in the Church whose responsibility it is to teach¹². Some New Testament quotations show the biblical roots of the notion of «sound teaching»¹³, which in the conclusion of the treatise is neatly identified with the Christian doctrine of the title: *doctrina sana id est Christiana*¹⁴. So these final words seem to close the circle, taking us back to the beginning of the treatise.

In view of such a variety of uses of *doctrina*, one can easily understand the difficulties scholars encounter in defining the meaning of the title and, therefore, of the whole work. And in fact, the word *doctrina* of the title has been hitherto translated in very different ways: doctrine, culture, instruction, education, teaching, exegesis, according to the general interpretation of the nature and purpose of the treatise. To overcome these difficulties no help whatever is supplied by the consideration that a chronological break of thirty years separates the first part of the work (Prologue and Books 1,1-3,78), dating back to the years 396-7 CE, from the second part, comprising the end of Book 3 (79-135) and the whole of Book 4, which was composed in 426-7 CE¹⁵. This long interruption may have produced some modification, or shift of accent and interest, in Augustine's dealing with the theme, due to the change of external conditions and, above all, to his intellectual and spiritual evolution, but did not radically alter the plan of the work, which appears on the contrary to have been stated with extreme lucidity right from the start and carried out with absolute consistency up to the end. An important contribution to the solution of the enigma is given instead by an article of Luc Verheijen who has acutely pointed out five cases of the use of *doctrinae* in the plural in the section of the treatise 2,19,29-42,63 (=73-151)¹⁶.

¹¹ *Sana doctrina* is the translation of ὑγιαίνουσα διδασκαλία found in I Tim 1,10; II Tim 4,3; Tit 1,9 and 2,1.

¹² *DDC* 4,90: «Quas tres apostolicas epistolas ante oculos habere debet cui est in ecclesia persona doctoris imposita».

¹³ See *DDC* 4, 91; 92 (three times); 95; 112; 152; 156; 164.

¹⁴ *DDC* 4,166.

¹⁵ See *Retract.* 2,31.

¹⁶ L.M.J. Verheijen, Le «De Doctrina Christiana» de Saint Augustin. Un manuel d'herméneutique et d'expression chrétienne avec, en II,19(29)-42(63), une «charte fondamentale pour une culture chrétienne», *Aug(L)* 24 (1974) 10-20. This study retains its value even though, wrongly in my opinion, he believes that this section is a «digression» embedded in a differently orientated context. In reality, as will be seen, these chapters are an integral part of the development of Augustine's argument, and precisely for this reason they help us to understand the right meaning of the title.

«Doctrina christiana» and the «doctrinae» of the pagans

Augustine begins by stating that the pagans pursue two kinds of sciences, each of them having its own specific object of inquiry: one is of the things which men have instituted, the other is of the things already developed, or divinely instituted, which men have observed. Of those instituted by men, some are superstitious, some not¹⁷. The connection between the use of *doctrinae* in the plural and the general context of pagan tradition is clear right from the outset, and is amply confirmed in later places. All the arts of the futile and harmful superstition of the pagans must be totally rejected and avoided by the Christian, as if they were the contracts of the untrustworthy and treacherous partnership established by a pernicious alliance between men and demons¹⁸. These devilish *artes* are also called *doctrinae*¹⁹. Augustine advises young people who are keen and intelligent, who fear God and seek the happy life, to discri-

¹⁷ *DDC* 2,73: «Duo sunt genera doctrinarum quae in gentilibus etiam moribus exercentur, unum earum rerum quas instituerunt homines, alterum earum quas animadverterunt iam peractas aut divinitus institutas. Illud quod est secundum institutiones hominum partim superstitionis est, partim non est».

¹⁸ *DDC* 2,89: «Omnis igitur artes huiusmodi vel nugatoriae vel noxiae superstitionis, ex quadam pestifera societate hominum et daemonum quasi pacta infidelis et dolosae amicitiae constituta, penitus sunt repudianda et fugienda Christiano». The idea that superstitious practices and beliefs imply consultations, alliance, contracts and agreements with demons, is repeated in *DDC* 2,74; 2,86; 2,90 and 2,139. Instead of *artes*, W.M. Green in CSEL 80, 59, reads *artifices* with the codex Petropolitanus Q.v.I.3 (olim Corbeiensis, of the early 5th century). C. Schäublin, Zum Text von Augustin, *De doctrina Christiana*, WSt N.F. 8 (1974) 173-181 (178f.), keeps *artes*, but inserts *et* between *superstitutionis* and *ex quadam*. Schäublin's emendation (*et*) has been accepted by M. Moreau-I. Bochet-G. Madec, *La doctrine chrétienne* (BA 11/2), Paris 1997, 192. Other scholars read *artifices* and also welcome Schäublin's suggestion: see R.P.H. Green, *Augustine. De Doctrina Christiana* (OECT), Oxford 1995, 98; K. Pollmann, *Augustinus. Die christliche Bildung* (*De doctrina Christiana*), Stuttgart 2002, 77. To my mind, the comparison with 2,90 and 2,139 (quoted below) confirms, beyond doubt, that here Augustine is not speaking of *artifices*, but uses the word *artes* as an obvious synonym of *doctrinae*. Besides, the neuter *pacta*, which is in apposition with the only subject *artes*, has attracted the gerundives *repudianda et fugienda*. This could simply be a solecism, that is, what results when words are not combined according to the rules by which they should be combined: see *Rhet. Her.* 4,17; Quintilian, *Inst. orat.* 1,5,34-54, and *DDC* 2,44. Augustine was well aware that his speech contained solecisms and barbarisms (*De ord.* 2,17,45; *De mus.* 2,2,2). This was possible because to him, contrary to the general opinion, the use of a polite literary style to describe lusts seemed much worse than the use of solecisms and barbarisms in the description of not reprehensible actions (*Conf.* 1,18,28).

¹⁹ *DDC* 2,90: «In omnibus ergo istis doctrinis societas daemonum formidanda atque vitanda est qui nihil cum principe suo diabolo nisi redditum nostrum claudere atque obserare conantur».

minate carefully between the *doctrinae* pursued among the pagans outside the church of Christ, and even to repudiate them entirely, if they involve an alliance with demonic powers established through a sort of contract or agreement based on particular esoteric meanings²⁰. Nothing that is really useful can be found in the other pagan sciences, with the exception of the investigation of things past or present which concern the bodily senses, including the experimentations and the conjectures of the practical arts that are useful to the life of the body, and the sciences of dialectic and number²¹.

Actually, all the sciences (*doctrinae*) of the pagans contain not only false and superstitious fantasies and burdensome studies that involve unnecessary effort, but also the liberal arts (*liberales disciplinas*). Augustine writes that, like the Hebrews surreptitiously claimed for themselves the treasures of the Egyptians in order to make better use of them (Ex 3,21f.; 11,2f.; 12,35f.), in a similar way the Christians must regain the legitimate possession of the liberal arts in order to apply them to their right use, that of preaching the gospel (*ad usum iustum praedicandi evangelii*)²². Some years later (ca. 400 CE), commenting again on the spoils of the Egyptians against the Manichaean bishop Faustus of Milevis, Augustine recalls that he had already discussed this theme in *DDC* and, just as he had done in that work, he stresses again that the treasures of the Egyptians are the prophetic prefigurations of certain *doctrinae* which are normally learned among the pagans with a not useless study²³. It is worth remembering in this context that, around the same time, Augustine gives directions in his treatise *On the Instruction of Beginners* about how to deal with a catechumen who is trained in the liberal arts (*liberalibus doctrinis excultus*)²⁴.

It may therefore be stated that in all these passages a basic contrast is outlined between the plurality of the pagan *doctrinae*, which are intrinsically dan-

²⁰ *DDC* 2,139: «Quamobrem videtur mihi studiosis et ingeniosis adulescentibus et timentibus deum beatamque vitam quaerentibus salubriter praecipi ut nullas doctrinas quae praeter ecclesiam Christi exercentur tamquam ad beatam vitam capessendam secure sequi audeant sed eas sobrie diligenterque diiudicent, et si quas invenerint ab hominibus institutas, varias propter diversam voluntatem instituentium et ignotas propter suspiciones errantium, maxime si habent etiam cum daemonibus initam societatem per quarundam significationum quasi quaedam pacta atque converta, repudient penitus et detestentur».

²¹ *DDC* 2,140: «In ceteris autem doctrinis quae apud gentes inveniuntur, praeter historiam rerum vel praeteriti temporis vel praesentis ad sensus corporis pertinentium, quibus etiam utilium artium corporalium experimenta et coniecturae adnumerantur, et praeter rationem disputationis et numeri, nihil utile esse arbitror».

²² *DDC* 2,144-147.

²³ C. Faust. 22,91. For a detailed analysis see P.F. Beatrice, The Treasures of the Egyptians. A Chapter in the History of Patristic Exegesis and Late Antique Culture, in: StPatr (forthcoming).

²⁴ *De cat. rud.* 8,12.

gerous on account of their ambiguous mixture of demoniac idolatry and liberal disciplines, and the unique Christian *doctrina*, which, on the contrary, is the hermeneutical procedure of finding out the contents, both things and signs, of the Scriptures. In a long and stimulating page of the *Explanations of the Psalms*, Augustine writes that the expression «flood of many waters» means the multiplicity of the pagan and heretic doctrines, whereas the true doctrine of God is one, not many waters but only the water either of the sacrament of baptism or of the doctrine which brings salvation²⁵.

«Doctrina christiana» and the liberation from the liberal arts

In *DDC* Augustine definitively forsakes the idea he had amply developed ten years before (386-387 CE) in the *Cassiciacum* dialogues, that the study of the liberal arts is an essential condition for the purification of the soul and the enjoyment of the happy life²⁶. Now Augustine narrows the perspective, by assigning the liberal arts only the simple, subordinate function of useful tools for the scientific investigation of the Scriptures. In particular, the chief purpose of the liberal arts is to assist the Christian exegete in the examination of the «unknown metaphorical signs» (*signa ignota translata*)²⁷.

In *On Order* dialectic was still considered «the discipline of disciplines»²⁸. Augustine now claims that dialectic is just a tool, even though a very precious one, for the explanation of all kinds of problems in the Bible²⁹, and puts his readers on their guard against the error of thinking that, when people have mastered dialectic, that is, the rules about syllogisms and definitions and classifications, they have also automatically learnt the truth about the happy life³⁰. A few years later, Augustine maintains against the Donatist Cresconius

²⁵ *En. Ps.* 31,2,18.

²⁶ See for example *C. Acad.* 3,4,7: «disciplinarum, quibus excoluntur animi, circulum»; *De ord.* 1,1,3: «qui plagas quasdam opinionum ... liberalibus medicant disciplinis»; 1,2,4: «eruditioni ... qua purgatur et excolitur animus»; and above all *De ord.* 1,8,24: «Nam eruditio disciplinarum liberalium, modesta sane ac succincta, et alacriores et perseverantiores et comptiores exhibet amatores amplectendae veritati, ut et ardentius appetant, et constantius insequantur et inhaereant postremo dulcius, quae vocatur, Licenti, beata vita ... deinde totus attollere in laudem puri et sinceri amoris, quo animae dotatae disciplinis et virtute formosae copulantur intellectui per philosophiam et non solum mortem fugiunt, verum etiam vita beatissima perfruuntur».

²⁷ *DDC* 2,57ff.

²⁸ *De ord.* 2,13,38: «disciplinam disciplinarum quam dialecticam vocant».

²⁹ *DDC* 2,117: «Sed disputationis disciplina ad omnia genera quaestionum quae in litteris sanctis sunt penetranda et dissolvenda plurimum valet».

³⁰ *DDC* 2,133: «Illa vero conclusionum et definitionum et distributionum plurimum intellectorem adiuvat; tantum absit error, quo videntur sibi homines ipsam beatae

that Christian doctrine does never fear dialectic³¹. In *On Order* Augustine had gone so far as to attribute a great deal to the liberal arts, as he himself was to acknowledge with regret in the *Reconsiderations*³². The treatise *DDC* marks Augustine's definitive abandonment of the theory elaborated in *On Order*, and anticipates in general speculative terms that which, a few years later in the *Confessions* (ca. 400 CE), was to be the autobiographical description of his progressive liberation from the temptations of those liberal arts he had passionately studied in his youth³³. However, Augustine keeps the notions acquired through the liberal arts in the storehouse of his memory³⁴.

The new trend of Augustine's thought was the result of the biblical studies he had intensified especially in the years of his ministry as a presbyter at Hippo (391-5 CE). It is a new perspective, decidedly far from the Neoplatonic and intellectualistic infatuation of the first philosophical works. This change is clearly attested especially by the shift in the interpretation of the ascent to wisdom. In the dialogue *On the Greatness of the Soul*, of the year 388 CE, Augustine had placed on the third step all the great and specifically human activities, both practical and intellectual, the liberal arts included³⁵. But in *On the Lord's Sermon on the Mount* (ca. 393-4 CE) the seven stages of the ascent of the soul tally with the seven beatitudes (Mt 5,3-10), the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit (taken in reverse order from Is 11,2f. LXX), and the seven petitions of the Lord's Prayer (Mt 6,9-13). Thus, on the third rung of the ladder we now find the gift of science, which corresponds to the beatitude of those who mourn for they will be comforted³⁶, and to the petition «May Your will be

vitae veritatem didicisse, cum ista didicerint».

³¹ *C. Cresc.* 1,25: «Hanc enim artem, quam dialecticam vocant ... numquam doctrina christiana formidat ...».

³² *Retract.* 1,3,2: «Verum et in his libris displicet mihi ... quod multum tribui liberalibus disciplinis, quas multi sancti multum nesciunt, quidam etiam qui sciunt eas sancti non sunt».

³³ *Conf.* 4,1,1: «Per idem tempus annorum novem, ab undevicesimo anno aetatis meae usque ad duodetricesimum, seducebamur et seducebamus, falsi atque fallentes in variis cupiditatibus, et palam per doctrinas quas liberales vocant ...»; 4,16,30: «Et quid mihi proderat quod omnes libros artium quas liberales vocant tunc nequissimus malarum cupiditatum servus per me ipsum legi et intellexi, quoscumque legere potui? ... Quidquid de arte loquendi et disserendi, quidquid de dimensionibus figurarum et de musicis et de numeris, sine magna difficultate nullo hominum tradente intellexi ...».

³⁴ *Conf.* 10,9,16-12,19.

³⁵ *De quant. an.* 33,72: «vim ratiocinandi et excogitandi, fluvios eloquentiae, carminum varietates, ludendi ac iocandi causa milleformes simulationes, modulandi peritiam, dimidiendi subtilitatem, numerandi disciplinam, praeteritorum ac futurorum ex praesentibus coniecturam. Magna haec et omnino humana».

³⁶ *De serm. Dom.* 1,3,10: «Inde iam incipit scire quibus nodis saeculi huius per carnalem consuetudinem ac peccata teneatur. Itaque in hoc tertio gradu, in quo scientia est,

done on earth as it is in heaven»³⁷. A few years later, Augustine develops this exegesis in *DDC*, and unambiguously identifies the stage of science with the scientific investigation of the Bible.

«*Doctrina christiana*» and «*divinarum scripturarum scientia*»

«After these two stages of fear and piety one comes to the third stage, that of science (*ad tertium venitur scientiae gradum*), with which I now propose to deal. Actually, this is the stage in which every investigator of the divine Scriptures exerts himself (*Nam in eo se exercet omnis divinarum scripturarum studiosus*), and he will find in them quite simply that God must be loved for himself, and his neighbour for God's sake, and that he must love God with his whole heart, his whole soul, and his whole mind, and his neighbour as himself – in other words, that his love of his neighbour, like his own self-love, should be totally related to God»³⁸.

Augustine had already dealt with these two commandments in Book 1, in the discussion of things³⁹, and emphasizes again and again the idea that love is the true content of the biblical message⁴⁰. But this passage is particularly important for our theme because here Augustine explicitly says that the exegesis of the Bible belongs to the realm of *scientia*, after having presented the *modus inveniendi*, at the beginning of the first book, as a *doctrina*. The two words *scientia* and *doctrina* are clearly synonyms. Every *doctrina* (or *disciplina*) is in fact the science of something: for example the art of grammar is the liberal art through which one acquires the science of letters⁴¹ and tropes⁴²; music is the science of modulating well⁴³, and is the discipline which gives the fullest instruction on rhythm⁴⁴; dialectic and arithmetic are sciences⁴⁵; in particular, dialectic is the science of disputing well⁴⁶. In *On the Immortality of the Soul*

lugetur amissio summi boni, quia inhaeretur extremis; and see also 1,4,11f.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 2,11,38.

³⁸ *DDC* 2,18.

³⁹ *DDC* 1,57f.; 1,84; 1,88.

⁴⁰ *DDC* 2,24; 2,90; 3,34-38. The same thought is already expressed in *De mus.* 6,14,43 and 6,17,59.

⁴¹ *Conf.* 1,18,29: «litterarum scientia».

⁴² *DDC* 3,87f.: «Quos tamen tropos ... eorumque scientia ... artem grammaticam ... liberali arte ...».

⁴³ *De mus.* 1, 2,2-4,8: «Musica est scientia bene modulandi». See also *De ord.* 2,14,39-41.

⁴⁴ *DDC* 4,116; «Nam illa musica disciplina, ubi numerus iste plenissime discitur ...».

⁴⁵ *De ord.* 2,18,47: «Ad istarum rerum cognitionem neminem aspirare debere sine illa quasi dupli scientia bonae disputationis potentiaeque numerorum».

⁴⁶ *De dial.* 1 (B.D. Jackson, Augustine. *De dialectica*, Dordrecht/Boston 1975, 83): «dialectica est bene disputandi scientia».

Augustine programmatically establishes the identity between science and discipline⁴⁷. That in *DDC* the word *doctrina* has the same meaning as *scientia*, seems to be further confirmed by the fact that things and signs are objects of both *doctrina*⁴⁸ and *scientia*⁴⁹ or, which is the same, by the fact that *doctrina* and *scientia* have the same objects, that is, things and signs. And at the end of Book 2 Augustine contrasts «the science that is collected from the books of the pagans», that is, the *doctrinae* or *disciplinae* of the pagans, to the «science of the divine Scriptures» (*divinarum scripturarum scientia*), that is, the *doctrina christiana*⁵⁰. Of course, people who are strengthened by faith, hope, and love, as the numerous monks who live in solitude without any biblical manuscripts, have no more need of this science of the Scriptures, but use them only to instruct others, because they already hold something perfect, at least as far as perfection is possible in this life, and have fulfilled the words of the apostle Paul (I Cor 13,8): «Prophecies will be brought to an end; tongues will stop, science (*scientia*) will be brought to an end»⁵¹.

In this hermeneutical horizon, which is characterized by the opposition between Christian biblical exegesis and the pagan liberal arts, the *doctrina christiana* mentioned in the title of the treatise takes on the connotations of a real scientific knowledge of the Bible which replaces all the kinds of knowledge current among the pagans, and subordinates them in order to achieve a totally different goal. It is simply «the science of the Scriptures», the specifically Christian science, the main aim of which is the building of a community based on the observation of the commandment of the double love of God and of one's neighbour. *DDC* is the manifesto of a new culture in the sense, and only in the sense, that the culture it proposes is «biblical science», a science which defines the criteria and the ways of the religious behaviour of a new community, the Christian community, called upon to bring about the civilization of love on earth.

⁴⁷ *De imm. an.* 1,1: «Nec ullam rem scientia complectitur, nisi quae ad aliquam pertineat disciplinam. Est enim disciplina quarumcumque rerum scientia». This definition, of course, does not apply to God, who has the *scientia* of everything without learning the *disciplinae*, as Augustine remarks in *Retract.* 1,5,2.

⁴⁸ *DDC* 1,4: «Omnis doctrina vel rerum est vel signorum».

⁴⁹ *DDC* 2,46: «non rerum scientia qua aedificamur, sed signorum, qua non inflari omnino difficile est, cum et ipsa rerum scientia saepe cervicem erigat nisi dominico reprimatur iugo».

⁵⁰ *DDC* 2,151: «tanta fit cuncta scientia quae quidem est utilis collecta de libris gentium, si divinarum scripturarum scientiae comparetur».

⁵¹ *DDC* 1,93f.

«Doctrina christiana», «doctrina sana» and «doctrina pietatis»

It should not be ruled out that Augustine was already thinking of the *Pastoral Epistles* and of their solemn appeal to the «sound doctrine», when he planned to write *DDC* and published its first part (396-7 CE), and that the concept of «sound doctrine», taken from the *Pastoral Epistles*, was implied in some way in the choice of the title. It is true that in *DDC* 1,33 we find only a rapid allusion to the *apostolica doctrina* of Eph 1,23, and that the notion of «sound doctrine» is totally absent in the first three books of *DDC*. But to think that *sana doctrina* emerged only in Book 4 (426-7 CE) as a later enrichment, due to the long episcopal experience that separates the two parts of the work, would be a serious misrepresentation of the reality. This scriptural expression is actually already present in a passage of the *Confessions* (around 400 CE), a work which is very near, not only chronologically, to *DDC*, in the anti-heretical sense of «Catholic truth»⁵². The sound doctrine is simply the orthodox faith in the truth, proclaimed by the Catholic Church and grounded on the canon of the Holy Scriptures⁵³.

The need to study the Scriptures became particularly impelling for Augustine when he began to tackle the problems of the ministry of preaching after his priestly ordination in 391 CE. Feeling unprepared to carry out his new tasks adequately, he implored the bishop Valerius to allow him sufficient time to fill, at least partially, the gaps in his knowledge of the Bible⁵⁴. But that was not enough. The gradual intensification of the study of the Scriptures forced Augustine to make a radical revision of the gigantic cultural project on which he had begun working during his stay in Milan, that is, the encyclopedia of the seven liberal arts (*Disciplinarum libri*). Augustine, as we read in the *Re-considerations*, was prompted to write such a work by the desire to arrive himself, or to lead others, through corporeal things to incorporeal things by certain definite steps, as it were, but was able to finish the book *On Grammar*, and only the first six books of the dialogue *On Music* dealing with rhythm, whereas of the other five disciplines only the sketchy beginnings remained⁵⁵. Now, the interruption of this enormous undertaking was due not only, or not principally, to his new ecclesiastical tasks and to the consequent lack of

⁵² *Conf.* 7,19,25: «Ego autem aliquanto posterius didicisse me fateor, in eo quod verbum caro factum est, quomodo catholica veritas a Photini falsitate dirimatur. Improbatio quippe haereticorum facit eminere quid ecclesia tua sentiat et quid habeat sana doctrina».

⁵³ *DDC* 2,24: «Erit igitur divinarum scripturarum sollertissimus indagator qui primo totas legerit notasque habuerit, etsi nondum intellectu, iam tamen lectione, dumtaxat eas quae appellantur canonicae».

⁵⁴ See *Epist.* 21.

⁵⁵ See *Retract.* 1,6.

time. It was the study of Scripture itself, that had become for Augustine the only true Christian science, that led him to abandon that project with its inner logic, and to assess in totally new terms the value of the *disciplinae* for biblical hermeneutics. In *DDC* we witness the final reckoning of Augustine with those liberal arts, which he had studied so brilliantly in his youth. The fact that his agile mind found no difficulty in those sciences (*doctrinas* in the plural), and that he could elucidate extremely complicated books without assistance from a human teacher, as he was to write in the *Confessions*, certainly could not be of any profit to him while, as an adherent of Manichaeism, he was straying into error concerning the *doctrina pietatis*, in a distorted and shamefully sacrilegious way⁵⁶.

Doctrina pietatis is a rather enigmatic expression. *Pietas* is reckoned in *On the Lord's Sermon on the Mount* and in *DDC* as the second step to wisdom, between the fear of God and science, and its specific function is to make us docile, by compelling us to admit, and submit to, the authority of the Holy Scriptures⁵⁷. The reader who is at the third stage of science, first learns from the Scriptures that he is far from loving God and his neighbour to the extent that Scripture prescribes, and it is at that point that the fear of God and piety compel him to mourn for his own sinful condition. Thus, both the fear of God and piety transform the scientific exegesis of the Bible into that particular science which makes a person with good reason to hope not boastful but remorseful⁵⁸. In the *Confessions* Augustine adds that skill in scientific matters is not essential to learning piety (*pietas*), and that these matters have nothing to do with religion (*doctrina religionis*), since «piety is wisdom» (Job 28,28)⁵⁹. That is why the mature man who has reached the very form of the doctrine of piety (*doctrina pietatis*) is no longer carried about by any wind of doctrine (Eph 4,14)⁶⁰.

⁵⁶ *Conf.* 4,16,31: «Quid ergo tunc mihi proderat ingenium per illas doctrinas agile et nullo adminiculo humani magisterii tot nodosissimi libri enodati, cum deformiter et sacrilega turpitudine in doctrina pietatis errarem?». It is worth remembering that, in his quest for the truth, Augustine had discovered, to his bitter disappointment, that the Manichaean bishop Faustus of Milevis, contrary to the repute which had preceded their encounter, was ignorant of the «liberal arts» (*honestae doctrinae, liberales disciplinae*) other than grammar, and was therefore not in a position to give him the food of «science» (*scientia*) which still had at that time a great meaning in his eyes (*Conf.* 5,3,3 and 5,6,11).

⁵⁷ See *De serm. Dom.* 1,3,10; 2,11,38; *DDC* 2,17; 2,19.

⁵⁸ *DDC* 2,20: «Nam ista scientia bonae spei hominem non se iactantem, sed lamentantem facit».

⁵⁹ *Conf.* 5,5,8.

⁶⁰ *Conf.* 5,5,9. We find here again the contrast between the unique Christian doctrine and the various doctrines of pagans and heretics.

The wings of love and piety

In the light of these remarks, I would be willing to paraphrase *doctrina pietatis* as the new Christian, exclusively biblical science, which leads to humility and repentance and aims at the love for God and neighbour. This kind of science sharply contrasts with all the other worldly *artes, scientiae, disciplinae* or *doctrinae*. What really matters is to nourish the wings of love (*alas caritatis*) with the food, not of science, but of sound faith in the nest of the Church⁶¹. Books 4 and 5 of the *Confessions* shed a particular light on the first two books of *DDC*: in fact, these texts depict in similar terms the same implacable conflict between the science conveyed by the liberal arts and the biblical science aiming at the love of God and neighbour.

It is worth recalling that Augustine had used the same metaphorical image of the wings of love in the prologue to Book 6 of the dialogue *On Music*, in a similar context of general depreciation of the liberal arts. Here we read that those who are not able to understand secular culture, but have been initiated into the mysteries of Christian religion and long for God with the greatest love (*summa caritate*), have already flown, and still should fly, beyond all these childish things, since they possess the wings of piety (*alas pietatis*). On the contrary, those who still lack these wings should nourish their feathers with the teachings and in the nest of Christian faith, in order to avoid the difficult and dusty road of secular learning on their way back to the heavenly homeland⁶².

By overcoming the attractions of the liberal arts, Augustine took a decisive step in his gradual but irreversible estrangement from the pagan cultural heritage he had found in the works of Varro and Marius Victorinus⁶³. As a Christian bishop involved in the pastoral care of his flock, Augustine writes that the salvation of the soul does not depend on the liberal doctrines⁶⁴. That is

⁶¹ *Conf.* 4,16,31: «Aut quid tantum oberat parvulis tuis longe tardius ingenium, cum a te longe non recederent, ut in nido ecclesiae tuae tuti plumescerent et alas caritatis alimento sanae fidei nutrirent?»

⁶² *De mus.* 6,1,1.

⁶³ Both of them had led Augustine into the fascinating world of the *enkyklios paideia*. Varro, the author of the *Disciplinarum libri*, was a man full of doctrine and a teacher of all liberal erudition (*De civ. Dei* 6,2), while Marius Victorinus, whose translation of the *libri platoniconum* had a deep impact on Augustine's mind, was extremely learned and most expert in all the liberal doctrines (*Conf.* 8,2,3). In a previous article I have tried to identify these books with Porphyry's anti-Christian treatise *The Philosophy according to the Oracles*: see P.F. Beatrice, *Quosdam Platonicorum libros. The Platonic Readings of Augustine in Milan*, VigChr 43(1989) 248-281, but further research still needs to be done to understand the influence they exerted on Augustine's encyclopedia of the seven liberal arts.

⁶⁴ *Epist.* 87,1, to the Donatist Emeritus.

why Possidius had been fed by Augustine not on the liberal arts but on the bread of the Lord⁶⁵. Augustine expresses his disregard for the so-called liberal studies by stating that there is no need to draw the attention to the *christiana doctrina* by means of Cicero's dialogues⁶⁶.

At this point, after all that has already been said about the identity of *doctrina* and *scientia*, and the contrast between the liberal disciplines and the science of the Scriptures, it can hardly be denied that the notion of *doctrina pietatis*, found in Books 4 and 5 of the *Confessions*, substantially coincides with that of *doctrina sana id est christiana*. But what matters even more is that, finally, we are now in a position to understand precisely the reason for the choice of the word *doctrina* and its true meaning in the title of *DDC*. *Doctrina* was actually the only comprehensive word Augustine had at his disposal to signify at the same time two deeply different concepts such as the *scientia* (*ars* or *disciplina*) of secular learning, which is simply the knowledge of things and signs, and the *sana doctrina*, derived from the Latin translation of the *Pastoral Epistles*, which is the sound teaching of the unique orthodox faith to be defended against the numerous and perverse *doctrinae* of pagans and heretics. Both concepts converge in the idea that the only true Christian *doctrina* is the scientific investigation, or scientific knowledge, of the things and signs contained in the canonical books of the Bible, which convey the sound teaching summarized in the commandment of the double love of God and neighbour. Thus, by choosing *doctrina* as the most appropriate word for the title of his treatise on biblical hermeneutics, Augustine has achieved an original synthesis of Christianity and Antiquity.

Abstract

This paper tries to explain why Augustine entitled his treatise on biblical hermeneutics *De doctrina christiana*. Hitherto the word *doctrina* has been translated in many different ways, according to the general interpretation of the nature and purpose of the work: doctrine, culture, instruction, education, teaching, exegesis. The systematic and detailed analysis of several passages from Augustine's works seems to justify the conclusion that he chose this word to signify at the same time two completely different concepts. In its current meaning, *doctrina* was the scientific knowledge of things and signs, and was often used as a synonym of *scientia*, *ars* and *disciplina*. But Augustine used this word also with the meaning of sound teaching, which he found in the Latin translation of the *Pastoral Epistles*. The subject of the treatise, therefore, is the «science» (or «scientific knowledge») of the «sound Christian

⁶⁵ *Epist.* 101,1, to Memor bishop of Capua.

⁶⁶ *Epist.* 118,1-2 and 9, to Dioscoros.

teaching, contained in the canonical Scriptures, which enjoin nothing but the commandment of the double love for God and neighbour.

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