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**DIVINE IMMUTABILITY
IN SAINT AUGUSTINE**

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The immutability of God has in recent years come under discussion for a number of reasons. It has seemed to some that an immutable God cannot be genuinely concerned about and involved with his creatures.¹ It has seemed to others that God's eternal and immutable knowledge destroys human freedom.² This article does not aim directly at settling such questions; rather its aim is to examine Augustine's reasons for insisting upon the absolute immutability of God's being.³ Generally the doctrine of divine immutability is thought to stem from Platonism, and it is sometimes regarded as a philosophical accretion that is not at all essential to the Judaeo-Christian concept of God.⁴ I shall argue that there are good reasons for believing that Augustine's position regarding divine immutability is as much the result of his dissatisfaction with Manicheism as the result of his contact with Neoplatonism.⁵ Of course, if this suggestion has merit, there are implications for the direction that contemporary discussion of the issue might take.

I. THE MEANING AND SCOPE OF DIVINE IMMUTABILITY

Before examining how and why Augustine came to hold that God is immutable, it is necessary to clarify what he means by the term "immutable." First of all, "immutable," as a negation or denial of change, is an element of negative or apophatic theology. For Augustine's God is better known by not knowing.⁶ Moreover, the term excludes from God not merely the fact of change, but the possibility of change.⁷ Third, the Latin verb "*mutari*" literally means "to be changed." Though the force of the passive voice is often lost in the English translation, the Latin means that God cannot be acted upon or modified by something else. He is, after all, "changing everything, while remaining unchangeable," and he "makes changeable things without any change of himself and is acted upon in no way."⁸ In the latter text Augustine is dealing with the Aristotelian categories of *actio* and *passio*. He explicitly excludes from God any *passio* or being acted upon, though he goes on to say that perhaps God alone can be truly said to make (*facere*). "In the case of making perhaps it is said truly of God alone, for

God alone makes and is not made (*facit, et ipse non fit*) and is not acted upon in his substance by which he is God.⁹ Hence, it is, first of all, passivity that is ruled out by immutability. Augustine says,

We are not permitted to believe that God is affected in one way when he rests and in another way when he works, since he must not be said to be affected, as if something comes to be in his nature which was not previously there. For one who is affected is acted upon, as everything that undergoes something is mutable (*De civitate dei* XII, 17).

God cannot be changed or acted upon or undergo anything, though he can certainly change and act upon and make things. Indeed, perhaps he alone can be truly said to act.¹⁰

When Augustine speaks of God's immutability, he frequently adds other terms, such as, incorruptible and inviolable — much stronger terms which clearly emphasize that God cannot be acted upon, be corrupted or suffer violence.¹¹ However, though "everything that undergoes something is mutable," it need not follow that everything mutable undergoes something. That is, could there not be a change which does not involve being acted upon

⁹In "A New Look at the Immutability of God," *God Knowable and Unknowable*, edited by Robert J. Roth, S.J. (New York: Fordham University Press, 1973), pp. 43-72, W. Norris Clarke, S.J., says that the traditional or Thomistic position is challenged from two sources: "process philosophy, in terms of the speculative exigencies of its own metaphysics of reality, and existential religious consciousness . . ." Of the two Father Clarke finds the objections from the second source of much more concern.

¹⁰Robert Ayers, for example, argues along such lines in "A Viable Theodicy for Christian Apologetics," *The Modern Schoolman* 52 (1975) 395. He maintains that

even a relative freedom of man cannot be maintained. If God knows with absolute certainty the totality of one's existence from eternity, then his life is complete before he himself has actualized it in time.

Cf. Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford, 1977) pp. 175-176, for an attempt to limit God's knowledge to the past and present. For an attempt to deal with this sort of challenge to classical theism, cf. "Omniscience, Omnipotence, and Divine Transcendence," *The New Scholasticism* 53 (1979) 277-94, where I draw heavily upon Bernard Lonergan's writings in order to locate the mystery where, I believe, it belongs, namely, in God's eternity.

¹¹One of the tasks of this paper will be to unpack what Augustine means by the immutability of God. However, the topic of immutability runs through so much of Augustine's treatment

of God that I shall have to limit my discussion in this paper to the immutability of God's being or essence and leave for another paper an investigation of God's immutable knowledge and will. Nonetheless, God's essence, knowledge and willing are one and the same immutable reality.

Nam sicut omnino tu es, tu scis solus, qui es incommutabiliter, et scis incommutabiliter, et vis incommutabiliter. Et essentia tua scit et vult incommutabiliter, et scientia tua est et vult incommutabiliter, et voluntas tua est et scit incommutabiliter (*Confessions* XIII, 16, 19; hereafter *Conf.*).

Despite all of his emphasis upon divine immutability, one could hardly maintain that the God of the *Confessions* is a religiously unavailable metaphysical abstraction. Augustine's use of imagery makes his God much more humanly approachable than his theory might seem to allow. Here, as in so many areas, Augustine eludes facile categorization. For the importance of imagery in Augustine and in metaphysics generally, cf. Robert J. O'Connell, S.J., *Imagination and Metaphysics in St. Augustine* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1986).

¹²For example, in *Aquinas to Whitehead: Seven Centuries of Metaphysics of Religion* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1976), Charles Hartshorne traces divine immutability to Plato and argues for growth in God's knowledge. Though Hartshorne does not say so in this lecture, I recall him telling a group of faculty members that his God was, of course, not a creator in the traditional sense — a point which, one would think, should give pause to some Catholic process thinkers.