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Notes on the Pelagian Controversy

ROGER D. HAIGHT, S.J.

When one opens Augustine, he is faced with some of the deepest questions about the nature of man, of God and of our relationship with him on almost any given page. Because of Augustine's questioning and probing character, most of the conclusions he reached have a certain timeless quality about them. And on the question of grace, his thoughts were written into the doctrine of western Christianity. Because of the experiential quality of his thought, so attached as it is to his own life experience, his theology has a kind of perennial contemporaneity and vital relatedness that has made him probably the most influential theologian since Paul.

This is particularly true on the question of grace as it is presented in the Pelagian controversy. In one sense, this debate can be viewed very narrowly as involving the question of whether or not God's internal grace is prior to and supportive of the exercise of man's freedom in faith and the doing of the good. Seen in this way, the councils of Carthage and Orange testify that this problem has been solved; Pelagius lost and he is a heretic. But the question is really much larger. At stake is a much more basic conception of what the very nature of man is according to Christianity, the nature of Christian life and of the Church. Set in the context of human freedom, the Pelagian controversy asked the perennially radical question of the quality of human behavior, and the sources of good and evil in this world. There is no Christian spirituality, nor can one even give a retreat or preach a sermon, without explicitly or implicitly working on assumptions that underlie the Pelagian controversy.

Because of the extensiveness of the broader question and

because of its implications it must be said that the Pelagian question is not solved. A-priori and on the supposition that both Augustine and Pelagius were Christians (Pelagius being the more traditional in more than one respect), and that every heresy is based on some truth, one has to allow Pelagius his say before becoming an Augustinian. And a-posteriori, after the issues are sifted, it will appear that the values that both Augustine and Pelagius fought for must really be held in constant tension. It is at this level, then, that the following interpretation of the Pelagian controversy is set. The controversy can be seen as involving two elements or poles that must always be held in tension. The fundamental relationship between these two poles was defined through the Pelagian controversy, but the delicate balance between them is a constant issue and one that has particular relevance for today since more and more man is being defined as freedom and is called upon to exercise his autonomy.

THE BACKGROUND

When Augustine and Pelagius arrived in Rome in the 380s they had much in common. Both were provincials, Augustine from Thagaste in Northern Africa, Pelagius from Britain. Pelagius like Augustine could well have come in search of a civil career in the heart of the empire. Both, however, turned out to be religious leaders exercising an enormous spiritual force.

More than anything else they shared a common historical period. Paradoxically, while the Church in the late 4th century was rapidly shifting from the persecuted minority religion that it had been to the state religion of the masses, the tradition of a radical conversion to an authentic Christian life of dedication and perfection was still strong, and Augustine converted to it. The tension of a radical break with the past can be seen in Book VIII of the *Confessions*. Pelagius would be the apostle of the need for just such a conversion.

Time is the fashioner of change and this is particularly so in the case of Augustine. From the new convert, a contemplative as much Plotinian as Christian, to the priest and then the bishop, Augustine faced several turning points in his life, and

was a far different person when Rome was sacked in the year 410 than he was during the winter of 386—387, and far more different still than the reformer Pelagius. Augustine had always been deeply concerned with the problem of evil in man, even from his Manichaeian days, and the question of the nature of man, in the terms of moral good and evil as he viewed it, formed the context of much of his introspection and his theology. A major shift in his thinking occurred around the years 396—397 while he was intensely engaged in the study of Paul and had occasion to respond to some questions put to him by Simplicianus. For the first time the theme of a total dependency on God is announced with the simplicity and strength of conviction that only a kind of religious experience and personal insight can give. He later testified to the extent that he was influenced by Paul's statement: "What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?" [1 Cor 4/7].

The mechanics of grace and election were seen by Augustine in terms of the phenomenon of delight. We are commanded to live righteously, but this cannot be achieved without faith. We are commanded to believe. "But who can believe unless he is reached by some calling, by some testimony borne to the truth? Who has it in his power to have such a motive present to his mind that his will shall be influenced to believe? Who can welcome in his mind something which does not give him delight? But who has it in his power to ensure that something that will delight him will turn up, or that he will take delight in what turns up? If those things delight us which serve our advancement towards God, that is due not to our own whim or industry or meritorious works, but to the inspiration of God and to the grace which he bestows. He freely bestows upon us voluntary assent, earnest effort, and the power to perform works of fervent charity."¹

Of this turning point, TeSelle writes:

1. Augustine, "To Simplician — On Various Questions," Bk I, ques. 2, vii, 21, in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, John H. S. Burleigh, ed. and trans. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), p. 405.

All that he had worked out concerning the freedom and bondage of the will, the call of grace and its reception through faith and the infusion of love, came to be seen in a new light; it was not so much modified as brought to what seemed to be a fitting conclusion in the conviction that the will is so bound by custom that it cannot free itself, cannot even receive the promises of grace and seek divine aid, but must be called forth by a divine invitation that is suited to the particular situation of each man, that is issued, therefore, by a providence which has watched over the details of his life from the beginning.²

With this conviction and in this light Augustine began to review minutely the whole of his life in terms of grace. His whole life and every moment in it was seen as guided by the providence and grace of God. His understanding of man's movement toward Truth and the Good, of conversion, of the Christian life and of man's ability to lead it was summed up in the keynote statement: "Command what you wish, but give what you command."³

Pelagius could only have been disappointed when he caught the drift of that statement.⁴ For Pelagius had become a spiritual director and something of a leader in a reform movement. Closely associated with the aristocratic class, he preached, against the pagan morality that had infiltrated into the Church with the conversions of convenience, a life of authentic Christianity, of Christian perfection, one that appealed to the first families who wanted to stand out above the crowd. While Augustine had retired to a corner of the empire and was immersed in theological reflection, Pelagius was in the capital, in the thick of a degenerating Church life, immersed in pastoral activity and spiritual exhortation. He preached on the decision that radical conversion demanded; he preached a Christian ideal that stood out against the background of Rome's pagan past; Christianity was a *new* life. It was not surprising that the ideas of the reform movement would be popular among the missionary bishops in southern Italy where Christianity could not but be presented to the unbeliever as a new way of life. Nor

2. Eugene TeSelle, *Augustine the Theologian* (London: Burns and Oates, 1970), p. 182.

3. Augustine, *Confessions*, Bk X, ch 29.

4. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), p. 179.

was it surprising that when the reform movement reached Africa with the refugees from Rome it met a different interpretation of man, of sin and of grace. For that was a more established church, tired with its long struggle with the Donatists; and it was dominated by the ideas of Augustine.

THE TEACHING

The Pelagians did not deny grace; they affirmed it. But grace was first of all man's own freedom, his God-given ability to decide between good and evil. For Augustine, while free choice remained, the desire and affections of man were locked in a web of sin. The custom and habit of personal sin imprisoned free choice within the narrow confines of sensible self-seeking. For the Pelagians, religion and Christianity was mainly an affair of adults, and it meant conversion to and baptism into a radically new life. The Christian should steadily advance in perfection through his asceticism. Augustine who had once shared elements of this idealism was now convinced that no real perfection was possible in this life. The Pelagians held that Original Sin did not involve personal guilt leading to damnation; man's freedom was part of his nature and it remained intact. Infant baptism tended to be regarded as an initiation into the kingdom of God and the effects of Original Sin as mediated by society. Only adult baptism included the remission of sin. Augustine denied this traditional view: Man's nature is fundamentally disordered because of inherited sin and this involved personal guilt so that an unbaptized infant could not be saved. Man's nature suffered from a *gravitas* or weight that pulled it downward even though the spirit of man is naturally ordained to ascend to the One, the True and the Good. The Pelagians saw the grace of God in his law; and more specifically in the Christian dispensation, man had the grace of Christ's teaching and his example. This external grace appealed to man's freedom and he could follow if he wanted to follow. The external bonds of sin, both of one's personal past and those of his milieu, could be broken if the Christian had the courage to follow. For Augustine, grace had to be primarily an internal force because sin held man prisoner

from within; his will was a prison to itself. And although Christ's teaching was certainly a public grace, only those who were freely called and given the very inner force to respond (and these were relatively few) could be saved. Who would be saved and why? This was ultimately hidden in the mysterious counsels of God.

THE VALUES

Stating the doctrines of Augustinianism and Pelagianism is dangerous for it detaches clear and distinct positions from the experience and life-view of those who held them. Each of these opposing doctrines really represent an aspect of a holistic response to the world within the Christian faith. One way to get below the doctrines is to look for the values that are contained within them and on which they are based.

A central value underlying Pelagius' position is man's freedom his power of self-determination, his autonomy. For Pelagius, the adult Christian should become a "son of God," that is, an emancipated heir who is now responsible, in the language of the Roman family.⁵ As a spiritual director he could not very well exhort other Christians without a sense that he was appealing to other "centers of freedom." In Pelagius' view to be a Christian must "make a difference" and his conception of conversion and adult baptism fitted with the deep and long Christian tradition of a complete break with the past. Here Pelagius is strikingly contemporary since more and more today man is being defined as freedom, an autonomous possibility for self-determination, self-creation and world-fashioning. Man can and does control whole areas of his existence and this is not only a personal experience, it is also a human ideal — to create and define oneself. Any solution to the Pelagian question must incorporate into itself this Pelagian value.

By contrast, a central value underlying Augustine's doctrine is his experience of the absoluteness of God and man's correlative total dependency on Him. A dominating image used to describe man's relation to God is that of the child or the infant at his

5. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 352.

mother's breast. While he had been an enthusiastic convert, Augustine came to realize that the ideals of perfection that the mind could conceive and that Christianity promised were eschatological; they would never be realized in this world. Augustine himself had been too tossed about by passion, concupiscence and external circumstance to hope for too much. And as he looked around him he saw that Christians were scarcely different from other men. Augustine stands forth as a realist in the face of Pelagian idealism.

A second value underlying Pelagius' teaching is a concern for the universal possibility of salvation. Here Pelagius' outlook was much wider and global than that of Augustine; he could not accept a "*massa damnata*." And common sense taught him that eternal damnation for unbaptized infants was an affront not only to man but to God. Christianity taught that God's salvific will was universal and its vehicle was seen by Pelagius in human nature itself which is provided with the gift of freedom. Sin is certainly abroad, he thought, but it affects man mainly through the external mechanisms of social influences that leave man's internal nature and freedom intact in its core. This being the case, man could at any given time respond to God's appeal. God, then, is no respecter of men, choosing some and not others; God appeals to all men of all times in like measure.

By contrast, Augustine came to realize that God's grace is absolutely gratuitous and this was translated into a doctrine of election and predestination. The evidence was on his side, he thought: One had only to look inside himself and see that sin gripped him interiorly and from within. If man was opened up to the Good, to what is higher and spiritual, this came as a sudden and spontaneous movement over which he had no control. Among the effects of Original Sin was man's *de facto* disordered nature and one did not need a very keen perception to see its effects in the world at large. Augustine stands forth as a pessimist regarding man in the face of Pelagian optimism.

THE DANGEROUS EXTREMES

The values themselves that underlie these two positions can

of course be carried to dangerous extremes and thus become disvalues. Pelagius' emphasis on man's freedom to obey seems to make God into a tyrant; the autonomous response of man to God does not appear softened by the dynamics of love. In this respect Pelagianism can be linked to the tradition of Stoicism. The key role of law and even the emphasis on it can easily degenerate into the very legalism that the gospel is meant to overcome. And the elitism and perfectionism that Pelagius recommends seems so narrow that Christianity becomes either unrealistic or inhuman, or else the Church becomes an exclusive society hardly capable of accepting men and breaking down the barriers that separate them. Pelagius wanted the whole Church to live the ascetic lives of monks. And, finally, the burden he places on freedom and autonomy is immense; Christianity ceases to be liberating and becomes terrifying.

The dangers of Augustine's position are more subtle but just as real. His doctrine of predestination cannot fail to be discouraging. Ultimately it offends not only human sensibility but also a Christian view of God. In the long run man's autonomy is really compromised, the very autonomy that the Christian believes is established by God in man as his birthright and guaranteed by his grace.

THE LARGER ISSUES

The case, however, cannot rest here, for each position had its consequences and has them still. Behind the Pelagian idealism one should not read naturalism; he believed in God's grace and the covert and baptized was a different person because of it.⁶ And this is the point. Christian life was seen as a witness and sign of God and his grace to the pagan empire of this world. Pelagianism may stand for rigid asceticism or perfectionism; but the symbol should not distract from the issue of whether or not the Christian way of life is to be different, which, it seems, it must if it is to be an effective sign at all of anything.

6. Peter Brown, "Pelagius and His Supporters: Aims and Environment," *The Journal of Theological Studies*, XIX (April, 1968), 103.

By contrast, Augustine's decisions seemed to favor a tolerance for Christian mediocrity. The Christian is essentially a "convalescent;" his life is saved, but he remains "sick."⁷ Augustine's position allowed within the Church all the human failings that one finds outside it. And the effect was a leveling of the wholesale Christian witness to the common standard of the ordinary. And this could only canonize the double standard of a nominal Christianity for ordinary people in the world and the "real" Christianity that led people to flee to the monasteries.

Intimately connected with the question of Christian man, then, is the question of the Church. Pelagian emphasis on freedom should not be confused with individualism. Behind the Pelagian reform is a conception of the Church; Pelagius did not want the individual to be an ascetic outside the Church, he wanted the Church to become ascetic.⁸ While this would be completely unreal in the context of a Church of the masses, a Church of "Christian Society," it is not so in a Church of the minority, a Church of the dedicated few. Pelagius was content with such; it was the ancient tradition. This issue suddenly becomes more real when it is realized that Christianity is now becoming more and more a Church of a conscious minority.

Augustine's view envisages the Church as the majority religion, the state Church, and the Church of the masses. Christianity swallowed the empire whole and introduced the Christendom of the Middle Ages. But as the Christendom consciousness breaks down it would seem that one has to ask whether the Augustinian decision in this regard was "cultural," i.e., a spontaneous response that accorded with an historical movement, or whether it was a normatively Christian event. *Should* Christianity be the minority religion that it is rapidly becoming?

A final issue regards the Christian judgment on human history that unfolds outside the pale of explicit Christian revelation. Pelagian optimism can be translated into a positive view of that history. Even though, paradoxically, Pelagius recommended a

7. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 365; "Pelagius and His Supporters," pp. 110-111.

8. Brown, "Pelagius and His Supporters," pp. 102-103.

rigid asceticism, he viewed human nature's freedom for the good as intact. By extension, such an interpretation leads one to accept the possibility of a human history that can be moving toward God without the help of explicit Christianity. In general, Augustine was less sanguine about this world and its history. "To him earthly tasks could not have ultimate significance, for it was not easy to see how the building of the earthly city could make much difference to the final outcome."⁹ For Augustine grace is radically gratuitous "because it comes to a man who is sinful through and through, in no way deserving of the initiative by which God transforms his bad will into a good will."¹⁰ "For Augustine, the good acts of pagans, though of some apparent value, are ultimately sham, because they do not bring pagans any closer to union with God."¹¹

TWO SYMBOLS

Pelagius and Augustine were contemporary Christian leaders. We have taken these two figures and expanded their religious experiences and views and doctrines into more and more general issues and consequences. In the end one is left with two rather abstract but all embracing symbols that represent two opposing views of man, Christian life and Christianity itself. While these symbols remain abstract and general, they are not for all that detached from life; they are rooted ultimately in the lives of those men who were involved in definite moments of history, who both interpreted Paul, but whose Christian experience generated very different ideas based on fundamental values. They stand respectively for human autonomy and total dependency on God, for human freedom and the constriction of that freedom so that it needs internal divine aid to accomplish the good, for a universal possibility of salvation and an optimistic

9. TeSelle, p. 271.

10. Jean-Marc Laporte, "The Dynamics of Grace in Aquinas: A Structural Approach," *Theological Studies*, XXXIV (June, 1973), 222.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 221. Cf. Augustine, "On the Spirit and the Letter," ch XLVIII, in *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, I, Whitney Oates, ed. (New York: Random House, 1948), pp. 498-500.

view of human nature over against a pessimistic view of man under the shadow of predestination.

Insofar as these symbols are abstract and general, they can be considered as guides for thinking and questioning. The Pelagian controversy provides a splendid insight into the nature of human life and Christian experience. And therefore it provides us with some basic categories, heuristic concepts, with which one can see and analyse tendencies in Christian thought and their dangerous extremes. One must suppose that in such a fundamental question as was debated in the Pelagian controversy, one that necessitated an authoritative decision of the Church, that the elements and values at stake were "substantial," that is, implied in the very nature of Christian experience so as to be written into Christian faith experience itself. And if this is so, the opposing tendencies will be found to appear wherever Christian experience appears and in every understanding of it. The construction of these symbols, then, by contrast and generalization, supplies types by which one can see this structure in Christian experience in other periods, in other understandings, and by which one can judge the relevancy of past doctrinal assertions for today's Christian understanding. As a matter of fact, this is how the symbols of "Pelagianism" and "grace" in the Augustinian sense have always operated, that is, as "critical" categories.

Treating the Pelagian controversy in this way obviously takes one beyond the study of the doctrinal formulas that mark its term, and in two ways: First, the analysis of the elements of the controversy takes one behind the doctrine, as it were, and by explaining its genesis gives one an understanding of what it means. And, secondly, it takes that doctrine itself not as a definitive term for understanding, but as a point of departure for further understanding of the Christian experience. Doctrine is not an end, but a beginning for understanding.

One must suppose again that since each of the two symbols are evidently based on solid values; despite their excesses, aspects of each position must somehow be integrated into a total Christian view of man and the Christian life. If either of

the symbolic positions espoused in Pelagianism and Augustinianism are taken by themselves without the modifications that the other demands, if they are simply pitted against each other in an either/or fashion with no attempt at integration, one will inevitably be led to the untenable extremes that each position implies. This being the case, the symbols can be seen as poles of human life and Christian faith experience that must be integrated in Christian life and understanding. While the values of each must find a place in the Christian outlook, still, because they are opposing, they must be held in tension, one pulling against the other as the lines of force emanating from the two poles of one magnet. Because Christianity has unanimously judged that Augustine's is essentially the Christian doctrine, his view must provide the key on how this integration is to be effected, how the two poles will relate to one another. But, finally, before such a constructive synthesis can be attempted, certain problems with both the Pelagian and the Augustinian positions themselves must be criticized.

AMBIGUOUS ASSUMPTIONS

A number of the sometimes tacit sometimes explicit assumptions of both Pelagius and Augustine are either questionable or at least can no longer be assumed today. Once these are laid bare one is in a better position to see that the values that each position represents need not be opposed in such a way that they necessarily exclude each other.

Pelagianism's idea of freedom will not do. Freedom cannot be viewed simply as the power to choose; and the power to choose itself is not simply a purely detached or disinterested state of equilibrium by which man can completely dispose of himself either toward good or toward evil. Augustine's conception of the problem is considerably more profound and corresponds to some of the deepest experiences of man, especially today. There are levels in our life at which we are not in control of ourselves. And, moreover, man's liberty and his elemental delight does often seem to be twisted. This is both the personal experience of men and the experience of mankind in general. It is eminently

attested to by Paul and is what Paul Tillich calls "estranged existence." In whole areas of his existence man is passive to and a victim of his total self, his past and his milieu. Freud has vindicated Augustine on this point and so have the social sciences. The values, ideas and presuppositions, the prejudices and biases of society, do not remain simply external to us; they are internalized and shape us and thereby become inward determinants of our personality, of who we are. In short, the effects of both the determinisms of personality and the external attractions to sin are far deeper and all pervasive than Pelagianism supposes.

But, on the other hand, man's freedom is still an ideal and Augustine does not do it full justice. But he too was working on a series of suppositions that must be modified. First, Augustine's conviction that infants who die without baptism are worthy of damnation can scarcely be admitted by Christians today. Such a doctrine offends common sense. This means, secondly, that Augustine's theory of Original Sin must be altered. In fact the Pelagian doctrine is much more plausible than Augustine's quasi-physical inheritance theory that involves personal guilt. Thirdly, Christians today are much more willing to take the doctrine of the universal salvific will of God seriously. [Cf. 1 Tim 2/4] Augustine interpreted this doctrine particularistically, which, in effect, means that he interpreted it away.¹² Fourthly, Augustine saw God's grace to man as tied too closely to historical and explicit revelation. Again, Christians today are much more inclined to admit that God's grace is not merely co-extensive with explicit revelation, the Church, or explicit faith. Explicit knowledge of Jesus Christ is not necessarily an ontological condition for grace operating in any given individual or society, or in history at large. Theories of "anonymous" and "latent" Christianity are designed precisely to explain how grace may be operative universally. Fifthly, Christians today are beginning to feel much more at home in the world and tend to think of Augustine's other-worldliness as escapist. Granted no one has

12. TeSelle, pp. 319-320. Cf. Augustine, "On the Spirit and the Letter," ch XL & XLIV, in *op. cit.*, pp. 491-492, 494-495.

here a lasting city, still Christian life must be led in the world and it is being thought of more and more in terms of a life for this world. And sixthly, Augustine seemed to confuse the absolute and total gratuity of grace with its non-universality. One need not, indeed, it seems difficult to say that God's justice in punishing sin is needed to highlight his mercy in forgiving sin. There seems to be no contradiction to say, indeed, it seems more Christian to say, that while God's grace remains totally gratuitous, it is still operative in the life of every man. This last point is most important both for understanding Augustine and for any criticism of him. It is difficult to see how Augustine's doctrine of predestination can be distinguished off from his vision of man and his doctrine of grace as some interpreters are inclined to do. This is no mere appendage; it is an essential and integral part of Augustine's conviction. And from this point of view it must be said that Augustine's man appears too dependent on God (if that can be said at all), that he ultimately robs man of autonomy and compromises the Christian God in so doing. A way must be found in which the total gratuity of grace and the dependency of man on God are affirmed in a way that also preserves man's autonomy of self-determination and his ability to freely respond to God as a person and in genuine love.

INTEGRATION THROUGH POLARITY

More and more Christian theologians, especially existentialist theologians, are describing human existence as involving a fundamental ontological polarity. With this conception they are able to demythologize popular conceptions of the effects of Original Sin. Rahner views the division in man which is called concupiscence as the natural tension between "person" and "nature." "Person" corresponds to that center of human autonomy and freedom by which he asserts, posits and creates himself. On the other hand, "nature" represents man under the laws of his particular kind of being; man as conditioned, limited, finite, determined. What Rahner calls "nature" includes the whole of man's being insofar as it is *prior* to his freedom and

self-determination, and these "mechanisms" can be understood at a variety of levels, that is, biological, psychological, social, and so on. These two poles interact within man so that no one can ever be completely free of passivity, determinism, hinderances and obstacles to self-affirmation, desires, pushes and drives. Man cannot "completely" determine himself either for the good or for evil. But the more man transcends these spontaneous mechanisms and posits his whole self, sometimes against these a-priori tendencies of "nature," sometimes in the same direction, the more he becomes a person. Concupiscence is precisely this dualism, this tension between person and nature, especially insofar as it is an obstacle to performance of the good. Concupiscence is neutral; it is not sin; it only appears as concupiscence when it resists freedom and counter's man's free disposition of himself towards the good. In short, concupiscence is man's existential polar structure. There is an inner dualism within man, making him a potentially divided self, but one that ideally strives for the unity and autonomy of personhood that comes with self-direction and self-positing.¹³

Tillich's description of the polar structure of "Freedom and Destiny" that is one of the constitutive elements of man's being is remarkably similar to Rahner's. Freedom and destiny are two elements existing together but pulling in opposite directions; they sustain each other by co-existing in dynamic tension, and as such they are a structure that constitutes human existence. To say that man is a polarity between freedom and unfreedom is to say that he is not a machine whose course is entirely predictable, on the one hand, and on the other, that he is not a series of arbitrary acts. Freedom is exercised within a context of a whole series of systems and determinisms which are presupposed as the very matter to be assumed, directed and disposed by freedom. "Biological, psychological, and sociological powers

13. Karl Rahner, "The Theological Concept of Concupiscentia," *Theological Investigations*, I (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1961), pp. 347-382, esp. pp. 359-366.

are effective in every individual decision. The universe works through us as part of the universe."¹⁴

FREEDOM, SIN AND GRACE

If this polarity exists in man, if it constitutes an aspect of the very structure of human life and existence, it can serve as a framework for understanding how grace operates within the human personality. It is apparent that these poles roughly correspond to the Pelagian pole or symbol of freedom and the Augustinian pole or symbol of the constriction and inner paralysis of habit, custom and sin that demand God's assistance and help through grace. But it is Augustine himself who provides the more profound and satisfying view of human freedom and consequently of the relation of God's grace to it. Augustine's probing analyses allows one to see the working of grace on a much deeper level than that of the overt mechanics of external alternative and internal choice. Ultimately, to preserve both the role of grace as well as man's freedom and autonomy one must conceive of grace operating in man in such a way as not to undermine that freedom, and this demands a relationship involving some sort of cooperation between God and man in the exercise of freedom and the doing of good. And here again Augustine provides the beginnings of an understanding of this when he says that grace does not destroy but establishes man's freedom.¹⁵

There are several levels on which grace can be seen as establishing man's freedom and autonomy. In outlining these various levels we take Rahner's definition of grace as our guide: Grace is the self-donation of God to man. Grace means that God gives himself to man, is present to him, in a new and personal way. Moreover it is assumed that God's grace is present and available

14. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, II (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 42. Cf. also *Systematic Theology*, I, pp. 198–201.

15. Augustine, "On the Spirit and the Letter," ch LII, in *op. cit.*, pp. 503–504.

to every man in some way because of God's universal salvific will.¹⁶

GRACE GUARANTEES MAN'S AUTONOMY

On a first and most fundamental level, God's grace can be seen as constituting man's autonomy. This is more than an abstract statement or assertion of blind faith for it corresponds to something that can enter into experience. To grasp what it means to say that grace establishes man's autonomy the statement must be seen over against the negative aspects of finitude and the destructive forces of temporality, i.e., of being unto death. In such a situation the personal address of an infinite and absolute God does guarantee the autonomy of man over against these forces. In Augustine's terms, to be in contact with the One, the True and the Good is to share in the absoluteness of these qualities. Even while remaining dependent on God, the free address of God to man gives him an absoluteness and autonomy that he would not have and could never experience outside of this relationship. This is best expressed by Augustine when he says that man desires to be, and to be absolutely means to be in God. "If you begin by wishing to exist, and add a desire for fuller and fuller existence, you rise in the scale, and are furnished for life that supremely is." "If you wish more and more to exist, you will draw near to him who exists supremely."¹⁷ This desire for an autonomy of being is supremely fulfilled when it is met by the personal contact with God that grace mediates.

GRACE EXPANDS FREEDOM BY GIVING LIBERTY

Closely related to man's autonomy in being is his exercise of autonomy in free self-determination. In the tension that governs human existence there is always the tendency for man as person

16. Cf. Karl Rahner, "Nature and Grace," *Theological Investigations*, IV (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), pp. 165-188.

17. Augustine, "On Free Will," Bk III, vii, 21, in *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, p. 183.

to slip back into the determinisms that control his life. There is a force that is experienced as a law of least resistance by which man tends not to exert himself, but to succumb passively to the mechanisms that structure the self, from within, from society, from the world. However, it does not seem that any concept of grace is necessary in order to understand how the freedom and personhood that is inherent to man can exercise itself against these forces. It would seem that Pelagius (and Rahner and Tillich) is correct in saying that this power is part of the very nature of man and no concept of grace is needed to explain man's ability to determine himself to some extent.¹⁸

There is, however, much more to be said and Augustine views the matter much more profoundly when he enters his distinction between freedom and liberty into the discussion. In Augustine grace is seen as a force that expands the field or horizon of freedom to include the possibility of decision that transcends this world in its intentionality. And again, this is no mere assertion for it can be, as it was by Augustine, experienced in one's own life. The experience of being in contact with a transcendent and absolute God, the source and sustainer of all that is, and one who addresses man by personal gift and calling, draws the exercise of freedom beyond the limited and finite and ultimately disappearing values of this-world-taken-in-itself. This does not mean, however, that decisions in and for the values of this world are bypassed so that God becomes one's only motive for acting, as Augustine tended to think. Rather what we are describing here is an entirely new dimension whereby decisions in and for this world are given a qualitatively different

18. A good portion of this interpretation is inspired by Juan Luis Segundo, *Grace and the Human Condition* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis books, 1973), pp. 21-39, 43-46. However this analysis differs somewhat and the levels outlined here seem confused in his presentation. Segundo wants to establish the fact that grace establishes freedom itself by giving "person" the very power to posit itself over against the tendency of least resistance, of slipping back through non-exertion of self into mechanism and routine. But one does not need a concept of grace to explain the exercise of freedom as Pelagius explained and Augustine agreed.

consistency precisely because they transpire in an entirely new context of the ultimately important and permanently valuable. It is not that concrete opportunities are numerically multiplied by this new liberty; it is rather that freedom is expanded because the objects of choice and decision exist in a new context of importance. In this way liberty expands freedom.

Viewed in connection with the first level of the operation of grace, its constituting man's autonomy and absoluteness, here contact with God through his grace enables man to exert himself over the determinisms of nature in a new and qualitatively different way, in an ultimate and absolutely meaningful way that would not be possible without this intimate contact with God himself. Viewing the matter psychologically, as Augustine himself does, by reorienting man's elemental desire, interest and delight, and his understanding of being, over which he has little control, the touch of grace not only reconstitutes man's person but also his freedom of decision in a qualitatively new way; it gives personhood and its ability to posit itself an entirely new and absolute dimension. And this can in turn be translated into the concrete motivation and determination needed to pass into new forms of action.

GRACE OVERCOMES THE ROOTS OF SIN

Still another and distinct level of the operation of grace has to do with sin. Some would incline toward identifying man's tendency to sin with the very mechanisms of "nature," those forces that tend to submerge the transcending exercise of "person" and freedom in love.¹⁹ While there is some truth in

19. Segundo tends to identify sin with the mechanisms of nature to which man submits instead of exercising freedom and love against them. This identification of sin with mechanism is never complete, however, though obviously there is some connection between sin and the determinisms of life. But the more one leans toward that identification the more the mystery of sin is explained away. Sin and egoism is not passivity and is ultimately not rooted in determinism. Sin is diminished when passivity and mechanism increase; and it increases when freedom and responsibility increase. This is precisely the problem with egoism; it is self-assertion and rooted in the will itself.

this, namely, that selfishness often implies taking the path of least resistance, still, seeing this as the ultimate root of sin is to miss the depth of the Augustinian insight. It is true that Augustine made much of habit and custom imprisoning the will; but sin itself is much more than passivity and succumbing, and in itself it is much more than the determinisms that govern life. For Augustine, sin resides in the will itself and this is its mystery; sin is in man's *freedom*, it passes through habit and custom to reside in man's spiritual "person."²⁰ It is a *cupiditas* by which man *asserts* himself but cannot transcend himself; he tries to draw reality into himself. *Cupiditas* makes man precisely as person the norm and value of all other things and uses the world and others to satisfy itself.

For Augustine, the effects of sin come to be lodged in man's person, and it is here that the "medicinal" quality of grace is experienced. The personal contact with God through his grace reorients person; *cupiditas* becomes *caritas* or love, a love not only for the good as such but a love that recognizes that others have an absolute value in themselves and cannot be used as a means of self-satisfaction or as a means for anything. Love establishes a basic reverence that allows the other to be what it is in itself (himself or herself) and tends to foster that value. And this too need not remain an abstract assertion or arbitrary construct; it can be experienced and can be seen in the lives of the saints.

On these three levels, then, one can see how God's personal gift of himself to man can establish and guarantee man's autonomy, can expand the horizon of his freedom and personhood so that he can assert himself in, through and above the passive elements of his nature with new quality and force, and, finally, can liberate man from the inner imprisoning force of egoism and selfishness. It should be insisted, however, that these three levels of the operation of grace can really not be separated. Although autonomy and personhood are values in

20. Cf. Augustine, *Confessions*, Bk VIII, ch viii and ch x where he depicts the will as prisoner to itself.

themselves, if they are separated off from the third level, there will be a tendency to interpret religious experience and the operation of grace in terms of personal fulfillment or psychological wholeness and integrity. To see religious experience or religion simply as a means of mental health and an integrated personality is the most fundamental distortion possible, and it is not uncommon.

GRACE IN THE WORLD TODAY

If grace is real, it must be experienced; if grace is a reality in the world, it must become manifest. And this "becoming visible" will be seen in terms of actually existing systems that destroy man's autonomy and alienate persons by imprisoning this freedom. To put the same thing negatively, if there are no movements within history where persons assert their own freedom and try to spread goodness by freeing others from the forces of alienation and depersonalization, the assertion that God's grace or God's Spirit is at work immanently in the world will seem sheerly arbitrary and gratuitous.

To understand the threat to man's autonomy and freedom which is guaranteed by God one should not slip back into the spirit-matter dualism that was common in Augustine's time. As Segundo tells us, the dualism that Rahner and Tillich speak of is not that of pure spirit being threatened by the power of sensuality and the material world as if the material world were somehow evil. Rather the moral dualism or polarity in which autonomy, freedom and personhood are threatened should be envisaged in the concrete systems of reality that modern philosophy and science have disclosed. These are the mechanisms and determinisms that are biological, psychological, educational, social, cultural, economic, political, ideological. All of these are the determinisms of "nature" which man can "suffer" or which he can transcend by putting them in service of his own personhood, by bestowing on them something of an absolute value and meaning, by controlling them for man. God's grace, then, insofar as it is a force that liberates man, guarantees his autonomy and expands his freedom, should be seen as unfolding in this world

in terms of these imprisoning factors. Its vehicle will be men who in service of others attack and criticize the forces of dependence and alienation. "In other words: the economic alienation discussed by Marx and the psychological alienation discussed by Freud cannot be alien to the Christian conception of redemption."²¹

CONCLUSION

Since Augustine, the notion of grace as a medicinal force, as a "sanating" power of God releasing us from an internal bondage, especially of sin, has been a permanent fixture in the Christian language about grace. Although this theme probably plays a greater role in Protestant spirituality and talk about grace than in the Catholic, still, it is a universal theme in the teaching of western Christianity. And this corresponds not only to Pauline teaching but also to the deepest Christian experience of the freeing and liberation that Christ mediates to the believer. The grace of Christ constitutes human autonomy and expands human freedom giving it a new depth and power. And it overcomes the egoism and selfishness that is sin. This understanding of grace as a dynamic liberating force for freedom and action for the good remained the dominating conception of grace right up to the 13th century when, around the time of Aquinas, the understanding of grace underwent a dramatic shift.

This does not solve some of the wider issues that the Pelagian controversy raised. As Christianity shifts back into the state of being in a self conscious way a minority religion in the world today that it was in the pre-Constantinian era, some basic questions are re-opened, but on new and different suppositions than were shared in the time of Augustine. Moreover, if the Christian community begins to conceive of itself as a sign to the world and a mediator and sacramental presence of grace, then the whole question of Pelagian reform and "elitism," if only it can be stripped of its negative overtones, must also be rethought. Can Christianity still be thought of as the religion of the masses?

21. Segundo, p. 35. Cf. also pp. 32-35.

And to what extent is much of our theology of the Church based on the tacit suppositions of a Christendom that can no longer exist?