DIVINE SEMIOTICS AND THE WAY TO THE
TRIUNE GOD IN AUGUSTINE’S DE TRINITATE

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Introduction

Among the notable distinctions of Augustine’s De Trinitate is the sheer variety of tasks that are encompassed by the overall project of the work. It contains a sustained polemic against the Western “homoian” Arians as well as against Neoplatonic (Plotinian and Porphyrian) soteriology.¹ We find Augustine engaging in elaborate exposition of the exegetical foundations for Trinitarian doctrine, followed by a close analysis of conciliar formulations, thereby recapitulating much of the doctrinal debates of the fourth century.² His recounting of the manifestation of the Trinity in salvation history finds its climax in a meditation on the Incarnation of the Word (Book 4) that integrates Trinitarian doctrine with christology and soteriology. Perhaps most famously, he articulates

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a theological anthropology and a phenomenology of human consciousness that attempts to construe a Trinitarian imprint on the structure of the human spirit. Throughout the work, Augustine is concerned with leading his readers in a spiritual exercise that is distinctive in its exhortations to defer to the authority of ecclesial teaching, and to engage in contemplation that is Christ-centered and ultimately eschatological in its orientation. Such an abundance of riches can easily bring an interpreter to embarrassment. The question arises as to whether it is possible to have a unified and synoptic view of the whole work that would be commensurate with Augustine’s own judgment that his “inquiry proceeds in a closely-knit development from the first... to the last.”

Up until recently, the prevailing resolution to the question of the structure and unity of the work has been to divide it into two halves within a framework of the interplay between faith and reason. In this schema, the first half of the work (Bks. 1–8) is concerned with the articulation of scriptural and ecclesial faith, followed by the appropriation of this faith by reason in the second half (Bks. 9–15). More recently, the appropriateness of the framework of faith and reason has been seriously questioned. It has been pointed out that such traditional interpretations labor under anachronistic conceptions, most notably the post-medieval notion of an autonomous reason that is unguided by revelation. Such a conception of reason is nowhere to be found in Augustine’s work. Moreover, the division of the work into two halves along the lines of this framework seems to distort the text, since there is “rational” reflection on scriptural and ecclesial faith in the first half and scriptural reflection on the search for a Trinitarian image in human consciousness in the second half.

Yet, there has not emerged in recent scholarship any consensus on an alternative schema for interpreting the structure of the work as a