Doctrine in a radically apophatic register

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Abstract

This article develops an account of doctrine that seeks to reconceive the nature of doctrinal reference within the context of human transformation. It sets out from Augustine's advice to the preacher of the doctrine of predestination, discovering three layers of doctrinal interpretation, rooted in and geared towards transformation. Augustine's advice is applied generally to suggest that the role of doctrine is to ward off general classification in respect of God, making way for redemptive encounter with God. These insights generate a new perspective on the question of doctrinal reference that rules out both straightforward reference to God and straightforward denial of such reference. The article concludes by suggesting that one way through the resultant linguistic minefield would be to speak of 'hyper-reference' to God, with the intention of evoking the 'more than' of God.

In this article I attempt to think through the role of doctrine by making two complementary moves: (1) by postponing the question of doctrinal reference – of whether doctrine aims to say something about God (or more minimally, point to God); and (2) by bringing into prime position the question of transformation, making it the determining context for doctrinal reference. This will not simply be to make reference secondary, however; it will be to reconceive the nature of doctrinal reference in and through doctrine's transformative power. Thus, I do not seek simply to remind you that doctrine is useless if it doesn't also transform the human beings who wield it, important though such a reminder is. Nor do I seek to balance an undue focus on reference with a renewed emphasis on transformation. I seek, more radically, to reconceive reference in relation to transformation, or more precisely, to reconceive doctrinal reference through a new account of doctrine as transformative.

On this account not any old transformation will do. God's redemptive transformation is what we are after, and the means of its elucidation in this paper will be semiotic. More strongly, we will discover that God's redemptive transformation of creation is a transformation of creaturely semiosis. Our

123

focus will be on the human use of signs or human semiosis in particular, because that is the aspect of creaturely life more widely which is most transparent to us, and because our own actions are the ones for which we bear primary responsibility.

I will be following in the footsteps of various others who have begun to reconceive doctrine apophatically, but also following through on their insights in a way that radicalises them. Thus, Nicholas Lash has offered a powerful reading of doctrine (summed up in the doctrine of the Trinity) as a set of protocols against idolatry: as primarily regulative rather than descriptive.[1] Karen Kilby has also begun to develop a rigorously apophatic trinitarianism in which (by contrast *inter alia* with social trinitarianisms) the doctrine of the Trinity is not the *object* of human contemplation but, rather, the structuring principle of the Christian contemplation of the Father in the Son through the Spirit. It leaves us, in other words, with no insight into the inner life of God, but rather with a linguistic rule and a liturgical rhythm.[2]

However, while Lash and Kilby rule out description, they both (arguably) retain reference. Thus for Lash, who distinguishes pointedly between description and reference, the aim of the doctrine of the Trinity is still to '[ensure] correct reference' to God.[3] In her discussion of Aquinas's account of the trinitarian processions, Kilby concludes the following:

> What is a procession which does not occur in time, nor involve change, nor allow of any diversity between the one who processes and the one from whom the procession takes place? I have no reason to affirm that there is no such thing, but also no way of grasping or imagining what it might be.[4]

Thus, I suggest, she rules out the descriptive function of the word 'procession' in the trinitarian context while retaining its referential purchase.

In following through on their insights I will pursue their emphasis on the performative or transformative dimension of doctrine (Lash in terms of its debunking of idolatry and Kilby in terms of its rhythmic structuring of the Christian life), but my attempted radicalisation will come in the postponement of the question of reference – until the nature of the

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[1] E.g. Nicholas Lash, *Easter in Ordinary: Reflections on Human Experience and the Knowledge of God* (Notre Dame, IN, and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), pp. 257–72. See also Nicholas Lash, 'Considering the Trinity', *Modern Theology* 2/3 (1986): 183–96.

[2] See esp. Karen Kilby, 'Aquinas, the Trinity and the Limits of Understanding', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7/4 (2005): 414–27; and Karen Kilby, 'Is an Apophatic Trinitarianism Possible?', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12/1 (2010): 65–77.

[3] Lash, *Easter in Ordinary*, 258.

[4] Kilby, 'Aquinas', 420.

transformation has been established, by which time the kind of reference involved will look very different.

Unlike Lash and Kilby, I will not have the doctrine of the Trinity as my focus. I will begin with an Augustinian example in which the doctrine of predestination is at stake, and will conclude on the basis of it with some reflections on the role of doctrine more widely.

An Augustinian example: predestination

My Augustinian example can be found at the end of his *De dono perseuerantiae* (The Gift of Perseverance), the last of a set of four so-called anti-Semi-Pelagian works written at the end of his life, between 426 and 429.[5] It is in these four works that Augustine develops his most stringent doctrine of predestination, read by some as ruthlessly determinist.[6] I read it, by contrast, as a non-competitive account of the relation between grace and free choice (divine and human agency), which in fact maximises the room for human agency. This is an important implication of the passage we will be looking at in this article, although there will not be time to dwell on this theme.

When he reaches the end of *De dono*, Augustine addresses the question of how the doctrine of predestination should be preached. Augustine is writing for certain monks in Provence among whom dispute has broken out about the predestinarian implications of his anti-Pelagian writings. Earlier in the work he has cited the monks' summary of his doctrine of predestination, to which they object because of its pastoral implications. He returns to this summary at the end of the work, reciting it in slightly modified form. The principal change is that he puts it in the third person, while they had envisaged a preaching context and so use the second person. Augustine acknowledges the truth of his third-person version, but is horrified at the idea that this should simply be preached to the congregation, as the monks have assumed by rendering it as second-person address. He suggests an alternative version for the preaching context. So we end up with three different versions. I will refer to them as follows: Version I: the monks' version (for which a preaching context is assumed, and which Augustine judges to be erroneous); Version

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[5] The other three works are: *De gratia et libero arbitrio* (Grace and Free Choice), *De correptione et gratia* (Rebuke and Grace) and *De praedestinatione sanctorum* (The Predestination of the Saints). *De praedestinatione* and *De dono* were originally one work, probably with the title of the former; but since at least the ninth century have been treated as separate works. The English translation followed in this article (with minor adjustments) is Roland J. Teske, *Answer to the Pelagians, IV: To the Monks of Hadrumetum and Provence* (*WSA* I/26; ed. John E. Rotelle; New York: New City Press, 1999).

[6] E.g. John M. Rist, 'Augustine on Free Will and Predestination', *Journal of Theological Studies*, NS 20: 420–47.

II: Augustine's alternative version for the preaching context; and Version III: Augustine's third-person version.[7]

Given the limits of time and space I will single out only one of the phrases for analysis (though for optimum understanding the reader is advised to consult each of the three versions of the passage in full in order to be able to consider the phrase in context). I will begin by comparing a parallel phrase (which I designate 'B') in Versions I and II (the 'erroneous' versus the 'correct' way to preach the doctrine of predestination), before going on to consider the role of Version III, the third-person doctrine (as we would imagine it to be rendered for a conciliar context).

> B^I [B]ut the rest of you who dally in the delight of sins have not yet risen up because the help of merciful grace has not yet raised you up.
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> B^{II} But if any of you still dally in the delight of damnable sins, embrace discipline which is most salutary [. . .].

B^I is an indicative sentence, while B^{II} is a conditional followed by an imperative. B^I emphasises divine agency, while B^{II} emphasises human agency. Let us take time to tease out the implications of these differences, using semiotic tools to do so.

In B^I the preacher reads dallying as a sign of (the lack of) a divine past act. If you find yourself amongst the dalliers, it is only divine agency that can help you. The implication is that you are stuck where you are for the time being, your identity fixed as a dallier by divine fiat. Considering B^I alongside the phrase that immediately precedes it, in which 'some of you' (again by divine agency) have been brought to faith, what emerges is a congregation divided into 'some' and 'the rest' by the predestining hand of God. The preacher might be said to read the congregation as a sign of this predestinarian scheme: a sign of the doctrine of predestination. It is this interpretive manoeuvre which fixes the members' identities on one side or the other, with no way of crossing the line save by the hand of God. Worse still, the congregation is offered no guidance by the preacher regarding the question of who lies on which side of the divide. The sole criterion provided for distinguishing between dallying and believing is the divine act of raising up, and that lies beyond empirical reach (except, of course, insofar as it

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[7] Version I is from *perseu.* 15.38; Version II is spread out over *perseu.* 22.58-61, amidst Augustine's discussion, in which he cites and responds to Version I, the monks' rendition; and Version III is from *perseu.* 22.58. The Latin is to be found at PL 45.1016 and 1029-30. An online English version (following the translation from the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers series) can be found at http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1512.htm (accessed Feb.2016).

becomes manifest in dallying and belief, in which case we have a circular definition).

Such a message can only be debilitating. Insofar as B^I equips the listener with a fixed identity as either a believer or a dallier, it will tend to inculcate the alternate dispositions of complacency and resignation. Thus, consider a member of the congregation when confronted by the cry of a sufferer whose suffering she has (sinfully) caused. Either she will fail to recognise the suffering, proudly including herself among the believers, above and beyond criticism; or she will see her sin only too well but be powerless to do more than acquiesce in it, condemned to being a dallier as she is. In either case she reads the sufferer in terms of her already established identity, dyadically fixing the sufferer's identity in relation to her own. What she is lent no capacity for is responsive transformation.

Moreover, insofar as the identities imposed by B^I are not only fixed but also hidden, B^I will tend, over and above complacency and resignation, to induce paranoia and paralysis. Am I a dallier? Which side of the divide am I on? How can I tell? And if I cannot tell, what can I possibly do? And these dispositions will tend only to reinforce any complacency or resignation. In response to the insecurity of my status, I might respond by digging myself deeper into a position of complacency, reassuring myself that I am surely no dallier. Or I might throw up my hands in despair at the possibility of establishing true belief and resign myself all the more to the dallying I am no doubt condemned to. Again, there is no room within this nexus of blind self-scrutiny for responsive transformation.

Consider, by contrast, B^{II}: if you still dally, *embrace* discipline. The conditional plus imperative unfixes any fixed identities. Dallying is only identified insofar as it can be addressed and overcome. In other words, the preacher addresses the congregation as agents who have the capacity to do something about their sin. They are no longer signs for the preacher of an inflexible doctrine of predestination, pawns of a predestining God. There is no explicit invocation of divine agency, but if we can assume the latter (and we will see later on that we must), its presence is known only in its liberation of human agency. In this case, we might say that the preacher reads the congregation as a sign, not of the doctrine of predestination, but of the liberating God.

What disposition will B^{II} tend to inculcate in the listener? The preacher's words invite the listener to a readiness to be disciplined, i.e. to consider the possibility that she might in certain ways be compromised by sin, and thus be open to future contexts in which she is called to account for her sin. Again, imagine a situation in which she is confronted by the cry of a sufferer whose suffering she has caused. With an identity not fixed in advance but a

127

readiness to be disciplined, she will have the capacity to hear and respond to the cry of the sufferer, and thus be called to transformation. Contrast this with the complacency and resignation inculcated by B^I. In semiotic terms, the one who has sinned reads the sufferer not as a sign of her already fixed identity (as dallier or believer), but as a sign of the need for transformation.

Let us be more precise about the different semiotic dynamics involved in situations B^I and B^{II}. We referred to B^I as inculcating a dyadic dynamic. What exactly did we mean by this? The listener interprets the sufferer's cry in the context of her assumed identity. For example, if the listener considers herself to be above blame, then she might read the cry as a sign of the sufferer's own inadequacy. We technically have a triadic situation here: cry (sign) signifies inadequacy (object) for, or in the context of, the listener's blamelessness (interpretant[8]). But insofar as the context is assumed, the third component is effectively hidden, and the cry is reduced to its signification of inadequacy. The listener will be blind to any other possibility: cry simply equals inadequacy. This is the 'dyadic' sign that results. We might pick out other dyads too. Thus blamelessness and inadequacy are defined over against one another, holding the two persons in mutually captive definition. On this analysis it is the cry – as sign with other possible significations (e.g. suffering caused by sin) – which has 'fallen out' of the triad. It is reduced to its object, inadequacy. The two analyses amount to the same thing: we lose sight of other possible contexts, which is to lose sight of the sign as sign (which might signify differently).

Situation B^{II} is one way things might look when the triadic sign has not been lost sight of. The listener hears the cry of the sufferer and is challenged by it. What does this involve semiotically speaking? By contrast with situation B^I, the context of interpretation of the cry is not defined in advance. The listener is not bound to a fixed identity in terms of which all new data must be interpreted. Rather, the listener is called to a transformed identity by the datum or sign itself. The cry brings her to a recognition and repentance of her sin. What this means is that the sign brings about its own, unique context of interpretation. The triadic result is as follows: cry signifies *suffering-caused-by-another's-sin* for *repentant sinner*. The triadicity in this case is not only theoretical, as in situation B^I, but is living. The move from sign to signified is not automatic or determined in advance, but is contextually creative. Thus for the listener to interpret the cry as a sign of her own sin is not for her to give the cry a generic interpretation that might hold across other contexts,

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[8] This is the terminology of C. S. Peirce, whose semiotics lie in the background of this article, interpreted with the help of Peter Ochs (see Peter Ochs, *Peirce, Pragmatism and the Logic of Scripture* (Cambridge: CUP, 1998)).

nor for her to repent of a generic sin which could have had any victim. Repentance is what she is called to here and now, in this particular context of encounter.[9]

Let us unpack the implications of this with the aid of a more concrete example. Take a case involving a burglar who is in his twenties, is a repeat offender, having been convicted for two previous home burglaries, and who on the third occasion has been sentenced to a year's imprisonment. His motivation is the feeding of a drug habit, and the victims on the third occasion are a single father and his 9-year-old daughter. The financial effects are negligible, since the father and daughter are well off. While the burglar's motivations are relatively base, he feels no remorse for his criminal behaviour since he is only accountable, in his mind, to the state and its legal system, and neither have served him well, maintaining his exclusion from the wealthier classes from whom he burgles. Not having come face to face with his human victims, their 'cry' is mediated for him through the law courts. He hears it as a sign, amongst other things, of a punitive and exclusive system, which he is on the wrong side of. While recognising that he is technically the perpetrator of crimes, his anger against society simply feeds his view of himself as relatively blameless. He is oblivious to any suffering he may have caused.

Suppose that on the third occasion he comes, on request of the victims, to participate in a victim–offender mediation process. Both he and the victim are prepared by a mediator for a meeting with one another, a meeting which then takes place in the presence of the mediator. The offender discovers that his victims are a father and daughter whose wife and mother died four years previously, and that the daughter has subsequently developed a speech impediment for which she is bullied at school. The father is still traumatised by the loss of his wife, and he has worked hard at creating a home for himself and his daughter where they both feel safe and loved. The burglary has disrupted this safe haven, causing the girl to have constant nightmares and the father to be unable to let his daughter out of his presence.

In this new context the offender is given the opportunity to hear the cry of his victims more directly. It is possible that he will still only be able to perceive a rich, overprotective dad with his privately educated, sheltered and

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[9] The contrast drawn here elides a third possibility, in which the interpretation is both contextually creative and generic. We can think of abductions that work like this, such as Kepler's inference from particular positions of the planets to the elliptical path of their orbit. The positions of Mars, x and y, are signs of the points on an ellipse in the context of Kepler's hypothesis. The hypothesis is clearly creative, but as generic it allows other points of Mars's passage to be predicted. By contrast, as we will see, the particularity of sin requires both a creative and unique context of interpretation.

129

spoilt daughter, whose nightmares are a sign of her pathetic fragility. She has had parents who love her, while he was kicked out by his abusive mother and never knew his father. On the other hand, he may hear the cry as a sign of genuine suffering, which he is helped to empathise with because he has also, in a different way, lost a mother. No longer just the rich and well-to-do, these victims of his crime are human beings with their own story, one into which he has intervened for the worse, causing deep suffering. In the face of this suffering he is called to account. He can no longer see himself simply as the victim of society: his crime is a sin against these particular people for which he is called to repent.

His crime is generic; his sin is particular. He can admit to the crime (and accept the sentence) without recognising the sin. It must be said at this point that there is a proper and important place for the identification and sentencing of crimes, even if it is not the full story. The day-to-day work of the law courts abides, quite rightly, by the dyadic logic identified above. New cases are analysed with reference to previously encoded rules, and sentences are reached and applied accordingly.[10] Generalisability is of the essence, and in that sense it does not matter who the particular victims are.

While quite proper in legal procedure, this dyadic logic becomes a failing on the part of the offender in relation to his particular victims. The process of victim–offender mediation brings this truth home particularly powerfully. In our example the offender is brought to realise that this is not just another burglary, a repeat offence. It is a sin against these people. And as a sin it cannot be generalised; it can only be identified by the narration of this particular story. Thus the burglar does not repent of the 'generic sin' of burglary, but in response to the particular suffering he has caused these people. Moreover, it is *his* repentance that is called for. Someone else hearing the same cry (of father and daughter) will not be in the position to interpret it in terms of the burglar's sin. Take the mediator, or even the lawyer acting on behalf of the father and daughter: they might be in a position to name the offender's crime, and further to speak out against drug abuse, or to lament a society in which it is rife; but neither is in a position to convict the burglar of his sin. This is not just because of the offices they hold (mediation and legal argument requiring impartiality), but because of the radical particularity of the sin, which only the dialogical encounter can bring to light, and which it is the onus of the burglar to own.

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[10] This is a slight oversimplification. New cases can generate new rules, changing the shape of the law and setting new precedent. But, as with Kepler's hypothesis, the contrast still holds: the rules generated are intentionally generic, while the depths of sin (we are arguing) cannot be exhausted in general rules.

The hidden premise in operation here is that sin is before God. Only God knows the full story in which the burglar's act is reckoned as a sin. And the burglar alone is called to account for this sin before God alone: it is a matter between him and God. No one else is in the position to name or judge. This does not mean that the sin remains hidden: indeed it is acknowledged before the victim in the presence of the mediator, and thus made public. But only the sinner can identify the sin for which he is to repent. Indeed, the sin is identified in the context of its repentance before God.

As we have said, crime is generic; sin is particular. The same crime can be committed at different times by different people and in relation to different victims. No sin is the same. For God, everything is particular; God does not generalise. Again, as we have said, this does not mean that there are not times when generalisation is perfectly appropriate as part of being human – and being human well. More strongly still, generalisation is needed as the environment in which particulars come to flourish. Without legal systems and other such human contexts, there would be no stable environment within which sin could come to light and be dealt with. Generalisation, properly handled, serves the particular. As we will see later, moreover, generalisation also has a proper role within a specifically theological context: doctrine is general in its own special way.

But generalisation does not have the last word, and the problem comes only when generalisation intrudes into the domain of the particular. The burglar has committed a crime, to be sure. And it is important that it is identified as such and the appropriate measures taken. But something is missing from that picture which only comes to light in the burglar's recognition and repentance of his sin, in the face of his encounter with the victims. This is necessarily a creative moment which abides by a triadic logic. Thus the victims' cry calls forth recognition and repentance in the burglar, which forms the unique context for his interpretation of the cry as a sign of the suffering he has caused them. Without this triadic dynamic, there can be no repentance of sin: clearly so if the burglar clings to his identity as the blameless victim of society, but equally so if he hears the cry as a sign of a sin (say, his drug addiction), which he is resigned to committing. In the latter case his fixed identity as a drug addict is the predetermined context within which the cry is interpreted, and it leaves no room for repentance. Moreover, no repentance means no real acknowledgement of sin, only the resigned admission of a problem. Insofar as the problem remains the same (rearing its head in relation to ever new situations), it lacks the radical particularity characteristic of sin – and this is what goes hand in hand with a triadic logic.

It might seem that we have strayed rather far from our Augustinian starting point. But let us now revisit situations B^I and B^{II} in the light of our example.

B^{I}, which fixes the identity of the dallier with reference to a past event, defining it in terms of divine agency, ironically prevents any real dallying or sin from being confessed before God. The label of 'dallier' is applied in a way that prevents any particular sin from coming to light in particular contexts, and the agency is ascribed to God so as to remove the power of repentance from the sinner. B^{II} does not label in advance but invites an attitude of openness to future situations in which particular sin might come to light in encounter with others and before God. It should now be clearer why we said that B^{I} interprets the congregation as a sign of the doctrine of predestination, while B^{II} envisages it as a sign of the liberating God. The doctrine, in the abstract, cannot register particularity. Nor can it empower someone for repentance. Only the living God can do that.

Expanding the doctrinal context

But this immediately invites the next question in our inquiry. What, then, is the role of the doctrine of predestination, set out as in Version III in the third person? B^{I} and B^{II} are wrong versus right ways of putting the doctrine (i.e. B^{III}) to work in the context of preaching. Augustine's censorious response to B^{I} suggests that for him the doctrine is not simply to be transposed for the preaching context, from the third-person key to the second. It needs careful translation. B^{II} is Augustine's translation of B^{III}. To work out what the role of the third person doctrine is, we need to work out how Augustine has made this translation. On the face of it, with no explicit reference to God or to the divine act of raising up, B^{II} seems far removed from the same phrase in Version III of the doctrine:

> B^{III} [B]ut the rest who dally in the delight of damnable sins, even if they are predestined, have not yet risen up, because the help of merciful grace has not yet raised them up.

B^{III} has in common with B^{I} its referral of human agency to divine agency. But according to Augustine, B^{I} is in error in doing so while B^{III} is not. Why so? Judging from B^{II}, the result he is after is the possibility of acknowledging and repenting of particular sin. B^{I} forestalls this by speaking directly to the congregation as that which has been divided by God into believers and dalliers. B^{III} is not spoken to the congregation as such; it simply defines dallying in terms of corresponding divine agency. It locates human agency within the divine context. But our extended analysis of B^{II} suggests that sin, in its radical particularity, is something that can only be reckoned before God, or within the divine context. This should give us our clue to the interpretation of B^{III}.

132

As we have seen, signs signify in particular contexts, and differently in different contexts. But in many day-to-day cases the context of signification can be assumed. Thus in our above example, the burglar is convicted of a crime in the context of a legal system which is already in place, and must be so if the crime is to be identified and the burglar sentenced accordingly. A set of established conventions enable appropriate generalisations to be made about the burglar's particular act of burglary. The legal context is assumed. All well and good. But we saw that the same was not true when it came to the burglar's repentance of sin. And we can say, now with an eye to B^{III}, that sin is only understood as sin when it is referred to the 'divine context'. But to refer to the divine context is precisely not to invoke another particular set of generalisations, according to which the sin can be defined. And this is because the divine context is precisely not one context alongside others. The phrase itself is oxymoronic. God is the creator of all contexts, not one context amongst other creaturely contexts. We can talk about legal contexts, medical contexts, educational contexts, family contexts, etc. But all of these are districts within creation distinguishable from other such districts. The divine context is clearly not such a district.

It follows that to refer to the 'divine context' is to invoke no context at all in the sense of a circumscribed district of generalisations or presuppositions, since God presupposes nothing, being the presupposition and context for everything else. To refer to God, rather, is to debunk all general contexts, forcing the addressee to look to the particular. In this way we might say that B^{III} is the negative rule which prepares for B^{II}, its positive application. Let us spell this out. B^{III} says: 'Dallying can only be defined with respect to God. Do not try and categorise sin by way of some human generalisation. In other words, there is no human criterion by which to distinguish between the believers (the "some") and the dalliers ("the rest"). Only God can make that distinction.' B^{II} says: 'You will come to recognise and repent of your sin in particular contexts of encounter which bring it to light. Be prepared for these and do not cling to some fixed idea of yourself.'

B^{III} is thus an instruction not to generalise regarding sin. The preacher of B^{I}, by transposing it into the second person, evidently fails to recognise it as the instruction that it is, instead taking it to be an empirical statement about particular dalliers, turning divine agency, too, into an empirical fact. B^{III}, applied directly to the congregation, is misunderstood as offering the criterion by which to distinguish believers from dalliers: 'The dalliers are the ones whom God has not yet raised up.' The preacher of B^{II}, by contrast, follows the instruction and tells the congregation to seek their sin, if there be any, in the particular contexts in which they find themselves.

On the basis of this analysis of B^{III}, we can tentatively infer that the doctrine of predestination more generally (Version III as a whole) has the purpose (negatively) of warding off generalisation regarding the identity of believers and dalliers, or the nature of faith and sin, and (positively) of inviting contextually particular identification of faith and sin. To test this we would need to examine the other parallel phrases in Augustine's renditions as we have in the case of B. Since space precludes this, we will take this inference on trust. Let us briefly pause to note how our generic/particular distinction plays out here in the third-person doctrine of predestination. The latter is a *general* instruction *not to generalise* regarding sin. It is thus a general designed for very special service of the particular. It tells us – generally – where generalisation must stop.

How might we express the foregoing conclusions semiotically? Let us return, first, to B^{III}. This tells us that dallying is a sign of God's not having raised up. And the implicit third is 'for God'. We said above that sin is before God; we can say here that only God is privy to God's raising up (it is not an empirical matter). But given the oxymoronic nature of the divine context, or indeed a divine signified, B^{III} in fact tells us that an act of dallying only signifies, or comes to be interpreted, in particular contexts of encounter. The burglar's sin against his victims only came to be interpreted as such when brought into relation to the victims' cry. We focused on one aspect of this interpretation: the cry as sign of suffering-caused-by-sin for the repentant sinner. But this has its complement in another act of interpretation: the burglar's act as a sign of sin in the context of the victims' cry. The burglar's sin and the victims' cry come to be defined in relation to one another, each providing the context of interpretation for the other.

To generalise in respect of the doctrine of predestination, we can conclude the following. Human agency (faith, sin, etc.) signifies divine agency (God's gift of the will to obey, God's raising up, etc.) for God. This is the same as to say that human agency, in its ultimate particularity, only signifies, or comes to be interpreted, in particular contexts of encounter. In other words, while much of human life, indeed all particular districts of it, tick along by way of generalisation and dyadicity, this is not all there is. If it were, human beings would be machines. Rather, generalisation and dyadicity have their raison d'être in the service of particularity – or better, particular human beings and human communities. 'And he said unto them, "The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath".' This is in many ways obviously true. Taking up our example again, the identification and sentencing of crimes – the criminal justice system – is not its own end, but has the purpose of making the world a more hospitable place in which to live, with the healing of society (and in some cases the criminal) in view. But it is all the more

amazing how easily it gets lost sight of. How often do we see rules become ends in themselves, the process the master of the good it was originally supposed to serve? The doctrine of predestination, on our interpretation of Augustine's account, serves to remind us of the human faces beneath the system – by telling us that they are creatures of the living God, and more specifically, that their acts of significance are done before God and not in service of a faceless process.

Application to other doctrines

Does this conclusion regarding the doctrine of predestination tell us anything about the nature of doctrine more widely? Let us briefly look at one or two examples. Take, first, the Chalcedonian definition. It points to *this* person who is fully divine and fully human, but without telling us *how* divine and human natures are combined in Christ. Indeed, the four denials ('without confusion, without change, without division, without separation') tell us that there is no combination as such. The incarnation is not, in other words, about a juggling act with predicates (despite having been made so by some of Chalcedon's later interpreters). It's about a particular person. And it is so without incoherence because of the peculiarity of the 'divine nature', which is just as oxymoronic as 'divine context'. God does not 'have' a nature like human beings or other creatures do. Thus there can be no fitting together of divine and human natures like a jigsaw puzzle. It follows that the doctrine of the incarnation does not tell us *about* a person, to be distinguished in his particulars from other people ('he's not only human but divine as well'), but points to a person whom we are invited into relationship with. In other words, to say 'Jesus is divine' is not to predicate of Jesus one further attribute, but to point to the redemptive power of relationship with him. Just like the doctrine of predestination, it guards against general classification (in that case of believers and sinners, and in this case of Jesus as human and divine), turning our attention to the transformative particular (in that case particular expressions of faith and the repentance of sin, and in this case particular relationship with Christ).

Take, second, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. This tells us that God does not create 'out of' anything. Unlike particular creatures, which can be distinguished from one another in terms of what they are made out of or made up of, creation cannot be classified alongside other creatures. Thus to say that the universe is created is not to classify it in any way. To be created is not like being green or hungry or scared of heights. Rather, it is to be particular before God. Like the other two doctrines, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* guards against general classification, turning our attention to the radically particular.

135

Take, finally, the doctrine of divine simplicity. This tells us that *God* is not composed or made up of anything (thus complementing the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*). In other words, God is not a kind of thing to be classified alongside other things. We cannot know God in the way that we know other creatures, by way of descriptive analysis. The doctrine does not tell us positively how we are to know God, but this article might be regarded as offering just such a positive account to complement the negative doctrine of divine simplicity. God is known in particular transformation, like the burglar's repentance of his sin before his victims. Thus the doctrine of divine simplicity rules out general classification of God in order to make way for particular, transformative encounter with God.

Doctrine as invitation to transformation

Such a conclusion is more of an anticipation than a fulfilment, and it now needs spelling out with respect to the trajectory of the paper as a whole, and ultimately in terms of our initial promise: to reconceive of doctrinal reference through doctrinal transformation. We will begin by translating our general conclusion regarding doctrine into semiotic terms. To reiterate: doctrine wards off general classification in order to make way for the transformative particular. This can be semiotically unpacked as follows. General classification is dyadic insofar as it presupposes the context of signification (e.g. in the identification of a crime).[11] By contrast, the situation of particular transformation to which doctrine calls is triadic: a new, unique context is brought about in the act of interpretation (e.g. in the repentance of a sin). In shorthand, doctrine calls to triadic transformation.

Triadic transformation is what we see in particular moments of transformation, such as the burglar's repentance of his sin. This is where God is palpably present in the sense that the burglar and his victims encounter one another truly as the creatures of God that they are, manifesting God's creative agency. Insofar as it heals previously faceless relations, furthermore, we can say that this encounter is redemptive, thus manifesting God's redemptive agency. Triadic transformation, we can conclude, is where God comes to be known as creator and redeemer. But God is known here not referentially, but transformatively. Such knowledge is a matter of sinner and victims being before one another as redeemed creatures of God. It need not be articulate, since knowing God in this sense is about truly being a creature.

[11] To recall, this is a slight oversimplification insofar as generic interpretation can involve creative abduction, in which triadicity is no longer latent (see n. 10 for the example of Kepler's hypothesis). But the transformation we are after is to be distinguished from the latter, too.

Doctrine is distinguished from this 'knowledge-through-being-transformed' as the articulate invitation to it. Its articulacy can be spelt out more specifically as follows. In the case of the doctrines of divine simplicity and of creation *ex nihilo*, it articulates the ungeneralisability of God and of relationship with God; in the case of the Chalcedonian definition it spells out the incarnational implications of the divine ungeneralisability; and in the case of doctrine of predestination it draws on the ramifications of the divine ungeneralisability, by bringing faith and sin into relation with it. In semiotic terms we can say that doctrine negatively articulates the logic of triadic transformation, by sweeping aside false dyads. It tells us that with God there is no prior context of interpretation (as in dyadic logic), but that God is God's own context of interpretation; that God does not create within a prior context (with the implication that God creates the context); that Jesus does not fit our prior contexts (with the implication that he recreates us in relationship with him); and that faith and sin are before God (hence not generic but contextually particular).

As the articulation of the logic of triadic transformation, doctrine is nevertheless not to be set apart from transformation as 'mere articulation': as we have said above, doctrine is 'articulate *invitation*'. Let us spell this out. First, most obviously, doctrine is parasitic on transformational knowledge of God as the positive upshot for which it is the negative presupposition: divine ungeneralisability has its complement in the particular transformations for which doctrine makes way. We saw this specifically in the doctrine of predestination: it must be translated for the preaching context, and Augustine's translation focuses on transformative encounter. Second, doctrinal articulation is itself incipiently transformative. It does not just state (indicatively) that God is ungeneralisable (as if this were a predicate like any other): it *debunks* generalisability (by the oxymoronic creation 'out of' 'nothing', by the jarring identification of God with God's own goodness, and by the paradoxical uniting of divine and human natures in Christ); and it *instructs* us not to generalise regarding faith and sin. Thus it actively propels one towards the particular transformations it has in view as its endpoint.

Doctrine is both articulate and transformative. But what does this tell us about doctrinal reference? Our account has intentionally steered clear of imputing to doctrine any straightforward reference to God. In the case of the doctrine of predestination, it was the implicit assumption of such reference that led to the mistranslation of Version III into Version I. Version I assumes that Version III refers to God's division of human beings into the saved and the damned: to a divine plan of predestination. It applies this to the congregation, mistaking God for an empirical agent alongside others, rendering the human agents passive in the face of the divine. Version II, by

contrast, interprets Version III as the instruction not to generalise regarding faith and sin. The apparent reference to divine agency in Version III is, properly understood, a strategy for transformation. To take this reference at face value is to miss the oxymoronic nature of invoking a divine agent (or divine context).

However, to leave our conclusion there, saying that the doctrine of predestination transforms *rather than* refers, would be misleading. It is not the full story. First, the referential *shape* of the doctrine's grammar should give us pause for thought. Second, we note that alongside its reference to divine agency (indeed, as a correlate to it) the doctrine also refers to the human acts of faith and sin. We can learn more about its apparent reference to the divine agent by examining the character of its reference to human agency.

In the case of the phrase we chose for examination, B^{III} refers to sin in the interpretive context of B^{II}, the doctrine as preached ('embrace discipline'), which, in turn, refers to sin in the interpretive context of the particular encounters it invites, in which sin is disciplined and repented of. It is the exposure of sin in such moments of transformation – in all its particularity – which grounds the otherwise abstract reference to sin in B^{III}. In other words, the referential purchase of B^{III} is realised in particular transformative encounters, which are its ultimate interpretants.

But what about the referential correlate of sin in B^{III}, 'the help of merciful grace'? Should we deny any genuine referential aspect to this, accounting for it exhaustively as a strategy for transformation: 'do not generalise regarding sin (but be open to contextual transformation)'? On such a reading, the grammar is entirely misleading, and the only reference is to sin as exposed and repented of in transformative encounter. But this would imply that an account of such transformative encounter exhaustively in terms of human agency is enough. We have said above, however, that God is 'palpably present' to such transformation in God's redeemed creatures: God is known here transformatively. To deny all reference to God would not be to do justice to the genuine divine presence here, irreducible to the human agents.

It is clear, on the one hand, that we are not dealing with a case of straightforward reference to God, since God is not an agent to be picked out among others. But on the other hand, in God's inextricable presence to the repentant sinner, God is *more* present than a mere agent, not less; and thus *more* present than a mere referent, not less. Thus, insofar as the doctrine of predestination has its upshot in transformative encounter, its 'reference' to God does more than merely refer – it inducts one into the presence of God. Might we conclude, therefore, that the doctrine of predestination, as transformative, *hyper-refers* to God? By contrast with the

denial of reference, the affirmation of hyper-reference would seem to be a fitting acknowledgement of the fact that God exceeds our categories rather than falls short of them. We do not have time now to test it, but we can surmise that hyper-reference is a fitting category also for other doctrines besides the doctrine of predestination, insofar as they ward off generalisation, making way for particular, transformative encounter with God.[12]

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[12] This article was originally written as a plenary paper for the 2014 conference of the Society for the Study of Theology.