De Doctrina Christiana

Carol Harrison

One of our University committees, which has a sub-committee in each department, is called the Teaching and Learning Committee, or TLC for short. I am certain, however, that the University would hesitate if someone were to suggest it used the more concise Latin root of this term and called it the Doctrine Committee — a sign, no doubt, of modern ambivalence or hostility to anything that sounds remotely 'religious' or even 'old-fashioned', though it is a perfectly good word which has been used in the West to refer to precisely what the University Committee understands its remit to be, and in exactly the same context, for over two thousand years. Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* is usually translated by theologians less wary of the term 'doctrine' as *On Christian Doctrine*. But this too is significant, for it indicates that perhaps theologians, too, are not sufficiently alert to the true meaning of *doctrina*/*doctrine* as referring, primarily, to teaching and learning: a *doctor* is a teacher; the *doctus* is someone learned or wise; the *doctiloquus* someone skilled or practised in speaking. If we were to borrow the University's terminology and translate Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* as *On Christian Teaching and Learning* we would therefore already be well on the way to understanding its contents.

Like the University TLC committee, Augustine's work addresses a broad range of issues including matters such as: which syllabus is to be taught and learnt (book 1); which texts best facilitate this, and what historical, social, cultural or linguistic disciplines are presupposed, or need to be acquired, in order to read, interpret and teach them (book 2); what specific skills, rules or techniques are needed to tackle the sort of problems which the texts might raise (book 3); finally, how the teacher should best go about the task of actually communicating and teaching his or her subject (book 4). (Mercifully, Augustine did not feel the need to address other issues which seem so pressing in teaching and learning in a University context today, such as module proformas, quality assurance, external validation, feedback mechanisms or student assessment. . . .)

Although Augustine never tells us exactly why he wrote *On Christian Doctrine* (as, for the sake of clarity, I will continue to call it) it is significant, I think, that he began the work immediately after his consecration as Bishop of Hippo in 396, and that he thought it

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worth completing when he took up the unfinished manuscript towards the end of his life in the course of reviewing his entire literary output, and added the end of the third book, and the entire fourth book, thereby giving his readers the benefit of a lifetime's experience of attempting to communicate and teach the truth of the Christian gospel from the pulpit. Even in 396, however, as a new bishop, he was eminently qualified for the task of writing a work on teaching and learning: he had enjoyed the best that the Roman educational system could offer, had been trained in the disciplines of the Liberal Arts and, having attained its highest level by becoming an accomplished rhetor or public speaker, had spent the early years of his career as a successful teacher of rhetoric, or the art of public speaking, in Carthage and Rome, reaching the corridors of power as municipal rhetor in the Imperial capital, Milan. His meteoric career, which had brought him to the point where he had the Emperor's ear and could reasonably hope for a provincial governorship in the near future, was wholly due to teaching and learning. Instead, as we know, he converted to Christianity, where his ecclesiastical career was equally meteoric: he was swiftly — forcibly — ordained, and found himself, albeit still a priest, immediately preaching, teaching, catechising, advising, composing theological and polemical treatises, commentaries on Scripture, and addressing the assembled bishops of North Africa on the Creed. Teaching and learning had made him who he was, he had made a smooth transition from one side of the desk to the other, was outstandingly accomplished in this respect, and now found that teaching the Christian faith to those in his care, or advising those who were to undertake this task (as he is clearly doing, at least at one level, in *On Christian Doctrine*) was at the very heart of his new vocation.

But things were not quite as straightforward for Augustine as I have perhaps made them seem, and nor are they for us — probably for the same reasons. At his conversion he was precipitated quite dramatically from one distinctive culture and society to another: from one way of thinking and speaking, of understanding reality, and of acting in relation to the world and one's fellows, to another. One was informed by a long established, influential tradition of classical learning which had formed the minds of the ruling elite of the Empire for centuries, and by pagan myth, cult and belief in the gods; the other was informed by an equally long established, influential tradition founded upon exegesis of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, which had formed the minds of generations of Christians (or Christians 'before Christ'), and by Christian preaching, liturgy and belief in the triune God. The relation between one culture and society and the other — between paganism and Christianity — is really the subtext of *On Christian Doctrine*, and indeed of almost everything Augustine and the fathers wrote, for they are without

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exception acutely aware that, having been educated, trained and formed by the classical tradition; having had their ways of thought, manner of speaking, and modes of acting moulded by that tradition, it could not just be shrugged off and abandoned like a worn-out garment. It had made them what they were, and was the unavoidable, inevitable, ever-present context in which they approached, understood, articulated, and lived out their Christian faith. The sense that Christian culture and society was not, in effect, the culture and society which had shaped and formed their minds and ways of living, and was not shared by the majority of their peers, was perhaps the most important factor in shaping the self-understanding of Christians from the very beginning, who were first of all persecuted by the Romans and, after Constantine's conversion, lived in uneasy co-existence with the pagan culture and society which had formed them and in which they now continued to attempt to live out their Christian lives.

The burning question when a Christian author such as Augustine turned to the question of teaching and learning the Christian faith was therefore: how does Christian teaching and learning relate to pagan teaching and learning? How does it relate to the classical education — its texts, disciplines and manner of expression — which had moulded the minds and lives of all educated people? Given that it cannot simply be rejected and ignored, can it be legitimately used by, or integrated into, Christian teaching and learning? In what respects can it make a positive contribution to Christian teaching and learning and in what respects must it be opposed and rejected as hostile and contradictory to it? In addressing these questions Augustine and the fathers of the Church were, of course, in a situation not dissimilar to our own: they did not have an alternative system of Christian education and formation to turn to; education was thoroughly secular, classical and used pagan literature; children went to pagan schools; society as a whole was still largely pagan, and even when the Church grew, there was much that remained at least vestigially pagan, even among Christians, in the sense that pagan traditions, customs and practices continued to inform everyday life and social interaction. We will all have a different experience of what has taken the place of paganism today, and it will be much less homogenous than paganism was for Augustine and his contemporaries, but I don't think any of us would deny the existence and force of non-Christian traditions, customs and practices in shaping the lives, mind-sets and behaviour of people in the twenty-first century. So how does Augustine set about answering the questions posed by the existence of what effectively amounts to a Christian counter-culture and counter-society?

First of all, it is telling that, at least in the work we are considering, it is to teaching and learning that he turns to consider the questions

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we have raised above — thereby acknowledging their important role in shaping and identifying a particular culture and society. Even more importantly, it is revealing that Augustine makes clear from the outset that what is taught and learned in a Christian context is Scripture, and that all the other disciplines of classical education and its techniques of communication must be subsumed under, and made subservient to, the single aim of interpreting Scripture, and teaching and communicating its truth. Scripture is, as it were, the foundation, the norm, the paradigm or blueprint for a Christian culture and society. Why this is the case Augustine makes clear in book one of *On Christian Doctrine*: Scripture contains the truths of the faith, the eternal truths or realities — the *res*/things, in Latin — of which everything else is merely a sign and pointer, or *signum*. Scripture therefore contains the reality to which all else points; it is the meaning of all words; that which all signs signify; it is divinely instituted rather than simply agreed upon and instituted by human convention, agreement and custom. In other words, it contains the truth of the eternal reality of the Trinity, of God the Father, his Son, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. It therefore sets before us what is to be believed, hoped and loved, and renders everything else secondary, a mere sign, something to be used towards the end of attaining that ultimate truth. What Augustine therefore does in book one is to set forth a sort of Christian world picture in which everything is put in its place: the eternal, ultimate truth is set forth and everything else is shown to be dependent and contingent upon it. In so doing he not only systematically sets forth Christian doctrine or teaching, but also a Christian way of life, the foundations of a Christian culture, in which every aspect of created reality and every aspect of human culture, learning and activity is to be subsumed to the interpretation of Scripture and above all, the eternal truth it contains.

This is indeed a rather radical and dramatic way of going about deciding a syllabus – and Augustine has been criticised for his 'narrowly utilitarian, extremely reductivist viewpoint'[1], but we must remember that it is, in fact, a clear, uncompromising statement of faith in the Trinitarian Creator God, of hope of attaining him, and of love which moves towards this end. There is nothing narrow or reductivist about this, rather there is a characteristically Augustinian, eschatological openness, or endless stretching out towards the eternal, in which there is no finality in the world, but temporal things find their meaning only in relation to God. Augustine sums all of this up towards the end of book one in the language of love — or more precisely, faith, hope and love: what Scripture teaches us is love of God and love of neighbour. This is the

[1] Gerald Bonner, *God's Decree and Man's Destiny* (London:Variorum, 1987) IV, 14

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one lesson Scripture has to teach, the only one necessary. And if our interpretation of any passage of it lends itself to this lesson, it is legitimate. Indeed, once having learnt it and taken it to heart, we no longer need Scripture at all.

By establishing the identity of Christian doctrine, in other words, the eternal truth, authority and meaning of Scripture, at the very outset, Augustine puts himself in a position where he can decisively deal with all the further questions which might arise — and which he indeed proceeds to deal with in books 2–4 — concerning its interpretation, the knowledge, skills and techniques which might be helpful to the exegete; to what extent classical or pagan learning is of use; how one should deal with the ambiguities and difficulties of Scripture; how one should go about communicating its truth to others.

Can we share Augustine's understanding of what Christian doctrine is? It is, when one considers it, a very daring attempt to identify the 'essence of Christianity', to assert its claim to possess the ultimate truth, and to sum it up in terms, not so much of knowledge, but of human action: of love of God and love of neighbour. If we cannot, we probably cannot share the subsequent outworking of his claims about how Scripture should be read, or what aspects of general human culture and learning are acceptable and useful to the Christian, or what should be one's priorities in communicating this truth. If nothing else, and at risk of stating the obvious — though I think it needs to be put as obviously as possible — I would suggest that a clear understanding of what Christianity is, and a belief in its ultimate truth, is a necessary prerequisite to any discussion about how it can effectively articulate and communicate that truth in a modern/post-modern context.

We might well respond that to make Scripture central in a modern context could run the risk of alienating people for whom it simply seems alien, old-fashioned, bizarre, uncivilised or crude. This might well be true, but it is also precisely how it appeared to Augustine and his fellow bishops: their highly educated, refined, literary sensibilities, cultivated by reading the great Greek and Latin classics, found it a strange, vulgar, badly written, rebarbative, rather plebeian text. How they coped with their initial shock and distaste is therefore worth considering: the fact is that they embraced Scripture, warts and all, on the basis that it was divinely inspired, and that the truth — ultimately summed up in love of God and love of neighbour — was to be found in every part of it, however banal, absurd, contradictory, or offensive it might appear on first reading. Their real question was, how was this truth to be discovered? If a literal reading did not reveal it, then a typological, figurative or allegorical one might. Augustine and most of the fathers were much happier than we are to move beyond the literal: they valued the historical but were certainly not

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imprisoned by it. Their belief in the inspiration of Scripture was something that liberated them to seek for the truth of that inspiration: to embrace the difficulty and obscurity of Scripture as a divinely intended counterweight to pride or indigence and an inspiration to humbly search for meaning; to discover a spiritual, ethical meaning; to read Scripture as a work of literature, with as many different meanings as it had readers; to realise that it could be approached at different levels by people with different abilities, inclinations and interests; that it was a compelling, literary work of aesthetic merit which was more than a match for the Greek and Latin classics, which could, moreover, be analysed and, above all, enjoyed — as Augustine demonstrates rather ingeniously — or disingenuously — in book four of *On Christian Doctrine* according to the classical rules of rhetorical composition, and not be found wanting; that the delight and pleasure it occasions is the means to discover and embrace its truth.

I wonder whether the twenty-first century reader might not react to this approach to Scripture by feeling that an indulgent, rather superior, twenty-first century pat on the head for the fathers is in order: that of course, they knew no better, did not have the benefit of historical criticism, and really did the best they could according to their own, rather limited lights? This is not the time or place to mount a defence of Patristic exegesis but it does, I think, deserve more serious consideration, not least because it is uncompromisingly founded upon belief in the divine inspiration and truth of Scripture, it meets the difficulties and ambiguities of the text head on, does not fight shy of diversity and apparent disagreement, and has as its sole aim the inculcation of love of God and love of neighbour. If we cannot share the fathers' literary sensibilities because we do not now share their educational background, mindset or culture, let us at least be open to the literary sensibilities of our own time and be ready to use its methods and techniques in our own reading of Scripture and attempts to communicate it. The real problem we face is in identifying them. In a post-modern context, it is almost impossible to be specific, for we have irretrievably lost the homogeneity of either late antique culture or classical Christian culture, and live in a world of rich, almost overwhelming diversity. The tools we use will differ according to our own context and the context of those we are addressing, and may well lose any relevance or force in any other. In this situation, a basic conviction of the inspiration and truth of Scripture as teaching love of God and love of neighbour is an even more crucial bedrock and foundation upon which we might then feel free to build with the multi-faceted, multi-cultural, interdisciplinary, inter-denominational, tools which lie to hand, in order to discover and communicate this truth. Augustine himself provides us with a salient example of this process in book three of *On Christian*

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Doctrine, where he attempts to offer methods to deals with the interpretation of the difficulties and ambiguities of Scripture, and gives an extended analysis of the seven rules for interpretation which the former Donatist Tyconius, a member of the schismatic sect with which Augustine had spent the first decade of his ministry locked in bitter controversy, had set forth for their resolution. They are helpful rules, and Augustine feels free to adopt them, despite their dubious provenance, and to recommend their use.

In book two of *On Christian Doctrine*, we find a long digression which has been described by Augustinian scholars as a 'charter for Christian culture'. In it, we find Augustine taking each element of late antique society, culture and learning in turn, and assessing its relevance and use for the Christian — or more precisely, for the task of interpreting the Scriptures. Our own society, culture and learning is, of course, very different and much more diverse, and we might well envy the position of someone like Augustine who feels confident he has it at his fingertips to summarise and analyse, but there is much to learn from the general principles which emerge from Augustine's ambitious exercise. It is a highly systematic one, which first distinguishes between those things which are of human institution and those which are already firmly established or of divine institution. What Augustine describes as 'pagan superstition', including idol worship, divination, amulets, charms, astrology, fortune telling and pacts with demons, are immediately and categorically dismissed as things of human institution to be feared and avoided by Christians. Other things of human institution, which, like pagan superstition, work, not because of any innate value they possess, but simply because of convention and general agreement, are also dismissed as superfluous to the Christian, including the gestures of actors in the theatre, and the conventions of artists, sculptors or imaginative fables. (This outright rejection of the arts might seem rather disconcerting to us, but we must remember that it was almost impossible for Augustine and his contemporaries to separate them from their role in the propagation of pagan idolatry, immorality, lies and deception.) More useful conventions of human institution, Augustine observes, are those which enable us to distinguish sex and rank, which regulate weights and measures, coins, letters, signs and shorthand. Also useful are those things which are not of human institution but which are found firmly established or which are of divine institution: among these are history, natural history, geography, geology, human 'arts' such as building, medicine, agriculture, navigation, dancing, running . . . even wrestling, which all help the Christian in his or her understanding of Scripture and especially its figurative expressions. More useful still are those 'arts' which pertain to reason, the seven liberal arts of the classical curriculum, including grammar, dialectic, rhetoric, music and mathematics — but only (and one senses that this

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observation comes from personal experience and failings) if used without pride, ostentation, and sophistry, and by duly acknowledging that all truth comes from God.

The 'studious and intelligent youths who fear God and seek the blessed life' whom Augustine tells us he has in mind as his intended readership in *On Christian Doctrine* (perhaps those preparing for ordination and the task of preaching), are therefore advised to firmly close their nostrils to any whiff of pagan superstition but to freely absorb those human conventions and arts, and those disciplines of divine institution, which they encounter in pagan society and culture, which prove useful in discovering Christian truth — as freely, indeed, as the Israelites who plundered the Egyptians of their treasure — for these conventions, arts and disciplines are, after all, ultimately derived from the 'mines of divine Providence' and rightfully belong to Christianity. An eclectic approach, then, characteristic of all the early Christian apologists who had sought to find common ground with paganism, whilst defending and promoting the Christian faith, is what we see Augustine espousing here in the most uncompromising terms. His high-minded, 'studious youths' are left in no doubt about where the truth ultimately lies and to whom it rightfully belongs; their task is to use it responsibly, wherever it is found, to the ultimate end of identifying it as the truth of Scripture: of love of God and love of neighbour.

Are we prepared to follow the apologists, including Augustine, and claim that wherever truth is found it belongs ultimately and in its entirety only to Christianity? Can a post-modern world make sense of such a claim? Can Christians who make this claim make sense of post-modernity? Where is the truth to be found, and what might prove useful to the Christian in modern conventions, arts and disciplines? I suspect that it is easier for the Christian than for the bewildered non-believer to answer these questions and that without the certainty of faith in its ultimate truth Christianity will, at best, forever remain one manifestation of truth among manifold others. How is someone, then, to be taught the faith and moved and persuaded to adopt it?

It is with this question in mind that Augustine embarks on book four of *On Christian Doctrine*. In some ways it is perhaps the most alien section of the work for modern readers, for in it Augustine considers the role and practice of the discipline of rhetoric, or the art of public speaking, in a Christian context. As we saw earlier, rhetoric was the defining goal of classical education and, therefore, the distinguishing mark of the cultured elite of the Empire, including its Christian bishops who all thought, wrote and spoke in the same 'language'. The use of rhetoric would be expected in very much the same way as we now use grammar and punctuation; its absence would denote a lack of education and a consequent inability to

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express oneself. What, then, was the Christian teacher and preacher to do? Rhetoric was primarily used in government and in the law courts, to move and persuade others of one's argument, whether it was true or false. In Augustine's day it was associated with verbal fireworks, entertainment, clever, impressive, but ultimately empty displays, the ability to move one's audience to tears or to act upon one's words, whether they were moral or immoral, true or false. But to fail to use it in the pulpit would be tantamount to declaring oneself ignorant, vulgar, badly educated, and would risk alienating one's hearers. Cultural convention could, therefore, not be ignored but, as in the case of the Scriptures, had to be re-thought, re-assessed and adapted to a Christian context. This is precisely what we find Augustine doing in book four. The subject clearly touches a very sensitive nerve for him: he was, remember, a teacher and practitioner of rhetoric himself; he was far from immune to its cultural prestige, its beauty, its sheer persuasive force. And yet he is evidently ambiguous, embarrassed even, about using it in a Christian context, and everywhere hedges its theory and practice about with reservations, revisions and warnings. Above all, he does not want the Christian preacher to be seen to be using words merely for the sake of words; to please, entertain and delight. Augustine therefore turns the classical order of persuading, moving and teaching on its head by insisting that whatever the Christian teacher says, his first and ultimate aim must be to teach. Teachers must only use rhetoric or eloquence to delight, to move and persuade their audience to grasp the truth of what they have taught and to move them to act upon it. Clarity and simplicity must therefore be their first concern (even if — horror of horrors — it might involve using a vulgar, ungrammatical word) and delight and persuasion only if useful for teaching. One can almost feel Augustine's embarrassment as he tries to reconcile his own cultured sensitivities with the priorities of teaching and learning the truth. He seems to want to argue that a Christian use of rhetoric is almost unselfconscious, and is certainly unaffected: it is not a deliberate display of erudition or cleverness, but a totally natural, unforced, inevitable accompaniment to the truth. Wisdom naturally entails the beauty of eloquence, which does not have to be taught or sought out, but is simply absorbed by reading and listening to Scripture and ecclesiastical literature. But then we find him worrying that the authors of Scripture do not use rhythmic closings to their sentences and wondering if someone could not re-write their words, so they do. . . .

We may well not share Augustine's sensitivity to rhetorical expression, but we must all be aware of the gap between 'religious' language and everyday language, and the difficulties which the Christian teacher or preacher faces in communicating in a context where this language has no resonances. How can it be made to resonate, to convey meaning and truth? Augustine's dilemma was one of form

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and content. It was obviously the content or truth of the Christian message that was his first priority, but he was acutely conscious that it could only be taught if it was presented to his congregation in a form which they could relate to, understand, and which would above all ensure they could delight in it, be moved by it, and be persuaded to embrace and act upon it. The form he felt best suited for his purposes was, as it were, a secular one, with perhaps the wrong overtones from having being used in rather different, somewhat inimical contexts — and yet he could not reject it. It is, I think, the same for us, but what would represent an effective form of contemporary communication is rather less straightforward. Traditional preaching and teaching, if I dare hazard a generalisation, seems not only to have lost the rhetorical tradition of the fathers (and with it, regrettably, the use of allegorical, figurative, typological exegesis) but also to have lost touch with what reaches a contemporary audience used to multi-media communication. It also seems to have generally lost sight of the need for aesthetic delight and pleasure in teaching, moving and persuading a listener, which Augustine acknowledges as so important. But just as Augustine, in a rather confused, embarrassed and ambiguous manner was forced to allow for the use of rhetoric in Christian teaching and learning, so we — no doubt with same measure of embarrassment and ambiguity — might consider the use of multi-media presentations, or of poetry or music, in contemporary teaching and learning. This is certainly how a message is conveyed in almost every other context than the pulpit or lecture hall these days.

Lest that sounds too disconcerting, let us not, finally, lose sight of Augustine's main lesson in *On Christian Doctrine*, and that is that the one lesson which Christianity has to teach is love of God and love of neighbour: that this is the ultimate meaning of every part of Scripture; the foundation of Christian culture; that which underlies the way in which a Christian relates to every aspect of created reality; that any interpretation which does not contradict it is acceptable; that this truth should be taught in love, accepted in love, and acted upon in love, and that such teaching, acceptance and action is ultimately due to the action of God's grace, as love, enabling us to teach, to learn, accept and act. (At a number of points in the treatise, Augustine urges the reader to do nothing more than to pray for this grace.) There is a hermeneutical circle, a circle of teaching and learning, which begins and ends in love, and if love of God and neighbour motivates and inspires it, it cannot fail to attain its goal. This seems as good a starting point as any in confronting our contemporary problems and it is one which is self-fulfilling. Let me leave you with two quotations, the first from the prologue of *On Christian Doctrine* and the second from another work of Augustine's entitled *On Teaching the Uninstructed*:

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Charity itself, which holds human beings together in a knot of unity, would not have a means of infusing souls and almost mixing them together, if one person could teach nothing to another. (*On Christian Doctrine*, Prologue, 6)
So great is the power of sympathy, that when people are affected by us as we speak and we as they learn, we dwell in one another and thus both they, as it were, speak in us what they hear, while we, after a fashion, learn in them what we teach. (*On Teaching the Uninstructed* 12)

Dr Carol Harrison
Theology Department,
University of Durham,
Abbey House,
Palace Green,
Durham, DH1 3RS
Email: Carol.Harrison@durham.ac.uk

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