


# Augustine on theosis and divine illumination as the theologic framework for decolonisation

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This study examined the plausibility and role of theosis in Augustine's theory of divine illumination as a theologic framework for decolonising theology. Theologic refers to God's revelation about himself and his nature. Therefore, through an analysis of Augustine's dogmatic treatise concerning the nature of the Holy Trinity, this article argues that Augustine's theory of divine illumination is a precedent for God to speak about himself. Moreover, this theory of divine illumination is useful in developing a non-biased theoretical framework for decolonialism in theology today. At the centre of this theory is the inability of human beings to possess and command true knowledge as a result of inherent sin. However, in contrast, this highlights the graceful nature of God as he assists us in partaking in his glory and wisdom through theosis. Therefore, by incorporating Augustine's philosophical analyses into empirical studies, the purpose of this study was to discuss the following: (1) The theologic of Augustine's theory of divine illumination in the process of decolonising theology; (2) Augustine's comprehension and use of divine procession through a triadic function of the human mind in his treatise *De Trinitate*; and (3) the role and plausibility of theosis because of God's love in the process of learning and teaching. Through critical analysis of Augustine's philosophical thought, this study develops an ethical theoretical framework for decolonising theology. Thus, the key contention is to succinctly present Augustine's dogmatic thought rationally and logically in the process of his pragmatic stance.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** This article develops an ethical theoretical framework for decolonising theology based on Augustine's theory of divine illumination. The theologic of his divine illumination theory posits the pragmatic stance of his inner teacher concept, which he argued was the one true teacher in his philosophical treatises. Conversely, the study of decolonisation advocates for the inculturation of knowledge as an inclusive praxis that does not perpetuate a Eurocentric worldview. Thus, the authority of Augustine's inner teacher concept in his theory of divine illumination becomes ideal and fundamental in developing ethical hermeneutical praxis because of God's love.

**Keywords:** Augustine; theory of divine illumination; decolonising theology; *De Trinitate*; inculturation; theosis; theologic.

## Introduction

The plausibility of Augustine's theory of knowledge by divine illumination has always been questionable as a pragmatic pedagogical framework.<sup>1</sup> Such a subject is abstruse enough to be relegated to pseudoscience, but a lover of wisdom knows better. Augustine's philosophical analysis in general poses a philosophical problem to natural theology on the basis of its metaphysical presumption. Nevertheless, Augustine was convinced that God is somehow active in everyday human affairs after a thorough phenomenological investigation and the vision he had experienced together with Monnica at Ostia.

Moreover, the context in which Augustine developed his epistemology was polemical and apologetical. For these two reasons, his theory of knowledge should be understood twofold: (1) As a refutation against radical Scepticism of the New Academics who denied the existence of knowledge (*Contra Academicos* 2.5.13–2.6.15); and (2) as a refutation against the Arian and semi-Arian heresy on the divinity of Christ (Christology).

1. King (1998:2) posits that the theory of illumination is at its most plausible with mathematics, where the objects of knowledge are necessary truths that typically deal with ideal objects, such as perfect circles.

**Note:** Special Collection: Decolonialism in Theology Today.

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As a counterargument to the Arian controversy, Augustine developed his theology of the image in *De Trinitate*<sup>2</sup> (books 9–15). In these books, he argued his Christology on the indisputable authority of the Triune God and explained how the nature and will of God can be attributed to each Person in the Trinity (*De Trinitate* 15.20.38:209–210). Similarly, in his earlier pedagogical dialogues, Augustine based his theory of knowledge on the exegesis of Matthew 23:10, which reads, ‘Nor are you [*men*] called teachers, since there is one Teacher for you: Christ’. For Augustine, Christ has all the divine authority endowed to the Catholic Church.

Conversely, Augustine developed his theory of language to prove the impossibility of teaching through everyday language. Moreover, he posits that a learner applying his or her mind leaves himself or herself to be divinely illuminated. To find a workable explanation for the divine ascent, Augustine first demonstrated human depravity through the many ambiguities in our cognitive functions, especially the inability of language. The subject matter of his dialogues addresses the inadequacies of human cognition; thus, the hypothesis that the inner teacher is solely responsible for truth is based on his phenomenological experiences. Hammond (2014) notes:

Augustine’s attitude to his own mastery of rhetoric is ambivalent. He is acutely aware of its power both to inspire and inculcate the good and to manipulate and mislead hearers. (p. xxxiii)

According to Augustine, humans as sensible beings cannot come to true knowledge of God without divine intervention. This assertion forms the basis of my hypothesis. Moreover, the subsequent conceptual frameworks in Augustine’s theory of knowledge examine in different ways, the factors influencing God’s participation in education and human depravity in the process. However, the question remains, ‘If I can learn about God, will I be able to learn what it is that I seek?’ According to Silva (2016):

The attempt to know God and his attributes by human reason alone has been a controversial issue among Christian scholars. There are those who affirm and those who reject natural theology as a source of knowledge of God. (p. 117)

[Augustine] does not deny completely the human capacity to know God by reason, but he does object the human capacity to gain true knowledge of God by reason alone, without God’s intervention. (p. 117)

In *De Magistro*, Augustine understands Christ as a Model and object for mimesis in understanding truth and knowledge that abides only in God’s mind.

Therefore, it could be argued that Augustine’s philosophical analyses reach its climax in the human mind as a window to divine reality. However, according to Nash (2003:92) ‘No other important aspect of Augustine’s philosophy is as difficult to understand and to explain as this notion that God

<sup>2</sup>The composition and structure of *De Trinitate* is a scholarly debate. Hill (1990:278) posits its composition shortly after AD 400–420. And for the first 16 years or so, there were many pressing issues that demanded his attention thus forced Augustine not to finish writing this book as planned.

in some way illumines the mind of man’. This forms the statement of the problem of this research article that addresses the knowledge gap in the decolonisation of theology today through God’s intervention.

By critically analysing Augustine’s conceptual frameworks of his epistemology, this article develops a hypothesis for the plausibility and role of theosis<sup>3</sup> and theologic in Augustine’s epistemology based on his notion of love. According to Augustine, love is the practical example of the analogy of the Holy Trinity. He argues such a union as a relationship of divine equality, free of subordination. Likewise, my argument for decolonisation is based on love for the other and, more importantly, on love for God. In his general corpus, Augustine believed that education and all intelligible substances have a single scope and origin, namely, God.

## Divine procession in *De Trinitate*

The history of the trinitarian controversy dates from the preaching of Arius (AD 256–336) around AD 319 to around AD 419, around the completion of Augustine’s *De Trinitate* (Rusch 1980:1). In *De Trinitate*, Augustine distinguished between the external actions and the inner relationship of the three Persons or Personas of the Trinity. According to Drobner (2000:26), the traditional view of Augustine’s Christology can be attributed to Adolf von Harnack. In von Harnack’s view, it was Tertullian who first introduced the notion of ‘person’ to Christian theology. Thus, in the process shaped the formula of the ‘hypostatic union’ in the Chalcedonian creed.

Augustine’s theology culminates in his systematic thought of the Holy Trinity. He is correctly considered an advocate of the Holy Trinity as he presented his theory as a sound biblical and theological dogma. His many controversies centred on the Christological aspect as integral to his complex theological thought. In his natural theology, he ascribed each Person of the Holy Trinity a specific function without questioning or compromising on their divine nature. He understood the Three as a relational ordered structure of one essence.

Unlike in ancient and medieval times, modern theologians have since the work of Johan Urlsperger (1728–1806) and Karl Rahner (1904–1984) developed a distinction or rather had successfully coined a phrase between economic and immanent Trinity. In the West, Karl Rahner, Karl Barth and Vladimir Lossky were the major contributors of the revival of Trinitarian theology in the 20<sup>th</sup> century according to Ables (2012). The former would further formulate his famous ‘Rahner’s rule’ in his 1970 work entitled *The Trinity*.

In its simplicity, Rahner’s rule states that, ‘the “economic” Trinity is the “immanent” Trinity’ and vice versa. This was grounded in Rahner’s distinction between two ways of interpreting the Trinity, namely the ‘immanent’ Trinity is understood as the eternal being of God in his divine nature;

<sup>3</sup>Theosis denotes to the ‘being made weak for the weak in order to gain the weak’ (1 Cor 9:22).

while the 'economic' Trinity is understood as revealed to humans in its relational economy, in its biblical history, and in the narrative of salvation (Chipitsyn 2019:10).

For Augustine, the dominance of abstract modes of knowledge is a result of the Triune God's priority of relation over substance. Having been influenced by the Neo-Platonist metaphysics of individuation, which argues for the uniqueness in role-play rather than the ontological substance of the Triune God, Augustine's Trinitarian theology was primarily a transcendental unity over the corporeal. As a result, he recognised the inscrutability of God in the process. Furthermore, this notion of transcendental unity was adopted in his views on natural theology as a whole. However, Rusch (1980) posits that:

The weak point in Augustine's trinitarian theology was the apparent obliteration of the several roles of the three persons. He was aware of the problem. His answer was that each of the persons possesses the divine nature in a particular way. Thus it is proper to attribute to each the role appropriate by virtue of his origin. (p. 26)

In retrospect, unity is the foundation that constitutes the requirement for participation by each Person of the Godhead. Thus, in *De Trinitate*, Augustine asserts the revelation of God through the triune relation ordered structure. More significantly, he argues against any notion of the Son as a hindrance to the *Omni* qualities of God, as put forth by the Arians and the Eastern Orthodox Church. As a result, Augustine presented knowledge as primarily concerned with the nature and providence of God and how God through the Son and the Holy Spirit illuminates humanity.

Furthermore, in *De Trinitate*, Augustine considers the double procession of the Holy Spirit from both the Father and the Son as a way to argue for consubstantiality with God. He posits the Holy Spirit as a gift from a loving God that binds the Father and Son together. In the process, he adopts a perichoretic model of the Trinity as a logical expression of his theology. Throughout such a union, he maintains the distinction between hypostases. The trinitarian controversy that ensued challenged Augustine to combine identity with the distinction of Persons.

According to Ellingwood (2015:2), during Augustine's time, the trinitarian controversy, the creation 'ex-nihilo' and the ideas about 'modes of origin' influenced thinking on consubstantiality and relations within the Trinity. The common tendency was therefore a metaphysical asymmetric relation between the corporeal (of Christ) and non-corporeal of the Father. Since God created *ex-nihilo*, matter was given a lowly position in creation theology; thus, Christ (the human) cannot be co-eternal with God as he was begotten as flesh at a later stage.

Furthermore, the Son was subordinated to the Father because he came to do the will of the Father and not of his own. This, therefore, raised concern over the substantial relationship

between God (the Father), the Son (Christ) and the Holy Spirit (Logos) as all equal, because God cannot be conceived of incorporeal form. The same issues (Christology) comprised the core of the Arian controversy that Augustine confronted and refuted as blasphemous.

In *De Trinitate* (1.3.5), Augustine begins by seeking God's image and addresses those who inquire into the unity of the Trinity. More significantly, he warns of the error of misinterpreting the Trinity and, in the same sentence, praises the profitability of truth discovered in the Holy Trinity. Thus, for Augustine, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity is verifiable as much as it is metaphysical.

In *De Trinitate* (2.4), he states the reasons why God is a Trinity. He emphasised that such an endeavour requires faith before one can come to reason. He posits that we must first believe before we can understand. In summary, he states that those who have faith in God become the subject of divine illumination. Augustine's theory of divine illumination is the divine fulfilment of humanity and a correspondent of kenosis, whereby Christ became man (through sacrificing his divine nature) in order for humanity to partake in his divine nature.

In *De Magistro*, Augustine asserts that Christ not only freely compromised his divine nature to better relate to humanity, but moreover, he continually imparted his divine nature in the process of human salvation (which I assert in line with theosis). Thus, kenosis is reconciled in the divine illumination experience. The two as praxis can therefore be, understood as a two-nature model of Christology and divine causality.

The two praxis as *a priori* are dependent on each other in fulfilling a divine causality with humanity. Therefore, *kenosis* as an act of self-emptying of Jesus should be understood as the essential first step towards restoring and elevating the fallen human being and that is why kenotic leadership is crucial in this process. Human salvation depends on both kenosis and the divine intervention of Christ.

In this light, the divine procession in *De Trinitate* explains more than just an analogy to the three Persons but also the job description of each Person of the Trinity. Moreover, he attributes a similar trinitarian analogy to the mind.

On the Christological level, deification or theosis means becoming like Christ, which is essentially a Christian mandate. Augustine's corpus is moreover revered for its Trinitarianism than for its Christological theology. As an academic exercise, it can be argued that Augustine's theological departure was a threefold division of ontological properties not only of the divine nature as in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit but also of a cognitive nature based on memory, understanding and will given to us freely by the Trinitarian Godhead.

## The philosophy of mind in *De Trinitate*

In *De Trinitate* (10.4.6), Augustine presents the mind as a conscious entity that is aware of its presence in itself:

How can the mind come into the mind, as though it were possible for the mind not to be in the mind? Add to this, that if a part has been found, then the mind does not seek itself as a whole, but yet it does seek itself as a whole. Therefore, it is present to itself as a whole, and there is nothing further to be sought. For nothing is wanting to the mind that seeks; only the object that is sought is wanting. Since it, therefore, seeks itself as a whole, nothing of itself is wanting to it.

In *De Trinitate* (10.1.1–10.2.4), Augustine gives a summary of what love is and what it means for human knowledge. For Augustine, the mind plays a crucial role in determining his views on desire and love. In (10.1.2), he posits, ‘the more a thing is known, but not fully known, the more the mind desires to know the rest.’ He goes on to say, ‘What, then, does he love? For certainly a thing cannot be loved unless it is known. Nor does he love ... that he already knows.’

For Augustine, what does it mean to know? Moreover, how is knowledge obtained? Thus, knowledge requires oneness with the essence of the Supreme All-Being? The answer to this question can be found in *The Republic* (2002):

There seem to be two great aims in the philosophy of Plato, –first, to realise abstractions; secondly, to connect them. According to him, the true education is that which draws men from becoming to being, and to a comprehensive survey of all being. He desires to develop in the human mind the faculty of seeing the universal in all things; until at last the particulars of sense drop away and the universal alone remains. (p. 85)

Plato emphasised that our focus must be on the ideal forms that he considered the highest version of reality.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, this material world is a weak emanation of the ideal forms from which everything originates within the spiritual realm. The emanation, or going out, is seen in God in a simple form, the one proper to its nature as the cause. The mind, therefore, is endowed with the capacity to perceive reality. Augustine interchangeably refers to the mind as the soul based on its purity to discern divine matters.

In *De Trinitate* (12.14.23), he describes the ideal forms as accessible to the mind:

Neither have been nor shall be, but which are; and on account of that eternity in which they are, it is said of them that they have been, are, and shall be without any changeableness of times. For they have not been in such a way that they have ceased to be, nor shall they be in such a way as if they were not now, but they always had and always will have the self-same being. But they abide not as bodies fixed in space and place, but as intelligible things in their incorporeal nature they are so present to the gaze of the mind, as those visible

4. Although his concept of noble lies in book 3 could perhaps be used to counter-argue the ideal forms as a real world, nonetheless, my aim for the current topic is the traditional view that asserts the ideal forms as real and somewhat be contemplated in our material world.

and tangible things are present in their places to the senses of the body.

Augustine, as a Platonist, adhered to the truth of intelligible things based on logic and mathematics, which count as an abstract eternal truth that can be grasped directly by the human mind. Christ directly illuminates the human mind; thus, Augustine was convinced that God has left his footprints on the human mind that is accordingly intelligible and of one substance with the divine.

The belief that we can grasp intelligible things through reason is what Augustine called the theory of divine illumination. Through divine illumination, Augustine posits that God edify our minds with his divine light, which is essentially the process of the divine revealing itself to us. Augustine’s conceptual frameworks (inner teacher) of his epistemology in *De Magistro* and elsewhere accord with the intelligible aspects of the mind. He argued that the mind is susceptible to divine enlightenment; arguably this makes theosis plausible in his theology. Wills (1999) notes:

The intelligible light, the bridge by which we return to our source from the shadows of the cave, is present, sustaining and illumining us even in the very effort to deny it. To return fully to ourselves is to return to this light and achieve final fruition and since we are present to ourselves by our very nature to return to ourselves is a matter of simply looking. (p. 110)

Moreover, as an epistemic praxis, the mind is capable of universal truth, which Plato believed is certain. Plato urged us to search for this universal truth in other areas such as politics, society and education. For this reason, the search for universal truth should be the quest of the true philosopher, and it is in this light that I argue decolonisation as a quest for true philosophy.

## Theosis and Augustine’s theory of divine illumination

In *De Magistro* (10.32), Augustine concludes that ‘some men can be taught about some things, even if not all, without a sign’. As a result, one has to search within oneself by consulting the inner teacher. For Augustine, the inner teacher presupposes that knowledge is not something you create as it is immediately available to each of us. This article asserts Augustine’s systematic thought from his inward conception of reality.

Throughout his theology, Augustine highlights the central role of the Holy Spirit in consummating the process of theosis. The Holy Spirit, according to Augustine, operates within humans, although this operation requires external illumination. In *De Trinitate* (12.15.24), he points this out when he says:

[W]e ought rather to believe that the nature of the intellectual mind is so formed as to see those things which, according to the disposition of the Creator, are subjoined to intelligible things in the natural order, in a sort of incorporeal light of its own kind, as



the eye of the flesh sees the things that lie about it in this corporeal light, of which light it is made to be receptive and to which it is adapted.

He uses the analogy of light throughout his corpus to demonstrate the duality of truth and ignorance. This realisation underscores the integral involvement of the Holy Spirit in bridging the gap between the corporeal and the divine through theosis. Theosis as a state of mind is a bond between humanity and God through an inner dialogue. Thus, to speak of Augustine's theosis is to speak of the desired human telos in the presence of the Trinitarian Godhead.

This theory emphasises his entire theological outlook. According to Augustine, as aforementioned, God created man for Himself, and despite natural sin; theosis is still possible through God's grace. This is possible through the theology of the cross, in which God sent forth his only begotten son to redeem and reunite us in God's household. Thus, according to Augustine, God causes human activity inasmuch as humanity still enjoys free will.

For Augustine the Platonist, it is essential to construct hierarchies of choice by placing the human intellect as the closest cognition to function in divine matters. However, because of sin, the human intellect is limited and thus requires extrinsic illumination by light. In *Confessiones* (4.15.25), he tells us that:

The mind needs to be enlightened by light from outside itself, so that it can participate in truth, because it is not itself the nature of truth. You will light my lamp, Lord

and in (10.2.2), he affirms to God; 'You hear nothing true from me which you have not first told me'. Silva (2016) notes:

Due to his sinful nature, Augustine could not fully comprehend God's revealed truth in nature. His intellect functions under the influence of sin, however, the knowledge that his sinful mind acquires is vague and incomplete. (p. 120)

In this framework, the theory of divine illumination transcends ontology and becomes the foundation on which theosis can be understood. Furthermore, the human intellect depends on illumination to be comprehensible in its shadow state. In *Confessiones* (7.10.16), Augustine describes God as The Light of Truth itself. Earlier in (2.8.16), he asked: 'Who can teach me, except the One who illumines my heart and distinguishes between its shadows?'

In current scholarship on Augustine's theory of divine illumination, the illuminating aspect has been argued as intrinsic or extrinsic. Augustine occasionally described it as an extrinsic act. The general assertion is that divine illumination as a knowledge acquisition theory must be understood as the first step in terms of cognitive intuition, which bridges the gap between metaphysical and psychological memory from previous experiences and cultivates a solid foundation for intelligible and infallible knowledge.

The theory, although occurring naturally as a gift from God, proposes something altogether more demanding on our faculties of the mind. Even as divine intervention in our sixth sense, it should be well organised and pursued intentionally. Thus, the seven liberal arts were initially regarded as sufficient training to recognise and receive this divine illumination when it occurs. This demonstrates that Augustine's theory of divine illumination is one of the most difficult aspects of his theology to agree upon. According to Schumacher (2010):

Although Augustine's account of knowledge by illumination is fundamental to his thought on many other topics, scholarly consensus seems to dissolve when it comes to determining the exact function he assigns illumination in human cognition. Moreover, many scholars seem to doubt that the role of illumination, whatever it is, is philosophically plausible. (p. 375)

Likewise, Chidester (1983) notes:

There is widespread disagreement as to exactly what Augustine might have meant by his theory of learning, in which Christ, the truth, teaches within. The precise interpretation of Augustine's doctrine of illumination has been the subject of centuries of debate. (p. 73)

In hindsight, Augustine placed much emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in theosis to highlight God's initiative during the reformation process and transformation of humanity.

Chidester (1983) further notes:

There has been an almost universal tendency to understand Augustine's doctrine of illumination solely as an abstract epistemological theory. The temptation is to explain the learning theory conveniently in terms of Platonic conceptual categories, or Aristotelian in the case of the Thomists, as if it were based on such an abstract theory of knowledge. But first and foremost, Augustine's learning theory is a religious statement based on a correspondence between the intrinsic process of human learning and the primordial creative event. (p. 76).

Chidester alludes to three distinct versions<sup>5</sup> of the theory: ontologistic, ideogenetic and normative. Schumacher simplifies the distinctions as extrinsic and intrinsic interpretations of Augustine's theory of divine illumination. However, in both interpretations, the learner must actively participate in the learning process. To present the arguments for her research, Schumacher proceeds by interpreting Augustine's treatise on the Trinity as a foundation for her analytical exposition on the subject. She further emphasises the theological context in which Augustine posited his theory of divine illumination.

As for the role of theosis, theological attempts to understand human salvation and reunion with God brought the subject to the spotlight because the Eurocentric tradition looked

5. According to Chidester, the ontologistic version regards the immediate presence of the divine light the continuity between the mind of man and the mind of God, as primary in the act of learning. The ideogenetic version regards the activity of the word of God, mysteriously producing ideas in the human mind, as primary in the learning process. The normative version understands the metaphor of illumination to refer to the way in which the divine light provides an ultimate standard of certainty by which knowledge is evaluated, rather than describing an inner, psychological process through which the act of learning occurs (p. 73).

askance at its mystical attributes. Augustine's theology of natural sin made it impossible for him to view humanity in a positive light. Therefore, for many commentators and rightly so, the terms deification and theosis and Augustine could never be mentioned in the same sentence because of the antithetical nature of the two meanings. To speak of Augustine in support of theosis is to present humanity in a positive perspective, which is in contention with the core of his entire theological discourse unless we understand humanity as a Trinitarian being capable of partaking in divine matters.

However, it can be argued that Augustine's aim was to develop a systematic framework for the intertwining of the divine and human realms. From a theological perspective, Augustine posits salvation on the grounds of theosis. The root word *theos*, in this context, was used as an attributive term to all things aesthetic, not as a substantive for God. In other words, theosis can be attributed to a mature state of the soul as a rational and spiritual entity. It is a state of oneness, that is unity with the higher consciousness or Supreme All-Being in the Plotinian idiom.

Moreover, at the ecclesial level in both the East and West, the notion is fundamentally the same, but the treatment is incomparably narrower. In the West, this can be traced to the following: (1) Augustine's dualistic notion of flesh and spirit; (2) his consubstantial Trinitarian Christology; and (3) his theory of divine illumination. According to Pabst (2012):

Like Plato and Iamblichus [*whose works, however, he did not know directly*], Augustine associates deification with transformative action that is both doxological and political – worship and civic virtue, in particular the dispensation of justice, are indispensable to a godly life. As such, Augustine's synthesis of ancient philosophy and biblical revelation seeks to combine contemplative knowledge and deifying practices. (p. 82)

Bonner, in his 1986 journal *Augustine's Concept of Deification*, asserts that Augustine's undertakings on theosis have more similarities than differences with the Eastern Church. Furthermore, the concept itself is Biblical, and this may be the reason for such similarities and may be found in both the Old and New Testaments.

For Augustine, the fall of Adam was not only a fall from grace but also a fall from his perfect self. This has become the biggest obstacle in Augustine's earlier theology, which the Manichaeans promised to resolve in his youth. The question of sin/imperfection is not only limited to God's likeness and image, but man, because of his imperfect nature, suffers from a God-complex. This further highlights the dualism between God and man although we may share his image and likeness. A full union with God can only be partial and temporary because humanity in its fallen state cannot partake in the divine.

Farris (2013:223) interprets Meconi's book titled *The One Christ* as a defence of Augustine's theory of theosis as a means of

achieving God-like status. It is on such grounds that Augustine argued for divine intervention in the acquisition of knowledge because humanity cannot offer anything of certitude. Augustine's divine illumination theory should be seen as having a twofold function in this context. At the centre of this theory is the inability of human beings to possess and command true knowledge because of their tainted soul. On the other hand, it highlights the graceful nature of God as he assists us in partaking in His glory and wisdom.

Drawing from Meconi's work on *St. Augustine's Theology of Deification*, Farris (2013) writes:

For Augustine, humans always bear the divine image, but images always bear some degree or another of likeness to their exemplar [...] Augustine highlights the notion of likeness as a distinguishing feature of humans, which provides the ground for growth from imperfection to perfection. Finally, Augustine uses the term '*aequalitas*' (i.e. equality) in reference to the goal of humanity. Equality is never literally achievable for humans (i.e. humans never become God or equal with God), but humans can come to share in God's perfection through God the son. (p. 224)

Therefore, the voluntary self-emptying of Christ is an act of servitude and transformation that does not alter Christ's nature or place in the divine Godhead. Kenosis is thus a prime example of God's nature and earthly mission. Moreover, to suggest that Augustine viewed humanity as bearing a divine image is not to contradict or nullify his theology of human depravity through natural sin. In contrast, it is to infer the original consubstantial union of humans and the Triune Godhead. For God, the Father 'created us for Himself and our hearts are restless until we find rest in him' (*Confessiones* 1.1.1).

## The theologic and inculturation of theology

How can we interpret the concept of theologic in positioning Augustine's theory of divine illumination as a framework for decolonising theology? In other words, how can we make sense of divine enlightenment as a hermeneutically sound practice? Moreover, how can we posit the inner teacher as a theoretical model that conveys knowledge in the process of learning and teaching?

Schumacher (2010:375) posits that 'throughout [*Augustine's*] writings, Augustine speaks of divine illumination as though it were the condition of possibility of all human knowledge'. This article proceeds from this basis that renders the plausibility of divine illumination on logical cognitive praxis in the process of decolonising theology. If this concept is logically sound, it offers an alternative method for decolonising theology on the basis of its certitude on knowledge.

Therefore, it advocates for inculturation as a primary step in interpreting divine illumination, or rather, the two work

together in tandem to develop a framework for decolonising theology at a personal level. According to Augustine, one knows oneself best when engaged in a relationship with God. In *De Trinitate* (15.28.51), he prays to God, 'Increase these gifts in me, until You have reformed me completely'. According to Doyle (2012):

Inculturation ... denote a process of engagement between the Christian Gospel and a particular culture. The term is intended conceptually both to safeguard the integrity of the Gospel and to encourage sensitivity to various cultural contexts. (p. 1).

This article argues that the inculturation of theology is a primary step that plays a crucial role in understanding the theologic in the process of decolonising theology as a lived experience. The main methodological assumption of this article is that decolonisation as a discipline needs to begin from an intrinsic valuable dialogue that is logically comprehensive to a specific group of people. Through Augustine's pedagogy of divine illumination, the process of human thought can be aided by divine intervention that illuminates the cognitive functions in acquiring knowledge and more so in the context of decolonising knowledge. The weakness of this thesis, however, is that the divine intervention and subsequent theologic solely depends on the Holy Spirit as the third entity in the Trinity.

However, the integration of cultural beliefs and practices into the frameworks of theology affirms Augustine's theory of divine illumination as a significant and virtuous step in hearing God's word thus decolonising theology. Similarly, Verhoef (2021:1) affirms the need to decolonise the concept of the Trinity in this context. Such a call I argue through inculturation, which serves as an analytical tool to challenge and transform the Eurocentric understanding of natural theology. By engaging in inculturation, Augustine's theory of divine illumination can be interpreted in a way that aligns with the culture and religious context of each specific group of people. This framing involves integrating religio-cultural experiences into the theological discourse that promotes indigenous knowledge and virtue ethics by decolonising the Trinitarian image of God.

As a model of truth, Western theology is antithetical to African religious knowledge and beliefs as far as its doctrine of the Trinity and its subsequent *imago trinitatis* is portrayed. Consequently, it dilutes the image of God in the minds of African people unless interpreted through Augustine's theory of divine illumination in the human mind as the basis for human true knowledge of God. Through inculturation, Augustine's theory of divine illumination becomes a practical framework for narrating liberation theology from a foreign image of God. The cognitive certitude of inculturation reconciles Augustine's pedagogy of divine illumination as a necessary social change in decolonising not only theology but also the doctrine of the Trinity as the image of God. Silva (2016) affirms this view:

Without divine illumination, human reason can only acquire a vague and incomplete notion of God's existence, consequently, from Augustine's perspective, true natural theology is vague and incomplete if seen apart from the framework of divine illumination. (p.116)

But how can humans interpret divine ascent if not through familiar practices? The attempt to know God becomes achievable through inculturation as a model for seeking truth through the familiar. In other words, instead of having a predetermined theology based on colonialism, we can develop alternative epistemic dichotomies that recognise God's grace as a necessary intervention in the process of learning and teaching. In this way, scholarship avoids obvious regression on the subject of decolonisation and puts God's word at the centre of theology. Furthermore, God's grace is experienced through his active word in human affairs.

## Decolonising theology as a pedagogy of love

In *De Musica* (6.14.44), Augustine establishes a hierarchal and relational structure of things by distinguishing between the love of the world and the love of God, which in essence is incomparable. In *De Doctrina Christiana* (1.22.30), he posits that:

[H]uman beings are to be loved for the sake of something else because if a thing is to be loved for its own sake, it means that it constitutes the life of bliss.

For Augustine, a life of bliss can only be constituted by God. Intellectually, he understood love as the foundation of God's nature.

As aforementioned, in his work *Contra Academicos* (AD 386–387), Augustine argues against the Sceptics who denied the possibility of knowledge, thus as a result God's love. Later, in *De Civitate Dei* (11.26), he argues for the certainty of knowledge through the analogy of being:

For we both are, and know that we are, and delight in our being, and our knowledge of it. Moreover, in these three things no true-seeming illusion disturbs us; for we do not come into contact with these by some bodily sense, as we perceive the things outside us. . . . But, without any delusive representation of images or phantasms, I am most certain that I am, and that I know and delight in this. In respect of these truths, I am not at all afraid of the arguments of the Academicians, who say, What if you are deceived? For if I am deceived, I am. For he who is not, cannot be deceived; and if I am deceived, by this same token I am. And since I am if I am deceived, how am I deceived in believing that I am? For it is certain that I am, if I am deceived.

Augustine came to understand God in the Plotinian idiom of the Supreme All-Being so much that he tells us that, 'unless my being remains in Him, it cannot remain in me (7.11.17)'. In the same chapter, we come to realise that his theology depends on turning to the presence of the divine in oneself

and creating things (7.17.23). In *Confessiones* (13.11.12), Augustine also emphasises the same point on the importance of being:

For I am, and I know, and I love. I exist knowingly and willingly. I know that I exist and have a will; and I am willing to exist and to know. Let those who can, see how there is in these three an indissoluble life: and one life, and one mind, and one being-in-conclusion an distinctness that is inseparable, yes, but still distinct.

Furthermore, Augustine associates existence or being with love; therefore, to exist is proof of God's love. According to Matthews (2005), commenting on the philosophical notion of existence:

The idea that the words 'I exist' might be used to state a philosophically important truth would have mystified the classical philosophers of antiquity. Of course it was important to each of them individually that they existed ... But no major philosopher of antiquity would have thought of himself as expressing anything philosophically interesting by saying, 'I exist'. (p. 1)

In late antiquity, however, Augustine used the words 'I exist' to prove that knowledge exists. The fact that the Sceptics were aware of their existence was proof of knowledge that they denied. For Augustine, even Scepticism with all its negative dispositions proves that knowledge exists because you exist and know that you exist. In his many works, he encouraged the human teacher to possess a love for both the learner and the profession. In *De Catechizandis Rudibus* (4.8), he encourages Deogratias to:

Set love as the criterion of all that you say, and whatever you teach, teach in such a way that the person to whom you speak, by hearing may believe, by believing hope, and by hoping love.

In *De Trinitate* (8.8.12), he argues, 'You see the Trinity if you see love'. Love can therefore be regarded as the foundation on which morality, harmony, order and perfection are built. Therefore, love, especially for righteous virtues, must lead us to be active participants in the pursuit of something greater in this temporal world. Moreover, 'A brief and true definition of virtue is rightly ordered love' (*De Civitate Dei* 15.22).

Thus, our scholarly research on the tenability of decolonialism on theology today can be based on Augustine's theory of knowledge. Because all good things come from God, decolonisation is a fulfilment of theology through the instructions of the inner teacher as the true minister of knowledge. According to Chidester (1983):

It is [*the*] inner teacher, the voice of the word, which activates the learning process. The word of creation is for Augustine, therefore, the same word which is active as the inner teacher in the process of learning. (p. 75).

This article considers the primary source of knowledge as a standard practice in decolonising theology. Through Augustine's theory of divine illumination, this study

examines alternative praxis in developing knowledge systems. According to Aslam Fataar (2018):

Calls for decolonising education first emerged on the African continent in the context of decolonising struggles against colonial rule during the 1950s and 1960s. It is based on a negation of modern colonial education whose organising principle centred on shaping the colonised into colonial subjects, in the process, stripping them of their humanity and full potential. The knowledges of colonised groups, non-Europeans, and indigenous folk were suppressed or, as the decolonial scholar, Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) explained, their knowledges suffered a form of *epistemicide* which signifies their evisceration from the knowledge canon. (p. vi)

As a way of setting a proper approach to decolonising theology, decolonising theology as a discipline requires evidence of knowledge that corresponds to reality through reason, logic and facts. Therefore, in practise, decolonising theology must involve practical methods that are specific in a given culture. Consequently, this can demonstrate the flaws in our current Eurocentric views that undermine African systematic thoughts on theology and the image of Christ.

Through Augustine's theory of knowledge by divine illumination, decolonising theology could then be established on the basis of the pragmatic dichotomies experienced by each culture. The generalisation of natural theology in Western societies renders God's image foreign to African religions. This inconsistency renders theology superfluous as both a phenomenology and a metaphysical definition. Verhoef (2021) offers an alternative approach to the call of decolonising the Christian concept of the Trinity:

One approach is to reinterpret the name of God – as Trinity – in line with ATR's concept of God. This approach argues for a continuity within ATRs and African theology with Christianity. Another approach to the decolonising of the concept of the Trinity is to reject it as colonial and promote ATR's concepts of God as an alternative. (p. 2)

In many of our African religious traditions, we have theistic conceptual frameworks with reference to the supernatural. Charlesworth (2018:ii) argues that *Ubuntu* is another way of naming self-transcendence from an African perspective. Rightfully, he links the concept of *Ubuntu* to the proverb *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, Resane (2023:1) posits African proverbs, idioms and folklore as sapient and capable of contextually articulating theology. Moreover, this affirms my hypothesis on the importance of autonomous praxis in decolonising theology as Resane (2023) asserts for the highest authority in the dogmatic development of decolonising theology:

Decolonisation of theology, like the same attempts in all disciplines, calls for an authoritative base. Dogmatic formulations need a Supreme Court of Appeal in matters of faith and conduct. In theologising this final Court of Appeal, is the absolute Word of God inscribed. Subjectivism should never be allowed to be the final authority in and through theologising endeavours. (p. 5)

.....  
6. I am because we are.



When Augustine's theory of divine illumination is applied to decolonising theology,<sup>7</sup> God's Word becomes active and alive – sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow (Hebrews 4:12). Moreover, it sets the framework for consensus on key concepts to be included in decolonising theology. Such a paradigm shift ushers in Pleroma, as the fulfilment of theology to African indigenous knowledge as the authentic representation of indigenous knowledge about God and the practised religious rituals. In this light, God's image resonates with each individual and group of people through their lived experiences. Thus, God is logically discerned through each religio-cultural experience, which liberates the mind.

In book 12 (7.8 and 31.59) of *De Genesi Ad Litteram Imperfectus Liber*, Augustine argues for an intellectual vision concerning the human soul as created in God's image. According to Augustine, the human soul is not only the intellect but also the very image of God from which humanity is created. In Plato's mythology in *The Republic*, he conjectured that the human soul once had true knowledge, but lost it by being placed in a material body that distorted and corrupted that knowledge. Thus, people have the arduous task of trying to remember what they once knew. According to Ayres (2000):

Augustine discovered a paradoxical relationship between the soul and God. On the one hand, the soul was immaterial and 'above' the material reality of the body, and when discovered to be such served as a pointer to the nature of God. On the other hand, the soul was still mutable and served only to reveal the incomparable and infinitely surpassing reality and 'light' of the divine. (pp. 53–54)

The study of the human soul was, for Augustine, a means by which he could arrive at a clearer and better understanding of God. This is evident in many of his writings, in which he addressed the soul as a pure mutuality. Moreover, Augustine's approach to the subject of education is more art than science in the literal sense. For Augustine, education meant the Seven Liberal Arts, which focussed on a holistic approach to human development. Through abstract concepts, he argued that man can come closer to his true self.

## Conclusion

This study considered the issue of God's participation in the process of human knowledge. The findings of this study are a continuation of the relationship between metaphysics, epistemology and ethics, where his theory of divine illumination is central. Moreover, the research argued for the theory of divine illumination as a theoretical framework for decolonising theology that transcends empirical interests. To find a workable explanation for the pedagogy of divine ascent, Augustine began with cognitive skills and functions at large to demonstrate both cognitive and human depravity. Henceforth, I argued that theosis was the culmination of his trinitarian theology. In this regard, his metaphysical theories and pedagogy may seem to lack a semblance of normality for

<sup>7</sup>However, the application solely depends on God as the illuminator. Augustine initially argued the liberal arts as a means to high consciousness but later retracted.

a 21st-century reader. This study aims to promote an idealist approach to epistemology where cognitive skills are divinely illuminated to grasp the truth. In conclusion, Augustine's theory of divine illumination underpins all higher-order activities, such as conceptual understanding and explaining phenomena from an idealistic perspective.

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