

# Augustine's 'Si comprehendis, non est Deus' – To what extent is God incomprehensible?

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## Preview

The idea of God is one from which contemporary philosophy, to say nothing of Western society at large, seems to have turned away from or replaced by other quests. There is however no greater and more vital subject than the idea of God. It is essential because it is difficult to see how life can have an overriding meaning if there is no God. Or, as Ivan Karamazov puts it in Dostoyevsky's novel, if there is no God, all hell breaks loose. For philosophers and inquiring minds, God also happens to be one of the most cogent answers to the question as to why there is Being and not nothing. There is little to be gained by looking down on such an answer, which was revered as the highest Good in all cultures and epochs.

**Augustine's 'Si comprehendis, non est Deus':  
To What Extent is God incomprehensible?**

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**Can God be Understood?**

It goes without saying that, like all good answers, the answer of God raises itself a host of thorny questions. Two are most prominent and endlessly debated (besides the recurrent theodicy problem): does God exist? what is God? In classical terminology, these questions relate to the existence of God and to its essence. Many today may deem these questions to be secondary or too "metaphysical," in the bad sense of the word. It is also fashionable, at least in some circles, to claim that God cannot be understood, that God is beyond anything we "deplorable" mortals could grasp or utter about him or her. The idea that we know nothing of God is a main tenet of the otherwise respectable tradition of negative theology. It probably found its greatest poet in Plotinus when he stated that the One was ungraspable (*Enn.* 6. 9. 4), indeed ineffable (*Enn.* 5.3.13, 6. 9. 5), which is a contradiction of sorts since the words "God" or the "One" *can* be uttered (to name only these two) and understood, at least to a degree. Plotinus was aware that this idea went back to Plato himself who said that the first principles were unutterable (*arrheton*, *Letter 7*, 341 c 7) or that no poet

had ever sung a hymn about the supercelestial realm (*Phaedrus* 247 c). Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite transmitted this tradition to the Middle Ages where it would influence giants like Maimonides, Thomas Aquinas,<sup>1</sup> Nicholas of Cusa, Descartes and Pascal. This tradition has been renewed in our time by an author such as Jean-Luc Marion,<sup>2</sup> who has been profoundly influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius and Heidegger's departure from metaphysics and its understanding of God, indeed from the very idea that God would be understandable. As Jean Greisch recently argued in his illuminating study on the philosophical theologies of modernity, our epoch as a whole is fascinated by this idea that God is the "totally other," to use an expression that was made popular, in the footsteps of Kierkegaard, by Rudolf Otto and the dialectical theology of Karl Barth.<sup>3</sup>

This for many alluring view of God as the totally other is often traced back to a saying of Augustine that I use in my title—"*si enim comprehendis, non est Deus*"—a phrase that, unlike its subject perhaps, is easy to understand: "if you understand, it isn't God." This saying sounds like negative theology on steroids: it does not only state that God is way beyond our understanding, which is trivial if God is God, it claims or seems to claim that the very fact that we understand something about God means that it cannot be God. It is thus no surprise that Augustine's saying is gleefully quoted by the proponents of the negative theology of our time.<sup>4</sup> I fear that this appropriation of Augustine's saying also partakes in the general attempt, on the part of some thinkers in these post-modern times, to humiliate human understanding as such (as if we had any other?), allegedly in the name of human finitude, the new absolute of many philosophers.

I would like to focus here on the saying, *si enim comprehendis, non est Deus*, and see if it is true that we do not understand God at all. What strikes me in the appropriation of this saying by pure negative theology, is that it hides quite a few contradictions. Contradictions might also be fashionable when one is speaking of God, but I don't believe they are commendable when one tries to

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<sup>1</sup> One can think of the response (*respondeo*) of article 7 of *quaestio* 12 in the first part of the *Summa theologiae*: *comprehendere Deum impossibile est cuicumque intellecto creato* ("to comprehend God is impossible to any created intellect"). It is quoted by K. Barth in § 27 of the second volume of his *Kirchliche Dogmatik* (II. *Die Lehre von Gott I*, Zollikon-Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1940) on "The limits of the knowledge of God", which also quotes Augustine's *si enim comprehendis, non est Deus*. See K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, II.1. *The Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1957), p. 185. Needless to say, this "hiddenness" is limited for Barth to natural theology, since God reveals himself in Scripture.

<sup>2</sup> His book title of 1982, *Dieu sans l'être* (*God without Being*, The University of Chicago Press, 1991, 2012) is also a twist on Augustinian's idea that if we understand, it is not God. I am afraid the English translation of the title doesn't convey this very well, since it fails to render the verbal and transitive meaning of "l'être" in the original title. A paraphrase of this title would be "God without being God". In his later book on Augustine (*Au lieu de soi. L'approche de saint Augustin*, Paris: PUF, 2008, p. 392), Marion quotes Sermon 117, "*si comprehenderis* (sic), *non est Deus*", and views the incomprehensibility of God as a condition of possibility of his thinkability: "l'impossibilité de comprendre ne constate pas seulement une impossibilité de fait, mais définit le champ et les conditions d'accès à Celui qui, faute d'incompréhensibilité, disparaît à la pensée".

<sup>3</sup> See Jean Greisch, *Du 'non-autre' au 'tout-autre'. Dieu et l'absolu dans les théologies philosophiques de la modernité* (Paris: PUF, 2013), p. VI f.

<sup>4</sup> See J. Greisch, p. 29.

unfold a coherent discourse on anything, God included. The contradiction in Augustine's saying or, as I will argue, in the way it is used by some of his alleged followers seems obvious: one cannot say that "if one understands it isn't God" unless one actually has "some" understanding of God that allows us to say that, by comparison, this or that understanding is not God. It is impossible to claim that God transcends all understanding if one doesn't presuppose "some" minimal understanding of God, be it only as the being that transcends all understanding or that is infinitely better (*melius*) than anything that we can fathom, as Augustine himself puts it in his *Confessions* 7. 4. 6,<sup>5</sup> which is perhaps the source of Anselm's famous argument. When we are speaking of God, even if we do not claim to know anything about her, we cannot but presuppose that those who listen to this word at least vaguely understand what it means (as Anselm will remind the *insipiens* in his *Proslogion*<sup>6</sup>). The notion that if we understand God it cannot be God thus appears contradictory, since it involves itself an understanding of God which hopes to be defensible.

This self-contradiction is so plain, I cannot believe that Augustine himself could have endorsed it and that he can in this regard be used as an inspiration by the negative theologians of our time. To be sure, Augustine often speaks of God's incomprehensibility, yet he constantly speaks about God, he wrote 15 volumes on the Trinity, very often he speaks *to* God, and cannot but presuppose that we "understand" about what, or whom, or *to* whom, he is then talking about. Furthermore, Augustine readily acknowledges that God revealed himself in both Scripture and his creation, and that he certainly did this in order to make himself understood. If God remains incomprehensible or ineffable in Augustine's conception, it is because, when we speak of the divine, we always use a language that is suited to material things and can thus never adequately convey the spiritual reality of God. Yet, to say this, namely that God is a spiritual reality, is in effect to unfold an understanding of God! As such, Augustine cannot exclude that an understanding of God is possible.

I believe that this can be shown through a more careful reading of his saying, *Si enim comprehendis, non est Deus*, and its context, which has not always been taken into account by those who gladly cite this quote from Augustine. The saying in question can be found in Augustine's *Sermon 117*, which has been known for centuries, but of which François Dolbeau very recently, in 2014, published an impeccable critical edition.<sup>7</sup> The date of the

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<sup>5</sup> *Confessions* 7.4.6: "Neque enim ulla anima umquam potuit poteritve cogitare aliquid, quod sit te melius, qui summum et optimum bonum es."

<sup>6</sup> Anselm, *Proslogion*, chapter 2: "Sed certe ipse idem insipiens, cum audit hoc ipsum quod dico, aliquid quo nihil majus cogitari possit, intelligit quod audit, et quod intelligit, in intellectu ejus est, etiam si non intelligat illud esse."

<sup>7</sup> See F. Dolbeau, "Le Sermon 117 d'Augustin sur l'ineffabilité de Dieu. Édition critique," in *Revue bénédictine* 124 (2014), 213-253. It relies on the ancient collection *De verbis Domini* while taking into account the entire manuscript tradition and especially the newfound manuscripts in Mainz, on which Dolbeau published landmark studies. In the *Patrologia latina* (PL), it can be found in volume 38, p. 661-671. The sentence "*si enim comprehendis, non est Deus*" was quoted by John Paul II in the Apostolic letter he wrote on the occasion of the 16<sup>th</sup> centenary of the conversion of St.

relatively lengthy sermon is usually given as 418.<sup>8</sup> It is a sermon dedicated to the beginning of the Gospel of John, as its full title indicates: “Treatise (*tractatus*)<sup>9</sup> of Saint Augustine against the Arians on [the words of the Gospel of John] ‘In the beginning was the Word (*Verbum*), and the Word was with God, and God was the Word, and the Verb was in the beginning with God.’” Needless to say, the beginning of the Gospel of John is a text Augustine often commented upon. It was also most significant for him since it played a decisive role in his conversion to Christianity as he describes it in Book 7 of the *Confessions*.<sup>10</sup> The title stipulates that the sermon in question is directed against the Arians.<sup>11</sup> Its last part wishes to refute the Arian arguments against the coeternity of the Son and the Father and their perfect equality.<sup>12</sup> I cannot offer here a full account of this sermon,<sup>13</sup> and will concentrate on the context and philosophical significance of the saying, *Si enim comprehendis, non est Deus*, in order to argue that an understanding of God is indeed defensible for Augustine.

### The Pedagogical Intent of Augustine

I will not make too much hay of the trivial fact that Augustine in this text is himself unfolding an understanding of a passage of Scripture and thus of God, since this is what a *tractatus* or *sermo* is all about. Neither will I insist on the equally trivial point that he is arguing against the Arian *understanding* of God, which he deems erroneous, in order to propose what he believes to be a better *understanding*. In both instances, i.e., in the very idea of an interpretation of Scripture and in arguing against a *false* understanding of divinity, Augustine presupposes that God *can be understood*. I will not make use, finally, of the fact that the very notion of God as *verbum*, as Augustine understands it, itself strongly suggests that God has *revealed* himself in the *Word* and that this Word (and thus God) can as such be understood, at least to a degree. All this is plain to see and

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Augustine on August 28, 1986: <http://www.ewtn.com/library/papaldoc/ip2augus.htm>. In this text, the reference to Augustine’s *Sermo 117* (note 85) was erroneously to PL 38, 673 (*recte*: 663), as if to confirm that popes can be fallible. For a recent English translation of this sermon, which I will quote, with modifications, see E. Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine. A Translation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Sermons*, III/4 (New York: New City Press, 1992), p. 209-223 (2<sup>nd</sup> Release, Electronic edition, Past masters series, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> See E. Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, III/4, p. 210. Dolbeau, “Le sermon 117”, p. 220, is more careful and situates it in the last 15 years of Augustine’s life (415-430).

<sup>9</sup> Following here the text of Dolbeau, p. 227 (based on the Mainz manuscript; the other versions referenced by Dolbeau speak of *sermo*). *Tractatus* does not of course mean a treatise in our sense of the word, but a “treatment”, a discussion and in the case of Augustine, a homily or *sermo*.

<sup>10</sup> Dolbeau, p. 214.

<sup>11</sup> Dolbeau, p. 227.

<sup>12</sup> Dolbeau, p. 215.

<sup>13</sup> On this see P. van Geest, “De Deo loquimur, quid mirum si non comprehendis? (s. 117). The Merging of Orthodoxy, Heterodoxy and Negativity in Augustine’s Preaching,” in G. Partoens / A. Dupont / M. Lamberigts (ed.), *Ministerium sermonis. Philological, Historical, and Theological Studies on Augustine’s Sermones ad populum* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), p. 199-220, which can also be found in P. van Geest, *The Incomprehensibility of God: Augustine as a Negative Theologian* (Leuven/Paris: Peeters, 2011), p. 175-192.

only needs reminding against those who would allege, with or without Augustine, that no understanding of God is possible.

I would rather like to insist, first, on the *pedagogical* intent of the saying “If you understand, it isn’t God”, an intent which is very much in evidence throughout *Sermon 117*. From the outset, Augustine makes a point of professing that he will not try to explain how the text of Scripture (*In principio erat Verbum, et Verbum erat apud Deum, et Deus erat Verbum*) should be understood (*intellegi*).<sup>14</sup> Instead, he says, he will explain *why* this text is *not understood* (*quare non intellegatur*) and, more specifically, what *prevents* it from being understood (*sed dicimus quid impediatur ne intellegatur*). In other words, the incomprehensibility of this passage of Scripture is not absolute. It has a reason. It has to do with the fact that the eye of our heart is not pure, a condition of understanding on which *the very first line* of the *Sermo* insists: “the passage of the Gospel we have just heard, brothers, requests a clear and pure eye of the heart (*clarum et purum oculum cordis inquiri*).”<sup>15</sup> Unless this eye is pure, we will not understand Scripture. The “incomprehensibility” of Scripture and hence of God is not fundamental.

Not only that: the incomprehensibility we experience in reading this passage is there to make us *suffer* (*dolere*) because we don’t understand, so that it can serve as an incentive for us to remove what prevents us from understanding, that is, the impurity of our heart:

What I am saying is how incomprehensible is the passage that was read to us. But in any case, it wasn’t read in order to be understood by human beings (*non ut comprehendatur ab homine*), but in order to make us grieve because we don’t understand it (*sed quia doleret homo quia non comprehendit*), and make us try to discover what prevents our understanding, and so move it out of the way, and hunger to grasp the unchangeable Word (*et inveniret unde impeditur a comprehensione, et removeret ea, et inbiaret perceptioni incommutabilis Verbi*), ourselves thereby being changed from worse to better.<sup>16</sup>

The incomprehensibility of Scripture and what it says about the *Verbum* is thus qualified: it is incomprehensible because our heart isn’t pure. Moreover,

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<sup>14</sup> *Sermo 117.3* (Dolbeau, p. 229); Hill translation, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, III/4, p. 210. It is worth noting that Augustine uses here the verb *intellegere*, not *comprehendere*, which he will use in his saying. I will point later to the difference between the two terms. Augustine explains in this context (*ibid.*) that God can only be understood in ways beyond words (*ineffabiliter potest intellegi*), since human words cannot suffice for the understanding of the Word of God (*non verbis hominis fit ut intellegatur Verbum Dei*). The limit of human words, as we stressed and as *Sermon 117* will confirm, is that their material nature impedes a proper understanding of the spiritual. Nonetheless, a non-verbal “experience” of God is possible and we will see that *Sermon 117* will also try to describe it.

<sup>15</sup> *Sermo 117.1* (Dolbeau, p. 227); Hill translation (modified), *The Works of Saint Augustine*, III/4, p.

<sup>16</sup> *Sermo 117.3* (Dolbeau, p. 230); Hill translation, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, III/4, p. 210.

this incomprehensibility is intended, as it were: its purpose is to make us suffer (*dolere*) from this incomprehensibility, thus spurring us to remove what prevents understanding. *Understanding thus appears here highly desirable*. More than that, Augustine suggests that it is also *reachable*, at least to a certain extent, in that we can somehow aspire (*inhiare*) toward the perception of the unchangeable Word (*inhiaret perceptioni incommutabilis Verbi*). “Perception” is here a lazy, literal translation of *perceptio*, which alludes to a genuine “participation” in the unchangeable Word, which does not exclude some form of understanding, as I will argue. Such an understanding is obviously not our sole accomplishment. God must help us bring it about by leading us to change our ways (as God obviously did with Augustine in the *Confessions*): *Faciat Deus ut intellegatis*, writes Augustine in *Sermo 117*, “May God enable you to understand!”<sup>17</sup> With the help of God, understanding (again *intellegere* here) is certainly possible.

One of the many things we don’t understand about God and his Word is how God “is not less in his parts than in his totality.”<sup>18</sup> We do not understand this because our judgments are based on bodily objects we can see in space. It is undeniable that the parts of these objects occupy less space than the whole: an arm or head is less than the body it is part of. Bodily images and language are unsuited for the Word of God, and we should avoid imagining spiritual entities by following the lead of material realities (*non de suggestionem carnis spiritalia imaginemur*)<sup>19</sup> because God is no less in his parts than in his totality.<sup>20</sup>

### Touching God

It is immediately after claiming this (*Sermo 117.4*), that Augustine makes his ‘famous’ statement (*Sermo 117.5*):

But you are quite unable to imagine or think of such a thing [i.e., a Being that is no less in his parts than in his totality]. And such ignorance is more pious than any presumption of knowledge. After all, we are talking of God. It says: *Et Deus erat Verbum*. We are talking about God; so why be surprised if you cannot comprehend? (*De Deo loquimur, quid mirum si non comprehendis*) Indeed, if you comprehend, it isn’t God (*si enim comprehendis, non est Deus*). Let us rather make a devout confession of ignorance (*confessio ignorantiae*), instead of a brash profession of knowledge. It is certainly a great beatitude to somehow touch God with the mind (*adtingere aliquantum mente Deum magna beatitudo est*), but to

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<sup>17</sup> *Sermo 117.3* (Dolbeau, p. 230); Hill translation, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, III/4, p. 211.

<sup>18</sup> *Sermo 117.4* (Dolbeau, p. 231: *non est ille Deus minor in parte quam in toto*); Hill translation, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, III/4, p. 211. The importance of this point in the polemics against the Arians cannot be understated, since they argued that the Word, as the engendered Son of God, was necessarily less than God the Father or at least secondary in relation to the Father.

<sup>19</sup> *Sermo 117.4* (Dolbeau, p. 231); Hill translation, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, III/4, p. 211.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

comprehend him, is totally impossible (*comprehendere autem, omnino impossibile*).<sup>21</sup>

As I have insisted, the incomprehensibility of God is here qualified to the extent that it also has to do with the impurity of our hearts. As much as possible, we should strive to remove this obstacle, all the more so because this incomprehension makes us suffer (*dolere*). God can only assist us in this regard (*faciat Deus ut intellegatis*). As we underlined, this seems to suggest that some understanding is possible and even desirable.

However, in the present state of impurity (which can be lifted; Augustine seems a case in point, at least in the way he describes his moral conversion in the *Confessions*), whatever we can comprehend cannot be God. We cannot understand, more specifically, how God can be no less in his parts (say, in his Word) than his totality. In this condition, a confession (!) of one's ignorance is thus more devout than any foolhardy profession of science (*magis pia est talis ignorantia*, an anticipation of Cusanus' *docta ignorantia*), Augustine holds.<sup>22</sup>

God is however not unattainable for Augustine, as the very passage we are trying to understand makes clear. Right after emphasizing that a confession of our ignorance is more pious than any presumptuous claim to knowledge, Augustine states, surprisingly perhaps since nothing in what he had said before prepares the hearer for this, that God can to some extent (*aliquantum*) be "touched" (*atingere*) by the mind, an experience which can only bring about a great beatitude (*magna beatitudo*). Augustine uses here a strong verb, *adtingere*, which evokes the idea of touching (Hill translates it by the paraphrase "a little touch or taste of God") by the mind.

This might sound strange, at least to *our* ears: God could not be understood (*comprehendere autem, omnino impossibile*), but he could be touched (*adtingere aliquantum mente Deum*)! Quick readers could point out here an inconsistency: how can we somehow touch God, yet not understand him? Doesn't the touching of God imply some understanding?<sup>23</sup> For how do we know it is God we are touching if we don't "understand" it is God? The Latin word Augustine uses to describe this touching by the mind is intriguing: *adtingere*, to attain. It literally means to "touch at" ("*ad-tingere*"), evoking something like an "approaching," a "reaching for," a "bordering on" that barely strokes or brushes

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<sup>21</sup> *Sermo* 117.5 (Dolbeau, p. 231-232); Hill translation (modified), *The Works of Saint Augustine*, III/4, p. 211-212.

<sup>22</sup> *Sermo* 117.5 (Dolbeau, p. 231); Hill translation, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, III/4, p. 211. One can recall that in the first lines of the *Confessions* (1.1.1.) Augustine takes up the Bible verse that God "opposes the proud" (Prov 3:34, 1 Peter 5:5).

<sup>23</sup> Augustine speaks of a touching with the mind (*mente*). Somehow I cannot but think of Leonard Cohen's chorus in his song "Suzanne," all the more so in the immediate aftermath of his passing on November 7, 2016: "For you've touched her perfect body with your mind," a song which is otherwise replete with religious references ("Jesus was a sailor . . . he knew for certain only drowning men could see him . . . he himself was broken, long before the sky would open. . . . Our Lady of the Harbour," etc.).

what it is attaining. It is further qualified by the adverb *aliquantum*,<sup>24</sup> which is an adverb of quantity (*alis, quantum*). This quantity can be one of intensity (“to a certain degree”) or of duration (“for a while”). In the Hill translation, it is translated as an adverb of intensity (“a little touch or taste of God”<sup>25</sup>), but *aliquantum* often has a temporal meaning in Augustine.<sup>26</sup> It can be vaguely rendered by “to a certain extent”, which leaves the scale of this touching open. But Augustine does not say here (he will in other passages, to which we shall return) that it is modest. Indeed, *aliquantum*, as it is usually used in Latin, often connotes a high or a notable quantity.<sup>27</sup>

The strong word in this context remains *adtingere*, to attain or to touch, be it only to a certain extent or for a while. In the same paragraph of *Sermo 117.5*, Augustine states that this touching of God (literally: “touching God”, *adtingere Deum*) is accomplished by the eyes of the heart (*oculis cordis*),<sup>28</sup> to which the very first line of the sermon had already alluded: *Capitulum evangelii quod lectum est, fratres, clarum et purum oculum cordis inquirat* (*Sermo 117.1*). Augustine stresses again in our paragraph (117.5) that this touching only occurs if this eye is pure (*sufficit ut attingat, si purus est oculus*).<sup>29</sup>

The idea that the “touching” of God requires moral and ascetic purity was common in Neoplatonism,<sup>30</sup> but Augustine also found it in passages of Scripture, such as Mt 5:8: “Blessed are the clean of heart because they will see God”. Augustine commented extensively on this verse and took it literally.<sup>31</sup> Our *Sermo 117* has a few things to say about this touching of God. When the eye of the heart touches God, it does so through an unbodily and spiritual *tact* (*si autem*

<sup>24</sup> Note that it could also be an adjective *aliquantus, -a, -um*.

<sup>25</sup> A 19<sup>th</sup> Century translation of *Sermon 117* (St. Augustine, *Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament*, translated by R. G. Macmullen, Oxford: J.H. Parker, 1844, p. 789), which can be easily found online, is even more vague and in my view insufficient: “To reach to God in any measure by the mind, is a great blessedness.”

<sup>26</sup> Compare the usage of *aliquantum* in *Confessions* 9.10.26: *Unum erat quod in hac vita aliquantum immorari cupiebam, ut te christianum catholicum viderem, priusquam morerer* (“there was only one reason why I wanted to remain for a while in this life, namely to see you a Catholic Christian, before I die,” quoted following Dorothea Weber, “For what is what so monstrous as what the Punic says?”, in *Augustine afer. Saint Augustin: africanité et universalité*, ed. by P.-Y. Fux, J.-M. Roessli, O. Wermelinger and M. von Graffenried, Fribourg, Suisse: Éditions universitaires, 2003, p. 77).

<sup>27</sup> I am following here my Gaffiot Latin-French dictionary on *aliquantum* that gives as the primary meaning: “une assez grande quantité, une quantité notable.”

<sup>28</sup> An expression that according to Dolbeau (p. 217) goes back to Origen. Compare Plato, *Rep.* 533 c.

<sup>29</sup> *Sermo 117.5* (Dolbeau, p. 233); Hill translation, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, III/4, p. 212.

<sup>30</sup> On this see W. J. Hankey, “Reason,” in *Augustine through the Ages. An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), p. 698.

<sup>31</sup> See for instance his *Letter 147: Augustine to Paulina*, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, II/2, p. 321 *et passim*, to which we will return. This idea might perhaps be hard to square with the Christian notion that God is more accessible to sinners (Luke 19:10; compare Leonard Cohen, from the same song, “Suzanne”: “he knew for certain only drowning men could see [!] him”), but that is another matter.

*attingit, tactu quodam attingit incorporeo et spiritali*),<sup>32</sup> that is not, Augustine stresses yet again, a comprehension (*non tamen comprehendit*). He also underscores that it is this *tactus* or this touching that makes us happy (*beatus*), all the more so since we then touch “that which always remains happy” (*illud quod semper beatum manet*), indeed that which is “itself perpetual beatitude” (*et est illud ipsa beatitudo perpetua*). It is through this touching that man becomes *vivus* (animated, lively), by contact with perpetual life, and it is through it that man is made wise (*unde fit homo sapiens* [a nice, if of course unwanted allusion to the name of our species!]), by perfect wisdom itself, and through it that he is illuminated by eternal light (*ibid.*). “It is by this touching that man becomes what he wasn’t before, whereas what he touches (God) does not become something else,” since it always remains the same. Augustine can thus conclude: *Deus non crescit ex cognitore, sed cognitor ex cognitione Dei*, “God does not grow out of the one who knows him, it is the knower who grows out of the cognition of God.”<sup>33</sup>

Astute interpreters of Augustine such as James O’Donnell and Vincent Giraud are right to link this slight yet exalting touching of God, which Augustine in *Sermon 117* calls a *cognitio* though not a *comprehendere*, with the brisk contemplative “touching” that is described in Book 9 of his *Confessions*.<sup>34</sup> Augustine gives here an account of an “ecstatic” experience he shared with his mother at Ostia, shortly before her death and after his conversion, which went hand in hand with a moral purification (which is the crux of Book 8 of the *Confessions*). While talking about what the eternal life of the saints was all about (9.10.23), we came to realize, Augustine recalls, that the pleasures of the senses were nothing compared to the joy of this other life (9.10.24). We then suddenly, he goes on, “ascended inside ourselves” (*adhuc ascendebamus interius*), fixing our gaze, our discourse and our admiration on your works (*cogitando et loquendo et mirando opera tua*). It is then that “we went into our minds (*venimus in mentes nostras*), yet we also transcended them (*et transcendimus eas*) to touch the region of unlack of abundance (*ut attingeremus regionem ubertatis indeficientis*) where you feed Israel for eternity in the pasture of truth” (Ez 34:14). It is there “that life is wisdom (*ubi vita sapientia est*) through which all things present were made and those that will become will be made. Wisdom itself, however, is not made, but it is as it was and will always remain.” Now, while we were talking and “aspiring toward it” (*inbiamus*<sup>35</sup> *illi*), “we touched it slightly in a total push of the heart” (*attingimus eam modice toto ictu cordis*).

<sup>32</sup> *Sermo 117.5* (Dolbeau, p. 233); Hill translation, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, III/4, p. 212.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> See V. Giraud, *Augustin, les signes et la manifestation* (Paris: PUF, 2013), p. 246; J. J. O’Donnell, *Augustine: Confessions III. Commentary on Books 8-13* (Oxford University Press, 1992, 2012), p. 130, on the similarities between the recurrent *attingere* in *Conf.* 9.10.24-25 and *Sermon*

<sup>35</sup> It is the same verb Augustine uses in *Sermo 117.3* (Dolbeau, p. 230; *The Works of Saint Augustine*, III/4, p. 210: *inbiamet perceptioni incommutabilis Verbi* / to strive toward the perception of the unchangeable Word).

The parallels between the vision of Ostia, which is often called a mystic experience,<sup>36</sup> and *Sermon 117* are striking. Both speak of an *atingere* (the word is used no less than three times in *Confessions* 9.10.24-25), of a touching or an attaining of the higher reality. In both contexts, this touching is achieved by a movement of the heart (a moderate one in the *Confessions: modice*) and what is touched is Wisdom itself, which remains eternally the same. Both contexts also stress that this touching is the source of the highest beatitude or joy in the case of the *Confessions* (*nonne hoc est: intra in gaudium domini tui, Confessions* 9.10.25).<sup>37</sup> The only difference (if it is one) with *Sermon 117* is that the *Confessions* call this outstanding experience (which for all intents and purposes marks a climax in the narrative of the *Confessions* in Books 1-9 since the rest of Book 9 will recount the illness and death of Monica), a moment of *intelligence* (*hoc momentum intelligentiae*). He seems to deny this in *Sermon 117* when he claims that this touching has nothing whatsoever to do with any understanding (*Sermo 117. 3.5: comprehendere autem, omnino impossibile*). We might find this difficult to understand, since it is hard to believe that one can actually “touch” God, as the highest wisdom and the source of all happiness, without “understanding” that it is God that we are actually touching.

### Seeing and Understanding

Augustine obviously has another understanding of *comprehendere* than we do. As is clear from *Sermon 117*, it entailed more for him than a brisk touching of divinity, which can happen in a rare moment of ecstasy. *Comprehendere* evokes an intellectual grasp that is much more than a mere seeing, or even a *cognitio* or *intelligentia*.<sup>38</sup> Augustine felicitously explains what he understands by *comprehendere* in his *Letter 147* to Paulina (written in 413 or 414, so that it is not

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<sup>36</sup> On the issue of whether Augustine can be viewed as a mystic, see the recent, well-documented thesis of Mireille Cassin, *Augustin est-il mystique?*, Thèse de doctorat présentée à la Faculté de théologie de l'Université de Fribourg (Suisse), 2014.

<sup>37</sup> In his related *Letter 147* to Paulina (chap. 13.31; PL, 33, 610; *The Works of Augustine*, II/2, p. 335), Augustine discusses the issue of how the substance of God could be experienced (through some seeing or hearing) by certain people still situated in this life. He is thinking of Moses who was taken in an ineffable experience when God said to him: *No one can see my face and live* (Ex 33:20). Augustine wonders how Moses' mind could have made this experience, “whether, while its union with the body remained, the mind was removed from this life to that life, as often [!] occurs in very intense ecstasy, or whether the mind was totally released from the body, as happens in complete death” (*ut sive in corpore, sive extra corpus fuerit, id est utrum, sicut solet in vehementiori extasi, mens ab hac vita in illam vitam fuerit alienata manente corpora vinculo, an omnino resolutio facta fuerit, qualis in plena morte contingit, nescire se disceret*). This “vehement ecstasy,” which can happen while the union with the body remains, seems to correspond to the touching alluded to in *Sermo 117* and in the ecstatic experience of Ostia.

<sup>38</sup> Augustine uses the term *cognitio* in *Sermo 117.5* (Dolbeau, p. 233; Hill translation, *The Works of Saint Augustine*, III/4, p. 212) to describe the *atingere Deum* that is not a *comprehendere*, and the *Confessions* 9.10.25 speak, as we just saw, of the experience of ecstasy as a *momentum intelligentiae*.

far removed from *Sermon 117*), which is an almost book-length treatise dedicated to the vision of God:

For it is one thing to see (*videre*); it is another to comprehend (*comprehendere*) the whole while seeing. For that which is somehow perceived when it is present is, of course, seen, but the whole is comprehended by seeing *when it is seen in such a way that nothing of it escapes the attention of the seer* or when its boundaries can be seen. For example, nothing in your present will escape your attention, and you can see the boundaries of your ring. As examples I gave you these two, one of which pertains to the sight of the mind, the other to bodily eyes. Vision, as Ambrose said, can refer to both of them, that is, to the eyes and to the mind.<sup>39</sup>

Under these premises, one can understand how it is that one can see or touch God, according to *Sermon 117*, yet not comprehend him. A *comprehendere* of God would amount to a seeing (as for the Greeks, reason is generally understood as a form of vision for Augustine<sup>40</sup>) in such a way that nothing of God would escape the attention of the seer or when its boundaries could be seen. It is obvious enough that no one can say this about God. This notion of understanding (as *comprehendere*), at least as it is presented in *Letter 147* in a passage that will be quoted by Thomas in his *Summa*,<sup>41</sup> connotes in Augustine's Latin a perfect mastery and a conceptual grasp of something, not unlike like the one that was attempted by the proud philosophers. For Augustine, and not only for him, I am sure, we cannot fully grasp the reality of God with our concepts, we can only slightly touch or attain (*atingere*) it, a touching he can however also call a *cognitio* and a moment of intelligence (from *intellegere*, which is less totalizing in Augustine's Latin than *comprehendere*).

### The Touching of God in our Understanding Today

By evoking the notion of a touching of God, Augustine stands in the (Neo)Platonic tradition for which the task of philosophy or religion (there is no

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<sup>39</sup> Letter 147. 9; PL 33, 606; Augustine to Paulina in *The Works of Saint Augustine*, II/, p. 330 (modified): *Aliud est enim videre, aliud est totum videndo comprehendere. Quandoquidem id videtur, quod praesens utcumque sentitur: totum autem comprehenditur videndo, quod ita videtur ut nihil ejus lateat videntem, aut cujus fines circumspici possunt.*

<sup>40</sup> W. J. Hankey, "Reason," in A. D. Fitzgerald, *Augustine through the Ages. An Encyclopedia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), p. 699.

<sup>41</sup> *Summa theologiae*, I, qu. 12, art. 7. It is interesting to note that Descartes, at least in his Letter to Mersenne of May 27, 1630 (AT I, 17-18, quoted in J. Greisch, p. 125), espouses a similar notion of comprehension: "comprendre, c'est embrasser de la pensée." Not surprisingly, Jean-Luc Marion diagnoses a "conceptual idolatry" in this "embrasser de la pensée" (see J. Greisch, *ibid.*). However that may be, it is fascinating to observe that, according to Descartes, if we cannot comprehend God, we can certainly touch him with thinking ("toucher de la pensée", AT I, 152; quoted in J. Greisch, p. 135), which is exactly what Augustine claims.

real difference between the two for him, since he sees the Christian Gospel as the true philosophy, as the first lines of his *De vera religione* make very clear) is to unite us with the higher reality.<sup>42</sup>

If I am not mistaken (and it is easy to be in the case of God), this notion that we would somehow be able to “touch” God and be united with him is viewed as more problematic today, at least for the average believer during her lifetime. This Platonic idea of a direct experience of God, which is of course the root of the *visio beatifica* (and even of happiness understood as bliss, on which popular culture continues to thrive), is perhaps deemed to be not very common in this age of scientific rationality, where experience is allegedly limited to verifiable spatio-temporal entities. It has not however disappeared entirely. Some do claim to have made a “supernatural” experience of God. I cannot claim to be one of them whom I can only envy. I am also, I confess, a tad suspicious about those claims: how can we be sure that this experience or touching of God is not a matter of self-suggestion, despite the genuine honesty of those who claim to have experienced it? Nonetheless, this notion of a direct experience of God does survive in quite a few of the most influential philosophies of religion today. I am thinking especially, in the English-speaking world, of Robert Bellah, who often equates “religion” with what he calls a “unitive experience,”<sup>43</sup> or Charles Taylor who understands the religious experience as a response to a direct call from God.<sup>44</sup> It is in this sense that religion is for him a “transformative” experience.

However that may be, what separates us from Augustine is also our perhaps more modest understanding of *comprehendere*. When Augustine seems to deny that we can understand God (*si enim comprehendis, non est Deus*), he does not mean to say that God totally escapes our knowledge (say, *cognitio*), our intelligence (*intelligentia, intellegere*) or even our grasp (indeed, we can have a *tactus* of God according to *Sermo 117*). He means that we do not have a full mastery of God, a *comprehendere*, which would allow us to understand the whole reality (*totum*) of God. That is certainly the case. But it would be mistaken, I believe, to enlist Augustine among the negative theologians of our time who proudly trumpet that we have no understanding of God whatsoever and that if we do, it cannot be God (to say nothing here about the post-modern “refuseniks” of

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<sup>42</sup> See W. J. Hankey, “Reason,” in *Augustine through the Ages*, p. 698.

<sup>43</sup> R. Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 12: “The unitive event then, is a kind of ground zero with respect to religious representations.”

<sup>44</sup> See the strong statement in *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 768: “In our religious lives we are responding to a transcendent reality. We all [!] have a sense of this, which emerges in our identifying and recognizing some mode of what I have called fullness, and seeking to attain it. Modes of fullness recognized by exclusive humanisms, and others that remain within the immanent frame, are therefore responding to transcendent reality, but misrecognizing it.” Taylor argues here that even atheists have the experience of a transcendent reality, but that they only misconstrue it. On what grounds can he claim this?

understanding who claim we don't understand anything at all!<sup>45</sup>). Of course, we have such an understanding: we understand something of what the word God means (even when we deny his existence) and we can understand something about God through his Scripture and his works. It is not because we cannot grasp, through a *comprehendere*, the complete reality of God that we have no understanding of God at all. Maybe it's time to take some distance from the obsessive attempt of some to debase humankind's capability of intelligence and to realize that the capacity to understand reality through God and to understand the Beauty of God are some of our greatest possibilities.

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<sup>45</sup> If this is true, they would not understand what they are saying when they are saying this (on this they might have a point).