

# St. augustine's 'the city of god'

Philosophy



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'The City of God' is a book written by the 5th century Church Father, St. Augustine. Augustine wrote the treatise as a general defense of Christianity, that is, to admonish the assumption that Christianity was the cause of Rome's downfall. Augustine also intended the treatise to be an exposition of Christian orthodox beliefs (against the Arians and Schismatics). The historical context in which the book was situated, Christianity was the official religion of the Roman Empire.

Many Christians dominated the politics of Rome (the emperor himself was a Christian). The Roman state persecuted the adherents of pagan religions. A significant portion of the Roman budget went to the construction of elaborate basilicas and churches. Pagan philosophers saw these events as proofs of the evil intent of Christianity. The impending fall of Rome was the work of Christianity. Christianity weakened the Roman state by imposing its own will on Rome's future. It destroyed traditional Roman virtues.

It replaced militant nature of the Roman army by preaching the efficacy of peace and universal love. Christianity, in general, put Rome into a state of anarchy and loss of patriotism. Taking into account these facts, St. Augustine sought to establish a logical, transcendental approach in answering the criticisms of the pagan philosophers. He argued that the existence of the Roman state is first and foremost subject to Divine will. According to him, the destiny of nations and states is determined by God, the source of legitimate political authority.

No nation, state, or even community could last for eternity. For Augustine, the existence of the state is temporary, for its elements are temporary,

created by the minds of man - whose existence is also material. It was the destiny of Rome to fall under the hands of the barbarians - a fact which cannot be comprehended by the human mind. St. Augustine wrote, "Whether the same world remains intact throughout or whether it keeps setting into disintegration and rising into newness with each rotation of the wheel of time.

Whereas, if one rejects the periodicity of identical patterns, one is left with an infinite diversity of events which no knowledge or pre-knowledge could possibly comprehend" (Curtis, 429). Thinkers such as Smith, Nietzsche, and Gibbons rejected the above-mentioned assumption of Augustine. These thinkers argued that it was clear that the fall of Rome was due to 'the ineptness of the Christian religion, its impracticality as an imperial religion, and indecency as a political and religious movement' (Toynbee, 219).

One need not determine empirical data to prove Augustine's thesis. Michael Schmaus argued that the fragile nature of the state is due primarily to its origin. The state is the expression of man - a being whose existence is temporary. Hence, if a state is to last for eternity, according to Schmaus, it must be immune to the weaknesses of man - from outright desire of the flesh, from political conflicts, from the intrigues of the human mind. Schmaus stated: "The term 'eternity', in essence, only refers to the Divine Being.

The state, in particular, is not in any way an everlasting entity, for it is wholly man's creation - a derivation of man's innate qualities. These qualities, we may describe, as momentary, capricious, and overtly devoid of divine significance. Man, by himself, cannot affect a change in the state of nature,

or his predilections capable of uniting the elements of political life” (Schmaus, 57). St. Augustine based his arguments on the notion that the state is a necessary evil. Augustine derived this statement from basic theological truths. The first ‘truth’ attested to the integrity of man before the fall.

In traditional Christian theology, the first human beings possessed, besides righteousness and holiness a genuine partnership with God, the so-called preternatural gifts (*justitia originalis*), gifts of integrity, freedom from suffering and death, from inordinate appetites and ignorance. The sin of Adam greatly weakened these gifts. Man became vulnerable to weakness, to death. Hence, according to Augustine death belongs to the nature of man. But as a result of sin it has the added character of punishment; that is to say, what belongs to the nature of man, his transitoriness, is now bound up with anxiety, pain and glaring absurdity.

Because the state is a necessary evil, then man himself is bound by such necessity. He must live in that necessity, and of course its consequences. A necessary evil man must endure, for it is his temporary refuge. It is a temporary refuge from the ineptness of savagery, from irrationality, and from the affects of nature. The state was created as a temporary refuge of man - an entity which inhibits man's innate savagery and irrationality - things which were consequential of the fall. The state, according to Augustine, is led by pride and flesh. The state is the embodiment of worldly desires and passions.

Although it inhibits man's lust for materiality, it is in itself the efficacy of such materiality. The state though is necessary because it enabled man to work in groups, to limit man's obsession with himself, and to protect man from the dangers of the natural world. The state, however, is not necessarily good. Man must endure the world of politics, deception, and outright political chaos. Hence, the state is a temporary state of nature. Again, Augustine's argument makes sense because of the assumption that the state is a temporary association.

Philosophers like Aristotle, Hobbes, and Locke supported this argument. These philosophers agree that the state is a temporary refuge of man - that is, it was borne out of man's own innate weakness. However, these philosophers disagreed on the nature of man's weakness, whether either borne out of lack of faith on a Divine entity or just the condition of the state of nature. Augustine's arguments were not immune to criticisms. One of the weaknesses of this argument is provided by Schoonenberg who argued that it is impossible to attach the social origin of the state with the theological origin of man.

According to him, a distinction must be made between what is political and what is epistemological (Schoonenberg, 58). Schoonenberg argued that the origin of Christianity is separate from the origin of the state, as far as orthodoxy is concerned. Here, it is possible that Augustine may have committed this particular mistake. Now, Augustine examined the origin of man's weakness in relation to Divine Providence. St. Augustine argued that the fall of man is caused by man's desire to make himself an equal of God.

The evil which befallen man is neither the work of God or nature; it is the work of man. Here, St.

Augustine discussed the nature of evil and free will. According to him, evil comes into the world in a kind of privation. Privation is desire for things which are less real and not good. Evil is love of the world of shadows and illusion - a perversion of Divine will. According to Augustine, the origin of sin is free will, that is, individual freedom. Free will presupposes that man is independent of God, which man, by his own nature, can succeed apart from God (Schoonenberg, 329). For Augustine, the arrogance of man is in itself the rejection of God and the acceptance of the 'temporary state of nature. Man loves this arrogance because it increases his fidelity to himself; that is, arrogance is the fruit of deception - that man can wander by himself, that he can, apart from God, measure the knowledge and the inertia of God.

Augustine wrote: "The fundamental fallacy of these men, who prefer to walk in round about error rather than to keep to the straight path of truth, is that they have nothing but their own tiny, changing human minds to measure the divine mind, infinitely capacious and utterly immutable, a mind that can count things without passing from one to the next...

Without having a notion of God, they mistake themselves for Him, and, instead of measuring God by God, they compared themselves to themselves" (Curtis, 415). St. Augustine argued that the end to man's suffering is the establishment of the City of God, a place where Christ reigned. The City of God is synonymous with the Second Coming of Christ, whose authority has no equal. Augustine pointed that the founding of this city is unlike any other city on earth. It is everlasting. It is immune from the

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intricate weaknesses of man – from his passion, idolatry, and irrational manifestations.

The City of God is the manifestation of God's desire to free humanity from suffering and death. From an orthodox theological point of view, Augustine's argument is consistent with the notion of a God-saving being, merciful, and full of inertia. Man's choice is either to accept this promise or reject it. It may be impossible here to prove Augustine's point, but from a Christian viewpoint, his argument seems to navigate on the ideas of Divine love and justice, which are evident in the doctrinal conjugation of today's Christian sects. In the Confessions, Augustine proudly asserts, "What then is my God, what but the Lord God?"

For who is Lord but the Lord ... sustaining and fulfilling and protecting, creating and nourishing ... Thou owest nothing yet dost pay as if in debt to Thy creature" (Confessions, 24). Conclusion The 'City of God' is both a defense of orthodox Christianity from the attacks of pagan philosophers and a summary of primary Christian beliefs. Augustine dismissed the notion that Christianity was the cause of Rome's downfall. In addition, Augustine stated that the state is a necessary object of man's existence. Its origin lies entirely in the facet of individual social constructivism, not in the crucial malivolence of an evil entity.