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Augustine the Exile and the City of God

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“Augustine the Exile and the City of God”

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In honoring the legacy of Edward Said and his literary work devoted to the notion of exile, let us consider the contribution of one of North Africa’s fathers, Aurelius Augustinus of Hippo. Augustine was born in 354 CE in Tagaste (modern Souk Ahras, Algeria). He spent a total of seven years in nearby Carthage, initially as a student and then later as a teacher of rhetoric. After a few years abroad in Italy, Augustine, having embraced Christianity, returned to Africa where he spent the final thirty-four years of his life serving as the bishop of Hippo Regius (modern Annaba, Algeria).

The Sack of Rome

On August 24, 410, the unthinkable occurred as General Alaric led his Vandal armies into Rome and pillaged it. Before withdrawing from the city, the Vandals spent three days burning Rome, starving the people, and ultimately shaking the confidence of an entire civilization.¹ Rome had been regarded by the citizens of the empire as the ‘eternal city’ and her sack undermined this feeling of invincibility and security.² Peter Brown writes that ‘Rome was the symbol of a whole civilization; it was if an army had been allowed to sack Westminster Abbey or the Louvre.’³ He adds: ‘Rome symbolized the security of a whole civilized way of life.’⁴ As this security diminished, refugees began pouring into Roman Africa, including the port city of Hippo where Augustine resided.⁵

¹ P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 286.

² J. O’Donnell, ‘Augustine, City of God,’ p. 3. See also, Augustine, *Sermo*, 81.

³ P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 287.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. pp. 300-301. J. O’Donnell, ‘Augustine, City of God,’ p. 3.

As the Romans were trying to make sense of their defeat, reactions of anger and disbelief were felt throughout the empire. The most vocal group was the Pagans, those who adhered to the traditional deities of Rome. Yet, since Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313, Christianity had not only been tolerated but gained increasing stature toward becoming the official religion of the empire. In the century that followed Constantine's edict, the Pagans would see their temples closed, festivals ended, and their religion suppressed.⁶ So when Rome was sacked, the outcry from the Pagans was that the gods, who served as the guardians of Rome, had been angered by the lack of piety and devotion and allowed the city to fall. Ultimately, the Pagans blamed the Christians of the empire for the disaster.⁷ While the Pagans responded with anger, the rest of Rome's citizens, including its many Christians, reacted to the events with dismay and despair. Hamman summarizes that the sack of the eternal city brought trauma for both Pagans and Christians alike.⁸

Context and Structure of *De civitate Dei*

It was in the aftermath of these events that Augustine, who authored about 100 books in his lifetime, sat down to write his *magnum opus* entitled *De civitate Dei* or the *City of God*. The work, which he began around 412, would take nearly fifteen years to complete, and was published in several installments.⁹ *De civitate Dei* was not a reaction to the fall of Rome but rather, as James O'Donnell puts it, 'a response to the response' of the fall of Rome. For in the first ten books of the work, Augustine, employing a mastery of Cicero, Virgil and other Roman writers, addresses the angry Pagans and sets out to show the

⁶ P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 285.

⁷ E. Fortin, 'Civitate Dei, De,' *Augustine Through the Ages*, p. 197.

⁸ Hamman writes: 'chez les païens et chrétiens, le sac de la Ville éternelle provoqua un traumatisme.' A. Hamman, *La Vie Quotidienne au temps du Saint Augustin*, p. 346.

⁹ Augustine, *Retractiones*, 2.43.1. J. O'Donnell, 'Augustine, City of God,' pp. 1-2.

futility of the Roman gods and their inability to protect Rome. Hence, the purpose of the first ten books is to render the anger and blame of the Pagans unjustified.

In the second half of his work, Books 11-22, Augustine addresses the other group—the bewildered Christians trying to come to terms with the imminent fall of their civilization. While showing great concern for the plight of the refugees filing into his city, Augustine chooses to rise above the fray and offer a deeper perspective on the events. To those who had become exiled or displaced, he does not offer a pragmatic solution to the question of ‘where is home?’ Rather, in this portion of *De civitate Dei*, he chooses to address the more fundamental question of ‘what is home?’ It is this second question addressed in the second half of *De civitate Dei* that will be the focus of this paper.

Augustine’s Personal Journey

Augustine had surely reflected on the question of ‘home’ long before he picked up his pen in 412 to begin *De civitate Dei*. He was born in the insignificant African town of Tagaste, which was a center of Punic-Berber culture. Both his mother and son had typically Punic names that reflected the pre-Roman religious leanings of the area.¹⁰ Yet, Augustine grew up in a Latinized fringe of Tagaste and it is quite apparent from his later correspondence that he never learned to speak Punic, the predominant language of his home town.¹¹ So, in his cultural identity, Augustine probably felt caught between two worlds. He was ethnically African yet more culturally Latin. However, as an African he could never fully be considered Roman. The modern sociologist David Pollock refers to this state of living between two cultures yet never fully belonging to one as being ‘third-

¹⁰ W. Frend, *The Donatist Church*, p. 230.

¹¹ Augustine, *Epistula*, 20*. P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, pp. 468-69.

culture.’¹² To add another twist, Augustine probably felt a bit of crisis in his religious identity as he was reared in a family with a Pagan father and a Christian mother.

It is apparent that this sense of cultural displacement and even a sense of existential exile caused Augustine to long and search for the security of ‘home.’ His search is evident in the interest he took as a youth in profane theatre shows, his pursuit of illicit sexual relationships,¹³ his dabbling in astrology,¹⁴ his relationship with an unnamed concubine who bore him a son out of wedlock,¹⁵ as well as his twelve year long involvement with the eastern sect called the Manichees.¹⁶ Augustine further sought security through career advancement as he wandered unfulfilled from Carthage to Rome and then finally to Milan as a teacher of rhetoric. This wandering is even more significant because he detested travel. Yet the pain of his searching heart was apparently worse than the inconvenience of moving around.

According to his *Confessiones*, Augustine did not find what he was looking for in career, pleasure nor religion. Rather, he testifies that his search for ‘home’ was realized through personal faith. Having observed the worthy example of faith in Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, Augustine converted to Christianity in 386. The opening lines of his *Confessions* expresses best his recovered notion of ‘home.’ He writes: ‘O Lord, you have made us for you and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.’¹⁷ Augustine found his ‘rest’ or his sense of ‘home’ at the age of thirty-one, following an extended youth characterized by physical wandering, searching and experimentation. His search

¹² D. Pollock and R. Van Reken, *Third Culture Kids*, p. 19.

¹³ Augustine, *Confessiones*, 3.1.1; 3.2.2.

¹⁴ Ibid. 4.3.4-6.

¹⁵ Ibid. 4.2.2.

¹⁶ Ibid. 3.6.10.

¹⁷ *Quia fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te. Confessiones*, 1.1.1, PL 32, S. Aureli Augustini Opera Omnia [web site]

<<http://www.augustinus.it/latino/index.htm>> last consulted 29 April 2005.

completed, Augustine would return full circle to the land of his birth and the faith of his mother.

A Tale of Two Cities

So when Augustine sat down to write the second portion of *City of God*, what did he offer the downtrodden and displaced masses? His response is really little more than a perspective and a Christian view of history. Eugene Kevane writes: ‘*City of God* is a world history like that of Herodotus (father of history) yet he does not eliminate the relationship of the divine in telling it.’¹⁸ For Augustine, the notion of exile does not begin with the fall of Rome, but with the fall of Adam into sinful rebellion against God. It was the fall that essentially separated all of humanity into two groups—those who are citizens of the earthly city and those who are part of the city of God. As Brown writes:

Since the Fall of Adam, the human race had always been divided into two great ‘cities,’ *civitates*; that is, into two great pyramids of loyalty. The one ‘city’ served God along with His loyal angels; the other served the rebel angels, the Devil and his demons.¹⁹

In his famous work, the *Enchiridion*, Augustine explicitly refers to Adam, following the fall, as an exile.²⁰

In Books 11-14 of *De civitate Dei*, Augustine shows the origins of the two cities. The earthly city begins with Cain, the murderous son of Adam, while the heavenly city originates with Abel, Adam’s righteous son.²¹ Books 15-18 show the historical development of the two cities from creation to the time of Christ including the contribution of figures like Abraham and David. Finally, Books 19-22 show the end result of both cities. Ultimately the citizens of the heavenly city will inherit heaven while

¹⁸ E. Kevane, *Augustine the Educator*, p. 18.

¹⁹ P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 313.

²⁰ Augustine, *Enchiridion*, 26, 27. G. Bardy, *Saint Augustin: l’homme et l’oeuvre*, p. 500.

²¹ P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 314.

the members of the earthly city will not. That is to say, the earthly city is merely temporary while the heavenly city is eternal.

How did Augustine characterize the two cities? The earthly city, symbolized by Babylon, is largely guided by self-love, independence and self-sufficiency. Its values are the anti-thesis of humble obedience to the word of God.²² Some of the outcomes are disasters and wars.²³ The heavenly city, symbolized by Jerusalem, is characterized by justice and peace while its key values are self denying love for God and love for neighbor. Virtue is achieved by imitating the model of Christ.²⁴ Ultimately, citizenship in the earthly city or heavenly city is a choice. It is determined by what the individual chooses as the object of his love.

At times, Augustine used the notion of the heavenly city and the Christian church interchangeably. That is, he regarded those who had come to faith in Christ as members of this heavenly city.²⁵ As Books 11-22 were largely addressed to the Christians of Rome, what counsel or encouragement did Augustine offer them as citizens of the heavenly city enduring the more difficult aspects of the earthly city? In their case, they were on the verge of displacement and losing their way of life. First, it is clear that through his laborious treatment of the origin, history, and end of the two cities, he wants to instill in them a spiritual and eternal perspective in the midst of their circumstances. He reminds them that, while members of the heavenly city, they are no more than temporary pilgrims in the earthly city.²⁶ As O'Donnell concludes:

²² *De civitate Dei*, 17.21.2. E. Fortin, 'Civitate Dei, De,' *Augustine Through the Ages*, p. 199.

²³ J. O'Donnell, 'Augustine, City of God,' p. 10.

²⁴ *De civitate Dei*, 17.20.2. E. Fortin, 'Civitate Dei, De,' *Augustine Through the Ages*, p. 199.

²⁵ P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 285. Augustine, *Epistula*, 95.

²⁶ P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 325. Augustine, *Sermo*, 88.15.

The fundamental pastoral point made by [Augustine] writing on the two cities is that Christians live in this world but they are not of this world. They are present here as strangers sojourning in a foreign country, enjoying the blessings the world has to offer, but always ready to move on. Heaven is the Christian's true home, and it is to heaven that his affections and his loyalties should be directed.²⁷

It is thus, the future hope of heaven that motivates the Christian living in the earthly city to persevere in difficult circumstances including political turmoil. It is equally the perspective of heaven that reminds the Christian to guard against looking for a false sense of security in the earthly city.

Secondly, Augustine teaches that it is possible to allow the earthly city, though imperfect yet not completely evil either, to serve as a place of preparation for the heavenly city.²⁸ Augustine expands on this idea in his book *De doctrina christiana* when he writes:

We have wandered far from God; and if we wish to return to our Father's home, this world must be used, not enjoyed . . . so the invisible things of God may be clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, that is, that by means of what is material and temporary we may lay hold upon that which is spiritual and eternal.²⁹

Finally, Augustine does not offer an eternal perspective to citizens of the heavenly city so that they will try to escape the earthly city. Rather, the pilgrim is challenged to consider his role and actively be involved in promoting the interests of heaven while living on earth.³⁰

²⁷ J. O'Donnell, 'Augustine, City of God,' p. 9.

²⁸ *De civitate Dei*, 22.21.26. P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 328.

²⁹ *Sic in huius mortalitatis vita peregrinantes a Domino, si redire in patriam volumus, ubi beati esse possimus, utendum est hoc mundo, non fruendum, ut invisibilia Dei, per ea quae facta sunt, intellecta conspiciantur, hoc est, ut de corporalibus temporalibusque rebus aeterna et spiritalia capiamus.*

Augustine, *De doctrina christiana*, 1.4.4, PL 34, S. Aureli Augustini Opera Omnia [web site]

<<http://www.augustinus.it/latino/index.htm>> last consulted 29 April 2005.

³⁰ *De civitate Dei*, 21.15. P. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 324.

Conclusion

As history records, the Vandals continued their siege across the empire and nearly twenty years to the day after the initial sack of Rome, they arrived at Augustine's city of Hippo and besieged it. Augustine passed away during the onslaught, actually dying of a fever at the age of seventy-six. His biographer Possidius wrote that in his final days, 'Augustine found strength in the sayings of a wise man (probably the philosopher Plotinus): "No one is great who is amazed that wood and stone collapse and mortals die."' ³¹ For Augustine surely continued to ponder what he had written years earlier in his *Confessiones*: 'We need not fear to find no home again because we have fallen away from it; while we are absent our home falls not to ruins, for our home is your eternity.' ³²

Augustine wrote the second half of *De civitate Dei* to encourage the Christians of the Roman Empire by offering them a Christian and eternal perspective of history. That is, even if the Roman Empire fell, the city of God would not. Even if they became displaced and exiled in the earthly city, they would never lose their citizenship in heaven. Augustine could have written *De civitate Dei* whether Rome fallen or not. In fact, in some of his earlier writings that go back to as early as 390, we find allusions to this idea of the two cities. A strong argument could also be made that Augustine's *Confessiones* is an autobiographical sketch of one living in the earthly city and being converted to the heavenly one. Nevertheless, the historical context of the decline of the Roman Empire thrust Augustine and his notion of the two cities onto the world stage with the publication

³¹ *Et se inter haec mala cuiusdam sapientis sententia consolabatur, dicentis: "Non erit magnus magnum putans, quod cadunt ligna et lapides, et moriuntur mortales"*. Possidius, *Vita Augustini*, 28.11, PL 32, S. Aureli Augustini Opera Omnia [web site]

<<http://www.augustinus.it/latino/index.htm>> last consulted 29 April 2005.

³² *Et non timemus, ne non sit quo redeamus, quia nos inde ruimus; nobis autem absentibus non ruit domus nostra, aeternitas tua. Confessions*, 4.16.31, PL 32, S. Aureli Augustini Opera Omnia [web site]

<<http://www.augustinus.it/latino/index.htm>> last consulted 29 April 2005.

of *De civitate Dei*. The result is that his *magnus opum* continues to the present day to find a significant place in the ongoing debate toward a conception and philosophy of history.

For Further Reading

Works of Augustine in Latin were found at: S. Aureli Augustini Opera Omnia [web site] <<http://www.augustinus.it/latino/index.htm>> last consulted 29 April 2005.

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