GOD IN HISTORY: AN AUGUSTINIAN APPROACH TO NARRATIVES OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

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This paper proposes a Catholic narrative structure for the story of Western civilization, a general outline that eschews secularism and historicism as much as biblical literalism and Catholic triumphalism. In brief, St. Augustine is more correct than Leonardo Bruni: There is only one age of man. We, God’s wondrous creatures, do not change over recorded time. Everywhere in the world, best documented and demonstrated in the West, we see mankind struggle against himself more than merely respond passively to impersonal and improbable social, economic, political, or gender-based “forces.” God, the author of history, writes straight across crooked lines. He shows us that the path of history points toward unity in diversity.

Can there be a “Catholic” reading of history, particularly in the case of Western civilization, and, if so, what would it say? The question challenges the academic discipline’s status quo, because normally no such thing is allowed.

On the whole, professional historians, especially those who write books about Western civilization, either do not believe in God or Christianity, or they write as if God did not exist and Christianity were just one set of shared discourses, ideas, and practices among many. While historians sometimes write about religion as a reality for some of the people they study, they are generally not supposed to imply, let alone argue, that what might have been true for those people is still true for us today. When it comes to God, the historian is supposed to fall silent. The rule of self-censorship, however, does not apply if one is a disciple of any number of modern, secular theoreticians (Marx, Weber, Nietzsche, Freud, Sartre, Durkheim, Foucault, et al.); in that case, dogmatic pronouncements are perfectly in order. Christian or Catholic historians, however, almost without exception, are expected to keep their faith to themselves and out of the classroom and their writing. This double standard is particularly flagrant because all historical writing, beyond the relation of bare fact, always has a moral intention, a competitive set of attitudes, values, assumptions, and beliefs.

Historians, then, serve a purpose, a goal, or a master, if you will, when they teach and write. They try to persuade, to seek acceptance for their arguments. As writers, they try to convert their readers to their
point of view. History that presents batches of details as intrinsically interesting, needing no relevance to anything else, merely engages in antiquarianism. A narrative with no argument is merely “the history of one damn thing after another.” Connections, causal and otherwise, give history its significance and make it interesting and worthwhile. Historical interpretation, therefore, conveys meaning and significance in its relation to philosophy, ideology, or theology, and their derivative anthropologies, like it or not. One would like to think that the prevailing academic culture of postmodern relativism, which acknowledges indiscriminating tolerance as the only permissible virtue, actually leaves the door open to a Catholic history.

This paper proposes an overarching Catholic narrative structure, the general outline of a story that eschews secularism and historicism as much as biblical literalism and sectarian triumphalism. In brief, there is only one age of man. We, God’s wondrous creatures, do not change over history, that is, recorded time. Everywhere in the world, but perhaps best documented and demonstrated in the West, we see mankind struggle against himself more than merely respond passively to impersonal and rather improbable social, economic, political, or gender-based forces.3 God, the real author of history, writes straight across crooked lines. History is God’s story as much as ours, one that he will not tell without us. His gift of freedom to humanity makes it endlessly interesting. He shows us that the path of history points toward unity in diversity. From the beginning to the end, we are all in this together.

A Catholic Periodization

A “Catholic” periodization should show that there is only one age of man. Humanity’s beginnings shroud themselves in mystery, and empirical evidence from the millennia shows that we have not changed significantly in either bodily structure or faculty of mind. Culture and civilization without a doubt change greatly, as much over time as across distance. Governments and empires rise and fall, and ways of life change in terms of production and consumption, education and attitude, food and drink, belief and behavior, and so on. Human beings, however, change their cultures, not vice versa. In our being, we are substantively, essentially the same creature as our distant ancestors from several thousand years ago.

Periodization automatically entails argument. The ubiquitous tripartite ancient-medieval-modern breakdown makes a tendentious statement: that humanity differs according to era. In historical writing, one sees myriad references to “the ancient world,” “medieval women,”
“modern man,” and the like, implying a divide between such persons and places that is more superficial than significant, more imagined than real. While professional convention demands conformity among historians in using these adjectives, we should dare to scrap them for that very reason. Besides, they are misleading and inaccurate. A Catholic historical narrative, on the other hand, should principally rely on millennia and centuries for organization. Although arbitrary, at least they are regular and interpretively neutral, except in one vital aspect. When one uses the traditional B.C. and A.D. designations, or even the trendy B.C.E. and C.E., one points to the same truth: Something happened about two millennia ago that made the world forever a different place.

We can trace the scheme that still dominates Western historical thinking today to Leonardo Bruni, a wealthy, prominent scholar who helped to govern Florence in the early fifteenth century. In his *History of the Florentine People*, Bruni begins with an “ancient” period that ends with the toppling of the last Roman Emperor in the Latin West in 476 A.D. Thereafter comes a rather tiresome “middle age” that drags on until about the twelfth century, when increased economic activity brings significant wealth to Italian towns. Then comes Bruni’s own era, the “modern,” from the thirteenth century on, when northern and central Italian towns such as Florence manage to free themselves from both the Germanic emperors and the popes in Rome. In the twenty-first century, historians use pretty much the same outline, but date the modern a bit later, when nation-states ascend in prominence and power, eclipsing the Holy Roman Empire and the papacy. In short, Bruni and his followers order human history according to money and worldly, political power (coercive violence). Modern historians often shape their narratives according to the same criteria, but for Catholics there is certainly a viable alternative.

A thousand years before Bruni, St. Augustine proposed a moral, historical order rooted in the unchanging nature of the human person, as relevant in our day as in his own. Neither Augustine nor anyone else in his time thought they lived in “late Antiquity.” The world he knew was equally ancient, contemporary, and mysterious. The origins of humanity and civilization were just as hidden to Augustine’s contemporaries as to our own. The former’s rather fantastic constructions relied principally on a cultural heritage of text and spoken word, while our contemporaries, mainly anthropologists, base their tales on rocks and bones, but scarcely attain a higher level of accuracy. Numerous empires around and beyond the Mediterranean had come and gone; each in turn had subdued collections of people by wielding money and violence, and eventually lost its grip to other predators.
One might apply a number of Augustine’s observations precisely to what is often called “postmodernity”:

[T]he perverse and froward hearts of men think human affairs are prosperous when men are concerned about magnificent mansions, and indifferent to the ruin of souls; when mighty theaters are built up, and the foundations of virtue are undermined; when the madness of extravagance is highly esteemed, and works of mercy are scorned; when, out of the wealth and affluence of rich men, luxurious provision is made for actors, and the poor are grudged the necessaries of life; when that God who, by the public declarations of His doctrine, protests against public vice, is blasphemed by impious communities, which demand gods of such character that even those theatrical representations which bring disgrace to both body and soul are fitly performed in honor of them.5

Augustine lived under a Roman imperial order facing financial and military challenges of such magnitude that one could easily conclude that the empire was in decline, if not in danger of complete collapse. Nonetheless, many people, especially among the elite, vociferously defended the regime and devoted their energies to upholding it:

“Only let it stand,” they say, “only let it flourish with abundant resources, glorious in victory or, and that is better, secure in peace. And how does it concern us? No, no! It interests us more that the individual should constantly increase his wealth to support his daily extravagance, and to enable the more powerful individual thereby to make weaker men his subjects.”6

But the empire did not flourish. Disintegration marched inexorably forward.

The Visigoths’ sack of Rome in 410 sent shockwaves through the educated, cosmopolitan circles of the empire. By that time, the city itself was no longer very important strategically, despite the abundant booty. The significance of the event, however, far outweighed the military act. In Hippo, where Augustine served as bishop, he heard the cries of many who attributed the humiliation to Rome’s official adoption of Christianity. The Christian God, they said, had failed the empire where its earlier, polytheistic pantheon had made it powerful and glorious. Christianity, they argued, was a recipe for weakness. Edward Gibbon would recycle these interpretations in the eighteenth century, and some still espouse them in the twenty-first.
St. Augustine wrote his magnum opus, *City of God*, in response to these attacks. He lashed back with his own *ad hominem* broadsides, stopping short of naming names:

Why, when afflicted by adversities, do you complain against the Christian era unless because you wish to maintain your luxury untroubled and to abandon yourselves to the most damnable practices with no harsh touch of vexing problems? For your desire for peace and abundant wealth of every sort does not spring from any intention of enjoying these boons in a respectable way, that is, decently, soberly, temperately, devoutly. Rather you would use them to procure an infinite variety in your unwholesome dissipations; you would engender in times of prosperity a moral plague of ills worse than raging enemies.7

Again, one might well say something rather similar about the so-called postmodern West, with its pandemic consumerism, hedonism, and environmental degradation. Rome, Augustine said, was not built by the intercession of a gaggle of gods and demonic cults, but, as with every empire, through limitless ambition, relentless violence, and insatiable greed, undergirded by licentious human pride at its worst. Rome was just another kingdom or empire, no different in nature than the small-time, local “robber band”:

The band is also a group of men governed by the orders of a leader, bound by a social compact, and its booty is divided according to a law agreed upon. If by repeatedly adding desperate men this plague grows to the point where it holds territory and establishes a fixed seat, seizes cities and subdues peoples, then it more conspicuously assumes the name of kingdom, and this name is now openly granted to it, not for any subtraction of cupidity, but by addition of impunity.8

Thousands of years of human history showed Augustine that large scale political order is impossible to establish without significant, continual injustice, usually in the form of violence and confiscation. This is the nature of so many empires.

Human history, however, according to Augustine, is richer than this bitter tale, and actually something rather beautiful; it is a simple matter of love. God is the great giver, who gratuitously creates and sustains all life and all existence. All that he gives is beautiful; he is the
source of all true happiness. God creates all human beings, also
gratuitously, and sustains their lives, giving them the freedom to love
him in return, or not. He gives each of us an intermediate nature,
 somewhere between beasts and angels, and he leaves us the choice of
which to emulate. Human nature is widely variant and often intense.
“For there is nothing,” Augustine writes, “so discordant when it
deteriorates or so sociable in its true nature as the human race.” The
best way to keep from abusing, oppressing, and slaughtering each other,
is to recall that we have a common parent, created by God, “as a single
being for the propagation of a multitude in order that we might thus be
reminded to preserve a single-minded unity even when we are many.”
Human history, therefore, has a point, a trajectory, and a meaning. The
goal of a human life is to find fulfillment in love; in other words, to
return to God. History does not meander aimlessly but points toward
unity, unity in diversity. We are all in this together. Love gives the story
meaning.

Love is much more than the passing feelings and sensations
that lead to sexual intercourse. Love guides life. People live as they love.
It guides all actions, orients all thoughts, induces all feelings. Human
love, therefore, drives history and determines human happiness. St.
Augustine wrote allegorically of two cities, coexistent and intermingled
throughout all of human history, each established by and governed
according to love: “the earthly city by a love of self carried even to the
point of contempt for God, the heavenly city by a love of God carried
even to the point of contempt for self.” Adherents of the earthly city
glorify themselves and their achievements, the other group glories in
God. Human society will always be divided against itself, so long as
people, individually and collectively, pursue their own goals and
pleasures at the expense of others. Because people will never find
satisfaction in anything material, finite, or fleeting—anything apart from
God in his infinite, immeasurable perfection—they will perpetually seek
their own advantage. Because of this, the stronger will always oppress
the weak whether they wish to or not. Those, however, who aspire to
nothing beyond love, continue to grow, increase, and open themselves to
God, even as he always leads to higher, newer, grander horizons. The
mystery of God is ever-increasing greatness.

Institutions, constitutions, and practices, social structures,
cultural influences, and gender roles in history merely reflect the simple
fact of what people love, individually and collectively. A people, a realm
or state, Augustine defines as “a large gathering of rational beings united
in fellowship by their agreement about the objects of their love; … surely
the better the objects of its united love, the better the people, and the
worse the objects of its love, the worse the people.”

With regards to government, form makes little difference. Democracies, therefore, can be just as abhorrent as monarchies, and even more so, if their leaders and people misdirect their love. No republic or democracy can truly be “a people’s estate.”

If the execution of justice errs, as it must, then the so-called ‘rights,’ however one may insist that they derive from principles of pure justice, invariably serve “the interest of the strongest.” If mere legality becomes the standard of good and evil, then there is no room for God. In the earthly city, the strong say what is legal, right, and wrong, and live by their man-made creed. This is the nature of so many republics. And no state or community built on war can make people truly happy; it cannot save souls and reunite them with their creator. Those who look to states and their leaders for salvation misapply their love. Anyone who brags about the size, wealth, and power of his respective empire automatically reveals a lack of both wisdom and rationality and a surfeit of pride. Misdirected love strengthens pride, the foundation of all sin.

Pride leads us to lie, to try to mask injustice with its opposite, to turn the kingdom, state, or empire into a vehicle for salvation. Pride, St. Augustine emphasizes, is certainly not God’s mistake, “a defect of Him who gives power or even of power itself, but a defect of the soul that misguidedly loves its own power while it despises the more righteous power of a higher Power.” Human pride perverts God’s greatness in his greatest creation. People who live according to God love the truth, because Christ said, “I am the truth.” But those who live for themselves and fashion their own individual truths must of necessity lie to themselves and to others. To live following God’s design is authentic; to live solely to fulfill one’s own pleasures is wrong, not to mention essentially asocial. “For [pride] abhors a society of peers under God, but seeks to impose its own rule, instead of His, on society.”

Augustine’s interpretation of history cuts through much of what commands historical debate. By way of example, it makes little difference to what extent Nazism was a hallmark of or a departure from “modern” German culture, whether twentieth-century Germans were Hitler’s willing executioners or the obedient, disciplined, misguided tools of his demonic regime. The greater truth is that people who love their pride, their race, their state, their empire, their leader, and even themselves above God are the ones most likely to justify mass murder through various means. Horrors like the Second World War and the Holocaust happen in history, with appalling regularity. Insane massacres blemish many and perhaps all parts of the world and its history: Think of Darfur, Bosnia, Rwanda, Armenia, and Cambodia, to name only a
handful. North America is certainly not free of them. Some instances are locally inspired, others are planned and ordered by more distant authorities. Had love of God prevailed, none would have happened. Returning to our German example, on December 5, 1349, after several nightmarish years of flood, foul weather, locust swarms, and finally the Black Death, people in Nürnberg lashed out in anger, despair, and greed. They destroyed the Jewish neighborhood and slaughtered 562 Jewish residents. Needless butchery occurs today in states around the world where leaders, fighters, and followers actively endeavor to identify, isolate, and destroy the supposedly unworthy.

Yet, all the suffering must have a rhyme and a reason. God, who is Love, is in charge; he raises up and hurls down empires for good and bad people alike, according to his own, impenetrable designs: “He does this,” Augustine tells us, “in accordance with an order of things and of times which is hidden from us but very well known to him.”16 In a Catholic history, nothing is truly random, utterly accidental, or empty. Events bear meaning, and the story has a direction and a point: God’s will reveals itself in the story of humanity.

The Task of the Catholic Historian

Catholic historians, therefore, can work, teach, and write amid great tension. They can look for this greater meaning, the truth about humanity, in the people, places, and epochs they study, and they need not settle for antiquarianism, whether through tacit or explicit denial of God’s eternal, active presence in the world. While we strive for maximum accuracy in mastering correct information and understanding extant source materials, we can attempt only with cautious humility to discern God’s hand in all of it. Scripture warns us not to pry, but at the same time, it behooves us to share word of his power and glory wherever we find it. We need not submit either to nineteenth-century positivism or twentieth-century subjectivism, relativism, or nihilism. We should readily expose the divergent teleologies at work in competing historical narratives, each the result of human love and free will. The job will never bore.

The Catholic telling of the story of Western civilization can dare to begin at the very beginning, with God’s gratuitous creation of being itself, which we experience and understand as the universe. With being comes the mystery of time, the permanent present, between a past that is gone and a future that is unknowable. God then creates humanity in his image, gives each and every human being a nature and freedom, and sets into play the same drama of all people everywhere. In addition,
at special times and in certain places, God reveals aspects of himself to his creation, in and through history. Especially through the coming, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God articulates his will for humanity. And, quite naturally, being as we are, many of us spend the rest of time struggling against it, or just fail to follow. The story of Western civilization unfolds from God’s creation and revelation, and humanity’s free response to it.

History concentrates on cultural changes, but humanity and its creator remain the same. There is only one age of man, and a human being is more than a perpetually evolving association of about a trillion cells. It makes no difference how and when the first homo sapiens sapiens were introduced into the world: whether, as Augustine says, it was 5,000 years before his day or 600,000,000, because we humans can always ask the question, “Why did He not create us before then?” Augustine adds that we will be able to ask this same question after another 5,000 years, and will probably do so after 600,000,000, “if our mortal condition with its ignorance and weakness were to endure so long through the rise and fall of generations.”

The great miracle of humanity is that we exist on earth at all, and live, move, think, act, and love as we do.

Given this reality, the conventional ancient-medieval-modern periodization for Western Civilization falls wide of the mark. Bruni’s division of history tells us as much about humanity as Hesiod’s or Homer’s. The usual terminology provides useful categories for names, dates, events, institutions, and ideas, but it tends to give the false impression that “ancient” persons differed in their nature from their “medieval” and “modern” relatives. Nonetheless, a Catholic history has need for a tripartite division of time: everything prior to Christ’s coming is somehow preparatory (i.e., B.C.); his time on earth is affirmative, revelatory, and determinative; and everything afterward confirms his message (i.e., A.D). These mysterious connections transcend material cause and effect. As faith is a gift from the Creator, it necessarily shapes the narrative, and the sources from the historical record, the surviving documentary and archaeological evidence, support its arguments. Faith and reason work together in history to help us understand reality and the human condition over time.
Notes


8. Ibid., IV, iv, p. 17.
9. Ibid., XII, xxviii, p. 129.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., XIV, xxviii, p. 405.
12. Ibid., XIX, xxiv, pp. 231–2.
13. Ibid., XIX, xxi, pp. 207–8.
15. Ibid., XIX, xii, p. 171.
16. Ibid., IV, xxxiii, p. 125.
17. Ibid., XII, xiii, p. 59.