

Preliminary Note on the Structure of the *City of God*



There are a few preliminary observations one should make about the structure of the *City of God*. The final twelve books deal in the main with the history of time and eternity as given in the Bible, which is of Jewish provenance. Of the first ten books the second five deal mainly with Greek philosophy, more particularly Platonism, and especially with the Neoplatonists Plotinus and Porphyry—with lengthy consideration of the views of the latter. The first five books deal in the main with the polytheism of Rome, with special reference to Varro. Here are the three great centers of the work: the Bible, Greece, and Rome. Augustine himself draws attention to this most explicitly in one of the most dramatic sections of the work (XIX. 22):

Book XIX. 22

“Who is this God of yours, and how do we know that the Romans were obliged to adore Him with sacrifices to the exclusion of other gods?” One must be blind indeed to be asking at this late date who our God is! He is the God whose Prophets foretold things we see realized under our very eyes. He is the God who gave the reply to Abraham: “In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed” (*Gen. 22. 18*) . . . this promise has been made good in Christ, born in the flesh of Abraham’s seed—a fulfillment which those who have remained opposed to Christ’s name know so well, though they like it so little. He is the God whose Spirit spoke through Prophets whose predictions are now realized in our visibly world-wide Church and which I quoted in previous Books. He is the God whom Varro, the most learned of Romans, thought was Jupiter, however little he grasped the import of his words. It is at least worth mentioning that a man of his learning was unable to think of our God as despicable or non-existent. . . . Varro identified Him with his own conception of the supreme deity.

Finally, our God is the one whom Porphyry, most learned of philosophers and bitter enemy of Christianity, admits to be a great God, and this on the strength of pagan oracles.

The first sentence in this excerpt indicates Augustine’s standpoint in the whole of his inquiry: the Roman world (cf. III. 1). His attitude is not negative; on the contrary he is concerned for that world’s future. Rome was to bring together within herself the revelation in the Bible, the wisdom of Greek philosophy, and what was good in her own tradition. Au-

gustine is fully conscious of the fusion of the elements that in fact went to make up the civilization of the West that has endured to this day. In this sense his *City of God* is a, if not the, Charter of Christendom, and in this lies its greatest significance.

The Bible, Greek philosophy, Roman speculation on religion all pointed to one God, the God of the Hebrews. This God should now be accepted as the God of Rome. The prophecies in their fulfillment, and the Church in its extension, its martyrs, and its miracles, left no doubt possible on this. The aspirations of Hebrews, Greeks, and Romans were to be fulfilled in a Christian Rome. The Christian Era, the *tempora Christiana*, was already a reality. Even if some evils endured, it was a blessed reality.

Augustine may have come to these pregnant views through reading or argument; but it is most unlikely that once again his own personal experience did not influence him here also. His was a life led in a Roman environment, based on Roman education, drawing importantly upon Greek philosophy at a time most critical to his development, and resting in the main after his conversion on the Christian Scriptures. His *Confessions* not merely testify to this in contents: in very form they too describe a Roman's background and education (I-VII. 12), the contribution of Greek philosophy (VII. 13-IX), and life according to the Christian revelation. In particular the last three books of the *Confessions* cover in part the same ground as is later covered in the fuller and richer canvas of the last twelve books of the *City of God*.

There are rudimentary traces of the same progress from Rome to Greece to the Scriptures in others of Augustine's works. The *Contra Academicos* proceeds from Cicero to the *schola Plotini*, but puts the authority of Christ above that again (III. 43). The preface to the *De Beata Vita*, with which we have already dealt, implies a similar progression. The contemporary *De Ordine* in its turn discusses more explicitly (II. 25-54) a system of education based on the same lines.

In the pages that follow we shall take our cue from Augustine and consider the *City of God* from the three angles indicated by himself: its interpretation of the Bible; its attitude to Greek philosophy, in effect to Platonism, or more precisely Neoplatonism; and its attitude to Rome.