

Confessing with St Augustine: God and Religion at the Twilight of the Roman Empire

Augustine's The City of God Against the Pagans

Presentation By
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Preliminary Points

A. Why Consider The City of God?

- Augustine's most significant book.

B. Caveats.

- Some of Augustine's positions in *The City of God* have potential to offend certain modern sensibilities. But they are his views.
- 'In this work, O Marcellinius, most beloved son – due to you by my promise – I have undertaken to defend her [the Church] against those who favour their own gods above her Founder. The work is great and arduous; but God is our helper.' (I. Preface)



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Roadmap of the Lecture

A. About *The City of God*

- ☐ Background, Purpose, and Genre
- ☐ Argumentative Outline and Structure
- ☐ Themes

B. Engagement with a Portion of *The City of God*

- ☐ *Book XIX*



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Background

- Written (413-426) in the years after the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410.
- The rise of Christianity and the decline of 'paganism' in the Roman empire, early 4th century to early 5th century.
- The fall of the Roman empire, late 4th century to early 5th century.
- Pagan-Christian rivalry in the late Roman empire.
- Augustine's pagan and Christian background.



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Purpose and Genre

- Christian Apologetic
 - The damage incurred was in keeping with the nature of wars.
 - The sacking could have been much worse.
 - Providence
- Theodicy (“Why do bad things happen to good people?”)
 - Divine Judgement
 - Weaning ‘weak’ Christians of their attachment to temporal goods.
 - Enabling the revealing of true piety.



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Argumentative Outline and Structure

- Divided into 22 books:
 - Augustine's critique of Roman paganism and pagan philosophers (books 1-10)
 - The radically different natures, histories, politics, and orientations of the two cities, the Heavenly City and the Earthly City (Books 11-22)



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Thematic Scope: 1. The doctrine of Two Kingdoms.

➤ Christian Dualism

➤ The end of the Heavenly City and the end of the Earthly City

➤ ‘Two cities, then, have been created by two loves: that is, the earthly by love of self extending even to contempt for God, and the heavenly by love for God extending to contempt of self. The one, therefore, glories in itself, the other in the Lord; the one seeks glory from men, the other finds its highest glory in God, the Witness of our conscience. The one lifts up its head in its own glory; the other says to its God. ‘Thou art my glory, and the lifter up of mine head’ (XIV. 28)



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Theme: Christianity as True religion. Pagan religion as false.

- Christianity as the true religion.
 - Its truth made 'evident' by the fulfilled promises of the Christian scriptures. Augustine's God is 'the God whose divine Spirit spoke through those whose prophecies ...which have been fulfilled in the Church and which we now see spread throughout the whole world.' (XIX. 22)
 - Pagan religions as founded by demons, fallen angels.



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BOOK XIX:

Augustine's critique of pagan illusions of happiness

- The vicissitudes of life.
- The limits of the virtues in securing personal happiness.
- The ubiquity of evil in social, family, and political life.
- No 'eternal life' – the problem of temporal orientation in pagan eschatology.



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BOOK XIX: 'Peace' in the Earthly City and Peace in the City of God

- Peace as a universal condition of human life.
 - Peace as rightly ordered relation of things.
 - Eternal peace as true peace : 'Peace in which they rest in immortality and suffer adversity no more' (XIX. 20)
 - Eternal peace is not "other-worldly"
- Use vs Enjoyment



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BOOK XIX: On Justice

- Justice as ‘giving each his due’
- Justice in the earthly City falls short, even on its own terms.
 - ‘What kind of justice is it, then, that takes a man away from the true God and subjects him to impure demons? Is this giving to each his due? Or are we to call a man unjust if he takes a piece of property away from the one who has bought it and hands it over to someone who has no right to it, yet just if he takes himself away from the lordship of the God who made him, and serves evil spirits?’ (XIX. 21)



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