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THE POLITICS OF ST. AUGUSTINE'S *DE CIVITATE DEI*

I

THE longest and greatest of St. Augustine's works is, in its main purpose, a work of apologetics, not a contribution to political thought. Yet it owes its origin to a question in its day as much political as religious, and it has had far reaching effects on the political history of succeeding ages. It sets out to answer the well-worn charge that Rome's disasters are due to Rome's neglect of her ancient gods, a charge brought forward anew after the sack of Rome by the Goths in 410 and are doubtless more dangerous than ever before in view of the exasperation of a terror-stricken populace. During the fourth century Christianity had been the professed religion of the Emperors, and by the end of it, aided somewhat by their influence and authority, was becoming the religion of all Romans. But its triumph was disputed. A world-shaking event like that of 410 might conceivably shake also the hold of Christianity upon Emperor and people. If there are traces in the course of a work, which took some twelve years to write, of an increasing confidence in the ultimate triumph of Christianity, Augustine even at the end will not allow it to be assumed that that triumph is assured or even that the series of persecutions has been finally closed. He evidently believed it still necessary to adduce proofs that disasters to Rome are not exclusively phenomena of Christian times and to indulge in derision of the multitude of major and minor divinities once acknowledged in the Latin world. He might even, had it been possible, have pointed to triumphs of the Christian Empire. In their absence he can make the most of the unwonted clemency of Alaric's Goths in their hour of victory. But he breaks away from this low and popular level of argument altogether. Not only have Rome's gods had nothing to do with increasing and preserving Rome's dominion, but true religion is no mere means to the worldly security or prosperity of the individual or society.

This radical detachment of Religion from politics is no doubt the great thing in his book. The linking of religion with politics, making religion a means to State ends and so an interest of the statesman was normal in antiquity, and is indeed so natural that

Christianity has not always been successful in avoiding it, particularly since the emergence of the modern national State. The *De Civitate Dei* is the most impressive expression of all time of the claim of Religion to independence and to supreme importance in its own right, a claim which belongs to the Jewish-Christian tradition and to it alone. It is a claim which to-day seems to stand in need of re-assertion. In Augustine's time it served to deliver Christianity from sharing the fate of a Society with which it was apparently identifying itself. More positively and more permanently it serves to mark the limits which must be set to the competence of any politically organized society.

The title of the work recalls the most famous of the aphorisms of Marcus Aurelius: "Thou hast said Dear City of Cecrops; wilt thou not say Dear City of Zeus." Doubtless synonyms for *Civitas Dei* are common enough in the Stoics, but Augustine owes little in his conception to them. However much he may be influenced by Stoic ethics in detail, Stoicism seemed to him the quintessence of the unforgivable sin, pride. He is only less averse to the Stoic than to the Epicurean. He was also offended by the *diesseitigkeit* of the Stoic ethical and political outlook. No doubt Stoicism knew nothing of the limitations of the city state, or indeed of any state. Its *civitas* was co-extensive with humanity. Political boundaries were to it accidental, the real division in mankind was that which separated them into the Wise and the Fools. Its ideal was the world state, cosmopolis, but it was prepared to see in such an organization as the Roman Empire a fair if partial illustration of the ideal. Hence Stoicism could be the philosophy of the Empire in the palmy days of its success. Augustine's "civitas" has much more in common with the *cara patria* of the Neoplatonists, the refuge of the immortal soul from the prison house of the body and the transience of earthly life. The parallelism between Augustine's thought and that of the Neoplatonists is very close both in the conception of the chief end of man and the means necessary to reach it. Plato had his own disillusionments with regard to the politics of his day, and was probably not sanguine that his *πολιτεία* would anywhere be adopted. Yet he did not wholly despair of the republic, and regarded his school as a seminary of potential statesmen. By Augustine's time Platonists had passed from the philosophy of the City State, passed even from

that of the World State, and looked for individual beatitude in a world beyond.

II

But the roots of Augustine's conception, however it may be coloured by Neoplatonism, lie in the Biblical and the Christian tradition. The text from which he sets out is Psalm lxxxvii. 3 : "Glorious things are spoken of Thee, City of God," and the words recur like a refrain throughout the work. But they are also associated with the New Jerusalem of the New Testament Apocalypse, and of the commentators of that book, notably Tyconius who had strongly contrasted the two cities, the City of Faith and the City of Unbelief. It may well be doubted whether to Augustine this tale of two cities amounts to much more than an allegory. The expression *Civitas Dei* is absent from long stretches of his book, and often when it reappears seems dragged in rather incongruously as if he had suddenly recalled his theme. But if his thought of the eternally and perfectly blessed life of the saints in heaven tends to supersede the thought of a *Civitas*, there is good reason why he should not drop the expression altogether.

It suited his apologetic purpose. It allows him to offer to the Roman, especially the Roman Christian, a Society more secure, more glorious, more satisfying than that which was breaking down before his eyes, a citizenship which might claim his devotion and reward his patriotism more surely than any earthly citizenship could, in short a better city than that which Alaric had destroyed. "Incomparably more glorious than Rome is that heavenly city in which for victory you have truth, for dignity holiness, for peace felicity, for life eternity." (Bk. II 29.) Augustine is well aware that such words will provoke the scorn of men who seek peace and security only that they may enjoy the material goods of life, its comforts, its luxuries, and that they may carry on their vicious habits—his picture of Roman pagan society is dark indeed. The virtues of the Romans, which may even be used as examples to stir the zeal of Christians, belong to a remote past, to the early history of the Republic. For the present is marked only by self-seeking and self-indulgence, "amor sui".

The contrast between the *Civitas Dei* of the Christian's loyalty and all forms of earthly or historical association whatever is clearly drawn. At all costs it must stand clear of the vicissitudes

of time, clear of all the worldly and temporal interests and loves of men, clear of all that is mutable. It came into being with creation, and was indeed the first creation, before the world and before man. Its first citizens were angels. The creation of the world and of mankind was the consequence of the revolt of the bad angels, God's method of filling up the places which they had left. The fall of man, repeating on earth the earlier fall of the angels, postponed but could not frustrate the fulfilment of God's plan. The City will one day be full again, and the history of man and his world will come to an end, a mere episode in God's eternity and in the story of His City, which, while it has a beginning, has no end ; and is in its nature both supra-mundane and supra-historical.

The life of this City is one of perfect and everlasting blessedness in which God is fully known, and He alone is enjoyed for ever more. In it are none of the temptations and ills which are inseparable from mortal life. There is neither fear, nor striving, nor passing away. In short *Civitas Dei* is very nearly, in some places quite obviously, a synonym for the blessedness which Christianity in Augustine's view both promises and guarantees, a blessedness unobtainable in this life, not even by philosophy, much less by activity. If his thought is as has been maintained "social through and through" it is none the less certainly individualistic at this point ; for those who attain to blessedness do so one by one through the predestinating grace of God, and, as all earthly conditions have ceased, so social relations are abrogated, the tasks and duties of social life come to an end, and with them the social virtues. Nevertheless the individuals share in the common blessedness. "*Amor Dei*" makes of them a community, a *populus*, a *civitas*. They retain their individual identity even when their qualities are enhanced, and are not merely absorbed back again into the being of God. Here Augustine remains faithful to the Christian as distinct from the Platonic tradition ; and he is prepared also to recognize a sort of civic hierarchy in the City of God, for Apostles and Martyrs will have special places of honour accorded to them.

III

In contrast to all this is the *Civitas Terrena*, which is not indeed the Roman Empire or any other state, but is "Society

human or angelic organizing itself apart from God," or rather apart from the True God, for all other gods are devils. Here again Augustine's thought is both social and individualistic. "Amor sui" founds the *Civitas Terrena*, and characterizes its citizens. Strictly speaking this is an anti-social, anti-patriotic love, and it is the selfish vices of the Romans of his own day which Augustine mainly scourges. Yet communities too can have their "amor sui", binding them together in pursuit of worldly glory and dominion, the ends of pride. He indeed somewhat grudgingly admits the virtues of the old heroes of the Republic who unselfishly served Rome, would even admit that possibly these virtues may explain why God gave to Rome its worldly success, its wide empire. But that unselfishness is not enough. The Rome they served itself served worldly ends, while it and they worshipped false gods. Their very virtues in consequence were but splendid vices.

Assuming that Rome is the most illustrious, perhaps the most worthy representative of the *Civitas Terrena*, and naturally it is the case of Rome which is at issue, it remains none the less just a representative and embodiment of the *Civitas Terrena*; its ends are worldly, its pride is in its conquests, its empire, the only felicity it seeks is secure dominion. Even granted that its wars were just wars of defence always, and that dominion was unsought, how great was their cost in blood and tears, not to the vanquished only but to the victors as well. Granted that the rule of the Romans made for the unity of the nations, for orderliness, for peace and even in a measure for justice how toilsome is its maintenance, how miserable the lot of the ruler. For its ends even when relatively good are still temporal and worldly. Real beatitude is for ever beyond its reach. World-dominion even at its best begets that pride which God rejects. Besides it is a thing which comes and passes away. The City of Romulus can never attain to the eternity of the City of God.

And to the *Civitas Terrena* belong no less the pagan philosophers. Not only do they justify the worship of false gods, sometimes even not believing in them themselves, but they have more than their share of human pride, for they seek truth by the light of their own unaided reason, and vain-gloriously contend for mere verbal victory.

All this cannot have been comforting to the patriotic Roman confronted with a crumbling empire; and he might

very well have sensed a real danger in this other-worldly doctrine. Devotion to the old gods of Rome, however they might be discredited as protectors of the Empire, at least meant also devotion to Rome herself. Devotion to the Civitas Dei must have looked like so much devotion lost to the State. Augustine himself was prepared to encourage Boniface, one of the few competent generals of the time, to abandon his soldiering for a life of contemplation. It cannot be doubted that for the fortunes of the Empire he shows but little concern. When provinces are overrun his main interest is that the ministrations of religion shall not be lacking to those of their inhabitants who have escaped massacre or cannot flee.

IV

Such indifference to the temporal fortunes of his country is unmistakable proof of the reality and sincerity of Augustine's devotion to his conception of Christianity, to the Civitas Dei. That is no mere apologetic weapon. But it also hardly prepares us to look to him for any interest in theoretical politics, and indeed there is not much. Still, as a classical scholar and student of Cicero he is familiar with the classical political thought. He knows that the State is in Latin *Respublica*. He knows also the traditional classification of the forms the *Respublica* may take, monarchical, aristocratic, democratic. But of these he has little to say, has no particular preference for any of them, save that he expresses general disapproval of great empires founded on conquest. The best arrangement would be, he thinks, a number of small states living together in brotherly concord. But what matters it under what forms of government man must live out his short life here on earth, or whether the bad or the good actually rule? Nero and Julian are to be obeyed equally with Constantine and Theodosius. Any and every *Respublica*, i.e. politically organized society is but a form of the *Civitas Terrena*.

In looking for a definition of the State he naturally goes back to Cicero. Here he reads that the state "is an assemblage associated by a common acknowledgment of right (*ius*) and a community of interests", and that where justice is not the state can exist in name only and not in reality. Augustine is glad enough to avail himself of Cicero's admission (Cicero was as he wrote a political exile!) that the Roman State had in reality

perished long ago because of the vices of the citizens. Furthermore, interpreting justice, "true justice", as including the rendering to the One True God of the worship which is His due, Augustine can conclude "that true justice has no existence save in that *respublica* whose founder and ruler is Christ, if at least any choose to call this a *respublica*," which is better called *Civitas Dei*. He thus draws back from propounding a theory of the Christian State. Rather, by abandoning the quality of justice from the definition of the State, he will frankly assign the State in general to a place among the communities which incorporate the *Civitas Terrena*. "Without justice", he says in another famous passage, "what are kingdoms but great banditries?" and kingdoms and states "with justice" he is unable or unwilling to contemplate. With a century of Christian Emperors behind him he cannot bring himself to see with some of the Eastern bishops at Nicæa "the Kingdom of Heaven already come". No doubt it is a matter for gratification that the highest potentate of the world's mightiest empire now comes and kneels humbly at the Fisherman's tomb, but a Christian Emperor does not mean a Christian Empire. To bear rule in a worldly state remains a grief and a burden to a Christian. Christian Emperors like other Christians "are 'beati' in the present time by hope, and are destined to be so in the enjoyment of the reality itself, when that which we wait for shall have arrived". Meantime they can use their power justly, mercifully, piously and humbly and make it "the handmaid of God's majesty by using it for the greatest possible extension of His worship". To this important point we shall have to return.

Meantime Augustine occasionally catches a glimpse of something like a Christian State forming itself from below. Taxed with the incompatibility of obedience to the commands of Christ with duty to the State he can reply—How great will be the gain to the State if all its judges, magistrates, soldiers, taxpayers, parents, citizens are truly Christian and obey the Christian law of love. In his desire to range the State on the side of the *Civitas Terrena*, as well as to reach a definition that would cover any State, he had defined it as "an assemblage of reasonable beings bound together by a common agreement concerning the objects of their love". Did he envisage such a community agreed upon a common "*Amor Dei*" in short a truly Christian State? Not very hopefully, I think. Not even

the fact of supreme power being in Christian hands plus the fact of a growing body among the citizens, possibly by now a majority of the citizens, accepting the Christian name, can induce him to see his ideal realized here on earth, not at least in the form of a State.

V

Nevertheless the *Civitas Dei*, supra-mundane, supra-historical as it is, does have its earthly counterpart. It has entered into history from the beginning, and has its place in human story. Its citizens have always been found in the world, mingling with the citizens of the worldly city, sharing with them their temporal goods and ills, and suffering in addition their hatred and persecution. Augustine loves to dwell on the sufferings of the saints and martyrs for the name of Christ. He acknowledges that the great persecutions have ceased for the time being, but believes that they may recur, and even endeavours to produce the impression that persecution is ever an element in the life of the Church. It is natural enough that he should look back to the heroic life of the pre-Constantinian Church, from his own time when the Catholic Church enjoyed a privileged position which he can on occasion welcome and even glory in, without being entirely happy in it either. His real conception of Christianity in earthly surroundings is of a faith held by an oppressed minority. If the African Donatists claimed to be the Church of the Martyrs persecuted by the Church of which Augustine was champion, he can urge that the very existence of heresies and schisms is a persecution of the Catholic Church!

There can be no doubt that for Augustine the earthly and historical representative of the *Civitas Dei* is not simply the long line of faithful and pious heroes of the faith, but is the Church and indeed what he calls the Catholic Church, whose history goes back to Abel, son of Adam, now since the time of Christ widely expanded among the nations. Of course there can be no question of his identifying the Church of any particular moment, the empirical Church, roundly with the *Civitas Dei*. The present Church dwells amid the evils of the mortal lot and is blessed only by hope. The *Civitas Dei* is even now in possession of perfect unending blessedness. Moreover in membership there cannot be identity, for the *Civitas Dei* includes

angels and the faithful of all generations past and to come. The present Church on the other hand includes many who are not predestined citizens of the Heavenly City. The distinction, later so useful in the hands of critics of the Church, between the Church Visible and Invisible is certainly drawn by Augustine, and is not to be put aside because in the later parts of his work he seems to use *Ecclesia* and *Civitas Dei* as synonyms. The apparent inconsistency of his thought, here distinguishing, there failing to distinguish, which has led to divergence of interpretation, is due to the fact that he does not always mean by *Ecclesia* the empirical Church of the moment, the *communio Sacramentorum*, only, but rather the earthly counterpart of the *Civitas Dei*, the community which in spite of its obviously unworthy members is nevertheless characteristically forward and upward-looking, living in faith and hope, and directing its love to God alone.

There is, of course, a passage which raises difficulty for this view. In Book XX, chapter 9 he sums up his new interpretation of the Reign of the Saints with Christ for a thousand years. That Reign he dates as beginning with the Advent, and interprets as meaning simply the history of the Church here on earth. The historical Church is the "kingdom militant in which conflict with the enemy is still maintained, and war carried on with warring lusts". The judgment seats of the Apocalypse "are the seats of the rulers by whom the Church is now governed". "Therefore even now the Church is the Kingdom of Christ and the Kingdom of Heaven." But even so it is not "that most peaceful kingdom in which we shall reign without an enemy". Here where the Church means most certainly the empirical Church it is clearly distinguished from the *Civitas Dei*.

At the same time while it must be maintained that for Augustine there is a distinction always to be drawn between the historical Church and the *Civitas Dei*, he views the two in closest relation, and has no inclination in any way to sunder irretrievably the "*communio sacramentorum*" with all its faults from the Divine City. It is the natural and only instrument for gathering the saints from among the nations, and for instructing and preparing them for their Heavenly destiny. He always believes that he himself was converted by the aid of God alone, and endowed with power to live the Christian life, but the visible Catholic Church had done much to mediate

that grace. It had given him the Scriptures and taught him how to interpret them, and it gave him above all a sense of security and authority, for it spoke as he supposed with the weight of world opinion behind it, and that alone impressed him. "Securus judicat orbis terrarum." Disagreements among the philosophers seemed to him to point the way to scepticism; schisms and heresies among Christians endangered the assurance of faith. The immensity and unity of the Catholic Church alone could guarantee Christian Truth.

VI

Now the visible Catholic Church as a "communio sacramentorum" was sharply defined over against paganism, and over against heretics and schismatics, and had interests of its own that were at least semi-political. In places it required defence against the violence of its foes, for outbreaks of pagan and sectarian violence were liable to occur, not without provocation from the Church itself. Moreover there were pagan rites to repress and heretics to restrain. And a member of the Catholic Church wielded the supreme temporal power, and could make his power "the handmaid to God's majesty by using it for the greatest possible extension of His worship". Augustine certainly had scruples about calling in the secular power in matters of religion. But if pagan mobs desecrated churches, and Donatist Circumcelliones terrorized the country side was not appeal to the Emperor justified? And once made and proved effective in defence of the Church, it was easy to go further and appeal once more to the State to suppress Donatism altogether and to exile Pelagians. This appeal Augustine brought himself to justify, so helping along the way to the "Christian" State in which baptism and orthodoxy should be compulsory, in which the secular arm should act at the behest of the Church, a State whose Christianity is at least somewhat external.

This may be the tendency, but it is hardly the central message of Augustine's great work. He inculcates a love of God which lifts the believer above the selfish ends of worldly striving, whether for power or renown or any baser end, above the bitterness of disappointed hope, to find his blessedness in God alone. The Church is characteristically a Church of such believers without interests or policy here on earth, save to

practise Christian love, to suffer uncomplainingly the hostility of men, to represent among them the City of God. So alone can Christianity weather the storms of persecution or temporal disaster.

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