

Some Surprising Omissions from Augustine's «City of God»^{*)}

Few men have had such enduring impact upon western christianity as that veritable giant among the church fathers—Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430). Further, of his many literary works, pride of place must be given his immortal *City of God* for its peerless influence, not only upon the formulation of western eschatology, but also for the formation of the values which have guided the course of western history down through the intervening ages. From Augustine's *City of God* grew the theocracy which culminated in the omnipotent papacy of a united medieval Europe. Later, when the reformers came with their remedies for all that was wrong with troubled christendom, they were guided no less by the same values embodied in Augustine's masterpiece. Coming closer to the present age, it has been claimed with scholarly justification that the very architects of the enlightenment drew upon the same work for their basic ideas¹⁾.

The initial cause which led to the writing of the *City of God* was the fall of Rome to the invading barbarians in the year 410 of the present era. Thus, Augustine explains its source in the *Retractions* :

Rome having been stormed and sacked by the Goths under Alaric their king, the worshippers of false gods, or pagans, as we commonly call them, made an attempt to attribute this calamity to the Christian religion, and began to blaspheme the true God with even more than their wonted bitterness and acerbity. It was this which kindled my zeal for the house of God, and prompted me to undertake the defence of the city of God against the charges and misrepresentations of its assailants²⁾.

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¹⁾ For a concise account of the life of St. Augustine and his immense influence, the neophyte is referred to : Henri-Irénée, *St. Augustine and his Influence, through the Ages*, (London), 1957. This is the english translation of *Saint Augustin et l'Augustinisme*, (Paris) 1955. For the influence of Augustine upon the enlightenment, see : Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers*, (New Haven) 1932.

²⁾ *Retractions* ii 43.

As seen in the perspective of the times, the catastrophic fall of Rome seemed to possess an added and ominous significance for the pagan mind. Beginning with Nero's persecution of 64 A.D., the pagan empire had struggled long and bitterly against the rising tide of the new, christian religion. This much-maligned sect finally attained to imperial sufferance with the Edict of Milan, proclaimed by Constantine in 313. Thereafter its influence grew steadily as it came increasingly under imperial patronage, thereby also displacing the traditional paganism. However, of particular significance to the more thoughtful of the pagans was the fact that beginning with the crossing of the Danube by the Visigoths in 376, the fortunes of the empire had steadily deteriorated. Barbarian incursions became increasingly more massive and more extensive, until even Rome itself fell in the year 410. On the one hand was the ascendancy of the new christian religion; on the other, the crumbling of the long-dominant roman empire. To the pagan mind, the conclusion seemed inevitable: the gods were expressing their wrath at the new religion which had only too recently supplanted the traditional cults.

These significant events illuminate the explanation of Augustine cited above. They also help explain the first surprising omission in the *City of God*. This consists in the almost complete absence of any kindly concessions towards paganism. Of the twenty two books which comprise the *City of God*, the first ten are devoted to attacking the spiritual and temporal benefits of the pagan cults. Not once in his lengthy polemic does Augustine make the smallest concession to paganism, even on the temporal level. Rather does he paint the blackest of pictures which become well-nigh incredible, unrelieved as they are by any glimmer of goodness. The gods of paganism are simply demons in disguise:

The false gods, whom they openly worshipped, or still worship in secret, are most unclean spirits, most deceitful demons, even to such a pitch that they take delight in crimes which, whether real or only fictitious, are yet their own³).

Perhaps the long and bitter struggle against paganism lay too closely behind for Augustine to make concessions. Again, it is conceivable that the fall of Rome had placed the recent gains of christianity

³) *City of God* IV 1. Citations are from the translation by Rev. Markus Dods.

in jeopardy. Yet another factor of some relevance is the matter of personality. In this regard, it is most instructive to compare Augustine's attack upon paganism with a similar polemic composed by one of his contemporaries. The *Contra Oratorem Symmachi* ⁴⁾ of Aurelius Prudentius Clemens (348-after 405) is a much more humane document, lacking as it does, the unqualified and sweeping condemnations of Augustine's polemic. Prudentius is willing to concede that in their own, ill-guided way, the pagans too were searching for God. Again, whereas Augustine repeatedly condemns the roman empire for its lust of domination (*libido dominandi*) ⁵⁾, Prudentius praises the extent and power of the empire for spreading unity and harmony among people who would otherwise be in conflicting diversity. Indeed, he sees the spread of the rule of Rome as preparing a unified world for the coming of Christ :

...Christo iam tunc venienti
crede, parata via est, quam dudumpublica nostrae
pacis amicitia struxit moderamine Romae ⁶⁾.

Another factor relevant to the contrast in attitudes, is that Prudentius' treatise was written just prior to the fateful fall of Rome (having been composed between 404 and 410), while the *City of God* was composed after the catastrophe. It was begun in 413 and finally brought to its completion in 426. On the other hand, apart from this difference, both authors had been witnesses to the declining fortunes of the empire.

Augustine's sweeping severity towards paganism remains one of the enigmas of the *City of God*. Transmitted to the middle ages through the influence of this great work, it made for intransigence of doctrine and therefore for the high value imputed to a refined orthodoxy. Western history may well have been much different had the moderation of Prudentius prevailed. Perhaps the great Augustine set too stern a precedent for posterity. As long ago as 1925, an eminent jesuit, writing of paganism in the *City of God*, had occasion to remark :

⁴⁾ This was a rejoinder to the *De ara Victoriae* of Quintus Aurelius Symmachus (c. 340- c. 402). Symmachus was the eloquent leader of the pagan faction which was protesting against the removal of the Altar of Victories from the Senate in 382. This Altar, it must be recalled, was the national figurehead of paganism.

⁵⁾ *City of God* III 10, 14; IV 3; V 12.

⁶⁾ Lines 620-2 in the Loeb Classical Library edition, (1949-1953), *Against Symmachus*.

My own mind is intimately convinced that the pagan world has found in God a more merciful and considerate judge than it would have had in his great servant, Augustine of Hippo ⁷).

Yet another surprising omission becomes evident upon adverting to the context of Augustine's times. He undertook the writing of the *City of God* in 413. Nearly four centuries had elapsed since the time of Christ. This was a critical period in which the infant church not only struggled for mere survival, but entered hesitantly upon the endless quest of christian speculation. Among the many pioneering thinkers which the era contained were such men as Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Athenagoras, Origen, Cyprian, Minucius Felix, Lactantius and Eusebius of Caesarea. In a sense, they laboured upon the very foundations of the City of God. Notwithstanding this fact, they play a very dubious rôle in Augustine's *City of God*. Their names are but rarely mentioned. It is an interesting irony that acknowledgement of them is insignificant when compared to such writers in the pagan tradition as Cicero, Virgil, Varro and Sallust. Yet these men worshipped the same gods which Augustine accused of being demons in disguise!

A fact of further significance emerges upon examining the rare occasions when earlier christian thinkers do merit mention. It is not for some contribution they have to make, but rather for chastisement. Such is the case with Eusebius of Caesarea, whose biblical scholarship is faulted ⁸). With Origen, Augustine is even less patient. He rebukes him for his opinion that souls merit different debasing bodies as prisons in proportion to their sins whereby they have abandoned God ⁹). Finally, while Tertullian merits a passing rebuke ¹⁰, with the rest of them, Augustine seems to have little patience. If they had any influence upon the construction of his *City of God*, it is an influence which passes without recognition.

This omission possessed some interesting implications for posterity. The hegemony which the *City of God* justifiably enjoyed in the middle ages also tended to detract from the earlier christian tradition.

⁷) Joseph Rickaby, s.j., *St. Augustine's City of God; A View of the Contents*, (London), 1925, p. 82.

⁸) *City of God* XVI 16; XVIII 31.

⁹) *Op. cit.* XI 23.

¹⁰) *Op.cit.* VII 1.

Let it be observed too that the compelling grandeur of Augustine's masterpiece was also accentuated by the contingencies of history. The work was inspired by the fall of Rome in 410. Thereafter the ravages of the barbarian invaders engulfed western Europe in five hundred years of darkest devastation. When from the smoldering ruins, the architects of the middle ages began their task of reconstruction, the monumental *City of God* shone to them across the intervening dark abyss somewhat after the manner of the proverbial city upon a mountain. Therefore, the dearth of the earlier acknowledged tradition in his masterpiece, when complemented by the barbarian devastations of the later centuries, accorded in affording a singular eminence to the *magnum opus* of Augustine. As a result the *City of God* tended to become both filter and focus of the western christian tradition.

Notwithstanding the monumental synthesis of Augustine's genius, it can be asked whether the christian tradition of the west did not in effect become excessively committed to *one* interpretation of the great mystery of revelation, whereas a saving diversity of opinions would have endowed the christian message with greater adaptability to the exigencies of future ages. Unity was evidently an important factor in fashioning the medieval synthesis out of the preceding chaos. On the other hand, it would seem that this question of a true catholicity of opinion is particularly relevant to the present age, which is witnessing the « crisis of christianity ». This religion is portrayed as being « irrelevant ». Is it not rather that contingencies of history have only too effectively conspired against exploring the fullest riches of the christian tradition?

Yet a third surprising omission from the *City of God* concerns the personality of Christ. In 1919, one author made the following observation about the work :

The words of Christ are rarely quoted and he is not regarded as either a teacher or example to mankind, but as the deified Saviour (*City of God* IX 15). It is hardly an exaggeration to affirm that the entire theory might have been maintained and developed by a theologian who had completely disregarded the Synoptic narrative ¹¹).

Certainly one of the striking features of Augustine's masterpiece is its rich recourse to the scriptures, containing as it does, over

¹¹) F.J. Foakes-Jackson, « The Kingdom of God in Acts, and the 'City of God', » *The Harvard Theological Review*, XII (1919), pp. 199-200.

one thousand citations from the bible. The new testament accounts for about one half of this total. Among these the words of Christ (albeit with certain repetitions) are quoted no less than one hundred and twenty times. The actual words of Christ do not therefore constitute the main bulk of the scriptural citations. On the other hand, it would seem rather a severe judgement of Augustine to maintain that « the words of Christ are rarely quoted ».

At the same time, it would appear that the inquietude which prompted the author to make the above observation is not without some substantiation, as becomes more evident when the actual portrayal of Christ in the *City of God* is examined. True, the rôle of Christ as mediator between God and man is repeatedly emphasised¹²⁾. Consistently with this, his divine nature is to be affirmed¹³⁾; whence his importance as purifying principle of the human race¹⁴⁾, his relations to the Church¹⁵⁾ and his function as final judge¹⁶⁾. However, the greatest emphasis of Augustine would seem to be upon the prophecies which anticipated Christ's coming, as a perusal of certain lengthy sections of the *City of God* will amply demonstrate¹⁷⁾. Indeed, this intense pre-occupation with the prophetic aspect of Christ's coming leads Augustine on to have recourse to pagan sources, such as the oracle of an erythrean sibyl and the now-famous « messianic eclogue » of Virgil¹⁸⁾.

This extensive emphasis acquires an almost eerie significance when the treatise moves on to consider the Christ-man of the evangelists. Here, his whole life of thirty three years on earth is abruptly dismissed in a few lines. The following extract summarises the treatment of the Christ-man in the *City of God*:

Christ was born in Bethlehem of Judah, man manifest out of a human virgin, God hidden out of God the Father ... He did many miracles that He might commend God in Himself, some of which, even as many as seem sufficient to proclaim Him, are contained in the evangelic Scripture¹⁹⁾.

¹²⁾ *City of God* IX 15; X 6; X 20; XI 2 and XXII 22.

¹³⁾ *Op. cit.* XI 10 and XXII 6.

¹⁴⁾ *Op. cit.* X 24.

¹⁵⁾ *Op. cit.* XIII 23; XV 18; XVIII 48.

¹⁶⁾ *Op. cit.* XX 30.

¹⁷⁾ *Op. cit.* XVII 8 to 24 and XVIII 27 to 36.

¹⁸⁾ *Op. cit.* XVIII 23 for the former and X 27 for the latter.

¹⁹⁾ *Op. cit.* XVIII 46.

With little more than this, the entire earthly life of the Christ-man is dismissed as the treatise moves on to other considerations. This virtual absence of the Christ-man from the *City of God* therefore constitutes the third surprising omission from that work.

In attempting to account for this enigmatical omission, allowance must be made for the circumstances under which the *City of God* was written. Certainly, adverting to the cited extract in which Augustine accounts for his writing the work affords some understanding of the great emphasis he places upon the prophetic aspect of Christ's coming. He was defending the City of God against the pagan uproar over the fall of Rome which seemed all the more ominous in view of the then-recent rise of christianity. It was imperative to emphasise the divine nature of Christ, the source and soul of the new religion. If further compelling evidence could be uncovered by recourse to pagan authors, then this possessed the added advantage of constituting an *argumentum ad hominem*. This helps explain the emphasis that Augustine places upon the prophecies which pointed to the coming of Christ. On the other hand, it explains little about the virtual omission of the Christ-man from the *City of God*.

Perhaps it could be said that in the passage just cited, Augustine refers the reader to the gospels where he can read for himself about the details of Christ's life on earth. Yet this explanation possesses certain insufficiencies. As has been observed, Augustine makes abundant use of the scriptures in the *City of God*. What then withholds him from treating in depth and detail the supreme climax of the scriptures, namely the life of the Christ-man on earth?

Indeed, adverting to the circumstances under which Augustine wrote the *City of God* brings to light reasons of such topical urgency that he should have felt compelled to treat of the earthly life of Christ in great depth and detail. As was observed, the *City of God* was intended to be a massive rebuttal of the pagans. But who were these pagans? The paganism of Rome was compromised of a vast array of sects, as Augustine himself testifies²⁰). Among these however, the manichaean faction possessed a certain primacy of power²¹). Being primarily a

²⁰) *Op. cit.* III 12.

²¹) « Plures enim eos Roma occultat » (*Confessions* V X 19). An appreciation of the influence and importance which this sect had acquired can be gleaned from the number of imperial edicts which were issued against it. See Erich-Hans Kaden's « Die Edikte gegen die Manichäer von Diokletian bis Justinian », pp. 55-68 in *Festschrift Hans Lewald*

religion of intellectuals and writers, it exercised considerable influence ²²).

Christ was accorded a particularly important rôle in the manichaean religion. He was the divine mediator between the god of light and mankind, without however being physically human. Christ, for the manichaees was a phantasm which *appeared* to be human ²³). The incarnation as taught by the christian religion therefore appears as a supremely important differentiation between the two religions.

Considering the crisis which evoked the *City of God* and the fact that manichaeism was a prominent force in the paganism which Augustine attacked, this constituted an added urgency which should have induced him to emphasise quite unmistakably the fact of the incarnation. Nothing would have achieved this more effectively than an extensive consideration of the life of the Christ-man.

In view of the previous considerations, it is all the more interesting to observe that the incarnation does indeed come under discussion on several different occasions in the *City of God*. Thus, Augustine rebukes Porphyry for not accepting Christ, and precisely because of the incarnation :

[He] refused to recognize that Christ is the Principle by whose incarnation we are purified. Indeed he despised Him, because of the flesh itself which He assumed ²⁴).

On another occasion the platonists are also attacked for their reluctance to believe possible the incarnation whereby Christ, the son of God, became man ²⁵). With the manichaees however, the attitude of Augustine seems somewhat different. They are indeed impugned in the *City of God*, yet not over the question of the incarnation. Augus-

(Basel), 1953. For a well-written account of the manichaean religion, the english reader is referred to Francis Crawford Burkitt's *The Religion of the Manichees*, (Cambridge), 1925. Geo. Widengren's more recent *Mani and Manichaeism* (translated by Charles Kessler, revised by the author, London, 1965), written by one whose sympathies lie with the Manichaees, makes interesting reading. Unfortunately however, source references are often lacking. It should also be noted that Augustine wrote many polemics against the Manichaees, but these do not concern the present topic.

²²) Em. de Stoop, *Essai sur la diffusion du Manichéisme dans l'Empire romain*, (Gand), 1909, pp. 6-7.

²³) Burkitt, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-41.

²⁴) *City of God* X 24.

²⁵) *Op. cit.* X 29.

tine chastises them for imputing the origin of vices to the human body, which they considered evil²⁶), as also for being a dualistic religion concerned with two conflicting gods²⁷). However, it is most interesting to remark that in that work he does not see the incarnation as the bulwark to his rebuttal of manichaeism.

By way of attempting to account for this deficiency, it might be proposed that Augustine was unacquainted with the manichaean doctrine of the phantom Christ. This is readily contradicted by recourse to the writings of Augustine himself. Moreover, it must be remembered too, that he had been a manichae during nine important years of his life and therefore possessed a first-hand knowledge of the religion²⁸).

The enigma surrounding the virtual omission of Christ's earthly life from the *City of God* would seem to be partly explained by adverting to the general perspective of the work. According to Augustine, life on earth is intrinsically insignificant. « Our whole life is nothing but a race towards death²⁹ ». « The end of life puts the longest life on a par with the shortest »³¹). Short of suicide, it is death and not life which possesses the greatest wisdom :

I am not unaware of the poor-spirited fear which prompts us to choose rather to live long in fear of so many deaths, than to die once and escape them all; but the weak and cowardly shrinking of the flesh is one thing, and the well-considered and reasonable persuasion of the soul quite another³²).

The perspective of the *City of God* bears not upon this world, which according to Augustine is a mere transient phenomenon at best, but rather upon the next life. It looks to the final separation of the elect and the damned, whereby will also be finally constituted the two kingdoms, the one of God and the other of Satan³³). There, in the other-world, and not in the present life, lies the centre of gravity of

²⁶) *Op. cit.* XIV 5.

²⁷) *Op. cit.* XI 22.

²⁸) Thus, in the *De Continentia* 24 [X]: « Quid de carne Christi dicit insanissimus Manichaeus? Quod non fuit vera, sed falsa ». The manichaean concept of the phantom Christ is referred to at least a dozen times in the writings of Augustine.

²⁹) *Confessions* III 6 and V 7.

³⁰) *City of God* XIII 10.

³¹) *Op. cit.* I 11.

³²) *Ibid.*

³³) *Op. cit.* XXI and XXII.

Augustine's *magnum opus*. This perspective would seem to explain in part, the virtual omission of the earthly life of the Christ-man from that work.

However, Augustine's vision of a united and peaceful Church (even if in Heaven), contained a powerful lesson for a Europe wracked with the turmoil of the dark ages.

Besides endowing Augustine's monumental synthesis with an impressive supernatural grandeur, his vision was of great efficacy in achieving unity and harmony in the emergent medieval civilization. It aided in bridging cultural differences and in subduing destructive dissonance to a sublime vision, wherefrom resulted the united christendom of the middle ages.

On the other hand, with the birth of the modern sciences and therefore of man's increasing pre-occupation with this world, a growing crisis developed between the « this-wordly » and the « other-worldly » aspects of human enlightenment. This tension reached its climax in the nineteenth century, when christianity became the arch-foe of « materialism ». It was the same age which witnessed religion being chided with the marxian taunt of « pie in the sky when you die ». In the meantime however, sober reconsiderations by all concerned have made for more amicable relations.

It remains a matter for interesting speculation, just how much of the unfortunate encounter between the « this-wordly » and the « other-wordly » protagonists could have been avoided, if the Christ of this world had been accorded a prominent place in the magnificent synthesis of Augustine. Christianity may well have taken a far different stand, with a corresponding change in the course of ensuing history. At the same time, it is interesting to observe the recent emergence of the « secular Christ » — the Christ who came not only to teach men the way to the other life, but more immediately to teach men how to live this life ³⁴). It may well be the dawning of a concrete realisation that christianity is supremely committed to this life, for in it, transient as it must be, lie the seeds of eternal life.

³⁴) This theme seems to have grown out of that heroic german pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. It finds particularly emphatic expression in the letters he wrote during his last months of imprisonment. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, (Macmillan, New York), 1953). Thus, in the letter of 25 May, 1944 : « God is no stop-gap, he must be recognized at the centre of life... The ground for this lies in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. He is the centre of life, and he certainly did not 'come' to answer our unsolved problems », (*Op. cit.* p. 174).

The previous considerations have attempted to draw attention to some of the omissions from Augustine's magnificent synthesis in his *City of God*. Tentative explanations have been proposed with a view to accounting for these omissions and some of the possible implications for posterity have been suggested. If these omissions appear as deficiencies, it can well be on account of the exigencies of later history, contingencies which even the genius of the great Augustine could not have anticipated. Without the guiding vision of a man of such peerless stature, western civilization may well have never attained to its present heights.

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