Section I: Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem: Background of Western Civilization

Contemporary Civilization (Ideas and Institutions of Western Man)

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7. Jerusalem: St. Augustine

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Abstract

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Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, Christianity, Jesus, Christians, St. Paul, St. Augustine

Disciplines

Biblical Studies | History of Christianity | Religion

Comments

This is a part of Section I: Athens, Rome, and Jerusalem: Background of Western Civilization. The Contemporary Civilization page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man,* as well as the Table of Contents for both volumes.

More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

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7. St. Augustine

Perhaps no individual after Paul exercised an influence on the history of Christianity comparable to that of Augustine (354-430). Beyond a doubt the greatest of the Latin Church fathers, he lived during the years when the formative period of the Christian Church was drawing to its close. By the time of his death, the polity, the doctrine, and many of the practices which the Western Church was to carry into the Middle Ages were already clearly recognizable, if not finally set. It was the contribution of Augustine, during the last half of a long and eventful life, to sharpen, expound, and expand upon so many different aspects of the Christian faith and in such a convincing (though sometimes inconsistent) way that there was no significant restatement of Roman Catholic doctrine for more than eight hundred years after his death. When the early Protestants of the sixteenth century wished to return to what they held to be true Christianity, they did so through Augustine.

Aurelius Augustinus (or, as he is better known, St. Augustine) was born in the Roman province of Numidia, in North Africa. His parents went to considerable expense to provide him with an education and prepare him for a career as a teacher of rhetoric. It was apparent, by his late teens, that his mind was already thoroughly restless and that he was seeking some interpretation of human destiny by which he could live. He was likewise confronted with a personal problem of a somewhat different kind: as the father of a son born to his mistress, he was perplexed by an apparent inability of his spirit to control

* Philip Schaff, ed., The Creeds of Christendom... (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1877), pp. 66-70.

the fleshly appetites which he regarded as evil. Although his
mother had long been a devout Christian and although his father
became a convert shortly before he died (371), Augustine could
not bring himself to be baptized. (Adult baptism was general
practice at this time). There were parts of the Scriptures
which were undignified and repulsive to him and he found it
impossible to accept the doctrine of the Incarnation. When he
was nineteen years of age he came upon a work of Cicero which,
to use his own words, "quite definitely changed my whole atti-
tude." It was the study of philosophy which Cicero had com-
mended to him, but before he had the time to explore it tho-
roughly, his attention was diverted.

For about a decade, while he was teaching in his native
town, Augustine was sympathetic to Manichaeism, a religion
founded by a Persian, named Mani or Manes (c. 215 - c. 276).
Mani taught that there were two necessary and distinct things
or forces in the universe -- good and evil. He equated good *was very simple.*
with light and evil with darkness. These two forces were in
constant and violent opposition to each other; this struggle *good + evil*
was the great theme of history. Man, though thoroughly defiled *describe*
by the forces of the kingdom of darkness, yet possessed some- *the world*
thing of the kingdom of light. It was to this something that *it is.*
Mani made his appeal. He considered himself the last of a
series of prophets -- ambassadors of light -- called to in-
struct men as to their true nature, dedicate them to the moral
code of the kingdom of light, and call them apart from the
darkness. Mani believed that when, at last, all light has been
delivered from the world there will be a great conflagration,
at which time the final separation of good and evil will take
place.   *He first turned to wild parties.*   *augustine's belief of two*
cities

After about 300, Manichaeism began spreading into the
Roman world, where it gained many adherents because of its
relatively simple and straightforward solution to the difficult
problem of good and evil. It was a fighting, spiritual, and
moral religion, free of such potentially formidable stumbling-
blocks as the Trinity or the Incarnation. In the Mediterranean
area, it was strongest in North Africa, where quite naturally
such a seeker as Augustine would weigh the claims it made to his
commitment. Finally, after being disenchanted completely by
hearing and talking with an influential Manichaean teacher,
whose beliefs he compared with the Greek philosophy which he
had been reading, he rejected Manichaeism and continued his
searching. He found philosophy more congenial but not completely
satisfying.

Augustine now traveled to Rome, where he expected to find a
better position as a teacher of rhetoric. Shortly thereafter,
he went to Milan (384) to teach in a publicly supported school.
It was while he was here that he was introduced to the writings
of Plotinus (c. 205-270), a native of Egypt who had long taught
philosophy in Rome. Plotinus was the leading early exponent of
Neoplatonism.

Spiritual pilgrimage he was going through paralleled
the Roman Empire during this period.

Neoplatonism was the last school of Greek philosophy that had begun with Thales and that had included Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, and the Stoics, among others. In a sense, it is the other side of the coin on which one finds the Church fathers. The interests of the latter were primarily religious, but they felt the need of philosophy to express adequately many of their theological beliefs. The interests of Plotinus and other early Neoplatonists were primarily philosophical. They insisted that they were Platonists, but they shared the preoccupation with religion which characterized the imperial Roman world and for which philosophy alone did not seem adequate. Neoplatonism represents, therefore, an attempt to fuse philosophy and religion.

Plotinus believed that the human soul aspires during the lifetime of the body to break from its fleshly prison and return to the One or the Eternal from which it has "come down" into the sensory world. In preparing to fulfill this aspiration one must make full use of his reason as far as it will take him in understanding the nature of man and the universe. He learns, among other things, the necessity of practicing the virtues, which Plotinus arranged in the order of their capacity to elevate the soul. But even the most virtuous soul is still one step removed from its goal. Up to this point it is possible to recognize the similarity between Plotinus and Plato. Now, Plato had insisted that his speculations were completely rational, that the Good was not beyond the world susceptible to reason. Plotinus, on the other hand, declared that the last and most rewarding step the human soul could take was not only beyond sense but that it was also beyond intellect. By rigorous discipline, by purification, one might succeed in achieving a momentary union with the Eternal, in which one completely loses awareness of himself as a corporeal being and is conscious only of an incomparable bliss in the eternal home of the soul. It is an ecstatic bliss that is essentially indescribable, but it is the highest experience of life. "He who has seen it," wrote Plotinus, "knows what I say." His biographer reported that he had only ever experienced it a very few times in his life. This last step of Plotinus, which complements all the others, is properly described as mysticism -- the belief that it is possible for the human mind to achieve a direct, intimate, supra-rational communion or experience with the Highest, or God -- but it is mysticism that is grounded in reason.

The Eternal with which this mystical union can occur was further identified by Plotinus as the One, the Infinite, the transcendent, ultimate source of all existence. It is beyond knowledge (which is why the rational faculty of man cannot contemplate it as it was possible to contemplate Plato's Good). It is also above and beyond existence (which is why it is not correct even to say that it exists). Everything that does exist is the result of a series of emanations from the One. The first such emanation was Mind, or Spirit, which contains the forms after which particular things were made. The second emanation, from Mind, was Soul, which produced the sensible

world (though not in historic time) after the pattern of these
forms. Further emanations produced human souls and other souls
(in the sense in which the Greeks used this term). Things par-
take less and less of being and reality as they are more distant
from the One, Mind, and Soul. The lowest forms of matter are
almost, if not altogether, non-being and non-reality. Plotinus
was strongly inclined to believe that matter is the source of
evil. The whole picture is one of a great connected chain of
being, a hierarchy linking everything from the highest to the
lowest in a harmonious whole, with each link begotten by the
one above it. Because things are arranged in this fashion, it
is possible for human sensory experience and the human intellect
to prepare the way for the human soul to escape the material
world and return to its source in the One.

Neoplatonism became the most important single school of
philosophy in the later Roman Empire, like Manichaeism a com-
petitor of Christianity. It could not guarantee that the inner
peace which comes from mystical union with the Divine would be
felt frequently. It could appeal only to those who were, in *put the good*
Plotinus' words, "born philosophers." But to them it did ap- *be reason*
peal, to those few self-sufficient rational men left in the *you have to*
Roman world who might qualify as the intellectual descendants *go out of*
of Plato and Aristotle. Unquestionably, the experience of *the world*
Augustine with Neoplatonism left a deeper impression on him *to get*
than did Manichaeism and prepared him later to accept Christi- *good*
anity. Through him (and in time through others), it infiltrated
Christianity. This is true of its thinking about God and par-
ticularly true of its mysticism. From time to time mysticism
has been an important factor in Christianity. It was charac-
teristic neither of Judaism nor of earlier Greek philosophy.
As for Neoplatonism itself, in its later manifestations it
became less and less a philosophy as mystical and magical
elements that were introduced after Plotinus came to predomi-
nate over the rational. The cycle of Greek philosophy had run
its course and ended, as it began, with reason a secondary factor.

Can't really comprehend God until you rise above it

Augustine found much that was helpful to him intellectually
in Neoplatonism, but he was still encountering his moral dif-
ficulty. He was weighed down by the feeling of his own sinful-
ness and could not experience the peace that he craved. The One
was indeed the source of all existence. Man could aspire to a
fleeting, but rewarding union with it. But the transcendent One
was motionless, totally unaware of what went on in the affairs
of men and therefore incapable of reaching out to sustain them
in their weakness. Shortly after Augustine arrived in Milan,
he began listening regularly to the preaching of Bishop Ambrose
(c. 340-397), who was himself later to be ranked among the
Church fathers. He formally became a catechumen. He heard
Ambrose interpret allegorically some of the very passages of
Scripture whose literal translation had been so offensive and
absurd to him. He began to look sympathetically on the possi-
bility of subscribing to the doctrine of the Incarnation. All
he needed at this point to become a Christian was the actual

commitment of his life. This followed upon the intense reli-
gious experience which he underwent in the year 386. Only
after this could he write: ["thou hast made us for thyself and
restless is our heart until it comes to rest in thee." He and
his son were baptized by the bishop (387) and soon returned to
Africa. After a few quiet years of devotion and study, Augus-
tine was ordained into the priesthood (391) and then consecrated
a bishop (395). From 396 until his death in 430 he was a bishop
of the small city of Hippo, west of Carthage, which he made
famous as a Christian center. He died while the Vandals were
storming the city. *wrote his last book during this time*

During his long episcopate, Augustine faithfully performed
the many duties associated with his office; but he found the
time and energy to leave his mark on subsequent generations by
his many writings. More than two hundred of his letters, some
of them very lengthy, have been preserved. Many of his sermons
were copied down and kept. He turned out more than two hundred
other literary productions, most of them to meet some immediate
need before him. One of the most important of these latter is
the Confessions (397-398), Augustine's spiritual autobiography
and the earliest book of its kind. In it he described the
events leading up to his conversion and then discussed at length
what he had learned about the faith which he confessed.

[The City of God was Augustine's most influential work. It
was written in the wake of the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in
410. Augustine was aware of the charge that, by taking the
Romans away from the gods that had protected their city and
brought it to greatness, Christianity was responsible for a
disaster such as had not befallen Rome for eight hundred years.
Beyond this, he was aware of the deep-rooted belief held by
some in his day that Christianity was not compatible with the
best political and social interests of the Roman Empire. In
the minds of these men, the empire was such a permanent and
valuable feature of the cultural landscape that they could
scarcely contemplate its end without the simultaneous end of
the world itself. They could scarcely be expected to embrace
voluntarily a religion which seemed to subvert the very founda-
tions of what was uppermost in their lives.]

These were the fundamental considerations which Augustine
was moved to counter in The City of God. It was a voluminous
book which was issued in parts over a period of thirteen years
(413-426) and which represented the mature thought of its author.
In it Augustine gave his explanation of why the city of Rome,
indeed the whole Roman Empire, was on the decline. In so doing
he had to place Rome, and temporal empires in general, into what
he took to be their proper perspective in the episode of human
history. This grand design required him to formulate his own
interpretation of the meaning of human events. Augustine would
have insisted that this interpretation was revealed to him by
means of the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures. Whether one agrees
with this or not, he must admit that what Augustine produced was
an explanation which ever since has been advanced (albeit often

against the liveliest opposition) as the Christian philosophy
of history.]

The thought of Augustine began with the belief that every-
thing was created by the God of the Christian Trinity. He had
created everything in historic time, from nothing, and according
to the forms in his own mind. He directly sustains the universe
from day to day; without this sustenance it could not continue.
When its purpose in time has been accomplished, the universe
will come to an end. Augustine went to great lengths in discus-
sing the role of God in creation. This is not surprising in
the light either of his own previous intellectual experience or
of the distinction between Christian views of creation and those
of Greek philosophy. He found the ultimate authority for his
opinions in the Scriptures. There are, for example, almost
forty quotations in The City of God of passages taken from the
first three chapters of Genesis.

Augustine believed that from the very beginning of its
existence the human race has been divided:

> This race we have distributed into two parts, the one
> consisting of those who live according to man, the other
> of those who live according to God. And these we also
> mystically call the two cities, or the two communities of
> men, of which the one is predestined to reign eternally
> with God, and the other to suffer eternal punishment with
> the devil. *]

City of God just is.

This is not to say that the earthly city was necessarily evil
and a thing to be avoided. It has its purposes and, in its way,
can effect a limited good:

City that lives without God.

> But the earthly city, which shall not be everlasting...
> has its good in this world, and rejoices in it with such
> joy as such things can afford.... But the things which
> this city desires cannot justly be said to be evil, for
> it is itself, in its own kind, better than all other human
> good. For it desires earthly peace for the sake of en-
> joying earthly goods, and it makes war in order to attain
> to this peace; since, if it has conquered, and there re-
> mains no one to resist it, it enjoys a peace which it had
> not while there were opposing parties who contested for
> the enjoyment of those things which were too small to
> satisfy both. This peace is purchased by toilsome wars;
> it is obtained by what they style a glorious victory. Now,
> when victory remains with the party which had the juster
> cause, who hesitates to congratulate the victor, and style
> it a desirable peace? These things, then, are good things,
> and without doubt the gift of God. **]

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* The City of God, trans. Marcus Dods (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark,
1871), II, 49.
**Ibid., II, 53-54.

This evaluation of things temporal meant that Augustine could never share in the exaltation of political virtues and the state that was so central to Plato and Aristotle. As we have seen, the real break with these Greek thinkers came, not in Christian thought, but several centuries earlier with the Epicureans and the Stoics. None the less, Augustine could scarcely consider the civic virtues to be even as important as they were to the Roman Stoics. For him, the state was one of the consequences of human sinfulness. Had mankind retained the state of perfection in which it was created, political institutions would have been unnecessary. Granted, the fact of human sinfulness makes the state inevitable and provides the basis for Divine approval, but it could not hope to occupy the place in Augustine's thought that it had either for the Greek or for the Roman. *Rome falls because of its nature. It belongs to the city of man*

With this as background, we can examine the claims of Rome and of the Roman Empire to eternity. Augustine was careful not to make either of these two institutions synonymous with the earthly city, which had existed since the beginning of time and which gave promise of existing until time ended. Rome was but one particular example of the earthly city. As such, it was doomed to pass away just as previous cities and empires had disappeared long before the advent of Christianity, the inevitable victim of its chosen allegiance to pride and the devil. Augustine devoted the first ten of the twenty-two books of The City of God to an exposition of the powerlessness -- even more, of the downright evil -- of the gods the Romans had worshiped as the protectors of their imperial city. The one true God, he declared, was in fact responsible for everything that had ever befallen Rome and alone could stay or hasten its day of decline:

> ...we do not attribute the power of giving kingdoms and empires to any save to the true God, who gives happiness in the kingdom of heaven to the pious alone, but gives kingly power on earth both to the pious and the impious, as it may please Him, whose good pleasure is always just.... He, therefore, who is the one true God, who never leaves the human race without just judgment and help, gave a kingdom to the Romans when He would, and as great as He would, as He did also to the Assyrians, and even the Persians... He who gave power to Marius gave it also to Caius Caesar; He who gave it to Augustus gave it also to Nero; He also who gave it to the most benignant emperors, the Vespasians, father and son, gave it also to the cruel Domitian; and, finally, to avoid the necessity of going over them all, He who gave it to the Christian Constantine gave it also to the apostate Julian... Manifestly these things are ruled and governed by the one God according as he pleases; and if His motives are hid, are they therefore unjust? *

Furthermore, who was to say that the usefulenss of the Roman Empire to God was yet at an end:

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* Ibid., I, 218-219.

...the Roman empire is afflicted rather than changed, --
a thing which has befallen it in other times also, before
the name of Christ was heard, and it has been restored
after such affliction, -- a thing which even in these
times is not to be despaired of. For who knows the will
of God concerning this matter?]*

"The glorious city of God is my theme in this work." With
these words Augustine opens his book and introduces one of the
central affirmations of his philosophy of history:

I have undertaken its defence against those who prefer
their own gods to the Founder of this city, -- a city
surpassingly glorious, whether we view it as it still
lives by faith in this fleeting course of time, and so-
journs as a stranger in the midst of the ungodly, or as
it shall dwell in the fixed stability of its eternal
seat, which it now with patience waits for... **

Here, truly, is the only eternal city men will ever know. They
must prepare themselves for the comings and goings of terres-
trial empires and not make them their standards of judgment.
One illustration of what this meant for Augustine is to be found
in his discussion of justice. "Justice being taken away," he
asked, "what are kingdoms but great robberies?" Then he advanced
the thesis that no pagan state could fully realize justice,
since it was something that could not be considered apart from
the sustaining power of God.

...justice is that virtue which gives every one his due.
Where, then, is the justice of man, when he deserts the
true God and yields himself to impure demons? Is this
to give every one his due?... when a man does not serve
God, what justice can we ascribe to him, since in this
case his soul cannot exercise a just control over the
body, nor his reason over his vices? And if there is no
justice in such an individual, certainly there can be
none in a community composed of such persons........what
I say of [the Romans] I must be understood to think and
say of the Athenians or any Greek state, of the Egyptians,
of the early Assyrian Babylon, and of every other nation,
great or small, which had a public government. For, in
general, the city of the ungodly, which did not obey the
command of God that it should offer no sacrifice save to
Him alone, and which, therefore, could not give to the
soul its proper command over the body, nor to the reason
its just authority over the vices, is void of true justice. ***

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* Ibid., I, 143.
** Ibid., I, 1.
*** Ibid., II, 331-332, 340.

The state grows out of man's sin.

The heavenly city was not to be equated with the Church.
Like the earthly city, it has existed from the beginning of time,
its first citizens having been recruited from among the angels.
Augustine believed that after ages of virtual dormancy on earth
the heavenly city was at last coming into the open to direct men
to their true loyalty. *members of the ~~heavenly~~ Church ~~was~~ belonged to the heavenly city.*

There is a tension in Augustine which is part and parcel of
a deeply ingrained feature of the Christian faith. The two
cities, he wrote, "are mingled together from the beginning down
to the end." Even if he would, the citizen of the heavenly
city, while he sojourns on earth, cannot ignore the earthly
city. The simplest disposition would be to deprive it of all
its terrestrial citizens by converting them, but Augustine was
never quite sanguine enough to believe that this would occur.
In an atmosphere of half-peace and half-war, the good citizen
of the Christian polis would pass his earthly days:

> ...the things necessary for this mortal life are used by
> both kinds of men and families alike, but each has its
> own peculiar and widely different aim in using them. The
> earthly city, which does not live by faith, seeks an earthly
> peace, and the end it proposes, in the well-ordered concord
> of civic obedience and rule, is the combination of men's
> wills to attain the things which are helpful to this life.
> The heavenly city, or rather the part of it which sojourns
> on earth and lives by faith, makes use of this peace only
> because it must, until this mortal condition which neces-
> sitates it shall pass away. Consequently, so long as it
> lives like a captive and a stranger...it makes no scruple
> to obey the laws of the earthly city, whereby the things
> necessary for the maintenance of this mortal life are ad-
> ministered; and thus, as this life is common to both cities,
> so there is a harmony between them in regard to what belongs
> to it. But...it has come to pass that the two cities
> could not have common laws of religion, and that the heav-
> enly city has been compelled in this matter to dissent, and
> to become obnoxious to those who think differently, and to
> stand the brunt of their anger and hatred and persecutions,
> except in so far as the minds of their enemies have been
> alarmed by the multitude of the Christians and quelled by
> the manifest protection of God accorded to them. *

in the world, not of it   *"give to Caesar what is Caesar's, & to God what is God's."*

An integral part of the Augustinian philosophy of history
was his treatment of the origin and nature of sin and evil, a
subject to which his own experience made him acutely sensitive.
As a Christian, he had somehow to avoid Manichaean dualism on
the one hand and the Neoplatonic identification of evil and mat-
ter on the other. Whether he was ever completely successful in
this is still open to question.

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* Ibid., II, 326-327.

Augustine argued that since God had created everything and that since God is supreme good, there was originally no such thing as evil, whether material or spiritual. He explained the possibility of evil's arising by saying that human natures, created as they were from nothing, could defect from the good. Man, then, was created perfect in the image of God, but with the capacity to fall away from this perfection. Evil entered human history by an act of free choice on the part of the first human beings, who in their pride chose to behave like God and not like men:

> ...by the precept He gave, God commended obedience, which is, in a sort, the mother and guardian of all the virtues in the reasonable creature, which was so created that submission is advantageous to it, while the fulfillment of its own will in preference to the Creator's is destruc- tion. *

Augustine was careful to explain that it is not the flesh that is evil ("it was not the corruptible flesh that made the soul sinful, but the sinful soul that made the flesh corruptible") nor is it human nature ("It is not nature...which is contrary to God"). Evil is simply the defection from God of the human will -- that mental faculty by which we determine to do or not to do something.

The consequences of the disobedience of the first human beings, as stated by Augustine, were catastrophic indeed: slavery to natural appetites, the death of the body (which he believed would never have taken place but in consequence of this disobedience), and the death of the soul (by which he meant the separation of the soul from God and its everlasting punish- ment).

At this point Augustine came face to face with another of the recurring problems of Christianity: that of predestination. Surely an omnipotent God knew in advance that man would use his freedom to sin. It would detract from God's perfection to say that there was ever any lack of knowledge about it in His mind. And yet, particularly in view of the dire consequences which Augustine saw issuing from sin, it made a cruel and pathetic joke of human freedom to say that even before the sin of Adam God knew which men who will ever live are predestined to eternal bliss and which are predestined to damnation. The attempted resolution of these two divergent possibilities -- divine fore- knowledge and human freedom -- often seems to resemble the pur- suit of the will-o'-the-wisp. It is enough at this point to say that Augustine subscribed to a belief in predestination.

Augustine concluded that the sin of Adam and Eve was such that its stain and consequences are transmitted to every suc- ceeding generation. This is called the doctrine of original sin:

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* Ibid., II, 25.

God can't destroy evil and doesn't want to?

For God, the author of natures, not of vices, created
man upright; but man, being of his own will corrupted,
and justly condemned, begot corrupted and condemned
children. For we all were in that one man, since we
all were that one man who fell into sin by the woman who
was made from him before the sin. For not yet was the
particular form created and distributed to us, in which
we as individuals were to live, but already the seminal
nature was there from which we were to be propagated;
and this being vitiated by sin, and bound by the chain
of death, and justly condemned, man could not be born of
man in any other state. And thus, from the bad use of
free will, there originated the whole train of evil,
which, with its concatenation of miseries, convoys the
human race from its depraved origin, as from a corrupt
root, on to the destruction of the second death, which
has no end, those only being excepted who are freed by
the grace of god. *

In this hopeless predicament, Augustine observed, man cries
out for salvation from the sin and death which are his lot and
which he justly deserves. Hope is reborn when the grace of God
-- God's unmerited love -- is offered through Jesus Christ to
those who have faith:

..For He, abiding unchangeable, took upon Him our
nature, that thereby He might take us to Himself; and,
holding fast His own divinity, He became partaker of
our infirmity, that we, being changed into some better
thing, might, by participating in His righteousness and
immortality, lose our own properties of sin and mortal-
ity, and preserve whatever good quality He had implanted
in our nature, perfected now by sharing in the goodness
of His nature. For as by the sin of one man we have
fallen into a misery so deplorable, so by the righteous-
ness of one Man, who also is God, shall we come to a
blessedness inconceivably exalted. **

The doctrine of original sin, which Augustine was not the
first to enunciate but to which he added the great weight of his
influence, involved him in what is known as the Pelagian contro-
versy. Pelagius (c. 360 - c. 420) was a monk from the British
Isles who came to Rome about the year 400. He was depressed by
the low level of morality which he found there and unsatisfied
with the argument that it was all somehow inevitable, brought
about by utter impotence of the human will to do good. Pelagius
had never experienced the troubled mind of Augustine. When he
read the Confessions, he took up the cudgels against its author,
in the belief that the arguments which Augustine advanced only
buttressed the attitude which he had found in Rome. In the

* Ibid., I, 534-535.
** Ibid., II, 441-442.

debates which followed, Augustine stated the extreme position that in the sin of Adam and Eve the human will became totally depraved. This meant that man was free only to sin, that without Divine assistance man can do nothing that is good, and that he cannot even receive God's grace without help. Like others before them, including some of the Church fathers, Pelagius and his followers denied the doctrine of original sin as a reflection on God's creation. They believed that Adam's sin stained only Adam ("God will not condemn a man for something over which he has no control.") They stressed the God-given freedom of the will to choose good or evil, to accept or rejcet the proffered grace. "If I ought, I can," wrote Pelagius in effect. From this followed the corollary that it was quite possible for a man to lead a sinless life. From this it was simple to deduce that Christ had been sent into the world merely to provide men with an example of a good life.

This controversy was not settled until about a century after the death of the leading protagonists. In the year 529 the Council of Orange stated what was to be the orthodox position, which might be described as a softened Augustinianism. The doctrine of original sin was affirmed, but it was denied that man was totally depraved or that he is predestined to do evil. The council declared that through the sacrament of baptism all men receive grace and that, by diligence, they can do everything necessary to the soul's salvation.

Augustine's doctrine of the Church, to which we shall return in Chapter III, is not as pronounced in The City of God as it is in some of his other writings. Clearly, he considered it a divinely ordained institution whose authority was derived by the bishops in succession from the apostles. It was the dispenser of the sacraments and they were the indispensable vehicles of grace. Consequently, it was possible for him to say that outside the Church there is no salvation.

During his episcopate Augustine added to the institutional authority of the Church by helping to end the Donatist controversy, which had plagued the church in North Africa for about seventy-five years. The Donatists held that the Church was a society of regenerate persons which could not include unworthy members and that the sacraments were not valid when administered by unworthy priests. In the year 411 Augustine arranged for a conference of bishops to meet at Carthage under imperial auspices. The result was a solution along the lines which he had advocated. The validity of the sacrament properly administered according to the rules of the Church was held to depend upon the recipient and not upon the worthiness of the administrant. Furthermore, it was declared that the holiness of the Church depends upon its divine institution and not upon the absence of unworthy members from its midst. This solution did not satisfy everyone in North Africa or dispose of the difficulty elsewhere, but it became the accepted opinion of the Roman Catholic Church.

By way of summary, it can be said that St. Augustine represented one powerful link between the Greco-Roman world, with much of whose culture he was more than passingly familiar, and the medieval world, very much of whose culture he influenced. It can also be said that he represented a strong link between this world, in which his activities as bishop and formulator of orthodoxy -- of such doctrines as creation, fall, original sin, and grace -- come to mind, and the next world of the Christians, in which his activities as a mystic are to be found. This helps to explain why this great defender of the Roman Catholic Church could appeal so strongly to some of the early Protestants. Finally, it can also be said that St. Augustine represents a link between his age and our own. Some of his observations on human nature have been reexamined by modern psychologists. Some contemporary theologians have found in him their answer to the predicament in which twentieth-century man thinks he finds himself. In a survey of Western Civilization we cannot in justice ignore Augustine.