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Some Anti-Pelagian Echoes in Augustine's *City of God*

Among the solutions which Christians have offered to the problem of the origin of evil in God's good world, St. Augustine's *City of God* is still classic. The political development of the fifth century presented a situation which demanded some answer to this problem, and the Augustine who addressed his great apologetic treatise *De civitate Dei* to that development had been dealing with the problem of evil in a number of polemical treatises as well, namely, in those directed against the Pelagian heresy. The issues involved in the Pelagian controversy were clear and fundamental in Augustine's thinking.¹ So much is this the case that these issues form a significant, if not dominant, motif in many of Augustine's works not usually classified as "anti-Pelagian." The present brief study seeks to make a few observations on this aspect of the *De civitate Dei*, which appears to this observer to have been neglected by many students of the treatise.² It suggests that a neglected theme of the treatise is stated in the words: "... the stranger in this world, the citizen of the City of God, predestined by grace, elected by grace, by grace a stranger below, and by grace a citizen above" (XV, 1: p. 285).

From the year 413 to 426 Augustine worked on his *City of God*. To the height of his great argument he asserted eternal Providence and sought to justify the ways of God to men. Like Plato's *Politeia*, Augustine's *De civitate Dei* has often been interpreted as a political treatise, dealing with issues like the relation between Church and State.³ But in all these attempts, as in similar interpretations of Plato, the interpreters seem to have overlooked what Gustaf Aulén calls the *Lebenstrieb* or *Grundmotiv*.⁴ "Because God foresaw all things, and was therefore not ignorant that man also would fall, we ought to consider this holy city in connection with what God foresaw and ordained [secundum id, quod praescivit atque disposuit, civitatem sanctam debemus adserere], and not according to our own ideas, which do not embrace God's ordination" (XIV, 11: p. 271).

Let us consider this holy city in this way. In his preface to this "great and arduous work" the author indicates his awareness of "what ability is required to persuade the proud how great is the virtue of humility, which raises us, not by a quiet human arrogance, but by a divine grace, above all earthly dignities that totter on this shifting

scene" (p. 1). Thus he shows that in opposition to the tottering and shifting of human efforts he wishes to extol the sovereignty of divine grace.

This aspect of the *City of God* comes to the fore repeatedly throughout the treatise, but especially in the already quoted fourteenth book.⁵ It undergirds a good part of Augustine's discussion about the Roman Empire and its history. So, for instance, the "bloody bliss of Marius" was due "to the secret providence of God, that the mouths of our adversaries might be shut. . . . And even if the demons have any power in these matters, they have only that power which the secret decree of the Almighty allots to them [quantum secreto omnipotentis arbitrio permittuntur]." (II, 23: p. 38.) And power was not granted to men like Nero "save by the providence of the most high God, when He judges that the state of human affairs is worthy of such lords. . . . Though I have, according to my ability, shown for what reason God, who alone is true and just, helped forward the Romans . . . there may be, nevertheless, a more hidden cause, known better to God than to us, depending on the diversity of the merits of the human race." (V, 19: pp. 101—102.) It is this God who "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. . . . 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?" (V, 21: p. 103.)

The purpose of presenting these rather extensive quotations has been to show that Augustine looks at Roman history and its evils, as at everything else, *sub specie aeternitatis*—yes, *sub specie aeternae Dei gratiae*. For even the demons, maintains Augustine, probably with reminiscences of his former Manichaeism, "cannot do anything of this kind unless they are permitted by the deep and secret providence of God, and then only so far as they are permitted" (VIII, 24: p. 163). This is, of course, rooted in Augustine's conception of God⁶ and His immutable, sovereign will. "He is called Almighty only because He is mighty to do all He wills [certe non ob aliud vocatur omnipotens nisi quoniam quidquid vult potest]" (XXI, 7; p. 458). Such a comprehensive view of immutability as Augustine's must exclude all anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms; in a long passage which has become a Christian classic on this problem, Augustine explains *Umstimmungen in Gott* in terms of unchangeableness (XII, 17: pp. 237

to 238). To be consistent in his doctrine of God, he was ultimately driven to ask rhetorically: "Why, then, should God not have created those whom He foresaw would sin, since He was able to show in and by them both what their guilt merited and what His grace bestowed, and since, under His creating and disposing hand, even the perverse disorder of the wicked could not pervert the right order of things?" (XIV, 26: p. 282.)

Here is one of the issues of the Pelagian controversy — the problem of evil and the problem of Adam, which occupies so large a portion of Book XIV. It is probably inevitable that it should come up somewhere along the line; for the *civitas terrena* began with Cain and the *civitas Dei* with Abel (XV, 1: p. 284). Evil begins with Adam. Nor does it help matters any to carry the problem beyond Adam to Satan, as the demonological section of the *City of God* and the theodicy of Milton amply demonstrate. Adam is the crux; from him all men descend and both cities proceed, to join the good angels or the evil, as God secretly but justly decrees (XII, 27: p. 244). Augustine does not want to be a determinist, but he is more zealous of preserving the foreknowledge of God than of avoiding determinism. "They are far more tolerable who assert the fatal influences of the stars than they who deny the foreknowledge of future events," he says in a long discussion (V, 9-10: pp. 90-93), which sets up the eternal paradox of divine foreknowledge and human freedom. The inhabitants of the *civitas terrena* are predestined to suffer eternal punishment with the devil, just as the inhabitants of the *civitas Dei* are predestined to live eternally with God (XV, 1: p. 284).⁷ And yet God "governs all things in such a manner as to allow them to perform and exercise their own proper movements" (VII, 30: p. 140). In fact, "no one is evil by nature, but whoever is evil is evil by vice" (XIV, 6: p. 266).⁸

Basically, this is Augustine's answer to the problem of the origin of evil, both in the Pelagian controversy and in the *City of God*: that sin came into the world not because, though within, God's foreknowledge, nor yet because of man's free will, but because man abused that free will; and that this abuse of free will brought death into the world and all our woe.⁹ This aspect of free will becomes somewhat clearer if viewed in terms of the eschatology in the *City of God*. Augustine summarizes the entire situation in a few words: "Neither are we to suppose that because sin shall have no power to delight them, free will must be withdrawn. It will, on the contrary, be all the more truly free, because set free from delight in sinning to take unfailing delight in not sinning. For the first freedom of will which man received when

he was created upright consisted in an ability not to sin, but also in an ability to sin; whereas this last freedom of will shall be superior, inasmuch as it shall not be able to sin." (XXII, 30: p. 510.)

Additional light on all of this is offered by a consideration of some isagogical facts about the *De civitate Dei*. For one thing, it was composed during the years of the Pelagian controversy; so great an upheaval as this in Augustine's thought cannot have been without influence on his masterpiece. Then, too, the *City of God* was written at the urging of "my dearest son Marcellinus" (Preface: p. 1), who, it will be remembered, was partly responsible for involving Augustine in the Pelagian controversy.¹⁰ Nor dare Pelagius himself be forgotten. Jacobi has attempted to show that Pelagius' world view was in many ways almost deistic, that, in opposition to Augustine, he taught very little divine participation in human affairs.¹¹ Although Jacobi, influenced by the centuries of historical polemic, probably finds too much in the meager documentary evidence he produces, Pelagius' doctrine of God's grace in action, as summarized by Loofs,¹² was, to say the least, not the same as Augustine's from this angle either. The problem is that Augustine expressly states he is not dealing with "those who either deny that there is any divine power or contend that it does not interfere with human affairs" (X, 18: p. 192).¹³

From these data it would appear that there may be more of an anti-Pelagian tone to the *City of God* than is generally thought.

NOTES

1. Even Adolf von Harnack, who can hardly be said to be partial to doctrinal controversies, says: "Es hat vielleicht keine zweite, gleich bedeutsame Krisis in der Kirchengeschichte gegeben, in welcher die Gegner so klar und rein die Prinzipien, um die es sich handelte, zum Ausdruck gebracht haben." *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (Tuebingen, 1920, III, 167).
2. Throughout this paper I quote the *City of God* by the traditional book and chapter divisions; the page number after the colon refers to the translation by Marcus Dods in Philip Schaff (ed.), *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, II (Buffalo, 1887), pp. 1—511. In a few critical spots I have added the Latin. My discussion owes much to Heinrich Scholz, *Glaube und Unglaube in der Weltgeschichte* (Leipzig, 1911), esp. his "Voraussetzungen und Grundbegriffe," pp. 20—69.
3. For two extreme presentations see Bruno Seidel, *Die Lehre vom Staat beim heiligen Augustinus* (Breslau, 1910), which presents a Roman Catholic viewpoint; and H. Reuter, "Die Kirche als 'Reich Gottes,'" *Augustinische Studien* (Gotha, 1881), which criticizes such interpretations.
4. *Das Christliche Gottesbild in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart* (German translation of *Den kristna gudsbilden*, 1927; Gütersloh, 1930), p. 54.
5. Perhaps this is why Scholz regards Book XIV as "heimatlos." He groups it with Book XIX, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

6. For the following compare the stimulating chapter "Augustins Gottesbegriff und die Entstehung der Gnadenlehre" in Viktor Stegemann, *Augustinus Gottesstaat*, No. 15 of the "Heidelberger Abhandlungen zur Philosophie und ihrer Geschichte" (Tuebingen, 1928), pp. 4—18.
7. The phrase "altera aeternum supplicium subire cum diabolo" offers a severe exegetical problem. But the force of the parallelism in "altera," as well as the lack of anything else in the context to which the "subire" can be attached, makes the interpretation given above most plausible. Cf. also the question, spoken of the evil angels: "Who, then, can doubt that God, either in foreknowledge or in act, separated between these and the rest?" (XI, 33: p. 224.)
8. On the significance of "vitium" cf. XI, 17: p. 214, with Dods' note there, as well as his note *sub* XII, 1: p. 227.
9. Interesting to note is Coquaeus' comment, recorded by Dods (to XII, 21: p. 241), that "this passage is leveled against the Pelagians."
10. On Marcellinus cf. the note in Benjamin B. Warfield, *Two Studies in the History of Doctrine* (New York, 1897), p. 28, and Scholz, *op. cit.*, pp. 7—8, where reference is made to Angus.
11. J. L. Jacobi, *Die Lehre des Pelagius* (Leipzig, 1842), p. 27.
12. In his article on "Pelagius und die pelagianischen Streitigkeiten," *Real-enzyklopaedie fuer protestantische Theologie und Kirche*, XV, 747—774.
13. He repeats this statement at least twice explicitly (XII, 24: p. 242; XXI, 7: p. 458), and implicitly *passim*.

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Swedish Episcopal Letter on Sex Problems

The Lutheran Quarterly, February 1952, published "A Letter Concerning a Life Problem of a People—To the Clergy of the Church of Sweden from their Bishops." The episcopal letter indicates implicitly how tenuous the line between the world and the Church has become in a country which is so predominantly Lutheran. But are we not confronted by the same problems? This episcopal letter will serve to point up and correctly evaluate some of the problems which confront the Christians in our modern society. Dr. Bergendoff has translated the letter from the Swedish text and has also kindly given permission for this reprint. The letter follows.

F. E. M.

MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

Marriage, a legalized union of one man and one woman, has as its purpose the common welfare and care of parents and children. It seeks the development and deepening of their character and is the absolute foundation of community life. The Church wishes to protect and preserve this gift of God.

Marriage vows in God's will are irrevocable. Security and stability in the fellowship of the home depend on the fact that the marriage bond is indissoluble. The unshakable intention of the parents to belong to each other throughout life saves them from being driven whither in