

The Violence of Idolatry and Peaceful Coexistence: The Current Relevance of *civ. Dei*

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In Dialogue with Augustine

Augustine's work, in addition to having its own identity, continues to be a mirror by which different eras, cultures and visions of the world can gauge their relationship with tradition. Hermeneutically speaking, this is particularly true of *civ. Dei*: because of its thematic complexity and the set of explanations woven through it, this work is not only open to a plurality of interpretations, but, throughout history, has also served as a lens through which the different manifestations of the relationship between Christian faith and philosophical inquiry can be viewed.

Drawing upon the title of an excellent work by Etienne Gilson, contemporary culture continues to question itself regarding the *Métamorphoses de la cité de Dieu*. In this fruitful hermeneutical circularity, however, the interpreter of Augustine must not project upon his work the tendency, particularly widespread today, toward selective and reductive reading that leads one to read *civ. Dei* like the *centones*. This is important for several reasons, not the least of which is the fact that Augustine did not intend to have his work classified this way.¹ On the other hand, the search for thematic coherence and unity of inspiration, which *is* the legitimate concern of the best Augustinian historiography, can help us better evaluate contemporary culture's reticence toward Augustine's answers and, even prior to that, his questions.

1. Cf. *civ. Dei* XVII,15 (CCSL 48, p. 579).

An aspect of this comparison that is particularly relevant today concerns the relationship between polytheism and idolatry. Contemporary culture is permeated with a renewed openness to polytheism. The manifesto that legitimizes this tendency can be found in the famous words of Nietzsche:

For an individual to posit his own ideal and to derive from it his own law, joys and rights—that may well have been considered hitherto to be the most outrageous of human aberrations and idolatry itself. . . . The wonderful art and power of creating gods—polytheism—was that through which this drive could discharge itself, purify, perfect and ennoble itself. . . . Monotheism, in contrast, this rigid consequence of the teachings of a normal human type—that is, the belief in a normal god next to whom there are only false pseudo-gods—was perhaps the greatest danger to humanity so far.²

In another work, Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* imagines that the gods one day "laughed themselves to death! This happened when the most godless words issued from a God himself—the words: 'There is one God! Thou shalt have no other God beside me!'"³

Among the many texts that could be quoted alongside Nietzsche's, suffice it to recall the words of Cioran:

Le polythéisme correspond mieux à la diversité de nos tendances et de nos impulsions, auxquelles il offre la possibilité de s'exercer, de se manifester, chacune d'elles étant libre de tender, selon sa nature, vers le dieu qui lui convient sur le moment. Mais qu'entreprendre avec un seul dieu? comment l'envisager, comment l'utiliser? Lui présent, on vit toujours *sous pression*. Le monothéisme comprime notre sensibilité: il nous apporofndit en nous resserrant. . . . Nous étions assurément plus *normaux* avec plusieurs dieux que nous ne le sommes avec un seul.⁴

Commenting on this rehabilitation, David Miller wrote:

We have suffered a death of God. But, now that the first shadows of desperation have passed, we discover a new opportunity coming from the loss of a single center that held everything together. The death of God was in effect the death of a monotheistic way of thinking and speaking of God and, in general, of a monotheistic way of thinking and speaking of meaning and of the general human being.⁵

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2. F. Nietzsche, *The Greatest Advantage of Polytheism*, in *The Gay Science*, trans. B. Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 128–129.
 3. F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. G. Parkes (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 158.
 4. E. M. Cioran, *Le mauvais démiurge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), pp. 35–36.
 5. D. Miller, *The New Polytheism. The Rebirth of the Gods and the Goddesses* (Dallas, TX: Spring Publications, 1981), p. 25.

Although the connection he made is questionable, Miller went on to denounce the political consequences of these different religious forms: “Socially understood, polytheism is eternally in unresolvable conflict with social monotheism, which in its worst form is fascism and in its less destructive forms is imperialism, capitalism, feudalism and monarchy.” His conclusion, which equates religion with politics, would certainly be problematic for the principle of the laity or the common people: “There is an incipient polytheism always lurking in democracy. This polytheism will surface during the history of democracies if the civilization does not first succumb to anarchy.”⁶

This brief study will not permit a broader exploration of this unexpected and paradoxical twist in contemporary thought, a twist that has allowed for a simultaneous convergence of different themes and motifs on the psychological, anthropological, social and political levels.⁷ The root of this phenomenon lies in the crisis of reason, which appears today as the only possible alternative to modern rationalism, the culture that a widespread stereotype tends to define as “postmodern.” The difficulty of articulating the relationship between the many and the one and of measuring oneself critically against the metaphysical difference between finite and infinite, a move which was one of the greatest achievements of the Greek *logos*, tends to obviate a difference in altitude with the sheer heights of transcendence and permits the postmodern individual to foster the illusion that he can reproduce it on an “all too human” level in the paradoxical form of an idol. According to Marion, because the adorer fears atheism in the sense of being abandoned by the gods, any idol that is taken seriously attempts to adapt him or her to the divine. In this way, the idol loses the distance that identifies the divine as such—as that which does not belong to us, but comes toward us.”⁸

This contribution seeks to listen in on a critical interlocution between Augustine and contemporary thought regarding this phenomenon by re-reading, according to an inner coherence, the first and second parts of *civ. Dei*. The fundamental intent of this re-reading can be explained via three theses. The first calls upon the anthropological pertinence of faith: unlike atheism, which can be considered a conspicuous variable of modern culture but historically limited and rather elitist, the true alternative that is continually proposed to us by the Scriptures, the Fathers and by Augustine in particular, is not between believing and not believing, but between faith and idolatry. After all, the opposite of faith isn't incredulity; it is idolatry. For this reason, we

6. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

7. In fact, I have attempted just such an interpretation in my *Cielo di plastica. L'eclisse dell'infinito nell'epoca delle idolatrie* (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2009).

8. Cf. J.-L. Marion, *L'idole et la distance: cinq études* (Paris: B. Grasset, 1977), pp. 18–19.

could agree with Scheler that “Jeder endliche Geist glaubt entweder an Gott oder an einen Götzen.”⁹ Another way of expressing the radicalism of this “either/or” is to employ the Augustinian opposition of heaven and earth, which, of course, provides the criterion for distinguishing between the two cities.

The second thesis, while clearly connected with the first, concerns the difference—and therefore the absolute incompatibility—between monotheism and polytheism. This difference makes it impossible to identify the latter as more inclusive, as if monotheism were an impoverished and intolerant form of religious faith. Instead, in the era of multiculturalism, it seems that religions can only be liberated from the temptation to fundamentalism if they are willing to enter into the pantheon of compatible cults. Hidden behind this drift toward polytheism, which has infiltrated contemporary culture so widely and thoroughly, however, is an idolatrous compulsion which in our day—not unlike it did in Augustine’s—has come to play an important role in the *Weltanschauung* of the *civitas terrena*.

The third and final thesis concerns the ethical and political implications of this difference: according to Augustine, faith in one, transcendent God is an alternative not only to idolatrous faiths, but also to all forms of violence in interpersonal relationships. It is simply not true that a monotheistic faith is an obstacle to all forms of peaceful coexistence, or that, in the name of a single system of thought, monotheism introduces rigidity and intolerance into the political sphere. According to Augustine, the opposite is closer to reality: it is the *civitas terrena*, which draws its gods from the earth, that seeks an equivocal sacralization and, in this way, infects the fabric of coexistence with the destabilizing and nihilistic virus that is inherently deceitful and violent.

De vera et falsa religione

My approach to *civ. Dei* draws upon the thesis of Goulven Madec.¹⁰ According to Madec, *civ. Dei* can be read as a work *de vera et falsa religione*, in the sense that it foregrounds an irreducible competition between Christian religion and pagan cults with regard to the full attainment of happiness and demystifies all the false promises

9. M. Scheler, *Ioom Ewigen im Menschen*, in Scheler *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 5, ed. Maria Scheler (Bern: Frank Verlag, 1954, 1968⁵), p. 261.

10. Cf. G. Madec, “Le De civitate Dei *comme* De vera religione,” in *Interiorità e intenzionalità nel “De civitate Dei” di Sant’Agostino*, ed. R. Piccolomini (Roma: Institutum Patristicum “Augustinianum,” 1991), pp. 7–33. This essay is now available in *Petites études augustiniennes* (Paris: Institut d’Études Augustiniennes, 1994), pp. 189–213. Madec’s view is shared by I. Bochet. See her *Introduction à Saint Augustin, La cité de Dieu*, I (Paris: Institut d’Études Augustiniennes, 1993), pp. 11ff.

of polytheism.¹¹ Obviously, this approach necessitates a careful re-reading of the first part of the work, books that are too often ignored on the assumption that they seem dated or of little contemporary relevance. In this vein, I will start by establishing an intrinsic link between the first and the second parts of *civ. Dei*.

In the first ten books of *civ. Dei*, Augustine opens a polemical front directly against pagan culture, which seems to have been impacted by the other comparisons and conflicts that marked his reflective journey toward maturity. Scholars have rightly indicated the impact of the Pelagian dispute on the composition of this work,¹² as well as that with the Donatists. More complex is the relationship with Manichaeism, which has fueled inaccurate interpretations of the antithesis between the two cities. The intellectual, religious and human experience of Augustine as a member of the Manichaean sect left a profound mark on the foundational categories of *civ. Dei*. This mark, however, was not in the form of a more or less latent dualism. On the contrary, it was precisely his critical victory over Manichaean dualism that helped Augustine internalize the conflict between good and evil and to avoid hypostasizing it on the cosmic and ontological level. As is well known, the two cities are not on the same plane: just as there are not two natures, but a nature and the *corruptio* of the *voluntas*, there is also one unique city that triumphs eternally and its historical *defectio*, which distances itself from the former through the perversion of its loves. Just as there was only one city at the beginning of time, so also will there be just one at the eschaton: “The earthly city will not be everlasting; for when it is condemned to the final punishment it will no longer be a city.”¹³

In grappling with the doctrine of Mani, Augustine comes out with a strengthened monotheistic faith; in fact, it increases simultaneously with the assertion of God’s absolute immutability: “He in fact is perfect, lacking nothing, has no origin, is not divided, has no extension, is entirely gathered in himself, immutable, self-sufficient, happy in himself, because of the abundance of his goodness he spoke through his Word and all was made. He commanded and everything was created.”¹⁴ However, the discovery of the aggressive, and not just defective, character of an evil act distances

11. The fundamental work here is G. Bolis, *L'idolatria in S. Agostino. Una prospettiva antropologica* (Milano: Pontificio Seminario Lombardo, Roma: Glossa, 2004).

12. Cf. R. Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

13. *Civ. Dei* XV,4; For this trans., see H. Bettenson, *Saint Augustine Concerning the City of God against the Pagans* (London: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 599. Cf. CCL 48, p. 456: “Terrena porro civitas, quae sempiterna non erit (neque enim, cum extremo supplicio damnata fuerit, iam civitas erit), hic habet bonum suum.”

14. *C. Faust.* 14,11 (CSEL 25, p. 412): “Ille enim perfectus et nullius indigens et nusquam defluens neque discissus neque per loca distentus apud se totus incommutabilis sibi que sufficiens, se ipso

him—at least on this point—from Neo-Platonic thought. It induces him to conceive of polytheism not only as a simple distortion of true religion thanks merely to its intellectual deficiencies, but also as the result of a diabolic deception.

The modern reader should not be surprised by the great amounts of space and ink that are devoted to demonology in *civ. Dei*.¹⁵ In the Greek world, the *daimon* originally indicated an unforeseeable non-human event present in phenomena.¹⁶ It was thus conceived as a supernatural force and was understood in the vague and generic sense of *theós* and, like the latter, was endowed with the privilege of immortality (*athánatos*). Although it began among the faith of the common people, demonology progressively affirmed itself in the Orphic religion and even came to exercise significance influence on Plato, who acknowledged that *daimones* mediated between the divine and human spheres.¹⁷ A particularly developed demonology is present in the doctrines of the “Platonists,” which, in turn, have various aspects in common with the *Chaldean Oracles*, especially Albinus, Apuleius, and Plutarch.¹⁸

In the years immediately preceding the composition of *civ. Dei*, Augustine’s attention to demonology increased: on the one hand, he defended Christian faith against any and all polytheistic contaminations, attributing to Christology an unequivocal discontinuity from any other form of mediation between the divine and the human; and, on the other, he increasingly equated polytheism with idolatry. For example, in *CONS. EV.*, which was probably composed just after *c. Faust.*, he affirmed that, with the coming of Christ, people came to Him as he made the words of the prophets his own over against the people’s idolatry and as he cast down their

beatus propter abundantiam bonitatis per uerbum suum dixit et facta sunt; mandauit, et creata sunt.” This trans. is my own.

15. Cf. Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society*, p. 44 (cf. n. 12).

16. Cf. A. D. Nock, *Conversion: the old and the new in religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).

17. According to Plato “the universe being thus full throughout of living creatures,” the demons “act as interpreters, and interpreters of all things, to one another and to highest gods, seeing that the middle ranks of creatures can flit so lightly over the hearth and the whole universe.” *Epinom.*, 985b, in Plato, *Philebus and Epinomis*, trans. A. E. Taylor (London: Th. Nelson and Sons, 1956), p. 239. On the mediating function of demons, see also Maximus of Tyre, *Diss.*, 14,6–8, Bibliotheca Teubneriana, ed. M. B. Trapp (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1994) pp. 122–125; Plutarch, *De def. orac.*, 415a and 416 d–f, Bibliotheca Teubneriana, ed. W. Sieveking (Stuttgart: Teubner, 1997), pp. 70 and 74–75; Celsus in Origen, *Contra Cels.*, 8,63 (cf. PG 21, cols. 1609–1612).

18. At 15,2 of his *Didaskalikos*, Albinus presents the demons as generated gods who preside over many and various evil practices: “From them derives omens, oracles, dreams, and all other things practiced by man concerning divination.” See Albinus, *Il Didaskalikos di Albino e il medioplatonismo*, II, ed. G. Invernizzi (Roma: Abete, 1976), p. 38.

simulacra.¹⁹ All were aware that condemnation of idolatry is ubiquitous in the Old Testament, but now, through the work of Christ and His Church, the Author of that promise is proclaimed as the God of all the earth.²⁰ Augustine takes advantage of this opportunity to condemn the hypothesis, advanced *mira dementia*, that Christ adored pagan gods and worked miracles through their intercession.²¹

Augustine faces the issue explicitly in *divin. daem.* (406–411). In this work he resolves the *quaestio* about the divinatory power of demons at its root and in full continuity with Jewish tradition, which understood demons as agents of evil, as minions of Satan who were formed during the rebellion against God.²² *Ep.* 102 to Deogratias, which dates from this same period, is of particular importance in this regard since it confirms the irreducibly anti-idolatrous nature of the Christian religion: the difference between angels and demons is not purely nominal because angels approve only the sacrifice offered to the one true God.²³ With the psalmist, Augustine repeats: *Quondam omnes dii gentium daemonia* (cf. Ps. 95:5);²⁴ Christian religion does not reproach the sacrifices of pagans *in se*, but only their disordered destinations. Thus, in polytheism, one can recognize the reflection of a disorder that was originally produced in a sphere superior to the human one.

In fact, *dii falsi, hoc est daemones, qui sunt praevaricatores angeli*, never would have asked for sacrifices for themselves, knowing that sacrifices are due to the one true God; it is precisely this point that comprises the discriminating factor between *vera religio* and *noxia superstitio*.²⁵ And it corresponds to the antithesis between *pia humilitas* and *impia superbia, sive hominum, sive daemonum*,²⁶ which

19. Cf. *cons. ev.* I,26,41 (CSEL 43, p. 40).

20. Cf. *ibid.*, I,32,50 (CSEL 43, p. 54): “Ipse Deus universae terrae, sicut tanto ante promisit, per Christum et Christi Ecclesiam iam vocatur.”

21. Cf. G. Madec, “*Le Christ des païens d’après le De consensu evangelistarum de saint Augustin*,” in *Recherches Augustiniennes* 26 (1992): pp. 48–67. Cf. also Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society*, 95 (cf. n. 12).

22. Cf. L. Alici, “Introduzione,” in Sant’Agostino, *La vera religione*, NBA VI/2 (Roma: Città Nuova, 1995), pp. 635–636.

23. *Ep.* 102,20 (CSEL 34/2, p. 562).

24. *Ibid.*, 19 (CSEL 34/2, p. 561).

25. *Ibid.*, 18 (CSEL 34/2, p. 559): “Hoc sane nec in ista brevitate praetereundum est, quod templum, sacerdotium, sacrificium, et alia quaecumque ad haec pertinentia, nisi uni vero Deo deberi nosent dii falsi, hoc est daemones, qui sunt praevaricatores angeli, numquam haec sibi a cultoribus suis, quos decipiunt, expetissent. Verum haec cum exhibentur Deo, secundum eius inspirationem atque doctrinam, vera religio est: cum autem daemonibus, secundum eorum impiam superbiam, noxia superstitio.”

26. Cf. *ibid.*, 20.

is the fundamental hermeneutical key for *civ. Dei*. The epistemological primacy of monotheism is matched by the primacy of true religion over idolatry. In its most radical form, it is exemplified by the diabolical perversion of the angels and by the original transgression: sin is essentially an act of wickedness carried out before God.²⁷ Moreover, it is carried out against God; it is a daring act of open rebellion, an attempt to negate the difference between finite and infinite. In this way it repeatedly reveals the impotence of the creature's place in the ontological order, a place which is "the disposition of equal and unequal realities, each to its own place."²⁸

This revolt is destined not only to fail, but also to rebound in a self-destructive way against its author(s).²⁹ Being unable to overturn the order of being, the very act of attempting to overturn it provokes the fall of the sinner. In fact, evil is not that toward which one falls, but the act of falling itself.³⁰ Herein lies its nihilistic root: not only in the Neo-Platonic sense of the maximum distance from the good, but in both the Manichaean sense of a self-destructive conflict and, if anything, even more obviously in the biblical sense of an egotistical pathology of love that generates division and unhappiness. At the same time, there is a fundamental difference with Manichaeism: the antithesis between good and evil is, in this case, not the reflection of an antithesis between being and nothingness. There is a fundamental asymmetry between ontological good and moral good: in the order of creation there is no alternative to being,³¹ while the will of the rational creature is constantly exposed to an ethical alternative between good and evil, an alternative which, in a post-lapsarian universe, can no longer be faced with lucidity and equidistance. As Marion has noted "telle est en effet la loi de l'idolatrie: je deviens toujours ce que je vise et possède; si donc je vise moins que Dieu, je deviendrai moins que Dieu, je deviendrai moins que lui, *donc moins que moi*."³² At this point, Pascal also comes

27. A fact also noted by S. Kierkegaard; see his *La malattia mortale*, in *Opere* (Firenze: Sansoni 1972), pp. 666–667. Cf. also P. Ricoeur, *Finitude et culpabilité. II. La symbolique du mal* (Paris: Aubier, 1960), p. 54: "La catégorie qui commande la notion du 'péché' est la catégorie du 'devant' Dieu."

28. *Civ. Dei* XIX, 13 (CCSL 48, p. 679): "Ordo est parium dispariumque rerum sua cuique loca tribuens dispositio." For this trans., see H. Bettenson, *the City of God against the Pagans*, p. 870 (cf. n. 13).

29. Cf. A.-I. Bouton-Touboulie, *L'ordre caché. La notion d'ordre chez saint Augustin* (Paris: Institut d'Études Augustiniennes, 2004), p. 595, who observes that, according to Augustine, "l'ordre est absolu, il ne peut qu'être respecté ou violé, voire même simplement 'négligé'."

30. *Civ. Dei* XII,8 (CCSL 48, p. 362): "Deficitur enim non ad mala, sed male."

31. Cf. *ibid.*, XIX,13, where Augustine notes that even the nature of Satan, *qua natura*, is good.

32. J.-L. Marion, *Au lieu de soi. L'approche de Saint Augustin* (Paris: Puf, 2008), p. 178. The italics are Marion's.

to mind: “We make an idol of truth itself, for truth apart from charity is not God, but his image and an idol that we must not love or worship. Still less must we love or worship its opposite, which is falsehood.”³³

Augustine sees this opposition between ontological order and ethical disorder as the root of all (other) differences between *pietas* and wickedness, truth and deception, *conversio* and *aversion*,³⁴ in a word, it is between *superbia* and *ordo amoris* that the summary of the insuperable distance between the *civitas* born of the earth and the *civitas* that descends from heaven may be found. The former springs from a will to self-affirmation and feeds upon an equivocal religious idolatry. It is only at the service of an imperialistic model of power and, hence, is, like everything that is born and wears itself out on earth, destined to perish. The latter, by contrast, has an absolutely heteronomous genesis that confers on it the call to find its supreme fullness in communion with God and His people: “*ordinatissima et concordissima societas fruendi Deo et invicem in Deo.*”³⁵

Thus we are led back to the heart of the design governing the entire conceptual and literary architecture of *civ. Dei*: the conflict between love of self and love of God makes it possible to recognize the very root of peace and violence on either the intrapersonal or interpersonal level. This is not by chance. Augustine portrays the antithesis between the two cities by opposing Babylon, “*quae appellata est ‘Confusio,’*”³⁶ a disturbing and exemplary metaphor for *superba impietas*, and Jerusalem, in whom the *nomen mysticum* can be interpreted as *visio pacis*.³⁷ The Platonic idea of a fundamental internal continuity between anthropology and politics finds here a new articulation: just as the very statute of the personal being is identified in the mystery of the Trinitarian communion, so too the human person reaches an authentic “*de veritate gaudium*”³⁸ when his life achieves a triple equilibrium in his relationships on the interior, the exterior, and the superior levels.

33. B. Pascal, *Pensées*, §581, trans. W. F. Trotter (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003), p. 161. Cf. also J.-L. Marion, *Au lieu de soi*, p. 190 (cf. n. 32).

34. Cf. Augustine’s *ep.*140,23,56 (CSEL 44, p. 202): “*Aversio eius, vitium eius et conversio virtus eius est.*” Cf. also Ph. Curbelié, *La justice dans la Cité de Dieu* (Paris: Institut d’Études Augustiniennes, 2004), pp. 240–241.

35. *Civ. Dei* XIX,13 (cf. CCSL 48, p. 679).

36. *Ibid.*, XVI,4 (cf. CCSL 48, p. 504).

37. Cf. *ibid.*, XIX,11 (cf. CCSL 48, p. 675).

38. *Conf.* X,xxiii,33 (CCSL 27, pp. 172–173).

“Non veritas, sed vanitas fecit” (civ. Dei IV,21)

In this context, the fundamental thematic unity of *civ. Dei* emerges clearly; indeed, it begins with Augustine’s foundational and opening question, one which actually parallels a question asked by the psalmist long ago: “*Ubi est Deus tuus?*”³⁹ The broad survey that is the first ten books thus tends not only to demonstrate the impossibility of giving a polytheistic response to such a question, but also to reconstruct the diabolic genesis of any such response. The distinction between the Books I–V and Books VI–X makes it possible to measure the impotence of the pagan divinities according to the dual earthly and heavenly parameters that have been woven throughout the entire work. And it is for this reason that the discourse of the second section deepens and a more articulated theological analysis is inserted in place of descriptions of pagan divinities.

Thus, the entire structure of Augustine’s argument is sustained by the difference between error and deceit: the polytheistic cult is born not simply of error, having sought to hypostasize in mythological form the multiple attributes of God, but, in fact, is the fruit of a deliberate and systematic deception through which the fallen angels protract their rebellion against God. Drawing upon Eccl. 10:15, “*Initium quippe omnis peccati superbia,*” Augustine sees the dividing line between the happiness and unhappiness of the angels as precisely their union with or separation from the supreme being,⁴⁰ and it is for this reason that the pagan cult is dominated by the sinister ethos of a tragic and desperate revolt.

In this way, Augustine’s intent goes well beyond the realm of simple apologetics. There has already been an abundance of sarcastic ridicule of the pagan cultus: it is theoretically unsupportable, morally indecent, and practically useless all at the same time. The author’s objective is far more ambitious: Augustine wants to denounce the subtle iniquity of the evil spirits and warn his readers against their diabolic power. In fact, while humans have no vice so deep as to cause the total loss of their sense of honesty, the wickedness of the demons climaxes its perversity as they mask themselves as angels of the light (cf. 2 Cor. 11:14),⁴¹ thus eliminating all differences between sacred and sacrilege, between purification and

39. Ps. 41:4. Cf. *civ. Dei* I,29 (cf. CCSL 47, p. 30).

40. *Civ. Dei* XII,6 (CCSL 48, p. 359): “Proinde causa beatitudinis angelorum bonorum ea verissima reperitur, quod ei adhaerent qui summe est. Cum vero causa miseriae malorum angelorum queritur, ea merito occurrit, quod ab illo, qui summe est, aversi ad se ipsos conversi sunt, qui non summe sunt; et hoc vitium quid aliud quam superbia nuncupetur?”

41. *Ibid.*, X,10 (CCSL 47, pp. 283–284).

profanation.⁴² Varro's attempt to reserve for the elect gods the highest functions proper when applied only to the one true God was to no avail; it is from Him alone that eternal life is to be hoped for.⁴³ Moreover, if the pagans wanted to adumbrate a plural articulation of the virtues, why deify only Virtue and Faith and ignore the others?⁴⁴ Do those who adore Virtue and Happiness need further polytheistic integrations? Is it not perhaps true that "surely, virtue includes all that ought to be done, felicity all that ought to be desired?"⁴⁵

The believer sins when he offers sacrifices due to the true God to some other element of the world or some created spirit. And when his sacrifices degenerate into vile and iniquitous practices, then "such a man commits a double sin against God; in the first place, he worships, in place of God, a being who is other than God; in the second place, his instruments of worship are such as should not be employed in the worship either of God or of any other being."⁴⁶ This degeneration of the idolatrous cultus is the logical consequence of the vanities upon which it is founded, the convergence of the defective and nihilistic aspect that connotes the ontological fragility of every earthly absolute as well as of the abusive and dishonest aspect of the sin of pride.⁴⁷ The absurd pretext of placing human creations before man in order to worship them inevitably translates into a distancing from God: "So it is just that man should be sundered from him who made him, when he puts above himself that which he has created."⁴⁸ All the pagan gods, in fact, "are 'sons of earth,' and so earth is their mother. But according to the true theology, the earth is the work of God, not its mother."⁴⁹

42. Ibid., II,4 (CCSL 47, p. 37): "Quae sunt sacrilegia, si illa sunt sacra? Aut quae inquinatio, si illa lavatio?"

43. Cf. ibid., VII,30 (CCSL 47, p. 212).

44. Cf. ibid., IV,20 (CCSL 47, p. 114).

45. Ibid., IV,21 (CCSL 47, p. 114): "Omnia quippe agenda complectitur virtus; omnia optanda felicitas." For this trans., see H. Bettenson, *The City of God against the Pagans*, p. 159 (cf. n. 13).

46. Ibid., VII,27 (CCSL 47, p. 210): "Bis peccat in Deum, quod et pro ipso colit, quod non est ipse, et talibus rebus colit, qualibus nec ipse colendus est nec non ipse." For this trans., see H. Bettenson, *The City of God against the Pagans*, pp. 288–289 (cf. n. 13).

47. The warning of *vera rel.* 38,69 (CCSL 32, p. 233) always seems to lurk in the background: "Itaque cum omnia temporalia mundus iste concludat, omnibus mundi partibus serviunt, qui propterea putant nihil colendum esse ne serviant."

48. Cf. *civ. Dei* VIII,23 (CCSL 47, p. 241): "Quapropter merito homo deficit ab illo qui eum fecit, cum sibi praeficit ipse quod fecit." For this trans., see H. Bettenson, *The City of God against the Pagans*, p. 332 (cf. n. 13).

49. Ibid. VI,8 (CCSL 47, p. 177): "Sic enim sunt terrigenae, sic eis mater est terra. In vera autem theologia opus Dei est terra, non mater." For this trans., see H. Bettenson, *The City of God against the Pagans*, p. 242 (cf. n. 13).

Calling upon or otherwise worshipping them means rendering oneself a slave of demons, not of gods.⁵⁰

In an important passage in *civ. Dei* VIII, Augustine uses the words of Jeremiah (cf. 16:20) in order to claim that a man cannot make gods for himself; in particular, he denounces several pernicious consequences of this vain and sinful attempt. First, making earthly idols is the same as subjecting oneself to a dangerous form of slavery, entering into relations with unclean spirits;⁵¹ for this reason, those who deplore the end of the cultus of idols actually desire to remain in a state of complete enslavement.⁵² Second, the act of binding oneself to earthly idols can only give rise to a closed society devoid of authentic universality: in fact, “the demon attached to an image by an impious art has been made a god by man, but a god for this particular kind of man, not for all mankind.” Augustine then goes on to ask: “What sort of a god then is this who could only be made by a man who is in error, who lacks faith, who is estranged from the true God?”⁵³

How can one be happy in a society desperately clinging to such ephemeral goods? In Book IV, the antithesis between the two cities is fully anticipated in the form of an irreducible opposition between *felicitas* and *vanitas*; it is one that can be seen on the personal, familial, social and political levels. Augustine associates with this not only the proclamation of Christian universalism, born of the awareness of humanity’s common destiny, fulfilled in the incarnation of Christ, the unique authentic mediator and the only way of salvation for all men, but also an important corollary: adoring the true God and serving Him with authentic sacrifices and purity of habits brings about the *regnum bonorum* for the benefit of Christians and of all citizens of earth:

And, in this world, the reign of the good is a blessing for themselves, and even more for the whole of human society. In contrast, the reign of the wicked is more harmful to those who wield the power, who bring destruction on their own soul through the greater scope thus given for their misdeeds, whereas those who are enslaved beneath them are harmed only by their own wickedness.⁵⁴

50. Cf. *ibid.* VII,14 (cf. CCSL 47, p. 198).

51. *Ibid.* VIII,24 (CCSL 47, p. 244): “Sed immundi spiritus eisdem simulacris arte illa nefaria colligati cultorum suorum animas in suam societatem redigendo miserabiliter captivaverant.”

52. Cf. *ibid.*

53. *Ibid.* VI,8 (CCSL 47, p. 245): “Daemon quippe simulacro arte impia colligatus ab homine factus est deus, sed tali homini, non omni homini. Qualis est ergo iste deus, quem non faceret homo nisi errans et incredulus et aversus a vero Deo?” For this trans., see H. Bettenson, *The City of God against the Pagans*, p. 337 (cf. n. 13).

54. *Ibid.* VI,3 (CCSL 47, p. 101): “In hac ergo terra regnum bonorum non tam illis praestatur quam rebus humanis; malorum vero regnum magis regnantibus nocet, qui suos animos vastant scelorum

At the same time, by linking the idolatrous perversion with an impious phenomenology of the *libido dominandi* and denouncing the inversion of freedom and slavery that is at the origin of the act that instituted the *civitas terrena*, Augustine rejects the fundamentalist and theocratic temptations that can arise from attributing any kind of salvific mission to politics.⁵⁵ The *civitas terrena*, in fact, is founded on an equivocal mixture of religion and politics, inasmuch as its god does not precede the *civitas*; on the contrary, it is the *civitas* that comes first and creates its own gods.⁵⁶ And, since the *civitas* claims to be ultimately self-legitimizing, it manipulatively offers the pagan divinities a relativistic pantheon, in which the disintegrative drive of *amor privatus* is accentuated. For this reason, there can be no *pax iustitiae*, the only possible foundation for peaceful coexistence, if the social projection, however imperfect, of *amor humanae laudis* does not give way to *dilectio iustitiae* and to *amor veritatis*.⁵⁷

In contrast, the *civitas Dei peregrina*, inasmuch as it finds in the *civitas Dei caelestis* the foundation and salvific condition of its own being *in itinere*, avoids any political, cultural, or ethno-geographic identification:

this Heavenly City, therefore, is in pilgrimage in this world, she calls out citizens from all nations and so collects a society of aliens, speaking all languages. She takes no account of any difference in customs, laws, and institutions, by which earthly peace is achieved and preserved—not that she annuls or abolishes any of those, rather, she maintains them and follows them (for whatever divergences there are among the diverse nations, those institutions have one single aim—earthly peace), provided that no hindrance is presented thereby to the religion which teaches that the one supreme and true God is to be worshipped.⁵⁸

In this way, and for the sake of political coexistence, Augustine does not exchange the historical horizon, which is the place of the individual and collective

maiore licentia; his autem, qui eis servendo subduntur, non nocet nisi propria iniquitas.” For this trans., see H. Bettenson, *The City of God against the Pagans*, p. 139 (cf. n. 13).

55. Cf. J. B. Elshtain, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), which underlines the Augustine’s distance from any kind of triumphalistic mythicizing of the state.
56. This thesis is central to J. Ratzinger, *Volk und haus Gottes in Augustins lehre von der Kirche* (St. Ottilien: Eos, 1992).
57. Cf. *civ. Dei* V, 14 (cf. CCSL 47, p. 147).
58. Ibid. XIX, 17 (CCSL 48, p. 685): “Haec ergo caelestis civitas dum peregrinatur in terra, ex omnibus gentibus cives evocat atque in omnibus linguis peregrinam colligit societatem, non curans quidquid in moribus, legibus institutisque diversum est, quibus pax terrena vel conquiritur vel tenetur, nihil eorum rescindens vel destruens, immo etiam servans ac sequens, quod licet diversum in diversis nationibus, ad unum tamen eumdemque finem terrena pacis intenditur, si religionem, qua unus summus et verus Deus colendus docetur, non impedit.” For this trans., see H. Bettenson, *the City of God against the Pagans*, p. 878 (cf. n. 13).

manifestation of moral evil, with the ontological horizon, which at its root is marked by a creaturely positivity and by an inter-human solidarity that not even the first sin was able to destroy. In fact, “no creature’s perversion is so contrary to nature as to destroy the very last vestiges of its nature.”⁵⁹ Thus, in the gap between the ontological positivity of created nature and the various forms of *defectio* in which the evil of history expresses itself, there exists a kind of point of intersection, albeit fragile and precious, in the good of peace—and the peace of the *civitas* in particular—inasmuch as it is an inalienable condition of an ordered coexistence. It is the point of arrival for the minimum historical aspiration of Babylon and, at the same time, the point of departure for the maximum eschatological tension of Jerusalem: “All man’s use of temporal things is related to the enjoyment of earthly peace in the earthly city; whereas in the Heavenly City it is related to the enjoyment of eternal peace.”⁶⁰

Even the people that alienates itself from God, in fact, “loves a peace of its own, which is not to be rejected. . . . Meanwhile, however, it is important for us also that this people should possess this peace during in this life, since so long as the two cities are intermingled we also make use of the peace of Babylon.”⁶¹ In peace, therefore, the bond of harmony inherent in love is built, albeit on different levels: temporal peace speaks the language of mutable sharing, but not of the full, indefectible possession possible only in eternal life. Thus, in history, Christians live a kind of paradoxical citizenship: by virtue of grace, they tend toward *pax aeterna*, but, by virtue of nature, they live in the *pax terrena*. For this reason they are called to embrace and promote the peace that, for the *civitas terrena*, is only a *res*; that is, they are also called to assign that peace a *signum* and to embrace the liberating value that it has for them. What distinguishes the Christians is not an exterior separateness, nor a theocratic claim to have “captured” coexistence. They share with everyone the harshness, the disorder and the injustice that reign in history, but they are called to the unheard of task of converting all of these things, so to speak, from within. “For they do not give orders because of a lust for domination but from a

59. Ibid. XIX,12 (CCSL 48, pp. 677–678): “Nullius quippe vitium ita contra naturam est, ut naturae deleat etiam extrema vestigia.” For this trans., see H. Bettenson, *the City of God against the Pagans*, p. 869 (cf. n. 13).

60. Ibid. XIX,14 (CCSL 48, p. 680): “Omnis igitur usus rerum temporalium refertur ad fructum pacis terrena in terrena civitate; in caelesti autem civitate refertur ad fructum pacis aeternae.” For this trans., see H. Bettenson, *The City of God against the Pagans*, p. 872 (cf. n. 13).

61. Ibid. XIX,26 (CCSL 48, pp. 696–697): “Diligit tamen etiam ipse quamdam pacem suam non improbandam, quam quidem non habebit in fine, quia non ea bene utitur ante finem. Hanc autem ut interim habeat in hac vita, etiam nostri interest; quoniam, quamdiu permixtae sunt ambae civitates, utimur et nos pace Babylonis.” For this trans., see H. Bettenson, *The City of God against the Pagans*, p. 892 (cf. n. 13).

dutiful concern for the interests of others, not with pride in taking precedence over others, but with compassion in taking care of others.”⁶² In the final analysis, the two cities are marked by *diversa fide, diversa spe, and diverso amore*.⁶³

Book XIX’s splendid treatise on peace, therefore, is not a happy parenthesis that unexpectedly illuminates an unsystematic and disjointed narrative structure. Rather, it is the coherent intellectual harbor for the voyage that is this entire work. And it is in the light of this harbor that the interpretive theses with which I began should be re-examined. The impossibility of avoiding the dilemma between faith and idolatry confirms, first of all, the anthropologically inalienable statute of belief, which, in Augustine, goes hand-in-hand with the recognition of the anthropologically constitutive statute of the interpersonal relationship. This convergence makes it impossible to suspend the entire warp and woof of the life of relationships in some neutral limbo and it demonstrates how it, too, continually oscillates between *civitas Dei* and *civitas diaboli*. The possibility of this dual anchorage in heaven or on earth qualifies the very nature of the *civitas*, and does so at a level that precedes the genesis of the political institution and prevents the power that it represents from manipulating religious categories.

In the second place, the nature and content of the Christian revelation includes and bears witness to an absolute irreducibility vis-à-vis the polytheistic pantheon, by which Christianity can never be syncretistically absorbed: “[t]he *differentia* in worship, *latreia*. The City of God cannot have ‘common laws of religion’ with the Earthly City.”⁶⁴ This idea could also be expressed via the words of Benedict XVI, whose magisterium has been consistently characterized by this Augustinian perspective. He recently observed that “[t]his appeal to shun idols . . . is also pertinent today. Has not our modern world created its own idols? Has it not imitated, perhaps inadvertently, the pagans of antiquity, by diverting man from his true end, from the joy of living eternally with God?”⁶⁵ Consequently, the antithesis between the two cities, which incarnate two opposite modalities of living love, is insuperable in principle, even though belonging to one or the other is always historically open

62. Ibid. XIX,14 (CCSL 48, p. 682): “Neque enim dominandi cupiditate imperant, sed officio consulendi, nec principandi superbia, sed providendi misericordia.” For this trans., see H. Bettenson, *The City of God against the Pagans*, p. 874 (cf. n. 13).

63. Ibid. XVIII,54 (CCSL 48, p. 656).

64. E. TeSelle, “Justice, Love, Peace,” in *Augustine Today*, ed. R. J. Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 95.

65. *Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI*, given in Paris at Notre-Dame, Esplanade des Invalides, on Saturday, September 13, 2008 (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2008), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20080913_parigi-esplanade_en.html (accessed June, 22, 2010).

and, until the last day, is a tension that tempts and interrogates the heart of man; until, that is, the lord of the harvest intervenes to separate definitively the wheat from the chaff.⁶⁶

Finally, a dual lesson can be drawn from this severe admonishment against idolatry: on the one hand, the will to disown determinism and polytheism on the dogmatic level is welded with the pastoral concern to keep Christianity from being contaminated by paganism. Refusing to channel into the Christian river the ancient ritual practices or to exploit expectations of miracles from them, Augustine warns against an unreflective return to superstitious practices within Christianity and encourages the constant purification of the Christian faith from idolatrous nostalgias of false intermediaries that are so often sought out in order to exorcise the anguish of dark times. On the other hand, reminding us that disorder, injustice and pride are the true enemies of peace and the things that poison the heart of man, he points out that the *civitas Dei peregrina*, in the eschatological dimension that constitutes it, re-establishes the right rules for coexistence, inviting us to seek its transcendent foundation, since, in fact, this foundation is the only one able to keep man's power over man from becoming a disastrous enslavement to one (or more) of several earthly absolutes. In the name of the *concors communio* that constitutes it, the *civitas Dei peregrina* offers precious antibodies against idolatries and introduces beneficial enzymes of virtuous sociality into the peace of Babylon.

66. A beneficial conclusion that Augustine obviously gleaned from his difficult confrontations with Donatism.

