

the city of god against the pagans

the city of god against the pagans stands as one of the most profound and influential works of early Christian literature, penned by the esteemed theologian Saint Augustine of Hippo. This monumental treatise, written in the wake of the Visigothic sack of Rome in 410 CE, offers a sweeping theological and philosophical response to the pagan accusation that Christianity had weakened the Roman Empire, leading to its downfall. Augustine masterfully dissects this claim, presenting a compelling argument for the enduring nature of God's kingdom in contrast to the transient glories of earthly empires. This article will delve into the core tenets of Augustine's argument, exploring his distinction between the City of God and the City of Man, his views on history and providence, and his critique of pagan philosophies and religions. We will examine the historical context that spurred its creation and its lasting impact on Western thought and theology.

- Understanding the Historical Context of The City of God
- The Two Cities: A Fundamental Distinction
- Exploring the City of God
- Examining the City of Man
- Augustine's Philosophy of History and Providence
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- The Enduring Legacy of The City of God Against the Pagans

The Historical Context: Rome's Fall and Augustine's Response

The genesis of **the city of god against the pagans** is inextricably linked to a pivotal moment in Western history: the Visigothic invasion and sack of Rome in 410 CE by Alaric. This cataclysmic event sent shockwaves throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. For centuries, Rome had been perceived as the unassailable bastion of civilization, its power and influence seemingly divinely ordained. The pagan populace, clinging to their traditional beliefs, readily attributed Rome's vulnerability and subsequent suffering to the abandonment of their gods in favor of Christianity. They argued that the Christian God had failed to protect His followers, and that the old Roman deities, if appeased, would have preserved the city's might. This widespread accusation presented a significant challenge to the nascent Christian faith and its adherents.

Saint Augustine, then Bishop of Hippo Regius in North Africa, was deeply affected by these

events and the prevailing pagan sentiment. He recognized the need for a robust theological and philosophical defense of Christianity, one that could address not only the immediate crisis but also provide a comprehensive framework for understanding the role of faith in the grand sweep of human history. For over two decades, from approximately 413 to 426 CE, Augustine meticulously crafted **the city of god against the pagans**, a work intended to refute pagan criticisms, offer solace to Christians facing tribulation, and articulate a Christian worldview. The sheer scale and ambition of the project reflect the gravity of the situation and Augustine's commitment to a thorough and systematic exposition of Christian truth.

The Two Cities: A Foundational Dichotomy in Augustine's Theology

At the heart of **the city of god against the pagans** lies Augustine's seminal concept of two distinct, albeit intertwined, cities: the City of God and the City of Man. This dichotomy is not primarily geographical or political in nature, but rather spiritual and moral. It represents two fundamental orientations of human will and love, two ultimate allegiances that shape individual lives and the course of human societies. Augustine argues that throughout history, humanity has been divided into those who live according to the flesh and those who live according to the spirit, those who love self more than God, and those who love God more than self.

The City of God is comprised of those who are predestined by God's grace to eternal life, those whose hearts are oriented towards divine love and justice. Its citizens are characterized by faith, hope, and charity, and their ultimate hope and citizenship lie in the heavenly Jerusalem. This city is not bound by temporal borders or earthly powers, but exists in the hearts of believers and will find its full realization in the age to come. It is a community united by a shared love for God, seeking His glory above all else. This divine community transcends the limitations and failures of any earthly institution.

Conversely, the City of Man, also referred to as the earthly city, is composed of individuals who are primarily oriented towards temporal power, worldly possessions, and self-gratification. Their love is directed towards earthly things, and their pursuits are often characterized by pride, greed, and a desire for dominion. While members of the City of Man may engage in acts of civic virtue and establish forms of order, their ultimate end is temporal and subject to decay and corruption. This earthly city, though it may achieve periods of grandeur and stability, is ultimately transient and imperfect, overshadowed by the enduring reality of God's eternal kingdom.

The Love of Self vs. The Love of God

Augustine explicates the fundamental distinction between the two cities by highlighting their animating loves. The City of Man is founded upon the "love of self, even to the contempt of God." This self-centeredness leads to a pursuit of earthly glory, power, and pleasure, often at the expense of divine principles and the well-being of others. The pride

inherent in this self-love fuels ambition, conflict, and the cyclical patterns of human history marked by war and injustice. It is a love that ultimately leads to dissatisfaction and spiritual emptiness, as earthly possessions and achievements are ephemeral.

In stark contrast, the City of God is built upon the "love of God, even to the contempt of self." This principle signifies a profound humility and a recognition of God's absolute sovereignty and goodness. The citizens of the City of God subordinate their own will to God's will, finding their ultimate fulfillment and joy in Him. Their lives are characterized by a selfless pursuit of justice, mercy, and peace, not for their own glory, but for the glory of God. This divine love fosters true community, compassion, and a lasting hope that transcends the vicissitudes of earthly existence.

The Role of Peace in the Two Cities

Augustine's understanding of peace is nuanced and integral to his exposition of the two cities. He argues that peace, in its broadest sense, is the desired end of all rational beings. However, the nature of peace pursued by each city differs significantly. The City of Man seeks a temporal and outward peace, characterized by order, security, and the absence of overt conflict within its own sphere of influence. This peace is often maintained through the exercise of power and the enforcement of laws, but it is inherently fragile and subject to the forces of change and decay.

The City of God, on the other hand, seeks an inner and eternal peace, a peace that transcends the imperfections of the temporal realm. This divine peace is found in the harmonious relationship with God and in the proper ordering of all things according to His will. While citizens of the City of God may strive for temporal peace and contribute to it in their earthly lives, their ultimate peace is an eschatological reality, a gift of God's grace that will be fully realized in the New Jerusalem. This ultimate peace is characterized by absolute justice, perfect love, and unwavering communion with the Divine.

Augustine's Philosophy of History and Divine Providence

A central theme woven throughout **the city of god against the pagans** is Augustine's distinctive philosophy of history, which posits a divinely ordered and purposeful unfolding of events. He rejects the cyclical views of history prevalent in some pagan thought, which saw human affairs as perpetually repeating patterns of rise and fall. Instead, Augustine presents a linear conception of history, with a definite beginning (creation) and a divinely appointed end (the Last Judgment and the establishment of the eternal kingdom). This teleological understanding imbues history with meaning and direction, driven by the overarching will of God.

Augustine emphasizes the doctrine of divine providence, the belief that God actively governs and guides all of creation, including human affairs. He argues that nothing occurs

by chance or accident; rather, all events, whether seemingly good or evil, serve God's ultimate purposes, even if those purposes are not always immediately discernible to human beings. This concept of providence was crucial in refuting the pagan claim that God had abandoned Rome. Augustine asserted that even apparent catastrophes were part of God's grand design, a design aimed at guiding humanity towards salvation or judgment.

The Meaning and Purpose of History

For Augustine, history is not a meaningless flux of events but a stage upon which the drama of salvation is enacted. The purpose of history is to reveal God's justice, mercy, and power, and to bring about the completion of His elect in the City of God. The rise and fall of empires, the triumphs and tribulations of nations, are all instrumental in this divine plan. Augustine's focus is not on the transient glory of earthly kingdoms but on the eternal destiny of souls and the ultimate triumph of God's kingdom. History serves as a testament to God's faithfulness and His unwavering sovereignty.

The narrative of history, from the Fall of Adam to the Second Coming of Christ, is interpreted by Augustine as a continuous struggle between the forces of good and evil, embodied in the two cities. The temporal events of empires, wars, and political shifts are secondary to the spiritual realities at play. The progress of history, in Augustine's view, is not necessarily one of linear human progress in terms of worldly power or societal advancement, but rather the progressive revelation of God's redemptive plan and the gradual gathering of His people.

The Problem of Evil and God's Sovereignty

One of the most enduring challenges addressed by Augustine in **the city of god against the pagans** is the problem of evil. How can a benevolent and omnipotent God allow suffering and wickedness to exist in the world? Augustine grapples with this question, arguing that evil is not a positive substance but rather a privation of good, a falling away from God's perfect order. He posits that God, in His infinite wisdom, permits evil for greater good, often using the wicked actions of humans to achieve His divine purposes. This perspective, while difficult, underscores the absolute sovereignty of God over all of creation.

Augustine's understanding of God's sovereignty means that even the ravages of war and the fall of mighty empires do not signify God's defeat or impotence. Instead, they are illustrations of the consequences of human sin and the working out of God's judgment and redemptive plan. The sack of Rome, for instance, is interpreted not as a refutation of Christianity, but as a consequence of Rome's own moral and spiritual decay, and perhaps a divine chastisement or a catalyst for a deeper spiritual engagement with the eternal City. He reassures Christians that their ultimate security lies not in the stability of earthly kingdoms, but in the unwavering power and promise of God.

Augustine's Critique of Paganism and Philosophy

A significant portion of **the city of god against the pagans** is dedicated to a rigorous examination and critique of pagan religions, philosophies, and practices. Augustine meticulously dissects the pantheon of Roman gods, exposing their moral deficiencies and their inability to provide true solace or salvation. He challenges the very foundations of pagan worship, arguing that it often venerates corruptible beings and perpetuates ignorance and moral vice. The alleged virtues and miracles attributed to pagan deities and heroes are often reinterpreted by Augustine as either illusions, the work of demonic forces, or mere human achievements devoid of divine backing.

Augustine also engages with various philosophical schools of thought prevalent in his time, most notably Platonism and Neo-Platonism. While he finds some common ground with certain Platonic ideas, particularly the concept of an immaterial, eternal reality, he ultimately finds them insufficient for true salvation. He criticizes pagan philosophies for their reliance on human reason alone and their failure to grasp the necessity of divine revelation and grace for understanding ultimate truths and achieving spiritual transformation. The pursuit of wisdom through philosophy, while commendable, is ultimately incomplete without faith in Christ.

The Gods of Rome and Their Inadequacies

Augustine systematically deconstructs the efficacy and morality of the Roman gods. He points out the often scandalous myths and tales associated with these deities, highlighting their jealousies, infidelities, and cruelties. How could such flawed beings provide moral guidance or protection to a civilization? He argues that the worship of such gods perpetuates a low view of morality and leads individuals astray from the true God. The supposed interventions of these gods in human affairs are often shown to be either natural phenomena misinterpreted or the result of human ingenuity, rather than genuine divine power.

Furthermore, Augustine questions the very essence of pagan worship. If the gods are indeed divine, why do they require appeasement through sacrifices and rituals, and why do they seem so concerned with the petty affairs of mortals? He contrasts this with the Christian understanding of God, who is self-sufficient, loving, and whose grace is freely offered. The pagan pursuit of earthly favor through their gods, Augustine contends, leads to a perpetual state of anxiety and dependence on capricious powers, a stark contrast to the peace and assurance found in Christian faith.

Philosophical Pursuits Without Divine Grace

While Augustine acknowledges the intellectual prowess of pagan philosophers, he asserts that their systems of thought, however sophisticated, are ultimately flawed because they are detached from divine revelation and grace. Philosophers might aspire to understand the good and the true, but without the illuminating power of God's Spirit and the revelation of

His Word, their efforts remain incomplete and can even lead to pride and error. Augustine draws heavily on Platonic concepts, such as the existence of an incorporeal reality, but he Christianizes them, seeing these truths as pointing towards the Creator God revealed in Scripture.

The Neo-Platonic concept of the ascent of the soul towards the One, while appealing, is deemed by Augustine to be insufficient for bridging the gap between the human and the divine. Only through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, God becoming man, can this bridge be truly established. Human efforts at self-perfection, however diligent, cannot achieve the righteousness and salvation that are solely the work of God's grace. Therefore, pagan philosophy, in its highest aspirations, still falls short of the Christian promise of redemption and eternal life.

The Enduring Significance of The City of God Against the Pagans

The impact of **the city of god against the pagans** on Western civilization cannot be overstated. This comprehensive work served as a foundational text for Christian theology and philosophy for centuries, shaping the intellectual landscape of the Middle Ages and beyond. Augustine's articulation of the two cities provided a framework for understanding the relationship between church and state, spiritual and temporal authority, and the individual's ultimate allegiance. It offered a theological interpretation of history that provided hope and meaning in a tumultuous era.

The work's influence extended far beyond theological circles. Its philosophical insights into human nature, justice, and the nature of society resonated with thinkers of various disciplines. Augustine's nuanced understanding of peace, his exploration of the problem of evil, and his profound reflections on the human condition continue to be relevant and debated. The enduring power of **the city of god against the pagans** lies in its timeless exploration of humanity's deepest questions about purpose, destiny, and the search for ultimate truth and belonging. Its arguments have been revisited and reinterpreted throughout history, demonstrating its profound and lasting intellectual vitality.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is 'The City of God Against the Pagans' and who wrote it?

'The City of God Against the Pagans' is a foundational work of Christian theology and philosophy written by Saint Augustine of Hippo, a prominent bishop and theologian in Roman North Africa.

When was 'The City of God' written, and why was it significant?

Augustine began writing 'The City of God' around 413 AD and completed it in 426 AD. Its significance lies in its comprehensive defense of Christianity following the Visigothic sack of Rome in 410 AD, challenging pagan accusations that the abandonment of old gods led to the empire's downfall.

What are the two 'cities' Augustine describes in his work?

Augustine distinguishes between two cities: the 'City of God' (Civitas Dei), composed of those who love God and live according to His will, and the 'Earthly City' (Civitas Terrena), composed of those who love themselves and live for worldly glory and possessions.

What is the primary purpose of Augustine's 'City of God'?

The primary purpose is to explain the relationship between God and humanity, history, and the ultimate destiny of mankind, asserting that true peace and fulfillment are found in the spiritual realm rather than in earthly empires or human endeavors.

How does Augustine address the pagan accusations about the fall of Rome?

Augustine argues that the fall of Rome was not due to the abandonment of pagan gods but rather a consequence of the inherent transience and corruption of earthly kingdoms. He emphasizes that God's Providence governs all, and true security lies in the City of God.

What is the role of divine providence in Augustine's 'City of God'?

Divine providence is central to Augustine's argument. He posits that God's will orchestrates all events, both in the City of God and the Earthly City, guiding history towards its ultimate divine purpose and judgment.

What is the concept of 'just war' as presented in 'The City of God'?

While not a systematic treatise on just war, Augustine lays the groundwork for the concept by suggesting that warfare can be a just instrument for rulers to maintain peace and order, especially when undertaken for a righteous cause, though he also acknowledges its tragic nature.

What is the lasting impact of 'The City of God' on Western thought?

'The City of God' has had a profound and lasting impact on Western civilization, influencing political philosophy, theology, history, and the development of the concept of a separate spiritual and temporal authority, shaping ideas about the state and the church for centuries.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to The City of God Against the Pagans, with short descriptions:

1. Augustine's Two Cities: A Modern Reading

This book offers a contemporary interpretation of Augustine's seminal work, exploring its enduring relevance to political philosophy and theological thought. It delves into how the concepts of the earthly and heavenly cities can be applied to understanding contemporary societal divisions and aspirations. The author examines Augustine's arguments in light of modern challenges to faith and reason.

2. Rethinking Rome: From Empire to Augustine's Vision

This scholarly work analyzes the historical context that shaped Augustine's City of God, focusing on the decline and transformation of the Roman Empire. It investigates the political, social, and religious landscape of late antiquity and how these factors influenced Augustine's critique of paganism. The book highlights the profound impact of the sack of Rome in 410 AD on Augustine's theological framework.

3. The Enduring Allegory: City of God and Western Civilization

This title explores the profound and often unacknowledged influence of Augustine's City of God on the development of Western political and cultural thought. It traces the allegorical interpretations of the two cities through centuries of European history, examining its impact on medieval kingdoms, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment. The book argues that Augustine's ideas have shaped fundamental understandings of justice, authority, and the human condition.

4. Pagans and Christians: The Clash of Worlds in Late Antiquity

This book provides a detailed account of the religious and philosophical interactions, and often conflicts, between pagan traditions and early Christianity in the Roman Empire. It specifically examines the arguments and counter-arguments presented by both sides, setting the stage for Augustine's comprehensive defense of Christianity. The author highlights the intellectual and social pressures faced by individuals navigating these shifting religious landscapes.

5. Theology of History: Augustine's Grand Narrative

This work focuses on Augustine's groundbreaking theological framework for understanding history as a divinely ordered progression. It dissects the concept of providence and its role in shaping the destinies of both the earthly and heavenly cities. The book explains how Augustine viewed historical events not as random occurrences but as part of a larger, divine plan.

6. Augustine's Apologetics: Defending the Faith in a Roman World

This study examines Augustine's sophisticated methods of defending Christianity against accusations and criticisms from pagan philosophers and Roman officials. It analyzes the specific arguments Augustine employed to refute charges that Christianity was responsible for the misfortunes of the Empire. The book showcases Augustine's intellectual prowess in engaging with his contemporaries.

7. Citizens of Heaven: The Spiritual Identity in Augustine

This title explores the profound emphasis Augustine places on the spiritual identity of believers as citizens of the heavenly city, regardless of their temporal circumstances. It delves into the implications of this dual citizenship for earthly loyalty, morality, and ultimate hope. The book unpacks how this concept offered solace and a sense of belonging amidst the instability of the Roman world.

8. The Philosophy of Two Cities: Love and Justice in Augustine

This book delves into the philosophical underpinnings of Augustine's distinction between the earthly and heavenly cities, with a particular focus on the contrasting loves that define each. It examines how self-love and love of God shape the motivations and actions of individuals within these respective cities. The author also analyzes Augustine's complex ideas about justice and its pursuit in both realms.

9. Legacy of the Fall: Sin and Redemption in City of God

This title focuses on Augustine's profound theological doctrines of original sin and divine redemption as central to his understanding of the human predicament and the two cities. It explores how the consequences of the Fall necessitate a transcendent solution offered by God's grace. The book argues that this emphasis on sin and redemption is crucial for grasping Augustine's critique of human self-sufficiency and his hope in divine salvation.

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