



Teaching Augustine with Dr. Junius Johnson

Lecture 6: Augustine's
City of God, Part I

Augustine's *City of God*

Addressing the fall of Rome, paganism, and the Christian response.

Introduction

- **Date and Context:**
 - Completed in 426 AD, *City of God* is Augustine's most comprehensive work.
 - Written after the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410 AD, a catastrophe that shook the Roman world and led many to question the strength of the empire and the role of Christianity.
- **Title:**
 - The Latin title *De Civitate Dei Contra Paganos* refers not to a physical city but to a spiritual community of people aligned with God's will.
 - It contrasts with the *Civitas Terrena* or the "City of Man," which represents those who live for earthly pleasures and power.
 - The book is polemical in nature, and its polemical target is the pagans.

Historical Background

- **Sack of Rome (410 AD):**
 - Neither Augustine nor the Roman Emperor were in Rome when it was attacked by the Visigoths under King Alaric.



- A certain Roman prefect wanted to perform a public sacrifice to Zeus to save the city from destruction. Pope Innocent I would not allow it and the city eventually fell.
 - Many Romans believed that the empire's conversion to Christianity had angered their traditional gods, resulting in the city's downfall.
 - Pagans blamed the abandonment of the ancient Roman religion for the empire's weakening, creating a cultural and religious crisis.
 - Augustine wrote *City of God* in response to these accusations, defending Christianity and explaining the moral and spiritual causes of Rome's decline.
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Structure of the Work

- **Books I-X:**
 - Augustine refutes the idea that the Roman gods provided protection, happiness, or salvation, addressing pagan claims that returning to their worship would restore the empire.
 - He highlights the inherent violence, war, and disaster that plagued Roman history long before Christianity.
 - Reminder to teachers to use sensitivity when discussing historic instances of suicide in their classes.
 - **Books XI-XXII:**
 - These books focus on the *City of God* as a divine reality that transcends time, contrasting with the *City of Man* which is destined for destruction.
 - Augustine traces the progression of humanity from creation to the final judgment, offering a vision of the eternal fate of both cities.
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Book I: The Sack of Rome

- **Bad Things vs. Evil Things:**
 - Augustine distinguishes between physical suffering (bad) and moral (ie. "true") evil.



- Rape victims were innocent of the moral wrong, and he argues it is better to suffer physical harm than commit evil (e.g., suicide or lying).
 - *Nota bene*: Conduct this discussion with sensitivity for students.
 - **Limiting the Power of Attackers:**
 - Augustine asserts that attackers can only harm the body, not the soul.
 - The persecution of Christians in the past century (Diocletian's reign) and the continuous warring in the Roman Empire made physical dangers all too real.
 - **Protection of Christians:**
 - Roman pagans who sought refuge in Christian churches were spared, while those in pagan temples were not.
 - Augustine begins dismantling the idea that pagan gods could protect Rome from disasters.
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Books II & III: Critique of Pagan Gods and Moral Corruption

- **Pagan Gods and Rome's Fall:**
 - Augustine argues that pagan gods are unreliable and did not prevent past disasters, such as the sack of Rome in 387 BC.
 - **Moral Degradation:**
 - The worst calamity brought by the pagan gods was the moral degradation of the Romans.
 - Augustine contrasts the bad (natural disasters, suffering) with true evil (moral guilt attached to actions like murder or lying).
 - **The Role of Pagan Gods:**
 - Augustine argues the pagan gods led Rome into superstition and vice, warping the moral core of Roman society in exchange for false promises of physical security.
 - He views these gods as real entities but identifies them as demons misleading people for their own purposes.
 - Augustine argues not that the pagan gods don't exist but that they are demons who actively harm the Romans.
 - Their promises of security were never fulfilled, and instead, they fostered moral decay.
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Books V: Freedom, Fate, and Christian Emperors

- **Freedom and Fate:**
 - Augustine begins a discussion on fate and human free will, setting the stage for later discussions on grace.
 - This is before Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings, and demonstrates his thoughts on the will before later arguments.
 - He criticizes astrology and the idea of astrological destiny, which fascinated the Middle Ages and Renaissance literature (e.g., *Romeo and Juliet*).
 - It is especially good to read with *On Grace and Free Will* or *On the Predestination of the Saints*.
 - **Christian Virtue and Reward:**
 - Augustine argues that Rome's success was due to the Christian God rewarding the Romans for their virtue.
 - Roman emperors, particularly Christian ones, were blessed when they ruled with moral strength.
 - This theme will influence medieval thought, particularly regarding Christian monarchs and their connection to divine favor.
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Books VIII: Platonism and True Salvation

- **Arguments Against Platonism:**
 - Augustine treats the Platonists with respect, engaging in theological debate rather than dismissing them outright.
 - The central critique is their polytheism and their worship of *daemons*, which Augustine identifies as demons, completing the Christian transformation of the ancient idea of daemons.
 - **True Salvation:**
 - Augustine explains that true salvation comes through God, not through pagan philosophy or gods.
 - He contrasts the propagation of error in the City of Man with the founding of the City of God, where true salvation is found.
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Conclusion of Part I (Books I-X)

- **City of Man vs. City of God:**



- The first part of *City of God* highlights the moral and spiritual decline of Rome under paganism.
 - Augustine sets up the City of God as the counterpoint to the City of Man, leading into the next section that will discuss happiness in this life and the life to come.
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