

City of God and Ethical Citizenship

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Abstract

Set against the decline of the Roman Empire, the thought of Saint Augustine, as expressed in *The City of God*, presents history as a tension between the divine and the earthly cities, defined by moral purpose as opposed to political or ethnic identity. Knowledge is rooted in self-awareness, while the state is viewed as a necessary but imperfect institution, and true citizenship lies in a dual allegiance to temporal authority and divine order, grounded in moral values such as love, justice, and peace. In dialogue with Stoicism, this vision affirms a universal model of citizenship shaped by ethical commitment.

Keywords: Saint Augustine; *The City of God*; citizenship; divine law; political theology; ethics; Stoicism; moral values.

Initially:

Saint Augustine is a prominent figure among the thinkers of the Latin Middle Ages, he was born in Souk Ahras, he lived through the fall of the Roman Empire, which coincided with the Visigoths' capture of Rome in the year 410. This event influenced the direction of his spiritual life, which passed through two stages:

The stage of youth, studies, and ordinary activity, and the beginning of his intellectual and philosophical anxiety, in this stage, he was influenced by Cicero, as Abd al-Rahman Badawi says, with the most profound impact, as it ignited in his mind a love for eternal truth and enduring wisdom. Moreover, Augustine found in the Manichaean doctrine what satisfied his inclinations, and he became fascinated with astronomy and found a justification for vice (Abd al-Rahman, 1984, p. 248).

As for the second stage, it begins with his critique of Manichaeism due to his non-conviction in its scientific explanations, and what it presented regarding astronomy; nonetheless, he maintained good relations with the bishop of the Manichaeans, and went through a period of conscious doubt, which ended with him becoming a monk and then a bishop, and he devoted himself as a foremost defender of the Western Christian Church. Further, he left many works that reflect the power of thought and a wide ability to encompass many sciences, including a treatise *On the Beautiful and the Fitting*, a treatise *On the Immortality of the Soul*, the book *Against the Academics*, *On Genesis*, *On the True Religion*, a book *On Music*, the book *Confessions*, *The City of God*, *On the Trinity*, *On Nature and Grace: Against the Pelagians*,

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Against the followers of Pelagius, On Grace and Free Will, and On Heresies. (Abd al-Rahman, 1984, pp. 248-249)

It is noteworthy that Saint Augustine was not a philosopher in the strict sense of the term, giving that the mission he believed in and to which he devoted his pen was the defense of religion; he was a theologian, or mutakallim in Islamic terminology, particularly against the Donatists and against the Pelagians the followers of Pelagius, who was “a clergyman belonging to the region of Wales in England, whose temperament was closer to the human spirit than that of most churchmen of his time. He rejected the idea of original sin and maintained that a human being can attain salvation through his own efforts if he chooses to live a virtuous life.” (Bertrand, 1983, p. 200)

Augustine was not a politician; nonetheless, after the fall of Rome, Christianity was accused of being responsible for the calamity, as the God of Christianity was said to have been unable to protect it. Therefore, he rose to the occasion and resolved to defend Christianity and refute the arguments of its opponents, which led to the birth of the book *The City of God*, which is classified among religious and philosophical utopias, for the religious motive lies behind the writing of this work.

As for the philosophical dimension, it is present through reflection on history. As Touchard states: “It does not represent a complete doctrine; rather, it is above all an impassioned mediation of a Roman Christian biography, torn, in the face of the disintegration of the empire whose life wavers between collapse and the desire to confront reality, and a deep reassurance that something will emerge from the ruins.” (Jean Touchard, 2010, p. 100)

Furthermore, before addressing the utopian and ethical content of *The City of God*, it is appropriate to examine Augustine’s theory of knowledge, as it helps to crystalize his political and historical philosophy and this view is manifested in the book (*Against the Academics*), where Augustine strove in his attempt to refute the arguments of the skeptical position. Giving to the fact that the senses are a necessary tool and instrument for the perception of knowledge and cannot be excluded; however, they are not sufficient for attaining truth. Hence Augustine says in the book *On Music*: “The soul is never subject to the body as matter is subject to the craftsman. And if the body produces in the soul a certain harmony, when we hear, for example, this does not produce in the soul derived harmonies like those we hear in sounds.” (Jean-Claude, 1982, p. 89)

This is the problem that was the site of conflict between the rationalist and empiricist schools namely, the relationship between perception, sensation, and the apprehension of truths. Besides, for Augustine, the apprehension of truth occurs through intuitive insight, which is the principal path to knowledge, and the first stage in the construction of knowledge is self-knowledge; through knowing the self, we arrive at truth (Abd al-Rahman, 1979, p. 22). Moreover, the search for the self is the cornerstone of attaining knowledge, and the personal experience through which Saint Augustine passed is evidence of the importance of this path. Augustine points out *On the Trinity*: “How does the soul seek itself and find itself? It is a very troubling question: where does it extend to seek itself, and from where does it come to find itself?” (Jean-Claude, 1982, p. 98)

Subsequently, self-knowledge, or the apprehension of eternal and everlasting truths inherent in the self, and the understanding of their causes which are of the same nature implies a correspondence between images and their causes, and the aim is to demonstrate the connection of meanings to God, as is evident in his statement: “There exists an eternal and everlasting being, and this being is God. Existence and essence are one and the same; therefore, the essence we conceive of God in our minds entails existence. Hence, the idea of God present in our minds also entails His existence. Therefore, God exists.” (Abd al-Rahman, 1979, p. 68)

The intersection between Augustine’s proof and the Cartesian cogito appears clear. As for the foundations of the ethical dimension in Augustinian philosophy, they are evident and require no further justification: God is the source of moral values, and happiness is bliss in God and for God, and nothing outside this life can be truly happy. For, happiness and truth are synonymous, as they share the same source. Further, Augustine’s epistemological aim is the knowledge of the eternal law, or the law of nature, which is characterized by constancy and absoluteness, and which exists within all; it derives its existence and legitimacy from God, and may therefore be termed divine law. In view of the fact that, good consists in acting in accordance with natural law, whereas evil is violation of this law, as good possesses ontological existence, unlike evil, which is a negative form; evil is a privation of good, that is, a privation of order, and moral virtues are founded upon the virtue of love, love of God and justice and all other values ultimately return to love.

Before addressing The City of God as proposed by Augustine as an alternative model, it is indispensable to point to the Christian view of politics in general. Therefore, Christianity began to spread at a time when the Roman Empire was flourishing, and its initial spread was among the lower classes of society, who embraced it as a logical result of its call for the principle of equality among all people. Notwithstanding, over time, and as the empire began to weaken and gradually decline, Christianity spread among all social classes, though it remained distant from political life due to the belief of the early Church Fathers in the necessity of obeying the ruler in accordance with the commandment of Jesus Christ, peace be upon him: “Render unto Caesar what is Caesar’s and unto God what is God’s.”

This situation continued until Emperor Constantine recognized Christianity as the official religion of the empire, and the role of the Church increased as the empire weakened, and the authority of the emperors diminished, such that the authority of the Church became parallel to that of the empire. Christianity thus emerged as a religious movement with its own system independent of the state, responsible for spiritual matters and striving to save humanity from sin. For, the state remained an independent institution deriving its authority from God, and accordingly, it became necessary for the Church to submit to its authority. Conversely, as the Church’s role grew and it came to possess authority rivaling that of the emperor, it put forward the idea of “dual loyalty,” which revolves around the necessity for the Christian to be subject to a kind of dual allegiance based on the dual nature of the human being.

As for the body, it directs its loyalty to temporal authority represented by the imperial government. Hence, emerged [the theory of the two swords or the duality of authority], based on the existence of two types of functions in society: functions related to spiritual and moral

values, which are undertaken and supervised by the Church, and functions related to maintaining security and order and achieving justice, which are undertaken by the government. The book *The City of God* by Saint Augustine, who is considered one of the Church Fathers, reflects political thought in Christianity; he began writing it in the year 412 and completed it in the year 427.

City of God:

An initial reading of the book's title suggests the meanings and messages it was intended to convey. Considering that, the City of God is a conception that links political communities with theological concepts, and the expression "City of God" is one that recurs in both the Old and the New Testaments; it is not a new designation. For, in the Book of Psalms [Psalm 46] of the Old Testament, the phrase "City of God" appears in the following text: "...There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High... God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved." And In the Book of Tobit of the Old Testament, we find in chapter 12 the phrase: "O Jerusalem, City of God, the Lord has chastened you by the works of your hands..."

As for the New Testament, it appears in the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews: "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem." (The New Testament, 1964, p. 367)

Ergo, the City of God is an expression of the Christian philosophy or vision of the movement of history, which is asserted by Cantor in his statement: "The Christian philosophy of history was essentially embodied in Augustine's *The City of God*, and it may be the most influential work in the history of Christian thought after the Bible." (Norman, 1997, p. 117)

The importance of the book in Christian thought on that account becomes evident. For, the motive behind its composition was the search for a Christian explanation for the fall of the Roman Empire; nonetheless, his historical sense, as the historian Cantor terms it, led him to study historical writing among the Greeks and Romans, and he found himself compelled to critique these methods of historiography. Additionally, the Augustinian view of the philosophy of history is based on rejecting the cyclical view of historical movement and refusing the possibility of the repetition of historical events: "The incarnation of Christ that is, His life on earth was a unique event that can never be repeated in history." For that reason, *The City of God* does not merely express a religious view of the universe and life, but rather constitutes a foundational philosophical vision of the Christian monotheistic perspective on the universe, the individual, and history.

The book *The City of God* consists of twenty-two books. In the early books, Augustine attempts to demonstrate that what befell Rome plunder, torture, and captivity is not unusual in the entirety of human history; rather, it is a trial that it suffered like other peoples over centuries as a result of its domination and arrogance. Equally important, the destiny of the human being is not determined on this earth, nor within the scope of bodily life, and such calamities do not affect the essence of human existence and should not lead to despair: "Temporal life is a dwelling of beginning that prepares for eternity, and calamities for the Christian are nothing but a test and discipline." In reality, they are an instrument of divine

education. In Augustine's view, every collective or individual pain must first be regarded as an explicit punishment for grave errors; the suffering that results from such events should become for each individual an occasion for repentance and asceticism, and this can only lead the Christian to sincere self-examination. The greater the crisis, the more a person must choose the direction of his existence: will he be an ordinary citizen of the earthly city, finding his way through its historical turns, or will he instead be faithful to the City of God?

Citizenship:

The state, as a civil and political institution in Christian belief, is based on control and domination exercised by a body or a group of individuals. It is foreign to human nature and arose as a result of the spiritual realm in which Adam, peace be upon him, once existed. Accordingly, the political condition is a second nature associated with sin and transgression, which lay behind the exit or expulsion from the heavenly realm. For, acceptance of control and authority is therefore expiation for sin and for the pride arising from egoism or self-love, which scorns natural equality that affirms human partnership, based on the foundation of sharing in created nature, unity of origin, and unity of purpose.

Saint Augustine says: "God willed that the rational being, created in His likeness, should not dominate anything except non-rational beings; He willed that man should not dominate man, but rather animals." All forms of domination, in Augustine's view, will eventually disappear at the end of time, that is, in the Kingdom of God, where God will be all in all. (Jean-Jacques, 1998, p. 154)

Furthermore, the legitimacy of authorities derives from the idea of sin; thence, every authority established in this world ought to be honored, even by those who are better than it. Besides, the idea of reconciling the authority of a tyrannical ruler with the principles of God is termed the "just disposition." Augustine, on the other hand employs symbolism based on historical data to clarify this condition when he spoke of the Christian soldiers of Julian the Apostate: these soldiers refused to praise idols, yet they accepted to march into battle.

They distinguished between their eternal master and their temporal master; nevertheless, they obeyed the temporal master in order to please the eternal one. (Jean-Jacques, 1998, p. 155)

The search for the political and organizational foundations of civil society is the responsibility of the Christian believer in general and of the scholar in particular. As a doctrine, in the view of religious authorities, it is capable of transforming citizens into virtuous individuals; rather, it possesses the ability to grant human beings both worldly and eternal happiness. Further, all religions converge in this conception, which may become a sufficient cause for the emergence of sectarianism and extremism. Besides the accusation that Christianity was the source and cause of the fall of the Roman Empire was enough to prompt Christian scholars to defend and uphold their doctrine; in their view, this claim is unfounded, and the proof of this lies in historical facts rather than rational arguments, for the history of this empire was founded on war; ergo, its bloody past is the cause of its downfall, not Christianity.

Citizenship in Roman society took on a legal dimension, in which foreigners or strangers were granted the right to citizenship, and Saint Augustine, as a "barbarian" individual as the

Romans referred to any foreigner or anyone who was not Roman from Hippo (present-day Annaba), was able to obtain Roman citizenship, which was based on pagan belief. As a result of the spiritual transformation he experienced, he came to believe in dual citizenship, which, from a political standpoint, served as an intelligent way of overcoming the pressures exercised by the Roman government on Christian believers, and the story of the People of the Cave records the suffering experienced by these believers. It follows that, dealing with the Romans under certain conditions establishes the earthly city, while striving through thought and conduct leads the believer to the heavenly realm or the City of God, and the ethical and metaphysical foundation upon which Augustine bases the concept of dual citizenship rests on the principles of good and evil: striving to satisfy vital needs is part of human nature and cannot be excluded, while the desire to transcend this nature is itself part of that same nature. These two opposing desires give rise to two cities, the City of God, which stands in contrast to the earthly city and all human societies ultimately belong to these two cities (Atiyat, 1997, p. 374). Additionally, the arguments upon which Augustine relies in establishing this vision are historical, for the political history of humanity proceeds according to this historical pattern. Considering that, from the descent of Adam to the present, there have been two cities: one with God and the other with Satan. Abel belongs to the City of God, and it was willed by God's mercy, and what He inscribed in the Tablet of Destiny, that Abel be a sojourner on this earth while remaining affiliated with heaven as his true homeland. Likewise, the patriarchs belong to the City of God (Bertrand, 1968, p. 91).

Belonging to one of the two cities, according to Augustine, or "what makes a person a member of one city or the other of these two cities is not race or the nation he claims as his own, but rather the end he seeks, to which all his actions are ultimately subject." (Augustine, 1994, p. 191)

Citizenship in Augustine's thought intersects in many respects with the modern concept of citizenship, even though the contexts that frame citizenship differ in most cases. For, the acknowledgment of loyalty or belonging to the city is not based on factors of race (ethnicity) or affiliation with a particular nationalism state, as is the case in modern citizenship, which recognizes a single constant loyalty to the homeland alone but rather on the moral ends that we embody in our actions.

On that account, citizenship for Augustine, from a temporal perspective, is not founded on the present; more precisely, not everyone who belongs to a particular city is necessarily a member of it, since criminals are also members of the earthly city alongside believers. Alternatively, he looks toward the future and to the actual and practical embodiment of values, not merely to slogans.

The City of God, "whose foundation is a community of the righteous," is the true model of this citizenship. As Leo Strauss puts it, it is not composed only of followers of Christ and worshippers of the true God; instead, it consists of godly people, and its entire life may be described as a life of pious obedience to the world of God. It is there, and there alone, that true justice exists. (Strauss, 2005, p. 288) There are two types: the justice of earthly cities, which is based on the principle of citizenship according to the Roman custom, and here Augustine, draws on the philosophy of Cicero, which he approached at the beginning of his

inquiry with a critical and objective method. In Book 19, chapter 21, he reveals the contradiction into which Cicero fell when he defined the republic as the “public thing.” Additionally, he argues that if this definition is correct, then the Roman government was never truly a “thing of the people,” and justice in Roman civil society was always absent. Nevertheless, this critique did not lead Augustine to be biased against Cicero; rather, he praises the latter’s commitment to law and his firm view of civilized human life, which he did not conceive possible without law, and his conception of the state as a “community of law.” The idea that the state is subject to the law of God or to a higher law that transcends human actions and the idea of using force when necessary for the state to achieve justice and right (Ibrahim, 1973, p. 199), both of which were affirmed by Cicero, constituted a foundation upon which Saint Augustine relied to overcome the dilemma of judging earthly cities as corrupt. Not all earthly cities are devoid of legitimacy or are corrupt; however, true justice is the justice of God. Giving to the fact that earthly cities are not perfect, and every earthly polity, insofar as it aligns with Cicero’s conception, contains certain features of the City of God, even though, in practice, every society organized according to positive law is considered a political state.

An initial reading of the two models, the City of God and the earthly city suggests separation and contrast between them. Notwithstanding, Saint Augustine presents a political project that attenuate the tension between the two tendencies: the desire for worldly life and happiness, and the fear of the unknown (the afterlife). For, the City of God does not abolish the need for civil society but rather complements it, seeing that the divine citizen is also a citizen of an earthly city, but his ethics are divine, and the purpose and end of creation is the embodiment of higher moral values, with God as the primary model, and Jesus Christ, peace be upon him. Membership in the City of God brings peace and tranquility to the citizen: “It is only insofar as one is a member of the City of God, and through one’s relation to an order that transcends the political realm, that one can attain the peace and happiness to which all people aspire, even the wicked.” (Augustine, 1994, p. 192)

Membership or citizenship in the City of God does not abolish citizenship in a temporary earthly society; rather, it preserves and completes it. For, the divine city is a city of values, and through understanding its values, we are able to identify the qualities of the ideal global citizen given the universality of Christianity whom the culture of globalization seeks to promote. For the reason that citizenship in Augustine’s thought converges with the model of the citizen advocated by Stoic philosophy. Considering that the cosmopolitan citizen (Cosmopolite) closely resembles the Christian citizen (Oranopolite) as affirmed by Christianity. In the Stoic perspective, the human being is a member of a vast community of cosmic dimensions; the city of the wise is the Cosmos. From this emerged the concept of the universal city (Cosmopolis), or the city of the world. On the grounds that the shared nature or common constitution of human beings is what gives rise to a sense of similarity and equality among all, and the world itself proceeds according to the principle of the universal Logos; it is, in its essence, an ordered and harmonious system that contains no inequality or injustice. In juxtaposition, belonging to a particular group or ethnicity gives rise to conflict rooted in individual or collective egoism. Christian citizenship, on the other hand, is grounded in the

universality of moral values and the unity of humanity. On that account, the political space of Augustinian citizenship is founded on ethics: the happiness, peace, and tranquility of the citizen lie in embodying moral values linked to divine law.

As for the cosmopolitan citizenship advocated by Stoicism, it is transcendent and detached from place. Seneca states in *Moral Letters to Lucilius*: “Wherever you find yourself, in any remote corner of the earth, that place no matter how desolate is a noble dwelling. You yourself are far more important than any place you may come to; for this reason, you should not allow any place to enslave your mind, live in the belief that I was not born for any one part of this universe; the whole world is my homeland.” (Jalal al-Din, 1999, p. 133)

From this standpoint, the convergence between Stoic thought and Christian thought appears in the universality and comprehensiveness of the principle, even if the difference is merely formal (namely, the divine religious dimension). For, in Stoicism, the moral law is the law of existence; existence is life, and life is the proper and natural exercise of functions. Happiness, therefore, is nothing but our awareness that we are not performing our functions in complete harmony. “When a person desires life, he in fact desires happiness; and when he desires happiness, he desires that everything should conform to the law of nature.” (Zakaria, 1969, p. 135)

Consequently, the world of the Christian citizen and that of the Stoic citizen are one, so long as the law or the Logos of existence is one, namely God, and what we strive to demonstrate is the discovery of the explicit and implicit moral values embedded within The City of God. And among these values is love. Seeing that loyalty to authority whether it is loyalty to the authority of God (the City of God) or loyalty to the authority of the earthly city proceeds from love. For, the emotional bond between the citizen and the ruler grants legitimacy and justification to authority and motivates the citizen toward devotion to the beloved, whatever the object of love may be. Hence love is not a mere bond between the citizen and authority, but a foundational principle upon which authority itself is built.

This conception is reflected in what Saint Augustine says: “Two loves have made two cities: love of self, even to the contempt of God, made the earthly city; and love of God, even to the contempt of self, made the heavenly city. The former seeks glory from men, while for the latter; God is the witness of its conscience and the source of its glory.” (Augustine, 1994, p. 191)

Love, love on that account, is not impure in its nature but only accidentally so; it becomes moral and necessary when the object of love is objective and ethical, as preferring others over oneself is a love for humanity, not a negation of the self. As Saint Augustine puts it: “...we see their leaders the leaders of the City of God devoting themselves to love...” Therefore, the Christian citizen believes within himself that he is called to be an individual or a member of a community broader than the human society to which he actually belongs. This community is the community of the righteous or just persons, who enjoy eternal happiness and who constitute the Kingdom of Heaven, or the City of God. Furthermore, the moral values upon which citizenship is built consist in acting according to the law (the divine rule); what is moral is not what society, the individual, or the state determines, but rather God, who grants

moral legitimacy to action. Ergo, the determination and foundation of values depend on proximity standard or distance from God.

We believe that the problem of the foundation of moral values which has been the subject of intense debate and theological controversy across cultures, especially among those who hold that values are transmitted or revealed finds in Saint Augustine many arguments. He says: "...the virtues which the soul believes it possesses, and by which it rules the body and the vices, are in reality vices if the soul turns away from God. For, in themselves they are virtues, but the pride that affects the soul when it turns away from God transforms them from virtues into vices..." and among these virtues is the virtue of peace, a value sought by the citizen within the city and within civil society, and which relies on the nature and form of the relationship with God: "Wretched is the people that turns away from God; it loves peace and cannot reject it, yet it does not possess ultimate peace because it has misused this peace... As for our peace on earth, it is with God through faith, and in eternity it will be with Him through vision..." In addition, it can be said that Saint Augustine truly deserves to be classified among the Fathers of the Church. In view of the fact that through him, ancient thought passed into the Middle Ages, and his writings became a rich source from which both Catholic and Protestant authors later drew. (George, 1969, p. 275)

What is striking is that the writings of this thinker have been anticipated in multiple and even opposing ways: some classify him among the pillars of Christian thought, while others consider him a theorist of persecution, and these differing interpretations were expressed by Professor Tawfiq al-Tawil, who stated: "From his writings on righteousness and piety, on predestination and good works, the Protestants derived some of their strongest and most solid arguments; while in his theoretical rigor, Catholicism found some of its most distinctive features, and the dogmatists of both concealed their intolerance behind the name of this great saint..."

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