"We See Through a Glass Darkly"

Augustine's Historical Thought and the Vision of God

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Since the very birth of Christianity, Christians have thought of their religion as essentially historical, a religion uniquely based not on philosophical ideas, but on historical events. Within the New Testament scriptures one can already see the Apostle Paul arguing for such a conception of Christianity: *Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you be saying that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ cannot have been raised either, and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is without substance, and so is your faith* (I Corinthians 15:12-14).[1] Certain historical events, therefore, are endowed with special significance for the Christian, particularly those of salvation history.[2] And in the same New Testament scriptures one reads that God's providence is what sustains the whole of creation. The Apostle Paul preached this to the men of Athens when he asserted that God *gives everything—including life and breath—to everyone* and that in God *we live, and move, and exist* (Acts of the Apostles 17:25, 28).

Pondering the significance of such statements, one might begin to ask important questions about God and history: What other events besides the Resurrection lie within the realm of salvation history and what events lie outside of it? If God's providence is said to sustain creation, in what other capacities is it active? Is God's activity in time

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[1] All Scripture quotations in italics taken from the New Jerusalem Bible.

(history) observable or understandable? If so, how authoritative is human judgement concerning it?

Probably the fullest and most mature answers to such questions in the early Christian church came from the quill of St Augustine of Hippo. Augustine did not purposefully engage these questions nor write a systematic theology of history.[3] His primary concerns were pastoral, not academic. Yet, many have called *De civitate Dei* a theology of history despite the fact that others have specifically cautioned against looking for one in its pages.[4] The questions asked above, however, do not require a full exposition of the theology of history, but only that part dealing with God's temporal activity. Augustine's wisdom sheds valuable light on this topic, providing occasional clues and answers here and there throughout his prolific writing.

Pulling together the fragmentary, and seemingly contradictory, threads of Augustine's thought and modern Augustinian scholarship, I believe one can paint a fairly complete and accurate portrait of how St Augustine saw God working in human history. I qualify my 'complete and accurate portrait' with the word 'fairly' because Augustine's thought on this topic as a whole is ambiguous, as is his God, who is "most hidden and yet

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[2] By salvation history I mean the history of God's active redemption of humankind. The main events of salvation history are the Fall, Incarnation, Resurrection, Second Coming, and Final Judgement.

[3] This is really just a branch of the philosophy of history, just as theology is a branch of philosophy. One scholar remarking on this subject has said that "there is no real difference here, since theology is philosophy by other means" (R. Bittner, "Augustine's Philosophy of History," in G. B. Matthews (ed.), *The Augustinian Tradition*, Philosophical Traditions, [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999], p. 359, n. 16). Bittner also points out that to speak of Augustine's 'philosophy of history' is anachronistic (p. 345).

[4] Those who call *De civitate Dei* a theology or philosophy of history: Bittner, "Augustine's Philosophy of History", p. 359; T. Merton, "Introduction," St Augustine, *The City of God*, (New York: Modern Library, 1950), p. ix; and M. Boulding (trans.), *The Confessions*, (New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics, 1998), xxxxvi. Those who maintain that it is not a theology of history: J. J. O'Donnell, "Augustine, *City of God*," http://www.ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/augustine/civ.html, (15 October 2001), IV and H. Chadwick, *Augustine: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 114.

intimately present" (C VI.3.4).[5] Or in historian Robert Markus' description: "God's hand and God's purposes are equally present and equally hidden" in history.[6] God's purposes are present in history because the Scriptures attest to it, yet they are hidden because Scripture does not describe the whole of history. Human history between the founding of the Apostolic Church and the Second Coming of Christ is one big blank; it contains none of the events of salvation history. Because no 'real' change occurs in regard to the salvation of humankind, this period of history has been described as "monotonous."[7]

Yet God's providence is continually manifest in the natural order and in the lives of individuals. The notion of divine providence seems to have been such a commonplace in ancient thought that Augustine did not even feel the need to refute those who denied its operation (DCD X.18).[8] Furthermore, Augustine's own *Confessiones* is full of allusions to divine providence working in his life, bringing him to conversion. But he is careful not to single out certain events of extra-biblical history as due to the 'special' providence of God. In so doing, it has been rightly recognized that Augustine "does not really deny the operation of a special providence so much as he avoids it."[9] He knows that his knowledge of that activity is imperfect. Yet even so, he believes that we must "dedicate ourselves to the pursuit of a [knowledge] we know to be unattainable here: to a quest which is doomed, and yet, is an inescapable duty."[10]

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[5] Quotations from the *Confessiones* are taken from the translation of Maria Boulding, (New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics, 1998).
[6] R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of Augustine*, rev. ed., (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 23.
[7] R. Bittner, "Augustine's Philosophy of History," p. 355.
[8] Augustine remarked that "we have not undertaken in this work, of which we are now writing the tenth book, to refute those who either deny that there is any divine power, or contend that it does not interfere with human affairs, but those who prefer their own god to our God." Quotations from *De civitate Dei* (DCD) and *De doctrina christiana* (DDC) are taken from the translation of Marcus Dods, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Vol. II, First Series, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1993).
[9] L. G. Patterson, *God and History in Early Christian Thought*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1967), p. 131.
[10] Markus, *Saeculum*, p. xx.

I

Aurelius Augustinus (354-430) was born in the small town of Thagaste in Roman North Africa to a Catholic mother, Monica, and a pagan father, Patricius, who later converted to Christianity (C IX.9.22).[11] Aspiring to be a teacher of rhetoric, Augustine's education and career took him to the important metropolises of Carthage, Rome, and Milan. His philosophical and religious ideas underwent significant change and development as he flirted with Academic and Neo-Platonic philosophy, astrology, and Manicheism before finally committing himself to Catholic Christianity in 386. Augustine then gave up his secular career, was baptized by St Ambrose, and went home to Thagaste to live the life of a contemplative. During a visit to the industrious port city of Hippo Regius in 391, Augustine's life took a much more active turn. There he was compelled to accept priestly ordination and, just a few years later, episcopal ordination. Throughout his long ecclesiastical career he fought unremittingly against the errors of paganism, Manicheism, Donatism, and Pelagianism in the hope of creating a truly Catholic Church in which all types of people could find salvation.

Augustine's complex body of thought did not develop in a vacuum. While formulating his ideas on history, he absorbed and reacted against both classical and early Christian historiographical traditions. In the classical tradition, Augustine especially despised the idea that history was cyclical and repeated itself. This could not happen, he argued, because Christ died once for all time. Furthermore, there was order in the

[11] For biographical information on St Augustine see Peter Brown's enduring and comprehensive *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography, A New Edition with an Epilogue*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000) or Garry Wills' excellent new *Saint Augustine*, A Penguin Life, (New York: Penguin, 1999).

universe, not chaos, providence, not fate.[12] Augustine made use of many Roman and Greek authors in the first ten books of *De civitate Dei*. His principle method was to draw supposedly logical premises from authoritative sources and then make absurd conclusions from them, or show them to be inconsistent. In this way, Augustine used Cicero's definition of a republic, as one ruled with justice, to show that Rome never was a republic, because even its own historians admit that it was never ruled justly (DCD II.21).

Augustine's favorite source for Roman history was Sallust (86-35 BC), author of the *Bellum Catilinae* and the *Bellum Jugurthinum*. He made frequent use of Sallust's remarks regarding the moral degradation of the Roman Republic. Republican Rome was supposed to be the period in which Rome was at its most glorious, free from the corruption of Empire. Augustine liked Sallust's model of decay so much that he subsequently read all of his other sources for Roman history and religion in this way.[13] Yet, even though he found this device useful, it was not the type of historical interpretation Augustine himself wished to employ. Rather, Augustine believed that moral degradation had always existed and did not necessarily increase or decrease with the vicissitudes of time. Virtue did not either, for both commingled ambiguously here on earth in the *civitas terrena*, not to be separated until the end of time.

Augustine stands out especially among Christian historians. He rejected the historical interpretation of the first and most eminent historian of the early Church, Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260-339), author of the *Historia ecclesiastica*. Perhaps most objectionable in Eusebius' writings was his portrayal of the Emperor Constantine, who

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[12] M. T. Clark, *Augustine*, Outstanding Christian Thinkers, (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994), pp. 49-50.
[13] A. Schindler, "Augustine and the History of the Roman Empire," *Studia Patristica*, 22, (1989), pp. 326-336, 329.

"completes the work begun by Christ" on the cross and spreads the message of redemption throughout the Empire.[14] In so doing, Eusebius went beyond the revelation contained in the biblical narrative and planted Constantine firmly in the soil of salvation history. Moreover, because of the Christian triumphalism of his own day, ushered in by the conversion and toleration of Christianity under Constantine, Eusebius conceived of the post-Resurrection era as one of progress. Augustine wholly rejected this line of interpretation, maintaining that the Roman Empire was not the instrument of humankind's redemption, nor could it be since it had not been written into the biblical narrative of salvation history. For Augustine, one historian has argued, "history was the *operatio Dei* in time, it was a 'one-directional teleological process, directed towards one goal—salvation,' the salvation of individual men, not of any collective groups or organizations."[15] If there was any progress in history, then, it was in the turning of individuals toward God, progress in the redemption of humankind—salvation history. Augustine did not even prefer the material progress of Eusebius to Sallust's model of decline.[16] History was marked not by progress or decline, but rather by the eschatological tension of the two cities, the *civitas terrena* and the *civitas Dei*.

Augustine did not see eye to eye with Christian historians of Late Antiquity either. In 417 Augustine commissioned an historical work, *Historia contra paganos*, from the Spanish priest Orosius (born c. 380-385), meant to supplement his own *De civitate Dei*. Orosius argued in his *Historia* that the past was more oppressive the further

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[14] R. A. Markus, "The Roman Empire in Early Christian Historiography," *Downside Review*, 81, (1963), pp. 340-353, repr. in his *From Augustine to Gregory the Great: History and Christianity in Late Antiquity*, (London: Variorum Reprints, 1983), p. 344.

[15] T. E. Mommsen, "St. Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress: The Background of the City of God," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 12, (1951), pp. 346-374, 370.

it was removed from the time of Christ's Incarnation and Resurrection.[17] This was but a different form of Eusebius' Christian triumphalism, which Augustine certainly had no taste for; it would join "the many books of his contemporaries that Augustine pointedly ignored."[18]

After the Sack of Rome in 410 by the Goths, Christian historians seemed to have gradually abandoned the earlier Eusebian optimism and reverted to Sallust's model of decline. The priest Salvian of Marseilles (c. 400-480) saw in the Fall of Rome the infliction of God's judgement and wrath, not due to the people's neglect of worshipping the gods, as had been the opinion in Augustine's day, but because of the moral laxity of Christians.[19] Salvian's *De gubernatione Dei* (439-451) contained none of the comforting pastoral intent of Augustine's *De civitate Dei*, but a firm and stern rebuke. Yet, despite rejecting Eusebius' model of progress, Salvian still saw the Empire "as the special object of God's concern."[20] The difference, he argued, was that God expressed not favor toward it, but anger.

Another, earlier attitude to the Christian Empire existed before the conversion of Constantine and the pro-Constantinian histories of Eusebius. It was that of hostility towards the Empire.[21] Before the Edict of Milan (312-313) officially granted toleration to Christianity, its adherents had been horribly persecuted, especially under the Emperors

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[16] G. F. Chesnut, "The Pattern of the Past: Augustine's Debate with Eusebius and Sallust," in J. Deschner, L. T. Howe and K. Penzel (eds.), *Our Common History as Christians: Essays in Honor of Albert C. Outler*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 91.
[17] Markus, "Roman Empire," p. 350.
[18] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 294.
[19] D. Lambert, "The Uses of Decay: History in Salvian's *De gubernatione dei*," in M. Vessey, K. Pollman and A. D. Fitzgerald (eds), *History, Apocalypse, and the Secular Imagination: New Essays on Augustine's City of God*, Augustinian Studies 30:2, (Bowling Green, OH: Philosophy Documentation Center, 1999), p. 117. For biographical information on Salvian see J. J. O'Donnell, "Salvian and Augustine," Augustinian Studies, 14, (1983), pp. 25-34.
[20] Lambert, "Uses of Decay," p. 129.
[21] Clark, *Augustine*, p. 103.

Nero (54-68), Trajan (98-117), Decius (249-251), and Diocletian (303-305). The apologist Lactantius (c. 250-325) wrote a narrative of their condemnation, *De mortibus persecutorum* (c. 314-315), which showed what horrible deaths came to those who persecuted Christians. Augustine maintained a much more neutral, ambivalent attitude to the Empire, however, being content to use the Empire to further his own causes, especially against the heretical Donatists, rather than attach to it any soteriological significance.

II

Augustine, despite all that he had to say about the broad outlines of history**,** was not an historian but a theologian. In a passage of the *De civitate Dei* can be found his oft-quoted statement that "were we to attempt to recount or mention these calamities, we should become writers of history" (III.18). As has already been mentioned above, Augustine gave that task to Orosius. Probably no satisfactory explanation exists for why he did this. Besides the fact that he was constantly busy and hard-pressed for time, perhaps the best reason can be deduced from Augustine's remarks in *De doctrina christiana* (397-427). "Anything that we learn from history about the chronology of past times assists us very much in understanding the Scriptures" (II.28). It is in this connection that he acknowledged the usefulness of Eusebius' historical works (DDC II.59). For Augustine made much use of Eusebius' and Jerome's chronicles in Book XVIII of *De civitate Dei*, in which he synchronized the history of the two cities. All this would seem to indicate that Augustine felt history to be a useful tool, merely a means to the better understanding of Scripture rather than an intellectual pursuit in its own right.

Yet, for all this, Augustine did write two minor 'historical' works.[22] One of these is the *De gestis Pelagii* (416-417), that tells about his dealings with the heretic Pelagius. The other is the *Breviculus conlationis cum Donatistis* (411), which summarized the proceedings of an important conference between Catholic and Donatist bishops held in Carthage of that year. Neither of these works, however, is properly in the genre of history. For the former work reads more like a short chronicle or long memorandum, while the latter is a mere summary copied from council documents and probably unoriginal in all but selection.

Two other works of Augustine are much more historical, the *Confessiones* (397-401) and *De civitate Dei* (413-427), and provide the basis for my analysis of Augustine's thoughts on God's activity in history. The *Confessiones*, probably the most widely read of St Augustine's works, is autobiographical, telling the story of his early life up until his conversion to Catholicism. It reads more like a series of theological reflections than narrative, peppered throughout with retrospective analyses of the activity of God's grace in bringing him to conversion and concluding with an allegorical exegesis of the creation story. Augustine confessed in it far more than his own sin, but continuously gave praise to God: "I confess before you those acts of mercy by which you plucked me from all my evil ways… Lord, you are my king and my God" (C I.15.24).

Augustine's *De civitate Dei*, which is more properly polemical and theological history, is also full of theological reflection. Without going into the many reasons why he felt compelled to write this 'magnum opus et arduum', it seems obvious from the

[22] For information on these works I am indebted to the relevant articles in A. D. Fitzgerald (ed.), *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999).

work's early content that it was begun in response to the Sack of Rome in 410.[23] Augustine described his aim in the preface to Book I of *De civitate Dei*: "The glorious city of God is my theme in this work…. I have undertaken its defence against those who prefer their own gods to the Founder of this city." Following a scheme provided by Augustine himself, this work has been traditionally divided up into five parts.[24] The first two argue that the worship of the gods cannot provide happiness in this life (books I-V) or in the next life (books (VI-X). The next three concern the origins (books XI-XIV), history (books XV-XVIII), and ends (books XIX-XXII) of the two cities. In describing these two cities Augustine said, "two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self" (DCD XIV.28).

Before moving on to what Augustine actually wrote in these works, it is necessary to make a distinction between sacred and secular history that will help to clarify terms and significantly limit the focus of this study. When the terms sacred and secular history are used, it may be thought that sacred history refers to the history containing God's actions, while secular history refers to the history devoid of God's actions. But this is not the type of definition that Augustine envisioned. He believed that God was active in all of human history, for it was he who had created the world and whose divine providence continually sustained it.[25] Both sacred and secular history, therefore, are full of God's

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[23] See especially T. D. Barnes, "Aspects of the Background of the *City of God*," *Revue de l'Université d'Ottawa/University of Ottawa Quarterly*, 52, (1982), pp. 64-80, repr. in his *From Eusebius to Augustine: Selected Papers, 1982-1993*, (Aldershot: Variorum, 1994). Barnes argues, however, that Augustine would have written *De civitate Dei* whether Rome had been sacked or not (p. 67).

[24] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 302.

[25] In his commentary *De Genesi ad litteram* (401-415) Augustine wrote: "Therefore we understand that God rested from all his works that he made in the sense that from then on he did not produce any other new nature, not that he ceased to hold and govern what he had made. Hence it is true that God rested on the

activity. Augustine conceived of the difference between the two, not in terms of God's activity, but in terms of written form.

The difference between sacred and secular history essentially concerns the quality of the historical narrative.[26] Sacred history is contained in the biblical narrative, comprised of both the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. Only this narrative has divine sanction, for it is the only book whose authors were inspired by the Holy Spirit. Its contents are prophetic, containing the divine utterances of God and the story of human redemption—salvation history. All other historical narratives, in contrast, can be relegated to the realm of secular history for the simple reason that they are not divinely inspired writings. They are and always will be human writings, no matter how much they are permeated with the language and knowledge of Sacred Scripture, no matter how saintly the author. Rephrasing the distinction in German vocabulary, one could say that God is active throughout all *historie*, both sacred and secular, but that the Scriptures are the only *heilsgeschichte*; all other *geschichte* is secular.[27]

My aim, then, is to illuminate Augustine's thoughts on the activity of God outside the realm of sacred history, i.e. in secular history. For what Augustine believed about sacred history was obviously derived from the Scriptures, so that one can easily read them to find out what he believed. His interpretation of those Scriptures, however, especially in the realms of eschatology and retribution, does oftentimes bear on his understanding of secular history. Otherwise one must look for Augustine's historical

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seventh day, and it is also true that he works even until now" (V.20.41). Quoted in C. Gousmett, "Creation Order and Miracle According to Augustine," *Evangelical Quarterly*, 60, (1988), pp. 217-240, 225.

[26] The following distinction between sacred and secular history is derived from Markus, *Saeculum*, ch. 1. Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 321, n. 5, concurs: "For Augustine, the Bible was the only truly reliable history-book, because not written by men alone (*Ep*. 101,2) and because the choice of what is significant had been correctly made."

[27] Markus, *Saeculum*, p. 14.

speculation specifically in the realm of secular history,[28] an area in which he far surpassed all of his predecessors, to say nothing of his successors.

III

A useful framework for discussing Augustine's historical thought is the succinct formulation of historian Robert Markus, who describes it as secularist theology, though not in the modern sense.[29] In Markus' reckoning, Augustine's secularist theology is threefold, aiming at the secularization of history, the Roman Empire, and the Church. This secularist, ambivalent attitude of Augustine's originated in his pre-conversion struggle with the problem of evil, which he solved by formulating the *privatio boni* argument.[30] Rejecting the absurd Manichean notion of two opposing Gods, one good and one evil, Augustine reasoned his way to the conclusion that evil was not a substance because all matter was good. Things could not be purely evil, for evil was relative to the absence of good. Russell succinctly summarizes the ramifications of this argument for Augustine's later ideas on human society saying, "there could be no such physical or institutional separation between good and evil here below, but only an eschatological and moral one."[31] This eschatology will prove especially important for Augustine's thinking on the nature of the Church in contrast to the heretical Donatists with whom he frequently engaged in formal debate. Such a combination of moral ambiguity with eschatology helped lay the groundwork for Augustine's attitude of secular ambivalence.

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[28] Indeed, Markus writes, "The past, when it lies beyond the range of the canonical scriptures, lies outside the scope of sacred history. It is the field for historical investigation" (*Saeculum*, p. 54).
[29] Markus, *Saeculum*, p. 133; Brown calls Augustine the "great 'secularizer' of the pagan past" (*Augustine of Hippo*, p. 263).
[30] F. H. Russell, "'Only Something Good Can Be Evil': The Genesis of Augustine's Secular Ambivalence," *Theological Studies*, 51, (1990), pp. 698-716, 707.
[31] Russell, "Augustine's Secular Ambivalence," p. 711.

Augustine's secular ambivalence more properly refers to his secularization of the Church and the Roman Empire, rather than to his secularization of history, which originated in the development of his ideas on prophetic inspiration.[32] Explaining Augustine's secularization of the Roman Empire is problematic because of the need to explain and reconcile his early optimistic appraisal of the Roman Empire and his later ambivalence towards it. Why the change? Barnes shows that the change came in the wake of the Sack of Rome in 410.[33] Rome held such a strong place in the minds of many Christians that their faith was shaken by its destruction. Augustine, a man of strong faith, questioned the theological significance of Rome rather than the providence of God. He fully articulated this in *De civitate Dei*, written as historian Garry Wills argues, "to dethrone the *idea* of Rome from its place in people's minds. It was never the city that could satisfy human hearts. Only the City of God can do that."[34] Augustine's pastoral vigilance did much to reinvigorate the faith of Christians in North Africa and to bring heretics and pagans into the Catholic fold.

Augustine dethroned the idea of Rome from people's minds by turning their thoughts away from earthly things to heavenly things—from the *civitas terrena* to the *civitate Dei*. He did this primarily in the first book of *De civitate Dei*, where he discussed the ambiguity of God's temporal rewards and punishments.[35] Augustine's starting point was Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount: [God] *causes his sun to rise on the bad as well as the good, and sends down rain to fall on the upright and the wicked alike* (Matthew 5:45). Divine providence distributes both temporal prosperity and temporal

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[32] Markus, *Saeculum*, p. 43.
[33] Barnes, "Aspects of the Background," p. 72.
[34] Wills, *Saint Augustine*, p. 114.

punishment to the just and to the unjust in this life. By contrast, in the "world to come", prosperity and punishment will be given unambiguously and eternally, "for the righteous good things, which the unrighteous shall not enjoy; and for the wicked evil things, by which the good shall not be tormented" (DCD I.8). The purpose of temporal ills, such as the Sack of Rome, was not necessarily punitive, but could be used to test moral character, as had been the case with the biblical character Job (DCD I.9). Augustine drew the conclusion, "So material a difference does it make, not what ills are suffered, but what kind of man suffers them" (DCD I.8). The rise or demise of Rome made little difference; it was the human being's response that counted for everything.

Augustine moved onto the subject of Rome itself in Book V of *De civitate Dei*. There he indicated that it was the virtues of the early Romans that were responsible for the success of the Roman State. Augustine's justification for this appears wholly inadequate: "For as to those who seem to do some good that they may receive glory from men, the Lord also says, 'Verily I say unto you, they have received their reward'" (DCD V.15). Again, Augustine drew a moral lesson from these noble Romans. The example of those whose virtuous deeds made the Empire prosperous for their own glory, he argued, ought to provoke Christians to greater virtue, that they may give glory to God and prosper in the Eternal City, the City of God (DCD V.18). Once again, Augustine pointed away from the earthly present to the heavenly future.

After what seemed to be an unsubstantiated argument about the prosperity of Rome, Augustine took cover behind the hidden ambiguity of divine providence, for "there may be, nevertheless, a more hidden cause, known better to God than to us" (DCD

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[35] See the excellent study of G. W. Trompf, "Augustine's Historical Theodicy: The Logic of Retribution in De Civitate Dei," in G. Clarke et al. (eds.), *Reading the Past in Late Antiquity*, (Rushcutters Bay, NSW:

V.19). He had asserted earlier that God "gives earthly kingdoms both to good and bad…according to the order of things and times, which is hidden from us, but thoroughly known to himself" (DCD IV.33). That God bestowed earthly kingdoms did not take away from free will, for though all powers were from him, "the wills of all are not from Him" (DCD V.8). Augustine wanted to have his cake and eat it: God knows all things, but that does not take away from the freedom of the individual. This he argued in explicit opposition to the opinion of Cicero (DCD V.9). How the two are to be reconciled was not proven. The compatibility of God's foreknowledge and human free will, then, seemed to be numbered among the unfathomable divine mysteries, such as the triune God and Christ's dual nature.

Human beings also could not know why God bestowed earthly kingdoms to some and not others. Such distributions of temporal power followed the same incomprehensible law as divine retribution. Augustine seems to have struggled with this when contemplating the lives of various Roman emperors. "He who gave [power] to Augustus gave it also to Nero…He who gave it to the Christian Constantine gave it also to the apostate Julian" (DCD V.21). Once again he constructed a theodicy: God made Constantine emperor so that men would not think that they had to be pagans in order to gain dominion. Conversely, "lest any emperor should become a Christian in order to merit the happiness of Constantine, when everyone should become a Christian for the sake of eternal life, God took away Jovian far sooner than Julian, and permitted that Gratian should be slain by the sword of a tyrant" (DCD V.25). Dwelling on what little God reveals to human beings of his providential purposes, Augustine concluded that "it is too much for us, and far surpasses our strength, to discuss the hidden things of men's

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Australian National University Press, 1990).

hearts, and by a clear examination to determine the merits of various kingdoms" (DCD V.21). The fate of Rome, therefore, remained ultimately clouded in the fog of secular ambivalence.

Augustine's secular ecclesiology is similar in that it also is ambiguous with regard to the present; but it is significantly more forward-looking and eschatologically-oriented. In contrast to the Donatists of Augustine's native Africa who saw their Church as a pure society, one whose ministers had remained steadfast in the face of persecution, Augustine described his own Catholic Church much differently.[36] The Church was the pilgrim City of God, not yet a pure society, for "as long as she is a stranger in the world, the city of God has in her communion, and bound to her by the sacraments, some who shall not eternally dwell in the lot of the saints" (DCD I.35). Augustine viewed the Church as a mixed body of both saints and sinners, just as he viewed all human societies. For even the Church was not immune to the overlapping of the two cities. "In truth," he wrote, "these two cities are entangled together in this world, and intermixed until the last judgment effects their separation" (DCD I.35). Augustine's attitude of secular ambivalence towards the Church, as towards all human societies, expressed itself in terms of individual persons whose ends would not be known for certain until the eschatological resolution of all ambiguity in the Last Judgement.

Augustine was strongly indebted to the Donatist theologian Tyconius (died c. 400) for his ideas on the Church and for his method of interpreting the Apocalypse. Tyconius wrote the *Liber regularum* (c.382), a book of rules for interpreting the Scriptures that Augustine summarized in his *De doctrina christiana* (396; 426-427), and a now-lost commentary on the Apocalypse (c. 385?). The second rule of Tyconius dealt

with the mixed Church (DCD III.32), enabling and teaching Augustine to "transpose concepts which earlier African theology had understood in empirical, sociological or historical terms, into an eschatological key."[37] Tyconius showed the Church to be "subject to the permanent tension between what is here and now and the eschatological reality to be disclosed in and through it."[38] Because his ecclesiology more strongly supported Catholic than Donatist theology, he died excommunicate from his own Donatist Church.

Furthermore, Tyconius' commentary on the Apocalypse freed Augustine from the embarrassments of a literal interpretation.[39] Augustine strongly objected to any such literal interpretations of the millennium that described it as a material paradise;[40] rather, he asserted that the Church "exists in the millennium, *is* the millennium."[41] The Church was identified with the heavenly Jerusalem of St John's vision: *I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride dressed for her husband* (Revelation 21:2). Augustine was "reluctant to attempt to define too exactly the manner in which biblical prophecy would, in the future, be fulfilled."[42] He knew how problematic this could be. In avoiding such futurist interpretations, he 'de-eschatologized' biblical prophecies, "transposing them back into the present, where they

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[36] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 209.
[37] Markus, *Saeculum*, p. 120.
[38] *Ibid*.
[39] P. Frederiksen, "Apocalypse and Redemption in Early Christianity: From John of Patmos to Augustine of Hippo," *Vigiliae Christianae*, 45, (1991), pp. 151-183, 151.
[40] G. Bonner, "Augustine and Millenarianism," in R. Williams (ed.), *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 236.
[41] J. K. Coyle, "Augustine and Apocalyptic: Thoughts on the Fall of Rome, the Book of Revelation, and the End of the World," *Florilegium*, 9, (1987), pp. 1-34, 16.
[42] Bonner, "Augustine and Millenarianism," p. 241.

serve to describe the current experience of the church."[43] Augustine did this to exhort his audience to "ethical engagement in the present."[44]

Yet Augustine did not want to interpret present-day events as the "literal fulfillment of prophecy" either, for too many Christians had already been misled and deceived that way.[45] They were looking for the fulfillment of Jesus' prophecies on the end of the world. *You will hear of wars and rumours of wars; see that you are not alarmed, for this is something that must happen, but the end will not be yet. For nation will fight against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. All this is only the beginning of birthpangs* (Matthew 24:6-8). Julian the Apostate ridiculed such Christians: "Such things [wars, earthquakes, or epidemics] have often happened and do still happen, and how can these be signs of the end of the world?"[46] Augustine's response to such tactics was to 'remythologize' the Apocalypse, "both by emphasizing that its events are happening repeatedly throughout human history…and by employing apocalyptic structures like the unknowability of God's judgement."[47] All this served to shift attention from the end times, from biblical prophecy, from history, to the individual within history, whose salvation was so important to Augustine. "History cannot serve as the prime medium of salvation…rather, the individual as the locus and focus of God's saving grace."[48]

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[43] Frederiksen, "Apocalypse and Redemption," p. 163.
[44] K. Pollmann, "Moulding the Present: Apocalyptic as Hermeneutics in *City of God* 21-22," in Vessey, *History, Apocalypse, and the Secular Imagination*, p. 179.
[45] H. O. Maier, "The End of the City and the City Without End: The *City of God* as Revelation," in Vessey, *History, Apocalypse, and the Secular Imagination*, p. 163.
[46] Quoted in Pollman, "Moulding the Present," p. 166.
[47] *Ibid*., p. 179.
[48] Frederiksen, "Apocalypse and Redemption," p. 166.

IV

One can see exactly how Augustine did this in his autobiographical *Confessiones*, where his biographer Possidius of Calama (c.370-440) remarks, "he describes the kind of person he was before receiving grace and the kind of life he lived after receiving it" (VA pref.5).[49] Indeed, it is only through God's grace that Augustine was able to find meaning in life: "you have made us and drawn us to yourself, and our heart is unquiet until it rests in you" (C I.1.1). Upon reading the *Confessiones*, Pelagius was annoyed by Augustine's incessant talk of God's grace,[50] especially his famous dictum: "Give what you command, and then command whatever you will" (C X.29.40).

Reflecting back on his early life, Augustine saw God's grace come to him primarily through people. Monica, his mother, dominated the story[51], for she had brought him up as a catechumen in the Catholic Church; he constantly recalled this early inculcation with Christian beliefs. One such incident occurred when Augustine was still very young. He had almost died of illness and been baptized, but when his health improved it was deemed unwise that he be baptized, for which he looked back as a middle-aged man with yearning for what might have been. "You saw, my God, because even then you were guarding me, with what distress and what faith I earnestly begged to be baptized into your Christ, who is my God and my Lord; you saw how I pleaded with my loving kindly mother…she was bringing my eternal salvation to birth" (C I.11.17). He would also remember God speaking through his mother, chastising him for sexual wantonness: "Whose, then, were the words spoken to me by my mother, your faithful

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[49] Quotations from *The Life of Saint Augustine* are taken from the edition of J. E. Rotelle, The Augustinian Series, 1, (Villanova, PA: Augustinian Press, 1988).
[50] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 343.
[51] *Ibid*., p. 17.

follower? Were they not your words, the song you were constantly singing into my ears?" (C II.3.7). Augustine firmly believed that the prayers and tears of Monica were instrumental to his salvation. For God had assured his mother in a dream that her son would be saved, and when later she saw him making progress, she redoubled her prayers. Augustine confessed to God, "You stretched out your hand from on high and pulled my soul out of these murky depths because my mother, who was faithful to you, was weeping for me more bitterly than ever mothers wept for the bodily death of their children. In her faith and in the spiritual discernment she possessed by your gift she regarded me as dead; and you heard her, O Lord, you heard her and did not scorn those tears of hers which gushed forth and watered the ground beneath her eyes wherever she prayed" (C III.11.19).

God's grace also came to Augustine through people other than his mother, some of whom were complete strangers. One such person was an old man who counseled Augustine to give up the errors of astrology with which he was fascinated at the time. Augustine saw in this old man's words the providence of God: "By the answer he gave me, or which you gave me through him, you made provision for my needs and sketched in my memory an outline of the truth I was later to search out for myself" (C IV.3.5). But Augustine could also see God working through people that had quite opposite intentions. While living in Carthage as a Manichee hearer, Augustine asked many difficult questions; he was told that when Faustus came, all his questions would be answered. "Thus it came about that this Faustus, who was a deathtrap for many, unwittingly and without intending it began to spring the trap in which I was caught, for thanks to your hidden providence, O My God, your hands did not let go of my soul" (C V.7.13). Unable

to find answers to questions of Manichee doctrine, Augustine slowly drifted out of the sect and into the Catholic Church.

Augustine was an avid reader, and as one might imagine, books affected him deeply. In his late teens he was converted to philosophy after reading Cicero's *Hortensius*. Yet Augustine recalled that he did not consume Cicero with reckless abandon for the simple reason that Cicero did not mention the name of Christ. "Through your mercy, Lord, my tender little heart had drunk in that name, the name of my Savior and your Son, with my mother's milk, and in my deepest heart I still held on to it" (C III.4.18). But Augustine would come to see God's grace most clearly, and for the first time, while reading the letters of St Paul. "So I began to read, and discovered that every truth I had read in those other books [of the Platonists] was taught here also, but now inseparably from your gift of grace… So totally is it a matter of grace that the searcher is not only invited to see you, who are ever the same, but healed as well, so that he can possess you" (C VII.21.27).

The progress of salvation through God's grace and mercy that brought such healing, Augustine came to learn, was fraught with pain and bitterness, for "you sprinkled bitter gall over my sweet pursuits" (C III.1.1). Because of God's presence, Augustine could not even find pleasure in sex. "You were ever present to me, mercifully angry, sprinkling very bitter disappointments over all my unlawful pleasures so that I might seek a pleasure free from all disappointment" (C II.2.4). This is the same type of reasoning that Augustine made use of in his *De civitate Dei*. He constantly exhorted his audience to turn their attention from the transience of this present life to the eternal happiness of the saints in the City of God. He taught this firmly and stubbornly from his own experience.

"I was hankering after honors, wealth and marriage, but you were laughing at me. Very bitter were the frustrations I endured in chasing my desires, but all the greater was your kindness in being less and less prepared to let anything other than yourself grow sweet to me. Look at my heart, Lord, you who have willed me to remember this and confess to you. You freed my soul from the close-clinging sticky morass of death; let it now cling to you. How wretched it was! You probed its wound to the raw, to persuade it to leave all else behind and be converted to you" (C VI.6.9).

Augustine's imagery grew more terrible as the inner struggle leading to his conversion intensified. God tortured him inside as he and Alypius heard Ponticianus' story of two men who converted on reading the *Life of St Antony*. "Lord, even while he spoke you were wrenching me back toward myself, and pulling me round from that standpoint behind my back which I had to take to avoid looking at myself. You set me down before my face, forcing me to mark how despicable I was, how misshapen and begrimed, filthy and festering. I saw and shuddered. If I tried to turn my gaze away, he went on relentlessly telling his tale, and you set me before myself once more, thrusting me into my sight that I might perceive my sin and hate it" (C VIII.7.16).

Augustine fled with Alypius to their lodging's courtyard garden, where the final drama of his conversion would be played out. "In my secret heart you stood by me, Lord, redoubling the lashes of fear and shame in the severity of your mercy, lest I give up the struggle and that slender, fragile bond that remained be not broken after all, but thicken and constrict me more tightly" (C VIII.11.25). Then Augustine heard a child chanting, "Pick it up and read, pick it up and read." It's a wonder he heard this at all, so preoccupied was he with his own inner agony. "I stemmed the flood of tears and rose to

my feet, believing that this could be nothing other than a divine command to open the Book and read the first passage I chanced upon" (C VIII.12.29). *Let us live decently, as in the light of day; with no orgies or drunkenness, no promiscuity or licentiousness, and no wrangling or jealousy. Let your armour be the Lord Jesus Christ, and stop worrying about how your disordered natural inclinations may be fulfilled* (Romans 13:13-14). "No sooner had I reached the end of the verse than the light of certainty flooded my heart and all dark shades of doubt fled away" (C VIII.12.29).

V

After conversion and baptism into the Catholic Church, Augustine came to see God working in many more ways than he had before. One such way was through miracles. For what almost immediately follows Augustine's baptism in the *Confessiones* is a story telling of the discovery of two martyrs' bodies, Protasius and Gervasius, and the miracles that ensued (C IX.7.16). Miracles fascinated Augustine more and more throughout his life until a "sudden wave of miraculous cures" occurred in his old age; more than seventy took place in Hippo within two years.[52] Around this same time, Augustine was finishing up *De civitate Dei*. He filled an enormous chapter of it, perhaps the largest in the whole work, with these miracles stories (DCD XXII.8).

Augustine defined miracles in an early work written soon after his priestly ordination, *De utilitate credendi* (391-392). "But I call that a miracle, whatever appears that is difficult or unusual or above the hope or power of them that wonder" (DUC XVI.34).[53] Miracles had a purpose; when understood, they were profitable. But those who merely wondered and did not understand miracles could not benefit from the truth

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[52] Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, p. 417.

they conveyed.[54] Augustine preached on this subject in his *In Johannis evangelium tractatus* (c. 406-421): "For who is there who considers the works of God, whereby this whole world is governed and regulated, who is not amazed and overwhelmed with miracles? If he considers the vigorous power of a single grain of any seed whatsoever, it is a mighty thing, it inspires his [sic] with awe. But since men, intent on a different matter, have lost the consideration of the works of God, by which they should daily praise him as the Creator, God had, as it were, reserved to himself the doing of extra-ordinary actions that, by rousing them with wonder, he might rouse men as from sleep to worship him" (IJET VIII.2.1).[55]

God worked through divine providence as through miracles, but the workings of divine providence were so general or abstract that they were wholly inscrutable to human beings. This is the main difference between miracles and ordinary events, not the fact that "miracles are worked by voluntary providence, through the instrumentality of men and angelic beings, rather than spontaneously through natural providence," although that is certainly true.[56] God's activity in miracles could be easily discerned and understood by those who witnessed them, although sometimes it might be necessary to test the miracle in order to find out if it was from God or not. The test concerned whether the miracle brought glory to God or to the one who performed it.[57]

Augustine always told of miracles in precisely this way: to proclaim God's glory. He did not generally use the miraculous to explain historical events except when the events themselves were miraculous. Otherwise providence in the natural order was

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[53] Quoted in Gousmett, "Creation Order and Miracle," p. 231.
[54] *Ibid*., p. 232.
[55] Quoted in *ibid*., p. 229.
[56] *Ibid*., p. 236.

sufficient. For what may first appear as inconsistencies in Augustine's historical analysis often turn out not to be. In *De civitate Dei* Augustine directly attributed some historical events to God's activity, but since he did not say why they happened, it must be assumed that they were due to divine providence. The first such instance occurred while Augustine was describing the Sack of Rome. Presumably because they were Arian Christians, the Gothic invaders, spared all who sought refuge in churches. Augustine concluded that this could only be due to the name of Christ (DCD I.7). Another famous instance is Augustine's statement that through Rome "God was pleased to conquer the whole world, and subdue it far and wide by bringing it into one fellowship of government and laws" (DCD XVIII.22). Augustine consistently attributed historical events to the activity of God, to divine providence. Miracles were usually isolated events with little bearing on the course of secular history, except in so much as they drew men and women towards God. Sacred history, on the other hand, was filled with numerous miracles of great significance.

Augustine also wrote about seeing God directly, rather than indirectly through providence, grace, or miracles. Human beings could see God with the eyes of the soul, with spiritual sight. "You goaded me within to chafe impatiently until you should grow clear to my spiritual sight. At the unseen touch of your medicine my swelling subsided, while under the stinging eye-salve of curative pain the fretful, darkened vision of my spirit began to improve day by day" (C VII.8.12). At the same time as he began writing *De civitate Dei,* Augustine answered a letter from the noble lady Pauline asking for a

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[57] Gousmett, "Creation Order and Miracle," p. 238.

treatise on the vision of God, *De videndo Deo* (413).[58] The central text around which Augustine wove his answer came from Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. *Blessed are the pure in heart: they shall see God* (Matthew 5:8). Who are the pure in heart? They are those who want to see God, for no one will see him who does not want to (DVD 25). And not only must one wish to see God, but God must also wish to show himself to that person (DVD 18). Yet "no one living in this life can see Him as He is. Many have seen, but what His will chose to show they saw, not what formed His nature" (DVD 20). Augustine felt obliged to distinguish between seeing a representation or attribute of God and seeing God's unchangeable essence. Only those who rose to eternal life, the saints, would see God as he is (DVD 27); they would see not with bodily eyes, but with the eyes of the heart (DVD 37).

Augustine had written on the vision of God earlier in *De doctrina christiana* (397-427), in a passage describing the ascents of wisdom. To reach the sixth step one had to purify "the eye itself which can see God, so far as God can be seen by those who as far as possible die to this world. For men see Him just so far as they die to this world; and so far as they live to it they see Him not. But yet, although that light may begin to appear clearer, and not only more tolerable, but even more delightful, still it is only through a glass darkly that we are said to see, because we walk by faith, not by sight" (DDC II.11). Augustine often made use of the idea that we see *through a glass darkly* (I Corinthians 13:12). He did this throughout many of his works, including *De videndo Deo* (51), the *Confessiones* (VIII.1.1), and *De civitate Dei* (XXII.29).

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[58] Quotations from *De videndo Deo* (Letter 147) are taken from the translation of Mary Clark, *Augustine of*

VI

'We see through a glass darkly' sums up Augustine's overall thought on seeing God at work in secular history. To begin with, this phrase captures the ambiguity of Augustine's own thought, as well as the ambiguity and inscrutability of divine providence. Apart from the Scriptures, human beings could not know with any certainty why God did the things he did in the natural order. They could guess, but "there may be, nevertheless, a more hidden cause, known better to God than to us" DCD V.19). At best, they could be confident that the giving of kingdoms and empires followed some hidden order, known only to God. Even the Church was not exempted from the fate of kingdoms and empires while on earth; it was, however, differentiated by its eschatological orientation. Now it was made up partially of citizens of the heavenly city, but in the end it would be full only of the elect, for by then the City of God would have attained its full heavenly splendor.

Human beings could see God more directly via grace, as Augustine had seen God in the *Confessiones*. But not all persons received grace; for by grace only a few persons might see and experience God directly and personally, though others might see indirectly. God's grace could act through many different ways, whether through family members, strangers, books, or miracles. Miracles had the advantage of opening the eyes of those who experienced them, so that those who had not seen God might see him. But it was the pure in heart, the saints, who were guaranteed to see God, to experience the beatific vision (DCD XXII.30).

Augustine only approved of and practiced three types of history. The first was the conversion narrative or miracle story (the *Confessiones* and chapter 8 book XXII of *De*

Hippo: Selected Writings, The Classics of Western Spirituality, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984).

civitate Dei). In this type of history one could see God's grace working in individual persons' lives to change them and bring them to salvation. The second was that of salvation history, which resembled literal biblical exegesis (books XI-XXII of *De civitate Dei*). God most plainly revealed himself through the biblical narrative of sacred history. All secular history was but a human attempt at creating a similar, divinely ordered narrative. The third type of history was the synchronous chronicle, which put sacred and secular history side by side (book XVIII of *De civitate Dei*). Augustine recommended use of this type of history in *De doctrina christiana* (II.28). It allowed one to see the relationship between God's revealed activity in sacred history and his hidden activity in secular history, while also aiding one's understanding of Sacred Scripture. To see God directly at work in history according to Augustinian principles is to drastically reduce the field of historical investigation.