Chapter 8

Happy the People Whose God Is the Lord

The Holy Scriptures of the Hebrews say, "Happy is the people whose God is the Lord" (Ps. 144:15). It follows then that a people alienated from that God [of the Hebrews] will be miserable.

Saint Augustine

Reading the Scriptures as an old man Saint Augustine was drawn to the historical books of the Bible. As a young priest he had studied the epistles of Saint Paul, and as a bishop he preached a series of sermons on the Gospel of John, on the first epistle of John and on the Psalms. In the last years of his life, however, he found himself rereading the history of the kings of Israel recorded in the books of Samuel and Kings. What impressed him most in these books, Peter Brown observes in his biography of Augustine, "was the manner in which the hidden ways of God had caused the most reasonable policies to miscarry."

The dream that human beings, guided by reason, tempered by
virtue, and moved by good will, could build a lasting city in this world inspired men and women in ancient times no less than it animates people in our own day. For many this hope seemed to have been realized in the institutions of the Roman Empire. No other political order had been successful in embracing so many peoples in so many countries under one system of government. Even today one gazes in wonder and admiration at the ruins of Roman cities stretching from one end of the Mediterranean world to the other, in Tunisia (ancient Roman Africa) on the southern coast of the Mediterranean, in Turkey (ancient Asia Minor) on the northern coast, and in Syria far to the east. It is astonishing that these cities were once part of a single rule and a common culture. Ancient Rome was unique. It could not only boast of having brought peace and prosperity, stability and the rule of law, but also claim universality and aspire to finality. Its capital was Roma Aeterna, the eternal city that would endure long after others had fallen. As Virgil, the celebrated poet of Rome, had sung, for the Romans the gods

Set no limits, space or time
But make the gift of empire without end.²

As long as there is civilized life, Rome, it seems, would endure.

As a boy Augustine had committed Virgil’s verse to memory. Raised in the certainty that the city of Rome, the empire, the institutions and conventions that ordered the rhythms of society, the Latin language and Roman culture had been there for centuries, Augustine lived with the quiet confidence that the world that was in place would last indefinitely, a belief he held till his death. Augustine could no more conceive of Rome passing away than Americans can imagine our way of life and institutions

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fading into oblivion or being displaced by another form of government, another language, another way of life. In one of his sermons he referred to the "city that had given us birth according to the flesh," to which he added, "Thanks be to God."³

Yet he lived at a time when the institutions he cherished were threatened. In 410, when Augustine was in his late fifties, Rome was sacked by a Gothic army that had marched down into Italy from the barbarian north. To the horror of its inhabitants and the disbelief of citizens all over the empire the invaders looted and plundered the eternal city, and with impunity. Rome had stood for a thousand years; never before had it been overrun by a foreign army. People were stunned, fearful, incredulous. Although Constantinople in the East had claimed the title New Rome, the old Rome, the historical capital of the empire, held their affections and sustained their memories. Rome represented civilized rule, an ancient way of life, culture, and law, the things that make social and civic life possible. "If Rome can perish," wrote Jerome, "what can be safe?" His sentiments were Augustine's.

The sack of Rome was the immediate occasion for Augustine's most ambitious work, the City of God. Written during the two decades after the sack of Rome, the City of God occupied Augustine's thinking for fifteen years. The first three books were finished in 414, when he was sixty, but the last book was not completed until 426, when Augustine was in his early seventies. Yet the entire work was conceived according to a comprehensive plan, and Augustine remained true to his original conception until the final page.

The City of God stands apart from other early Christian treatises. For one thing, it is very long, more than a thousand pages in English translation. Augustine referred to it as "this huge
work.” For another, it ranges over topics so diffuse and varied that it can almost serve as a handbook of Christian thought. Whether the subject is Christ, creation and fall, sexuality, biblical exegesis or history, political philosophy, human passions, love, prophecy, Incarnation, sacrifice, miracles, suicide, or Christian hope, one will find a discussion in its pages. What makes the *City of God* invaluable, however, is that it is the first treatise to deal in depth with the relation of Christianity to social and political life. In the second and third centuries several apologists had touched on such questions, and Melito (d. 190), bishop of Sardis in western Asia Minor, suggested that there was a convergence between the rise of the Roman Empire and the appearance of Christianity. In the fourth century Eusebius, the first historian of Christianity and biographer of the first Christian emperor, Constantine, had addressed the challenge of relating Christianity to the new political situation in which the Roman emperor was a Christian. But Augustine wrote on a much larger scale and with a keener appreciation that the sacred history of the Bible did not simply continue without interruption in the history of the church. The *City of God* reflects the growing maturity of Christian thinking and provides an occasion to examine how one Christian thinker thought about the community of Christians, the church, in relation to the society in which he lived.

Although the *City of God* was occasioned by the sack of Rome, it is much more than a response to that catastrophe. As the early sections make clear, the book was an apology in defense of Christianity to those who “prefer their own gods to the founder of the city of God.” In the first five books Augustine addressed Romans who believed that worship of the traditional
gods ensured happiness in this life, and in the second five books, particularly beginning in book 8, he turns to a more formidable foe, the Platonists (whom we call Neoplatonists), who shared with Christians belief in one God but did not think worship of the one God excluded veneration of lesser gods. Even though Christianity was now the official religion of the Roman Empire, there were many critics among the intellectual class. Augustine’s book was addressed to such critics as well as to Christians whose faith had been shaken by the assault on the ancient and venerable city. Something like the City of God would probably have been written even if the Goths had not sacked Rome.

The City of God can be read as a Christian response to Plato’s Republic, though Plato’s work does not figure large in it. In a revealing passage early in the work Augustine alludes to the program of the Republic. There Plato had sketched out a rational ideal of a perfect commonwealth, in Augustine’s words, “what kind of city ought there be.” The use of the term ought is noteworthy. Augustine emphasizes that Plato had set forth his thinking on what an ideal city would look like. One might have expected Augustine in response to outline his ideal city, contrasting the city of God with the kind of commonwealth envisioned by Plato. But Augustine does not present a model city, a society human beings should strive to build in this world. His city of God is not an ideal but an actual city, a living community to which one belongs. In a telling phrase in one of his letters, he refers to the city of God as a city one enters, that is, a society of which one becomes a part. Though the life of the city of God is oriented toward the future, it is a social and religious fact. In the very first sentence of the City of God Augustine says that he has taken upon himself the task of “defending the glorious city of
God against those who prefer their own gods to the Founder of that city.”

The *City of God*, then, is not the defense of an idea or a set of beliefs (though much of the book is, of course, a defense of ideas and beliefs), but rather a defense of a community that occupies space and exists in time, an ordered, purposeful gathering of human beings with a distinctive way of life, institutions, laws, beliefs, memory, and form of worship. The most characteristic feature of the city of God is that it worships the one true God. Augustine never defines this city outright, but it is closely identified with the church. The *City of God* was written, he tells us, against philosophers who attack “the city of God, that is, [God’s] Church.” Wherever the church is, he says, there will be “God’s beloved City.” The City of God is more than the church because it includes the angels and the saints who have gone before, but there can be no talk of the city of God without the church.

Yet the *City of God* is not a book on the doctrine of the church, at least not in any conventional sense. In his writings against the Donatists, a schismatic group in North Africa, Augustine developed a theology of the church. But his aim in the *City of God* is to interpret Christianity to the Romans, and with that goal in mind to explain how this new community, this other city, relates to the city in which Christians reside. Christ’s coming joined people in a more enduring fellowship than the institutions or associations of civil society. Hence Augustine rests his argument not on political theory but on an understanding of the nature of the community whose founder is Christ. The political philosopher Sheldon Wolin wrote, “The significance of Christian thought for the Western political tradition lies not so much in what it had to say about the political order, but primarily in what it had to say
about the religious order. The attempt of Christians to understand their own group life provided a new and sorely needed source of ideas for Western political thought. Christianity succeeded where the hellenistic and late classical philosophies had failed, because it put forward a new and powerful idea of community which recalled men [and women] to a life of meaningful participation.”

The Life of the Saints Is Social

Christian thinking about the city of God begins with the Bible. To introduce the theme of his book Augustine cites three passages, all from the psalms: “Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God” (Ps. 87:3); “Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God” (Ps. 48:1); and “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” (Ps. 46:4–5). All three of these passages are speaking about Jerusalem, the ancient city in Palestine, the city of Jewish history, and the city where Jesus was crucified and raised from the dead, a place one can locate on a map. But for Augustine the phrase “city of God” in the psalms also carried another meaning: it designated a company of men and women and angels who are united in their love of God. His book is about this city; yet to depict this city Augustine speaks about another city, “the city of this world,” the earthly city, the social and political community that exercises dominion over human beings. The two cities must be discussed in tandem because “in this present transitory world, they are interwoven and mingled with one another.” The citizens of the city of God are also citizens of the earthly city, and, conversely, many of the citizens of the earthly city belong to the city of God."
In the course of his book Augustine refines these initial definitions by introducing the notion of ends, the goal toward which each city is directed. By end Augustine means that larger purpose that sustains the life of a city. In setting forth the ends of the two cities, Augustine begins with definitions that were well known to Roman political thinkers. He draws on Varro, a Roman philosopher, and Cicero the great Roman statesman. In book 2 he cites Cicero’s De Republica, in which Cicero defines community not as just any association of human beings, but one “united in association by a common sense of law and a community of interest.” Yet in book 19, his most detailed discussion of the ends of the two cities, Augustine starts at another place. The end toward which all human life is directed is peace. “Anyone who joins me,” he says, “in an examination, however slight, of human affairs, and the human nature we all share, recognizes that just as there is no man who does not wish for joy, so there is no man who does not wish for peace.” Even when men go to war their aim is to achieve peace. All our “use of temporal things,” he writes, “is related to the enjoyment of earthly peace in the earthly city.”

For Augustine peace is not simply external peace, the peace that exists between peoples or kingdoms that share a common boundary. In his view the term also applies to the relations among members of a family, to the bonds of trust between citizens in a city, to the laws that make it possible for members of society to carry on their activities without discord or fear or danger. Peace means order within society: it presupposes law, and it requires justice. Peace without justice, he writes, “is not worthy even of the name of peace.”

All the components of society, whether the family, the neighborhood, civic associations, or legal and political institutions, are
directed to a common end, securing and preserving peace. Augustine writes, “Now a man's house ought to be the beginning, or rather a small component part of the city, and every beginning is directed to some end of its own kind, and every component part contributes to the completeness of the whole of which it forms a part. The implication is quite apparent, that domestic peace contributes to the peace of the city—that is, the ordered harmony of those who live together in a house in the matter of giving and obeying orders, contributes to the ordered harmony concerning authority and obedience obtaining among the citizens.”

In this passage Augustine is speaking of the peace for which the earthly city strives. Peace, however, was not simply a word borrowed from the lexicon of political thought. It was also a key term in the Bible, and it was used in the Psalms of the city of God. The passage that caught Augustine’s attention was in Psalm 147, a psalm that speaks about Jerusalem, that is, the city of God: “Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion! For he strengthens the bars of your gates. . . . he makes your borders [fines] peace” (147:12–14). This psalm teaches us, says Augustine, that the end of the city of God is peace, playing on the term fines (plural of Latin for end), which also meant borders or frontiers. To which he adds, drawing on a traditional etymology of the name Jerusalem, “Jerusalem means city of peace.”

Because peace as end applies equally to the earthly city and to the city of God, it is the pivotal term in Augustine’s understanding of both cities. No word, he says, falls more “gratefully upon the ear, and nothing is desired with greater longing.” At one level, then, the ends of the two cities are the same. At first this seems puzzling because Augustine has insisted throughout the
book that the two cities have different ends. To clarify the difference he introduces another biblical text, this one from Saint Paul, that speaks of the end of the city of God as “everlasting life.” Paul writes, “But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the return you get is sanctification and its end, eternal life” (Rom. 6:22). Augustine will not, however, give up the term peace so he settles on the formulation that the end of the city of God can be called “peace in life everlasting” or “life everlasting in peace.” What sets the city of God off from other communities is that it seeks “the end that is without end,” the supreme good, that “good whereby good is brought to final perfection and fulfilment.”

This peace for which the city of God yearns is a “perfectly ordered and harmonious fellowship in the enjoyment of God,” a peace of “enjoying one another in God.” Notice that Augustine’s language is social, not individualistic. He does not say “fellowship with God,” but enjoying one another in God or, as one translator has it, a “mutual fellowship in God.” Augustine’s controlling metaphor for the new life that God creates is not, for example, being born again, but becoming part of a city and entering into its communal life. When the Scriptures speak of peace they do not have in mind simply a relation between an individual believer and God; in the Bible peace is a gift that human beings share in communion with God. In a hymn to the church in an early writing Augustine said, “You unite together citizens to citizens, nations to nations, indeed the whole human race . . . so that all are joined together not simply as a social organization but as a family.”

Christianity is inescapably social. The philosophers, Augustine writes, had taught that the “happy life is social,” that the
A virtuous man wishes for others what he wishes for himself. Augustine agrees, but adds, “We insist on that even more strongly than they. . . . How could that City have made its first start, how could it have advanced along its course, how could it attain its appointed goal, if the life of the saints was not social?” Peace can be realized only in community and enjoyed only when all the members of the community share in that good. As always, Augustine rests his discussion on an apt scriptural text, this one from the Psalms: “Blessed is the people whose God is the Lord” (Ps. 144:15). In a thought-provoking passage late in the work he says that when the city of God reaches the “peace of God” (Phil. 4:7) there will no longer be enmity, no longer discord, and there will be such mutual trust that “the thoughts of our minds will lie open to mutual observation.” This is why the apostle Paul said, “Pass no premature judgments” and added that when the Lord comes “He will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purpose of the heart” (1 Cor. 4:5).

Things Pertaining to This Life

Everything that Augustine says about the heavenly city and about the earthly city is related to peace. But peace, as Augustine understands it, can never be fully realized in this life, for the peace that human beings are able to build among themselves is always fragile, unstable, ephemeral. Accordingly, the Scriptures offer no promises concerning peace on this earth. In the Bible peace is always a matter of hope, and the peace for which the city of God yearns can only be the work of God, not of human hands. According to the prophet Habakkuk, the goal for which we hope cannot be seen with our eyes: we seek it “by believing.” “The just man lives on the basis of faith” (Hab. 2:4). If we are to
reach this end "we must be helped" by God, who is that very good we seek.16

It is possible for some human beings to find a measure of peace in this life, Augustine observes, yet we need only look around to see the miseries that afflict human life: "The attitudes and movements of the body, when they are graceful and harmonious, are reckoned among the primary gifts of nature. But what if some illness makes the limbs shake and tremble? What if a man's spine is so curved as to bring his hands to the ground, turning the man into a virtual quadruped? Will not this destroy all beauty and grace of body whether in repose or in motion?" Strive though we may to secure a safe haven in life, we cannot avoid being "tossed about at the mercy of chance and accident."17

What is more troubling, human beings discover they cannot find peace even within themselves. The more we strive for virtue and holiness, the more we discover refractory forces within ourselves that war against our best efforts. What stands in the way of a virtuous life is not what comes from outside, for example, the evils of society or the iniquity of fellow humans, but our own passions and turbulent desires. Even when we seem to achieve a measure of tranquility in our lives, we learn that virtue does not make us immune from pain and sorrow. Human life offers no lasting peace, whether peace among nations, peace within the city, peace in the home, or peace in the inner chambers of the soul. In this life perfect happiness is illusory.

Christians, however, belong to a community of hope whose end lay outside of history. As Saint Paul wrote, "It is in hope that we are saved," and Augustine commented, "It is in hope that we are made happy." As he was fond of putting it, the church is the city of God on pilgrimage "in this condition of mortality and it
lives on the basis of faith.” In a beautiful phrase depicting the future hope, Augustine says that the “angels await our arrival.”

It would seem, then, that the church has little stake in the effort to build a just society. Were the City of God to end at this point it would hold much less interest than it does. What gives the book its allure and abiding significance is that Augustine knew efforts to achieve peace on this earth, though fragile and destined to fail, must be undertaken. He illustrates this point with one of the most familiar, yet compelling, stories in the book. What shall we say, he asks, about a judge whose office is to determine the fate of men and women who come before him, knowing all the while that he cannot see into the minds of the people he judges? How can he be certain that his judgments are just? Will he not on occasion condemn an innocent person out of ignorance?

What is the judge to do, asks Augustine? In the absence of indisputable evidence, should he refuse to judge? Augustine writes, “In view of the darkness that attends the life of human society, will our wise man take his seat on the judge’s bench, or will he lack the heart to do so?” To which Augustine replies, “He will sit. For the claims of human society constrain him and draw him to this duty; and it is unthinkable to him that he should shirk it.”

The claims of human society constrain him! What are these claims? If the ends toward which Christians strive are a matter of hope, and peace is a work of God, on what basis does Augustine defend the action of the judge?

For the first two hundred years of the church’s history Christianity was a minority religion in the Roman Empire. The sociologist Rodney Stark, on the basis of statistical projections
drawn from random references in the ancient sources, suggests that by the year 200 there may have been only two hundred thousand Christians in an empire of sixty million. By the year 300, however, the number may have risen to more than six million. When Augustine was born in midcentury the total may have reached thirty million; and the numbers were growing. Christians were no longer outsiders. The emperor was a Christian, and Christians were well represented in imperial and provincial offices, on city councils, and in the military.

During the early history of the church the task of running the cities and the empire was someone else's responsibility. In the early third century, Origen thought that Christians should not hold public office. In his view they served their cities best by offering prayers for those in authority and training people to lead lives devoted to God. By our prayers, he writes, "we contribute to the public affairs of the community."21

In the fourth century, with the conversion of the emperor Constantine to Christianity and the steady growth of the church, the relation of Christianity to the society underwent a gradual but momentous transformation. Constantine introduced laws that made Sunday a day of rest, thereby creating a new calendar and reordering the life of society to make space for Christian worship. He advanced legislation that discouraged the exposure of infants by indigent parents and saw to it that the public fisc would provide food and clothing to rear abandoned children. He built churches, not only in the new Christian city of Constanti-nople and the old capital, Rome, but also in Jerusalem, a city that would acquire potent symbolic significance in the public consciousness. As these new buildings displaced the temples built by former emperors the plan of cities began to reflect the presence
of Christianity in the life of the empire. The most prominent public building became the church, and to this day one will find a church on the central public square of European cities.

Priests had been a familiar feature of life within the Roman Empire, but Christianity introduced a new kind of priest, the Christian bishop. By contrast to pagan priests, the bishops were not functionaries of the state. Political authorities had no say in their selection. The responsibility of Roman priests had been chiefly cultic, but bishops exercised oversight (the meaning of episcopos, the Greek word for bishop) over the community, taught, for example, through preaching and writing, and presided over the church’s worship. Most bishops were well educated and were expected to provide spiritual leadership and give a moral example. Unlike the older religious institutions of the empire, the church thought of itself as a single corporate body with a common identity, exemplified in the calling of church councils and in the extensive correspondence between bishops. As leaders of an alternate society—another city, if you will—the bishops became players in the social and political life of the empire.

By Augustine’s day, Christians did not have the luxury of contributing to the commonweal solely by their prayers. Without the participation of Christians, the cities would lack qualified people to serve as magistrates, judges, civic officials, teachers, soldiers. Among some of Augustine’s most interesting letters are those written to civil and military officials who were Christians, men who were no less engaged in preserving the peace of the earthly city than their fellow citizens. They too had a stake in the rule of law, in stability, in order, in civic concord, in good relations with the peoples who lived on the borders of the Roman Empire, in short, in earthly peace.
A few examples from Augustine’s correspondence illustrate the point.²² Augustine had a warm relation with Boniface, a Roman general and Catholic Christian who had spent his life in military service. Late in Augustine’s life Boniface had been stationed on the southern border of the province of Africa with a small force of soldiers charged to protect the frontiers of the empire from hostile tribes threatening the stability of the region. When Boniface’s wife died he considered giving up “all public business . . . to retire in holy retreat,” that is, to become a monk. One would have thought that Augustine, who had encouraged others to enter a monastery, would applaud Boniface’s decision, but instead he strongly urged him to stay at his post. Decisive leadership was needed to prevent the “ravaging of Africa.” As a Christian it was Boniface’s responsibility to ensure the safety of the society, not to retire from public life and devote himself to a life of prayer.

In another letter, this one written in 422 or 423, when Augustine was almost seventy years old, he wrote to his friend the bishop Alypius of Thagaste, Augustine’s hometown, about a problem close to home. Slave traders had invaded the province and moved about in gangs in military dress terrorizing the populace in rural and sparsely populated areas and forcibly carrying off children and some adults to be sold as slaves. These slave traders had become so numerous, Augustine says, that they were emptying the province of able people and selling them as merchandise across the sea. Augustine tells Alypius about a young girl who had been abducted from her home by night in the presence of her parents and brothers.

What makes the letter so revealing is that Augustine took care to ground his opposition to the slave traders in Roman law, and
at the same time, as a Christian bishop he complained that the
punishment for the offense, flogging with leather thongs, was
too harsh. Hence it was not being enforced. Further, he thought
the law was not specific enough because it was vague about the
more serious offense of these traders, selling persons who were
supposed to be free and in effect making slaves of them. Au-
gustine even appends a copy of the law in his letter to Alypius,
though he suggests that what is needed is a revised law that
included a financial penalty.

As citizens of the heavenly city, Christians knew that the
yearnings of the human heart could be satisfied only in God and
the hope for peace would be realized only in fellowship with
God. Yet, in this life, when the city of God is on pilgrimage,
Christians were full citizens of the communities in which they
lived. Like other citizens they cherished law, stability, concord.
But these goods were not possible without coercion, and Au-
gustine recognized that in this fallen world human beings could
not live together without some form of coercion. This is the
reason, he writes, for "the power of the king, the power of the
sword exercised by a judge, the talon of the executioner, the
weapons of the soldier, the discipline of a lord, and the firmness
of a good father. All these have their methods, their causes, their
reasons, their usefulness. While these are feared, the wicked are
kept within bounds and the good live more peacefully among the
wicked." 23

The Scriptures promise a peace in which there will no longer
be the "necessary duty" of ordering society by coercion. 24 Until
we arrive at this state of peace, however, the citizens of the two
cities hold certain things in common; they differ in how they use
these things. That is, Christians view the laws, political institu-

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tions, social practices and customs in light of a fuller, more perfect order, never as ends in themselves. All political institutions are provisional, and the city of God brings no grand projects to completion.

Yet, as the examples above indicate, the city of God must “make use of earthly and temporal things.” For this reason Augustine says that there is a “coming together of human wills,” an agreement whereby the citizens of the city of God join with the inhabitants of the earthly city “about things pertaining to mortal life.” In Augustine’s mind this conjunction is always prudential, limited “to the giving and obeying of orders . . . about things pertaining to mortal life.” The city of God views the peace brought about by the laws and institutions of the earthly city in relation “to the heavenly peace” that is truly peaceful. The customs and practices of society can be embraced as long as they do not misshape the souls of the faithful or detract them from their ultimate goal of fellowship with God and with one another in God.25

Although citizens of the city of God participate in the life of the earthly city, indeed, love and cherish its institutions and way of life, they have no ultimate stake in them: “She [the city of God] takes no account of any difference in customs, laws, and institutions by which earthly peace is achieved and preserved.” Here Augustine seems to imply that the city of God has no interest in the affairs of the earthly city. Yet he adds one qualification, and it is this qualification that gives the book its punch. The city of God, he writes, “neither annuls nor abolishes” the institutions of the society in which she lives “provided no obstacles are put in the way of the form of devotion that teaches the one supreme and true God is to be worshipped.” The sentence is
unexpected. But a few paragraphs later Augustine supports the argument with a citation from the book of Exodus: “Whoever sacrifices to any god save to the Lord alone will be destroyed” (Exod. 22:20). At the very point in the discussion where Augustine has drawn a thick line between the earthly and heavenly city he says that city of God does have an interest, indeed, a religious interest, in the affairs of the earthly city—for even the earthly city must honor and venerate the one true God.  

_A Just Society Serves God_

In book 2 of the *City of God* Augustine had cited a passage from Cicero’s *De Republica* about the nature of political communities. The passage reads as follows: a people is defined as a multitude “united in association by a common sense of law and a community of interest.” The term used for “law” in this definition is _jus_, the word from which the Latin term _justitia_ comes and from which we derive our English word _justice_. Augustine explains that Cicero understood this definition to mean there can be no political community (_res publica_), no common weal, no state “without justice.” For where there is no “true justice there can be no _jus_,” no law, no equity, no right. A republic cannot be simply a community of interest; it must be bound together by _jus_, by law or justice. A society united only on the basis of a common interest could just as well be a mob or a gang of pirates. Where there is no justice, only brigandry, lawlessness, and exploitation, there is no commonwealth. But justice has to do not only with the relation of human beings to one another. It also has to do with the justice due God. What kind of justice is it, Augustine asks, that turns human beings away from the worship of the true God? How can someone say that it is
unjust for someone to take an estate away from a person who has bought it and give it to someone else, and at the same time say that God is not to be given his due worship? If one does not serve God there can be no true justice. A commonwealth that does not serve God cannot be a genuine republic.

Augustine is not speaking here about god in general, about an abstract, amorphous deity. His book is not a defense of a form of deism; the God of which he speaks is the God of the Bible. Some of his critics had asked, Who is this God you talk of and how is it that this is the “only one” to whom the Romans owe obedience? Augustine shows some impatience at the question. At this time in history, he says, it shows some obtuseness to ask “who this God is.” Then he reminds his readers that the one God is well known from the history of Israel (which he has recounted in the *City of God*), from the revelation in Christ, and from the church. Hence the answer to the question, Which God? can only be, “The same God whose prophets foretold the events we now see happening. He is the God from whom Abraham received the message, ‘In your descendants all nations will be blessed.’ And this promise was fulfilled in Christ, who sprang from that line by physical descent.” And, Augustine adds, he is the same God who is acknowledged by Porphyry, the “most learned of philosophers.” The God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God to whom justice is due, is not the private deity of Christians or of Jews, but the one God who created all things and also elected Israel and appeared in Christ. This God commanded that worship be offered “to no other being whatsoever but to himself alone.”

The first biblical text to be cited in the opening paragraph of the *City of God* is Habakkuk 2:4, “The just person shall live by faith.” In Augustine’s Latin this text reads, “Justus vivit ex fide.”
The same passage is cited at the beginning of book 19, the most concrete examination of relations between the city of God and the earthly city. What draws Augustine to this text is that it links the justice that is a mark of a genuine commonwealth with the justice due God—exemplified by the just person who lives by faith. Justice, Augustine says again and again, can be found only where God is worshiped. As a just person lives on the basis of faith, so the "association of just men" also lives by faith. Where this justice, the justice due God, does not exist there is no commonwealth.

Augustine then proposes another definition of a commonwealth. "A people," he writes, "is the association of a multitude of rational beings united by a common agreement on the objects of their love." The question, then, to be asked of any political community is, What does it love? This is a characteristically Augustinian and, one might say, uniquely biblical way of putting things. In the words of Jesus, "Where your treasure is there will your heart be also" (Matt. 6:21). A person is what one loves, and what a community loves makes it the kind of community it is. If this definition is applied to Rome, says Augustine, it is clear that Rome is a people and its corporate life is indubitably a commonwealth. But it is a very inferior kind of commonwealth because it does not render worship to the one true God. Because Rome does not give God his due, it is a city "devoid of true justice."28

Why is this so? Augustine’s answer is that the good for which all human beings yearn, the final end of human life, the highest good, is God. It is only in God that human beings find fulfillment and perfection. If they have no sense of God, they have no sense of themselves. Although it may appear that a political community can form its people in virtue without venerating God, over
time its life will be turned to lesser ends, to vice rather than to virtue. For virtue is not simply a matter of behaving in a certain way; it has to do with attitudes and sentiments as well as deeds, with loves as well as with duties and obligations. A society based on lies, for example, will not long endure. If the soul and spirit do not serve God, and reason does not bring the body and its impulses “into relation with God,” a people will not be virtuous. Without the good that is God one cannot have other goods. Only in honoring and serving God can human communities nurture genuine virtue. A just society, then, must be one that “serves God.”

Augustine’s *City of God* defends a fundamental truth about human beings and about society. Only God can give ultimate purpose to our deepest convictions, for example, the dignity of the human person, and provide grounds for communal life that transcend self-interest. A society that denies or excludes the principle that makes human beings human, namely, that we are created to love and serve God, will be neither just, nor virtuous, nor peaceful. The point is twofold. All human life, not just religious life, if it is to be fully human, is directed toward that good which is God, the summum bonum, the desire of all human hearts, and the Lord of all. Second, life directed toward God is always social. Virtue cannot be pursued independently of other human beings. Out of goodness and love God calls men and women to serve him and love one another as citizens of a city, the city of God. It is as a people, not as individuals, that they are blessed. The peace for which the city of God yearns will be found “in the enjoyment of God” and in a “mutual fellowship in God.”

Augustine offers no theory of political life in the *City of God*. 
But he shows that God can never be relegated to the periphery of a society’s life. That is why the book discusses two cities. He wants to draw a contrast between the life of the city of God, a life that is centered on God and genuinely social, and life that is centered on itself. Augustine wished to redefine the realm of the public to make place for the spiritual, for God. As Rowan Williams, the archbishop of Canterbury, has observed, the City of God is a book about the “optimal form of corporate human life” in light of its “last end.” In Augustine’s view, “It is life outside the Christian community which fails to be truly public, authentically political. The opposition is not between public and private, church and world, but between political virtue and political vice. At the end of the day, it is the secular order that will be shown to be ‘atomistic’ in its foundations.”

A society that has no place for God will disintegrate into an amoral aggregate of competing, self-aggrandizing interests that are destructive of the commonweal. In the end it will be enveloped in darkness.

Some have argued that in the City of God Augustine makes place for a neutral secular space where men and women of good will can come together to build a just society and culture on the basis of “things relevant to this mortal life.” Here there could be a joining of hands of the city of God and the earthly city to cultivate the arts of civilization. For Augustine, however, a neutral secular space could only be a society without God, captive of the lust for power, the libido dominandi. He was convinced that in this fallen world there could be no genuine justice or peace without the worship of God. Where a people has no regard for God, there can be no social bond, no common life, and no virtue.
Augustine is defending neither a naked public square nor a disembodied theism. His theme is the worship of the one true God and of the community that worships and serves this God. The city of God is—I repeat—a book about the church and the God of the Bible. It is only in relation to the church and its destiny that Augustine takes up questions concerning the earthly city. Near the end he writes,

The reward of virtue will be God himself, who gave the virtue, together with the promise of himself, the best and greatest of all possible promises. For what did he mean when he said, in the words of the prophet, “I shall be their God, and they will be my people”? Did he not mean, “I shall be the source of their satisfaction; I shall be everything that men can honourably desire; life, health, food, wealth, glory, honor, peace and every blessing”? For that is also the correct interpretation of the Apostle’s words, “so that God may be all in all.” [God] will be the goal of all our longings; and we shall see him for ever; we shall love him without satiety; we shall praise him without wearying. This will be the duty, the delight, the activity of all, shared by all who share the life of eternity.32

Like other early Christian apologists, Augustine realized that it was not enough to make abstract appeals to transcendent reality, to the god of the philosophers, to a deity that takes no particular form in human life. As Newman once remarked, “General religion is in fact no religion at all.”33 The god of theism has no life independent of the practice of religion, of those who know God in prayer and devotion, who belong to a
community of memory, who are bound together in common service and share a common hope. Only people schooled in the religious life can tell the difference between serving the one God faithfully and bowing down to idols. For Augustine, defense of the worship of the true God could only take the form of a defense of the church, the city of God as it exists on pilgrimage.

The church is a social fact as well as an eschatological sign. It draws its citizens into a shared public life with its distinctive language, rituals, calendar, practices, institutions, architecture, art, music, in short, with its culture. Though it joins with others to promote the good of society in which it lives, its end is with the heavenly company of angels. “With us,” says Augustine, “they make one city of God.” That part of this city “which consists of us, is on pilgrimage,” and “the part which consists of the angels, helps us on our way.” The church is not an instrument to achieve other ends than fellowship with God. It serves society by being unapologetically itself and by bearing witness to the justice that alone makes human community possible, the justice due God. The greatest gift the church can give society is a glimpse, however fleeting, of another city, where the angels keep “eternal festival” before the face of God:

It is we ourselves—we, his City—who are his best, his most glorious sacrifice. The mystic symbol for this sacrifice we celebrate in our oblations familiar to the faithful. . . . It follows that justice is found where God, the one supreme God, rules an obedient City according to his grace, forbidding sacrifice to any being save himself alone. . . . Where this justice does not exist, there is certainly no “association of men united by a common sense
of right and by a community of interests.” Therefore there is no commonwealth, for where there is no “people,” there is no “weal of the people.”

By offering itself to God as a living sacrifice, the church’s life foreshadows the peace for which all men and women yearn, the peace that God alone can give.³⁴