

Past and Future Background Briefing:

Saint Augustine and the Christian Debate Against Roman Tradition and Popular Mentality: From Dialogue to Transvaluation

Topics:

- *Augustine at the Nexus of Change*
- *The Politics of Cultural Appropriation and Revisionism*
- *Cultural and Ideological Context*
- *Augustine and the Attack on Popular Mentality*
- *Conclusion: Restructuring Values*

Abstract

This paper provides a detailed introduction to the political thought of St Augustine, an important historical figure and foundational religious writer who stood at the nexus of the violent collapse of the Western Roman Empire and its transformation into a competing group of kingdoms and tribal confederations. He was a profound thinker who shaped the direction of Christian doctrine for over a thousand years, was a transmitter of a wide range of Graeco-Roman philosophy, and wrote one of the first intimate autobiographies that reflected on the mentality of his age (the *Confessions*). He was engaged in intense intellectual debates against 'paganism', rival religions such as Manicheism, the competing Donatist church movement and schismatic Christian doctrines including Pelagianism and Arianism. Beyond all this, he sought a profound re-orientation of religious aspirations and reframed how Christians should view imperial political authority, resulting in one of the most formative works of period, *The City of God*. The transvaluation of earlier morality was part of a wider reshaping of ideas as Christianity took centre-stage in the intellectual transition of Late Antiquity into the Middle Ages. This involved some cultural appropriation of Graeco-Roman ideas and educational methods, but also a strong intellectual and legal attack on pagan thought and social practises, including worship of the gods, state sacrifices, gladiatorial games, sexual attitudes, and the theatre.

1. Augustine at the Nexus of Change

St Augustine (354-430 CE) is an important historical figure and foundational religious writer who stood at the nexus of the violent collapse of the Western Roman Empire and its transformation into a competing group of kingdoms (for debates on this process, see Ward-Perkins 2005). These kingdoms and tribal confederations would be slowly transformed into the network of states that formed early Christendom. He was a profound thinker who shaped the direction of Christian doctrine for over a thousand years, was a transmitter of a wide range of earlier Graeco-Roman philosophy, and wrote one of the first intimate autobiographies that reflected on the mentality of his age (the *Confessions*).

He was engaged in intense intellectual debates against ‘paganism’ and rival religions such as Manicheism, competing church movements (the Donatists) and schismatic Christian doctrines including Pelagianism (which denied the concept of original sin) and Arianism (which denied the divinity of Christ). Beyond all this, he sought a profound re-orientation of religious aspirations and reframed how Christians should view imperial political authority, resulting in one of the most formative works of period, *The City of God*. This transvaluation of earlier morality was part of a wider reshaping of ideas as Christianity took centre-stage in the intellectual transition of Late Antiquity into the Middle Ages. He left behind a huge mass of writings, including philosophical works, polemical tracts, letters, and sermons, allowing a strong insight into the turbulent fourth and fifth centuries.¹ Many of his ideas on the nature of sin, evil, sexuality, women and redemption remain controversial today, even for Christians (Chadwick 2009), though they laid down the intellectual foundations that shaped the Catholic Church for the following millennia.

Beyond this, Augustine’s insights have a significant wider legacy:

He has a special place in the history of Christianity in the West, and through that place has left a permanent mark on the general consciousness of humanity. Augustine saw in the limited circumstances of his life and times an element of the universal, a clue to the very nature and destiny of man, a glimpse of what God intends for all of a fallen race. Thereby he became a thinker and analyst of the human condition with an extraordinary sense of the glory and the misery of man. (Chadwick 2009, p1)

Augustine was born into a Numidian family, who though probably of Berber stock and able to speak Punic, were highly Romanised (Chadwick 2009). Augustine received a fine education in Latin, grammar, rhetoric and probably elements of law, thereafter becoming a professor of rhetoric in Milan (Possidius *Life of St Augustine* 1). At first influenced by scepticism and Neo-Platonism, he became a time follower of the dualistic religion of Mani (Manichaeism), which saw life as a direct struggle between good and evil, between the light and the darkness of gross matter, with knowledge and inner illumination as pathways to transcending suffering. He soon rejected this religion and wrote several works against their doctrines (including *On the Moral of the Manichaeans*, *On Two Souls*, *Against the Manichaeans*, *Concerning the Nature of Good: Against the Manichaeans* and *On Freedom of Choice*). Under the influence of several friends, the preaching of St Ambrose, and an inspired moment in a garden where he felt he had been urged to read the Letters of St Paul, Augustine converted to Christianity through 386-387 CE, and thereafter returned to Numidia (for this complex path, see Augustine *Confessions* VI.4, VI.11 & VIII.12).

¹ For a partial listing of English translations available on the internet, see <https://www.augustinus.it/links/inglese/opere.htm>

By 391-396 he had been pushed by the local Christians into becoming first a consecrated presbyter and then a coadjutor bishop of Hippo, and soon thereafter the full bishop when the aged Valerius passed away (Chadwick 2009; Possidius *Life of St Augustine* 4-5 & 8). It was at this stage that Augustine moved from being a philosopher and meditative Christian into the highly active social and legal life of a bishop tending a flock during complex and difficult times. This included contending with attempts to continue traditional Roman beliefs, and dealing with schismatic and divergent Christian groups active in North Africa and across the Roman East. He was often engaged in public debates against the Manichaean, Donatist, Arian and Pelagian positions, placed arguments before the emperor and provincial authorities concerning heresies, and gave sermons that encouraged conversion to the Catholic vision of Christianity before visitors and locals (see Possidius *Life of St Augustine* 15-18). This made his life a highly political and contested one, and during his entire life he continued refining, writing, disseminating and at times revising or defending his ideas (Possidius *Life of St Augustine* 28; the title of Augustine's *Retractions* might better be translated as revisions or 'reconsiderations' Chadwick 2009, p167).

We can sense some of the scope of Augustine's spiritual, moral and psychological concerns by themes found in the *Confessions*, written by 397-398 CE, not just as an autobiography but as a tool to convert others and defend Christian beliefs against their critics. His ideas included the controversial contention that babies are not free of sin but full of unchecked desires and even jealousies (Augustine *Confessions* I.7), though this is moderated by an innate feeling towards the good and joy at finding the truth (*Confessions* I.20). Pleasure in doing what is forbidden is explored, along with the motives for wrongdoing (*Confessions* II.4-5), with the love of transient things doing great damage to the soul (*Confessions* IV.10). For Augustine, human wickedness was the 'perversion of the will' when it turned aside from God and 'veers towards things of the lowest order' (*Confessions* VII.15). The will, moreover, is often divided in human beings, with human nature already being corrupted by the original sin passed down from Adam and by enduring habits that are hard to change (*Confessions* VIII.9-11). It was only through God's grace and Christ's redemption through dying and being resurrected that people could be saved from their own error and sin (*Confessions* IX.4 & X.42). These themes are taken up in great detail in his later writings, and constituted not only a path towards individual salvation, but the emerging structure of an educational, social and political order that support Christian communities and the proper activities of the Church. In doing so, Christianity would need to oppose and appropriate different parts of existing Roman culture, while creating its own systems of pedagogy and limit its accommodations to political authority.



Netherlands painting *Scenes from the Life of Saint Augustine*, central panel of a triptych by the 'Master of Saint Augustine' painter circa 1490. It shows Augustine being consecrated as bishop (centre scene), plus other images of his preaching and being ordained as a priest.²

2. The Politics of Cultural Appropriation and Revisionism

During the fourth and fifth centuries intense interactions between Christianity and earlier Roman and Greek traditions had emerged not just as a cultural but also as a political battlefield. Not just current questions such as the relationship between Rome and Constantinople and the emergence of a divided empire were at issue (especially problematic after 395 CE, see Dudley 1991), but the authority of the Emperor in relationship to the Church, and the authority of bishops in relation to each other and their local churches became disputed. Beyond these immediate concerns, the deeper meaning of the entire history of humankind, Roman and Christian, was being reappraised in the light of divergent religious viewpoints. The critical interpretation, re-interpretation, rejection and appropriation of the past helped define authority and the right to wield

² Public Domain image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/471903>

religious and political power. Transformative cultural interpretations shook a Roman Empire already stressed by economic turmoil and external military threats. One of the those most deeply involved in this process, both in his personal life-choices and as a writer and bishop, was Augustine of Hippo. Out of the thousands of pages he wrote, one of the most significant outlines of these debates are found in his seminal work, *The City of God*. *The City of God* (published 426 CE) was more than a work of religious history: it was a major political reinterpretation of the history of Rome, pointing towards a new relationship between secular power and religious institutions.

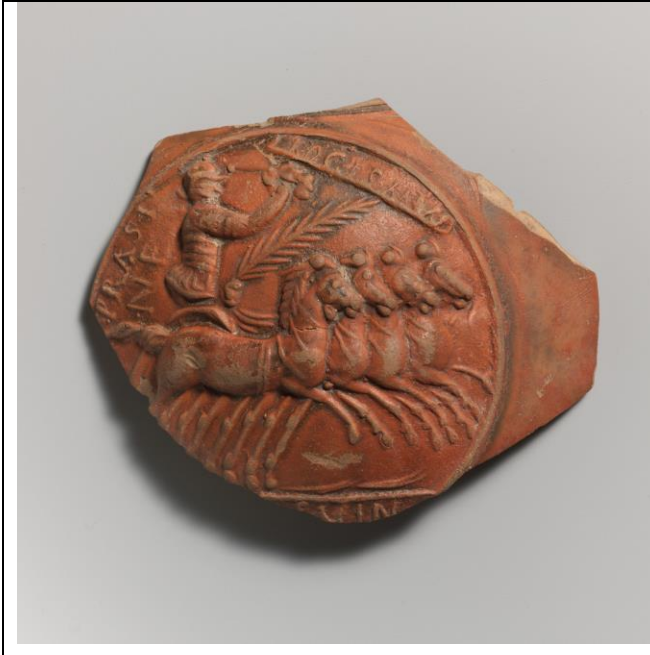
The City of God also recapped a huge body of classical thought and history, ranging across the writings of Livy, Sallust, Cicero, Tacitus, Lucan, Apuleius and others. Ironically, within this Christian garb many of these earlier writers were preserved as important sources for later European thought. Augustine asked people of the fifth century to view the works of these writers and their own traditions in a radically different way to their original Roman contexts. In part, this had already been done by the adaptation and revamping of the classical educational curriculum for Christian purposes, although Christian training remained grounded in the moral and direct education found in the home and local Church communities (Barclay 1959). Study of grammar, rhetoric and traditional Rome thinkers such as Cicero and Seneca would be supplemented by Christian writers such as Tertullian, Origen, Lactantius, and Eusebius (Dudley 1991). Augustine went beyond this, however, to structure a polemic designed to suggest what life within the Empire really meant, what its limits were, and what it could and should be. To do this he was willing to condemn or recontextualize many elements traditionally associated with the Roman state. This was not just a challenge to the symbolism of the Roman state and its secular authority. It was a challenge to the popular mentality and ethics of the time. *The City of God* emerges as one more landmark in the ‘Christianisation’ of the Empire and its cultures. The work’s most obvious message is an extended attack on polytheistic beliefs and traditional Roman religious mores that were still major strata within day-to-day life. This also involved a rejection or relocation of most of non-Christian works of Roman literature.

The word ‘pagan’ itself reveals much of this process. Originally the Latin word *paganus* indicated a local district or community with fixed boundaries. The negative focus of the word pagan as ‘un-Christian’ is a formulation that could only take force from the fourth century onwards once Christianity was normative (Salzman 2022). It is thus much more than a rejection of polytheism. It was a negative identification of what is non-Christian, and has traditional Roman religious beliefs, strongly tainted by Greek and Hellenistic modes of thought, as its target. For a writer, thinker and teacher such as Augustine, the task was to retain what was worthwhile and good in Graeco-Roman educational and

philosophical traditions, but shift them into a framework of Christian theology, pedagogy and morality (Chadwick 2009).

The City of God supported four overlapping social functions: -

- 1) It was written to bolster faith of Christians, which may have been shaken after the Gothic 'sack' of Rome in 410 CE, an event that suggested Rome could not remain a centre of world order. Though some Christians saw the sack of Rome as God's wrath visited against the city's sinful inhabitants, there was also some effort to see this as less than earlier calamities visited in pagan Romans (Ward-Perkins 2005; Orosius *History Against the Pagans* 37.4-39.15 & 43.16-18). A more sophisticated view saw that there had been a serious failure of the Roman Empire as the political framework guaranteeing peace and order for Christian communities.
- 2) It was a potential instrument of conversion, providing yet another part of Augustine's long debate with educated 'pagans', schismatic Christians and 'heretics', including religious movements such as the Donatist Church, the Pelagians, and the Manichaeism religion, of which the young Augustine had gained detailed knowledge as an adherent 'Hearer' (Van Oort 2008; Brown 1979; Frend 1952; Liebeschuetz 1963; for the concept of Christian conversion, see Nock 1972).
- 3) It provided a subtle rephrasing of the relationship between Christian society and Imperial power, demonstrating that the Empire as such was not theologically privileged, but did provide a necessary material base and ordering framework for the Christian community.
- 4) It was a continued attack on popular mentalities and institutions that reflected non-Christian traditions, especially the theatre, gladiatorial games, the circus (including chariot racing), and the emphasis on earthly glory and pre-eminence that still saturated Roman society and its elites. The debate between Christian and 'pagan' was intense during this period, and there had been efforts to revive non-Christian religions that might replace its role within the imperial system, e.g. the short-lived attempt under the emperor Julian (361-363 CE) to create a synthesized and philosophical polytheism, as well as the ongoing impact of Manichaeism and several eastern cults (see further below).



A Roman Terracotta Medallion of the late 2nd-early 3rd century CE, showing a charioteer in his quadriga, a four-horse racing chariot, holding a crown and palm branch, with the Latin inscription showing that the Victor belonged to the Green circus faction.

Chariot-racing, unlike gladiatorial games, continued throughout the Christian period, though finding disapproval in Christian writers such as Tertullian who rejects 'the madness of the circus' (*Apology* 38). They fanatically followed in Rome, Constantinople and elsewhere, with different teams becoming important factions in the Byzantine period (Cameron 1976).

Public Domain image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum, (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/250464>).

In the period under discussion there were strong and direct relationships between political ideology, religion and popular mentality. *The City of God* is a highly synthetic text which demonstrates a great deal about the Christian thought of the time and the traditions it opposed. These traditions, though going back to the early history of the Roman Republic, were still deeply entrenched in the minds of 'pagan' senators, and saturated the viewpoints of Romanised populations across much of the empire. The literary importance of *The City of God* has long been recognized, as has its evangelical thrust (Hagendahl 1967). The general tone of this debate is indicated by Augustine's comments on the Christian Marcellinus: -

The glorious City of God is my theme in this work which you, my dearest son Marcellinus, suggested, and which is due to you by my own promise, I have undertaken its defence against those who prefer their own gods to the Founder of this city, - a city passing glorious . . . And therefore, as the plan of this work we have undertaken requires, we must speak also of the earthly city, which though it be a mistress of the nations, is itself ruled by its lust of rule. (*The City of God* I. Preface).

This displacement of the Roman Empire as the mistress and ruler of the world into a flawed human creation puts it beneath the divine power of God and second to the City of God as a privileged and predestined community. It is this transformation that was a key driver in a profound re-ordering of Roman, Byzantine and Western societies from the fourth century onwards. This reordering process would survive not only the political decline of Rome through the period of 476-560s (Watts 2021), but also the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Even as the empire in the West fragmented into kingdoms and emergent states, 'Christendom' would flourish as an expanding cultural framework for governance and social mores. Though often challenged, disputed and divided by

interpretive schism, it became a central ideology for interpreting past and future, the meaning of human life in the universe, and for shaping law and popular morality.

3. Cultural and Ideological Context

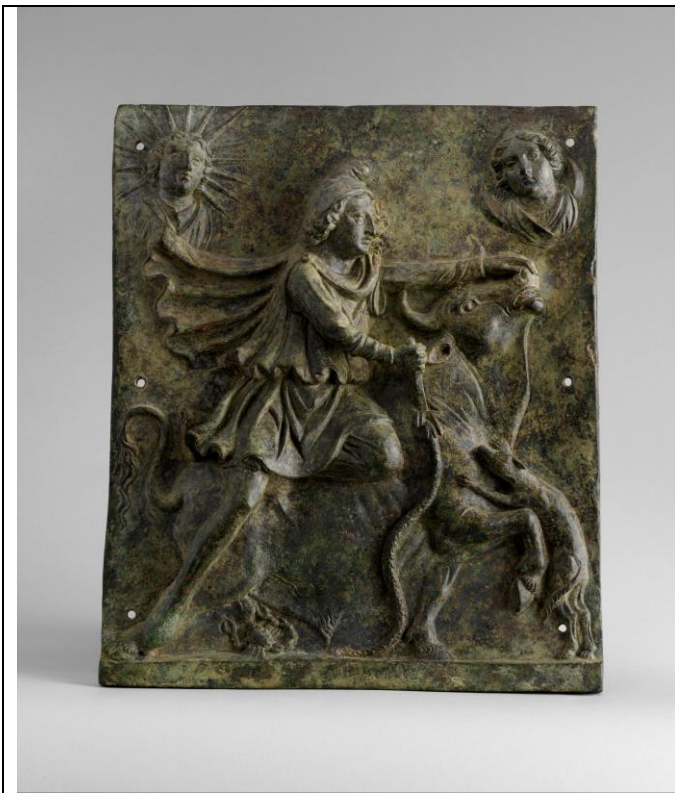
Since the Edict of Toleration by Galerius in 311 CE, Constantine's subsequent tolerance and then recognition of Christianity (from 312-313 CE), and the founding of Constantinople as a new capital, the Roman state gradually transformed itself into a Christian empire with strong authoritarian features mobilizing both imperial and church hierarchies as channels of power and control (see Eusebius *History of the Church* 10.5-10.9; Dudley 1991). Although the process was gradual, the date of 380 CE is significant since it was then that Christianity was recognized as the official religion of the state via the Edict of Gratian, Valentinian II and Theodosius I (Coleman-Norton 1966; Croke & Davies 1982, pp19-29). This led to the replacement of a whole range of traditional religious practices which used the symbols and formulae of the earlier polytheistic and ritual system that we call 'Roman religion'.

For the Roman Republic and early Empire, *religio* was not a system of credal belief, but a set of public actions designed to ensure the good will of the gods in relation to the state, its communities, its leaders and families. This Pax Deorum was designed to ensure the good fortune of Rome and was a real force in daily life and practice not just for priests and temples, but set the pattern of conduct for Roman elites and officials (see Champion 2017). This was particularly important during periods of warfare and crisis. Looking back to the early Republic, Plutarch notes that the Romans 'have been known to perform a single sacrifice thirty times over, because some omission or mistake was believed to have taken place' and that they had extreme 'piety and reverence' in religious matters (Plutarch *Coriolanus* 25). Likewise, the dictator Fabius Maximus used religion as a way of bolstering Roman morale during the Second Punic War and as a means of reducing their fear of the enemy (see Plutarch *Fabius Maximus* 4-5). Just before or during a war it was viewed as crucial 'to appease the anger of the gods or to avert inauspicious omens' by a scrupulous conduct of all appropriate rituals (Plutarch *Fabius Maximus* 18; see further Plutarch *Marcellus* 4). It is not surprising therefore that a class of priests, Fetial priests, were engaged in declarations of war and negotiating peace treaties (see Livy VII.6-7). Likewise, during the early Empire, public business and elections could only take place on calendar days of good omen, and all it took was a certain class of augur priests to notice bad omens overnight for the Forum and voting assemblies to be closed on the following day, a process that was sometimes used as a political delaying tactic (Tatum 2024). The holding of priesthoods by elite Romans, leaders and even Emperors was always noted with pride as important and prestigious posts. Augustus noted that:

I have been pontifex maximus [chief height priest], augur, a member of the fifteen commissioners for performing sacred rites, one of the seven for sacred feasts, an arval brother [priests who offer annual sacrifices for good harvests], a sodalis Titius, a fetial priest [concerned with treaties and declarations of war]. (Augustus *Res Gestae* 7, explanatory brackets added)

After Augustus the title of Pontifex Maximus, whose religious roles included controlling the calendar and making all major state sacrifices, became a standard addition to the titles of following emperors (Bowersock 1993).

However, by the fourth century the Roman empire and its social practices had been informed by Greek philosophy, especially Stoicism and Neo-Platonism, had been exposed to numerous eastern religions, including mystery and saviour cults such as those of Cybele, Isis and Mithras, and was seeded with early Christian, Jewish and Manichean communities. Though there were repeated efforts to control or expel subversive foreigners, cults and astrologers during the late Republic and early Empire, Rome by the third century was an incredibly diverse city, drawing in migrants and new citizens from its expansive territories. Cults such as Mithraism and worship of Sol Invictus ‘supported a parallel temporal order . . . by supplying a cosmopolitan vision of empire’ (Martin 1989, p8).



Bronze Plaque of Mithras Slaying the Bull, with the busts of Sol and Luna looking on, mid-2nd-early 3rd Century CE.

Mithraism was a popular eastern cult that spread throughout the Roman Empire, and was especially popular with soldiers, with shrines found from Hadrian's Wall to Dura Europos in Syria.

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Though the main state cults continued to function in the third century, there was some drift towards henotheism with the idea of a leading god being worshipped above others, e.g. the cult of Sol or Sol Invictus (in various forms) being promoted by several emperors, e.g. Vespasian, Commodus, Septimus Severus, Caracalla, Elagabalus, and Aurelian (White 2015; *Historia Augusta Life of Aurelian* 25). Likewise, the emperor Constantine from 316-321 minted coins showing Sol as crowning or presenting Victory to him, or in a chariot, with the phrase SOLI INVICTO, indicating that the emperor was still using such symbolism even after his victory at the Battle of Milvian Bridge in 312 CE (Lewis 2009). Such emblems may have influenced the emergence of the Chi-Rho symbol, which used the Greek letter XP as a symbol for Christ (Lewis 2009). In the *Saturnalia* of the early fifth century we find an account of all the Greek and Roman celestial gods and their properties being related to the Sun and Apollo (Macrobius I.17-18).

Likewise, the expanded diaspora of Jewish communities from the late first century CE spread throughout the Roman world, and the subsequent establishment of synagogues and prayer houses may have helped this process of cultural broadening. Though conversion to Judaism was limited due to Roman laws against proselytizing, the presence of ‘God-fearers’, fellow-travellers and sympathizers in Asia Minor, Minor, Phoenicia and Palestine suggests a wider influence on Greek-speaking gentile communities (Feldman 1993). Early Christianity probably relied on the existence of Judaism in the Mediterranean world to help establish its roots. Jesus and later on Paul preached in synagogues, and several apostles spoke and wrote to gentile Christian communities, often based in private homes and with a strongly educative function, i.e. they were more like synagogues than eastern temple structures (*Mark* 1:21-28; *Luke* 4:16-17; *Acts* 19:8; Filson 1964). It was precisely these Hellenised Jews, and their Greek sympathizers, who would have been most likely to understand the Christian gospel.

Although aspects of Christian thought could be accommodated by the highly syncretic nature of 1st and 2nd century CE Hellenistic religions (Fox 1986), there also remained major sources of alienation between the Hellenic and Christian traditions. One of the reasons for the ‘evangelistic success’ of the early Christians may have been due to their dialogue with gentile sympathizers associated with Jewish communities. As early as 160 CE Justin wrote his *Dialogue With Trypho*, a harsh Christian criticism of Jewish views on their history and actions in relation to Christianity. It also shows, however, that there was a fierce dialogue between these groups on the nature of Christ, his resurrection, and the meaning of the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple by the Romans. One its chapters notes:

"And though all the men of your nation knew the incidents in the life of Jonah, and though Christ said amongst you that He would give the sign of Jonah, exhorting you to repent of

your wicked deeds at least after He rose again from the dead, and to mourn before God as did the Ninevites, in order that your nation and city might not be taken and destroyed, as they have been destroyed; yet you not only have not repented, after you learned that He rose from the dead, but, as I said before you have sent chosen and ordained men throughout all the world to proclaim that a godless and lawless heresy had sprung from one Jesus, a Galilaeen deceiver, whom we crucified, but his disciples stole him by night from the tomb, where he was laid when unfastened from the cross, and now deceive men by asserting that he has risen from the dead and ascended to heaven. Moreover, you accuse Him of having taught those godless, lawless, and unholy doctrines which you mention to the condemnation of those who confess Him to be Christ, and a Teacher . . . and Son of God. Besides this, even when your city is captured, and your land ravaged, you do not repent, but dare to utter imprecations on Him and all who believe in Him. Yet we do not hate you or those who, by your means, have conceived such prejudices against us; but we pray that even now all of you may repent and obtain mercy from God, the compassionate and long-suffering Father of all.

(Justin Martyr *Dialogue With Trypho*, Chapter CVII)

By the third century, there was a three-way battle, with Synagogue and Church ‘waging war over the pagan soul’ (a phrase of P. van der Horst, in Stanton 1993). This enmity would persist and intensify through the Late Antique period into the Middle Ages.

Nonetheless, these religious debates and dialogues made the idea of monotheism somewhat more palatable for many members of the Roman world, though this awareness was at best a gradual and limited process (see Bohak 2000). It is against this turbulent mental landscape that the evolution towards Christianity was marked by two strong trends: -

- 1) An intensive debate between pagan and Christian values within literary, philosophical and educational spheres (Barclay 1959, pp210-231). Christianity appropriated a large section of the classical tradition for its own use, but also engaged in a strong attack on the elements of Roman tradition which conflicted with its own beliefs and ethics.
- 2) As the empire Christianised in the fourth century, there was the gradual introduction of legislation designed, first, to remove pagan ceremonies from the heart of the state apparatus, and second, to control and eventually forbid the worship of other gods, restrict pagan writings, and as far as possible forbid the public expression of non-Christian beliefs. (The main elements of this legal transition are summarized in Table I below).

During the third century dual emperors or colleges of rulers (entitled ‘Augustus’, of the eastern and western parts of the empire) are sometimes found, usually ruling respectively from Rome and Constantinople, or other temporary administrative sub-capitals, e.g. at Antioch, Nicomedia, Trier, Milan and so on (Williams 2024). Sometimes associated with the Emperors were ‘Caesars’, in effect sub-emperors of lesser rank. This trend reflects the

growing weight of administration forced upon imperial households, and the need to keep strategic control of eastern and northern borders.

Table I: Keys Dates in the Official Acceptance of Christianity and the Repression of Non-Christian Observances and Social Practices (Derived from Coleman-Norton 1966, pp22-636; Croke & Harries 1982 pp19-29; Bradbury 1994; Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History*).

<i>Date C.E.</i>	<i>Edicts, Mandates and Rescripts</i>
311	Edict of Galerius on toleration of Christians
313	Letter of Constantine restoring property to the Church
321	Mandate of Constantine on Recognition of Sunday
323	Mandate of Constantine on Clerical Immunity from Pagan Sacrifice
324	Probable general proclamation against Pagan Sacrifice (not fully enforced)
341	Letter of Constantine Augustus to Praetorian Prefect against Pagan Sacrifice
356	Letter of Constantius and Constans Augustus Closing Temples.
365	Mandate of Valentinian I and Valens against the Condemning of Christians to the Arena
371	Mandate of Valentinian I, Valens and Gratian on Release of Christian Players from the Theatre
372	Mandate of Valentinian I & Valens Against Assemblies of Manichees
380	Edict of Gratian, Valentinian II & Theodosius I Establishing Catholic Christianity as Official Religion of the State.
382	Gratian Refuses to Accept the Robes of Pontifex Maximus (ancient Roman Chief Priesthood)
382	Gratian Removes the Altar of Victory from the Senate House
384	Symmachus Petitions Theodosius for Restoration of the Altar of Victory
386	Mandate of Gratian, Valentinian II and Theodosius I Prohibiting Christians as Chief Priests (in Egypt)
388	Mandate of Valentinian II, Theodosius I & Arcadius Banning Public Discussion of Religion
392	Mandate of Valentinian II, Theodosius I & Arcadius Suppressing Games in the Circus (unless on their birthdays)
392	Mandate of Theodosius I, Arcadius and Honorius Prohibiting Pagan Rites Offensive to Christianity
399	Mandate of Arcadius and Honorius on Suppression of Shows on Sunday
399	Letter from Honorius Augustus to Praetorian Prefect, Ordering Demolition of Temples (in the east)
407-8	Letter of Honorius and Theodosius II Enforcing the Suppression of Heretics and Pagans
415	Edict of Honorius and Theodosius II on Allocation of Pagan Religious Property to the Church (addressed to the Carthaginians)
425	Mandate of Theodosius II & Valentinian II on Punishment of Heresy, Perfidy, Schism, Pagan Superstition and Religious Error (leading to Confiscation of Property)

The range of this legislation indicates that there is still something to legislate against, i.e. pagan practices continue to occur down into the fifth century (Croke & Harries 1982, pp25-7) and in residual form via later folk custom and belief. The promulgation of a law does not mean it will be effectively implemented, and some of the early letters and

declarations may have been of moral intent rather than an explicit legal injunction, e.g. the early proclamation in 324 against pagan sacrifice that has been disputed by modern scholars (see Bradbury 1994). Many laws are repeated at different dates in the Theodosian Code, suggesting that they were not effective on the first occasion (Croke & Harries 1982, p25). Furthermore, these laws usually do not specify the apparatus with which they are to be carried out, i.e. we cannot be sure without other evidence to what extent they were enforced by the secular or Church authorities. Often the cooperation of local governors, city authorities, bishops and Christian communities would be needed to carry through more repressive measures, thought usually only with explicit imperial approval (Bradbury 1994). As noted by Scott Bradbury: -

Despite the existence of general constitutions aimed at pagan cult and pagan sanctuaries, civil officials almost never initiated the coercion of pagans. Aggressive bishops usually instigated these attacks, but normally only after they had secured imperial approval, usually in the form of a rescript addressing a specific situation. When Bishop Porphyry of Gaza, for example, wanted to close Gaza's temples in 398, he did not entreat the local governor to enforce one of the laws ordering the closing of temples, laws that had been in existence for nearly half a century. He worked the patronage network in the time-honored fashion and acquired an imperial rescript. A few years later Porphyry travelled to Constantinople with Bishop John of Caesarea and solicited through the empress, Eudoxia, another rescript ordering the destruction of Gaza's pagan shrines. (Bradbury 1994, p137)

However, even this brief selection of laws (above) shows that Christianity was favoured after 380 CE as the official religion, while paganism was restricted, then at various levels proscribed. These laws also show an interest in prescribing ethical conduct, e.g. avoiding plays and actors, limiting the days on which games might occur and reducing the number of gladiatorial shows. This entire procedure is a social and cultural reformation, with an attempt to marginalize and then destroy pagan cultic practices, as well as countering pagan doctrines. This was done not just by the use of imperial force, but often by Christian violence directed against pagan temples, shrines and altars, sometimes followed by counter-riots that could leave persons on the both sides dead or injured.

This reform involved an attack not just on rival religious organizations, e.g. schismatic churches and pagan temples, but also included a major program transforming popular mentalities. This was largely done by the leading Christian thinkers, their Churches and their brethren, on occasion supported by secular laws and governmental force. This made sense from a Christian perspective since many of these activities involved actual implicit or actual sacrifices to pagan gods, now often viewed as demons by the Church (Augustine *City of God* X.1-12). Gladiatorial contests, for example, were originally rooted in early Roman and Etruscan funeral traditions, while competitive public games had originally been held in parallel with religious festivals and usually involved public sacrifices. Gladiatorial games probably first appeared in Rome in 264 BCE, when the sons of Iunius Brutus decided to honour their dead father by matching three pairs of

slaves against each other (Auguet 1972). Special amphitheatres to view such events had been developed in Campania by the 2nd century BCE (Humphrey 1986). The gladiatorial games had not become a regular official function in Rome until 105 BCE, where they were associated with placating the gods and the spirits of dead ancestors (Carcopino 1981). However, it seems likely that they were conducted on a semi-regular popular basis from the early 2nd century BCE onwards.

The first permanent amphitheatre in Rome was that of Statilius Taurus, in 29 BCE, and burnt down in the great fire of 64 CE (Humphrey 1986). It was only after this, in 80 CE, that Titus would dedicate the great amphitheatre we know as the Colosseum - this seems to have been a masterly stroke of propaganda perhaps directed against the earlier regime of Nero, as well as an active example of patronage to the Roman population. Large amphitheatres and over one hundred gladiatorial training schools were built in Italy, North Africa and other provinces, e.g. in Rome, Carnuntum (Austria), and Pompei (Lidz 2016). Early Christian Emperors had to acknowledge that public games did form part of the civic structure of city life in the empire, and at first were careful not to ban them wholesale, but sought to reduce official entanglement with non-Christian rituals, especially blood sacrifice and gladiatorial games (Bradbury 1994). It was in this context that the young Augustine was horribly drawn to, and horrified by, the games held in Carthage (see further below).

This official movement away from traditional Roman values can be further demonstrated by one official debate with widespread political and symbolic implications. The debate over the status of the Altar of Victory in Rome clearly shows the existence of an elite group of pagans in Rome during the fourth century that actively sought to retain their non-Christian Roman traditions. The Altar of Victory was a pagan altar (with an associated statue) in the Senate House at Rome, dedicated to the glories and victories of the Roman State. In 384 CE the prominent senator and writer Symmachus wrote a *relatio*, a petition, to Theodosius I asking for the restoration of the Altar of Victory, which had been removed in 382. Symmachus' reasons included: -

We seek therefore to have the religious institutions that have served the state well for so long . . . Who is such a good friend of the barbarians that he does not want the altar of Victory back? We are cautious with regard to the future and avoid omens of change. If she cannot be honoured as a God, at least let her name be honoured. Your Eternities owe a great debt to Victory and will owe more still. Let those who have gained nothing from her turn their backs on her power, but do not yourselves forsake her friendship and patronage with the triumph it brings. All men should pray to her power. (Symmachus *Relatio* II.3 in Croke & Harries 1982, p36)

Further on, speaking of the cutting of funds to the traditional priesthoods and the Vestal Virgins, Symmachus adds: -

Because of this deed a general famine has resulted and bad harvests have disappointed the expectations of all the provinces. (Symmachus *Relatio* II.3 in Croke & Harries 1982, p36)

What is striking about both passages is the use of the traditional notion of the patronage of the gods in aiding Rome's strength and prosperity, a *Pax Deorum* that ensured good fortune, a notion that was central to the public role of religion since the early Republic (Champion 2017; Scullard 1981; MacMullen 1981). The proper performance of ritual, particularly appropriate sacrifice, was viewed as part of the essential obligation of the state in order to receive the aid of the gods, and in establishing good order between humans and the divine. From the point of view of Symmachus and his followers, without this support Rome and its empire would fall victim to natural and man-made disasters, including famine, invasion and military defeats.

Both Christians and pagans accepted that divine help was required in running the state, and sought such aid. But the kind of divine order appealed to differed radically in the two groups. Saint Ambrose gives his view of the use of the Altar of Victory in the Senate: -

If today, Emperor, some pagan were to set up an altar with images (heaven forbid!) and were to force the Christians to assemble there to take part in sacrifices, to have the breath and mouths of the faithful choked with ash from the altar, dust from the sacrifice, smoke from the burning offering; if he were to give his opinion in that senate where they would be compelled to their opinion after swearing before the altar of that image . . . the Christian forced to attend the senate faced with this choice would think he was being persecuted. (Ambrose, Letter XVII.9 in Croke & Harries 1982, p32).

Both Ambrose and Symmachus clearly see the ideological implications of the Altar. Ambrose, after having emphasized the word 'persecuted', with all its echoes of past state violence against Christians, goes on to add that the views of a few pagans should not be taken to represent the general will of the Senate (Ambrose *Letter* XVII.10 in Croke & Harries 1982, p33). Even if the petition represented the majority vote of the Senate in a particular session, Ambrose tried to represent the Senate as composed mainly of Christians (Ambrose, *Letter* XVII.10 & *Letter* XVIII.31 in Croke & Harries 1982, p33 & p48), many of whom were presumably not present for the vote.

Although it is not possible to discover from our currently available sources the exact number of pagans and Christians in the Senate at this time (Matthews 1975), it is clear that there was at least a sizeable pagan minority in the 380s. Traditional Roman religion, including sacrifices at public events and meetings, still played a routine role in state practices, while in many Graeco-Roman cults sacrifice remained the 'central ritual act' (Bradbury 1994, p120). This was more than a nostalgic sentiment, or a polite erudition concerning the past. We can see this clearly in the case of Symmachus's purchase of Saxon slaves to be used as gladiators in the quaestorian games circa 393 CE (Mitchell 2012). Rather than allow themselves to be humiliated in the games, 29 of these Saxon

warriors committed collective suicide (by strangulation), something that Symmachus lamented with distain, seeing them as an impious and desperate race (Mitchell 2012, following Symmachus *Epistle* 2.46; Ward-Perkins 2005). This ‘pagan resistance’ was an active attempt to avoid allowing Christianity total dominance as the official ideology. In the case of the Altar, the pagan position was initially overcome by Ambrose, but the opposition persisted down to the restoration of the Altar in 392 by Eugenius. However, it was finally removed again in 394 CE (Croke & Harries 1982), probably due to further Christian agitation.

How far did these cultural and ideological commitments persist into the fifth century? Symmachus himself died in 402 CE, but respect for pagan traditions continued. The poet, Rutilius Namatianus (born circa 370, with official appointments through 395-423 CE),³ for example, writes in self-consciously pagan terms: -

As authors of our race we acknowledge Venus and Mars - mother of the sons of Aeneas, father of the scions of Romulus: clemency in victory tempers armed strength: both names befit thy character: hence thy noble pleasure is war and in mercy . . . thou too, hast embraced the world in triumphs fraught with law, dost make all things live under a common covenant. (Rutilius Namatianus *A Voyage Home to Gaul* 1.65-83)

These religious concepts are once again connected with the idea of world order established by the glories of Rome’s past, providential in the sense of a religious-ordained fate justified by Rome’s unique *imperium*. This pagan tradition continues in the work known to us as the *Saturnalia*, which Alan Cameron associates with a Macrobius Ambrosius Theodosius who was a praetorian prefect of Italy in 430 CE (Cameron 1966, pp26-7). Though by this time Macrobius as an office-holder would have had to accept Christianity as the State religion, his work certainly shows a ‘genuine sympathy with the old religion’ (Davies 1969, p1). The work reflects a huge compendium of pagan beliefs and traditions, and once again indicates how active these traditions and their public memory remained in the early fifth century, even among learned Christians.

3. Augustine and the Attack on Popular Mentality

We have seen that there was certainly a group of elite pagan Romans active during the late fourth and early fifth centuries, exemplified by the writings of Symmachus, Rutilius Namatianus and even in Macrobius. These might be viewed as exceptional group with literary visions divorced from their social contemporaries. However, it is possible to gain a further glimpse of the popular mentality of the Roman people, and the African citizen population with whom Augustine was familiar (in the areas around Hippo and Carthage). Some further discussion of three forms of mass entertainment will demonstrate this wider mentality: gladiatorial shows, the circus, and the theatre.

³ See https://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Rutilius_Namatianus/Introduction*.html.

Although the gladiatorial training-schools had already been formally abolished in 399 CE, and their displays banned in 404 (Friedlander 1965, Vol IV, Appendix xxxv, p192), they still formed an interesting foil to Augustine's moral aspirations. Speaking to his friend Alypius in *The Confessions*, Augustine provides the following account of a visit to the arena: -

When they had got in and taken their places in such seats as were available, the whole place was boiling with the most savage passions. With his eyelids tightly closed, he forbade his to go out to such wicked things. Would that he had been able to stop his ears, too! For, when one man fell in the fight and an immense roar from the whole audience struck his ears with a violent shock, he was overcome by curiosity. Convinced that, whatever it was like, he could defy and overcome it, he opened his eyes and was wounded more seriously in his soul than the gladiator, whom he lusted to observe, had been wounded in his body. Thus he fell more wretchedly than that man whose fall had caused the uproar which had entered through his ears and laid bare his eyes so that the means was provided by which his daring mind could be wounded and knocked down . . . As he looked upon the blood, he drank in the savagery at the same time.

(*Confessions* VI.8)

This vivid description shows that the gladiatorial displays were functioning and popular in late fourth century Carthage. The view of it as a morally degrading temptation is at variance with earlier Roman thought on the subject. When these games had been first officially introduced in Rome (105 BCE) they were associated with ritual blood sacrifices placating the gods and the spirits (*manes*) of dead ancestors (Carcopino 1981). During the late Republic and early Empire these games were given by newly appointed consuls and praetors, and especially the Emperors, to whom these displays formed part of the patronage to the plebeian classes. Augustus himself was said to have disposed of ten thousand gladiators in eight games and staging mock sea battles involving more than thirty ships and three thousand men, apart from rowers, in a specially constructed artificial lake (*Res Gestae* 22-23). The gladiatorial displays had originated as something 'deeply religious' (Balsdon 1969, p248) but now served as part of the cycle of festivals, entertainments and games which structured the Roman year.

Moreover, feelings could run very high in these games, especially if local rivalries were involved, as indicated by an incident in Pompey during the reign of the emperor Nero, recorded by Tacitus: -

At about this time there was a serious fight between the inhabitants of two Roman settlements, Nuceria and Pompeii. It arose out of a trifling incident at a gladiatorial show given by Livineius Regulus . . . During an exchange of taunts - characteristic of these disorderly country towns - abuse led to stone-throwing, and then swords were drawn. The people of Pompeii, where the show was held, came off best. Many wounded and mutilated Nucerians were taken to the capital. Many bereavements, too, were suffered by parents and children. The emperor instructed the senate to investigate the affair. The senate passed it to the consuls. When they reported back, the senate debarred Pompeii from holding any similar gathering for ten years. (Tacitus *Annals* XIV.15-17)

These events were sufficiently well known to have been preserved in a wall painting from Pompeii, which seems to show street-fighting outside the arena (Cornell & Matthew 1987). Such criticisms of gladiatorial contests as are found in the first century CE, however, are based on the unruliness of gladiators and their followers, the use of such displays for inappropriate political purposes, and misuse of gladiators as bodyguards or faction fighters. The ethics and ideals of such contests are rarely challenged, though there is some slight drift towards a more humanitarian view of slaves (Dudley 1991) and women during the first and second centuries CE.

However, by the time of Augustine we can see a real tension developing between a proportion of the public which is still fascinated by these displays, and a new ethical concern which sees them as both inhumane and vile. In *The City of God* we find a general criticism of the Roman games, especially in their relation to traditional religious practices: -

Now, therefore, let us see how it is that they dare to ascribe the very great extent and duration of the Roman Empire to those gods whom they contend that they worship honourably, even by the obsequies of vile games and the ministry of vile men . . .
(Augustine *The City of God* IV.3)

This criticism also extended to plays as cultic enactments representing pagan gods: -

The gods themselves have loudly demanded that these plays should be exhibited in their honour, have fiercely exacted them, have menaced destruction unless they are performed, have avenged its neglect with great severity, and have manifested pleasure at the reparation of such neglect . . . What sensible man does not see that men, having been put upon by malignant demons, from those whose domination nothing but the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord sets free, have compelled by force to exhibit such gods as these, plays which, if well advised, they should condemn as shameful?
(Augustine *The City of God* IV.26)

Indeed, Augustine generally viewed theatre-goers as enemies of the 'City of God': -

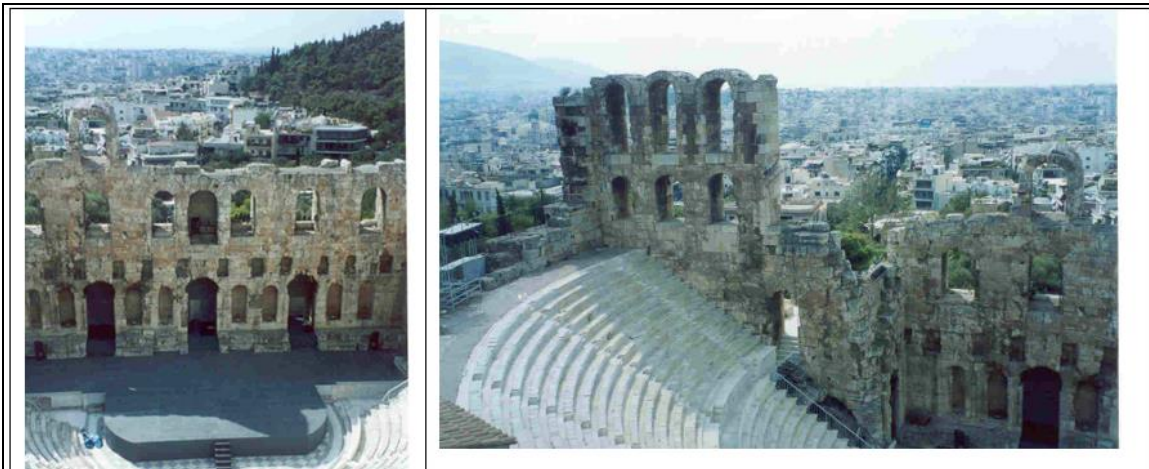
So, too, as long as she is a stranger in the world, the city of God has in her communion, and bound to her by the sacraments, some who shall not eternally dwell in the lot of saints. Of these, some are not now recognized; others declare themselves, and do not hesitate to make common cause with our enemies in murmuring against God, whose sacramental badges they wear. These men you may today see thronging the churches with us, tomorrow crowding the theatres with the godless.
(Augustine *The City of God* I.35).

Bearing in mind the licentiousness and bawdy humour of much Roman comedy, the lewd contents of pantomimes, and the mixed seating arrangement in the theatre (Friedlander, Vol. I, 1965), this view of Augustine's is not surprising.

Chariot races did continue through the later Christian period, becoming especially important in Constantinople. The popularity of this sport can be demonstrated by the huge dimensions of the audience seating arrangements of the Circus Maximus, and the popularity and fame of prominent charioteers in society (Carcopino 1981). During the later Empire the different factions of the circus (especially Blues and Greens) certainly added to the violence of politics within Constantinople, though it does not seem possible to divide these groups along class lines, or along a simple division between orthodox and Monophysite religious views (Cameron 1976). Rather, Alan Cameron would have us tie these later social phenomena into notions of suppressed ritual violence: -

It is clear enough from the evidence here collected that there is a direct connection between the games and factional misbehaviour, just as there is between the football stadium and soccer hooliganism today. But in neither case is the violence to be explained solely in terms of the excitement generated by the dancers or footballers. Other factors certainly are involved. In both cases there is undoubtedly a ritual element, the 'ritual violence' which a social anthropologist has recently claimed as a typical feature of the phenomena which he calls 'male bonding'. The games can serve as a field where the youth who otherwise lives an ordinary and unexciting life can prove himself a man by fighting and destroying, hunting in a pack with peers; for an hour or two he can be an object of fear to all who cross his path. (Cameron 1976, pp295-296)

It is possible that, in a somewhat sublimated form, the chariot races took over the function earlier on fulfilled by gladiatorial contests. They both emphasize an enduring aspect of Roman culture, both high and low. Roman political life was extremely competitive, just as the realities of Roman social life always recognized the possibilities of violence and cruelty (see Hopkins 1983, Vol. II). Roman society remained competitive in its core, even if the Imperial system had sought to moderate and limit that competition.



The Odeon of Herodes Atticus in Athens, built on the slopes of the Acropolis circa 161 CE, indicates the importance of public displays and theatre in the major cities of the Roman Empire (Photos © R. James Ferguson 1994)

It is just this focus on glory, pride and competition in the Roman tradition which Augustine criticizes: -

At that time it was their greatest ambition either to die bravely or to live free; but when liberty was obtained, so great a desire of glory took possession of them, that liberty alone was not enough unless dominion also should be sought . . .

(Augustine *The City of God* V.12)

Furthermore, this desire must remain part of the earthly city, the counterpoint to Augustine's conception of the city of God: -

But since those Romans were in an earthly city - not in the sphere of eternal life, but in the sphere of demise and succession, where the dead are succeeded by the dying - what else but glory should they love, by which they wished even after death to live in the mouths of their admirers?

(Augustine *The City of God* V.14)

This simple statement is a sweeping rejection of several motifs that had been a driving force in Roman life: the emphasis on glorious ancestors, high status won by deeds or office, and the public recognition of nobility or pre-eminence. If these motivations had already become dangerously outmoded as a form of invalid political ambition once the autocracy of Empire was firmly established, they were now rejected outright by a Christian religious morality that would shift status and power onto a divine stage. This already represents an evolution beyond paganism, with the 'peace of the gods' translocated onto Christian rituals in the formulation found in an imperial letter preserved in Eusebius: -

Many facts combine to prove that the sad neglect of religious observance, by which the highest reverence for the most holy, heavenly Power is preserved, has brought great dangers upon the community, and that the lawful restoration and preservation of the same has conferred the greatest good fortune on the Roman name, and wonderful prosperity on all mankind – blessings conferred by divine benevolence. (Eusebius *History of the Church* 10.7)

For Eusebius, the religious observance here is that of the 'Catholic' Church, and Rome's Fortune seems conditional rather than a compactual. By Augustine's later thought this fortune was seen as a beneficial temporal framework for the spread of Christianity, but did not constitute an eternally privileged community on earth.

4. Conclusion: Restructuring Values

Augustine strongly attacked the gladiatorial games and the theatre, which were gradually repressed or modified in content during the late antique period. Mass participation was still pursued through the chariot races common to the cities of the Western and Eastern Empire, though more conservative Christians criticized these as worthless distractions. Other areas of popular mentality can be cast into relief by the debate between pagan and

Christian values. Sexuality and the role of women, were example, went through profound changes from the late Republic till Augustine's time. Although elite woman had always been cloistered to some degree in Roman society, and used for family and political marriages, we find an explicit sexuality and sophisticated eroticism in the writings of Romans such as Catullus, Ovid and Petronius (see Veyne 1988). In the Christianising of Roman social life, we find two trends: a shift towards total sexual renunciation, and a parallel shift, especially supported by the older Augustine, to bring orderly sexual relations within the ambit of a Christian marriage aimed at raising children (Brown 1990, pp387-427; for Augustine's rejection of his early relations with women, a 'bargain struck for lust', see *Confessions* IV.2 & VI.15). The latter option, of course, was essential for the success of the Church within earthly societies. The kinds of renunciation involved and the views on family life were different to pagan Roman concepts of virginity and the family (see Brown 1990, p5-32). Likewise, there was an attempt to shift away from *eros* as a philosophical and social ideal involving a kind of uplifting desire (as exemplified by Plato's *Symposium*), towards the notion of *agape* as a universal, non-transactional, non-discriminating type of regard for others (Nygren 1982; Outka 1972; Singer 1984). The path of female renunciation of sexuality through dedication to Christ as nuns would only become relatively accessible from the fourth century onwards, allowing women access to education and a kind of freedom impossible for most women within the structures of normal family life, pagan or Christian (Brown 1990).

Taken as a whole, Christianity sought an inversion of many traditional Graeco-Roman values. A suffering Christ rather than powerful gods were embraced as the only path to salvation, while devout Christians were encouraged to surrender their will to the Will of God (*Romans* 12:1-2; *Proverbs* 3: 5-6; *Luke* 9:23-24). For modern thinkers such as Nietzsche and Freud this was seen as a kind of slave morality. Ironically, Christian mentality became so entrenched in European culture that Nietzsche would call for its reversal by a revolutionary transvaluation of its morality:

Nietzsche concluded that there must be a revision of our conception of what is good and evil, an alteration in our valuations. This transmutation of all values will involve the destruction of the timid Jewish-Christian morality which is the negation of the Will to Power and which for centuries has made man spiritually impotent and sterile. In this tremendous transvaluation, the Christian God will at last meet his doom. In creating Him to sanctify the negation of the Will to Power, man created a "God" who killed him. A new god, Dionysius, born of the Will to Power, fostered by its enormous forces, conflicts, and tensions, must be brought into being - a being who accepts all responsibility for all that is, and re-instates everything that the Jewish-Christian God denounced. (Clifford 1960, p151; see Nietzsche *The Antichrist* 5, 16 & 18)

For Sigmund Freud, too, Christianity was a mix of infantile desires for an all-powerful father figure, a desire to control nature and conquer death, and a way to eternally delay gratification and reward into an always future heaven (Freud 1961 & 1986). These two

thinkers were merely the opening shots in the modernist critique of Christianity and other belief-systems as illogical, unproven and unscientific. Humanism, in contrast, envisaged a knowable world of physical causation, biological evolution and public rationality. That the battle lines between religion and science remain so fraught in the 21st century indicates how deeply religious discourse had shaped European philosophy and culture the preceding two millennia.

Augustine was one of the main protagonists engaged in this grand exercise of transvaluation which transformed the earlier Roman world. He was not only engaged in a debate against Roman religion, against privileged political power based on the pagan past, but in a fierce argument with enduring Roman values which had been forged in the Republic and passed on down through the early Empire. In this light *The City of God* is not just directed against the elite senatorial group which followed Symmachus in seeking a return to traditional Roman rituals. It was an attempt to find the necessary vision to restructure a society and its culture through new social values: those derived from the 'heavenly city'. In this restructuring Rome was privileged, but not eternal. This must have seemed even more true when he endured the first three months of the siege of Hippo by the Vandals (Possidius *Life of St Augustine* 29) before dying of a fever in August 430 CE. His legacy lived beyond him in his students, many of whom became priests and bishops, his writings, his controversial ideas, and the impact they had on the doctrines and policies of the Church and the increasingly Christianised Roman Empire.

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Online and Media Resources

Translations of many of the writings of St Augustine and other early Christian writers (Fathers of the Church) can be found at the *New Advent* website at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/>

Several in-depth lectures on related topics will be found in the *Literature and History Podcast* including episodes 94-102 (see <https://literatureandhistory.com/episodes/>)

Numerous movies and TV series have been made about Roman popular culture and the transition period from the 1-5 centuries CE, with wildly varying degrees of historicity and quality, including *Those About to Die*, *Gladiator*, *Ben Hur*, *Quo Vadis*, *The Last Legion*, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*, *Sant'Agostino*, *Roman Empire: Reign of Blood*, *Attila the Hun* (several versions), *The Robe*, *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, *Two Gladiators*, and *Gladiators*. Some are available from YouTube and others via commercial streaming platforms.

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