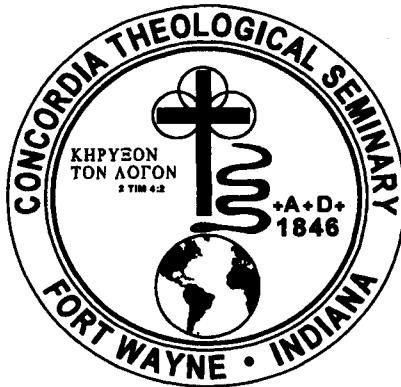


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Divine Providence, History, and Progress in Saint Augustine's *City of God*

John A. Maxfield

Midnight on December 31, 1999 came and went without the worldwide disruption of computer systems foretold by seers of the Y2K phenomenon. Fears of the unknown future after Y2K quickly subsided, but they reveal yet again the chronic fascination, even in modern secular cultures, with apocalyptic visions of the uncontrollable demise of civilizations whose enduring stability remains precarious. In the latter decades of the twentieth century secular visions of the apocalyptic destruction of modern civilization have ranged from the threat of nuclear annihilation (especially during the confrontational years in relations between the Soviet Union and the United States in the first term of President Ronald Reagan) to the prospect of economic collapse (foretold in some circles as the inevitable result of the economic policies of President Bill Clinton). As such visions fail to be realized, it seems chronic in our culture's condition that, far from being laid to rest, they are instead modified or replaced by new fads. These play on the uncertainties of the future and thus aid in the sale of popular books or the raising of funds by various interest groups heavily invested in the political processes of modern democracies.

Such are the secular versions of apocalyptic visions that are so prominent especially in the varieties of non-conformist Christianity historically and of conservative evangelical Christianity today. They reveal that Christian fascination with biblical apocalyptic prophecy holds no monopoly on the way fears regarding the uncertain future can be either exploited or used constructively in the promotion of an agenda or in the cementing of the social and ideological identity of a group. And although such fears are perhaps exploited most effectively in times of turmoil or crisis, even in present prosperity the ability for a scenario such as the imminent collapse of technological systems (as in the Y2K phenomenon) to captivate the minds and influence the patterns of economic behavior of a populace testifies to the enduring strength of apocalyptic visions of the future, whether secular or religious.

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Marjorie Reeves has written persuasively about the influence of prophecy in history, arguing that "Human beings in general can no more ignore their future than they can lose their past. Thus a theme common to all periods of history is that of attitudes towards the future."¹ Taking her cue, this essay will examine the occasion and the content of Saint Augustine's *magnum opus*, the *City of God*, in the light of Augustine's view of biblical revelation and its relation to his attitude toward the future of his world as it was guided, he believed so strongly, by the providence of God. Our view of Augustine may indeed show that his world is not so different from our own. Augustine's confidence in God even in the face of the crisis of his world speaks volumes to our own day, full of preoccupations with and manipulations of human fear in the face of the uncertain future. The sack of Rome by the Visigoth chieftain, Alaric, in A.D. 410 had a significance for Augustine's world that far outweighed the fairly inconsequential material reality of the sack itself. In the aftermath of that event, in provincial towns far away from the city of Rome itself, Augustine preached to Christians who were uncertain of themselves – so Peter Brown describes them at the beginning of his poetic description of this chapter in Augustine's pastoral life.² "They had boasted of the 'Christian Era,' and now it had coincided with unparalleled disasters."³ As recently as 404 Augustine had been one of the boasters, so confident was he that in his day the prophetic scriptures were being fulfilled in the conversion of the world:

Lately, kings are coming to Rome. A great thing, brothers, in what manner it was fulfilled. When it was spoken, when it was written, nothing of these things was. It is extraordinary! Pay attention and see; rejoice! May they be curious who do not want to give attention to it; for these things we want them to be curious. . . . Let them discover that so many things which they see of late were predicted beforehand. . . . Every age [of individual] has been called to salvation. Every age has already come – every dignity, every level of wealth and human capacity. Soon let them all be inside. Presently a few remain outside and still argue; let them wake up at

¹Marjorie Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy in the Later Middle Ages: A Study in Joachimism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), vii.

²Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1967), 313-329.

³Brown, *Augustine*, 313.

some time or another to the rumbling of the world: the whole world clamors!⁴

That whole world clamoring in 404 for pagans to convert to Christianity became, in the aftermath of Alaric's sack of Rome, the clamoring of pagans that Christianity and Rome's forsaking of its gods were to blame for the fall of the "Eternal City." Far from being dead after a generation of Christianization, despite the coercive measures against it under the emperor Honorius beginning in 399, paganism remained alive and well in the early part of the fifth century, as Augustine's rhetorical engagement with paganism in his sermons of the period reveal.⁵ Peter Brown depicts the cultured pagan aristocrat that would have been the target of Augustine's masterful parlaying of classical literature and philosophy so evident in the *City of God*. This is "a whole culture running hard to stand still . . . a strange phenomenon: the preservation of a whole way of life in the present, by transfusing it with the inviolable safety of an adored past."⁶ Augustine directs his polemic against them not so much by engaging their current practice as by a thorough critique of the history of pagan culture, all the while demonstrating his mastery of the literature of these "fanatical antiquarians."⁷

One of these, Volusianus, had, through Augustine's friend Flavius Marcellinus, made the charge against Christianity quite specifically: in a letter to the Bishop of Hippo, Marcellinus communicated Volusianus's

⁴Saint Augustine, *Sermo Sancti Augustini cum pagani ingrederentur* (Dolbeau Sermon 25/Mayence 61), edited by Francois Dolbeau. "Nouveaux sermons de Saint Augustin pour la conversion des païens et des donatistes" (I), *Revue des études augustiniennes* 37 (1991):75-76.

⁵See especially Dolbeau sermons 25 and 26 in Dolbeau, "Nouveaux sermons" (I), *Revue des études augustiniennes* 37:37-77, and (IV), *Recherches augustiniennes* 26 (1992):69-141. English translation in Saint Augustine, *Sermons III/11: Newly Discovered Sermons*, translated and annotated by Edmund Hill, edited by John E. Rotelle. *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Hyde Park, New York: New City Press, 1997), 366-386 (Dolbeau 25) and 180-237 (Dolbeau 26). See also Brown, *Augustine*, 299-312, and Herbert Bloch, "The Pagan Revival in the West at the End of the Fourth Century," *The Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity in the Fourth Century*, edited by Arnaldo Momigliano (Oxford: Clarendon, 1963), 193-218.

⁶Brown, *Augustine*, 301.

⁷Brown, *Augustine*, 305. See also Arnaldo Momigliano, "Pagan and Christian Historiography in the Fourth Century A. D.," in *The Conflict Between Paganism and Christianity*, 99.

conviction that it was manifest "that very great calamities have befallen the commonwealth under the government of emperors observing, for the most part, the Christian religion."⁸ In his response, Augustine reveals the accusation as a calumny. How often in the past, "long before the name of Christ had shone abroad on the earth," had Roman authors like Sallust proclaimed the doom of Rome, holding responsible the emperors and their faults, the corruptive wantonness of the army, "the evils which were brought in by wickedness uplifted by prosperity."⁹ Augustine would ask someone else, the Spanish priest Orosius, to write a history that would expose the grim and violent picture of the pagan past. The result was Orosius's *Seven Books of Histories against the Pagans*, a work firmly grounded in a tradition of Christian historiography which Theodor Mommsen refers to as that of the "Christian progressivists."¹⁰ In the *City of God* Augustine would answer the accusations of a resurgent paganism with an entirely different presentation, indeed one that would give a view of God's providential dealings with human societies quite at odds with that of Orosius and the tradition he followed. Mommsen has argued convincingly that the refutation of paganism was not Augustine's only concern in writing his great work.¹¹ To arm a Christian readership with an effective apologetic against pagan attacks was, perhaps, a secondary purpose.¹² Augustine had a more fundamental interest to refute this "progressivist" tradition, which viewed Rome as the "Eternal City," and, more importantly, interpreted in a materialistic, this-worldly sense the

⁸*Letters of Saint Augustine* 136.2; Saint Augustine, *The Confessions and Letters of St. Augustin, with a Sketch of his Life and Work*. A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, volume 1, edited by Philip Schaff (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 473. In the *Retractions* (2.43.1) Augustine recalled how the pagans had attempted "to attribute that overthrow of Rome to the Christian religions, and began to blaspheme the true God with even more than their customary acrimony and bitterness." Quoted in Theodor E. Mommsen, "Orosius and Augustine," in Theodore E. Mommsen, *Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, edited by Eugene F. Rice Jr. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, 1959), 328.

⁹*Letters of Saint Augustine* 138.3; Augustine, *Confessions and Letters*, 486.

¹⁰Theodor E. Mommsen, "St. Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress: The Background of the City of God," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12 (1951):343.

¹¹Mommsen, "Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress," 368-369.

¹²Gerard O'Daly argues cogently that Augustine anticipated a Christian and not a pagan audience. *Augustine's City of God: A Reader's Guide* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1999), 36-37.

progress of Christian Rome with a shallow optimism that "was of necessity badly shaken by the turn of events," namely the sack of Rome.¹³

The progressivists were the theological descendants of Eusebius of Caesarea, who viewed Constantine in Messianic terms, who discussed the *pax Augusta* in theological terms, and who viewed the empire as having an important place in salvation history.¹⁴ These views were grounded in the apocalyptic literature of the Bible and were widespread during the fourth century, as is evident in several biblical commentaries of the period. Mommsen cites Jerome and Sulpicious Severus from the West and Eusebius and Chrysostom from the East as four commentators who identified Rome with the fourth monarchy in the apocalyptic prophecy of Daniel.¹⁵ Characteristic of this view of Rome in biblical prophecy was the teaching of Cyril of Jerusalem in his *Catechetical Lectures* that "the Antichrist is to come when the time of the Roman empire has been fulfilled and the end of the world is drawing near."¹⁶ So closely was the destiny of Christian Rome tied to the future of the church that Rome's demise could be viewed only as signaling the very end of time.

Robert Markus, in his study of Augustine's views on history and society that for three decades has been considered all but definitive, describes how Augustine himself had once espoused a similar viewpoint. In the period of his confrontation with Manichaeism, he had spoken of an *imperium Christianum*.¹⁷ More frequently and for a longer time, at least through the opening years of the fifth century, Augustine spoke of *tempora christiana*. We have already seen a striking example in the newly discovered sermon of 404 cited above of Augustine's euphoric triumphalism as divine prophecy was being fulfilled through the conversion of the nations. Markus notes that such views were especially prominent in Augustine's writings in the years after the repression of paganism under the emperor Honorius. "It is about this time that [Augustine] refers repeatedly to the fulfilment of the prophecies

¹³Mommsen, "Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress," 369.

¹⁴R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: University Press, 1970), 49-50.

¹⁵Mommsen, "Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress," 349.

¹⁶Mommsen, "Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress," 349.

¹⁷Markus, *Saeculum*, 37, citing Augustine, *Contra Faustum* XXII.60.

temporibus christianis: ecce nunc fit—now, under our very eyes, the nations are coming to Christ from the ends of the earth."¹⁸

But, according to Markus, sometime during the decade following 404 Augustine abandoned this concept of *tempora christiana*. Markus identifies the change as related to the mature development of Augustine's view of canonical prophecy and its divine inspiration, as reflected in his commentary *De Genesis ad litteram*, Book XII, completed by 414.¹⁹ "As a result of this development in his thinking," concludes Markus, "Augustine had come to see 'sacred history' as confined to the history to be found within the scriptural canon, and he came to deny this status to any other interpretations of historical events."²⁰ Throughout the *City of God*, he notes, the phrase *tempora christiana* is used to refer only to pagan charges against Christians in the Theodosian establishment, with the one exception being the use of the phrase in the title of Book XVIII.¹⁷ where the phrase refers not to any specific events or time viewed as a fulfillment of prophecy, but rather to the whole period since the incarnation.²¹

In the aftermath of 410, euphoria over *tempora christiana* as a fulfillment of prophecy not only opened the way for pagan attacks like that of Volusianus; it also could be spiritually dangerous for Christians influenced by the Eusebian doctrine of progress. Augustine saw the danger lurking among his hearers; in a sermon of the time he warns against "those blasphemers who chase and long after things earthly and place their hopes in things earthly. When they have lost them, whether they will or not, what shall they hold and where shall they abide? Nothing within, nothing without; an empty coffer, an emptier conscience."²²

Against such a view of progress as worldly, material, and inviting speculation that "all will be well" during these Christian times, Augustine presented his view of history, especially in Books XI through XII of the *City of God* which totally abandoned such optimism about "things earthly." He dismissed as speculation all arguments from

¹⁸Markus, *Saeculum*, 33.

¹⁹Markus, *Saeculum*, 43.

²⁰Markus, *Saeculum*, 43.

²¹Markus, *Saeculum*, 38.

²²Sermon 105.13, quoted in Mommsen, "Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress," 369.

canonical prophecy that Rome, as the Christian empire, had ended all persecution of the church and that the church would endure in peace until the appearance of the Antichrist in the very end times.²³ Such had been the conviction of Orosius, who is clearly the object of Augustine's critique in Book XVIII: "I do not imagine that we should rashly assert or believe the theory that some have entertained or still do entertain: that the Church is not going to suffer any more persecutions until the time of Antichrist. . . ."²⁴ For Augustine, the church always remains in a precarious position as she relates to the *civitas terrena*, which Rome remains, despite the Christianization of the empire.²⁵

The question at this point is how Augustine viewed this *civitas terrena* in relation to the *civitas dei*, and how he incorporated both in his understanding of the historical process. The first thing to note is that Augustine viewed history as universal, for the providential God of history in whom Augustine believed was the God of all history, not only that of the church of the Old and New Testaments. Augustine was certainly not the first to view history in universal terms; that honor might be said to belong to Eusebius in his *Ecclesiastical History*, but the concept goes back to the Hebrew prophets.²⁶

Related to the concept of history as universal is that of history as a divine, rather than a human, production.²⁷ Augustine demonstrates his incorporation of these concepts in his theology of history when he addresses, especially in the first five books of the *City of God*, the subject of divine providence and the progress of Roman history. That he arrived at this understanding of history as a universally applied divine

²³Markus, *Saeculum*, 54.

²⁴Saint Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, translated by Henry Bettenson (1972; reprint, with an introduction by John O'Meara, New York: Penguin, 1984), 835. Hereafter cited as Bettenson. The Latin text is in Saint Augustine, *La Cité de Dieu*. Bibliothèque Augustinienne. *Oeuvres de Saint Augustin*, volumes 33-37. Cinquième Série. Texte de la 4e Edition de B. Bombart et A. Kalb. Introduction et notes par G. Bardy. Traduction Française de G. Combes (Desclee de Brouwer, 1960), 670. Hereafter cited as CG followed by Book and chapter number, with volume and page number of this edition in parenthesis. Here, CG XVIII.52 (36, 670). See also Mommsen, "Orosius and Augustine," 347.

²⁵Markus, *Saeculum*, 57.

²⁶F. W. Loetscher, "Augustine's *City of God*," *Theology Today* 1 (1944-45):318.

²⁷Gerald A. Press, *The Development of the Idea of History in Antiquity* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1982), 118.

production from the biblical revelation itself is best shown from his own words:

For could we rely on a better chronicler of the past than one who also foretold the future as we now see it happening before our eyes? In fact, the very disagreement of historians with one another affords us good reason for trusting, in preference to the rest, the authority who does not clash with the inspired record which we possess. Moreover, the citizens of the irreligious city, who have spread all over the world, read authors of the profoundest erudition, and see no reason for rejecting the authority of any of them; but they find them differing from one another in their treatment of events most remote from the memory of the present age, and they cannot discover whom they ought particularly to trust. In contrast, we can place our reliance on the inspired history belonging to our religion and consequently have no hesitation in treating as utterly false anything which fails to conform to it. . . .²⁸

Gordon Clark reasons correctly when he writes that "to cast the results of historical research into the framework of a providential view, one must come to history with Christian ideals already in mind, and this requires revelation as a methodological principle."²⁹ Robert Markus, even while developing the argument that Augustine had narrowed his concept of "sacred history" down to that in the scriptural canon by the time the *City of God* was written, nevertheless acknowledges that Augustine "was never without a deep sense of God's ever-present activity in each and every moment of time, as in every part of space."³⁰ All history, even the antithetical evil actions of fallen man, moves under that providence of God which puts "such creatures to good use, and thus enrich[es] the course of the world history by the kind of antithesis which gives beauty to a poem. . . . The opposition of such contraries gives an added beauty to speech; and in the same way there is beauty in the composition of the world's history arising from the antithesis of contraries—a kind of eloquence in events, instead of in words."³¹

²⁸Bettenson, 815, CG XVIII.40 (36, 622).

²⁹Gordon H. Clark, *Historiography: Secular and Religious* (Nutley, New Jersey: The Craig Press, 1967), 245.

³⁰Markus, *Saeculum*, 16.

³¹Bettenson, 449, CG XI.18 (35, 86). See also *Letters of Saint Augustine* 138.1.5: ". . . the unchangeable Governor as He is the unchangeable Creator of mutable things,

Augustine has been criticized for being too limited in his actual treatment of the history of civilization. One author concludes that Augustine's goal of a universal history is not matched by the material actually present.³² This view fails to grasp the centrality of revelation in Augustine's theology of history. Because he deals with a revealed schema, the details of any particular history, even that of the covenant people of God in the Old Testament, are not essential.³³ What is essential is the macrocosmic reality that God has revealed, which Augustine lays out clearly in the final book of the *City of God*, unveiling the *finis* of the *civitas dei* from its very creation in the beginning:

Now if the epochs of history are reckoned as "days," following the apparent temporal scheme of Scripture, this Sabbath period will emerge more clearly as the seventh of those epochs. The first "day" is the first period, from Adam to the Flood; the second from the Flood to Abraham. Those correspond not by equality in the passage of time, but in respect of the number of generations, for there are found to be ten generations in each of those periods.

From that time, in the scheme of the evangelist Matthew, there are three epochs, which take us down to the coming of Christ; one from Abraham to David, a second from David to the Exile in Babylon, and the third extending to the coming of Christ in the flesh. Thus we have a total of five periods. We are now in the sixth epoch, but that cannot be measured by the number of generations, because it is said, "It is not for you to know the dates: the Father has decided those by his own authority" [Acts 1:7]. After this present age God will rest, as it were, on the seventh day, and he will cause us, who are the seventh day, to find our rest in him.³⁴

ordering all events in His providence until the beauty of the completed course of time, the component parts of which are the dispensations adapted to each successive age, shall be finished, like the grand melody of some ineffably wise master of song . . ." Augustine, *Confessions and Letters*, 482. See also H. I. Marrou, *Time and Timeliness*, translated by Violet Nevile (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969), 71-73.

³²Loetscher, "Augustine's *City of God*," 319.

³³Clark, *Historiography*, 237; Karl Lowith, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 172.

³⁴Bettenson, 1091, CG XXII.30 (37, 716). Note the parallel to the *Confessions*, Book 1.1: "You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." Saint Augustine, *Confessions*,

There is a true linear progress, then, in the course of human history, but it is not the material progress in earthly time envisioned by the Eusebian progressivists; it is, rather, a progress aimed at eternity.³⁵ Nor is it the idolatrous progress of the Enlightenment, a progress of the earthly city toward its rational perfection, but the progress of "the Body of Christ, growing toward its full stature and perfection."³⁶ All this is a direct repudiation of the pagan cyclical theory of history, and such is the object of the entire Book XII of the *City of God*. The basis of Augustine's theology of history is the incarnation of God in Christ, an event that happened, and could happen, only once.³⁷ Any view of history which denied progress to and from the incarnation received Augustine's firm rebuttal. Again, it is not a progress of any material nature or earthly society but rather the progressive revelation of the truth of God to mankind, through prophecies of the Messiah and their fulfillment in the incarnation of God in Jesus, which is the focus of Augustine's theology of history.³⁸

Given a methodological principle by revelation that provides a linear model of the progress of history centered in the incarnation of God in Christ, Augustine shapes his whole approach to divine providence working in history around the image of two cities, the *civitas dei* (a phrase adapted from the Psalms; sometimes Augustine writes *civitas caelestum*) and its intertwined existence in the *saeculum* with the *civitas terrena*. The two cities are defined by the objects of their love:

We see then that the two cities were created by two kinds of love: the earthly city was created by self-love reaching the point of contempt for God, the Heavenly City by the love of God carried as far as contempt of self. In fact, the earthly city glories in itself, the Heavenly City glories in the Lord.³⁹

translated and with an introduction and notes by Henry Chadwick. Oxford World's Classics (Oxford and New York: Oxford University, 1992), 3.

³⁵Marrou, *Time and Timeliness*, 33.

³⁶Marrou, *Time and Timeliness*, 37.

³⁷Clark, *Historiography*, 234. See also Lowith, *Meaning in History*, 318, and Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine* (New York: Oxford, 1940; Galaxy Books, 1957), 480.

³⁸Mommsen, "Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress," 372.

³⁹Bettenson, 593, CG XIV.28 (35, 464).

Later, Augustine further defines these two cities in terms of their eternal destinies: "By two cities I mean two societies of human beings, one of which is predestined to reign with God for all eternity, the other doomed to undergo eternal punishment with the Devil."⁴⁰ Yet Augustine makes it abundantly clear that these two societies cannot be defined simply as the visible church versus those outside the church. While he repeatedly identifies the *civitas dei* with the church, Augustine nevertheless defines the society of the church in hidden rather than visible terms:

[The pilgrim City of Christ the King] must bear in mind that among these very enemies are hidden her future citizens; and when confronted with them she must not think it a fruitless task to bear with their hostility until she finds them confessing the faith. In the same way, while the City of God is on pilgrimage in this world, she has in her midst some who are united with her in participation in the sacraments, but who will not join with her in the eternal destiny of the saints.⁴¹

Interpreters of Augustine have unfortunately made havoc of this clear definition of the *civitas dei* as the church hidden or invisible, so central in Augustine's ecclesiology as it developed in opposition to the Donatists. Robert Markus, in particular, has interpreted Augustine's development of his ideas on history and society in terms of secularization. His own concise summary provides a window into his rationale:

At the risk of representing Augustine as a precursor of modern "secularist" theology, it is not out of place to describe his mature thought in this sphere as a synthesis of three themes: first, the secularisation of history, in the sense that all history outside the scriptural canon was seen as homogeneous and, in terms of ultimate significance, ambivalent (Chapters 1 and 2); second, the secularisation of the Roman Empire (Chapters 2 and 3) and of the state and social institutions in general, in the sense that they had no immediate relation to ultimate purposes (Chapters 3 and 4); third, the secularisation of the Church in the sense that its social existence was conceived in sharp antithesis to an "otherworldly" Church such as was envisaged by a theology of the Donatist type (Chapter 5).

⁴⁰Bettenson, 595, CG XV.1 (36, 34).

⁴¹Bettenson, 45, CG I.35 (33, 298).

These three strands together constitute what we may call a theology of the *saeculum*. The *saeculum* for Augustine was the sphere of temporal realities in which the two "cities" share an interest. In Augustine's language, the *saeculum* is the whole stretch of time in which the two cities are "inextricably intertwined"; it is the sphere of human living, history, society and its institutions, characterised by the fact that in it the ultimate eschatological oppositions, though present, are not discernible . . .⁴²

While much of Markus's argument has been received enthusiastically by scholars and is reflected in the present essay, he has been accused of anachronism precisely as he anticipated in the quote above. John Milbank, in a penetrating critique and "demolition of modern, secular social theory," as he puts it, accuses Markus of playing down "Augustine's explicit identification of the visible, institutional Church with the 'city of God on pilgrimage through this world.'"⁴³ Michael Hollerich, in a recent essay evaluating Milbank's critique in relation to Markus's evaluation of Augustine, makes explicit the charge of anachronism, using Markus's own words: "The world for which Augustine's attack on the sacral interpretation of the empire was really intended was our own: 'His "secularization" [*sic* – Markus spelled it with the British "secularisation"] of the realm of politics implies a pluralistic, religiously neutral civil community.'"⁴⁴ The same applies to Markus's view of the church in Augustine's theology, a view characteristic of "the modern liberal reading of Augustine [which] therefore seeks to define Augustine's greatest accomplishment as *arriving at an individualist conception of both church and state*."⁴⁵ Again quoting Markus directly, Hollerich notes how the author of *Saeculum* drew a sharper distinction

⁴²Markus, *Saeculum*, 133.

⁴³John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford and Cambridge, Massachusetts: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 402.

⁴⁴Michael J. Hollerich, "John Milbank, Augustine, and the 'Secular,'" in Mark Vessey, Karla Pollmann, and Allan D. Fitzgerald, editors, *History, Apocalypse, and the Secular Imagination: New Essays on Augustine's City of God*, Proceedings of a colloquium held at Green College, The University of British Columbia, 18-20 September 1997 (Bowling Green, Ohio: Philosophy Documentation Center, 1999), 313, quoting Markus, *Saeculum*, 173.

⁴⁵Hollerich, "John Milbank, Augustine, and the 'Secular,'" 318, emphasis in the original.

between the *civitas dei* and the church on its earthly pilgrimage in Augustine's theology than is warranted by the texts:

And this City is not the Church, though it will exist within the Church as well as outside it. The path of its pilgrimage is hidden, its working anonymous. . . . The Church is not this Kingdom, even in its germ and chrysalis." Milbank charges that this suggests that institutional adherence only held some sort of secondary status in Augustine's mind. That would be a grave underestimation of the critical importance Augustine attached to the actual public life of the church. The Donatist controversy is revealing on this score. Even though Donatism was the catalyst which stimulated Augustine's most profound reflections on the church as a mixed body, his obsessive campaign to re-establish sacramental communion and to end the schism makes little sense unless we take him at his word and understand that the unity of the church was not a peripheral by-product of redemption but its very substance.⁴⁶

⁴⁶Hollerich, "John Milbank, Augustine, and the 'Secular'," 321, quoting Markus, *Saeculum*, 180-181. The long ellipsis in Hollerich's quotation of Markus omits key statements which would actually strengthen the case of his (and Milbank's) objections to Markus's argument:

The path of its pilgrimage is hidden, its working anonymous: only at the last will they appear for what they were. Christ's presence in the world cannot be simply identified with the Church.

We are in the presence here of the paradoxical relationship of the Church's mission to the salvation of the world. This relation lies in the mystery of the divine purpose: "God our saviour desires all men to be saved . . ." (1 Tim. 2:4): the object of Christ's redemptive work is the world. The Church, Augustine had said, is the world—the world redeemed and reconciled. Yet, it is also, in some sense, not identical with the world but in the world. Even a "worldly" Church is in some way "set apart," recognisable [*sic*] as an institution among others, as something distinct in the world—as "visible," in the traditional vocabulary of theology. Are we then to say that salvation is somehow confined to the empirically circumscribed thing which we can recognise [*sic*] in the world as "Church"? Although Augustine was, as a matter of fact, inclined to answer in the affirmative, though with some important qualifications, few theologians, even of the Roman communion, would now accept such a solution. If then we refuse, on the one hand, thus to confine salvation to a visible grouping and, on the other hand, jettison the visibility of the Church as a distinct entity in the world, there is a wide gap between the visible Church and the Kingdom in which the redeemed world is to be consummated. What is the visible Church in relation to this Kingdom, on the one hand, and in relation to the world on the

Augustine spoke of the church as hidden in the sense that not all to be saved *were yet* incorporated into her communion, but were presently even her enemies, on the one hand, while on the other, there were some within her communion who were in hidden reality tares along with the wheat and thus "will not join with her in the eternal destiny of the saints." But Markus's conception of a secular church, in effect, separates visible sacramental communion from Augustine's definition of the church. In the end, Hollerich endorses Milbank's critique of modern social theory and its "valuable corrective to Markus's classic study. The corrective does not invalidate the still persuasive account Markus has given of Augustine's disenchantment with a Christian legitimation of the Roman Empire. It does, however, reject that account's time-bound assumptions about 'the secular,' and the de-emphasis of Augustine's churchmanship associated with it."⁴⁷

The nub is Augustine's careful delineation of the intertwined experience of the two cities in the *saeculum*, which reads clearly enough in the text of the *City of God*, but which has been rendered obscure by Augustine's (over-)interpreters down through the ages. The obscuring of the Augustinian tradition began in the Middle Ages by the identification of the two cities as one in the concept of Christendom, in particular by Otto de Freising (c. 1114-1158):

He had modeled his *Chronicon* on the Augustinian schema as a history of two cities, but when he reached Book V and began to deal with the rise of the Christian Empire he suddenly realized that "since everyone including, with only a few exceptions, the Emperors themselves, had become devout Catholics, it seems to me that I have

other?

The Church proclaims the inauguration of God's Kingdom by Jesus, it is not identical with it. The Church is not this Kingdom, even in its germ or chrysalis. For there is no continuous development, no growth or maturation of the Church into the Kingdom.

⁴⁷Hollerich, "John Milbank, Augustine, and the 'Secular'," 326. For a theologically astute and accurate interpretation of Augustine's ecclesiology in relation to his theology of history, see Marrou, *Time and Timeliness*. The original French title is more descriptive of the work: *Théologie de l'histoire*. The book is a more detailed examination of themes treated originally in Henri-Irenee Marrou, *L'ambivalence du temps de l'histoire chez saint Augustin*. Conference Albert-le-Grand, 1950 (Montréal: Institut d'Etudes Médiévales, 1950).

written, not a history of two cities but, to all intents and purposes, that of only one which I shall call the Church . . ."⁴⁸

Also, Augustine's rejection of the materialistic concept of progress in Christian civilization promoted by the Eusebian "progressivists," including Orosius, was lost to the Middle Ages, which inherited not an Augustinian but an Orosian philosophy of history that viewed God's providential involvement in events under the essentially pagan principle, adopted by the progressivists, of *do ut des*, "I give that you may give."⁴⁹ The response of the secularizers like Robert Markus was an over-correction. As Augustine introduces the second part of his *City of God*, he foretells how he will describe the distinguished but intermingled cities in terms of "the rise, the development and the destined ends of the two cities, the earthly and the heavenly, the cities which we find, as I have said, interwoven, as it were, in this present transitory world, and mingled with one another."⁵⁰ Later, in Book XVIII, he summarizes his work thus far and acknowledges "that my pen has been devoted solely to the progress of the City of God. And yet this City did not proceed on its course in this world in isolation; in fact, as we well know, just as both the cities started together, as they exist together among mankind, so in human history they have together experienced in their progress the vicissitudes of time."⁵¹

Such progress, of both the *civitas terrena* and the *civitas dei*, Augustine always describes as developing under the providence of God. In Books I-V, Augustine asserts the sovereignty of God in human history, his object in these books the society of the old Roman republic, which to the pagan antiquarians of his day was a glorious society. To which Augustine responds in his preface, "I have taken upon myself the task of defending the [most] glorious City of God [*gloriosissimam civitatem Dei*] against those who prefer their own gods to the Founder of that City."⁵² Book I then opens with a discussion of the events during the sack of Rome when pagans who fled to the shelter of Christian basilicas were spared barbarian atrocities for the sake of the name of Christ, "and now

⁴⁸Marrou, *Time and Timeliness*, 21.

⁴⁹Mommsen, "Orosius and Augustine," 343-348.

⁵⁰Bettenson, 430, CG XI.1 (35, 34).

⁵¹Bettenson, 761, CG XVIII.1 (36, 480-2).

⁵²Bettenson, 5, CG I.Preface (33, 190).

these Romans assail Christ's name."⁵³ Augustine's response sets in motion the discussion of divine providence that will occupy him throughout the first five books of the *City of God*:

In this way many escaped who now complain of this Christian era [*Christianis temporibus*], and hold Christ responsible for the disasters which their city endured. But they do not make Christ responsible for the benefits they received out of respect for Christ, to which they owed their lives. They attribute their deliverance to their own destiny; whereas if they had any right judgement they ought rather to attribute the harsh cruelty they suffered at the hands of their enemies to the providence of God. For God's providence constantly uses war to correct and chasten the corrupt morals of mankind, as it also uses such afflictions to train men in a righteous and laudable way of life, removing to a better state those whose life is approved, or else keeping them in this world for further service.⁵⁴

Thus Augustine addresses the pagans who reject the providence of the one true God. In asserting this providence he prepares the way for a discussion of a God who gives gifts to some and scourges others not simply to reward the moral and punish the evil (*do ut des*), but to draw all to the desire of the one true good, that rest in God without which man is always restless. Whether he is speaking of the gifts of God or his scourges, Augustine always relates these to God's providence. When he speaks of the good, he is certain to denote their source in the Divine Goodness. But that Goodness is always working providentially for the eternal good of His creation and not merely for the temporal good. Thus, in regard to God's good gifts, Augustine notes that:

if God did not grant it to some petitioners with manifest generosity, we should not suppose that these temporal blessings were his concern, while if he bestowed prosperity on all just for the asking we might think that God was to be served merely for the sake of those rewards, and any service of him would prove us not godly but rather greedy and covetous.⁵⁵

⁵³Bettenson, 6, CG I.1 (33, 192).

⁵⁴Bettenson, 6, CG I.1 (33, 194).

⁵⁵Bettenson, 14, CG I.8 (33, 212).

Similarly, when God scourges evil men through the course of history, His providential purpose is not simply as retributive punishment, but as a chastening of all to the end that some might be led to repentance and eternal life. For the evil in man that God seeks to heal is the perversion of His love, so that earthly peace is sought, but eternal peace ignored. God's chastening, then, as it affects both the good and evil, is righteous: "Good and bad are chastised together, not because both alike live evil lives, but because both alike, though not in the same degree, love this temporal life."⁵⁶

One can see in this passage that Augustine was addressing not only pagan critics, but also Christians who were placing too much value in earthly life. The text illustrates that Augustine was indeed responding both to pagan critics and a Christian community too preoccupied with fears concerning the future of Rome. In the *saeculum*, as the City of God and the earthly city exist inseparably, there is a God who is in control over all things, who shapes events for the ultimate good of both those with perverted self-love and those with rightly ordered love for God. This theme of Book I sets the foundation for the entire *City of God*. Not only are the charges of pagans against these Christian times answered by the assertion of a universal divine providence, but the Eusebian idea of the material progress of a Christian society is refuted on the grounds that God's providence works among the good and the evil. His providence is not for the temporal and material blessings of the good and the judgement of the evil, but for the eternal beatitude of all who, when scourged by the hidden workings of providence, turn to seek the ultimate good of "love for God carried as far as contempt of self," healed of their preoccupation with earthly things.

Augustine further develops this theme in Book II when he recounts the history of pagan society as it existed in the day of the old Republic, now idealized in the minds of pagan antiquarians. Here Augustine develops the progress of the *civitas terrena* as it existed apart from the *civitas dei*. Throughout this book as well, Augustine proclaims the providence of God also in the earthly city of pagan Rome. He begins by a rehearsal of the calamities that befell the Roman state long before the advent of Christ (chapter 3) and proceeds to question the power of gods who failed to act against the increasing moral corruption of the Republic (chapter 23). His

⁵⁶Bettenson, 16, CG I.9 (33, 218-20).

rhetoric was calculated, no doubt, to appeal to lovers of Sallust, whose moral history of the Republic was considered the definitive history at this time.⁵⁷ Also, Augustine's diagnosis of events would have been striking: the gods of pagan Rome are nothing but *daemones* who act only insofar as God allows:

I do not ascribe the bloodstained good luck of Marius to Marica, whoever she was, but rather to the inscrutable providence of God whose purpose is to shut the mouths of our opponents and to free from error those who are not swayed by the prejudice and who carefully observe the facts. For the face is that even if the demons have some power in these matters, their power is limited to the extent allowed them by the inscrutable decision of the Omnipotent, whose purpose is that we should not set too much store by earthly felicity, which is often granted to such scoundrels as Marius, and yet should not regard it as an evil, since we observe that many devout and upright worshippers of the one true God are also richly blest, in spite of the demons.⁵⁸

This theme, applied to various episodes of Roman history, occupies the whole of Books II and III. Book IV addresses the subject of the involvement of pagan deities in the rise and fall of earthly kingdoms, concluding with the same assertion of God's sovereignty over all history in the interest of drawing men to the proper love of things unseen. Significantly, this applies also to the history of God's covenant people Israel:

It is therefore this God, the author and giver of felicity, who, being the one true God, gives earthly dominion both to good men and to evil. . . . The reason why God gives worldly dominions both to the good and the evil is this: to prevent any of his worshippers who are still infants in respect of moral progress from yearning for such gifts from him as if they were of any importance.

This is the sacrament, the hidden meaning, of the Old Testament, where the New Testament lay concealed. In the Old Testament the promises and gifts are of earthly things; but even then men of spiritual perception realized, although they did not yet proclaim the

⁵⁷Brown, *Augustine*, 311.

⁵⁸Bettenson, 78, CG II.23 (33, 384-6).

fact for all to hear, that by those temporal goods eternity was signified; they understood also what were the gifts of God which constituted true felicity.⁵⁹

Having proclaimed and described in some detail the providence of God in both the earthly city and the city of God in Books I through IV, Augustine turns in Book V to a discussion of divine foreknowledge and human will. Throughout the discussion Augustine holds in tandem the complete foreknowledge of God and the total responsibility of the human will for its choices. Human choices fall within the order of causes that propel history forward.⁶⁰ Affirming both human choice and divine foreknowledge is central to Augustine's understanding of the dilemma of man in his fallen human nature. Thus toward the end of Book V Augustine notes the critical difference between God's providential dealings with the earthly city and the heavenly. To the men of virtue in the *civitas terrena* God has not withheld a reward: "When such men do anything good, their sole motive is the hope of receiving glory from their fellow-men; and the Lord refers to them when he says, 'I tell you in truth, they have received their reward in full.'"⁶¹ Yet even these temporal blessings are given ultimately for the benefit of the *civitas dei*:

Very different is the reward of the saints. Here below they endure obloquy for the City of God, which is hateful to the lovers of this world. That City is eternal; no one is born there, because no one dies. . . . In that City the sun does not rise "on the good and on the evil"; the "sun of righteousness" spreads its like only on the good; there the public treasury needs no great efforts for its enrichment at the cost of private property; for there the common stock is the treasury of truth.

But more than this; the Roman Empire was not extended and did not attain to glory in men's eyes simply for this, that men of this stamp should be accorded this kind of reward. It had this further purpose, that the citizens of that Eternal City, in the days of their pilgrimage, should fix their eyes steadily and soberly on those examples and observe what love they should have toward the City on high, in

⁵⁹Bettenson, 176-177; CG IV.33 (33, 634).

⁶⁰Book V. 9; Bettenson, 192.

⁶¹Bettenson, 204; CG V.15 (33, 710).

view of life eternal, if the earthly city had received such devotion from her citizens, in their hope of glory in the sight of men.⁶²

Such passages show most clearly the double purpose of Augustine in writing the *City of God*. More than an apologetic of Christianity against pagan criticism in the midst of the crisis of his world, Augustine's *City of God* is also his testament to the church describing the relationship of this hidden, spiritual kingdom to the earthly society with which it is intertwined throughout the *saeculum* until the coming of her Lord.

Books I-V lay the foundation; the remaining five books of the first part of Augustine's *magnum opus* are devoted "to the task of refuting and instructing those who maintain that the pagan gods, which the Christian religion does away with, are to be worshipped, not with a view to this present life, but with a view to the life which is to come after death."⁶³ The remaining twelve books build on these foundational chapters to define in detail Augustine's theology of history as it expounds the origin, progress, and ends of the *civitas dei*, culminating in the apocalyptic vision of its future glory as Augustine has expounded it from the canonical Apocalypse, the Revelation to Saint John.⁶⁴

Harry Maier has written a compelling essay describing Augustine's *City of God* as a revelation. "Throughout the work," Maier notes, "Augustine appeals to God to reveal to him the true meaning of biblical texts or historical events or even how to structure the complex tale of two cities he sets out to tell."⁶⁵ In the final paragraph of his essay Maier concludes:

⁶²Bettenson, 205; CG V.16 (33, 712-4).

⁶³Bettenson, 226; CG VI.1 (34, 44).

⁶⁴Paul B. Harvey ("Approaching the Apocalypse: Augustine, Tyconius, and John's Revelation," in *History, Apocalypse, and the Secular Imagination: New Essays on Augustine's City of God*, 148 and elsewhere) has recently presented a compelling argument for the importance of Augustine's reading of Tyconius for his own confidence, only after A. D. 400, in interpreting the Book of Revelation, concluding: "Augustine's sermon M12, when read in the light of later Augustinian works, offers evidence for the simple hypothesis that Tyconius's writings taught Augustine how to approach John's Apocalypse. We need read only *City of God* 20 to appreciate how far Augustine was prepared to follow Tyconius." For the importance of the Book of Revelation in the *City of God*, see also Harry O. Maier, "The End of the City and the City Without End: The *City of God* as Revelation," in *History, Apocalypse, and the Secular Imagination: New Essays on Augustine's City of God*.

⁶⁵Maier, "The End of the City," 153.

The City of God is a Revelation. It is an unveiling offered by a seer confident of the end of the story where all, if unimaginable, is nonetheless paradoxically made clear. It is a narrative meaningless without its final three books, themselves unimaginable without the final chapters of the Apocalypse.⁶⁶

While I would be more cautious than to use the term "revelation" to describe Augustine's great and arduous work (for the Bishop of Hippo had developed by this time a very precise understanding of revelation which was limited to the received scriptural canon of the church), it is clear that his appeals for God's assistance were answered through what can be described as divinely assisted preachment. Augustine viewed himself as *dispensor verbi Dei*, as dispenser of the word of God, and the *City of God* should always be viewed in that light. Like his sermons in the aftermath of the sack of Rome, Augustine's *City of God* speaks to Christians who were uncertain of themselves, as their world seemed to be falling apart. Yet the word of God that their bishop dispensed in their midst held the key to their uncertain future. Though no longer with that spirit of triumphalism that he just a few years earlier had expressed as Christian Rome seemed to be absorbing the pagan masses, Augustine continued to be convinced that now, before his very eyes, the prophecies of sacred Scripture were being fulfilled. The Revelation to Saint John revealed that God's providential care of the church was expressed also through the crises of this world's history, all for the progress of the City of God as it made its pilgrimage in this world to the eternal rest of the next.

"The medieval concept of prophecy," writes Marjorie Reeves, "presupposed a divine providence working out its will in history, a set of given clues as to that meaning implanted in history, and a gift of illumination to chosen men called to discern those clues and from them to prophesy to their generation."⁶⁷ Far from being an anticipation of a modern, secular vision of the two cities, Augustine's theology of the *saeculum* and of God's providential dealings in history was an inspiration for the prophetic medieval world view, though with crucial distinctions. For Augustine, the prophetic key to the future was unveiled strictly through the canonical text, and the gift of illumination was that of

⁶⁶Maier, "The End of the City," 164.

⁶⁷Reeves, *The Influence of Prophecy*, vii.

scriptural exegesis, not mystical experience. For Augustine, there would always in the *saeculum* be two cities, their histories intertwined, and an important calling of the church was to seek the peace of the earthly city while on her pilgrimage to heavenly rest. For Augustine—and this speaks to the church in every generation, also to our own with its peculiar apocalyptic visions, secular and religious, of civilization’s demise—fears of the unknown future can subside because the future is not unknown.

After the present age God will rest, as it were, on the seventh day, and he will cause us, who are the seventh day, to find our rest in him. . . . [T]he seventh day will be our Sabbath, whose end will not be an evening, but the Lord’s Day, an eighth day, as it were, which is to last for ever, a day consecrated by the resurrection of Christ, foreshadowing the eternal rest not only of the spirit but of the body also. There we shall be still and see; we shall see and we shall love; we shall love and we shall praise. Behold what will be, in the end, without end! For what is our end but to reach that kingdom which has no end?⁶⁸

⁶⁸Bettenson, 1091; CG XXII.30 (37, 716-8).