

Politics in Augustinian City of God: Issues in Medieval Political Thought

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Abstract: In this paper we have attempted to show the significance of St. Augustine's thought on the problems of politics as contained in his famous work *The City of God*. We established that his theoretical enterprise on politics and State based as it were on the theory of the two cities, the earthly city and the heavenly city is that of necessity. In arriving at this conclusion, the paper shows that there is logical and consistent correlation between St. Augustine's conception of the nature of the universe on the one hand and the central issues of political theory on the other hand. It is the realization and recognition of this fact that makes for discipline and civilized conduct in political life, the highest activity in human society.

Key Words: Political theory, Society, Medieval time, St. Augustine,

INTRODUCTION:

Political theory is man's attempt to consciously understand and explain the problems arising from his group life and organisation with a view to solving them. Its basic function is to show what political practice is and what it means or ought to mean. Thus, it is able to relate political events, and happening, people and objects under the notion of a common good or interest.

The history of political theory as an intellectual tradition reflecting the evolution of men's thoughts and ideas about political problems overtime started with the ancient Greeks and then the Romans, from about the 5th century B.C to about the 5th century A.D. This is what is called in the literature as the Ancient Political Thought. It includes the Thoughts of Plato, Aristotle and the thoughts of the Epicureans, Stoics, Cynics and the Sceptics (Paolucci and Bigongiari, 1953). Among the ancient Romans, we have the political thoughts of Cicero and a group known as the Roman Lawyers who introduced the science of jurisprudence in the realm of politics.

The entire ancient political theory could be summarized quite briefly as follows: That morality is the foundation of society which gains its highest expression in the state, and the individual can only exist and actualize himself only within the framework of moral perfection provided by the state. But with the collapse of the Greek-City state and the expansion of the Macedonian Empire, the Sophists especially the Epicureans and the Stoics expanded Ancient Political Thought to include the fact that the aim of life of man in society is virtue expressed in the pursuit of intellectual pleasure, and governed by reason.

The Stoic Political Philosophy was used by the Romans to build the great Roman Empire (Pax Romana) from about the first century BC to the 5th century AD under a political arrangement based on the Polybian principle (named after Polybius). This principle ensured a mixed grey in political affairs in which the Nobility and Plebeians were integrated into a common legislative authority in order to prevent one form of government- say the Monarchy, from changing into its perverted form- Tyranny. But by the 5th century AD precisely by 410 AD, Pax Romana had collapsed and the great city of Rome had been sacked and ravaged by Germanic barbarian tribes. The origin of the city of Rome, could be traced to the legendary city Troy whose golden walls were built by the gods themselves (Apollo and Poseidon) and whose beauty and fame were song by Homer; by whose destruction by the Greeks because of a woman (Hellen) led the survivors in the person of Aeneas to establish the city in Latinum. The city of Rome and its empire not only had a divine origin but also had a long ancestral line of glorious warriors whose prowess and bravery in war and sagacity in public affairs have fortunately come down to us through the genius of Plutarch, Livy and Caesar.

Hence the fall of Rome and its empire can be safely described as the most catastrophic event that took place in ancient antiquities signalling the end of the classical era and its political thoughts and the beginning of the medieval time which lasted from about the 5th/6th century AD to about the 14th/15th century AD. Here in this paper

we present the Strand of Political Thought as seen in St Augustine's, *City of God* – a work of immense political value. In doing this we examine, the political and socio-economic conditions of the time and the contending issues at stake.

POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND IDEOLOGICAL SITUATION OF THE MEDIEVAL TIME:

The fall of Rome and its imperial centralisation and bureaucracy coincided with the rise of Christianity in the 5th century AD and thus marked the beginning of the medieval time often known in human history as the Middle Ages. The period itself was characterised by massive ignorance, superstition and limited education with a philosophy that was God-centred.

Some of the distinguishing features of the medieval time is the fact that the church exercised overwhelming control and influence over social, economic and political life of the society. Secondly, governments in the medieval time were not strictly independent units, but cut across boundaries as territorial units were not sacrosanct as there were no common culture, no common laws and no common people. Basically, there was fragmentation of territory, authority and people. At the political level, local landlords exercised tremendous political power. This was perhaps, because, land was the only essential means of production. However, it must be said that the hegemony of these local landlords were checked by the fragmentations of the political authority, land and people. These local landlords were agents of the church and in fact were subordinate to the Roman church which was ultimately supreme in all matters. Because ignorance, superstition and the fear of the unknown was the hallmark of the day during the medieval time, as science and technology were still at their lowest and rudimentary level, it was therefore easy for the Roman Catholic Church to capitalise on all these to assert its hegemony and supremacy in all facets of human life. Education for instance was basically a church affair as the priests were the only ones entitled to read and interpret the Bible. In fact the priests who declared themselves and claimed to be the representatives of God here on earth had the power to decide who goes to Heaven or Hell through the institution of purgatory. Philosophy, Music, Art and Architecture and even other aspects of studies in the Humanities were directly under the control and influence of the church; as well as taxation and legislation which were partially under the control of the church.

In addition to all these, the church also established what became known as the Ecclesiastical courts. These courts were designed to handle cases involving widows, orphans, university students, crusaders and contracts. In fact the "seal of God" given by priests on contracts involving two businessmen made it possible for the priests to intervene in business matters and by implication exercise control over commercial concerns. In the case of exercising power and control over local landlords and leaders, the Roman Catholic Church invented the power of ex-communication which was in fact extremely important in keeping the local landlords under check and control of the church.

From the above, it is obvious that the state was not the dominant institution of the medieval era since there was equally the supremacy of the spiritual over the material, at least ostensibly. In fact Roman Catholic Church was the most visible dominant institution of this medieval period. The church carried out most of the functions of the state. It could be said that in the medieval period, the church was the state and the state was the church. And salvation which was a very critical and important element of social and political control was also under the control of the church. And so like Robert Ergang had argued:

The church in the medieval era enlisted all phase of organised nivities and life as a whole was intimately linked with the interest of the church (Ergang, 1983).

At the economic level, the Roman Catholic Church propounded certain economic theories in order to provide rationalization and justification for its intervention in the economy. An example of such theories is the theory of the "Just price" which was simply a formula for establishing an equitable price for goods, services, commodities and merchandise. In doing this, the church put into consideration the amount taken as profits. Another economic dimension of the medieval period was the prohibition of lending money for interest (ie usury). The church felt that usury was capable of drawing people into enormous debts which in turn can undermine economic activities. In addition to these theories, the church promulgated regulations during warfare. The church also ensured that commerce which was the major economic activity of the medieval era did not suffer extensive setbacks in the

periods of conflict. And to effectively do this, the church invented what was called the “Truce of God” which it invoked to stop any conflict or war at any time it deemed necessary to do so.

At the ideological level, the medieval period just like every other period of human history had its own ideologues and political philosophers who tried to provide rationalisations, explanations and justifications aimed at drumming up support for church power. Through a combination of intellectual manipulation, oratory and dissemination of uncommon knowledge, these ideologues attempted not only to strengthen the power of the church, but also to ensure that church power and authority remained unchallenged. Amongst these ideologues and political philosophers were St. Augustine, St Thomas Aquinas, Alighieri Dante, Marsilio of Padua and John Jandun. Here we shall be concerned with the ideas of St. Augustine who propounded a theory of politics in his book *The City of God*.

St Augustine’s *The City of God*:

St Augustine was born in 354 AD at Tagaste, a North African village and died in 430 AD. Throughout his time he wrote copiously and rose to become a professor in Rhetoric and Bishop of Hippo after he had lived with and studied under St. Ambrose, the Bishop of Milan. It was St. Ambrose who made the monumental statement:

“St Augustine, when you get to Rome, you do as the Romans do”. (cited in Omoregbe, 1991 p. 29).

as a parting gift to him after his visit to Ambrose. His biography are chronicled in his book *the Confessions* while his political ideas are seen in *The City of God*. According to St. Augustine (1950:3):

The glorious city of God is my theme in this work... have undertaken its defence against those who prefer their own gods to the founder of this city- a city surpassingly glorious, whether we view it as it still lives by faith in this fleeting course of time and sojourns as a stranger in the midst of the ungodly, or as it shall dwell in the fixed stability of its eternal seat, which it now with patience waits for, expecting until righteousness shall return unto judgement” and it obtain by virtue of its excellence final victory and perfect peace.

From the above, it is obvious that St. Augustine wrote the *City of God* in order to defend Christianity against pagan charges that Christianity was responsible for the sack of Rome by the Barbarian forces and the political dislocation and military hardship she was experiencing. Theodosius the Great, when he was the Emperor in Rome, had in 380 AD proclaimed Christianity as the Official Religion of the Empire (implying the replacement of the Eagle with the cross) as the standard of Roman character; which means that Roman Valor had been replaced by Christian humility. And so, in the general atmosphere of confusion, widespread violence and war that accompanied the collapse of established institutions and belief with the sack of Rome, St. Augustine argued that contrary to the charges of Pagans, it was Christianity that really saved whatever was left of Rome. In his words:

Contrary to the practice of war, the barbarians victors showed mercy to the Romans for the sake of Christ (Ibid, p.3).

and that it was the Romans themselves who displayed an extra-ordinary lack of their usual sagacity to have entrusted their hope on impotent Pagan gods who were unable to defend Troy the legendary origin of the city of Rome when it was ransacked and razed to the ground by the Greeks.

Thus, Augustine rooted his explanation of the fall of Rome in the philosophy of history (i.e. Time) reflecting the pattern of human development from the beginning of mankind in Adam and then Eve; and then went further to apply Aristotelian teleology to the history of mankind’s development. He argued that since the beginning of mankind – all its nobilities, and baseness, its achievements and failures, its glories and ignominies – has proceeded from potentialities that God placed in Adam and that these potentialities are manifested in the different historical ages represented by the Greeks, the Persians, the Egyptians and now the Romans. St. Augustine therefore viewed mankind as a single organism made up of interdependent parts undergoing a cycle

of growth and decay and foredestined to universal destruction in time. This is what is called in Augustine's system of ideas, the Theology of the Fallen man. In the words of Deane (1963:10).

For Augustine as for all Christians, the world and everything in it were created by God. The world is not eternal, it had a beginning, and the beginning of the world was also the beginning of time. The world would have an end – the last judgment –when heaven and earth shall pass away, and a new heaven shall appear.... Between the two points the creation of the world and its destruction, is played out the great drama of man's career on earth..... The climax of the drama.... is the incarnation of Christ”.

St. Augustine went further to argue that it is only after this that the transhistorical would begin signalling the dawn of the city of God for eternity. According to him:

The city of God we speak of is the same to which testimony is borne by that scripture which excels all the writings of all nations by its divine authority, and has brought under its influence all kinds of minds and this is not by a casual intellectual movement but obviously by an express providential arrangement. (op.cit. p.345).

St. Augustine distinguished between this City of God and the earthly city represented in this instance by the fallen great City of Rome; and thus argued that both are governed by two different kinds of love (i.e Augustine's Theology of Love). According to him:

Two cities have been formed by two loves; the earthly by the love of self even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, latter in the Lord (Ibid. p.477).

With this theology of the two cities, and the intervention of God in human history through Christ incarnate, St. Augustine went on to present his theology of Predestination which implied the contamination of the whole human race by one man (Adam) and the determination of the creator to save some (who are normally very few) and not the others (the large majority). It is on the basis of this doctrine that St. Augustine fashioned out the political structure of the medieval period, and its natural hierarchical ordering of things. Henry Paolucci and Dino Biogongiari (1963:344) succinctly put it this way:

Long before Adam was created God knew that Adam would sin and that all mankind would be corrupted by that sin. But out of that corrupt mass of humanity to come, God picked out certain souls whom he saved by sending them grace in the form of a Summons or Call of irresistible force – irresistible grace, that is the phrase of St. Augustine – The persons thus chosen have to be saved. They are the good and therefore saved..... God has destined very few for salvation; the rest are to be damned. The damned.... act immorally because they have no grace... filled with lusts, desires for wealth, power and pleasure. They are the ones whose needs have called into existence the political state.

Based on the above doctrine, St. Augustine argued the case of the natural hierarchy of things. According to him:

From, among those things which exist, and which are not of God, the creator's essence, those which have life are ranked above those which have none; those that have the power of generation or even of desiring above those which want this faculty. And among things that have life the sentient are higher than those which have no sensation, as animals are ranked above trees. And among the sentient, the intelligent are above those that have not intelligence - men for example, above cattle. And among the intelligent, the immortal such as the angels above the mortal, such as men. These are the natural gradation according to the order of nature (op.cit. p.360).

From the above analytical summary the importance of St. Augustine's system of ideas may not be clear, but what is quite obvious is the influence and role played by the gradual rise and ascendancy of the papal power over and above the state, with the separation of the church and the state, which implies that the state could only be part of the City of God only when it submits itself to the authority of the church in all religious matters. That the earthly city (the diabolical city) *civitas diaboli*, which represents man's eternal urge, desire and striving over material goods, wealth, sex e.t.c leading to strife, war, greed and all sorts of vices, must be subordinated to their corresponding qualities in the city of God which expresses itself in self-restraint, discipline and self-control over absolute lust over material things. But since this is not absolutely realizable here on earth it becomes necessary to establish the state in order to maintain peace, justice, law and order and thus ensure that men live together and attain the objects that are necessary for their earthly existence.

CONCLUSION:

In this paper we have attempted to show the significance of St. Augustine's thought on the problems of politics as contained in his famous work. The City of God we have been able to establish that his theoretical enterprise on politics and State based as it were on the theory of the two cities, the earthly city and the heavenly city is that of necessity. In arriving at this conclusion, the paper shows that there is logical and consistent correlation between St. Augustine's conception of the nature of the universe on the one hand and the central issues of political theory on the other hand. It is the realization and recognition of this fact that makes for discipline and civilized conduct in political life, the highest activity in human society. In other words, St. Augustine's impression about man and his society leads him to prescribe and rationalize the necessity of the state, the form and structure of which chart the course of discipline in a human society.

The theoretical context of St. Augustine's analysis of society and politics shows that given the apparent disharmony of society's institutions, laws and justice arising from man's eternal urge and desire for material goods, wealth, power etc, and leading to indiscipline, and savagery in governance of society, the intervention of the State and Church was inevitable, if order, discipline and civilization are to be restored. The lesson that is to be learned from St. Augustine's logical view of society and politics as espoused in *The City of God*, is that political ideals relate to conceptions of discipline and civilization in the conduct of politics within the practical possibilities and limitations of an imperfect human society made manifest in the earthly city- the diabolical city-*civitas diabolica*. This being so, it demonstrates the proper notion and understanding of human nature and how it could be harnessed for better social organization, conduct and behaviour especially in the practical field of politics.

Conclusively therefore, it is hoped that if St. Augustine's prescriptions on politics as contained in his *City of God* are followed, discipline and civilization which reflect the appropriateness of mind and action in accordance with laid down rules, would be achieved in any human society. And so, like Plato before Augustine, stated in the *Protagoras*, it is "by this means they become more civilized, more balanced, and better adjusted in themselves and so more capable in whatever, they say or do; for rhythm and harmonious adjustment are essential to the whole of human life.

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