
Augustine’s *City of God* in a modern translation, and in paperback (a thousand pages plus!), must be welcome. It is easy to forget how much we owe the book; how many of the features that we take for granted in ‘Western Christian civilisation’ were mediated through its pages from an older world. It may be that few would read it from cover to cover, even over a period of weeks (although the number may now increase with cheaper format and a less archaic style); but no one can afford to ignore it. Not really medieval (indeed, largely misconstrued by men of the middle ages), the *City of God* was accepted in the Renaissance as one more legacy of the ancient world to be rescued from oblivion, or (worse) from the destructive influence of commentators clumsy in their style, and superstitious. It stood as proof that theology was sounder for being better written. There will be many in our own times who regard themselves, perhaps with justice, as heirs more of the Renaissance than of any age immediately prior — at least as far as cultivation is concerned, and the social or political setting in which cultivation is attained and preserved. To readers such as these Augustine can seem surprisingly modern, which often means merely that he is reassuringly classical. To the classicist proper, however — the student of Greek democracy and thought, or of the literature and institutions of Republican Rome — Augustine will seem ‘late,’ to say the least: marked both in style and outlook by changes in the world symptomatic of decline. Yet these very qualities may recommend Augustine to a modern even more: the ability of this provincial bishop to stand back from his society and culture (undoubtedly threatened, not least by its own willingness to break apart into fragments of curious enthusiasm or self-interest); to stand back and inquire afresh about the forces that bind men together and impel their development. Hence almost any passage in this book will reveal conjoined a cast of mind, a style, indeed a vocabulary hallowed by centuries of intellectual and political self-assurance and, at the same time, an anxiety, a curiosity, a restlessness, that betoken something radically new in European thought. Is that not recommendation enough, to the patient reader with time on his hands?

‘Edited by David Knowles’ the cover says — an inaccurate ascription (corrected on the title page), since Dom David contributes no more than twenty-eight pages by way of introduction. Yet for
many now who read the *City of God* his essay will contain all that they know, or all that they immediately remember of the author before tackling his text: it will colour interpretation. Apart from which, anything from the pen of so sound and experienced a scholar is worthy of attention. Professor Knowles writes with his usual clarity and sober tone, warmed by the reflection of a lifetime, and strengthened by a willingness to judge as well as comment. He states an opinion, and therefore, on one or two points at least, invites debate.

His portrait of the Manichees, for instance, is perhaps too unsympathetic. ‘Nothing in Augustine’s life is stranger than his acceptance of Manicheism’ (p. xi) – a statement of some moment, and possibly misleading, in the context of the *City of God*, where dualism, no matter how subtle or elusive, is none the less present. We judge the Manichees largely on the evidence of Augustine himself, whose emphatic rejection of the sect must arouse our suspicion. The fear they inspired, and the obscurity surrounding their teaching, may indicate spreading influence and successful intrigue. Is their doctrine and new-found appeal best explained by contrasting, as does Professor Knowles, ‘a rational outlook and a civilized security,’ typical of Athens or the early empire, with the supposedly ‘primitive’, the ‘ decadent’, the ‘intellectual poverty’ of Augustine’s lifetime, ‘the cultural twilight of pagan Africa’ (p. xi)? To interpret religious enthusiasms of the fourth century as signs of a decline in the rational spirit is a notoriously tricky enterprise. The attempt made here to describe the attraction of the Manichees in near-contemporary terms may reveal the missing perception – the fundamentalist home and the free-thinking schoolmaster, gifted theosophists combining religion and science (p. xii). Such a circle would hardly explain, or even be aware of, the problem of evil – and that was the problem the Manichees solved, for a time, for Augustine. The problem certainly persisted in the *City of God*, and, it may be argued, a little of the old solution also.

Another implication of Augustine’s text may be overlooked by readers of this introduction – the Pelagian controversy. ‘It makes no appearance in the *City of God*’ (p. xiv). By direct reference, possibly not; but Augustine’s extended treatment of freedom, justice and authority must be read as a deep and slower-moving ground-bass, against which to measure the strident counterpoint of more obvious polemic. The critique of Cicero on prescience, Book V, chapter 9, is only the most famous of several examples.
All of which serves to remind us how careful a work this was — Augustine’s opportunity for reflection, for red herrings in the service of integrity, for blocking every syllogistic bolt-hole. Such leisurely apologetic was impossible in public controversy, where opponents must be proven wrong before they corrupted others, or condemned before they changed their minds! But in the *City of God* these urgent and clear-cut concerns were allowed to filter down to a more obscure but richer level of inquiry. The resulting ambiguity, the refusal to depend on easy distinctions, redeems a ruthless simplicity in more *ad hoc* pronouncements of the Augustinian corpus: it also explains the attraction of the *City of God* in later ages, and above all the ease with which it was misused. Professor Knowles is less than patient with this imprecision (and may overlook the importance of Augustine — in a negative sense, through misinterpretation — precisely in that Hildebrandine age that he contrasts so forcibly with the *augustinisme politique* of Charlemagne). Yet, in the midst of a wide-ranging and informative survey, he retains his capacity for the perfect judgment: Augustine, he says, is ‘ready to share, but not to define’ (p. xxiii).

Fullest honours, in all justice, will go to Henry Bettenson. How readily translators of the *City of God* must share with Augustine its final phrases: ‘And now, as I think, I have discharged my debt, with the completion, by God’s help, of this huge work.’ The first test of a translation such as this must be, no doubt, its clarity and its power to invite the reader further. Augustine makes either task an effort; but they are tasks completed here with great success. The English follows carefully each step, each turn of logic in the most complex philosophy (for example, the critique of Porphyry in Book X), and yet allows the reader to maintain his grasp upon the major structures of Augustine’s argument. There is perhaps, at times, an air of the pulpit about the style; but that may not be out of place in translating so rhetorical a churchman. Sentences are sometimes a little long, too close an imitation of Augustine: perhaps more semi-colons. Splitting the original period can often cause, on the other hand, more problems than it solves — a fault here noticed rarely. In general, then, the text is clear, carries one forward and remains always modern and fresh in the best of senses.

A judgment on accuracy, broad enough to be of value and importance, would take longer to prepare. There seems to be none of that change of imagery, none of the explanatory asides that have marred other renderings. Such ‘improvements’ are tempting, since
Augustine can be epigrammatic, as well as prolix. For *ubi victoria, veritas* (Book II, chapter 29), I would take issue with ‘there, instead of victory, is truth’: Healey’s ‘where truth is the victory’ seems nearer to Augustine’s point. This illustrates well a difficulty about Augustine that Mr Bettenson normally surmounts with great confidence. One can only admire the way in which, faced with a few pregnant words in the Latin, he will suggest all that they might mean in the context without suggesting more. ‘For they do not give orders because of a lust for domination but from a dutiful concern for the interests of others’: a reassuringly careful equivalent to *neque enim dominandi cupiditate imperant, sed officio consulendi* (Book XIX, chapter 14).

*Quibus parum* therefore, *vel quibus nimium est, mihi ignoscant*, as Augustine remarked in conclusion; but neither translator nor introducer should feel any need for forgiveness here: their learning, judgment and style invite one verdict only — *satis est*.

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