

AUGUSTINE'S *CITY OF GOD* AND THE BREAKING OF THE PAGAN MIND

by G. Tyler Fischer, Veritas Academy • Medieval History and Literature Series

Do you have a basketball hoop out in your driveway? If you are like me (not a great player, but wishing that you were), every once in a while everything clicks into place. The basket is a mile wide. You can't miss. During those times, your mind probably slips off into fantasies of hitting a last-second fade away three-pointer to beat Michael Jordan and the Chicago Bulls.¹ But what if, while you were knee-deep in fantasy, you turned around to find Michael Jordan standing in your driveway waiting to correct your fantasy with a little one-on-one? You might be able to guard Michael Jordan in your make-believe world, but in real life? Really? You might hit your fade-away jumper over his Airness in your dreams, but in real life he would smack your shot so

hard that the word "Wilson" would probably be imprinted on your forehead! Such is the situation faced by some crafty pagan apologists in the early part of the fifth century. (We could call these fellows the "Old Atheists.") They saw an opportunity. Life had not been going well since Constantine converted. Europe was becoming a Christian continent. Now, they had their chance. Rome had fallen to the barbarians. Christ could not protect the city. They decided to aim their criticism at the Christian faith. They probably hoped that their learned arguments against Christianity could turn back the tide of history. They turned around and found St. Augustine standing in their driveway. Game on. Augustine answered these pagan critics in his masterpiece *The City*

of God. This book not only ended their little hoop dream, it broke the pagan mind. As teachers in classical Christian schools, the *City of God* can help us to prepare our students to confidently approach the battle with unbelief in our day.

Augustine's *City of God* breaks the pagan mind in five powerful ways. When he is done, paganism's objections have been answered, its gods are shown to be silly, its historical chest thumping is reduced to airbrushed nostalgia, its philosophical weakness is unmasked, and the Christian narrative of history has salted the fields of any pagan renewal. The battle is over. Serious paganism would not rear its head in the West for about 1400 years.

Augustine's pagan opponents claimed two things: that Rome fell because the Christian God could not protect the city; also, they added, He could not protect His people who were raped, tortured, and murdered during the barbarian overthrow of the city. Augustine quickly moves

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to the most disturbing point: the rape, torture, murder, and (sometimes) preemptive suicide of young Christian women during the fall of Rome. It is a disturbing topic. It is hard to discuss. Why didn't Jesus save them from this horror? Augustine moves the argument to the most difficult point—if he can beat this pagan objection then it is all downhill from there. His handling of the topic is mature and thoughtful. He makes no excuses and, in the end, takes no prisoners. He recognizes the horror of what happened, but he does not dismiss the pagan objection immediately. They claimed that these young women killed themselves to avoid being raped. They killed themselves to avoid being sinned against. Augustine points out that killing yourself to avoid someone else's sin is wrong. Some killed themselves to avoid shame, but if you are a victim and are sinned against then you should not be ashamed because you are not guilty. After working through some hard questions about Christian ethical decisions, he turns his guns on his pagan critics. He asks them, "How did you survive the invasion?" It turns out that many pagans escaped death by pretending to be Christians and hiding in church buildings. The barbarians feared the Christian God, so they left His churches intact while sacking the city. Pagans survived by hiding

in churches. The pagan claim that Christ could not protect people is shown to be utter hypocrisy. The pagan critics survived because of Jesus and the fear of Christ that had fallen on the superstitious barbarians.

Next, Augustine turns on the pagan gods. He points out that pagan theology is a massive silly rouse. He gets down to the details of Roman mythology. He points out that these pagans have thousands of gods that rule over different parts of life. They have numerous gods that rule over different parts of child rearing. They even have numerous gods devoted to the different parts of corn (the god of the ears of corn, the god of the stalk, etc.). In the end he shows that pagan mythology is ridiculous.

He then blasts pagan views of history showing them to be nostalgic fairy tales. If pagans are angry because the Christian God did not protect the city, then one should also examine the history of Rome while it was under the care of the pagan gods. He recounts the disasters, invasions, mistakes, and catastrophes that occurred under the "oversight" of the pagan gods. Asserting that the pagan gods protected the city is sheer folly.

Augustine then turns his attention to pagan philosophy. He shows that Christianity is superior to pagan philosophy in every way.

Pagan philosophy does not offer the hope of eternal life. In the final analysis, it is a futile attempt of sinful man to find God. Christianity is God's revelation of Himself to men.

He smashes all of the pagan arguments, but instead of celebrating, Augustine unveils his final and most devastating argument. It is a narrative argument. He tells the story of all of history from creation to the end of the world. He tells of the creation and fall of angels and men. He works through Old Testament history. Again, he gets down into the details.² By the end of this massive (500 page) argument, Augustine has thrown down the gauntlet. If paganism wants to be taken seriously, it has to produce a story that fits the world as well as the Christian story. Unfortunately for the pagans, Augustine has already wrecked their mythology and philosophy. To make sense of the world, they have to borrow from the Christian story. He shows that, in reality, the pagan cupboard is bare.

But how should you use a book like *City of God* in the classroom? Here are a few ideas:

First, make sure that your students understand the nature of Augustine's argument. Make sure that they understand his masterful use of the *reductio ad absurdum*. He reduces pagan assertions about the gods, history, and their own philosophy to a pile of infantile

silliness. The *reductio* is an argument that ends by saying or implying “Really?” Pagans are saying that their gods protected Rome and brought her prosperity. Augustine counters, “Really? Let’s look at the facts!”

Also, make sure that your students understand the power of narrative in apologetics. The story of the history of the two cities (the City of God and the City of Man) is the most powerful part of Augustine’s argument. It reveals the devastating difference between Christianity and paganism. Christianity has a consistent and interesting story about the world from start to finish. Paganism has nothing like this. It cannot account for things like good and evil consistently; it cannot account for the origin of the universe or of man except by bringing in a lot of contradictory ideas.³ This is his closing argument. His story, the story of the two cities, explains the history of the world. What story does paganism have to counter it? He shows that his opponents’ objections to Christianity are infantile. They criticize Christianity, but they have no reasonable alternative. They have no story. They are just smart-alecky little children with cap guns picking a fight with a skilled general armed with howitzers.

Two profitable assignments for students during *City of God* are presentations and apologetic essays.

Augustine’s story is so detailed that I ask my students to prepare a brief oral presentation on a specific chapter of Augustine’s story (his chapters are usually between a few paragraphs and a few pages). The students have three minutes to tell me what Augustine said, whether he is right, and how they know he is right. These presentations are a lot of fun because Augustine talks about all sorts of interesting things.

Finally, do not miss the opportunity to give your students some apologetic work of their own. Augustine’s critique devastated ancient paganism. Today, however, we have a new breed of pagans. Take some time to examine brief arguments from modern pagans like Christopher Hitchens or Richard Dawkins.⁴ See if the students can discern the weaknesses in the modern pagan arguments and use some of Augustine’s methods to attack modern pagan arguments. This sort of activity gives students confidence that they can crush modern atheistic thinking as they head off to college.

Nothing is new under the sun. The snide criticisms of the New Atheists are as weak as the infantile ramblings of the Old Atheists in the fifth century. We need to prepare our students to run into the battle and to be prepared to (like Augustine) tear down strongholds.

NOTES

1. If you are younger than 30, insert Kevin Durant, Steph Curry, or Kobe Bryant for Michael Jordan in this part of the story.

2. Some of his story is speculative and other parts are hilarious. He wonders about how animals got from the ark to far-flung islands and wonders if angels carried the animals there or if God might have simply recreated them from nothing. He wonders if the giants mentioned in Genesis are the result of unions between fallen angels and women.

3. The most hilarious example of this in modern paganism is the assertion that life arises from non-life by accident (and luck). So life results from a mud puddle and lightning . . . really? Really?

4. They have plenty of books, but there are also shorter interviews online. My favorite is a brief portion of an interview with Richard Dawkins on YouTube. It is sort of amazing how much borrowing he has to do from a Christian worldview in five minutes, trying to make an argument that religion is wicked. At the time of the publication of this article the interview could be found online at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MWJm-mOGQ5E>. If you as a teacher are trying to get in the right mood, I would also recommend watching the debates between Douglas Wilson and Christopher Hitchens that turned into the documentary “Collision.”