Rhetoric Against Pagans in St. Augustine's *City of God*

As the works of a venerated scholar of Christianity in Rome after Constantine's divisive reign, St. Augustine's studies became a staple of Christian society and as such provide insight into the cultural climate of the era. A large portion of his City of God examines ancient pagan theology and belief systems, explicitly condemning the majority religion. Though the few remaining pagans in Rome still held influential positions in the community, they were dismissed as archaic, and St. Augustine argued that their polytheistic beliefs were regressive. This article examines the origins of the vast hysteria around paganism starting in fourth-century Rome, and the subsequent consequences of pagans' estranged status as a population. St. Augustine's rhetoric catalyzed a polarization of the two major religious populations in Rome, ultimately contributing to its decline.

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Saint Aurelius Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo (354-430 AD), was a revered theologian, writer, and philosopher. His works were foundational to early Christianity, and remain testaments to the religion's role in the late Roman Empire. In *City of God*, arguably his most disputed work, Augustine argued in favor of Christianity's place as the main religion of the empire by clarifying philosophical disputes and condemning paganism, and the work's theological conclusions catalyzed the formation of Christian identity in the Roman Empire. In the fourth century, Christians strove to find a foothold in a diverse cultural climate by separating themselves from other religions. Augustine, in solidarity with the rise of Christianity, believed that divine grace and understanding of God were necessary to obtain salvation, and rejected the idea that humans have an innate ability to reason and follow a righteous path.

Christian theologians, aiming to create a cohesive belief system in the budding Roman religions, often encountered conflicts with other scholars. Pelagius was another Christian theologian of Augustine's time, but unlike Augustine, he proposed that human free will could provide sufficient morality and righteousness. These theological debates reveal that Christianity was not yet built on a unified philosophy, but they also prove that theologians like Augustine worked to find a conclusive definition of Christian theology. To achieve this, Augustine publicly condemned the pagans in *City of God*, insulting their beliefs, arguing that their gods acted immorally, condemning their practices, and scolding them for their reluctance to follow the growing trend of Christianization. This work is representative of the gradual shift to Christianity in the Roman Empire at this time, because its rhetoric portrays the conversation between the two religions at the time it was written. The second half of the fourth century was marked by a complete shift in religious tolerance, as pagans were legally and socially marginalized. Pagans became the scapegoats of the empire where they had once been a powerful majority.

St. Augustine's use of derogatory rhetoric to marginalize pagans in *City of God* contributed to the religious transformation of the empire. In the process of defending Christianity, he belittles the influence and legitimacy of pagans and contributes to the widespread Christian evangelizing movement to establish Christian superiority. Augustine's unabashed denunciation of pagans provokes questions about the cultural changes in Rome at the time because of the inherent theological tension between the two religions and the hyperbolic language he used to convey the theological issues that prevented cooperation. Augustine's rejection of paganism can be examined to show how pagan religions influenced him, the importance of the long-standing belief systems to the structure of the empire, and the arguments that convinced subjects of Christianity's legitimacy. I will engage closely with his arguments against paganism to create a cohesive explanation of the cultural identity Augustine created for Christianity, with the help of other sources about pagan and Christian communities in Rome. Augustine sought to explain the damage caused by the old religion, and he worked through a catalogue of wrongs committed by pagans and their gods. In the conclusion of Book 1 of *City of God*, he lays out this goal: "we must mention the ills which [Rome] suffered before [pagan] sacrifices had been forbidden."[1] Augustine addressed the growing divide between pagans and Christians from the perspective of the Christians, dissecting pagan theology and its implications and arguing that the attack on Rome could not be blamed on Christianity because misfortune affects everyone.

FOURTH CENTURY ROME

In 313 AD, just one hundred years before St. Augustine wrote *City of God*, Constantine the Great issued the Edict of Milan.[2] The Edict ensured that Christians in the empire would no longer be persecuted, allowing the religion to begin to freely proliferate. It was not until 380 AD that Emperor Theodosius established Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire.[3] For centuries, pagans had dominated the empire

St. Augustine of Hippo Washes the Feet of Christ, Theodoor Rombouts, 1636
Source: Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp (Wikimedia Commons)

Pagans had a number of gods, assigned to every sector of life and every geographical region, and each god had its own realm of influence, whether it was a household, a threshold, or a city. Most gods were derived from earlier indigenous religious practices because tribes were fluid and changes of power were frequent, thus joining many belief systems together over the preceding centuries.[6] Such adaptation of gods and the ideals they represented ended with the onset of Christianity. Christian worship did not involve the same celebrations and rituals that pagans performed, and it became increasingly apparent that the differing practices would not coexist. In 392 AD, a new law made the struggle for influence between the religions much more urgent by banning pagan worship within the empire. This was not the first restrictive law employed against pagans, but it lasted longer than any before it. Legal actions in the second half of the fourth century marginalized pagans, and forced them to contend with prevailing Christian influence. Still, myths, gods, and pagan scholars remained an intrinsic part of Roman culture. Paganism had a lasting influence on the education, government, and daily life of Rome, and the Christian population frequently encountered the remnants of the old religion. Pagan public figures like Praetextatus and Symmachus maintained fame and influence, and art on state structures depicted the beliefs of ancient religions.[7]

In 410 AD, the Vandal tribe under King Alaric invaded, sacked, and seized the city of Rome, shaking the foundations of the empire.[8] The Vandals were a tribe that was part of a larger region of dwellers in Europe, known as the Germanic peoples. These tribes practiced Germanic paganism, and the Romans eventually converted them to Christianity through a mixture of force and persuasion. When the Vandals took Rome, it put an abrupt end to a centuries-long period during which the empire was impenetrable. Threats from tribes on the outskirts of the vast, powerful empire revealed increasing instability and augmented the interreligious uncertainty plaguing Rome. This event, along with the third century economic crisis, left the empire damaged, and forced it to reassess its religious affiliations. The great size of the empire made tax collection difficult for the centralized government, and when inflation soared, the economy left the empire vulnerable and penetrable. Defeat infiltrated the great empire in both the east and the west, and the culture was fragmented ethnically, linguistically, and culturally.[9]

Saint Augustine's influence grew from this dynamic era in Rome, and his writing is useful in understanding Christianity's journey to prevalence as the main religion in Rome and paganism's decline in tolerance and support. Anxieties about instability permeated the empire as opposing groups antagonized each other. St. Augustine subsequently wrote *City of God* in 413 AD, defending Christianity as the primary religion of the empire and arguing for the Christian god's ability to protect Rome. The religious groups of Rome sought to defend their deities against notions of illegitimacy and

and practiced intolerance towards Christians, but Christians soon gained power and influence. Pagans in the empire belonged to a plethora of belief systems, many of them tribal and polytheistic, and the long-term success of the empire had long been credited to pagan gods. Pagans were known in the empire as *pagani*. The Latin word *paganus* (s.), meaning country dweller, was used as a general derogatory term to describe citizens who lived in the rural areas of the empire and were purportedly slow to adapt to the new Christian religion.[4] In the Roman Empire, the term encompassed a variety of old Phoenician, Neoplatonist, and Oriental cults, along with a collection of tribal, polytheistic beliefs.[5] St. Augustine's use of the term primarily concerned the Greco-Roman pagan tradition, from which he drew the evidence for his arguments, but his slander extended to all religions encompassed by the word.

inability to protect the great city. The Christians, emerging from centuries of persecution, incurred the blame for the detrimental attack by the Vandals and the gradual decline of the empire. Saint Augustine's primary purpose in *City of God* was to respond to those allegations.

relentless accusations against pagans allowed Augustine to portray his rhetorical victims as scapegoats. Augustine established this theme early in *City of God*, within the first two pages, and maintained its centrality throughout the work to achieve its main goal of rejecting the pagans.

> ## "The divide shown by this rhetoric reveals ideations towards the pagans that prevailed in the Church and the empire, empowering Augustine to take literary ownership of the trend."

A complete picture of the transitional period circumstantial to *City of God* is difficult to create. The tensions between Christianity and paganism existed in many forms and their progression was far from linear. The full chronological extent of Christianization is difficult to gauge, especially from the arguments and evidence in the hyperbolic *City of God*, because "it was a regular feature in Christian literature to compile catalogues of pagan cults and heresies, each with its Christian counter-argument," thereby exaggerating the forsaken state of pagan communities.[10] This cultural and religious transformation happened in layers, with varying intensities, among scholars and in city halls, in different regions of the empire, and in markets and homes.[11] In *City of God*, Augustine provides essential information about the gradual transformation of the Roman Empire into a Christian one. The shift between religions is explicit in Augustine's indoctrinating presentation of the separation between the Christian and pagan communities, through careful use of rhetorical elements, attempts to convince his pagan readers of the validity of Christianity, and his hyperbolic depiction of paganism as evil.

SEPARATION OF A FLUID COMMUNITY

Augustine focused most heavily on pagans and their faults within the first ten of *City of God*'s twenty-two books. He displayed an intricate understanding of pagan gods, their stories, and their purposes, but relentlessly questioned their morals, their plans, and their sufficiency as protectors of the earth and those who live on it.[12] Augustine was a teacher of rhetoric, and he used his mastery of the discipline to form these arguments against the pagans.[13] The growing cultural divide between the two religions appeared in *City of God* as an "our" and "their" disconnection, as if pagans were not a part of the Roman Empire. Augustine discussed the pagan population with a dismissive tone, giving the pagans the title of outsiders, and excluding them from the empire. In his dismissal of the non-Christians who took refuge in churches during the massacre by the Vandals in 410 AD, Augustine asserted, "among those whom you see insulting Christ's servants with such wanton insolence there are very many who came unscathed through that terrible time of massacre only by passing themselves off as Christ's servants."[14] These

The divide shown by this rhetoric reveals ideations towards the pagans that prevailed in the Church and the empire, empowering Augustine to take literary ownership of the trend. Gillian Clark discusses Augustine's illustration of the divide to conclude that he could not accept the inability of the state and the community to come to an undisputed agreement on the meaning of life and the nature of God.[15] Augustine used the examples of revered pagan writers so that both sides of his audience would consider his argument and then gave them "our" and "their" titles to otherize the dissenters and invalid thinkers from those he portrayed as right. Pagan writers and creators like Virgil and Varro became "theirs," or belonging to the group of pagans, even though they were essential sources for Augustine's own knowledge of iconic texts and Roman polytheism.[16] For example, Augustine writes "Virgil is certainly held to be a great poet…they take great draughts of his poetry into their…minds, so that they may not easily forget him."[17] Contrasted with Augustine's description of Virgil from earlier studies as *poeta noster*, or "our poet," this intentional distancing reveals a shifting attitude towards even the most prominent and respected of pagans.[18] With this rhetoric, Augustine dismissed classical icons of Roman intellectual superiority and cultural progress, and turned *City of God* into "less an extended meditation on the reasons for [the sack of Rome] than a discussion of the place of the classical world and classical culture in the scheme of Christian providence."[19] This classical culture lost its role in the central identity of the empire with the proliferation of Christianity and its literature because of its affinity for the old pagan notions.

Augustine also switches his pronouns when he begins to directly address the pagans, questioning and reprimanding their actions. "For why is it that you place blame on this Christian era, when things go wrong…It is because you seek an infinite variety of pleasure with a crazy extravagance, and your prosperity produces a moral corruption far worse than all the fury of an enemy."[20] This diction, used throughout the book, is accusatory and turns every comment on the pagan religion into an antagonizing element of his argument. Pagans lost their voice in society as the state decreased its support for their religion, and the Christians started to form

a social group knowing that they had the force of the empire behind them. Augustine mentions the Christian population in *City of God* in conjunction with "we" and "us," highlighting the exclusivity of the new Christian identity. This association between the author and his audience includes the readers in his task of arguing the full extent of the theological debate on behalf of the Christians, as if they are working as a team. Augustine assumes an authoritative role over his audience: "Therefore, we must not fail in our duty, so that, when we have refuted their impious attacks…we may establish the City of God, and true religion, and the true worship of God."[21] Augustine's influence in the Christian Church gave his words power, and he wrote to unite his followers in building the Christian identity and turn them against the old religion.

To intensify the intercultural disagreement depicted in *City of God*, Augustine employs other words that portray a conflict that would produce change in society. These terms include referring to pagans as "opponents of Christianity" and to their beliefs and stories of their deities as "fables."[22] These are further rhetorical techniques that Augustine successfully used to stress the diversity of society and encourage Christians to oppose what was foreign to their theology. Augustine repeatedly refers to pagans as the opponents, adversaries, or enemies of Christianity, an extremely harsh expression of his disdain towards them, using the word *adversarius* (n.), meaning enemy, antagonist, or rival.[23] Augustine begins *City of God* by mentioning that both Christians and pagans found shelter in the basilicas and churches that the Vandals left alone out of respect for the god of the people they were attacking. As he recounts these events, he labels pagans *adversarii* because their lives were saved by Christ when they took refuge under his protection, but still "these Romans assail Christ's name."[24]

Another term Augustine associates with pagans is "fable," or folly, to delineate the myths and traditions that contain the wisdom and morality taught by paganism. Fable, translated from *fabula* (n.), meaning story or tale, is a derogatory term for this central element of pagan belief systems.[25] It denotes fiction, as if these stories used to educate and inspire generations of Greeks and Romans were fabricated material. This negative connotation is apparent in Augustine's moments of scrutiny of pagans. In Book IV of *City of God*, he discusses the unnecessary complexity of each god controlling a different realm, and demands, "let us not believe the fables; let us have better ideas about the gods."[26] Augustine concludes that the division of power for the pagan gods is counterintuitive and illogical, so he asserts that the myths are invalid. This is an extreme accusation, and Augustine's repeated use of and comfort with it exposes his mindset towards the now-ostracized religion and that of those around him. This was the predominant attitude that Christians held towards pagans in the second half of the fourth century AD. It shifted Roman culture, and Augustine's championing of it propelled its permeation of society.

THE LEGITIMACY OF CHRISTIANITY

As a representative of the Christian Church, St. Augustine was a prolific apologist, meaning that he was one of many church fathers of the era who made the case for Christianity to the pagans in the empire, so that the religion could continue its spread. Their writing was pertinent as Christianity triumphed over persecution and captivated Rome, while their increasingly scorned pagan counterparts still dominated powerful circles. Augustine shared this apologist goal and approached the defense of Christianity theologically. The bulk of *City of God* makes an exhaustive comparison of Christianity and paganism to prove that the former is much more deserving of the people's devotion than the latter. The gods and their power, their moral value, and the theological implications differentiating the two are delineated to reveal the incriminating details of pagan philosophies. "Augustine repeatedly exploited damaging admissions from small sections of a small number of texts," and his sources were questionably authoritative, yet he collected compelling evidence against the religion.[27] Augustine cited the philosopher Varro for most of his information on the gods, acting carefully to select a notorious and prolific authority on the traditional religion, so that he could interpret the actions of the gods and pagans subjectively yet without uncertainty.[28]

Augustine's argument clearly divides the theological organization of Christianity from that of paganism, leaving no room for the arguments like those of Varro, who contended that Jupiter is the equivalent of the Christian God. *City of God* spoke to the inability of the pagan gods to set examples for and benefit their society by focusing on their preoccupations with excessive realms, and Augustine found the abundance of gods counterintuitive and superfluous. Augustine disagreed with the assignment of the gods to multiple sectors, because his philosophy was that only one God could rule over every-thing in the world. "I find the whole thing disagreeable… that pagans have not the impudence to allege that the Roman Empire was established, increased, and preserved by those divinities who were so clearly confined to their own particular department that no general responsibility was entrusted to any one of them."[29] St. Augustine thought that each god's preoccupation with their own realm made them irresponsible and inefficient, and this sentiment permeated his attacks on paganism in *City of God*. In response to Varro's categorization of the various gods into those of the theater, those of the city, and those of the natural world, he stated, "you would have shown much more candour and percipience in your division if you had distinguished between 'natural gods' on one side and 'gods of human institution' on the other."[30] Augustine's rebuttal reveals his belief in the illegitimacy of many pagan gods, and his treatment of Varro's authority aimed to make it seem "inconsistent and inadequate, a confusion of competing gods and conflicting interpretations."[31] He explicitly dismissed the "host of tiny Gods" after stating his disdain for them, and looked to the greater deities for dependency and duration in their supreme state.[32] The primary god of the pagans, Jupiter,

was considered the ultimate controller of all other gods and their realms: "it is Jupiter whom the Romans will have to be the king of all the gods and goddesses."[33] Still, he goes on to assert that even Jupiter's sectors of influence and control have blurred lines and illegitimacy. "Jupiter is not the subject of the statement, 'The whole universe is full of Jupiter', if Juno also fills some part of it."[34] Augustine's presentation of the gods as excessive and inefficient is joined by descriptions of the Christian God as the "one true God" in later books.[35] Augustine fulfills his place as the voice of Christianity against paganism in Books VII and X, clarifying to his diverse audience that "all that is attributed to the world by the theology of those 'select' gods…should rather be ascribed…to the true God, who made the world, who is the creator of every soul and every material substance."[36] Using this comparison, Augustine boldly demonstrated the divide between pagan and Christian beliefs, practices, and identity.

Another rationale for Augustine's separation of the two religions was the careless, obscene, and corrupt behavior that he perceived in pagan myths. In the story of Regulus, a pagan commander-in-chief of Rome taken prisoner by the Carthaginians, St. Augustine recounted the death of a man who piously followed his promise to the gods and was not rewarded. "He was devoted to their worship; yet he was conquered and taken into captivity and because he refused to break the oath he had sworn by the gods, he was destroyed by torture of an unprecedented and excessively atrocious kind."[37] Augustine compares this to the story of the prophet Jonah from the Bible, illustrating that the Christian god is much more protective and fair to his followers. Jonah also experienced captivity in the process of following his faith, but he was protected and transported to safety by God after keeping his word. Augustine used these examples to voice the superior power of the Christian God, writing that "our story about the prophet Jonah is…more miraculous because it is evidence of greater power."[38] This simple yet compelling distinction of the deities and their compassion is one example of the elements of *City of God* that contributed to the gradual conversion of Rome. Augustine did not only compile examples of the gods showing disregard for their people, but he also explored the qualities of their characters as role models for pagans.

St. Augustine uses multiple opportunities in *City of God* to point out the corruption of pagan gods. Corrupt pagans and their gods are associated with greed, immorality, and depravity throughout the book, severely antagonizing them to the point of criminality. Pagans' moral corruption is attributed to the example set by their gods, which allowed pagan philosophy to be equated with uninhibited physical lust and material greed. Augustine established this in Book I and later reiterated, "there would be no occasion for this continuous progress [of the lust for power in arrogant hearts] if ambition were not all powerful; and the essential context for ambition is a people corrupted by greed and sensuality."[39]

Spanish Translation of St. Augustine's "City of God,"
Cano de Aranda, 1446-82.
Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The adjective for corrupted in Latin, *corruptorius*, does not only mean 'tainted', but carries the connotation of 'destroyed' or 'perished', so this word was strictly applied to pagans as if their religion ruined them and their value as living beings.[40] Augustine directed this intensely biased and discriminatory language at pagans to address the whole attack on Christianity by proving that Rome was and would be worse off morally in the hands of the pagans. In Book II, he examined the history of the Roman commonwealth before Christ, and stated that pagans "do not blame their gods for the self-indulgence, the greed and the savage immortality which, before Christ's coming, brought the republic to those 'depths of depravity.'"[41] Augustine cited the rapes of Lucretia, the Sabine women, and multiple wars to show this depravity, and these accurate historical details were a central part of his analysis.[42] He also exhibited and applauded the Christian standards for the same vices, that "lust should be restrained by fear, and should not issue in debauchery, and the check on debauchery should stop greed from running riot."[43] Augustine's specific arguments made his partisan perspective on the sack of Rome and its ripple effect on Roman culture influential for the growing Christian community.

Lastly, Augustine focuses on a darker part of pagan gods' corruption: their perceived obscenity. The Christian Church and pagan communities conflicted especially when it came to their practices of active worship. With the onset of Christianity, "just showing up [to church] was a sign of affiliation," and pagans had no such practice.[44] Pagans engaged in boisterous festivals, sacrifices, and plays. Augustine questioned these behaviors and the lack of rules of worship for the deities. He condemned the spectacles pagans made out of their worship as "disgusting verbal and acted obscenities," emphasizing another crucial disparity between the religions that forced him to denounce it entirely from a Christian perspective.[45] Pagan gods did not monitor the ways in which they were praised or depicted, and Augustine found it heinous that their gods were "not offended, but propitiated, by the representation of their depravities."[46] St. Augustine meticulously antagonized the pagan traditions with the combination of these rhetorical elements, making *City of God* his great influential work as an apologetic church father.

PAGAN EVILS

In *City of God*, St. Augustine paid the most attention to demarcating a group of pagan gods as demons, with cruel intentions and ambitions to corrupt the people. Indeed, an entire study could be written specifically on his use of the demonic label in regard to pagan gods because it is so extensive and theologically loaded. The main characteristic connecting Christianity and paganism in this period of transformation was the belief in and communication with non-physical entities, like gods, angels, and demons. Yet, it is unclear whether the demons Augustine mentions that pagans believed in are the same as the demons of Christian belief. Regardless, Augustine's presentation of pagan deities in this light has a strong connection to Christian theological anxieties surrounding demons and their evils. "[Those demons] avouch themselves as the promoters of lives of real crime and indecency, by their crimes and misdemeanors, real or pretended, and by the public presentation of them which is demanded from the shameless, and extorted from the modest."[47] St. Augustine detailed the interactions that pagans have in religious practice with demons, which would strike a chord with his Christian audience, indoctrinated into fear and aversion of demons.

> Christ with divine authority denounces and condemns the offences of men, and their perverted lusts, and he gradually withdraws his family from all parts of a world which is failing and declining through those evils, so that he may establish a city whose titles of 'eternal' and 'glorious' are not given by meaningless flattery but by the judgement of truth.[48]

This was Augustine's uplifting definition of Christian deities to his audience, removing the anxieties of evil.

"Scenes from the Life of Saint Augustine of Hippo" (1490)
Source: The Metropolitan Museum of Art

CONCLUSION

City of God is a respected and studied work of late antique Christianity that made an exhaustive study of Christian notions against pagan belief systems and philosophy. St. Augustine's rhetoric was hyperbolic, but it exemplified the shifting attitude of the Roman Empire in the fourth and fifth centuries AD. The Christian community served as Augustine's primary audience, and he kept them hopeful for their 'City of God'.[49] He maintained that Christians would lose nothing as long as they kept their faith, while pagans would be punished for their obstinacy.[50] "The Roman Empire has been shaken rather than transformed, and that happened to it at other periods, before the teaching of Christ's name; and it recovered."[51] The decisive loss the empire endured in the fourth century augmented religious tensions in the culture, and St. Augustine's contribution to a unified Christian identity strengthened the Christian population in the empire. Augustine wrote with devotion to the Christians in Rome, and taught them to stay faithful of God's plan. He achieved his own apologetic goals and those of the Church and the empire. As a community only recently liberated from persecution, the newly-formed Christian identity was successful because of Christianity's deviation from pagan worship practices. The empire was tightly intermingled, and "proximity does not just stimulate exchange: it also leads to the reaffirmation of one's own identity."[52] The dominant Christian church perceived pagans as possessing all of the negative characteristics that St. Augustine detailed, like moral ineptitude, cooperation with evil forces, fabrication, and blind faith, and they defined the young Christian orthodoxy by growing away from the groups they saw as heretics. Pagan influence lasted in the Roman Empire even after St. Augustine's time, but the assumption of Christian dominance changed the 'City of God' in every sector of life, transporting the Roman Empire from antiquity to the Middle Ages. 🏛

Rhetoric Against Pagans
Endnotes

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