

# BIBLIOTHECA SACRA

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## ARTICLE I.

### THE CITY OF GOD.

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THE present is manifestly a critical time in the history of the world. Before our eyes and ears comes constantly a vast stream of evidence that the fate of nations small and great, the fate of empires, the fate, some think, of mankind as a whole, is in the balance. Strengthened by such wealth as has never before been accumulated, aided by such organized knowledge as has never before been possessed, supported by such governmental energy as has never been equaled, nerved to such individual courage as has never been surpassed, armies of millions of men are striving to settle by force the lordship of lands, the control of trade routes, the hegemony of the world.

The effects of the conflict reach America in more ways than by words and pictures. They are felt in the slackening and uncertainty of business, and in the fever of speculation combined with hesitancy to begin new enterprises. The effects of the struggle present new political issues: Shall preparation be made for defense against possible aggression, or for taking an active part in this or future struggles? What general policy shall be supported — peace at any price,

watchful waiting, strenuosity? The effects of the great war suggest new moral questions: Is it right to take profits through supporting war with floods of ammunition and vast loans? Does the United States do right to abstain from forcible action, when neutrality is violated by the belligerent nations, and when the money and the lives of our citizens are taken in irregular ways?

But these are not the questions which most concern Christian people. What is the effect of the present crisis upon religion? Reports come that in all the warring countries the churches are filled as never before. As in the American civil war, both sides pray to the same God and both rely upon Him to give them victory. But these circumstances of increase of religious interest may be only temporary and superficial. From many sides, not only from adherents of other religions, not only from skeptics in Christian lands, but even from Christians themselves, come the deeper questions: Has Christianity failed? Why has it not prevented this savage struggle between nations whose people call themselves Christians? If in nineteen centuries Christianity has done so little to Christianize the world, can it ever do so? May not the entire Christian system, of belief and practice and organization, be best abandoned, and something better be sought?

Christianity is thus, in a sense, on trial. It is confronted by a fierce challenge. This is a day of hard practicality, of stern demand for efficiency, of ruthless destruction of that which is worn-out or even surpassed. Can the faith that sustained our ancestors stand up to the tests of the present? Can we continue to believe confidently in it as "the city which hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God"?

In some respects the present world struggle is the greatest

in human history, but its challenge to Christianity does not seem to be the greatest which our religion has answered. An apparently greater one was made fifteen centuries ago. For four hundred years Christianity had been growing within the Roman Empire. For one hundred years it had been a recognized religion. For a generation it had been the sole religion of the state: all others had been prohibited by law. And yet the decline of the Empire had not been arrested; civil wars had not ceased; enemies had broken through the frontiers; and finally, in the year 410 A.D., Rome, the so-called Eternal City, had been captured and plundered by invaders.

An outcry arose against Christianity. Was it not a failure? Had it not had full control without a rival? Why had it not strengthened and saved the state? And this was not merely a challenge of words. As is now the case, explanation was demanded for the facts themselves.

Prominent in the Christian Church of the West at the time was the famous philosopher and theologian, Aurelius Augustinus, bishop of Hippo in North Africa. He wrote near the close of his life: "Rome having been stormed and sacked by the Goths under Alaric their king, the worshippers of false gods, or pagans, as we commonly call them, made an attempt to attribute this calamity to the Christian religion, and began to blaspheme the true God with even more than their wonted bitterness and acerbity. It was this which kindled my zeal for the house of God, and prompted me to undertake the defence of the city of God against the charges and misrepresentations of its assailants." He then explained the plan of his work, which in twenty-two books treated of the "two cities — the city of God, and the city of the world." He concluded: "And so, though all these twenty-two books re-

fer to both cities, yet I have named them after the better city, and called them *The City of God*.”<sup>1</sup>

This work of Augustine's is one of those great books whose surpassing value everybody admits nowadays, but which few read, and none read through. Who reads all of the “*Æneid*,” the “*Divine Comedy*,” the “*Faerie Queene*,” or Gibbon's “*Decline and Fall*”? Then why should one be expected to read in the original late Latin or in dull translation a long work that surveys the whole of ancient history, philosophy, and theology, not without a touch of political theory, a tinge of ancient natural science, and a little repetition of absurd marvels? Other ages have been less indifferent than ours. The great Charlemagne liked nothing better than this book. It cast a lengthening shadow across the Middle Ages, when books were few, but were much read and highly honored. When the printing press began its miraculous service to the world, twenty editions of the “*City of God*” appeared within the first fifty years. It has not been unread since. Nevertheless, few besides erudite scholars can render judgment according to Augustine's final quaint words: “Let those who think I have said too little, or those who think I have said too much, forgive me; and let those who think I have said just enough join me in giving thanks to God. Amen.”

For present purposes, it is sufficient to consider only the main idea of the book, that of the two cities. Augustine says, in brief: Before man was created, the angels divided into two groups, since having the power to choose, some chose evil and some chose good; from Adam's two sons, Cain and Abel, descended two lines, worldly and righteous; the

<sup>1</sup> St. Augustine, *The City of God*, translated by Marcus Dods (Edinburgh, 1871), vol. i. pp. vii, viii.

worldly line continued on in the governments of the Greeks and Romans, and the heavenly line among the Jews and Christians, until Augustine's own day. Augustine does not follow the subject very systematically or logically. He does not explain why the worldly line was not extinguished by the Deluge, nor is it clear whether he distinguishes the organized Christian Church from the City of God; he recognizes indeed that in the Church "there are many reprobate mingled with the good."<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, he does not go to the length of likening the earthly Roman city to the fallen angels, although his argument connects them by direct descent. In fact, he betrays a real affection for Rome, the government under which he was born, as we may for the United States. He says of the earthly city: "But the things which this city desires cannot justly be said to be evil, for it is itself, in its own kind, better than all other human good. For it desires earthly peace for the sake of enjoying earthly goods. . . . This peace is purchased by toilsome wars; it is obtained by what they style a glorious victory. Now, when victory remains with the party which had the juster cause, who hesitates to congratulate the victor, and style it a desirable peace? These things, then, are good things, and without doubt the gifts of God."<sup>2</sup> So, in spite of all his aim and argument, Augustine makes no very clear distinction between the earthly and the heavenly city.

He failed to emphasize sufficiently, indeed, a very strong line of argument which is familiar enough in our day, namely, that connected with Christ's teaching regarding His kingdom. Substantially the same idea is expressed by the two figures of a city and a kingdom. The Psalmist (lxxxvii. 3)

<sup>1</sup> *The City of God*, bk. xviii. 49.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, bk. xv. 4.

and the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews (xi. 10 ff.) thought of ideal government as in the city Jerusalem, and they could represent the Jewish or Christian religious community as a city. So John could think of heaven as a holy city, the new Jerusalem. Augustine, brought up in an empire which had grown from the city Rome, thought naturally of the city (*civitas*) of God. But Jesus seems never to have pictured the community of His followers as a city, while He spoke of it often as a kingdom.

In general, Augustine does not emphasize Jesus Christ and His teachings as Christian people do to-day. He quotes as often from the Psalms or from the Epistles of Paul as he does from all the four Gospels; and from the several ways in which Jesus referred to His kingdom Augustine notices only one. Nor does he seem to grasp other ideas of Christ's which are to us the most important, and which would seem to be principal municipal ordinances of the City of God. For example, he quotes only once the words "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," and then he emphasizes merely the implication that we should love not others only, but ourselves also. Yet these words alone, if made the unbroken law of all the world, would banish wars and crimes forever. So does it seem to be also with the entire self-denying, altruistic side of Jesus' teaching. Augustine's Christianity was of the head, rather than of the heart, and he taught the individual to strive to save his own soul, but not to be much concerned about the bodies or the souls of others.

It would not be easy to apply most of the arguments of Augustine to present conditions. He fought heresies and combated philosophies which are dead as the leaves of his African summers. But his conception of the two cities, modified to suit the views and circumstances of this day, pre-

sents a comparison that is helpful in clearing Christianity of the charge of present failure.

If Augustine found it hard to separate the earthly from the heavenly city, and found that the Roman government contained much that is commendable, while the Christian church was tainted with evil, it is far less easy for Christians now to draw a sharp distinction between the actual and the ideal, between the organized world as it is, and the Christian Utopia that has never yet been. Pagan and Christian are still mingled in our governments, our churches, and ourselves. Nothing that we see is wholly of the evil of the fallen angels; nothing is wholly glorious, "not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing."

What may now be thought of as the earthly city and as the City of God? Not the physical descent of a worldly line and a separate righteous line, traceable from the first human beings to the present time. Nor can the City of God be expected to descend through a cleft in the opened heavens, a wonderful actual city, with its streets of gold and its river of the water of life. The beautiful figures of speech of an older time can be enjoyed, but not accepted as realities. But shall the City of God be placed wholly outside this life and in the future world? Shall the hope be abandoned of a righteous and regenerated human society? Shall the struggle be given up toward making the world, the church, and all individuals wholly and vitally Christian?

It is true that the prospect is just now far from pleasing. The phrase "Christian nations" has been used freely. The world has dreamed of universal peace, of equality, of ideal justice, of the brotherhood of man, — in short, of loving our neighbors as ourselves. The present "civilized" world has been contrasted with past barbarism. As for the individual,

he has no longer needed to become convinced of his personal sinfulness, and then brought through a distressing emotional experience to conversion and assurance of salvation. But now the scales—or some of the scales—have fallen from men's eyes. They see some of the accepted policies of the world for what they are, and behold, they are not of the City of God!

The accidents of history have brought into being certain associations of men, business firms, in a sense, which are called nations. Men are taught that they must give all their property, and that they must die, if need be, to prevent the association to which they belong from being dissolved. Nay, they must die lest their association lose the control of some land or the opportunity to gain some money, or lest a rival association go unpunished after some small offense that is called an insult to national honor. Indeed, men must die in order that the association to which they belong may receive more land or money, or even gain more recognition of its capacity to play a part in affairs. But Jesus said: "Love your enemies"; "Blessed are the *meek*, for *they* shall inherit the earth."

It was said long ago, "Thou shalt not steal." But nowadays it is not considered to be stealing if a Christian nation takes the land of a Moslem nation, or of an African people, or even of another Christian nation that has not men enough, or ammunition enough, or conviction enough that men should die to preserve these things called nations. Europe has nearly completed its appropriation of the lands of the world. Should it be surprising that similar methods should be tried in Europe itself, or that when there are no more lands over which to "expand," the expanding powers should fight for the appropriated lands? High loyalties of patriotism are



used to support all manner of evil deeds. Lofty ambitions towards self-realization are turned to the accomplishing of unjust empire-building. Noble services of production and transportation are converted into heavy chains which bind backward peoples hand and foot.

“Thou shalt not bear false witness.” But treaties are kept only so long as it pays. The news that is given out, combined with the absence of news that is suppressed, makes it impossible to know the truth about the belligerent lands.

“Thou shalt not kill,” nor even be “angry with thy brother.” Yet without ceasing men are loading missiles into cunningly devised machines, which hurl them into the midst of groups of men, where they explode with fearful energy, and in an instant the bodies of living men become bloody dust and mist. And the men who do this are accounted heroes, and those who do it most will win the game, and be classed with the immortals. Thus one might run through all the commandments and all the teachings of Jesus. Not one of them is obeyed. Jesus knew that it would be so: “I came not to send peace, but a sword.” He spoke of “wars and rumors of wars,” of “great tribulation,” and of the abounding of iniquity.

But is He to blame for all this and for the present world crisis? Is the teacher to blame if he assigns lessons and gives lectures, and the student abstains from study, and fails? Is the watchman to blame if he tells the owner that his warehouse is on fire, and the owner pays no heed, and the property is destroyed? Is the physician to blame if a poisoned patient refuses an antidote, and dies? The fault is not in Christ, and it is not in Christianity. It is the defect of the earthly city, and not the failure of the City of God.

But perhaps the Christian ideal is unattainable. Perhaps

it is impossible to do away with war, to establish justice upon earth, and to bring national affairs under the rules of Christian morality. There seems to be no sufficient reason for such a pessimistic view. Progress may have been slow, but has there not been great progress?

Christianity was not rightly charged with responsibility for the sack of Rome by Alaric. The Roman state, even under the emperors who professed Christianity, had not been conducted upon Christian principles. The invading Goths called themselves Christians, and for the sake of that Name they spared all who took sanctuary in churches. But they seem to have held the unchristian view, as yet by no means abandoned, that while an individual should of course not steal and kill, robbery and murder become virtues for a nation, and are renamed conquest and victory. From that day to this the nations have never been Christian. Even our own is accused of having plundered the Indians, the Mexicans, the Spanish, and the Colombians, and all save the last through war and bloodshed.

Nevertheless, the present world is better in countless respects than that of Roman times. Most people believe that war should be done away with, while even St. Augustine failed to condemn it. There is much talk of equality and justice, and much desire to extend these principles in human society; they are actually receiving continual extension. The world has begun to build up machinery for the peaceful settlement of international differences. There is talk of substituting right for might in international affairs, and of governing with the consent and for the interest of the governed. In these days talk advances into action oftener and more successfully than ever before. Peoples understand each other better, and hate each other less (barring the excep-

tional circumstances of the moment), than at any previous time. Though there is much yet to be won, the heavenly city has been gaining on the earthly city.

Now the nations cannot become Christian except through and after the Christianizing of the individual. It is to be feared that we are all far from being thoroughly Christianized. To take one or two among many examples, is not the law of the business world affirmed to be self-interest? But Jesus said, "Give to him that asketh thee." Nearly every Christian declines to take that command literally. It is evident that one who did so could even nowadays hardly retain any property or remain in any business. Obviously in an ideal Christian society, no one would ask from another what is not right, and then the command might be obeyed freely by all. Again, Jesus said, "Resist not evil." How many Christians are free from revengefulness and spite? In an ideal society no one would willfully do another evil, and there would be nothing to resist. But does not the disturbing thought suggest itself that in His numerous very difficult commands Jesus did not expect us to wait for the ideal society before obeying Him? In fact, there have been very few completely obedient Christians in all the centuries. Yet the modern world is softening appreciably. The new political economy has for its law implicitly if not openly, not self-interest but service. The self-respecting business man is more and more disposed to take his gains not as an unfair advantage or a result of superior cunning, but as a payment for genuine services faithfully rendered. And vengeance is more and more often left for God's repayment.

Christian people are slowly building the City of God here upon earth. The time is long and the way is difficult. Whether the world will last until the City is completed does

not appear, and is of little importance. But the City of God "hath foundations," and the superstructure is visibly rising. Christianity has not failed. It is the lack of Christianity that has failed.

It is not well to strive thoughtlessly to expedite the process. When Christians have tried to use force to hasten the building of the City, as under some Popes of the Middle Ages, and as under the Inquisition in Spain, it has seemed to rise more rapidly for a time, but it has quickly ceased to be Christianity, and after that what has been built has been the earthly and not the heavenly city. It is no mere coincidence that just at the time when the Papacy was rising rapidly toward political control of the world, Bernard of Cluny wrote his wonderful poem "De Contemptu Mundi," from which was taken, among other beautiful hymns, "Jerusalem the Golden." Though the church was trying with success to become the chief political authority, the poet was led to place the heavenly city after the present world. With greater love for human affairs and with wiser patience, Christians of today need not despise and abandon this world. Advancing by the slow sure method of obedience to Jesus Christ, they may feel that it is not only for the future life, but for the present world also, that they can say, "We have not an abiding city, but we seek after the city which is to come."