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AUGUSTINE’S “TWO CITIES” AND STEVEN SMITH’S *PAGANS AND CHRISTIANS*

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INTRODUCTION

Steven Smith’s *Pagans and Christians in the City* continues to elicit my esteem. The breadth and the intricacy of his argument, as well the sparkle of his prose, impressed me when I first read and then reread the manuscript. While I raise questions about some of his distinctions, I am grateful for such a capacious and engaging tour through ancient Roman and modern American conceptions of religious freedom.

Pagans and Christians makes the compelling case that today’s culture wars, just as much as those of ancient Rome, have religious roots. Smith takes T. S. Eliot as his primary authority for opposing pagan and Christian, but he might have cited G. K. Chesterton, who called paganism the “one real rival to the Church of Christ.”¹ Or maybe Robert Reich, who predicted in 2004 that “the underlying battle [of the twenty-first century] will be between...those who give priority to life in this world and those who believe that human life is no more than preparation for an existence beyond life”;² in other words, between “immanents” and “transcendents.”

Although there are many modern voices juxtaposing pagans and Christians, I want to focus on an ancient source, Augustine of Hippo’s *City of God (against the Pagans)*, which is one of the inspirations for Smith’s title.³ While the bishop of Hippo shows up occasionally in Smith’s account—indeed, his conversion is central to Chapter Five, *Looking beyond the World: The Christian Revolution*—Augustine’s description of the “two cities,” Babylon and Jerusalem, makes only a brief appearance. So as a scholar of

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¹ G.K. CHESTERTON, *THE EVERLASTING MAN* 85 (Dodd, Mead & Company, 1925).

² Robert Reich, *The Last Word*, *THE AMERICAN PROSPECT* (June 17, 2004), <https://prospect.org/article/last-word-4>.

³ Augustine prefers the shorter title *De Civitate Dei*. See AUGUSTINE, *THE CITY OF GOD*, Part I, II (William Babcock trans., 2012, 2013) [hereinafter *CITY OF GOD*].

both historical theology and Augustine (and as someone innocent of constitutional legal theory), I suggest that the *City of God* sheds light on some of the tensions that I find in *Pagans and Christians* and, in particular, the limits of identifying paganism with “immanent” commitments and Christianity with “transcendent” commitments.

I. IMMANENTS VS. TRANSCENDENTS IN HISTORY

Early in *Pagans and Christians* Smith lays out his distinction between transcendent and immanent neatly: “Pagan religion locates the sacred *within* this world....Judaism and Christianity, by contrast, reflect a *transcendent* religiosity; they place the sacred, ultimately, *outside* the world—‘beyond time and space.’”⁴ While Augustine, unlike Smith, is a Christian apologist, who spends much of his treatise attacking the pagan case, he would agree with Smith’s basic divide. At the same time, Augustine also shows that such a clean distinction is often muddied in the history of thought and religion. First, Augustine acknowledges that “immanents,” especially Stoics, often endorse a religiosity that transcends social norms and mirrors Christianity in its demands for self-abnegation and sacrifice. Second, Augustine acknowledges that many pagans, especially the Platonists, affirm the transcendence of God and yet still disagree with Christians on basic moral practices. For Augustine, Christians are distinct from pagans not ultimately because Christians profess commitments to a transcendent (or an immanent) God, but because they *worship* a God who is radically transcendent as well as radically immanent, through the Incarnation and the sacraments.

⁴ STEVEN D. SMITH, *PAGANS AND CHRISTIANS IN THE CITY: CULTURE WARS FROM THE TIBER TO THE POTOMAC* ch. 5 (2018) [hereinafter *PAGANS AND CHRISTIANS*]. I think Smith’s use of the term “religiosity” here is important: he is not identifying “transcendence” or “immanence” with a set of claims about the world, but with a set of practices and beliefs that characterize one’s disposition to the *summum bonum*. Cf. JOSEPH CARDINAL RATZINGER, *INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIANITY* 109 n.7 (J.R. Foster trans., Ignatius, 2000) (“One need only point to the fact that ancient philosophy embraced both philosophical atheists (Epicurus, Lucretius, et al.) and philosophical monotheists (Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus), and that both groups were by religion polytheists.”).

II. AUGUSTINE ON HEROIC “IMMANENTS”

Despite his dismissal and even mockery of pagan ideals, Augustine acknowledges that “this-worldly” pagans have displayed a heroic self-denial that outstrips any communal ethos; their virtue is best described as going “above and beyond” the demands of prudential judgment. Book One of *City of God* opens with a famous example of such heroism: Lucretia, the Roman heroine who preferred suicide over the shame of living with unchastity after being raped by the son of the tyrant Tarquin (N.B.: Augustine does not approve).⁵ Augustine proceeds to consider other Roman heroes, such as Cato and Regulus, lauding the moral courage that led them to observe a law that transcended the Republic’s.⁶ Augustine, then, recognizes that adherents of religio-philosophical “immanentism” do not necessarily assimilate to cultural norms.

Augustine’s insight prompts me to consider exceptions to Smith’s account of the relationship between pagan philosophy and pagan practice, especially in sexual ethics. At least one ancient Roman philosophy, Stoicism, rejected the prevailing pagan morality, especially in the sexual arena. Prominent Stoics, who lived during the Christian Era, were not the libertine pagans that Smith portrays but rather strict moralists who believed that “human nature is heterosexually paired and reproductively oriented.”⁷

By downplaying the Stoics in his account of pagan sexual morality, Smith follows Kyle Harper’s *From Shame to Sin*, which identifies them as “gloomy” exceptions to the Roman consensus on sex of all types as natural and unobjectionable.⁸ To be sure, dropping the Stoic outliers makes some sense: Stoicism generally remained a philosophical and cosmopolitan ethic rather

⁵ CITY OF GOD, *supra* note 3, at 1.19.

⁶ *Id.* at 1.23–24. Cato is a man of “learning and probity,” *id.* at 1.26, while of Regulus Augustine states: “Among all their praiseworthy men, renowned for their outstanding virtue, the Romans offer none better than [this man].” *Id.* at 1.27.

⁷ KATHY L. GACA, THE MAKING OF FORNICATION: EROS, ETHICS, AND POLITICAL REFORM IN GREEK PHILOSOPHY AND EARLY CHRISTIANITY 87 (2017).

⁸ KYLE HARPER, FROM SHAME TO SIN: THE CHRISTIAN TRANSFORMATION OF SEXUAL MORALITY IN LATE ANTIQUITY 70–78 (2013).

than a popular one, and scholars debate whether the more restrictive versions of Stoicism found in authors such as Seneca represent mainstream Stoicism in the first place.⁹

Yet Stoics matter in *Pagans and Christians* for at least two reasons. First, many of the distinctive features of early Christian ethics and attitudes toward sexuality are present in and often drawn from the Stoics. St. Paul's Stoicism and its affinities with Seneca's thought are well-documented.¹⁰ The parallels are recognized even in antiquity: there is a fourth-century apocryphal exchange of letters between Paul and Seneca; Tertullian speaks of *Seneca saepe noster*, "Seneca, often one of our own."¹¹ Around the turn of the third century, Clement of Alexandria includes extended excerpts from Stoic authors as he develops his own ethical thought.¹² The Stoics supplied the early church with a ready supply of rational defenses for practices we might otherwise consider distinctively Christian, such as the pursuit of "purity of heart" and the good of "philanthropy."

Second, the Stoics represent a particular challenge to Smith's distinction between "sexual libertinism" or "immanent religiosity" on the one hand, and "sexual restraint" or "transcendent religiosity" on the other.¹³ According to their decidedly immanent account of the Logos or the divine "rationality," Stoics understood the divine as the "Spirit" and the "Fire" functioning coextensively with the cosmic order. God or Logos was not beyond space and time, but rather a vital,

⁹ They may be Neopythagorean. GACA, *supra* note 7, at 111. On ancient Stoicism as a "rival tradition" to Christianity, see C. KAVIN ROWE, ONE TRUE LIFE: THE STOICS AND EARLY CHRISTIANS AS RIVAL TRADITIONS 206–38 (2016).

¹⁰ See generally JAN NICOLAAS SEVENSTER, PAUL AND SENECA (1961).

¹¹ TERTULLIAN, *DE ANIMA* 20.1; *Tertullian, On the Soul*, in TERTULLIAN: APOLOGETICAL WORKS AND MINUCIUS FELIX: OCTAVIUS, FATHERS OF THE CHURCH 226 (E.A. Quain trans., 1950) [hereinafter *Tertullian, On the Soul*]. The literature on Christianity and Stoicism is immense, but see generally TROELS ENGBERG-PEDERSEN, PAUL AND THE STOICS (2000).

¹² See Denis Bradley, *The Transformation of the Stoic Ethic in Clement of Alexandria*, 14 AUGUSTINIANUM 41–66 (1974).

¹³ Reflect, perhaps, in the recent varieties of non-theistic "neo-Stoicism," which have experienced as much of a revival as "neo-paganism." See MARTHA NUSSBAUM, UPHEAVALS OF THOUGHT: THE INTELLIGENCE OF EMOTIONS (2009); RICHARD SORABJI, EMOTION AND PEACE OF MIND: FROM STOIC AGITATION TO CHRISTIAN TEMPTATION (2010).

corporeal principle of reason that was dynamic and ever-present in nature;¹⁴ as Seneca puts it, "[t]his entire universe in which we are contained is one and it is God."¹⁵

At the same time, the Stoics viewed life "according to nature" as prescribing certain behaviors, including continence and the freedom from passions (*apatheia*), which characterize the *sapiens* or wise man attuned to the immanent order. According to Seneca the happy man is not the one who is rich and praised by the crowd, but the one "who takes Nature for his teacher, conforming himself to her laws and living as she commands."¹⁶ The life of the Stoic *sapiens*, devoted to self-mastery and to the contemplation of the deepest truths of the universe, might look to us much like a monastic existence. St. Jerome even cites the Stoic Seneca as an advocate for celibacy.¹⁷ Hence Stoics were able to develop a non-hedonistic account of the good life from a "this-worldly" religiosity. They are "immanent" in matters of belief and yet quite "restrictive" in matters of ethics and sexuality.¹⁸

III. AUGUSTINE ON IDOLATROUS "TRANSCENDENTS"

As for the second tension in Smith's framework: Augustine acknowledges that many who hold a transcendent view of the divine are nevertheless functional idolaters and therefore immanent in their religiosity. In Book Eight of *City of God* Augustine commends Plato and his followers for their belief in the one God who is "above every bodily thing...and above all souls."¹⁹ Yet he proceeds to critique them for their practices of theurgy and their theatrical performances, which they

¹⁴ Some early Christians, including Tertullian, endorse the materialism of Stoic cosmology. E.g. TERTULLIAN, *DE ANIMA* 5–7; *Tertullian, On the Soul*, *supra* note 11, 187–93.

¹⁵ *Epistle* 92.30, in SENECA, 2 EPISTLES 467 (Richard Mott Gummere trans., 1920).

¹⁶ *Epistle* 45.9, in SENECA, 1 EPISTLES 297 (Richard Mott Gummere trans., 1917).

¹⁷ JEROME, *AGAINST JOVINIAN* 1.49 (W.H. Fremantle et al. trans., 1893) (citing "noster Seneca" in a work *DE MATRIMONIO* ("On Marriage"), which does not survive).

¹⁸ Indeed, Harper notes that in *Leucippe and Clitophon* the verb "to philosophize" often means "to abstain from sex" and clearly has Stoics in mind. HARPER, *supra* note 8, at 71.

¹⁹ *CITY OF GOD*, *supra* note 3, at 8.10; Augustine, like many early Christians, thinks Plato stole this idea from encounters with Hebrews. See generally ARTHUR J. DROGE, *HOMER OR MOSES?: EARLY CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATIONS OF THE HISTORY OF CULTURE* (J.C.B. Mohr, 1989).

understand to be pleasing to the gods.²⁰ Hence, Augustine identifies intellectual pagan “transcendents” who were practical “immanents.”

Augustine’s sensitivity to the porous distinction between worldview and practice highlights the challenge of distinguishing between transcendents and immanents as they are portrayed in *Pagans and Christians*. When Smith presents the perdurance of paganism “under the canopy” of Christianity, he notes that pagans could easily pass as Christians. Likewise, Christians who publicly professed the Nicene Creed could still function as pagans, without giving any obvious indications that they had lapsed from their public faith. Even today, many certifiable Christians functionalize or “immanentize” their faith as much as pagans do: consider the prosperity gospel, Christian dating sites, or even Therapeutic Moralistic Deism, where the transcendent, ultimate good of religion is leveraged for personal gain.²¹ Such Christians, who receive mention in *Pagans and Christians*, have assimilated nicely to the current cultural regime.

Nevertheless Smith argues that the “location” of the deity has profound ramifications for the experience of the religious participant: Christians (and Jews) “do[] not feel entirely at home in the world.”²² Thus, we can trace pagans through history in part because they made peace with a “this-worldly” circumscription of meaning, whereas authentic Christians are known by a certain *dépaysement*. But here we must note that neither public affiliation nor even professed creeds suffice to mark one out as Christian or a pagan. We need to read the heart.

Augustine understands this dilemma. For Augustine, the sense of alienation that Smith identifies is not primarily a consequence of the type of god one believes in; even while a Platonist maintains that the One is beyond all space and time, he might be happy to offer sacrifices to intermediate divinities for social or civic ends. For Augustine, Christian homelessness is a consequence of *worshipping* a God who became flesh, who

²⁰ CITY OF GOD, *supra* note 3, at 8.13.

²¹ On the final “religion” on this list, see CHRISTIAN SMITH & MELINDA LUNDQUIST DENTON, SOUL SEARCHING: THE RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL LIVES OF AMERICAN TEENAGERS (Oxford University Press, 2005).

²² PAGANS AND CHRISTIANS, *supra* note 4, at ch. 5 (quoting JAN ASSMANN, THE PRICE OF MONOTHEISM 42 (Stanford University, 2009) (noting that the place of Jews (and other “transcendent” religiosities) in this framework receives attention from other respondents)).

ensures for us that not only our hearts, but also our bodies, are destined for a transcendent end.²³ Christians are estranged from wider society because they refuse to settle for a domesticated, civil worship, a sacrifice that is not directed to the God who is both transcendent and immanent.²⁴ Augustine knows that this divergence in worship between pagan and Christian will lead to a clash: "As a result of this difference, it has been impossible for the heavenly city to have laws of religion in common with the earthly city. Instead, it has of necessity had to dissent from the earthly city at this point and to become an annoyance to those who think differently."²⁵ So visible worship, and a refusal of pagan worship, are necessary and divisive markers of the Christian life.

But outward markers are not sufficient to identify a Christian. Because true worship is an affair of both visible body and invisible soul, we can only know the true Christian by knowing her heart; this side of the *eschaton*, prior to the Last Judgment, the two cities are "thoroughly mixed," a *corpus permixtum*.²⁶ Hence, even when we spot shared religiosities in the "earthly city," we must be cautious about lumping competing interest groups into factions of the immanent or the transcendent.

CONCLUSION: THE *CORPUS PERMIXTUM*

I do not think that Augustine's qualifications necessarily undermine Smith's case.²⁷ I do think they force us to recognize additional categories to account for the range of philosophical, civil, and religious commitments in Rome and today: one can be philosophically "transcendent" and yet worship the civic gods (whatever form they take); one can deny the civic gods and still be intellectually committed to an immanent, naturalized deity. This messier account of the "two cities" is of course less helpful than Smith's for setting policy or parsing court decisions. Yet the complexity demonstrates that labels or even self-identification do not settle the issue of one's membership in the wordly Rome or the heavenly Jerusalem.

²³ See *CITY OF GOD*, *supra* note 3, at 22.21.

²⁴ See especially *id.* at 19.17.

²⁵ *Id.* at 19.17.

²⁶ Augustine, *Exposition of Psalm 51.4*, in 3 *EXPOSITIONS OF THE PSALMS*, 51-72, 16 (John E. Rotelle, O.S.A. ed., Maria Boulding, O.S.B. trans., 2001).

²⁷ And I admit that he occasionally acknowledges these qualifications.

Indeed, closer attention to the question of worship would force all “immanentizing” Christians, myself among them, to preface scrutiny of the culture wars with scrutiny of oneself. What God do I worship? A God who is subordinated to my limited horizons, or the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of the Word made Flesh?