What constitutes a “people,” and how the Roman people are understood by Augustine

Name of the author: Augustine of Hippo
Date: 413 CE to 427 CE
Place: Hippo
Language: Latin

Category: Christian

Literary genre: Rhetorical treatise

Title of work: City of God
Reference: XIX.24

Commentary:
For an introduction to Augustine and the City of God, please see the commentary on II.16.

The present passage from book XIX of the City of God opens with Augustine’s consideration of what defines a people (populus), drawing upon, but ultimately rejecting the definition which Cicero gives in his De re publica (On the Commonwealth). As Phillip Cary explains, Augustine’s broader political theory is informed by his ontology (theory of being), which is essentially a Platonistic Christian one. He distinguishes between three levels of being: God, souls, and bodies, which are ordered hierarchically, and of the questions which concerns Augustine in this regard is what it is that makes a society. What does a people or a community consist of? What gives it its being? He works in this text and elsewhere with Cicero’s definition from his On the Commonwealth of a community or people (populus) as a “group brought together by agreement in law and common interest” (see City of God II.21 and XIX.21; Cary, “United Inwardly,” p. 3-4, quotation at p. 4). Augustine’s interest in this subject began several years prior to the composition of the City of God, when he was concerned with the conflict between the Catholics and the Donatists about whom it was that constituted the true Church. Augustine saw social unity as the main problem here, and emphasised, as he does in the City of God, that love, not law and justice, was at the centre of the definition of a people (Cary, “United Inwardly,” p. 4). For Cicero, the res publica (literally “public thing/affair,” but translated variously as “state,” “commonwealth,” “republic,” etc.) was what an assembly of the people in significant numbers held in common with respect to justice and the common good (I.39, 41-42; see Augustine’s words which echo this definition in his Letter 138.10, and the discussion of this topic in the commentary on Letter 138.17). For Cicero, citizens within the res publica had responsibilities to it just as it had responsibilities to them, and this was mainly expressed by them obeying its laws (see On the Laws III.6).

Augustine’s position asserts the opposite, arguing that societies can exist without laws, but not without love (see in addition to the present passage, City of God XIX.21). His understanding of the civitas is therefore not primarily in terms of justice, peace, or sovereignty, but in terms of love; this is what defines the character of a people (Todd Breyfogle, “Toward a Contemporary Augustinian Understanding,” p. 221). If a group does not love the same thing, it is not unified. Augustine’s definition of a people is therefore a readjustment of that of Cicero, which the opening of our passage rejects. Rather, Augustine asserts that a people “is an assemblage of reasonable beings bound together by a common agreement as to the objects of their love.” For Augustine, “the soul takes on the character of what it loves” (Cary, “United Inwardly,” p. 6). The focus of one’s love and devotion was the entire basis for how Augustine distinguished between the heavenly city and the earthly city. If one loves only earthly, human things, then they will never be a citizen of anywhere other than the “earthly city” (not to be understood in the sense of a literal, material “city”; on this, see once again the discussion of Letter 138.17). However, devotion to the true God enables citizenship in the “heavenly city,” which is eternal (see Michael Hanby, “Democracy and its Demons,” p. 118, n. 6). Although Rome’s history is presented throughout the City of God as idolatrous and immoral, with the focus of its people having traditionally been on the pursuit of power and glory, and not on the true God, Augustine’s understanding of the two cities model does not prevent citizens of Rome from becoming citizens of the heavenly city if they realign their priorities (this is made clear in Letter 138). Augustine writes in the fifth century, when the Roman empire was ruled by Christian emperors, and Christianity was widespread throughout the empire, but his presentation of the Roman people and their vices in this passage and throughout the work as a whole looks to their entire history as a people, and reflects upon its moral failings.
Augustine’s presentation of the Roman people is introduced by a statement that some peoples will naturally be united by “higher interests,” and some by lower. That Rome fits into this inferior latter category is then made clear with descriptions of the evils which characterised her from the earliest times onwards, with bloodlust leading to civil and social wars, and the concord which ensured “the health of the people” utterly destroyed. None of this stops Rome from being understood as a res publica, Augustine argues, because the people all sported a love for these unsavoury pursuits, and therefore still satisfied the definition of Cicero. It should be recalled at this point that Augustine’s use of Cicero’s definition of a people comes after a drawn out polemical attack in the previous books of the City of God on Roman immorality, particularly in relation to Roman religion (for a survey of Augustine’s argument up until this point, see Gregory Lee, “Republics and Their Loves”). In XIX.21, Augustine concludes that Cicero’s definition of the res publica incorporated the concept of justice, but because Rome’s religious devotion was misplaced, it did not have any justice, and therefore could not properly be classed as a res publica in Cicero’s framework. As Gregory Lee states, however, it is not certain to what degree Augustine actually took this argument seriously, and a large proportion of scholars understand Augustine as being aware that his conclusion was overly simplistic. As such, they argue that in XIX.24 he adapted Cicero’s definition by excluding justice (iustitia), instead claiming that it is a common object of love which unites and defines a people. (Lee, “Republics and Their Loves,” p. 556). For instance, Robert Markus’s study argued that Augustine’s definition here of a people affirms that it does not matter what kind of values unite a society. Regardless of whether a society’s common values and purposes are judged as bad or good, it is merely the fact that a common loyalty to these values binds the people which characterises them as a state (see Markus, Saeculum, p. 66). Essentially, in this view, XIX.24 acts as a crucial point in the book whereby Augustine demonstrates a positive attitude towards pagan societies. For Markus, Augustine’s redefinition of Cicero is an attempt to neutralise and secularise the political sphere, so that individuals with different beliefs can pursue the objectives that they have in common. In this sense, he imagines a religiously pluralistic civic society. By omitting reference to proper worship or true justice, common ground can be found between the earthly city and the heavenly city, which means that Rome can occupy a place in between the two. This allows for a more positive view of the Roman people and their history than has been present throughout the City of God up until this point (see also Morgan Brandon, “Worshipping in Public,” p. 229). For Oliver O’Donovan, however, this pushes Augustine too far. He argues that for Augustine, “Christians were never true Romans (in the sense of being part of the Roman imperial project) nor false Christians true members of the church (in the sense of being part of the pilgrim society)” (“The Political Thought,” p. 59). Markus’s interpretation is also rejected by Gregory Lee (“Republics and Their Loves,” p. 558). For this scholar, in the present passage (as well as XIX.21), justice (iustitia) is the most important factor (Lee, “Republics and Their Loves,” p. 572).

As Lee argues, in both books II and XIX of the work, Augustine makes clear that proper justice is dependent on proper worship, i.e. Christianity, and so for this reason, the pagan Roman state must naturally be condemned (“Republics and Their Loves,” p. 558). This does not mean that Augustine did not see Romans as capable of realigning their loyalties to focus purely on God, thereby making them eligible for membership of the heavenly commonwealth. Similarly, in theory a Christian could risk their place in the heavenly commonwealth by losing focus on God and making earthly pursuits their true “love.” As implied by the quotation from O’Donovan above, the present passage seems to be quite clear about the fact that certain characteristics are very “Roman,” and these characteristics are extremely negative, centred around bloodlust and thirst for power.

In summary, the present passage adapts Cicero’s definition of what constitutes a res publica by substituting justice, which Cicero saw as central to a society, for love. As Gregory remarks, this is quite predictable when we consider that the two “cities” presented in the City of God are contrasted fundamentally on what it is that they both love. As the previous books have demonstrated at length, the earthly city, of which the polytheistic Roman empire was one representative (but not the only one), prioritised its own power and wealth, was brutally violent, and worshipped false gods. For Thomas F. Martin, in this regard this passage (following the argument developed throughout Augustine’s work up until this point) sees much of Roman history as the antithesis to the ideal of salus concordiae (“secure peace”) (“Augustine and the Politics of Monasticism,” p.178). Rome’s possession or non-possession of justice was not what counted in this respect. Rome might have been a res publica by Cicero’s definition, this Augustine admits he does not dispute, but the Roman people’s violent history and persistent misplaced worship prove that their true love was earthly power and glory, which in turn led to many wars. Furthermore, Augustine states that if the Romans are a res publica, then he is forced to include the Greeks, Egyptians, and Assyrians in this category also, all of which he has in previous books denounced for their extreme idolatry and lust for power (“Republics and Their Loves,” p. 573). As pointed out by Rowan Williams, when this is taken into consideration, labelling Rome as a res publica does not seem to be particularly positive (Williams, “Politics and the Soul,” p. 59-60). Ultimately, as the closing sentence of our passage makes clear, in order for “true justice” to be present, one needs to completely obey the commands of God, submit the body to the soul, and control the vices with
reason. This is something which the Roman people as a whole has not always done, and for that reason, Rome cannot be said to have true justice.

Keywords in the original language:

- animus
- bellum civile
- civitas
- coitus
- communio
- concordia
- concordo
- corpus
- cruentus
- fidelis
- imperium
- impius
- iustitia
- multitudo
- populus
- populus romanus
- rationalis
- res publica
- sacrificium
- seditio
- socialis
- socio
- vitium

Thematic keywords in English:

- Assyrians
- Athenians
- Babylon
- city
- civil war
- commonwealth
- concord
- Egyptians
- government
- Greeks
- immorality
- impiety
- justice
- love
- nation
- people
- republic
- Roman people
- vice

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