

INTO EUROPE'S DARK AGE

In the spirit he carried me away to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God . . . the nations will walk by its light . . . and there will be no night there.

—THE APOCALYPSE OF ST. JOHN¹

However alien and eccentric Eastern asceticism sometimes seems, it had an extraordinary influence on the medieval West; indeed, the European monks of the Middle Ages were merely provincial imitators of the Eastern desert fathers.

—WILLIAM DALRYMPLE²

We intend to establish a school for the Lord's service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome . . . But as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love.

—THE *RULE* OF ST. BENEDICT³

1. Revelation 21:10, 24.

2. Dalrymple, *From the Holy Mountain*, 106.

3. Benedict, prologue, verses 45–47 (*RB* 1980, 165).

But when I had passed my first youth and attained the age of perfect strength, I heard a voice from heaven saying . . . write what you see and hear.

—HILDEGARD OF BINGEN⁴

ROME FELL ON AUGUST 28, 410, when Alaric led his Gothic army into the imperial capital. Subsequent reports tell us it was evening, autumnal darkness was descending on the burning city, resistance had ceased, dead bodies littered the streets, and for the next three days there was pillaging and raping. Many citizens were dragged off into slavery, and others fled as refugees across the Mediterranean as far as Asia Minor and the Holy Land. It was much like what is happening in the Middle East today, only in the opposite direction, redefining the destiny of Europe, then as now.

The fall of Rome did not immediately usher in the Dark Ages, even though it did bring about a chaotic transfer of power. What was left of the imperial bureaucracy remained in place, as happened in Nazi Germany after its defeat in 1945, and after the demise of the apartheid regime in South Africa in 1994. Some optimists in Rome even thought that the new normal would be a reinstatement of the old order under new management, as theaters and circuses revived to keep such hopes alive. But the writing was on the wall. The imperial army was being withdrawn from Britain, Gaul, and Germania—an army by then composed of foreign conscripts with little loyalty to Rome itself. Then, in 476, the last of the Roman emperors, Romulus Augustulus, was deposed. The Dark Ages had begun, even though there would be even darker times ahead, when hordes of Vikings descended on Western Europe in the ninth century destroying the last vestiges of imperial civilization—as well as many Christian monasteries. This chapter is the story of monasticism's rapid growth, sudden destruction, and remarkable rebirth.

Pagan critics held Christianity accountable for Rome's collapse. The cross might have been a sign of victory for Constantine according to Eusebius, but in the West, Christianity was accused by its pagan critics of bringing Rome to its knees. Christianity, they said, weakened Rome's resistance by preaching meekness and forcing Romans to forsake their patron gods. Fortunately, in Augustine, the bishop of Hippo

4. From the preface to Hildegard's visionary *Scivias*, a trilogy of books calling for the moral reform of the church; quoted in Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen*, 41.

(a small town near Carthage in North Africa), Christians had an astute theologian who was able to respond to the challenge. Before his conversion to Christ, Augustine had been a student of philosophy under the spell of Neoplatonism; he was well versed in the intellectual culture of pagan Rome; and, in addition, he was for a time attracted to Manicheanism, a Persian gnostic movement. In other words, he was well-informed about the intellectual and spiritual currents of the day. But his conversion changed the direction of his life as well as the development and character of Christianity in the West.

In shifting focus from the East to the West, we need to keep in mind that while monasticism was beginning to evolve in Western Europe, it was flourishing throughout the Eastern Orthodox world as it began to stretch north beyond the Balkans. There were at this time at least eighty-five monasteries in Constantinople alone, baffling Western observers by what Peter Brown calls their “over-production of the holy.”⁵ Monasticism lay at the heart of Orthodoxy in a way that was different from in the Catholic West. It would also remain much the same through the ensuing centuries, unlike in the West, where it was regularly reformed.

We do not know exactly when the first monastic community was formed in the West, but by the end of the third century there were wandering ascetic prophets, influenced by Coptic and Syrian monastics, traveling across the Mediterranean and spreading the story of what was happening in the East. As a result, monastic-like cells began to form and proliferate in parts of Italy and Gaul. Then monasticism received a major boost. Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria, was exiled to Rome in 339 during the Arian controversy, where he told the story of Anthony and the first Coptic hermits.

Later, in 356, after the death of Anthony, Athanasius wrote his *Life of Antony* which, as William Clebsch tells us, “quickly became the paradigm for . . . Christian hagiography.”⁶ It also became a textbook on monastic spirituality, especially after it was translated by Evagrius into Latin. Read alongside the Bible throughout this period and well into the Middle Ages, the *Life of Antony* shaped monastic life. More immediately, in answer to the prayers of his mother, Monica, it played a major role in the conversion of Augustine while he was still an agnostic student of philosophy enjoying the good life in Milan.

5. Quoted in Frend, *The Rise of Christianity*, 837.

6. Introduction to Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, xiv.

A Momentous Conversion

The history of Christianity is littered with conversions to Christ that had momentous consequences. That of St Paul on the Damascus road is probably the most paradigmatic. Not only did Paul become the apostle to the Gentiles and spearhead the expansion of the church in the Greco-Roman world from Asia Minor to Rome, but he also provided a theology for a post-Judaic and inclusive Christianity. Augustine took over the baton from Paul and became in the West what Origen had become in the East. He was an apologist for Christianity against its pagan critics, who blamed it for the fall of Rome. Deeply influenced by Neoplatonism, and something of a mystic, Augustine also established one of the first monastic communities in the West and provided an outline for what eventually became the Augustinian *Rule*. He then single-handedly fought and won what some have called a Pyrrhic victory over Pelagianism, a heresy that moralized faith and undermined grace, but has long persisted despite Augustine's efforts.

Augustine tells us about his conversion in his *Confessions*, a book written around the year 400 and destined to become a spiritual classic and favorite among Western monastics. One day, he recounts, a fellow African, Ponticianus, came to visit him and his friend Alypius in Milan. Ponticianus noticed some of St Paul's writings lying on a nearby table. Expressing his delight, he confessed that he was a Christian. Augustine tells us what then happened:

When I had told him that I had given much attention to these writings, a conversation followed in which he spoke of Anthony, the Egyptian monk . . . whose name . . . up to that time was not familiar to me. (He then gave) an account of this eminent man . . . We all wondered—we, that these things were so great, and he, that we had never heard of them. From this, his conversation turned to the multitudes in the monasteries . . . and to the teeming solitudes in the wilderness of which we knew nothing at all.⁷

To his astonishment, Augustine then learned from Ponticianus that there was even a monastery under the care of Bishop Ambrose (339–397) outside the walls of Milan. (The ruins of this monastery still lie somewhere beneath the ancient church of St Ambrose, close by the great Renaissance monastery designed by Bramante.) Ponticianus also told them that while

7. Augustine, *Confessions*, book 8, chapter 6, 166–67.

he and two friends were wandering in a forest near Trier, a German city on the River Moselle, they came across a small hermitage in which they found a copy of the *Life of Antony*. On reading it, the two friends, who in their time were equivalent to present-day secret service agents, immediately decided to join the community of hermits. Ponticianus was deeply moved, and congratulated them on their decision, but decided not to follow them. However, both their fiancées did follow them, and thereby “dedicated their virginity” to God.⁸

It was shortly after this, in 386, that Augustine’s own conversion occurred, while he was sitting in a garden, probably attached to Ambrose’s monastery, and reading from St Paul’s Letter to the Romans. In a well-known passage in his *Confessions*, Augustine compares his experience with that of Anthony. Hearing a chant from nearby, “Tolle lege” (“Pick up and read”), Augustine opened the Bible and read the first passage he came across.⁹

For I had heard how Anthony, accidentally coming into church while the gospel was being read, received . . . as though addressed to him: “Go and sell what you have and give it to the poor . . . and come follow me.” So . . . I snatched it up (the apostle’s book), opened it and in silence read the paragraph on which my eyes first fell: “Not in rioting and drunkenness . . . but put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh to fulfil the lusts thereof.”¹⁰

Instantly, Augustine goes on to say, “there was infused in my heart something like the light of full certainty and all the doom of doubt vanished away.”¹¹

As Augustine’s conversion was also influenced by the preaching of Ambrose, he undoubtedly shared what had happened to him with the bishop, and enquired about his experiment in monasticism.¹² So it is not surprising, that after Augustine returned to Carthage in 390, he established a small monastic community in nearby Tagaste, where he lived for the next few years, studying the Bible, engaged in theological reflection, and providing spiritual direction. It was also during this time that he

8. Augustine, *Confessions*, book 8, chapter 6, 168.

9. Romans 13:13.

10. Augustine, *Confessions*, book 8, chapter 12, 175–77.

11. Augustine, *Confessions*, book 8, chapter 12, 176.

12. Augustine, *Confessions*, book 5, chapter 13, 110–11.

opposed Manichaeism, a gnostic sect that had previously attracted him, rejecting its dualistic view of the world and denigration of the body. And then, somewhat reluctantly, he accepted ordination and was soon after made bishop of Hippo. There he relocated his monastic community as a center for training priests, and he established a convent for women.

Based on this experience and his growing knowledge of what was happening elsewhere, Augustine wrote his treatise *On the Work of Monks* in 401. This, together with a rudimentary draft of what became known as *The Rule of St Augustine*, was also influenced by the writings of Basil the Great, the most important monastic influence in Eastern Orthodoxy, along with John Cassian and Evagrius, the preeminent interpreters of the Eastern desert monastic experience for Christians in the West. But Augustine was by no means solely preoccupied with monasticism. The fall of Rome required that he also respond to the criticism that Christianity was responsible for the catastrophe.

The City of God

The argument against Christianity, later repeated in more detail by Edward Gibbon in his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776), was that Christianity had weakened the Romans' will to defend the empire and made them more interested in the afterlife than the present. After all, since the time of Constantine, when the empire gave up relying on its pagan gods and espoused Christianity, it had been assumed that the Christian God would ensure the security of the empire. Even Ambrose made that argument. So, if the true God was on Rome's side, critics asked, why had the city fallen to the barbarians, among whom were many Arian heretics?

Augustine rose to the occasion by writing his famed *The City of God*. It is a remarkable tour de force, in which he weaves together ancient classical writings and biblical tradition, along with Greco-Roman philosophy and Christian conviction, to demonstrate the providence of God at work in human history. Central to the narrative are the cities of Babylon and Jerusalem: the one, a symbol of inevitable ruin, and the other, of redemption. For Augustine, the root cause of the fall of Rome was the fall of Adam. What happened in the garden of Eden, whether you read the story as history or myth, was the original or primordial sin that inevitably led

to the fall of the tower of Babel. That same pattern, repeated in the subsequent decline of other empires, was now the fate of Rome.¹³

Rome fell for many reasons. Among them were pandemics, economic depression, a lack of patriotism and civic virtue, deep social divisions, and a reliance on conscripted soldiers from conquered territories. But Augustine probed more deeply. Rome, like Babylon, fell because it had become corrupt and unjust. The root cause was human arrogance and pride, the deadliest of sins because it makes us desire to be “like God,” determining what is good and evil according to our own self-interest.¹⁴ Interpreting Augustine, Hans von Campenhausen puts it succinctly. Rome fell, he says, because “the real basis of life, justice, which upholds men and kingdoms, was absent, and in its place came impious pride, the *superbia* [pride] of man.”¹⁵

If *superbia* was the underlying cause, Christians were unwittingly also to blame for having claimed that by adopting Christianity the empire would automatically have the protection of God. Christians may not have caused the fall of Rome, but they should not have believed that God was on the side of the empire, irrespective of what the empire did, in the first place. The God of Jesus Christ, Augustine’s God, is not a tribal god existing to protect one’s own town, nation, or empire whether right or wrong. The God of Augustine holds so-called Christian nations accountable to God’s law, even more so than pagan empires, because they should know better. This was exactly what the ancient prophets of Israel had told their people. In a memorable passage, Augustine writes:

Set justice aside then, and what are kingdoms but fair thievish purchases. For what are thieves’ purchases but little kingdoms, for in thefts the hands of the underlings are directed by the commander, the confederacy of them is sworn together, and the pillage is shared by the law among them?¹⁶

He goes on to say that “those ragamuffins,” once they have achieved power, use it to subvert the law because they make themselves the law-givers.¹⁷ In other words, lawlessness reigns under the guise of law when those who have power grasp absolute control. So, the civic and imperial

13. Augustine, *The City of God (De Civitate Dei)*, book 14, chapter 28, 2:58–59.

14. See Genesis 3:1–7.

15. Campenhausen, *Tradition and Life in the Church*, 209.

16. Augustine, *The City of God*, book 4, chapter 4, 1:115.

17. Augustine, *The City of God*, book 4, chapter 4, 1:115.

pride that leads to greatness turns to arrogance, a sanctioning of greed and corruption, and a disregard for justice, which undermines civil society. For that reason, all empires fall, and only the city of God remains, for only the kingdom of God is eternal.

What Augustine wrote in *The City of God* connects him to what he had read years before in the *Life of Antony*. For there, Athanasius describes how Anthony left the corrupt city behind when he went into the desert, overcame the temptation of pride by living humbly before God, and attracted many followers. Thus, a new city grew and flourished in that barren land, a foretaste of the “new Jerusalem come down out of heaven.”¹⁸ The monastic city was set on a hill to give light to the world.¹⁹ As Athanasius wrote:

For how is it that he [i.e. Anthony] was heard of, though concealed and sitting in a mountain, in Spain and Gaul, and in Rome and Africa, unless it was the God who everywhere makes his men known who also promised this to Anthony in the beginning? For, even though they act in secret, and may want to be forgotten, the Lord shows them like lamps to everyone.²⁰

In the end, Augustine did not equate the kingdom of God with the church.²¹ But the true *ecclesia*, though sometimes hidden within the church, is also the visible household (*oikos*) of faith and love that is always being renewed in the life of the world.²² The *ecclesia* of God is God's universal household or *oikumene*, which anticipates the eternal city, the new Jerusalem, among the ruins of Rome.

Augustine's theodicy does not resolve all the problems or answer all the questions raised by human and historical tragedy (no theologian from Job onwards has succeeded in doing that), and it could be argued that his pessimistic view of human nature did not inspire action to right all wrongs. But his diagnosis of the underlying problem, namely, the lack of will power to do what is right, or what Luther, following Augustine, would call “the bondage of the will,” has remained pertinent ever since.²³ People and politicians, among them many Christians, may know what

18. Cf. Revelation 21:2.

19. Cf. Matthew 5:14.

20. Athanasius, *Life of Antony*, 99.

21. See Elshtain, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics*, 92.

22. See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 398–408.

23. Romans 7:14–25. Luther, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 173–226.

needs to be done but too often lack the will to do it. Despite promises and good intentions, we allow self-interest to determine our actions. So, for Augustine, the conversion of the will of the individual ruler or citizen was the key to serving the common good. But to what extent could the church be involved in politics, and to what extent should the church allow the state to influence its life?

By the time Augustine wrote *The City of God*, the church in the West was in a good institutional position to serve the needs of society. Not only did it have the political authority, but mirroring the imperial structures in its own organization, it was well organized to do so. As Richard Fletcher writes: “All the diverse services which today we would classify under the heading of ‘welfare’ came to be the responsibility of bishops—poor relief, public works, education, health care, hospitality for travellers, prison visiting, ransoming of captives” even “the provision of public entertainments and spectacles.”²⁴ But God aside, where did ultimate political authority lie, and how was it to be exercised? Who had the authority to appoint bishops and convene synods, and who had control of the monasteries—the local abbot, abbess, or bishop, the prince, the emperor, or the pope?

The key figure in developing the basis for church–state relations in the West was Ambrose, Augustine’s mentor and a strong supporter of monasticism. Ambrose trained as a lawyer. Before his conversion to Christ, he was governor of the province of which Milan was the capital city. After he became bishop in 374, he continued his relationships with political leaders and tried to mediate between the West and the East. But he was always a fierce advocate of the independence of the church. Most famously, he excommunicated Emperor Theodosius, a friend of his, for the massacre of innocent civilians after a riot in Thessalonica in 390, thus establishing a precedent in church–state relations. Monasticism especially was an irritant. On one occasion Theodosius threw up his hands in perplexity and demanded to know from his friend Ambrose, “What am I to do with these fanatical monks?”²⁵ This question would be asked time and again by emperors and other rulers through the rest of Christian history. Anthony the hermit would probably have replied, “A time is coming when men will go mad, and when they see someone who is not mad, they will attack him saying, ‘You are not mad, you are not like us.’”²⁶

24. Fletcher, *The Conversion of Europe*, 51.

25. Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture*, 269.

26. Ward, trans., *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, 6.