AUGUSTINE'S IDEA OF HISTORY: A CHRISTIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

By

John Agbo, OSA

Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Nairobi, Kenya

agabsagbo@yahoo.com

Abstract

Implicit in St. Augustine's idea of history are the essential beliefs of Christianity, namely: there is but one God; all humans are creatures with a single ancestor in Adam; all things and events come under the care of divine providence; humankind has fallen from a more privileged original condition and is now subject to suffering and other evils; man has been redeemed through the incarnation of Jesus Christ; all people should strive to attain to final happiness with God in a future life. And so the events of temporal history viewed from this Christian lens become actions in the drama of redemption and eternal salvation. In other words, human events become significant when viewed in the light of divine providence. Hence, God is the focal point! (History is theocentric or rather Christocentric). However, though history is guided by divine providence, man is not just helpless with regard to history, but he truly brings something new into it through his freewill.

Keywords: Augustine, History, Historiography, City of God

1. Introduction

Although one may say that it is anachronistic to speak of St. Augustine's philosophy of history, because the expression 'philosophy of history' was only coined in the 1760's by Voltaire to herald a treatment of history that has already cast off the fetters of a Christian conception.[23] In any case, Augustine could be said to be a pioneer in the study of the meaning of history, because before his time historians concerned themselves with little more than a surface record of human events. With Augustine came an effort at a fully developed interpretation of history.[24] This was occasioned by the event of the sacking of Rome by King Alaric in 410 AD, which was blamed on Christianity. At the inspiration of his Roman friend Marcellinus, Augustine came up with one of his greatest books,

---

[23] Gareth B. Matthews, ed., *The Augustinian Tradition (*Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 345

[24] http://fac-staff.seattleu.edu/schan/web/ChineseTheology/Lectures2/file/Revelation.htm

The City of God. It actually started in form of letters to Marcellinus in defence of Christianity, but would later, in the span of fourteen years (412 - 426 AD) become a master-piece consisting twenty-two books. This is Augustine's major work as regards history. His thinking in this area (history) may be regarded as a philosophy of history or a theology of history (and there have been debates regarding this). But as has been rightly noted the name (philosophy of history or a theology of history) really is not important as his accomplishment is.[25] Let us now briefly consider his idea of history, but before we do that we shall give a brief biography of this great African philosopher, theologian and saint.

2. Life of St. Augustine

St. Augustine was born as Aurelius Augustinus at Tagaste, Numidia, North Africa (Souk-Ahras, in present day Algeria) on November 13, 354 AD. His father, Patricius, was a pagan who converted on his death bed; his mother was Saint Monica, a devout Christian. He received a Christian upbringing and in 370 AD went to the University at Carthage to study rhetoric with a view to becoming a lawyer. He gave up law to devote himself to literary pursuits and gradually abandoned his Christian faith, taking a mistress with whom he lived fifteen years and who bore him a son, Adeodatus, in 372 AD. After investigating and experimenting with several philosophies, he became a Manichaean for several years. In 384, he accepted the chair of rhetoric at Milan, and of his tutor, Simplicianus. Inspired by the sermons of St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan, he returned to his Christian faith and was baptized on Easter Eve 387 AD. On the death of his mother Augustine returned to Africa, sold his property, gave the proceeds to the poor, and founded a sort of monastery at Tagaste. He was ordained in 390 AD and moved to Hippo where he established a community with several of his friends who had followed him. Five years later he was consecrated bishop and made coadjutor to Valerius, bishop of Hippo, whom he succeeded in the following year. Augustine became the dominant figure in African Church affairs and was the leader in the bitter fights against Manichaeism, Donatism, Pelagianism and other heresies. Augustine's towering intellect moulded the thought of Western Christianity to a large extent. He wrote profusely, expounding and defending the faith, and to this day many of his two hundred treatises, some three hundred sermons are quoted repeatedly in theological and philosophical discourses. Among his best-known works are his *Confessions, City of God* (a magnificent exposition of a Christian philosophy of

---

[25] Vernon J. Bourke, ed., *The Essential Augustine* (New York: Mentor-Omega Books, 1964), 220

history), *De Trinitate, De Doctrina Christiana, Enchiridion* and his treatises against the Manichaeans and the Pelagians. Augustine remained as bishop of Hippo until August 28, 430 AD when he died reciting the Penitential psalm (Psalm 51), while the Vandal invaders plundered his city of Hippo.[26]

3. The Meaning and Nature of History

Augustine does not use the term 'historia' in the modern sense which refers to events (a totality of events or even the totality of events) rather than to reports of events. For him, *historia* is a narrative, and this is so because the dispensations of divine providence for the salvation of mankind are temporal and so it takes *historia* (a narrative of things past) and prophecy (a narrative of things to come) to represent them. For him then, *historia* is the Christian story, as revealed in the Bible.[27]

Again, for Augustine, history is history of changeable things. But for there to be history (of changeable things) there must be that which is beyond history, the eternal, unchangeable substance – God. And so, there is history because God made it; every particular event in history makes sense from God's point of view. Since God is eternal He understands everything temporal, as it was He who gave rise to it. Augustine contends: "Things which happen under the condition of time are in the future, not yet in being, or in the present, already existing, or in the past, no longer in being. But God comprehends all these in a stable and eternal present."[28] Thus history is owed to what is beyond history – God.

It is no wonder then that Augustine regards history as being homogenous, that is, there is really no distinction as such between sacred and profane history, as Karl Lowith in his book *Meaning of History* tries to make.[29] This comes out clearly in Book XVIII, Chapter 46 of *The City of God* where he writes: "When Herod was on the throne of Judea, and when Caesar Augustus was emperor, after a change in the Roman constitution, and when the emperor's rule had established a world-wide peace, Christ was born, in accordance with prophecy of earlier times, in Bethlehem of Judah."[30] Hence for him, through providence God is present in

---

[26] http://www.staugustinecc.com/life_of_st_augustine.htm
[27] Matthews, *The Augustinian Tradition*, 345-346
[28] Bettenson, *St. Augustine: Concerning The City of God Against the Pagans* (London: Penguin Books, 1467, 1984), 452
[29] Matthews, *The Augustinian Tradition*, 347
[30] Bettenson, *St. Augustine*, 827

human or profane history. However, if we talk of sacred history, then it is (for Augustine) revelation, and revelation as revealed in the Sacred Scripture (Bible).

4. Prehuman and Human History

As we have already noted, history for Augustine is of changeable things, and so one can talk of a history which involves humans (human history) and one which does not (prehuman),[31] since God made all things. The prehuman history refers to the world of nature in which things happen but these happenings only implement the natural order, which is constant. In this sense then nothing 'really' happens in prehuman history (in nature) – here, things just realize themselves in the course of time (they are what they were meant to be or become). This is not the case with human history. Human history differs in that humans have freewill. Things just do not happen to us as humans – we make choices and so write our histories. But as Augustine notes, this freewill has been misused from the very start: "God created man aright, for God is the author of natures, though he is certainly not responsible for their defects. But man was *willingly* [emphasis is mine] perverted and justly condemned, and so begot perverted and condemned offspring… Hence from the misuse of free will there started a chain of disasters: mankind is led from original perversion, a kind of corruption at the root, right up to the disaster of second death, which has no end. Only those who are set free through God's grace escape from this calamitous sequence."[32] This goes without saying that human deeds resemble God's creative act, only that human will is subject to change but not God's. So then man's wrong act of disobeying God is not the realization of his nature, for he was created "aright." But even so man can bring something new (even from bad choices, as is often said that "we learn from our mistakes"), which means that human history admits novelty. And so it is that gifted with freewill man creates his history aided by divine providence.

5. The Epochs of History

Augustine sometimes talks of the epochs of history as threefold and at other times as six-fold. There was a time of faultless humanity, there is the time of sinful humanity, and there will be a time of partly redeemed and partly damned humanity[33]: the first was the time before the fall; the second is the time after the

---

[31] Matthews, *The Augustinian Tradition*, 350
[32] Bettenson, *St. Augustine*, 523
[33] Matthews, *The Augustinian Tradition*, 351

fall to the Incarnation, which continues to the end of the world; and the third will be eternity, when those who submitted their wills to God will behold Him eternally in heaven, while those who were selfish and earthly—minded will languish forever with Satan and the fallen angels in hell. This is the threefold epoch of history. About the six-fold epoch, Augustine writes: "As therefore God made man in His own image on the sixth day: thus we find that our Lord Jesus Christ came into the sixth age, that man might be formed anew after the image of God. For the first period, as the first day, was from Adam until Noah; the second, as the second day, from Noah unto Abraham; the third, as the third day, from Abraham unto David; the fourth, as the fourth day, from David unto the removal to Babylon; the fifth period, as the fifth day, from the removal to Babylon unto the preaching of John. The sixth day began from the preaching of John, and lasted to the end; and after the end of the sixth day, we reach our rest. The sixth day, therefore, is even now passing."[34] From these it is obvious that Augustine was interpreting history according to the Bible, and both epochs are actually talking about one reality, which in the light of the six-fold epoch-means history as "the earthly pilgrimage of the city of God comes to an end and the eternal blissful peace begins. The six days of human history also come to an end, and the seventh day, the blessed eternal Sabbath begins."[35] For Augustine then, there is a true linear progress in human history, but this is not material progress in earthly time envisioned by the Eusebian progressivists, nor is it the idolatrous progress of the Enlightenment, a progress of the earthly city toward its rational perfection; rather, progress is aimed at eternity and it is the progress of the Body of Christ as it grows toward its full stature and perfection.[36]

In any case, for Augustine the whole of history can be understood with reference to the "Two Cities": City of God (Jerusalem), signifying the city and fellowship of the saints who are ruled by the love of God and Earthly City (Babylon), which signifies the city and fellowship of the wicked who are ruled by love of self and earthly goods. These two cities came into being at the fall of the angel (Satan), and passing to humanity, as we see in Cain and Abel, and then with Abraham commencing the clear prophetic reference to the consummation of the Divine community in Christianity. However, Augustine does not hold that Christianity,

---

[34] Bourke, *The Essential Augustine*, 224

[35] Luciano Mattei, *Augustine: The Last African Philosopher* (Nairobi: The Catholic University of Eastern Africa Press, 1999), 278

[36] John A. Maxfield, "Divine Providence, History, and Progress in Saint Augustine's *City of God*" *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 66, no.4 (2002): 348, http://ksuweb.kennesaw.edu/~tkeene/apwhStAugustineArticle.pdf

or the Church for that matter, is a perfect Divine Community, as Eusebius of Caesarea, Orosius and others thought. For they assumed that a converted Roman empire could live up to the ethical standards of the Gospel or a perfectly just social order was possible, but Augustine contended that no society ever conformed to the requirement of strict justice or was likely to do so.[37] Augustine was in deed a realist! For him, "these two cities would coexist as a *corpus permixtum* (a mixed body) in every man (even saints) and in every society (even the Church) until the *Eschaton*. Thus Christian Rome, even the earthy Church, could not represent the perfection of eschatological fulfilment, and their historical fate had nothing to do with God's plans for human salvation."[38] Hence, he holds that "As shadows, as well as the lights, go to make a picture, so the world, even with sinners, is beautiful."[39]

On a final note, Augustine was also opposed to chiliasm or millennialism, the belief expressed in the book of *Revelation* that Christ will establish a one-thousand year reign of the saints on earth before the Last Judgment, and which mechanistically puts civilisations into a period of 1000 years. Such a view was evident in Orosius' *Seven Books of History Against Pagans.* Augustine held that the thousand years stand for the whole period of this world's history, as "there is no better interpretation of those words than by taking 'a thousand generations' as signifying 'all generations.'"[40]

6. Evaluation and Conclusion

Implicit in St. Augustine's idea of history are the essential beliefs of Christianity, namely: there is but one God; all humans are creatures with a single ancestor in Adam; all things and events come under the care of divine providence; humankind has fallen from a more privileged original condition and is now subject to suffering and other evils; man has been redeemed through the incarnation of Jesus Christ; all people should strive to attain to final happiness with God in a future life. And so the events of temporal history viewed from this Christian lens become actions in the drama of redemption and eternal salvation. In other words, human events become significant when viewed in the light of divine providence. Hence, God is the focal point! (History is theocentric or rather

---

[37] Ernest L. Fortin, "Augustine's *City of God* and the Modern Historical Consciousness," *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 41, No.3 (1979): 342, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1407234.
[38] http://www.mille.org/people/rlpages/millennialism-mw-encyl.html
[39] W. Montgomery, *Augustine: Aspects if His Life and Thought* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1914), 228
[40] Bettenson, *St. Augustine*, 908

Christocentric). However, though history is guided by divine providence, man is not just helpless with regard to history, but he truly brings something new into it through his freewill. Augustine, in this way, could be seen as parting ways with the tradition that gave the state its aura of divinity and sought to place the principle of social order in the human will, and thus the Western ideals of freedom and progress and social justice owe more to him than we realize; though himself was indifferent to secular progress and to the transitory fortunes of the earthly state, "… he looked for a city that has foundations whose builder and maker is God."[41]

It is noteworthy too that before Augustine the prevailing theory of history was fatalistic, in that man was regarded as a puppet bound to the wheel of fate, and time was thought to revolve in great cycles. In other words, history was thought to be cyclic. But Augustine broke this wheel of fate by appealing to one great event that cannot be repeated – the CHRIST EVENT (His birth, death and resurrection).

From the foregoing, the observation of Christopher Dawson hereunder appears plausible conclusion to this work:

> Certainly *The City of God* is not a philosophical theory of history in the sense of rational induction from historical facts. He [Augustine] does not discover anything from history, but merely sees in history the working out of universal principles. But we may well question whether Hegel or any of the nineteenth-century philosophers of history did otherwise. They did not derive their theories from history, but read their philosophy into history [very much like Augustine]… His [Augustine] theory of history is strictly deduced from his theory of human nature, which, in turn, follows necessarily from his theology of creation and grace. It is not a rational theory in so far as it begins and ends in revealed dogma; but it is rational in the strict logic of its procedure and it involves a definitely rational and philosophic theory of the nature of society and law and of the relation of social life to ethics.[42]

---

[41] M.C. D'Archy et al, *St. Augustine: His Age, Life, and Thought* (New York: Meridian Books, Inc., 1957), 77
[42] Ibid., 43-44