

History of Western Thought, 500-1300

Discussion questions

Augustine, City of God

1. What can we deduce from Augustine's opening remarks in Book I about the position of Christianity within the Empire at the time of the sack of Rome by Alaric (410)?

*Only recently given political support of the Empire -- it is not at all clear whether it can survive without that support. Moreover, paganism is still quite strong and calamity at the hands of a 'Christian' is doubly disastrous.*

2. Why does Augustine devote so much attention to the problem of the virtue of Christian women who have been raped during the course of Alaric's attack? How does Augustine relate this narrow concern to the larger problem of making sense of the good and bad things which happen to people in this world?

*Book I, Chapter 8 (45) and Book I, Chapter 19 (55) and 28 (60), and Book II, Chapter 2 (67).*

3. What are the chief failings of the pagan gods? How are they related to the ultimate falseness of the concept of the Roman Empire itself?

*Ref. Books II, III on gods and IV on Rome. Pagan gods are immoral (69), they don't save from disaster (75 and 78) and they cannot bring real happiness (87-88).*

4. What is the nature, origin, and destiny of the two cities as envisioned by Augustine? What is the logical link between the temporal problems of the Empire and this particular theological understanding of the cosmos? (or why the switch from the sack of Rome to the Christian view of creation?)

*Ref. Book XI chapter 13 (223 and 229) -- need to refute Manichaen dualism; Book XII chapter 9 (255) -- no natural cause of evil, but rather an unmaking, chapter 24 (263) -- God also foresaw the community of saints; Book XIII chapter 3 (271) on original sin; Book XIV chapter 1 (295) -- on two loves; chapter 6 (303) man's will is the crucial determinant; Book XIX chapter 4 (437) -- eternal life and death are the two ends.*

5. Is man's position on earth an essentially good one, or an essentially unhappy one?

*Ref. Book XIX chapter 4 (440 and 442-43) for the evils of life below, and chapter 7 (447) for the problems of even just wars; Book XIX chapter 13 (458) for the blessedness of the human condition. See also Book V, chapter 9 (107-108) on how evil choices are not God's, and Book XII, chapter 6 (252).*

6. What are the implications of Augustine's conception of a spiritually organized City of God for Christians living within the Roman Empire? What about those living outside of it? In what ways does this fundamentally alter the terms of Christianity's place in the late antique world?