

Augustine's *City of God* and Benedict's *Rule*:

Innovative Worldview and Preserved Paradigm

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The writings of western Christian intellectuals and ascetics from the late fourth to the mid-sixth centuries gave birth to crucial new forms of philosophical thought while providing justification for the preservation of Antique culture. Written scarcely more than a century apart, two Christian literary works in particular from this era embodied the changing manifestations of Christianity in the European world where they left their mark: *City of God* by Augustine of Hippo and *Benedict's Rule*—written by the father of western monasticism himself. First, these works exemplify the rise of a fresh intellectual and philosophical religiosity in the Late Antique period, and second, they demonstrate the subsequent assimilation and transformation of traditional Roman society into the socio-religious and economic forms of Christianized medieval Europe. Additionally, Augustine's *City of God* and Benedict's *Rule* demonstrate the crucial role played by the Church as the only continuous institution linking the Late Roman Empire to the Middle Ages.

Faced with humiliation and persecution, Christian believers of the third century and very early fourth century had walked an unpopular road, yet they possessed a secure assurance of their salvation.

When Constantine legalized Christianity in 313 A.D. and supported this declaration by his token conversion, the Church received a subsequent influx of nominal “converts” from the populous. Christianity was no longer persecuted or disreputable; rather it was conventional and respectable (even many of the new church bishops came from the Roman elite). When Augustine of Hippo was just twenty-six years old, Theodosius issued his edict requiring all subjects of the Roman Empire to convert to Christianity en masse. However, many did so in name only. Pious Christians began to ponder whether these common Christians possessed the faith and purity necessary to obtain eternal salvation. They reacted against the secularization and lack of piety in the newly established hierarchy of organized Christianity. From the early fourth century, the focus of the Church shifted noticeably from a conversion and baptism mentality to a Last Judgment mentality. Christianity became more heaven-directed, emphasizing the connection between

the world of men and the afterlife. The church demonstrated these concepts by stressing the connection between men on earth and the saints who had died and were presently in heaven, praying for earth-bound souls. In the early fifth century, Augustine would expand this idea of the otherworldliness of Christian human beings in his *City of God*.

Once Christianity was legal and out of harm's way, educated Christians took time to think about more than merely quiet survival and small-scale conversion. Consequently, the Roman world witnessed the development of the Christian written tradition beginning in the fourth century. Christian theologians began to use logical and philosophical systems of argumentation to win debates with educated polytheistic Romans. This was even more essential

after 410 when a newly Christianized Rome was sacked by the Visigoths and the citizens began to question God's vacillating favor upon their city and the empire. Many of the previously pagan Roman elite blamed the disasters of the early fifth century on the public abandonment of traditional polytheism. Christian theologians both in the East and West had to grapple with why God had allowed the sack of Rome and the decline of the empire from its zenith, if Christianity was indeed the true religion.

Aurelius Augustinus (Augustine) was primed for the task of confronting these philosophically challenging questions. He was a typical Late Antique Roman citizen, raised in a home with both pagan and Christian influences (his father was a pagan and his mother was a Christian). After living for life's pleasures, as described in his classic *Confessions*, Augustine's conversion to Christianity and commitment to the priesthood led him to apply his Roman education in labor for the Church. Armed with his classical-historical and philosophical training, Augustine set out to create a new philosophy of history for the Christian world that would also explain the demise of the Western Empire. He rejected the traditional, cyclical notions of history in favor of a linear history, one that began with the incarnation of Christ and ran to the Last Judgment. Such a linear view looked beyond the present and terrestrial and into the realms of heaven and life eternal.

Augustine used his innovative Christian philosophy to provide a solution to the spiritual dilemma facing the empire. The true Christian, he argued in *City of God*, was only a pilgrim sojourning through the City of Man—the physical, temporal world—on the way to the City of God, the final goal for all believers. Rome represented a new Babylon, the City of Man, while the city of Jerusalem symbolized the

heavenly city. While these two cities offered distinct citizenships, throughout the history of humankind both cities remained mixed physically but separated morally, distinguished by those who accepted the salvation of Christ and those who did not. Christians were not citizens of the kingdoms of earth; rather they belonged to the kingdom of heaven, the City of God, a mystical rather than political world. When, through death, the pilgrim reached his intended kingdom, he would rule with his true Prince, the King of the Ages, forevermore.

In Augustine's theological philosophy, the fall of Rome and the fate of the empire were scarcely relevant to the permanence of the Church and certainly not a matter worthy of spiritual anxiety. Believers, he contended, did not lend primary allegiance to any earthly government. "The heavenly city, then," he wrote, "while it sojourns on earth, calls citizens out of all nations and gathers together a society of pilgrims of all languages, not scrupling about diversities."^[1] - The survival of Christianity was the paramount concern. The fate of Christianity was not the fate of the empire, for the City of God was the essence of the city of the faithful, *wherever* they were. Human cities would crumble and fall, but this did not affect the Christian's true citizenship—in the City of God.

Augustine's reaction to the Germanic invasions and the sack of Rome offers a prime example of the transformation of thought from the realm of the Antique Roman world into the early Middle Ages. Although the legitimization of Christianity brought an end to the Classical period, the fate of Christianity was not the fate of the empire. This perspective became a keystone of medieval Christianity. Moreover, Augustine's use of a linear-historical method to address the troubling theological questions of his day demonstrated the rise of a fresh intellectual and philosophical religiosity in the Late Antique period.

This infusion of Augustine's new doctrines drew Christians to a deeper interest in external measurements of holiness and inspired many religious ascetics to adopt a monastic way of life in order to maintain pious behavior and pursue a more intense spiritual experience. Monasticism had emerged first in the eastern deserts, establishing various sets of rules to govern their communities. Cenobitic monasticism arrived later to the West, inheriting this random assortment of rules and traditions. Augustine's spiritual insights encouraged Benedict of Nursia to write a *regula* for ascetic living and monastic stability. A hermit-turned-abbot, Benedict had established several small monasteries in Italy, including his famous monastery at Monte Cassino. Benedict's *Rule* built upon the theological-philosophical transformation set

in motion by Augustine while assimilating time-honored forms of order for the functional arrangement of monastic life.

At the time Benedict wrote his *regula*, likely between about 535 and 540, Ostrogothic Italy was in complete turmoil. In 535, Eastern Emperor Justinian sent General Belisarius into Italy where he temporarily recaptured Rome in 536 and proceeded in 540 to cede Italy to the empire. In the midst of chaos, ascetic individuals looked to monasticism for peace and order. For many ascetics, monastic separation was, in a sense, a practical attempt to separate the City of God from the City of Man.

Benedict's *Rule*, an organizational formula for holy cenobitism, met the needs of many new monastic communities in a timely manner. Although Benedict borrowed from earlier monastic rules and precepts, he infused his work with his own vision. As Benedict composed his *regula* on the very doorstep of the early Middle Ages, he had no idea that his modest formula for holy living would be a key element in the socio-religious transformation of the old Roman world into a medieval society. More specifically, his *Rule* was poised to become an integral part of the preservation of Antique culture by the Church. Benedict's monastic law contained within it the vestiges of the legal, social and land systems of the Antique world, embodying a new mentality based on preexisting Roman forms.

Benedict's *Rule*, composed just after the issuance of Justinian's newly compiled Roman law code, served as a communal law to which the monks within a monastery were required to orient every aspect of their daily lives. Benedict modeled the *Rule* on the organization and discipline of the old Roman army and maintained an uncompromising policy of obedience. He prescribed a regimented schedule for all activities, during both day and night. Promptness was compulsory. He carefully outlined the times and protocol of Divine Offices and Vigils. Obeying the injunction of the apostle Paul, to "let all things be done decently and in order," Benedict's *Rule* prescribed the proper amount of food and drink, clothing and footwear and specified the sleeping arrangements and job descriptions for the monks.^[2] The *Rule* reinforced the benefits of the cenobitic lifestyle, stability through community, and utilized isolation, like military solitary confinement, as punishment. The *Rule's* code of discipline sanctioned even corporal punishment as necessary, for boys within the monastery or anyone else simple enough to not to learn from less drastic measures.

Furthermore, the *Rule* replicated the Roman military system of authority through its hierarchical

power structure within the monastery. The head of each monastic community, the Abbot, was due mutual obedience by all. Second in command to the Abbot was his assistant, the Prior, who in turn commanded deans, men selected to manage groups of ten monks each. Each monk fell into a line of community rank based upon his order of entry into the monastery. The job of the Abbot was to train soldiers of Christ to wage spiritual war against the powers of evil under a trained commander (himself). Benedict admonished the Abbot to “so regulate and arrange all matters that souls may be saved.”^[3] - In proper military fashion, the Abbot-commander had the last word on any issue of life within the community and had to render an account for his own behavior and the management of his men before the Great Judge on Judgment Day.

The monastic system that developed from Benedict’s *Rule* assimilated a further vestige of the Antique world, one reflected in its formula for self-supporting monastic communities. The establishment of remote monastic centers contributed to the continuing ruralization of the western population and reinforced ongoing trends in land division patterns. The land-monastery relationship aided the development of small-town Christianity as it would exist in the Middle Ages. Benedict’s *regula* strengthened the tendency of monastic communities to pattern themselves after fortified, Antique Roman villas, functioning as socio-economic units. Consequently, monasteries arranged on the pattern of the *Rule* played a fundamental role in the evolving transformation of land and community structures in the West. Wealthy citizens often donated cultivated lands for monastic use, along with the laborers and dwellings attached to the land. A codependent relationship emerged between these agricultural communities and the monasteries whose lands they worked, further contributing to the centralization of small space and serving as a precursor for the land structures of the early Middle Ages.

Through the sixth and seventh centuries, Benedict’s formula for monastic living sustained its identity amid competing forms of monastic rules and became the most widely practiced *regula* in the West. From the mid-eighth to tenth centuries there was a movement within the Church to make it the singular rule for monasticism, although the effort never fully succeeded. Through transformation and assimilation, Benedict’s *Rule* bridged the gap from the established desert monasticism of the Eastern Empire to the new religiosity emerging from the Late Antique period in the West. By the early Middle Ages, monasticism, and especially Benedictine monasticism, became the very quintessence of asceticism. Everyday folk looked to the monks and nuns of the monastic orders for piety by proxy, in many ways shaping the socio-

religious patterns of medieval life.

In the end, the Church was the only centralized institution from the Roman Empire that survived intact to lend constancy during the tedious transformation from Late Antiquity into the medieval world. The Church utilized its new written tradition as a tool to transform old modes of thought into new explanations of current affairs. Simultaneously, the Church assimilated structural remnants from the organizational forms of the Late Roman Empire to lend a sense of authentication and familiarity to its own evolving traditions.

Augustine's philosophical/theological doctrine as represented in *City of God*, and Benedict's *Rule* for monastic life expanded Christian concepts of holy life and established new definitions of religiosity which characterized the form of Christianity that emerged from the Late Antique period. Together, these two literary works played a fundamental roll in the metamorphosis of Christianity from old Roman civilization into the socio-religious norms that became synonymous with European medieval life.

[1] Augustine, *City of God*, Book XIX, Chapter 17.

[2] I Corinthians 14:40

[3] *The Rule of Saint Benedict in English*. Edited by Rev. Timothy Fry, O.S.B., (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1982), 12.