

RELST-UA.991 TOPICS: St. Augustine's *City of God*

Professor Adam H. Becker Contact: adam.becker@nyu.edu

Meeting time: 2:00 pm-4:45 pm Wednesday (the seminar will only run for two hours: see below)

Office hours: please contact the professor about arranging a time to meet either outdoors, online, or on the phone

In 410 CE the Germanic tribe of Visigoths sacked the city of Rome. In response some blamed Christianity, accusing this new-fangled religion of displeasing the ancient gods and thus being the underlying cause for the violence suffered in the ancient imperial capital. From his bishopric in North Africa St. Augustine began to pen a defense of Christianity against such accusations. However, as he wrote the plan of the work expanded and in the end he composed his well-known, massive *City of God*, a foundational text in Christian theology and Western philosophy. What began as a response to the apparent decline of Roman imperial power became more than just an apology for Christianity. The *City of God* also provides a theory of history, an outline of Augustine's theology, and an articulation of Christianity's alleged superiority over the philosophical systems of the ancient world, in particular, Neoplatonism. Few other individual works cover such a broad range of significant topics.

This seminar will focus on St. Augustine's *City of God*. Brief lectures will set out the historical, literary, and intellectual context. However, a work such as this allows for questions and conversation that go well beyond its original setting. Our focus will be the text itself and the dialogue it provokes.

Topics addressed include: Augustine's critique of Roman religion, his relationship to Virgil and other Classical authors, his engagement with Greek philosophy, political theology, political philosophy, the Christian understanding of history, the problem of suffering, demonology, the origin of evil, the creation of the human being, Original Sin, war and peace, judgment and punishment, eschatology (the end time), envisioning God, and Augustine's doctrine of the two cities.

No Latin is required. However, the professor is willing to run a separate, extra reading group with students who have some Latin and are interested in reading selections from the work in the original.

Online mini-lectures

The seminar is officially scheduled to run for 2 hours and 45 minutes. However, the meeting time will only last for 2 hours each week because students will be expected to watch brief online lectures on the week's reading before each seminar meeting.

Course goals

1. To read slowly and closely through a classic in Christian theology.
2. To develop skills in reading a complex work composed in a cultural context radically different from our own.

3. Despite its distant and distinct cultural context we will also attempt to appreciate how the classical form of Christianity represented in the *City of God* contributes so much to our own historical cultural foundations.
4. To gain practice in selecting apt portions of a text for closer analysis.
5. To use the ideas, arguments, and characterizations in this book to think about ourselves and ideas prevalent in our own society.
6. To work on and compose a final essay synthesizing the seminar material, further reading, and the student's own interests.

Final Evaluation:

Class Participation	60%
Weekly Conversation Statements	10%
Final Paper (12 pages)	30%

Final Paper

In consultation with the professor students will plan and write one 12-page paper on some topic related to Augustine and/or the *City of God*. The topic will be open and depend upon each student's interests.

Weekly Conversation Statement

Students are required to post online an approximately one-page (short!) statement in response to a previously distributed prompt on that week's reading. The statements should be posted by 9:00 pm the night before the seminar meeting so that other students may have an opportunity to read them.

Attendance

Students are expected to attend all seminar meetings. Each meeting will be recorded in case anyone is unable to attend. However, considering the circumstances – we will all be online – student absence should be even more rare than it usually is.

Reading

The amount of reading varies from week to week. Plan ahead. The discussion will be less useful if the material has not been read beforehand just as it will be more difficult for a student to make a contribution to the conversation without an awareness of the pages under discussion. Students must have a copy of the reading in front of them during the seminar meeting. This copy must be easily accessible whether printed or on an electronic device.

Book to purchase:

*Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans* (trans. R.W. Dyson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Or possibly the older Penguin translation of Henry Bettenson. Still to be determined.

WEEK BY WEEK SCHEDULE

This provides a basic plan for our movement through the work but some parts may be moved up or back for given weeks. We aim to read the whole work by the end of the semester.

Week 1
January 27
Introduction

Week 2
February 3
Reading: Books 1-3 (some abridgements to 2-3)

Week 3
February 10
Reading: Books 4-5 (some abridgements to 4)

Week 4
February 17
Reading: Books 6-7, part of Book 8

Week 5
February 24
Reading: part of Book 8, and Books 9-10

Week 6
March 3
Reading: Books 11-12

Week 7
March 10
Reading: Books 13-14

Week 8
March 24
Reading: Books 15-16

Week 9
March 31
Reading: Book 17

Week 10
April 7
Reading: Book 18

Week 11
April 14
Reading: Books 19-20

Week 12
April 21

Reading: Book 21

Week 13

April 28

Reading: Book 22

Week 14

May 5

Conclusion: Discussion of Papers