

SAINT AUGUSTINE'S AND DANTE'S MODELS OF HISTORY¹

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ABSTRACT. In this paper I will try to analyze St. Augustine's and Dante's views towards history by showing how their visions can be articulated into particular models of history, i.e. a particular schema that describes the unfolding of history with its specific focal points, and to what extent this model differs from one author to another. If in Augustine's case, by exploring his division of sacred history in component parts, that can be found throughout his work, I will argue for a Christocentric model, in Dante's case, by analyzing his work on political philosophy, *De monarchia*, I will argue for a teleological model of history.

Keywords: St. Augustine, Dante Alighieri, models of history, eschatology, apocalypticism, *De monarchia*;

Introduction

In the existing literature on St. Augustine and Dante we can find many studies which are trying to analyze separately their views towards history, assessing their historical context, doctrinal content and eschatological implications. As a matter of fact, this method is quite adequate since the corresponding historical considerations were developed at a distance of almost nine centuries apart, in different contexts, with different means, by two different kind of writers. Nevertheless, by addressing this subject separately, we can easily lose ourselves in details without managing to grasp which are the specific elements of their view and in what way they are articulated in a general picture. To achieve this goal, I propose a comparative study that will try to

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describe St. Augustine's and Dante's views towards history in contrast, under the concept of a model, i.e. a particular schema that describes the unfolding of history with its specific focal points.

As I will try to show, from the following introductory remarks, Augustine's and Dante's views towards history are from a starting point different, in spite of a similar crisis scenario that could be trace in their intellectual climate. Their particular considerations can be distinguished in terms of purposes, sources, types of history to which they subscribe and intensity of apocalypticism.

Augustine of Hippo, one of the most important fathers of the Cristian Church, writes in a place and a period that should not be marginalized, especially when we try to understand his conception of history. Starting in Thagaste, then in Madaura, Cartagina, Roma, Milan and Hippo Regius, Augustine lived on the territory of the Roman Empire. Already from the very beginning of the Christian era, the vast Roman area suffers a series of changes that affects its population. In this sense, we can speak about a pre-Constantine era and a post-Constantine one³. The difference between these two consists of an entirely different way in which the secular power related to the Christians. If in the first era we are faced with the persecutions of Christians made by Nero, Maximus Thrax, Decius, Diocletian and Galerius, after Constantine I and the Edict of Milan, the attitude of the Roman Empire is gradually changing from one of oppression to one of acceptance and favor towards Christianity. This state of affairs does not have only a historical relevance, but most importantly a hermeneutical one, inasmuch as this change of attitude is one of the main factors which transformed the manner in which the Christian apologists relate to their own history and religion⁴. Afterwards, as Christopher Kelly⁵ is pointing out, the Roman Empire does not seem to have such an optimistic future. Starting with reign of Constantine I, until the death of St. Augustine, the Empire can be generally depicted as being in a situation of crisis. The internal destabilization, the continuous division of the Empire and the external imminent threats are factors of this state of affairs, that will culminate in the end with the conquest and sack of Rome in 410 by Alaric's forces.

In this troubled period of the 4th-5th centuries, we encounter, two types of historical narratives: secular history and sacred history narratives. The first one is usually used by pagan historians such as Eutropius, Festus and Ammianus Marcellinus.

³ See Geir Hellemo, *Adventus domini: Eschatological Thought in 4th-century apses and catecheses*, Brill, 1989, pp. 131-138.

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ See Mark Vessey, *A companion to Augustine*, Blackwell, 2012, pp. 11-24.

Although they present a pessimistic vision of history, the eschatological theme, the theme of an historical ending, and especially of an apocalyptic eschatology, does not appear. The second one is used in general by Christian writers and is described as a narration based on the Scriptures that comprise a group of events, which lay at the foundation of Christian faith. In this sacred history, the Christians see the manifestation of God's might for the benefits of the chosen people in his acts, which will come to a fulfilment through Christ⁶. Regarding St. Augustin, he distances himself from the tradition of secular history, and from a specific way of making sacred history narratives that has the intention to correlate sequences of the secular history with those of the biblical one. In his case, the division of history and the considerations regarding each moment of history in part are made in the framework of sacred history, described in the authoritative texts of Christian religion, the Sacred Scripture. In so far as the sacred text is considered to be of revealed and inspired nature, it is the basis of the Christian religion. Observing that Augustine in *Of True Religion* describes this basis as "the prophetic history of the dispensation of divine providence in time—what God has done for the salvation of the human race, renewing and restoring it unto eternal life."⁷, namely as an inspired narrative which contains all the necessary means offered by God for the salvation of man, every narrative of sacred history will be for the sake of knowing the Christian truth. As we will see, this catechetical dimension of his sacred history will cause a preference for a model of history in which the Christic episode takes precedence over the eschatological moment, eliminating the possibility of an apocalyptic eschatology.

Regarding the eschatological aspect, in recent studies we find a conceptual difference between: general eschatology and apocalyptic eschatology or apocalypticism. The first kind denotes any sort of beliefs or statements about the end of time and the ultimate fate of the individual soul, while the second kind denotes the belief that the end of history is imminent and will entail a series of crises, followed by the defeat of evil and the triumph of the chosen⁸. Regarding apocalyptic eschatology, Bernard McGinn⁹ is emphasizing that its origins can be traced back to the Judaic

⁶ For both kind of history see R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: history and society in the theology of St. Augustine*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 1-16.

⁷ J. H. S. Burleigh (ed.), *Augustine, Earlier writings*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2006, Augustine, *Of True Religion*, VII. 13, p. 232.

⁸ See Brett Edward Whalen, *Dominion of God. Christendom and Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, Harvard University Press, 2009, p. 237, note 2, and Richard K. Emmerson, Bernard McGinn, *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, Cornell University Press, p. 20.

⁹ See Richard K. Emmerson, Bernard McGinn, *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages*, Cornell University Press, pp. 4-7.

texts of the second temple's period (530 BCE - 70 CE). They describe a vertical revelation of the universe and secrets of the paradise, and a horizontal one, a revelation of the historical sense and of the world's end¹⁰. The knowledge of the divine plan through these revelations determines a search for "the signs of the time", which can reveal a relation between contemporary events and the final end. Nevertheless, the same author points out that the vision of history from these texts does not admit the idea of progress; the end is presented as an eruption of the divine element and not as an effect of human efforts¹¹. As far as Christianity is concerned, it slowly moves away from this kind of interpretation of the end, especially in the East. Origen, Dionisius of Alexandria, Methodius of Olympus, are maintaining a spiritual understanding of Apocalypse¹². But in the West, as Hieronymus is reporting, some Latins like Tertullian, Victorinus, Lactantius, and also Greeks like Irenaeus¹³, are advocating for an *ad litteram* interpretation of the final book of Scripture. In spite of this diversity, one thing seems clear, that the post-Constantine period brought a relaxation of the apocalyptic eschatological view. As Geir Hellemo is indicating, in the 4th century we can observe a reconfiguration of the meaning of sacraments. They stopped to be viewed from the perspective of the finality of human beings, becoming a representation, an enactment in front of God, of the historical processes that have taken place for the redemption of the human being, having at the same time a catechetical purpose¹⁴. The eschatological conception of St. Augustine can be understood within this framework, in a perspective about the finality of the universe void of apocalypticism.

If in St. Augustine's case we have to deal with a type of writing that has as its main purpose the clarification, explanation and apology of the Christian religion in an era of doctrinal and political turmoil, in Dante's case, although the context is still tense, the premises are quite different.

From the perspective of the socio-political context, starting with the first parts of the medieval period, arises a new type of conflict, that between the secular power represented by the emperor, and the spiritual power represented by the pope. These two parties found their respective supporters not just in the bigger medieval kingdoms, but also in the small but powerful city states of Italy.

¹⁰ Ibidem.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 10.

¹² Ibidem, p. 18.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 19.

¹⁴ See Geir Hellemo, *Adventus domini: Eschatological Thought in 4th-century apses and catecheses*, Brill, 1989, pp. 131-138.

Initially, the Ghibellines and Guelphs, and then the White Guelphs and the Black Guelphs. The conflict between powerful families and factions with opposed agendas was a reality from which Florence, the home city of Dante, makes no exception. It's a well-known fact that starting with the last decade of the 13th century until his exile around 1302, Dante occupied administrative and political functions in a turbulent city and that in this period he was a moderate sympathizer of the pro-imperialist faction. But, after the conflicts between the White and Black Guelphs, that took place at the very beginning of 14th century, in which Pope Boniface VIII intervened through the Cardinal Matthew of Acquasparta for the victory of the last faction, and which resulted in Dante's exile, it results naturally that for him, a peaceful outcome for his city cannot come from the papal institution. Consequently, Dante's only hope for peace in Italy and, as we will see in *De monarchia*, in the entire world, rests in the secular power, and for a brief time in the person of Henry VII of Luxemburg¹⁵. The preference for a non-spiritual or secular solution for the mankind's well-being will determine a model of history that doesn't have its base in the sacred history of the Bible, but in the Aristotelian tradition of political philosophy.

From the perspective of the socio-doctrinal or spiritual context, starting with the 12th–13th centuries success of the mendicant orders, arises a new set of values and beliefs. The ideals of poverty and of a spiritual renewal of man in accordance with the Christic model, become the desiderata of the Franciscans. One particular faction of this order, the spiritual Franciscans, also known as rigorists or conservators, took this idea to an institutional level or even to a historical one. Inspired by Joachim of Fiore's division of history and eschatological considerations, Gerardus de Borgo San Domino is frequently considered to be one of the first Franciscans who paved the way for a new interpretation of history and of the role played by the friars in it. He identifies the order of the just which will reign in the last period of history, the age of the Holy Spirit, with the Franciscan order. Consequently, for the last period of history to take place, when the perfect peace will reign and the true will be revealed, a reformation of man and human institutions through Franciscans spiritual effort are necessary¹⁶. It is a known fact that Dante has studied the Franciscan doctrines at Santa Croce. This very same place was frequented at the end of

¹⁵ For more details about Dante's political life see Jay Ruud, *Critical companion to Dante. Literary Reference to His Life and Work*, Fact on file, 2008.

¹⁶ For more details see Jay M. Hammond, Hellmann, Goff, *A companion to Bonaventure*, Brill, 2014, p. 16-17.

13th century by spiritual Franciscans like Jean Pierre Olivi and Ubertino of Casale¹⁷. Although, Dante rejects Ubertino spiritual interpretation of the Franciscan rule in the *Divine Comedy*¹⁸, he puts Bonaventura, Francis of Assisi and even Joachim of Fiore at a high praise. Moreover, he seems to share the same perspective with the spiritual Franciscans on the current status of papal institution. In some cantos of the *Divine Comedy*, e.g. *Inferno 19* or *Purgatory 32*, the Pontifical power is being described as corrupted and being in a state of decay. As we will see in his political text, *De monarchia*, Dante seems to have similar historical expectations like the spirituals but which will be accomplished by different means: a state of peace and knowledge obtained through a secular reign of one absolute monarch.

These being said, we already have noticed some general differences between Augustine's and Dante's view towards history. If the former has the intention of consolidating the Christian doctrine by offering a narration of sacred history in which the final end is of no specific importance, the latter, being concerned about the political fate of his state, will engage in a consideration of secular history in which the final end plays a very important role. Taking this into account, the rest of my paper will try to establish their corresponding models of history as follows.

In the first part of the paper I will try to show that St. Augustine's periods of history, that are defined throughout his work, are defined relatively to a unique event, that gives meaning to the entire history, the first coming of Christ. For this reason, I will argue that his model of history will lose its eschatological tension and consequently is void of apocalypticism. Under these terms, I will explain that in the case of Augustine we can speak about a Christocentric model of history.

In the second part of my study I will try to point out that Dante's political view from *De monarchia* describes a model of history in which the focal point is the final secular goal of the human kind, the universal peace, obtained through the complete actualization of the human intellect. The orientation of history towards a distant end that can be achieved through the human united progressive effort, will allow Dante's view to be described in an teleologic model of history, one with some apocalyptic and millennialist implications.

¹⁷ See David Burr, *The Spiritual Franciscans. From protest to persecution in the century after Saint Francis*, The Pennsylvania State University, 2001, pp. 46-48.

¹⁸ Allen, Mandelbaum *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri: Paradiso*, University of California Press, 1984, Canto 12, 124-127.

Augustine's periods of sacred history

Augustine's vision of history can be best noticed in his division of sacred history into component parts, that is repeatedly taken into consideration under various forms throughout his works, but with a certain constant, the centrality of the Christic figure. In what follows, I will analyze some particular recurrences of this division, to determine the model of history to which it pertains.

In his commentary on some propositions from the Epistle of Paul to the Romans, *Expositio quarumdam propositionum ex epistola ad romanos* (394), Augustine analyses the status of the human being over different periods of sacred history. The emphasis is put on the possibility of man to follow the divine will and to avoid sin. Here, Augustine operates on the basis of the Pauline distinction between the three periods of history, a division of the four states (*gradus*) of man:

And so, we can distinguish these four states of man: before the law, under the law, under grace, in peace. Before the law we follow the eager desire of flesh, under the law we are dragged by it, under the grace nor do we follow it, nor are we dragged by it, in peace there is no eager desire of flesh. Therefore, before the law we don't fight <it>, because we not only desire and sin, but we even approve the sins. Under the law we fight, but we are bound; for we admit that what we do is bad, and by admitting that it is bad, we certainly refuse to do it, but we are outdone, because the grace doesn't exist yet. In this status, it is shown to us how we lie down, and as long as we want to rise we fall, how we are crushed with heavier things.¹⁹

The states described in this fragment captures the different relations of the body-soul duality through the sacred history. Before the law, i.e. after the fall of man in sin, the body and its desires are prevailing in the relation to the soul, under the law the soul tries to oppose the body but without success. After the coming of Christ and consequently of grace, the status of man is restored, so that the soul can prevail against the body. In peace, after the final judgement, the corporal status will change, so that it will be no more opposed to the soul and implicitly to God's will:

¹⁹ Jacques-Paul Migne (ed.), *Patrologia latina*, Vol. 35, *Expositio quarumdam propositionum ex epistola ad romanos*, 12.13-18. The translation from Latin to English belongs to me.

therefore, comes the grace, which will forgive past sins and help the ones who try, grant charity to justice and remove the fear. When this will happen, even if some desires of flesh, as long as we are in this life, are fighting our spirit to lead it into sin, still, the spirit that is not consenting to those desires stops sinning, because it was fastened in the grace and charity of God [...] but because those desires, which we get from the first sin of the first man, are born from the mortality of flesh, from which we are carnally born, those will not end, unless by the resurrection of the body we will earn that change, which is promised to us, where will be perfect peace, when we will be in the place of the fourth status. But the peace will be perfect, because nothing will oppose us of those that opposes God.²⁰

The third state, which is established after and because of the first coming of Christ, represents for man the restoration of free will, because “before the grace free will does not exist”²¹. This means that now, the human being does not have only the possibility to sin as under law but also the possibility to avoid the wrong doings: “*for the sin will not be dominant in you, for you are not under the law, but rather under the grace*, certainly concerns now that third state, where the man with the mind serves now the law of God, although with the flesh he serves the law of sin”²². The spirit of man is changed with the beginning of the third state, the body is changed only in the fourth²³. In virtue of this renewal of the spirit, the most important event is the historical incarnation of Christ, the beginning of the third status, and not the end of history, the renewal of the body. The end of the sacred history does not represent a necessary condition for the salvation, such as the first coming of the Christ does.

The same idea of a historical centrality of Christ can be found in *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus* (379). Here, the units used for periodization are not those of the states of the human being (*gradus*), but rather those of time (*saeculum, tempus*):

for after the entire age of the human birth, the third time is that in which the grace of the Christian faith was given; the first is before the law, the second under the law, the third under grace. And because the fourth remains thus far, we are to come to the most satisfying peace of the heavenly Jerusalem, towards which stretches whoever entrust rightly in Christ²⁴

²⁰ Ibidem.

²¹ Ibidem.

²² Ibidem, 27.35

²³ Ibidem, 45.53

²⁴ Jacques-Paul Migne (ed.), *Patrologia latina*, Vol. 40, *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus*, 61.7.

In *De catechizandis rudibus* (403), Augustine uses a division of sacred history into seven periods. Every stage of history is put in direct correspondence with a specific day of creation:

Five ages of the world, accordingly, having been now completed (there has entered the sixth). Of these ages the first is from the beginning of the human race, that is, from Adam, who was the first man that was made, down to Noah, who constructed the ark at the time of the flood. Then the second extends from that period on to Abraham, who was called the father indeed of all nations[...] For the third age extends from Abraham to David the king; the fourth from David to that captivity whereby the people of God passed over into Babylonia; and the fifth from that transmigration down to the advent of our Lord Jesus Christ. With His coming the sixth age has entered on its process; so that now the spiritual grace, which in previous times was known to a few patriarchs and prophets, may be made manifest to all nations;[...] in this sixth age the mind of man may be renewed after the image of God, even as on the sixth day man was made after the image of God.²⁵

Now, on the subject of this rest Scripture is significant, and refrains not to speak, when it tells us how at the beginning of the world, and at the time when God made heaven and earth and all things which are in them, He worked during six days, and rested on the seventh day. For it was in the power of the Almighty to make all things even in one moment of time. For He had not labored in the view that He might enjoy (a needful) rest, since indeed He spoke, and they were made; He commanded, and they were created; but that He might signify how, after six ages of this world, in a seventh age, as on the seventh day, He will rest in His saints;²⁶

The idea of the centrality of the sixth period, which is equivalent with the third period and state of the previous division of history, can be easily observed. The first five historic periods, from Adam until the advent of Christ, do not bring anything essential for the change of the human condition and implicitly for the salvation of man. Only in the sixth period, the grace, i.e. the necessary condition for redemption, will be shown to all nations and the mind will be restored to its initial state, that of resemblance with God.

²⁵ *On the Catechizing of the Uninstructed*, translated by S.D.F. Salmond. *From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 3. Edited by Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1303.htm>, 22.39.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, 17.28.

From the passages exposed above, we can observe that in Augustine's division of sacred history the central event is the incarnation of Christ, and consequently, the rehabilitation of human nature. This event marks on one hand, in a universal sense, the beginning of a new period of history in which the grace is offered to the human kind, and on the other hand, in an individual sense, marks the beginning of a new state for each individual, in which his soul or mind is restored to its likeness to God. In as much as the salvation of each man becomes possible in the sixth period²⁷ of history, just because of Christ, the event of his first arrival becomes in history a transcendental cause of salvation. The renewal of man in this period, is not an effective cause of salvation, because it does not save, but only offers the possibility that was not available before, that every individual can reach it. Therefore, if the renewal of man by Christ can be considered a transcendental cause of salvation, and if in this historical event takes place the essential transformation of man, then, the end of history will lose its importance, becoming an event that eventually will take place at an unknown time. Consequently, the central point of Augustine's model of history is the first coming of Christ, when the status of man himself is changed.

Up to this point we have seen that Augustine's model of history has the Christic event as the central point and that the eschatological moment takes places in the period of history that follows the first coming of Christ. But the apocalyptic tension of placing the end now, in the sixth period of time (or the third according to the short division), is diminished by the impossibility of the human being to know exactly when it will happen. In *De civitate Dei* (426), Augustine employs once again the analogy between the days of creation and the periods (*aetas*) of sacred history to stress this aspect:

This Sabbath shall appear still more clearly if we count the ages as days, in accordance with the periods of time defined in Scripture, for that period will be found to be the seventh. The first age, as the first day, extends from Adam to the deluge; the second from the deluge to Abraham, equalling the first, not in length of time, but in the number of generations, there being ten in each. From Abraham to the advent of Christ there are, as the evangelist Matthew calculates, three periods, in each of which are fourteen generations—one period from Abraham to David, a second from David to the captivity, a third from the captivity to the birth of Christ in the flesh. There are thus

²⁷ Or the third according to the short division.

five ages in all. The sixth is now passing, and cannot be measured by any number of generations, as it has been said: *It is not for you to know the times, which the Father has put in His own power.*²⁸

That the last judgment, then, shall be administered by Jesus Christ in the manner predicted in the sacred writings is denied or doubted by no one, unless by those who, through some incredible animosity or blindness, decline to believe these writings, though already their truth is demonstrated to all the world. And at or in connection with that judgment the following events shall come to pass, as we have learned: Elias the Tishbite shall come; the Jews shall believe; Antichrist shall persecute; Christ shall judge; the dead shall rise; the good and the wicked shall be separated; the world shall be burned and renewed. All these things, we believe, shall come to pass; but how, or in what order, human understanding cannot perfectly teach us, but only the experience of the events themselves. My opinion, however, is, that they will happen in the order in which I have related them.²⁹

What Augustine is saying here, citing the *Acts of the Apostles 1.7* and discussing about the events of the Last Judgment is that the length of the sixth period of the sacred history remains unknowable for humans or, in other words, that the human being cannot know when the event of the second coming of Christ will take place. This restriction on the human mind towards the end is powerfully contrasted with the accessibility of the same mind towards the event of the first incarnation of Christ and the restoration of man.

Besides the unknowable character of the end, Augustine adds the rejection of millenarism, namely of that form of apocalyptic eschatology which anticipates a reign of a thousand years of Christ on earth. The rejection is made on one hand by sustaining that the future change of man will be merely a corporal one and will take place in the seventh state (or the fourth according to the short division), which will not be in this life:

If his spirit, which awoken Jesus Christ from death, lives in you; the who awoken Jesus Christ from the death will bring back to life your mortal body also, by the Spirit which will live in you, now he is pointing out to the fourth status of that four which we have distinguished above. But this status is

²⁸ Translated by Marcus Dods. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, Vol. 2. Edited by Philip Schaff. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1887.) Revised and edited for New Advent by Kevin Knight. <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1201.htm>, XXII, 30.5.

²⁹ *De civitate Dei*, Op. cit., XX.30.5

not coming in this life. For it pertains to hope, by which we expect the redemption of our body, when this corruptible <body> will put on the incorruptibility and this mortal <body> will put on the immortality. There the peace is perfect, because the soul does not suffer of any troubles regarding the body, which is now brought back to life and change according to divine nature.³⁰

On the other hand, the interpretation of the *Revelation* 20 is done from a figurative perspective, according to the hermeneutical principles exposed in *De doctrina christiana*, and constitutes a departure from millenarism. 1000 years, the period in which the devil will be bonded, the period in which the millenarists are hoping for a reign of God on earth, does not represent for Augustine a determined period of time. The number 1000 is a *numerus perfectus*, a complete or perfect number which signifies the undetermined time left until the end of the world. All this time, the devil is bound. This binding on earth does not represent the reign of Christ, but the fact that the devil does not have the same power over the people like in the previous state³¹. Consequently, any reference to a temporal reign of God is destroyed. The ideal of an earthly abundance and universal peace seems to be omitted. The reign of God will take place in the last stage of sacred history, after the consumption of the secular history, and after the events of Apocalypse. Here, the saved individuals with their renewed and perfect bodies will eternally stand in the contemplation of the beatific vision of God.

From the considered passages, we can observe first that the history in St. Augustine's thought is understood as sacred history, as the manifested history of God's divine plan for the salvation of the world. In as much as the secular history is implicitly embedded in the sacred history and represents merely the contingent aspect of the divine plan, it is of low significance. Secondly, from the examination of the sacred history division we can observe the existence of a Christocentric model of history, since its main event is the first coming of Christ. Because this moment can be considered the transcendental cause of the salvation of human being, the sacred history finds its justification and meaning in it and not in the final moment of history, the apocalyptic end. This placement of purpose in the event represented by Christ determines a homogenous unfolding of history, void until the end of the idea of a universal progress. Thirdly, we can ascertain a depreciation of the eschatological moment made negatively, by Augustine's Christocentric model,

³⁰ *Expositio quarundam propositionum ex Epistola ad Romanos*, op. cit., 43.51

³¹ See *De civitate dei*, op. cit, 20.7

and positively, on one hand, by his claim of inaccessibility towards the time of and ways in which the end will take place, and, on the other hand, by placing the reign of God and the corporal change of human being in the afterlife. Given these articulations of Augustine's perspective on history, we can safely acknowledge that his considerations cannot be labeled as being apocalyptic.

Dante's teleological model of history in *De monarchia*

So far, we have seen how Augustine's view towards history can be understood as a Christocentric model. In this part, I will argue how Dante's political philosophy from *De monarchia* contains a model of history that is very different from the previous one.

First of all, we must note that *De monarchia* is not preoccupied at all with offering a narrative of history of any kind. We can find only a few references to historical events, which are used by Dante's adversaries in the argumentation of the absolute jurisdiction of the Pontiff and which ultimately will be debunked by him. The main purpose in his work is to justify the necessity of the monarchical absolutist regime and to establish the autonomy of secular power in front of the ecclesiastical one. Consequently, the treatise itself is devised according to these intentions. The first book will demonstrate that the monarchy is necessary for the well-being of the world. The second will point out that the Roman Empire, the embodiment of his vision, has obtained the office of monarchy *de iure* and that, because of this, reached its maximal potential. And the third book will separate the monarchic and papal institutions rejecting the subordination of one by the other. Seeing Dante's main objectives, his model of history will then merely be an implicit consequence of his political view. For the former to be clarified, first of all we must understand the latter.

Dante's political thought is developed inside the framework of Aristotelian political philosophy. First of all, politics is a science and, being as such, it is rather preoccupied with the universal cause of things than with the particular ones. Although God, the most universal cause, has a certain importance in his historical view under the concept of providence, here He has a secondary role, in contrast with Augustine. Secondly, being a practical science, the concern for the universal cause

is not merely for speculation but also for action³². The particular understanding of politics as being destined to actions has an important role, because it will determine Dante's commitment to a teleological perspective, namely to a view in which his only concern is the final cause. The function of the efficient cause or the principle of movement and of the formal cause are both included in the final cause, because "in things pertaining to action the principle and cause of all things is the final end (because is that end goal that first moves the agent)"³³. But to whom pertains the final end or the final cause of politics and how ought to be understood? Dante's response is quite straight forward: since in politics we deal with the most universal cause, it must belong to the most universal entity, the human genus or the totality of humanity. By exercising progressively its proper function or essence as a whole, i.e. the actualization of the possible intellect, the human genus may achieve its final goal, towards which all its actions are ordained, the universal peace and implicitly temporal happiness³⁴. By setting a single natural and universal end for the entire humanity, Dante is preparing to argue for the necessity of one single ruler, the monarch, under one single regime, the monarchy, also named temporal monarchy or empire. The rest of the first book, chapters 5-16, will try to demonstrate how the monarch and the monarchy are the best way to achieve the final end of humanity, the peace and the temporal happiness. Although the arguments vary from chapter to chapter, and here is not our purpose to explore each of them, we must note that they share in common the Neoplatonic principle that the unity is better than the multiplicity. The preeminence of the one over the multiple, the whole over its parts, God over its creation, etc. form a series of analogies that culminate in the preeminence of the monarchy in front of the other traditional political forms of government that are based on a large or small multiplicity. Consequently, justice, peace, charity, good actions and even the resemblance to God are all better under one monarch, because the one universal entity (the human genus) will be driven by one common nature (the progressive actualization of the possible intellect) towards a single universal goal (peace and common good) under the direction of one single ruler.

In Dante's argumentation, the monarchy or the universal empire is not so much of a utopian state as it appears to be on first sight. In the second book, although idealized, he offers a historical model of his political form of government, the Roman

³² See *De monarchia* text in Anthony K. Cassell (ed.), *The Monarchia Controversy*, The catholic University of America Press, 2004, I.2.6-7, p. 112.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, I.4.5, p. 115.

Empire under the reign of Augustus. Challenging indirectly the Augustinian position on the Roman Empire, Dante's arguing by two types of arguments, based on reason and based on Christian faith, that the Romans have justly acquired the monarchic status according to the will of God. What is interesting for our purpose, is the way in which Dante's using the Roman case to exemplify how his teleological model is working in the fulfilment of the final goal of humanity. At the core of his argumentation, he states that "the Roman people in their subjugation of the earth attended to the public good"³⁵. The public good or the peace is the final end of the human genus. But as we already know, from our perspective, not all actions with a good final goal are just or good, so the argumentation for obtaining justly the status of empire by the Romans could fail. To surpass this problem, Dante is clarifying a specific function of the final cause that is functioning in nature and can be found in politics too:

it is absolutely clear that someone who directs his thoughts to the end goal of right must be directing his thoughts by the right.³⁶

since, therefore, there exists an end for mankind and some necessary means of reaching nature's universal end goal, nature must direct her attention to this.³⁷

The main idea is that, like in nature, in politics, the final cause contains its own means of achieving itself. Once the final goal of mankind dictated by its nature has started to be followed by the human genus, the final goal, through the very same nature, starts to move the human genus to a progressive completion of it. The same reasoning is applied in the argumentation for the justice of the Roman Empire: the Roman Empire attended the ultimate justice, by attending the ultimate justice its actions were directed by the ultimate justice in fully achieving it, so its actions were just. As we will see, this circular movement between the humans and their final goal will play a significant importance in Dante's historical model and its apocalyptic potential.

In the third and last book of his treatise, Dante is not only refuting some arguments from faith and reason which support that the jurisdiction of papal power stretches over the secular one, but tries to demonstrate the autonomy of the Imperial power by deriving its authority directly from God. In doing so, Dante

³⁵ *Ibidem*, II.5.18, p. 137.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, II.5.23, p. 138.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, II.6.5, p. 139.

offers new considerations on his teleologic model that brings him dangerously closer to the so called “doctrine of the doubled truth”, resembling in some parts with the secular Averroist discourse of someone like Boetius of Dacia³⁸. His main argument starts with a consideration of the human being: “For man, if he is considered according to both his essential parts, that is, his body and his soul, he is corruptible; if he is considered only according to one, namely, the soul, he is incorruptible”³⁹. By putting man between the corruptible and incorruptible realms, he seems to make some sense of the traditional Augustinian point of view where the human being has a double nature. There is also a point of departure. In Dante’s case, for each aspect of the human nature there is a legitimate final goal:

the blessedness of this life, which consists in the functioning of his own powers and is figured by the earthly paradise, and the blessedness of eternal life that consists in the enjoyment of God’s countenance to which man’s powers can ascend only by the aid of divine light; and this blessedness is made intelligible by the celestial paradise.⁴⁰

The earthly paradise and the heavenly one, are two different final goals for the two different aspects of the human nature. Consequently, they can be achieved by two different sets of means. The first one “through philosophical teachings provided we follow them by acting according to the moral and intellectual virtues”⁴¹ and the second one “through spiritual teachings that transcend human reason, provided we follow them by acting according to the theological virtues, namely, faith, hope, and charity”⁴². For a dual nature with a dual final end, there must be also a dual guide established by the Providence in achieving it. On the one hand we have the Emperor who will guide the human kind to temporal felicity according to philosophical teaching. On the other hand, we have the Supreme Pontiff who will guide the same human kind to the eternal life with the aid of spiritual teaching⁴³. Each institution has its own specific function with its own separate domain of activity. The monarchy must bring the human genus by secular means to a secular and historical end, the papacy must bring the human kind by spiritual means to a spiritual and trans-historical end. Although boundaries between the secular and

³⁸ See *De sumo bono sive de vita philosophi*.

³⁹ *De monarchia*, op. cit., III.16.4, p. 171.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, III.16.7, p. 172.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

spiritual realm are set quite clearly, there are certain relations between them that need to be explored. This fact is pointed out by Dante's last paragraph, where he states that "the happiness of mortal life is in some way ordered towards eternal happiness" and that the Emperor needs to show reverence to the Pope, so that he can be blessed by him to enlighten the whole globe. As we will further see, Dante's concern only for the secular power will betray, both a trans-historical expectation from the absolute monarch and a profound disappointment towards the papal institution, which teleological speaking has lost its function.

So far, we have seen that Dante's political philosophy from *De monarchia* consists broadly of an argumentation for the necessity of a universal secular monarchy, for the secular final end of the human kind to be progressively achieved. We have also seen that, in doing so, he is describing a circular movement between mankind and the final end as follows: mankind is establishing its final end, and the final end is offering the means to mankind towards the historical realization of it. But, because the final end, the universal peace is the supreme goal according to the very nature of human beings as a whole and is obtained only through a progressive development of the human mind, i.e. philosophy, and it is not only an extrinsic historical desideratum. If the final end brings mankind closer to achieving it by its offered means, mankind, by the collective activation of the passive intellect⁴⁴, is bringing the realization of the final end closer. In this way, a historical and secular end is subtly carrying an interior and spiritual aspect: the change of man through philosophy under monarchy will cause the fulfilment of history. This kind of teleologic model seems to surpass the limits of historical or philosophical discourse and tends to approach the prophetic one. This point has been noted by some scholars. W. H. V. Reade⁴⁵ is considering that Dante's view of history should be called "vision" because it's not rational enough to be considered a proper philosophy of history. Regarding this position we can note that, on one hand, it appears to be a little bit exaggerated, since Dante is using in most of his treatises traditional philosophical sources and he is employing logical argumentation. On the other hand, it seems to be true, but for a different reason, since in *De monarchia* we cannot find an explicit theory of history but only an implicit one. Charles T. Davis uses the same name but for a different purpose. He thinks that Dante's consideration of history should be called "vision" to suggest "the immediacy and intensity of Dante's perception of God's providence acting through

⁴⁴ Ibidem, I.3.

⁴⁵ For summary of Reade's point of view see Charles T. Davis, "Dante's Vision of History", in *Dante Studies*, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society, No. 93 (1975), pp. 143-160, p. 144.

his chosen people among the gentiles, the Romans"⁴⁶. He even goes so far as to name Dante a theologian of history⁴⁷. At the core of his observations seems to stay a particular paragraph of *De monarchia*, maybe the one with the highest apocalyptic implications:

All the above reasons we have set forth bear witness to one unforgettable event: to wit, the state of mortals which the Son of God either awaited, or decided to bring about himself when he was about to become man for man's salvation. For, if we reflect upon the conditions and the ages of man, from the Fall of our first parents, which was the first wrong turning point of all our aberrations, only under the monarch, *Divus Augustus*, when a perfect monarchy existed, will we find tranquility throughout the world. And that mankind lived happily in the tranquility of universal peace at that time all historians and all illustrious poets and even the scribe of Christ's compassion deigned to bear witness. [...] The time and all temporalities were indeed full because no agency of our happiness was without its minister.⁴⁸

Here, Dante offers an unfinished argument through analogy where the second term is missing but is implicitly suggested. If Jesus himself waited for the condition of man that was achieved only in the time of Augustus, the only time when the universal monarchy has been acquired, or he offered that condition in that time, then, the next Christic event will take place only after the establishment of the new universal monarchy, i.e. after the universal peace and the achievement of the full intellectual potential of mankind. His option for a secular eschatology with spiritual implication is obvious. The fulfilment of history with its apocalyptic implications is expected to come from the empire and not from Church. On one hand, the ecclesiastic institution is confronted with corruption, which Dante is pointing out throughout his works. On the other hand, even with a perfect institution, the Pope jurisdiction is only spiritual, and consequently Christian, while the monarchic one is universal, transgressing the doctrinal differences between people, as Donna Mancusi-Ungaro⁴⁹ is emphasizing.

From this perspective, the teleologic model of history found in *De monarchia* presents quite a few eschatological and apocalyptic implications. The realization of the final goal understood in a double sense, as an external historical goal (universal

⁴⁶ Ibidem.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p.154.

⁴⁸ *De monarchia*, op. cit., II.16.1, p.127.

⁴⁹ See Donna Mancusi-Ungaro, *Dante and the empire*, Peter Lang Publishing, 1987, p.5-6.

peace) and an internal spiritual one (the full potency of the human intellect), can take place only under a universal monarch in a universal monarchy. Only under this political form the mankind can progressively reach the perfect state that triggers the Christic event and implicitly the fulfilment of the universal history. The guarantee for his model is the idealized Roman Empire under the universal monarch Augustus.

Conclusion

In this paper I tried to show how Augustine's division of sacred history and Dante's political philosophy from *De monarchia* have at their core two different models of history. In Augustine's case, we have a Christocentric model of history, where the focal point is the first coming of Christ. Understood as a transcendental cause for the salvation of man, i.e. the cause for the renewal of human spirit and consequently for the possibility of salvation, the Christic event makes the Augustinian model free of apocalypticism and millenarism. The final end will take place in an undetermined future, the reign of God and the renewal of body will happen in the afterlife. In those terms, the unfolding of history after the focal point is linear, void of significant progress and of any relation between the human effort and the fulfilment of time. In contrast, in Dante's case the situation is quite different. In sustaining a teleological model of history, the focal point of the historical process is the final goal or end of mankind, the eternal peace. This can be achieved only by the collective use of human intellectual powers, under the rule of one universal monarch. The universal monarchy or the empire will then represent the condition for the fulfilment of history to take place. Employing an idealized example for his vision, Dante causally connects the secular realization of the monarchy under Augustus with the first coming of Christ, offering an apocalyptic aspect of his view. If the human genus only under the universal monarchy can obtain its final goal by means of gradual perfection through philosophy, then it depends on mankind when the fulfilment of time will take place. Put this way, the implicit vision of history from *De monarchia* is describing a progressive unfolding of time, in a rhythm that depends upon mankind's collective effort, with a climax in the full realization of the universal monarchy. In this final moment the human genus will be at its perfect status and the end of history will take place.

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