Augustine and Roman Civil Religion: Some Critical Reflections

In the preface to the second edition of his well-known work on myth and allegory, Professor Jean Pépin engages in a lengthy reply to the criticisms evoked by his interpretation of some aspects of Roman political religion. The bulk of the discussion turns on the correct understanding of *De Civitate Dei*, IV, 27, where Augustine takes the pontiff Scaeuola to task for posing as a defender of the pagan gods while at the same time slyly or tacitly denying their existence.

Augustine’s information purports to be derived from Varro, from whom he quotes freely and, as far as one can tell, literally. In the text under consideration, which anticipates the thematic account of civil theology in Books VI and VII, Scaeuola is said to have distinguished between three kinds of gods, one introduced by the poets, another by the philosophers, and the third by statesmen. The first of these is dismissed as silly or trifling (nugatorium) on the ground that it ascribes to the gods things that are contrary to their nature and dignity. It often depicts their conduct as unseemly and immoral, or otherwise discredits them by telling implausible stories about them. The theology of the philosophers is similarly ruled out, but for an altogether different motive. The objection this time is that its teachings are at odds with the requirements of the political life: non congruere civitatibus. Much of what it


3. Scaeuola’s strictures, needless to say, are not original. They belong to an old tradition which dates back at least to Xenophanes and according to which the defects attributed to the gods in poetic literature fall under two headings: ulla and miracula. Cf. Cardauns, *op. cit.*, p. 142.
says about the gods is superfluous, but it also includes a number of elements the knowledge of which must be deemed prejudicial to the city at large. One need not be unduly concerned about the former, since, as Augustine points out, citing Roman law, "superfluous things do no harm." The real problem arises when philosophers make bold to assert that Hercules, Aesculapius, and the Gemini are not in fact gods but glorified mortals and that the statues held in veneration by cities everywhere are not genuine images of the gods, if only for the reason that a true god has neither sex, nor age, nor definite corporeal members. These are the doctrines which, according to Augustine, the pontiff was intent on concealing from the public. Then comes the crucial and somewhat startling statement: "for he did not think them false; he is therefore of the opinion that cities ought to be deceived in matters of religion": nam falsa esse non putat; expedire igitur existimat falli in religione civitales.

Pépin had previously observed that the words just quoted could not have been those of Scaevola as reported by Varro. They were presumably supplied by Augustine, who "perfidiously and gratuitously" took it upon himself to accuse the pontiff of "Machiavellianism and insincerity." We have no evidence that Scaevola sided with the philosophers on the issue at hand or that his faith in the gods of the city was merely feigned. The more likely supposition is that he rejected their theories as objectively false and did not want the multitude to become acquainted with them lest they should be seduced by them.

This interpretation was later challenged by G. Lieberg and H. Hagedahl, both of whom contend that, while Augustine's controversial statement cannot be traced back to Scaevola, it could and probably does reflect accurately the mentality of the illustrious pontiff. Lieberg's point is that, if Scaevola had disagreed with the teachings of the philosophers, he would not have neglected to raise theoretical objections to them instead of merely declaring them politically unsound; yet we know of no such critique on his part. As Pépin is quick to note, however, this argument is an argument a silentio, from which no firm conclusion can be drawn. It neither proves nor disproves that Scaevola refrained from attacking natural theology on its own grounds. Fortunately,

7. Pépin, pp. 15-16: "Je n'insisterai pas sur la faiblesse reconnue de l'argumentation a silentio: on n'a pas conservé des critiques théoriques adressées par
there are positive reasons for thinking that Scaeuola was not prone to indulge in theoretical discussions of this sort, the main one being that the Romans had no interest whatever in dogma. Their religion was essentially oriented toward practice rather than doctrine. The important question was not what one believed but what one did in accordance with the laws and customs of the city. If, as one must assume, this was also Scaeuola’s frame of mind, one cannot reasonably expect him to have argued philosophically against the theology of the philosophers. Inasmuch as speculative preferences play no significant role in the matter, his icy non congruere civitatis is actually a far more devastating critique of natural theology than would have been any direct refutation of its content.

If Pépin finds Lieberg’s argument inconclusive, he is even less impressed with Hagendahl’s assessment of the same question. Like Lieberg, Hagendahl sees no reason to distrust Augustine’s testimony as it stands. Scaeuola could very well have held civil religion to be false and still not wanted his opinion to be shared by everyone else. On this point he appears to have been in total agreement with Varro. Neither one thought it expedient publicly to reveal the truth concerning the gods of the city. It matters little that Scaeuola, as distinguished from Varro, was an official representative of the Roman cult, for we encounter the same attitude later on in Cotta, himself a pontiff, who does not hesitate to oppose Balbus’s defense of the gods in Book III of Cicero’s De Natura Deorum.

None of these objections has done much to sway Pépin, who cannot bring himself to believe that Scaeuola could have been anything but forthright in professing his respect for the Roman gods. Doctrines are normally and logically censured because they are noxious, and they are noxious precisely because they are false. To argue that Scaeuola took exception to the theories of the philosophers because they were true is to impute to him a «complicated psychology» or a «devious turn of mind» of which he cannot in fairness be suspected, and to maintain that he deliberately allowed others to be misled in matters of religion is to cast grave doubts on his moral character. Such an allegation is not only «shocking», it runs counter to everything we know about his

Scaeuola à la théologie des philosophes, donc il lui reconnaissait une vérité objective ; cette conclusion revient exactement à la formule d’Augustin falsa esse non putat, dont on doit accorder au minimum qu’elle dépasse les présomptions (sans quoi elle ne pourrait être discutée) ; c’est un fait que l’on ne connaît l’attitude théologique de Scaeuola que par le témoignage de Varro filtré par Augustin ; on ne saurait garantir que toute donnée absente de ce document soit à exclure aussi de la réalité. Cf. ibid., p. 24.

8. Ibid., p. 16 : «... dans la Rome républicaine, tous les choix religieux sont dictés par l’intérêt de l’État, qui ne laisse aucune place aux préférences spéculatives ; dès lors, en disant d’elle non congruere civitatis, Scaeuola fit émerger la conception philosophique des dieux plus radicalement qu’il ne ferait en en discutant le contenu.»

personality. We have it on the word of Cicero and others that Scaeuola
was a man of pre-eminence of holiness and justice, whom everyone
admired for his personal integrity and who died as a kind of martyr
for the cause of the Republic, as Augustine himself recalls elsewhere
in the City of God. Nor does it help to suggest that his disregard
for the truth was motivated by pragmatic reasons, for it is hard to
imagine what worthwhile purpose it might possibly have served.
In any event, Augustine could not be privy to Scaeuola's secret inten-
tions. If he presumed to read his mind, it can only have been for the
sake of disqualifying the whole of Roman religion. The charges of
duplicity and 'cynicism' that he implicitly levels at him are thus
entirely without foundation.

As for the comparison with Cotta, it is wholly beside the point since
Cotta's reply is directed, not against the gods themselves, but against
Balbus's philosophic defense of them. Cotta himself is emphatic in
proclaiming his allegiance to Roman religion and even goes out of his way
to indicate that his faith in it rests on the authority of the ancestors — aut-
toritas maiorum— rather than on abstract reasonings, which invariably
lack force and tend to breed skepticism in regard to matters that are
not in themselves subject to doubt. Nothing that is said about him
in Cicero's dialogue warrants the slightest suspicion of insincerity.
True, Scaeuola does not expressly declare his attachment to the civic
gods, as does Cotta, but one may infer from his objections to the theology
of the philosophers that he was not any less faithful to them.

According to Pépin, the flaw in Hagendahl's and Lieberg's argument
is that it fails to take into consideration the manifest differences between
Scaeuola and Varro on this issue. Following Augustine's lead, both
scholars start from the premise that their views betray a similar attitude
toward civil religion. Pépin denies that this is the case. For one thing,

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10. CICERO, Pro Roscio Amer. 12, 33: Q. Scaeuola urt sanctissimus atque
ornatissimus nostrae ciuitatis... pro dignitate ne laudare quidem quisquam satis
commode posset »; Laelius, 1, 1: me ad pontificem Scaeuolam contuli, quem unum
nostre ciuitatis et ingenio et justitia praestantissimum audeo dicere. » Cf. VAL.
Max., VIII. 15, 6 and IX. 11, 2.

11. De Civ. Dei., III, 28. As far as I know, this is the only other mention of Scaeuola
in Augustine's works. See also Cicero, De Nat. Deor., III. 32, 80.

12. Pépin, p. 14: Si les mots d'Augustin nam falsa esse non putavit de
Scaevola une psychologie alambiquée, ce qui suit atteste réellement à sa moralité:
Exoprié igitur existimat falli in religione ciuitates. C'est une accusation de tromperie
caractérisée, que n'excuse pas la considération d'on ne sait encore quelle utilité.
Accusation étonnante, s'agissant d'un personnage dont les contemporains, notam-
ment Cicéro qui fut son élève, s'entendent à célébrer la haute conscience...


15. Pépin, p. 21: Scaevola ne proclame pas, comme le fera le Cotta de Cicéron,
on attachement aux dieux civils ; mais on doit l'inférer quand on voit le pontife
objetcr à la théologie des philosophes ; non congruere ciuitatibus.
Varro objected to the cultic use of divine images\textsuperscript{16}, a practice to which Scaeuola gives his unqualified assent. Furthermore, Varro praises natural theology and finds nothing wrong with it except for its tendency to give rise to a multiplicity of sects\textsuperscript{17}. Scaeuola, on the other hand, disapproves of it and disparages it by pronouncing it unfit for cities\textsuperscript{18}. To be sure, Varro readily acknowledges that philosophers often raise questions which are more appropriately debated behind closed doors than in the forum: \textit{facilis intra parietes in schola quam extra in foro ferre possunt aures}\textsuperscript{19}. However, Pépin takes this to mean no more than that most people are indifferent to or easily impatient with abstruse philosophic disquisitions and hence that such disquisitions are best carried on within the walls of a school. He grants that Lieberg's interpretation, according to which scientific speculations about the gods require secrecy and cannot safely be conducted in the open, is theoretically possible and that it is consonant with the one proposed by Augustine, who reveals his own bias by equating \textit{forum} with civil society\textsuperscript{20}. If this more pregnant exegesis were to be allowed, it would dispose of a serious problem, for it greatly reduces the distance between Scaeuola and Varro. But then, "why the devil would Varro have refused to the people any access to the theology of the philosophers\textsuperscript{21}?"

That he had no intention of doing so is vouched for by the fact that his position, in contradistinction to that of Scaeuola, postulates a definite relationship between the three theologies and a reciprocal dependence of each one of them on the other two. As a philosopher, Varro was understandably partial to natural theology\textsuperscript{22}, whereas others experience a greater attraction for the theology of the poets\textsuperscript{23}. As for civil theology, it may be said to occupy a kind of middle ground between them, drawing elements from both and adapting them to its own needs. All three theologies are in fact so closely interwoven as to justify our speaking of a single theology, which receives different specifications in so far as it originates with or is primarily addressed to philosophers, priests, or poets.

Accordingly, Augustine could not have been right in identifying Varro's \textit{forum} with civil society, thereby implying that Varro was at one

\textsuperscript{16} Cf. \textit{De Civ. Dei}, IV. 31, 2; VI. 7, 1.
\textsuperscript{17} De Civ. Dei, VI. 5, 2: "Nihil in hoc genere culpavit quod physicon uocant et ad philosophos pertinet, tantum quod eorum inter se controversias commemorauit, per quos facta est dissidentium multitudo sectarum."
\textsuperscript{18} Cf. Pépin, pp. 21-22.
\textsuperscript{19} De Civ. Dei, VI. 5, 2.
\textsuperscript{20} De Civ. Dei, VI. 5, 2: "Remouit tamen hoc genus a foro, id est a populis; scholis uero et parietibus clausit."
\textsuperscript{21} Pépin, p. 23.
\textsuperscript{22} Cf. \textit{De Civ. Dei}, VI. 5, 3: "Quis non uideat, cul palmam dederit? Utique secundae, quam supra dixit esse philosophorum. Also, \textit{ibid.}, VII, 5, ca. fin.
\textsuperscript{23} Cf. \textit{ibid.}, IV, 32; VI, 6, 3.
with Scaeuola in excluding natural theology from the market place. What we have in Varro is the exact opposite, namely, a civil theology that is largely open to philosophic influences and a natural theology that has itself become an integral part of civil theology. Since both of these theologies are intimately bound up with each other as well as with poetic theology, it makes little sense to pretend that Varro was bent on keeping natural theology out of the hands of the people. Such is not the stand taken by Scaeuola, who not only distinguishes the three theologies but maintains a sharp separation between them and denounces natural theology as both false and politically dangerous\textsuperscript{24}. It follows that Augustine has grievously misconstrued Scaeuola’s thought so that it might be more easily fitted into his global reprobation of Roman religion.

Since our only source of information regarding Scaeuola’s position is Varro, and since Varro’s testimony is known to us mainly through the few brief fragments preserved by Augustine, it is obviously difficult to arrive at a completely satisfactory solution to the problem. Still, the evidence at our disposal suggests that Augustine’s assessment of the situation is perhaps not as wide of the mark as Pépin would have us believe. Regardless of whether or not Scaeuola and Varro were in full accord on every point, nobody denies that they both subscribed in some fashion to the tripartite division of theology into mythical, civil, and natural. But one cannot make that distinction without implicitly raising the issue of the truth of these three theologies. To define one of them as “natural” is to insinuate that the other two are not natural or not completely natural, and hence that they belong to the lesser sphere of human institution; for, what exists by nature is widely understood to be higher than what exists only by virtue of some agreement or convention among human beings. Such at any rate is the premise on which Varro and Augustine rested their case for the superiority of natural theology\textsuperscript{25}. This does not mean of course that, once the distinction between nature and convention is called into play, civil theology must automatically be discarded. One may wish to retain it for other reasons; but its theoretical status has become, to put it mildly, a matter of considerable uncertainty.

Pépin’s opinion to the contrary notwithstanding, Scaeuola’s comment about the unsuitability of natural theology to the political life need not be interpreted as a denigration of that theology. It says nothing whatever about its intrinsic worth and draws attention only to the problem

\textsuperscript{24} Pépin, pp. 23-28, with reference to the argument made by Augustine along these or similar lines in De Civ. Dei, VI. 5 and VII. 5.

\textsuperscript{25} Cf. De Civ. Dei, VI. 5, 3: “I see indeed why it (the civil kind) should be distinguished from the mythical, namely, because the latter is false, because it is base, because it is unworthy. But to wish to distinguish the natural from the civil, what else is that but to confess that the civil itself is erroneous (modesum)? Now if one of them is natural, what fault has it that it should be excluded? And if the one that is called civil be not natural, what merit has it that it should be admitted?”
that it creates from the point of view of the larger or nonphilosophic context of the city. For all we know, Augustine could very well have diagnosed Scaeuola’s psychology correctly. The pontiff did not have any reservations about natural theology as such, which "he did not regard as false"; his sole complaint is that it was not directly applicable to the political life. Whatever else one may think of the argument, its logic is perfectly sound. Scaeuola wanted the doctrines emanating from philosophical circles to be kept from the people not because they were false but because they were true. Had they been false, it would have been easy enough to counter them with a true account of the gods. Lies of this sort may be damaging but they can be refuted, and, once exposed, they must sooner or later be abandoned. Not so with the truth, which by definition cannot be disproved by means of rational arguments and which is more likely to prevail on condition that the evidence for it be properly laid out. The wisest policy was still to maintain a judicious silence about the teachings of the philosophers and to restrict their diffusion within reasonable limits. Philosophers and their disciples could think or say what they pleased in the privacy of their chambers, as long as they showed due respect for the opinions of the city. In his capacity as pontifex maximus, the learned Scaeuola was in no position to do otherwise. It stretches the imagination to think that an impious Scaeuola would have gone about flaunting his impiety.

Neither can one leave it at saying that Roman religion lacked a set of formulated dogmas, that it was not a matter of theory but of practice, that the question of the truth about the gods could not arise within the framework of Roman life, and that to raise doubts about the genuineness of Scaeuola’s religious convictions is to pose the problem in terms in which it did not pose itself to Scaeuola and his contemporaries. Ritual actions no doubt bulk large in ancient religion and they certainly antedate the philosophical speculations that begin to emerge, under the influence of Greek thought, during the course of the second and first centuries B.C. This hardly entitles us to ignore the impact of the new doctrines on Roman society once they had become available. Religious practices are rooted in and supported by certain opinions about the gods whose credibility is necessarily undermined by the spread of philosophic skepticism. If the works of Varro and Cicero prove anything, it is that the issue could no longer be restricted to the level of practice alone. A more thorough defense of religion was called for, of the kind that Balbus and Cotta are forced to undertake in the De Natura Deorum. The basic question concerns the nature of the arguments put forward in its behalf.

26. To bolster his point, Pépin alludes to the destruction of Porphyry’s Contra Christianos by Constantine and his followers and observes that no one would dream of adding, "for they did not hold (Porphyry’s theses) to be false" (p. 14). The analogy does little to clarify the issue, however, especially since Constantine’s motives have long been the subject of a heated and still unresolved debate among historians.
In that respect, there is indeed something to be learned from the example of Cotta, whose eagerness to profess his loyalty to the ancestral gods is matched only by the cogency of his case against them. Granted, Cotta’s attack is supposedly made for the sake of argument rather than out of personal conviction\(^{27}\), but one cannot remain blind to the element of truth that it might contain\(^{28}\).

That Cotta was aware of the precariousness of his situation is apparent from the fact that he twice reminds his hearers that he is « a Cotta and a pontiff\(^{29}\) », that is to say, a member of a distinguished Roman family and a religious leader, as if to signify that his ready disclaimer should perhaps be understood in that light. Under the circumstances, it comes as no surprise that he should cite Scaeuola as one of his authorities and praise him for his « prudence » and his « moderation\(^{30}\) », two virtues which he himself ostensibly sought to emulate. The whole question would require a much more detailed analysis of the *De Natura Deorum* than any that can be contemplated here, but, pending the results of such an investigation, we have no guarantee that Cotta had found a new and better way to relieve the tension between his « inner aspirations » and his responsibilities as a citizen and a pontiff\(^{31}\). As matters stand, his position remains fraught with a good deal of obscurity. Both he and Scaeuola could have been sincere, but the evidence does not all point in one direction.

Even if one assumes, be it only for purposes of discussion, that Scaeuola was not always completely candid in his public utterances, one wonders whether his behavior can fittingly be described as Machiavellian. Machiavelli appears to have been largely contemptuous of religion,

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27. *De Nat. Deor.*, III. 1, 4 and 4 : « What I have in mind is not so much to refute his (Balbus’s) speech as to ask for an explanation of the points that I could not quite understand. »

28. Cotta’s speech is a point by point rebuttal of Balbus, who had argued a) that the gods exist, b) that the world is rational, c) that it is ruled by the gods, and d) that these gods care for human beings. The danger implied in this habit of speaking by way of pretence is emphasized by Balbus in II. 67, 168 : « For it is a wicked and impious habit to argue against the gods, whether it be done from conviction or only in pretence. »

29. *De Nat. Deor.*, III. 2, 5 and 6. Cotta had previously been reminded of the same fact by Balbus, *ibid.*, II. 67, 168 : « For your part, Cotta, would you but listen to me, you would plead the same cause and reflect that you are a leading citizen and a pontiff. » Assuming that Cotta had internally dissociated himself from Roman religion, it is unlikely that he would have publicly owned as much. See his remark about the risks involved in any open disavowal of the gods, *ibid.*, III. 1, 3 : « I think that your master Epicurus does not put up a very strong fight on the question of the immortal gods; he only does not venture to deny their existence so as to avoid any antagonism (*invidia*) or any crime (*crimen*). » The self-protection of the speaker or the writer is alluded to by Augustine, *De Civ. Dei*, VI. 5, 1 and 8, 2, in connection with Varro.


although he had no qualms about using it for his own ends, and he 
abandons altogether the notion of the common good, for which, to the 
best of our information, Scaeuola exhibited a noble regard. That being 
the case, Scaeuola's willingness to dissemble can scarcely be construed 
as a reflection on his moral character. The lies to which he became a 
party were not ordinary lies, perpetrated at the expense of others and 
for his own personal benefit. They were meant to serve the interests 
of the city and the well-being of its citizens.

In addition to stressing Scaeuola's holiness and justice, Cicero tells us 
that he was the best orator among lawyers and the best lawyer among 
orators. The remark is clearly intended as a compliment, but its 
meaning hinges on a true appreciation of what Cicero took a good lawyer 
to be. Political lawyers speak on behalf of the city and are listened to 
in so far as they are believed to have its welfare at heart. They argue, 
not about the ends to which the city is dedicated, but about the means 
that are most conducive to those ends. Ideally, they must be well versed 
in all of the sciences, including the philosophic sciences; but in pleading 
public causes they also have to be guided by considerations of prudence. 
By reason of their complexity, public affairs often defy rational analysis 
and can rarely be decided or persuasively argued on the basis of truth 
alone. False but plausible arguments are therefore preferable to true 
but implausible ones, which is just a more polite way of saying that, 
whether he likes it or not, the orator must frequently resort to lies. 
His conduct in such instances has nothing in common with the self-

serving tactics advocated by Machiavelli. If anything, it constitutes 
an act of political wisdom. To impugn Scaeuola's character on the 
ground that he willfully acquiesced in the deception of lesser minds is to 
obliterate the distinction between an everyday understanding of justice 
and the higher sense of justice that animates the true statesman. It 
bears mentioning that Augustine himself does not quarrel with Scaeuola's 
intentions. He merely deplores the fact that he and so many of his

32. See, for example, The Prince, ch. 18: ...And it must be understood that a 
prince, and especially a new prince, cannot observe all those things which are 
considered good in men, being often obliged, in order to maintain the state, to 
act against faith, against charity, against humanity, and against religion. Unlike 
its innumerable predecessors, Machiavelli's book does not once mention the common 
good. Its central teaching, as stated in the famous chapter 15, is that a prince 
must rather learn how not to be good, and to use this knowledge and not use it 
 according to the necessity of the case. On the novelty of Machiavelli's religious 
and moral views, see J. Strauss, Thoughts on Machiavelli, Glencoe, 1958, pp. 174-

299.

33. De Orat., I. 39, 180: ...Scaeuola..., iuris peritorum eloquentissimus, eloquent-
tium iuris peritissimus.

34. Cf. Orator, 14 ff.; De Orat., I. 48, 60; II. 82, 337.

35. Orator, 15; De Orat., II. 44, 185 ff. and 49, 201 ff.; Tuscan. Disp., IV, 55.

36. On persuasion as the goal of rhetoric, cf. Orator, 128; De Orat., I. 14, 60; 
II. 53, 214; Brutus, 279. Also De Orat., II. 77, 310-311, where Cicero explains that 
the orator must hide what he is doing from his audience,
fellow countrymen should have been placed in a situation that would still be hopeless were it not for the advent of Christianity and the final revelation of the one true God.

There remains the problem of the interconnection of the three theologies, which is presumed to be the point on which Varro displays the greatest originality and on which, we are told, his thought differs most conspicuously from that of Scævola. The fact of the matter, however, is that, here as elsewhere, the texts carry no trace of a profound disagreement between the two authors. As Augustine observes on several occasions, Varro was writing, not as the founder of a new polity, but as the reformer of an ancient and well-established polity. He had his thoughts about what could be attempted under ideal conditions, and, like other philosophers, he questioned the validity of all anthropomorphic representations of the gods; but he was also aware of the nature of the realities with which reformers have to contend. Had he been free to do as he pleased, he probably would have done away with the old religion altogether, but such a drastic step was sure to be resisted by those who remained attached to it or had a vested interest in it. The only practical alternative was to seek some form of accommodation with it. This explains, among other things, why he was obliged to devote greater attention to poetic theology than would otherwise have

37. De Civ. Dei, IV, 31, 1: "What says Varro himself, whom we grieve to have found, albeit not by his own judgment, placing the scenic plays among things divine? When in many passages he exhorts, like a religious man, to the worship of the gods, does he not admit that it is not in accordance with his own judgment that he follows the things which he relates as having been instituted by Rome? Accordingly, he does not hesitate to confess that, if he had been founding that city anew, he would have preferred to designate the gods and their names on the basis of a rule drawn from nature. But since he belonged to a nation that was already ancient, he was forced by his own admission to retain the old names and surnames as they had been handed down, his purpose being to write about them and scrutinize them in such a way that the people would be inclined to worship them rather than despise them." Ibid., VI. 4, 2: "Had Varro been founding a new city himself, he would have written according to the rule of nature; but as he was dealing with an old one, he had no choice but to follow its traditions."

38. Cf. De Civ. Dei, VI 6, 2, where Augustine accounts for some of Varro's apparent contradictions by saying that in one place Varro was speaking of what ought to be done, and in another only of what could be done: "Hic enim dixit quid fieri debeat, ibi quid fiat."

39. Cf. De Civ. Dei, IV, 9; IV, 31, 2; VI, 7, 1 and 8, 2; VII, 5. On the Stoic opposition to these anthropomorphic representations, cf. P. Boyancé, loc. cit., p. 66.

40. Cf. De Civ. Dei, IV, 29: "The more intelligent and graver Romans saw these things but were powerless against the customs of a city that was bound to observe the rites of the demons. Ibid., VI. 6, 1: "O Marcus Varro, you who are the most acute and without any doubt the most learned of men, but still a man, ... you are afraid to offend the most corrupt opinions and customs of the populace in their public cult, though you yourself, having considered them on all sides, perceive them to be repugnant to the nature of the gods." Also IV, 9; IV, 31, 2; VI, 2; VII, 17, et passim.
been necessary. Whatever the origins of a particular religion may be, poets have an important part to play in its propagation. They function both as the unacknowledged legislators of the nation and as instruments used by actual legislators in establishing or perpetuating its religious traditions. It is therefore not surprising that sizable portions of poetic theology should eventually find their way into the public cult. To that extent at least, the line of demarcation between it and civil theology is bound to remain blurred. For all that, poetic theology has no official standing of its own. It lacks the authority of civil theology and is subject to whatever control the rulers, who have the final say in the matter, may wish to exercise over it.

Similar considerations apply to the relation between civil theology and natural theology. Given the need for a reform of Roman religion, there was nothing to prevent Varro from trying to purge it of some of its less desirable features. We know from Augustine that his own account of the gods was selective and left out much that was no longer judged advantageous or credible. This is not to say that civil theology can ever coincide with natural theology, but only that, to the degree to which it draws nearer to it, it becomes less vulnerable to the attacks that reason is able to mount against it. Even in its perfected state, it still presents itself as a compromise between the theology of the philosophers, which demands too much of most people, and that of the poets, which demands too little of them.

Varro did as much as he reasonably could and no more. He never doubted that the gods of the Roman pantheon were creations of the human mind and he intimated as much by the very structure of his treatise, in which the discussion of human things is made to precede that of divine things. If he had thought otherwise, he would have reversed the order and given priority to divine things, for one speaks first of the painter or the architect and only afterwards of the picture or the building.

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41. See esp. De Ciu. Dei, II, 14, where Plato, that demigod (semideus), is commended for having been more consistent than the Romans in calling for the banishment of all poets.

42. De Ciu. Dei, VI, 6, 3: Civil theology is therefore not quite disjunct from that of the poets—non ergo nulla cum poetis. Cf. VI, 8, 2: for the fabulious and the civil are both fabulious and both civil. The theatre is itself an institution of civil society; it only thrives within it and has no real existence apart from it; Ibid., VI, 5, 3.

43. See the allusions to the supervisory power of the Senate in such matters, De Ciu. Dei, II, 5 and VI, 9, 1.

44. De Ciu. Dei, IV, 31, 1: Quibus uerbis homo autissimus satis indicat non se aperire omnia, quae non sibi tantum contemptui essent, sed etiam ipsi uulgo despiendi uiderentur, nisi tacerentur.


46. De Ciu. Dei, VI, 4, 2: For he (Varro) wrote the books concerning human things, not with reference to the whole world, but to Rome; which books, he said,
This and nothing else is the secret of his book\textsuperscript{47}. He knew full well that, since the gods did not exist, human beings could not be descended from them, but he also realized that most people would think more highly of themselves and aspire to greater deeds if they cherished the belief in their own divine descent\textsuperscript{48}. Therein lies the reason for which Augustine chose to classify him among those who defended the gods, not on account of this life, but on account of virtue or the life after death\textsuperscript{49}. In short, his concerns were those of a public-spirited writer who knows that what is best for him is not necessarily what is best for everyone else and who seeks to preserve the perspective of the dutiful citizen even as he himself transcends it\textsuperscript{50}. The reform that he projected defines accurately the possibilities as well as the limits of the political activity of the philosopher.

Except for the hypothetical reconstructions of modern scholarship, little is known of Varro’s proximate sources\textsuperscript{51}, but to all intents and purposes his program parallels closely that of the Athenian stranger in Plato’s \textit{Laws}, whose overall aim is to teach, not how one «founds» a new city in speech, as Socrates had done in the \textit{Republic}\textsuperscript{52}, but how one goes about improving an ancient and eminently respectable, though possibly decaying, regime. It is not without interest that the stranger’s conversation is carried on with two elderly statesmen, one a Cretan and the other a Spartan, both of whom are convinced of the superiority of their allegedly god-given codes of laws and look askance at any hint that they might leave something to be desired. The problem to which the dialogue points from the beginning is that of overcoming their resist-

\textsuperscript{47} Cf. \textit{De Civ. Dei}, VI, 8, 2.

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Ibid.}, III, 4: «For even Varro, a very learned heathen, all but admits that these stories are false, though he does not boldly and confidently say so. But he maintains it is useful for cities that brave men believe, though falsely, that they are descended from the gods, so that in this manner the human spirit, cherishing the belief in its divine origin, will both more boldly venture into great enterprises, and will carry them out more energetically, and will therefore by its very confidence secure more abundant success.»

\textsuperscript{49} Cf. \textit{De Civ. Dei}, VI, 1, 1; \textit{Retract.}, II, 43, 1.

\textsuperscript{50} Varro claimed to be writing, not for himself, but for the benefit of others; \textit{De Civ. Dei}, VI, 1, 2. His fear was that religion, which is essential to the city, was in danger of perishing from sheer neglect; \textit{ibid.}, VI, 2.

\textsuperscript{51} On the state of the question, see Pêpin, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 28-32 and 298-307.

\textsuperscript{52} Cf. \textit{Plato}, \textit{Republic}, III, 403\textsuperscript{b}; IV, \textit{427} \textsuperscript{d}; V, \textit{427} \textsuperscript{d}; IX, \textit{592} \textsuperscript{b}, and, on the greater freedom that «founders» enjoy in dealing with these matters, \textit{ibid.}, II, \textit{379} \textsuperscript{a}: «And I said, ‘Adeimantus, you and I aren’t poets right now but founders of a city. It’s appropriate for founders to know the models according to which the poets must tell their tales. If what the poets produce goes counter to these models, founders must not give way; however, they must not themselves make up tales» (A. Bloom transl., \textit{The Republic of Plato}, New York and London, 1968, p. 56).
ance and gradually opening them up to the possibility of change\textsuperscript{53}. Significantly, the proposals that are about to be made are far less radical than the ones set forth in the \textit{Republic}. They fail to include the community of wives, children and property\textsuperscript{54}, the rule of the philosopher-king\textsuperscript{55}, the expulsion of poets\textsuperscript{56}, the rustication of all but the youngest members of the society\textsuperscript{57}, and a number of other far-reaching innovations, which, we now discover, could never be implemented save among "gods or children of the gods\textsuperscript{58}", that is, among people to whom the attachments stemming from the body and the prospect of individual death are of no concern. The relative merit of the new proposals is that they take prevailing opinion into account and are generally content to suggest ways in which the old codes could be revised without prejudice to the authority they already enjoy.

As might have been anticipated, much of the argument centers on the role of the gods in human life and on the roots of man's religious impulse. Civil society cannot dispense with the belief in solicitous gods who lend significance to the ephemeral lives of its citizens and support the view that the just life is also the most pleasant life\textsuperscript{59}. Most human beings find it difficult to sacrifice themselves for a cause that promises them nothing in return. They are more apt to love justice if they stand to benefit by it and to love their own country if it can claim the favor of its gods\textsuperscript{60}. The only question has to do with the \textit{kind} of gods in which they should believe. In the best instance, these ought not to be cruel or punitive gods, constantly warring against one another and hostile to human beings, but harmonious and benevolent gods, capable of providing the model of a life that more nearly approximates the life of reason\textsuperscript{61}. On the other hand, if only that virtue which is founded on knowledge merits the name of true virtue, the city as a whole can never be expected to


\textsuperscript{54} Cf. \textit{Republic}, V, 457\textsuperscript{d}-462\textsuperscript{e}.

\textsuperscript{55} \textit{Ibid.}, V, 473\textsuperscript{e} e.

\textsuperscript{56} \textit{Ibid.}, III, 398\textsuperscript{a} b; X, 606\textsuperscript{a}-607\textsuperscript{d}.

\textsuperscript{57} \textit{Ibid.}, VII, 547\textsuperscript{a}.

\textsuperscript{58} \textit{Laws}, V, 739\textsuperscript{d}. Plato has just made it clear that, in practice, one can never hope to obtain more than a second-best regime; cf. 739\textsuperscript{a} e. The reference to the community of wives and children in 739\textsuperscript{e} appears to be the only explicit reference to the \textit{Republic} in all of the \textit{Laws}.

\textsuperscript{59} E.g., \textit{Laws}, II, 664\textsuperscript{e} e.

\textsuperscript{60} Cf. \textit{ibid.}, III, 691\textsuperscript{a} 6; 692\textsuperscript{b} ; 699\textsuperscript{e}.

\textsuperscript{61} \textit{Ibid.}, IV, 716\textsuperscript{a}-717\textsuperscript{b}, and, on the question of the concordant and discordant gods, AUGUSTINE, \textit{De Ciu. Dei}, VI. 9, 2.
possess more than an «image» of it. Few people live mainly for the sake of the truth, and the many who are unable or unwilling to do so have more to lose than to gain by being exposed to a philosophic education that explains all things in terms of «divine necessities» rather than of «divine will» or intention. For this reason if for no other, lies will always be necessary; but the wise legislator will at least see to it that they be of a nobler and more beneficial sort. Assuming the impossibility of universal or widespread enlightenment, no other decent course of action could seriously be entertained.

One gathers from Augustine's frequent remarks that this was also the rationale behind Varro's proposed reform. Whether Scaeuola had a similar program in mind remains unclear for lack of more solid information. Scaeuola, after all, was not a philosopher, although he does not appear to have been untouched by philosophical ideas. But there are no signs to indicate that he would have objected to the views of his younger contemporary.

The object of the first five books of the City of God was to refute the old but newly refurbished claim that Rome owed its enlargement to the protection of its gods and that its present weakness, dramatically attested to by the humiliation that it had lately suffered at the hands of Alaric and his Goths, was a manifest consequence of their abandonment in favor of Christianity. One way to lay the argument to rest was to show that the evils for which Christians were being blamed antedated the rise of the new Faith and hence could not have originated with it. At hardly any moment in its long history had Rome been free of war and rid of the threat that it posed to its security. The rebuttal was not foolproof, however, for it overlooked the fact that, in spite of everything, pagan Rome had not only thrived but had managed to reach the pinnacle of worldly power. Convincing as it may have sounded to the «unlearned rabble» or the «silly populace» whose support was courted by both

63. Laws, VII, 818a d.
64. Ibid., II, 663d e: «Athenian: Even if what the argument has now established were not the case, could a lawmaker of any worth ever tell a lie more profitable than this (i.e., he ever has the daring to lie to the young for the sake of a good cause), or more effective in making everybody do all the just things willingly, and not out of compulsion? — Kleinius: Truth is a noble and lasting thing; but it is likely that it's not easy to persuade people of it.» It should be noted that even Socrates’s perfect city in speech rests on a twofold lie: its citizens must be persuaded that they are begotten of the land they inhabit and hence are all brothers, and, second, that the position which they occupy within the society is determined by their natural dispositions; Republic, III, 414b 415a. Cf. ibid., V, 439c: «It is likely that our rulers will have to use a throng of lies and deceptions for the benefit of the ruled. And, of course, we said that everything of this sort is useful as a form of remedy.»
66. Ibid., IV, 1; VI, 1, 4.
sides, it did nothing to assuage the fears engendered in certain quarters by the rapid growth of a peace-loving religion and its recent proclamation as the official cult of a nation that had formerly been « dedicated to Mars⁶⁷. » A new tack was needed, which would bring to light both the true cause of Rome's erstwhile prosperity and the absurdity of the claim that the traditional gods had anything to do with it.

To clinch his argument, Augustine had only to point out that the pagan intelligentsia itself had long since ceased to take the existence of these gods seriously, even though it continued to uphold their cult on the theory that any substantial departure from the time-hallowed customs of the city was bound to have an adverse effect on the patriotism of its citizens⁶⁸. The manoeuvre was a clever one, based as it was on a principle whose force even his adversaries were compelled to recognize. If not only the philosophers but the pontiffs themselves could preserve or restore Roman paganism only at the expense of a blatant falsehood, how much more ready should they be to accept a religion that was both true and edifying⁶⁹! Lies cannot be maintained indefinitely. There are forces at work within society itself which, as time goes on, necessitate the abolition of polytheism and its replacement by a rationally defensible monotheistic creed.

What is striking, however, is that, even as he pokes fun at the pagan gods in general, Augustine is careful to avoid any direct assault on the last remnants of the old civil religion. It has often been remarked that his handling of this matter is hopelessly anachronistic, that it focuses on a host of picturesque but obsolete deities which it paradoxically restores to a kind of shadowy existence, that with rare exceptions his account is devoid of contemporary allusions, and that we learn next to nothing about living paganism from the pages of his book⁷⁰. Scholars

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⁶⁷. Ibid., IV, 29.

⁶⁸. Cf. ibid., II, 3; IV, I; VI, Praef. Also Cicero, De Nat. Deor., I. I, 4: «In all probability the disappearance of piety toward the gods will entail the disappearance of loyalty and the bond of unity among human beings as well, and of justice itself, the queen of all the virtues.» Cf. ibid., III. 2, 5: «I have always thought that none of these departments of religion was to be despised, and I have held that conviction that Romulus by his auspices and Numa by his establishment of our ritual had laid the foundations of our city, which assuredly could never have been as great as it is had not the fullest measure of divine favor been obtained for it.»

⁶⁹. De Civ. Dei, IV, 22.

have sometimes been tempted to explain this anomaly by observing that most of Augustine's data is borrowed from Varro, whose work does not appear to have been a canon on the subject of religion. But this still leaves us with the question of why Augustine should have chosen to follow Varro in the first place.

One possible answer to this intriguing question is that the approach adopted in the *City of God* was dictated in large measure by the conservative mood of the early-fifth century; in which case Augustine's antiquarianism would not be his own but that of his educated contemporaries, who, in the face of the impending crisis, had themselves become "fanatical antiquarians," seeking to "invest their religion in the distant past" and preferring "any form of religion and philosophy that could boast a *litterata veintas*." Outmoded as it may seem to us, his critique of the old gods has a sharp air of timeliness about it. Augustine was obviously not writing to please modern scholars, who tend to exhibit a livelier interest in such novel forms of religious sensibility as may have been derived from the mystery cults, Oriental religion, and Mithraism. Circumstances demanded rather that he try to "intercept" the pagans with whom he was doing battle in what had proved to be their last retreat. Admittedly, the paganism that he set out to demolish existed mainly in books, but if he looked for it there, it is because he had guessed that "the best way to reach these late pagans was through their libraries." Only by means of this otherwise baffling return to the remote past was he able to uncover the tainted origins of the ancestral cults and expose the massive "whitewash" of which they had been the object over the centuries. Viewed in this light, his attitude is not at all that of a conservative but that of "a true radical, faced with the myths of conservatism."

Even this may not tell the whole story, however. One does well to remember, first of all, that the burden of the whole first part of the *City of God* was to dismiss the view that Rome was beholden to its gods for the successes that it had achieved in former days. This alone might be thought to justify the rather onesided emphasis on past rather than present religious practice. More importantly, we have no assurance that the quaint deities which Augustine dredges up with Varro's help, and on whose names he sometimes puns shamelessly, were even remem-

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1. HAGENDAHL, p. 608.


3. BROWN, *ibid*.

4. See, for example, the almost scurrilous remarks about Pertunda in *De Civ. Dei*, VI. 9, 3.
bered, let alone reverenced, by the pagans themselves. By reverting to a book that appears to have been mostly ignored at the time\textsuperscript{75}, Augustine was hardly meeting head on the major concerns of his more thoughtful opponents. Besides, earlier apologists, Tertullian and Arnobius among them, had ridiculed some of the same gods in roughly the same way and for the same broad reasons\textsuperscript{76}. One would then have to suppose that the oblivion into which these gods had lapsed was a fairly recent phenomenon, or else that the conservative trend which is said to be characteristic of the first decades of the fifth century had already set in long before that time\textsuperscript{77}. As for the neglect of the mystery cults, historical scholarship has not yet turned up many documents to prove that they were sufficiently widespread or of sufficient public interest to rivet Augustine's attention\textsuperscript{78}.

All of this leads to the suspicion that his seemingly odd procedure was inspired by a different and perhaps slightly more political set of motives. Augustine could simply have discerned in Varro's forgotten classic the most complete and most searching analysis of Roman religion ever produced by a Latin writer, along with a ready-made critique of that religion which could be exploited for a new and higher purpose. This much seems to be implied in the unusually lavish praise that he bestows upon its author and which would be out of place if it did not reflect a genuine admiration for his accomplishment. The actual matter of Varro's work was no longer up to date and may even have been outdated from the start\textsuperscript{79}, but there is no reason to believe that in the interval the principles governing its treatment had shed any of their relevance.

At the same time, one wonders whether Augustine's keen sensitivity to the needs of the social life and his profound attachment to Rome, "wicked and dissolute as it was\textsuperscript{80} ", were not such as to induce him to

\textsuperscript{75} For an overall assessment of the \textit{Nachleben} of Varro's \textit{Antiquitates}, see B. \textsc{Cardauns}, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 125-129. Servius and Nonius appear to be the only other Latin writers of late antiquity to have had any firsthand knowledge of the work.

\textsuperscript{76} E.g., Tertullian, \textit{Ad Nat.}, II, 11; Arnobius, \textit{Adv. Nat.}, III, 23-26; IV, 1-7.


\textsuperscript{78} Cf. B. \textsc{Cardauns}, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 129.

\textsuperscript{79} Cf. Hagnendahl, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 608, who suggests that Varro's work \textit{represented} a learned reconstruction of early Roman religion rather than gave a true picture of conditions in Varro's own age.

temper the radicalness of his own critique by couching it in terms that remain somewhat cautious. We have only a limited knowledge of the extent to which, at that relatively late date, paganism had maintained its hold on various segments of the population; but that it was still a vital force in nearby circles is evidenced by the fact that some of Augustine’s own friends, who had been catechumens for years, were reluctant to accept baptism for fear that its demands might conflict with the duties of citizenship. To assail civil religion frontally would have been to rob the community of whatever benefit it could conceivably derive from it in an age of mounting political turmoil and instability. So long as Christianity had not yet succeeded in dislodging its antagonist from the hearts of all people, there was always the danger of adding to the confusion by creating a vacuum that no one was in a position to fill immediately. Inbred habits and long custom change only with time and through a process of education that admits of no short cuts. God himself had taken centuries to educate the human race. The more prudent solution, it seems, was to take issue with an archaic religion for the sake of demonstrating, if only by implication, the fundamental defect of contemporary pagan religion or, for that matter, of any form of civil religion.

It is thus fair to say that Augustine’s treatment of political theology


82. See esp. Epist. 151, 14: «Since you wish to hear the truth, there is indeed one thing in you which distresses me exceedingly: it is that, although qualified by age as well as by life and character to do otherwise, you still prefer to remain a catechumen, as if it were not possible for believers to administer the affairs of the commonwealth that much better and more faithfully as they are better and more faithful Christians.» Epist. 136, 2 (Marcellinus to Augustine): «Another one of Volusianus’s objections is that what Christianity enjoins and teaches is in no way consistent with the way of life of the commonwealth... These difficulties, he thinks, may be added to his earlier question; for, though he is silent on this point, it is manifest that the commonwealth has fallen on evil days under the rule of emperors who are dedicated for the most part to the Christian religion.» Augustine’s response to this objection is found in Epist. 138, 2, 9.

83. Cf. GEFFCKEN, op. cit., p. 226: «Seen in another way, Christianity, still a young religion, was not yet able to provide the strong support which, during times of grave external danger, people needed; in their wretchedness, men of all ranks, both high and low, longed for the old ways in matters of religion.»

84. On the role and importance of custom in human affairs, see, for example, Conf., III. 8, 15; De Civ. Dei, XV, 16.
is itself political, combining as it does an unflinching commitment to the truth with a deep sympathy for the failings of ordinary human beings. As such, it bears a curious analogy to the one for which Varro had opted centuries earlier. Varro censured poetic theology openly and civil theology only indirectly by manifesting its subtle connection with poetic theology\textsuperscript{85}. As a Christian, Augustine could not afford to be less concerned with the welfare of his fellow countrymen, including those whose religious opinions he did not share but which he was nevertheless careful not to offend any more than was necessary\textsuperscript{86}. He obviously had no use for Varro’s art of dissembling and he made it abundantly clear that lies of any kind, noble or otherwise, were not to be endorsed under any circumstances\textsuperscript{87}. Still, he was not averse to passing some truths over in silence if there was any chance that their premature disclosure might work to the detriment of others\textsuperscript{88}. His own strategy, whatever its merits, sheds light in retrospect on the ultimate reason for which Scaeuola, Varro, Cicero, and Seneca, to list only those whom he himself mentions, were loath to condemn what they secretly repudiated and saw fit to comply with what they knew to be false.

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\textsuperscript{85} De Civ. Dei, VI. 8, 2.

\textsuperscript{86} He could be harsh when he wanted to, especially if he detected a note of bad faith in his correspondent; witness his reply to the pagan, Maximus of Madaura, Epist. 17.

\textsuperscript{87} He returned to the subject with astonishing frequency, not only in the \textit{De Menda}, and the \textit{Contra Menda}, but in numerous other places as well. For the reasons underlying his uncompromising stance on lies, see E. L. Fortin, \textit{Augustine and the Problem of Christian Rhetoric}, in \textit{Augustinian Studies} 5 (1975), pp. 101-119.

\textsuperscript{88} \textit{Contra Menda.}, X, 23: • To hide the truth is not the same thing as to utter a lie. Every liar writes to conceal the truth, but not everyone who conceals the truth is a liar; for we often conceal the truth not only by lying but by remaining silent... It is therefore permissible for a speaker and an exponent or preacher of eternal truths, or even for someone who discusses or pronounces upon temporal matters pertaining to the edification of religion and piety, to conceal at an opportune moment anything that may seem advisable to conceal; but it is never permissible to lie and hence to conceal by means of lies. • Cf. \textit{De Menda.}, X, 17.