

Fighting for the City of God: Christian and Hellenic Appropriation of Plato's *Republic*  
in the Late Roman Empire

Following the Visigothic sack of Rome and the Vandal invasion of the western empire, Hellenes blame Christians for attacking traditional Roman religious institutions and practices, abandoning the gods, and inciting divine wrath against Rome. To defend the faith, Augustine constructs a monumental apology in the *City of God*, which is loosely based on Plato's *Republic*. Although Augustine begins by deconstructing pagan allegations, he goes on to reconstruct the history of Rome as a conflict between the city of man and the city of God, which commences even before original sin and extends through the Patriarchs to the kingdom of David, down to Jesus Christ, and on to the apocalypse. In the process, Augustine appropriates both Hellenic philosophy and Jewish history, though Pagan and Jewish cultural practices had been made anathema under Theodosius, to effectively Christianize world history, philosophy, and religion.

Beginning his *Commentary on Plato's Republic (In Remp)* about a decade after Augustine finishes the *City of God*, Proclus, then head of the Athenian Academy in Athens, constructs an equally ambitious defense not of Christianity but of all Hellenic culture, especially Homer and the tragedians but also the Platonic and Aristotelian commentary tradition on the *Republic*, which he cites as a kind of exegetical genealogy for doxographic support. In fact, Proclus is engaged in a culture war with Christianity and uses the authority of tradition no less methodically than does Augustine in his reconstruction of Roman history on the model of the *Old Testament* Patriarchs. Similarly, both Augustine and Proclus intend their vision of the state to be used for educational purposes. While Augustine completes his pedagogical work *De Doctrina Christiana* the year the *City of God* is published (426), Proclus introduces his *In Remp* with a guide for graduate students on how to teach Hellenic literature in a hostile Christian

environment. By the 440s the Academy in Athens is one of the last bastions of traditional Classical education.

A theme common to Plato, Augustine, and Proclus is the literary depiction of the gods, what role they should play in their respective educational curriculum, and what type of education produces the best state. My paper examines how Augustine and Proclus appropriate the arguments of Plato for their own purposes. Whereas Plato writes in the aftermath of the Peloponnesian war to offer an ideal alternative to Athenian democracy, Augustine is writing 800 years later as a provincial subject of the Roman empire, in fact as dedicated to the empire as he is to Christianity, since the empire has now been assimilated to the history of Christianity. Like Plato, he criticizes the gods for immorality and irrationality, not to sublimate them, but to discredit and supplant them with the one authentic God, in fact, the true cause of the long success of the Roman empire. Proclus cannot speak with the same license against Christianity. Early in his career he spent a year in exile because of Christian political opposition and, according to his student Marinus, was thereafter forced to work behind the scenes through his students. Hence the pedagogical introduction to his commentary. Proclus is faced with a particularly difficult task. As a dedicated Hellene, he is determined to salvage the entirety of the religious, philosophical, and literary heritage of Classical antiquity, and to rally its powers against what he considers the dangerous, new religion of Christianity. Yet Plato himself criticizes Homer, Hesiod, and the tragedians, and Aristotle refutes much of Plato's teaching. So, Proclus must first demonstrate how Plato was right in rejecting the mythographers, but also why and how myth is valuable. He must similarly show how Plato and Aristotle both disagree and complement each other.

The conclusions drawn by Augustine and Proclus are telling and far-reaching. For the former, there is no more need for Pagan education. Christianity can provide its own curriculum.

In fact, the city of man may be in jeopardy, but the true focus should be the city of God, which will be victorious in the end. For Proclus, again, the task is challenging. Not only must he save Hellenic culture in the face of widespread Christian oppression, but must also train teachers to work with students in often hostile contexts around the empire. Most importantly, however, he must prepare powerful and influential men, such as the future emperor Anthemius or the *magister militum* Marcellinus, to enter into Roman government and to realize at least a part of his vision of Plato's *Republic*.