Augustine (354-430 A.D.)

Christianity between persecution, Roman state religion and civilizing power

Cicero’s fears – as we know – became reality. During the period of the Roman empire there were rulers who saw in their office or in their military might the only source of law, which was often felt by their subjects to be unjust and arbitrary. In this situation the teachings of Christianity must have been seen as consolation by the oppressed, but as provocation by those in power in the Roman state. Persecution of Christians was the final attempt by Roman emperors to demonstrate their absolute claim to power before the whole of the people. But early Christianity proved to be the stronger moral force for co-existence of different social classes and peoples. When the Roman emperor Constantine realized this, he conceded the Christians the same recognition of their religion as of the Roman religion in the year 313. In 391 the Roman emperor Theodosius I even declared Christianity to be the state religion and forbade all pagan cults. A few decades later the Roman empire collapsed under the onset of the Germanic migrations.

At this time Augustine was writing his treatise on the City of God. At first he only intended to refute the reproach that the Christians had watered down the old virtues of the Romans and shaken belief in the Roman gods. Because of this the Roman state had grown weak and collapsed after 1000 years of existence. But this apologetic became a work of political philosophy whose effects are still felt today and which separated Christianity from the destiny of the Roman state, with which it could otherwise easily have come to an end.

For Augustine man lives in two states or cities. One he calls the earthly city, whether in the form of the Roman or of another state is of little significance to him, since man is only a pilgrim on earth; the other quite different state of a strictly transcendental nature he calls the City of God. (T 1/12)

Meaning and aim of the state: which values are the most important?

The earthly city must create justice and serve peace, i.e. serve an order which gives each person his proper place. It is not allowed to hinder the practising of the Christian religion, as this accompanies man into the realm of true peace in the City of God in the next world. At the same time the earthly city becomes a vessel in which man prepares for eternal life in the City of God. This profoundly Christian preparation obviously benefits the earthly state, whose concrete, i.e. terrestrial existence is of secondary importance to Augustine, since the decisive thing in man’s life is only the peace of the hereafter. (T 1/13)

What is the relationship between the earthly and heavenly cities?

As eternal peace in the next world held the greater importance for Augustine, he was open to all possible forms of co-existence on earth. This did help the survival of Christianity in the following centuries, but left the concrete participation of people in the political formation of government hanging in the balance. (T 1/14)

Summary
- In contrast to the cyclical events of history, as they were perceived in classical times and as they play a certain role in Asia up to the present day, Augustine developed a linear representation which corresponded to a divine plan of salvation leading all events on earth to culminate in the Day of Judgement at the very end of time. In a secular form this idea had influence through Hegel and Marx right up to the present time.

- Within the framework of the debate on values the idea of a linear sequence of history also has its consequences, for it at least makes possible a relative orientation for speaking about progress or retrogression in the development of values and concrete rights and duties.

- The separation of the Christian religion and the principle of being open to the most various forms of political power is an achievement of Augustine which has allowed Christianity an enormous flexibility within the world up until today. This becomes all the clearer when one considers the problems Islam still has today with the relationship between power and religion.

- Augustine, a teacher of Latin rhetoric in his early years, also knew how to include classical philosophy and science as propaedeutic to Christian Theology so that the classical heritage was diligently cultivated in the monasteries right through the Middle Ages. This put at the disposal of Christian thinking in the west the two most highly developed languages of classical times - Greek and Latin - and this independently of any one particular people whose language it was. What this meant becomes really clear when one considers what great difficulties the Muslims had with Koran Arabic in understanding the modern world from the 18th century, and this is often the case still today.