
Etienne Gilson begins his recently translated work, *The Metamorphoses of the City of God*, with these words, “The contemporary world suffers the pains of childbirth. With enormous turmoil a universal society is being born.” These words were uttered in 1952. We, like Gilson, are the witnesses to the process of this childbirth. The major events that we are experiencing are also of “a planetary character.” We, too, can recognize that:

Planetary unity has been achieved. Economic, industrial, and technical reasons in general, all of which we can view as tied to practical applications of the natural sciences, have established a *de facto* solidarity among peoples of the earth. Consequently, their vicissitudes are combined in a universal history of which they are particular aspects. Whatever the different peoples of the world may think about it, they have become parts of a humanity that is more natural than social.

We, even more so than he, are under a growing social pressure to will that humanity devise a means to organize the world into a society. For if we do not act with deliberation to organize our society, the world, and with it, our societies, will be organized haphazardly for us. They both will be organized as if all beings were things and not persons. Economics, modern science, and its technology can only properly order things, and they do so more and more efficiently. And we place the care and direction of our political policies and concerns more and more in the hands of the experts of scientific technology and economics. The organization of a rational society is beyond the specific interests and capacities of these powers alone. What is needed is to form a fitting idea of a universal society of humankind to guide us.

Because Gilson recognized the importance of this problem, he devoted this book to the study of
the origin and history of one idea, that of a universal society of man. In his first chapter, the author provides the pre-history that explains how this idea came to be conceived from various pre-conceptual perceptions and lived experiences. In the second, he presents the origin of the idea itself. The idea is born in the work of a theologian, St. Augustine, in his magnum opus, *The City of God*. In chapters three through nine, Gilson then traces the various transformations, or metamorphoses, of the idea of a universal society. In chapter nine, “The City of Scientists,” the idea finds its final transformation in the work of Auguste Comte. Gilson later makes several remarks about Marx and Marxism, for “Marx’s universal society is another sign of the times.” In Marxism “it is no longer spirit that leads but matter.” Here humanity is bound by economic and historical determinism. “None of those whom we have examined from Augustine to Comte would call that a society.” Gilson’s final judgment reads: “Marxism has only slipped down the slope of political imperialism. At the date we write these lines, the candidates to the universal empire are found in Moscow.” “Marxism is the most sustained effort the world has ever known to establish the perfect coincidence of the temporal city and the Earthly City.” Today we see other, similar ideologies in play. As Gilson’s readers learn from Augustine, who lived in the empire of the Romans, the universal society of humankind is not a mere political empire established by force, whether it be historical, martial, or economic. A union of all in common submission is not a “union of all in agreement of wills.” As Gilson remarks, “The history of our own time abounds in parodies of the City of God.”

In its form, Gilson’s work is a study of the history of this one idea and the multiple transformations it undergoes throughout its intellectual history. He does so because he sees in the history of an idea that one can find “the raw material for philosophical reflection.” So, this work is a philosophical experiment in which we see what is essential in the idea of a universal society of humankind and what is distortive, or inessential, to the intelligible essence of that idea. The object of this work, he explains, “is to gather some of its data and to clarify the meaning of the question.” The main question is: what in itself is the *idea* of a universal human society? Gilson answers that question by uncovering the origin of the idea in its most complete form and tracing its various transformations over time.

*Domus, urbs, orbis*, these three name the place, or space, wherein a community of persons, what Gilson calls “a society of rational beings,” can conceivably be established. A household, a city, and a world can designate an order of things, natural or volitional. But each of these can also name a form of a society of rational beings who can order themselves and their things. Each society, as Gilson following Augustine explains, orders everything and everyone to a shared communal good that is loved by each and every one.

“Physical force is certainly a bond, but it is not a social bond. There is a society only where the harmony of minds and hearts binds the individuals and persons together. Accordingly, those for whom harmony is the bond form a people.” They are united by their common order of loves and by their working together for one common and actively shared good. A universal
human society or social body will be to the city “what the city itself is to families and through them to individuals, in short a human society worthy of the name.” As the city completes the social aspirations and needs found in the family and its members, so the universal society of intellectual beings is to complete the social aspirations and needs of all humans and thus of humanity itself. As Aristotle relates in his *Politics*, the family household is the primary human society, founded upon the natural needs pertinent to preservation and upon the natural need for the propagation and preservation of the species, a need more natural than voluntary. As the household pursues its proper work, there is a further need recognized for a larger societal bond, the village. And the village itself culminates in the recognition of the natural need men have to deliberatively and voluntarily form themselves as a people in a city.

Thus, according to Aristotle, the *polis* or city is the perfecting community in which humans as a people can live and live well. It is here and here alone that humans can live nobly and with proper justice. For Aristotle “Justice is something political, for right is the arrangement of the political community, and right is a discrimination of what is just.” Such a city is both a political and a social body, or communion, while the family is a social but not yet a political society. For Aristotle the *polis* is the complete human community. There is no society that transcends it because there is no other society which can do the work of justice, for which *telos* the city is established. Aristotle further specifies that this political community could exist only if it were neither too small nor too large. For the accomplishment of its work of justice and of living a human life well could be accomplished only if its size met, but did not exceed, the natural limits of human bonding. There is a finite extension of our love and care. The city’s completeness is also based upon the fact that the city provided humans with the only society which is self-sufficient, as it alone satisfied the needs of human nature, body and soul. Unfortunately for this philosophy, human history has shown that the city as Aristotle conceived it was unable in another respect to be self-sufficient in fact. For the Greek cities were unable to defend themselves from the forces produced by larger trans-political nations and empires. The material finitude of the *urbs* seems to require for its survival a trans-political “political” teaching and a trans-political space or realm. There would appear to be a limit to be found then only in the limit of the *orbis* itself. Thus our questions: can there be a cosmic order which is not merely an order of things, a merely martial or economic order? Can there be a planetary state? Can there be a universal society of humankind, and if there can be, must it also be a world government or state?

The idea of a universal society of man, according to Gilson, first appeared in Augustine’s *City of God*. As a theologian inspired by faith, Augustine found that in the history of humankind there is, in fact, a single source behind the variegated streams of history across cultures and time. He also sees that this source very quickly generates two societies that include all of humankind, the City of God and the Earthly City. The Earthly City “aspires to the universality that is initially attributed to the City of God.” This theology of history is the thought that “alone unveils the origin and end of history.” Gilson notes that Augustine can write a universal history, a theology of history, and not itself a philosophy of history, because, through faith his “project” implied the prior acknowledgement of the unity of humankind and, consequently, the unity of history. That the history of man is one and universal is because it starts with a single human who is the immediate source of all other humans. It would be a single universal society if every intellectual being were united in one society because they each shared the one love of the One who is the good and the true. There are, in fact, two Mystical Cities because Adam’s progeny chose to follow as their final good either that of Cain or Abel. “Therefore, Augustine never conceived the idea of a single universal society, but of two, which are universal at least in the sense that every human, whoever he is, is necessarily a citizen of one or the other.”

Gilson concludes by proposing what lessons we can learn from this “history of the City of God
and the avatars it has assumed during the course of the centuries.” First, this City “cannot be
metamorphosized.” More importantly, we learn “that every attempt to usurp its title and goal
can bring misfortunes to the human societies that claim to realize it on earth.” Why is this so?
The City of God binds its citizens by means of the knowledge included in faith, hope, and love,
while these usurpers depend on a merely human bond of science or philosophy. They seek the
peace of God by merely human means and through a human mode of peace, which is merely a
cessation of conflict without the bond of a common love. Gilson recognizes that “science,
letters, law, philosophy and even so much technology” unite humans more and more closely.
“But the size of a society does not change its essence.” A society must live upon one truth. It
must be in accord with what Augustine proposed as its essence: “a collection of human beings
sharing in the love of one and the same good.” The merely natural cannot transform itself into
something more than the natural, for the human is more that the merely natural and human
love is more than a merely natural love. Consent is not enough. Those who would enter into
this union with passive acceptance without actually and primarily loving the same one true
good of humankind will not be genuinely integrated and united. “The stones of the city are not
the living rock.” Our politics, the City of Man, can move stones, but it cannot move human
hearts.

Comte seems to understand this, and he proposes a remedy greater than mere coercion, a
remedy that still animates in our time. The remedy seems to confirm, in its own way, a truth
that Augustine taught. We need a faith to bind us together. For Comte “demonstrated that the
science of things cannot be the unifying truth of humans or the bond of their society.” Comte
finds that our modern society is in need of a religion, with a modern god and a modern mode
of faith. He proposes “a positive faith,” a demonstrable faith—the universal faith of men in
Science. This, the god of modern rationalism, is what Comte substitutes for the discarded
notion of the Christian God and the theological faith of the past. Gilson quotes these words of
Comte:

> Positivism today comes to take up again the immense task of building, with a
> suitable doctrine and in a favorable situation, so as to finally determine the
definitive formation of the authentic Universal Church...its faith is real enough
> and complete enough to be equally suited to all parts of the human planet.

Thus, what is needed for a human society is a legitimate spiritual power which can be
demonstrated. This new church of humanity will have its own priests and apostles who will
“formulate, teach, and maintain the rules according to which political society will be governed,
without needing anything to guarantee its authority other than the spontaneous influence
exercised by the doctrine's evidence upon minds and hearts.” Humanity will become “the
Great Being of the new religion.” This new religion will, of course, need to punish those who do
not share the true faith. It will “command reproof for private faults on up to public reprimand
and, if necessary, temporary or permanent 'social excommunication' for more serious public
offenses.” As Gilson remarks, this scientific positivism is “a human rebellion against God. It is
not just an atheism, but antitheism.”

Gilson is not convinced.

> If the history of the avatars of the notion of the City of God since the Middle
> Ages has meaning, it signifies that outside the universalism of faith, a
> universalism of reason capable of replacing faith has not been found. As
> paradoxical as it may be, the result of the experiment is clear: even where
> reason divides, faith unites.
The history of Augustine’s idea “is the history of an obstinate effort to make a temporal city of this eternal city, by substituting for faith any conceivable natural bond as the unifying force of this society.” The final words concluding Gilson’s experiment are: “The City of Man can only be built in the shadow of the cross, as a suburb of the City of God.”

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