Abstract: Augustine’s *City of God* (412–426/427 CE) is only nominally a book on cities. Inspired by a historical event, the *City of God*’s project corresponds to the full-scale historicisation of a long-established theological-political trope within which space, in general, and urban space, in particular, seem to play a negligible role. Is this merely because Augustine’s two cities are only ‘allegorically (mystice)’ such? Aim of this paper is not to reinvent the wheel by ascertaining that Augustine resorts to a conventional imagery in order to visualize the way in which a human dichotomy takes shape and runs through the ages. My intention is rather: (a) to investigate the actual presence and significance of city-spaces in the *City of God*; (b) to apply the research programme of “urban religion” to the material provided by the book; (c) to verify whether and to what extent the Lefebvrrian concept of “non-city” fits the post-urban reality of Augustine’s heavenly *civitas*.

1 Introduction

St Augustine used the city as a metaphor for God’s design of faith, but the ancient reader of St Augustine who wandered the alleys, markets and forums of Rome would get no hint of how God worked as a city planner (Richard Sennett, *Building and Dwelling*)

This paper is a spatial analysis of Augustine’s *City of God*. It focuses on the role played by city-spaces in the most influential book of Western culture that features something translatable with “city” in its title. It concentrates on Augustine’s practice of “cityscaping” (Fuhrer, Mundt and Stenger 2015) as imaginative construction of city-spaces which draws on both cross-culturally recurrent and

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2 I will follow Ed Soja’s suggestions “to think, write, and read about cityscapes as *cityspaces*” in order to both retain the former’s “evocations of panoramic visuality and global scope” and better “embed the interpretation” of urban landscapes, places, and practices “in the wider framework of critical spatial thinking and analysis” (Soja 2006, XV; italics in original).
culturally specific urban semantics, tropes, discursive traditions, and imageries. Yet, just as to pen the City of God is not a secluded and uncommitted literary desk work, Augustine’s cityscaping, too, is not an isolated cognitive and rhetorical performance. From the perspective adopted here, a religiously engaged cityscaping represents only one strand of a wider set of socio-spatial phenomena which I term “citification of religion” (Urciuoli 2020). Evidenced also by the literate elites’ writing of mental cities, citification of religion refers to the processes whereby (permanently or temporarily) urban-based religious agents from all social stations carry out religiously infused actions that succeed in appropriating city-spaces at least for some time, in relation to a certain audience, and in manners that dynamically and deliberately engage with the urban quality of their contexts at particular moments in their histories. It defines also the religious state of affairs resulting from such processes in the long run, which should be viewed more as the outcome of specific effects and uses of spaces by religious agents than of some intrinsic characteristics of a specific religion (Urciuoli and Rüpke 2018, 120). Instead of measuring anew the impact of Augustine’s book on Western theological, philosophical, and political thought, the paper raises the question as to how and to what extent Augustine’s cityscaping in the City of God has contributed to the centuries-long collective enterprise of the citification of Jesus/Christ.

To my knowledge, the only spatially informed analysis of a book of Augustine hitherto published is Owen M. Ewald’s chapter on “Imperial Roman Cities as Places of Memory in Augustine’s Confessions” (Ewald 2014). Building also on Lefebvre, Shira L. Lander’s book on religious conflicts in Late Roman North Africa emphasizes the spatialized rhetoric of triumph and defeat, in-grouping and out-grouping, as it appears in some Augustine’s sermons and letters (Lander 2016).

3 Belonging to the lexicon of the critical spatial theory, the formula “socio-spatial” refers to the “fundamental premise” of Lefebvre’s sea-changing reassessment of spatial thinking: that is, to the idea that “the social and the spatial relationships are dialectical interactive, interdependent, that social relations of production are both space-forming and space contingent” (Soja 1980, 210). The notion of “spatiality” encapsulates precisely this dialectic.

4 “Citifying Jesus: Early Christians’ Making of an Urban Religion (1st – 5th CE)” is the title of the monograph I am currently writing at the Max Weber Centre in Erfurt within the framework of the research group on “Religion and Urbanity: reciprocal formations”. As the title shows, “citification” is one of the key notions of this study.

5 With “spatially informed” I mean informed by the insights of thinkers who “have contributed significantly to theoretical discussions of the importance of space and place in shaping cultural, social, economic and political life in recent years” (Hubbard and Kitchin 2011, 1). Ewald’s enquiry into Augustine’s spatial metaphors builds on the work of the architectural theorist Kevin Lynch and his notion of “public images” (Ewald 2015, 274; see Lynch 1960).
However, as far as the City of God is concerned, temporally focused enquiries have been predictably preferred to spatial investigations.⁶ Critical geographers and spatial theorists will certainly not be surprised to know that, once again, in the midst of what Foucault imagined as the “epoch of space” (Foucault 1986 [1967], 22),⁷ time and temporal concerns have subordinated space and the spatial problematic (Lefebvre 1991 [1974], 21–24; Soja 1989 31–38; Massey 1993).⁸ Moreover, biblical and early Christian studies are habitual latecomers in 20th-century epistemological trends and the “spatial turn” is no exception.⁹ Lastly, Augustine himself prioritizes time over space:¹⁰ while the temporal span of existence of the two cities is thoroughly sequenced (Civ. 16.43; 22.30), with their initial and final termini fixed or at least discussed in details (Civ. 11–14, in particular 12.11, and Civ. 19–21, in particular 20.5–14, respectively), their spatial features remain both untreated and undefined (Kemezis 2015, 3). When they do not rhetorically crystallize around “metonymic spaces” (Crang and Thrift 2000, 13) like Jerusalem, Babylon, Rome,¹¹ and when the Scriptures do not suggest any temporary emplacement (Markus 1971, 63), the two cities perfectly stick to the role theologically assigned to them: namely that of illegible and thus unmappable communities of humans and angels stretching across ontological realms, spanning continents, and running through millennia. We simply have no means to border them and no hints of how to map them out.

All these reasons may account for the substantial neglect of both the dynamics of spatiality, in general, and the topics of urbanism and urbanity, in particular, in the immense literature on the City of God. This paper will try to partially fill this lacuna in order to gain new insights into aspects of religion in the City of

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6 This tendency includes also scholars well versed in spatial theory. An author of cutting-edge spatial analyses of early Christians’ texts (Maier 2013; 2017a; 2017b), Harry Maier’s essay on “The City of God as revelation” (Maier 1999) prioritizes time over space.

7 Dating back to 1967, Foucault’s interview on “Des espaces autres” coincides with the “initial impetus” of the “spatial turn” but predates its much later “expansion” well beyond spatial disciplines “to infiltrate” scholarly fields hitherto dominated by a historical imagination (Soja 2006, XVI) – including religious studies (see Knott 2010).

8 For a philosophical history of the “dormant” position of place and space in Western thinking, see Casey 1997.

9 The earliest overview of the impact of spatial analysis on biblical scholarship is to be found in Stewart 2012.

10 For Augustine’s strong sense of historical development, see O’ Donovan 1987. For the debate on Augustine’s eschatological-soteriological sense of progress, see also van Oort 1991, 99–102.

11 We can probably say that, in the City of God, Rome and Babylon stand for the earthly city’s life and values just as, in urban literature, 19th-century Paris has functioned as a metonym for modern city life and 20th-century Los Angeles for postmodern urbanity (Crang and Thrift 2000, 13).
God that only a focus on space, in general, and urban space, in particular, can illuminate. It is divided into two parts. The first focuses more generally on Augustine’s treatment of city-spaces. The second pinpoints three possible foci of analysis for what might represent an “urban religious approach” to the textual material provided by the City of God. A final reflection on the urban remains in the world to come (in futuro saeculo) and the related limits of Augustine’s city-scaping will conclude the paper.

2 Writing cities un-spatially

2.1 Missing “the urban”

Augustine’s City of God (Hippo Regius, 412–426/427 CE) is only nominally a book on cities. Occasioned by the sack of a city without being a book on the sack of a city, the City of God is a work framed by a civic imagery and dotted with a city-related vocabulary but quite reluctant to deploy an urban imagination. This argument clearly builds on a preliminary distinction. In this paper “civic” is not taken as a synonym of “urban”. This study rather aims to stretch out the semantic difference between the two modern terms by poaching on this crack in an unprecedented manner for Augustinian studies.

In his 1991 book on the “sources of Augustine’s doctrine of the two cities”, Johannes van Oort has listed the main “possible meanings” of the manifold notion of civitas in Augustine’s time. Such meanings are: (a) a legally united and articulated community of citizens (without emphasis on the territoriality or the polity); (b) a territorially nucleated and built settlement where city-dwellers live; (c) a city-state (with emphasis on the polity); (d) citizenship and the related rights (van Oort 1991, 102). Surveying Augustine’s way to navigate the interrelated facets of the “Roman social imaginary” (Ando 2015) that coalesces around civitas, van Oort concludes that “city” is “the best way to denote” the comprehensive meaning of the word (van Oort 1991, 105). However, in a previous dedicated lexicographical analysis, R.T. Marshall had decidedly questioned this traditional option by judging its “restricted sense” “at odds with the inclusive natures” of the two civitates (Marshall 1952, 46): whatever its physical-geographical or political-personal connotations, our standard meaning and lexical definition of “city” do not fit the predominant “socio-religious” signification of Augustine’s use of the term (Marshall 1952, 43). An alternative comprehensive translation is not supplied and perhaps deliberately avoided. By focusing on semantics in order to eventually work out matters of theology, these two opposite ways of cutting the Gordian knot of the “standard metonymic range of civitas” (Ando 2014,
242) may help understand why Augustine’s reluctance to thematize “the urban” in the City of God has largely escaped notice.

The substantivized formula “the urban” is not meant to gesture at the long apprehended distinction between urbs and civitas as the difference and the tension between the “city of stones” and the “city of people”, also known as “la ville et la cité” (Sennett 2018, 1). Augustine too, in other writings, deploys this discriminating strategy in order to eventually divorce the lives of the Romans from the fate of Rome (Sermones 81.9; De excidio urbis Romae 6 and 8; see Ando 2014, 241–242) and thereby dry out any sentimental attachment to the metaphysically resonating places of a former pagan capital (Edwards 1996, 17–18). Yet this contrast between a local and a personal understanding of the city does not correspond to the thematic cleft I aim to point out. In fact, images of the urban built environment, that is, of the emplacement, spaciousness, and displacement of its imposing architecture, are far from absent in the City of God. Starting and stemming from Cain’s inception of the urban form and life (Civ. 15.8), we read of cities being materially founded, seized, and destroyed, pomeria being drawn, and high towers, like Babylon’s “marvelous construction” (Civ. 16.4), erected and torn down. Moreover, at a higher interpretative level, the “cities of stones” not only concretize the plot of the civilisational advancement of human race, by harboring its ambiguities since the dawn of history, but also display the God-sponsored constructional superiority of Christian architecture from the very outset of the book. On the one hand, the “moral and theological topography” of basilicas and martyrs’ shrines confronts that of temples and theatres all the way through (Lugaresi 2008, 674); on the other, the first book of the City of God immediately stages the physical capacity of big churches (amplissimae basilicae) in a real-and-imagined “space of religious competition” (Kong and Woods 2016, 3) with the pagan architecture over civilian protection (Civ. 1.1 and 7; 2.2). As articulated in both material and rhetorical strategies, competition over urban space makes religion tangible through the occupation

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12 As sketched above, in Roman political theorizing this distinction seeps through civitas itself by disarticulating the civitas qua citizenship from the civitas qua city: see Ando 2014. For a conciliation, see Cicero, De officiis 1.17.53. For an enforcement of the disjunction, see Cicero, De lege agraria 2.87–88. For the opposition between a local and a personal sense of polis in Greek classical sources, see Hansen 1998, 17–20 and 52–64. For an overview of the millennia-long cultural history of the polarity in the sense of an almost mutually exclusive relationship, see Farinelli 2003, 136–137. For an interpretation of urbanism as modern “fractured discipline split “between the knowledge of building [ville] and dwelling [cité]”, see Sennett 2018, 21–89.

13 See Ando in this volume.

14 Lander (2016, 26–30) calls these strategies “architectural dispossession” and “spatial supersessionism”, respectively.
of a limited and contented resource such as the city soil. Claiming space in the urban landscape represents for Augustine a crucial geographical side of the cosmic battle “against the pagans”.

“The urban” on which Augustine hardly focuses stands in this paper for both “urbanism” and “urbanity”. The former specifically refers to the constructional-functional features of the urban genotype as structures created by urbanization processes, whereas the latter designates the peculiar socio-cultural form and symbolic infrastructure of everyday city life. Zooming in on these two aspects, the scope of a spatial analysis of the City of God is to survey the whole work and look for the specific awareness, concerns, and even imperatives that are needed in order for his author to apprehend the city as city-space, that is, “as a historical-social-spatial phenomenon, but with its intrinsic spatiality highlighted” for specific purposes (Soja 2000, 8). Of course, in Augustine’s case, one cannot expect these purposes to be of an interpretive and explanatory nature. It would be neither sound nor fair to ask a late antique writer to be, at the same time, a pioneer of the “spatial turn” and a forerunner of the “urban turn”. Nor could the City of God be interested in laying out a sort of geo-history of city-spaces from the creation of the universe to the final judgment, with the writer either adopting a Le Corbusier-like bird eye view on buildings (Le Corbusier 1947 [1937]) or playing the role of the flâneur strolling the streets (Benjamin 1999 [1982]). Rather, what is more reasonable to look for, and not so unlikely to find among non-modern writers are hints of a “topographical logic” and an “interest in the systematics of topographical details” like those that Varro displays at length in the fifth book of the De lingua latina (Rüpke 2020, 81 and 82). In alternative, without necessarily assuming any topographical agenda, I would have been content to pinpoint a “trend”, if not a “logic of change”, in Augustine’s metaphorical treatment of

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15 For the role played by Augustine in the struggle against the Donatists as a seminal example of how “intra-religious competitions” can intersect with “religion-state competitions” (Kong and Woods 2016, 2), see Rossi 2013. On the spatial relations between religious competitors in Late Roman North Africa and their rhetoricization, see Lander 2016. On the transformation of the regional religious landscape in general, see Leone 2013.

16 Although Louis Wirth’s seminal article names the urban “way of life” “urbanism” (Wirth 1938), the Anglo-Saxon urban discourse has been increasingly resorting to the notion of “urbanity” to specifically refer to the cultural-symbolic dimension of cities. The German “Urbanität” tends to include both the socio-cultural and the architectural-functional aspects of the urban genotype (Rau 2011; Schneider and Stercken 2016). In some Graeco-Roman urban histories, the form “urbanism” is used to refer to both aspects. See Zuiderhoek 2016.

17 The latter formula designates geographical and sociological approaches both proposing “specifically urban explanations of social phenomena” (Soja 2003, 275) and emphasizing the “spatial specificity of urbanism” (Soja 2000, 7–10; e.g., Berking and Löw 2005 and 2008).
urban spaces, as it is the case for the *Confessions* (Ewald 2015). After all, if the cross-disciplinary development of a spatial epistemology is a 20th-century belated achievement,18 sense of space is not: neither is the attention to the spatial organization of the urban fabrics a hallmark of contemporary narratives on cities, nor are the symbolic-communicative implications of the ‘staging of urbanity’ (Schneider and Stercken 2016) coterminous with the late middle ages and early modern times (e.g., Edwards 1996 for Rome). Yet in the *City of God* Augustin not only never “put[s] space first” and “does not write cities spatially” (Soja 2003, 272) but also operates in a way that evens out all spatial formations by systematically ignoring the spatial characteristics of different political and social entities.

2.2 A methodical leveling of spatial forms

I will start with a few examples taken from some propositional materials in the *City of God*. Augustine offers two almost identical definition of *civitas*.19 The first appears already in Civ. 1.15, where Augustine poaches on the Roman repertoire of human ideals in order to show that the happiness of a city does not correspond with its historical fortune and religious loyalty is not necessary advantageous “in this life”:

> If, however, our adversaries say that M. Regulus, even while in captivity and suffering torture of the body, could still have been happy in the blessedness of a virtuous soul, then let us also seek such true virtue: a virtue by which a city also (*et civitas*) may be made happy, as well as a single man. The happiness of a city and of a man do not, after all, arise from different sources; for a city is nothing other than a concordant multitude of men (*cum aliud civitas non sit quam concors hominum multitudo*).

(Civ. 1.15; transl. Dyson 1998)20

Here the question of what a *civitas* is arises from a quest for the moral resources (*virtus ... vera*) that it needs from its citizens in order to “be made happy”. Within this eudemonistic frame based on individual men’s virtues, the urban magnitude is simply supposed to multiply (*multitudo*) and spread a single consensus-generating moral factor – whatever it is – rather than beeing brought to bear on the production of new and mutable ways of morally and happily coexisting. On

18 What Lefebvre has called “spatiology” (Lefebvre 1991 [1974], 404).
19 In the *City of God* there are neither definitions nor other specific propositional materials on *urbs*.
20 The same definition occurs in Ep. 155.9.
these bases, no sustained reflection involving the urban spatial specificity can be expected. Dating back to Aristotle (Pol. 2 1261a23–33), the argument about the specific societal benefits of increasing complexity via clustering a large number of different people,21 which already hints at the interplay between the three structural characteristics of urbanism according to sociologist Louis Wirth, i.e., size, density, and heterogeneity (Wirth 1938),22 is totally glossed over. Civitas is nothing but a ‘superorganism’ (Hölldobler – Wilson 2008) whose components are embodied individuals ultimately concordant and therefore synergetically interacting for the sake of a common earthly happiness. It is a consensually constructed but spatially unspecific collective body, like many other Roman-styled social unities (populus, societas, etc.).

The second definition, which occurs much later in Augustine’s reading of Genesis 4, is no more accurate in this sense. Civitas is “nothing but a multitude of men united by some tie of fellowship” (nihil est aliud quam hominum multitudo aliquo societatis vinculo conligata) (Civ. 15.8; thus also in Letters 138.10). Note that, despite the Ciceronian echo (concilia coetusque hominum iure sociati; De republica 6.13.2), the legal nature of this “tie” is deliberately denied and its quality left vague (aliquo vinculo; see Marshall 1952, 11). In fact, the urban macro-individual is further explained as a mere extension of a mostly biologically related domestic unit. No matter what the biblical narrative seems to say, the first city was founded by Cain and named after his first son, Enoch, when the growth rate in his family-run “assemblage of mammals in number and proximity” (Scott 2017, 104) was such to demand some functional update:

But even if Enoch was indeed the first-born of the founder of that first city, we should not on that account conclude that Enoch’s father founded it and gave his son’s name to it at the time of Enoch’s birth. For a city is nothing other than a multitude of men bound together by some tie of fellowship; and so a city could not then have been established by one man. However, when that man’s household (familia) became so numerous that it now had the size of a population (populi quantitatem), it was certainly then possible for him to establish a city and to give the name of his first-born son to what he had established.

(Civ. 15.8)

21 Yet not too large for Aristotle: see Pol. 7 1326a-b. For the way urban clustering fosters reflexivity and spurs innovation by putting into contact new people with new ideas, new ways of looking at things, and maybe new ways to solve old problems, see Jacobs 1969; also Storper 1997, 244–248; Soja 2000, 14–15; 2003, 274–280; Glaeser 2011.

22 “For sociological purposes a city may be defined as a relatively large, dense and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals” (Wirth 1938, 4). Archeologists have questioned these criteria as a good description of contemporary Western cities which is hardly applicable to pre-modern Western and non-Western societies: see M.E. Smith 2010, 138. Urban sociologists sometimes think the opposite: see Martinotti 2017, 94.
The Bible neither deceives nor speaks nonsense: no city can be a one-man enterprise and individual achievement. Only once his household had grown “so numerous (tanta numerositate)” that it exceeded the size limit of the kinship connectivity – whatever it is – Cain could (potuit) establish a city. Nonetheless, apart from this demographic argument and a subsequent reflection on the longevity of the antediluvian folks (Civ. 15.9), Augustine provides no further instruction about how such a massively scaled-up parental unit has technically morphed into something like a city – instead of a tribe, a nation, or more modestly a village. And why, a critic of Neolithic urbanization as universal aspiration might wonder, did Cain impose such a civilizational leap to his people?

For instance, Augustine could have focused on the internal division of labor of the newly founded urban superorganism, thus tapping into the biblical account of Cain’s progeny as the inventor of urban culture – above all, metallurgy and arts (Gen. 4.21–22) – via functional differentiation of the agricultural surplus. Alternatively, he could have drawn on the Genesis’ overall antipathy for cities in order to explain how it happened that the ancient peoples’ will to sedentarism and nucleation ended up with the divine destruction of the tower of Babylon (Gen. 11.1–9). Neither option is pursued. On the one hand, his Roman-styled notion of civitas prevents him from embarking on whatever narrative of the rise of urbanism which resorts to non-consensual initiatives on the part of ambitious chiefs (like coercion, expropriation, and exploitation of concentrated manpower; see Scott 2018). On the other hand, restrained by the biblical version of the story, this consensual sociopolitical framework does not prompt any insight into any of the socio-spatial dynamics that might have led to organize and structure peoples’ coalescence into an urban agglomeration as higher level of societal organization (like synoecism; see Soja 2003, 273–

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23 On the same passage, see already Philo, Post. 14, who solves the quandary by simply allegorizing the whole story: “It would seem... that it is better to take the words figuratively, as meaning that Cain resolves to set up his own creed, just as one might set up a city (καθότερ πόλιν)”.

24 See the anti-urban tones of the Book of Jubilees (II – I BCE) whose author rewrites the biblical genealogies between the destruction of the tower of Babylon and the birth of Terah, Abraham’s father, in Ur (Jub. 11.1–13). Here urbanity is connected with warfare, domination, expropriation, idolatry, and sinful lifestyles in general.

25 As Clifford Ando shows in this volume, Augustine’s necessity to contradict the biblical narrative by positing both Cain and Abel as “equally founders” of civitates calls for a non-genealogical inception of city life as “community of consent”. In consequence, he wrestles with the problem of grafting the Roman notion of civitas on the story of the patriarchs and its account of an urbanism based on descent.
The enlargement of the group is enough to justify and produce a city: only size matters.

However, size alone is no guarantee of spatial specificity. Augustine’s adoption of the Old Academic conceptualization of the sequenced levels of human society (\textit{Civ. 19.7}) elicits an explicit isomorphism in the elementary drives and workings of the two lowest forms of sociation: the household and the city. In two passages of the book 19 that develop the same argument, Augustine posits a concentric arrangement and a perfect alignment of the domestic and the civic “search for peace”. The premise is that, whatever its size and complexion, “every community seeks some peace” (O’Donovan 1987, 103). In consequence, the specific quality and capacity of city-spaces to sustain a nucleated diversity go unnoticed:

Thus, if he [\textit{scil.} a robber] were offered the servitude of a large number – of a city or of a nation (\textit{vel civitatis vel gentis}) – who would serve him in just the same way as he had required his household to serve him, then he would no longer lurk like a robber in his lair; he would raise himself up as a king for all to see.

(\textit{Civ. 19.12})

A man’s household ought to be the beginning, or a little part, of the city; and every beginning has reference to some end proper to itself, and every part has reference to the integrity of the whole of which it is a part. From this, it appears clearly enough that domestic peace has reference to civic peace (\textit{ut ad pacem civicam pax domestica referatur}): that is, that the ordered concord of domestic rule and obedience has reference to the ordered concord of civic rule and obedience. Thus, it is fitting that the father of a family should draw his own precepts from the law of the city (\textit{Ita fit ut ex lege civitatis praecepta sumere patrem familias oporteat}), and rule his household in such a way that it is brought in harmony with the city’s peace.

(\textit{Civ. 19.16})

Augustine’s general disinterest in the political-institutional specificity of social relationships (Weithman 2001, 238) includes their spatiality. The isomorphic logic glosses over the substantial difference between managing the propinquity

26 As Soja reminds (Soja 2003, 273–274), the most elaborate ancient theorization of synoecism as “stimulus of urban agglomeration” is provided by Aristotle to describe the natural processes leading to the polis creation – which develops out of the village which again develops out of the household: see Aristotle, \textit{Pol.} 1 1252b16–1253a18.

27 “After the city or town (\textit{post civitatem vel urbem}) comes the world, which the philosophers identify as the third level of human society. They begin with the household (\textit{a domo}), progress to the city (\textit{ad urbem}), and come finally to the world (\textit{ad orbem})” (\textit{Civ. 19.7}). See Cicero, \textit{Off.} 1.53: “\textit{Gradus autem plures sunt societatis hominum ...}”.
of thousands of strangers, on the one hand, and ruling the cohabitation of a few owned subordinates and biologically related individuals, on the other. The two types of “ordered concord” are fully equated in an un-spatialized treatment of their authority structures. The spatial bases of rulership do not matter at all, expect for the fact that scaling up the size complicates the task of the urban equivalent of the domestic peacekeeper, the judge:

If, therefore, there is no security even in the home from the common evils which befall the human race, what of the city (quid civitas)? The larger the city (quanto maior), the more is its forum filled with civil law-suits and criminal trials. Even when the city is at peace and free from actual sedition and civil war, it is never free from the danger of such disturbance or, more often, bloodshed.

(Civ. 19.5)

Among all the authority structures he comments upon, statehood is probably the subject of Augustine’s most sustained, though totally un-spatialized, theoretical-political reflection. He resorts twice to Cicero’s coupled definitions of “state” (res publica) as the “property of a people” (res populi) and of “people” (populus) as “a multitude united in fellowship by common agreement as to what is right and by a community of interest (coetum multituidinis iuri consensu et utilitatis communione sociatum)” (Civ. 19.21; also 2.21; see Cicero, Resp. 1.25). Building on these definitions, Augustine argues that, given that there is no shared sense of right without a shared concept of justice, but also no justice where the true God is not properly obeyed, one has to conclude that either the second definition is somehow wrong or ‘there never was Roman state (numquam fuit Romana res publica)’ (19.21; also 2.21). Eventually, Augustine is neither an ontological nor a political nihilist and therefore the first option is preferred. Justice is removed from the propositional picture and the definition of populus is later emended as follows: “a ‘people’ is an assembled multitude of rational creatures bound to-

28 For cities are “worlds of strangers”, where every human and non-human service “is there to serve strangers”, see Lofland 1973; also Massey 2005.
29 Only Christian rulers can “rule justly”: see the brief mirror for (Christian) princes in Civ. 5.24. Yet this briefly sketched Christian political justice is no condition for political order, since the government can perfectly work without and “vicious communities can function ... well as organized societies” (O’ Donovan 1987, 103). For Augustine, there is no alignment of moral and political order outside the eschatological realm of the city of God as res publica “whose founder and ruler is Christ” (Civ. 2.21).
30 For the complex interplay of book 2 and 19 in the presentation of this argument, see O’ Donovan 1987, 90–96.
31 For the less conspicuous, though equally important, removal of “common utility”, see O’ Donovan 1987, 97–99.
gether by a common agreement as to the object of their love” (... rerum quas diligat concordi communione sociatus, Civ. 19.24).

This “value-free”32 (O’ Donovan 1987, 97) alternative definition avoids absurdity. For, on the one hand, the identity of the supreme matter of concern affects only the quality of the people and not its reality: evil people’s territorial polities are state nevertheless. On the other hand, when the disagreement of what is ultimately desirable as social good is such that it undermines the common concern of security and orderly social intercourses – that which Augustine calls the “earthly peace” (Civ. 19.17) – then the res publica is torn apart and the populus breaks down into parties fighting each other in civil war: the “stateness” (Scott 2017, 23) of a state only vanishes when the social bond is severely damaged or lost. This second definition indirectly relaxes the conditions required for statehood and thereby rescues the political reality of both earliest and current states. On the contrary, the following quote shows how irrelevant the spatial reality of territorial polities still remains:

It must be understood, however, that what I have said of the Roman people and state (de isto populo et de ista re publica) I also say and think of the Athenians and any other Greeks, of the Egyptians, of the ancient Babylon of the Assyrians, and of every other nation, great or small, which has exercised its sway over states (quando in rebus publicis suis imperia vel parva vel magna tenuerunt). For the city of the ungodly (civitas impiorum), considered generally, does not obey God’s command that sacrifice should be offered to none save Him alone. Thus, because the soul cannot in that case rightly and faithfully govern the body, nor the reason the vices, there can be no true justice in that city.

Civ. 19.24 (transl. Dyson 1998; slightly modified)

Although lexicographical surveys have made sure that terms like res publica, populus, societas, regnum, urbs/civitas are not equivalent (del Estal and Rosado 1954, 420; Marshall 1952, 4), no qualitative difference associated with the diverse territorialities of the small-, medium-, and large-scale polities is felt significant to understand them. Questions as to how and to what extent the classical imperialist statelet of the Athenians differs from the post-classical dominated city of Athens in such things like order-maintenance policies and management of human diversity remain unexplored. Admittedly, there is only one passage in the book 19 where Augustine recognizes that, beyond the level of the “civitas vel urbs”, there is at least an annoying linguistic leap that impinges on the sociality of people:

32 For some scholars even “positivistic” (Markus 1970, 65) or “political realist[ic]” (Weithman 2001, 244).
After the city or town comes the world, which the philosophers identify, as the third level of human society. They begin with the household, progress to the city, and come finally to the world. And the world, like a gathering of waters, is all the more full of perils by reason of its greater size. First of all, the diversity of tongues now divides man from man (linguarum diversitas hominem alienat ab homine). For if two men, each ignorant of the other’s language, meet, and are compelled by some necessity, not to pass on but to remain with one another, it is easier for dumb animals, even of different kinds, to associate together (sociantur) than these men, even though both are human beings. For when men cannot communicate their thoughts to each other, they are completely unable to associate with one another despite the similarity of their natures (nihil prodest ad consociandos homines tanta similitudo naturae); and this is simply because of the diversity of tongues.

(Civ. 19.7)

Fully “ignorant of the other’s language”, two human beings meeting up at the level of the “world” (orbis) as the highest spatial scale are communicatively and thereby socially separated from one another in a way that, continues Augustine, only the military spread of the imperial language could amend at the cost of wars, slaughters, and bloodshed (Civ. 19.7). What the overall linguistic cohesion of the city of Hippo may offer to its Latin-speaking citizens is a “politics of the encounter” (Merrifield 2013) for which the outer world, that is, the world that for Augustine starts with the Punic-speaking countrymen of his diocese, provides no shared code. Nonetheless, Augustine does not pause to think that such failed encounters do happen in cities which are simply other than one’s own. Nor does the argument lead him to assume that daily urban encounters among city-dwellers can well produce situations of deep “estrangement” (… hominem alienat ab homine) that have nothing to do with the language. After all, the city as a spatial formation still remains out of the spotlight.

To summarize briefly: it was not my intent to survey once more the bundle of reasons (cognitive, semantic, scriptural, discursive-argumentative, etc.) why, despite this lack of concern for the urban, Augustine entitled his magnum opus “De civitate Dei” rather than “De re publica Dei” or “De regno Dei”, thereby employing the term civitas much more often than res publica or regnum (van Oort 1991, 106). Nor is my purpose to appeal to his preferred non-Christian and Christian sources in order to account for his almost undifferentiated spatial treatment of different social and political formations (van Oort 1991, 199–359) – such a comparative research would be too wide an issue to be tackled in this paper. Lastly, the pos-

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33 In the City of God Augustine never thematizes the city/country divide as a linguistic barrier. For his difficulties with the “Punic” of the countrymen of his diocese, see Letters 84.2 and 209.2–3. For the issue of rural vernacular and the geographical areas of city/country bilingualism, see Robinson 2017, 107–121
sible extra-textual motivations for this block of urban geographical imagination are not discussed at length either.\footnote{On the one hand, for his contemporary Catholic reader, some more instructions about how to navigate the topographical illegibility of the heavenly city may well have been of help in order to account for its preeminent realization and telescopic overlap with the historical-empirical Catholic church (for the lexical alignment see the related table in Marshall 1952, 38). On the other, considering the neatly bordered and spatialized ecclesiology of the Donatists, the emphasis on the commingling of the two cities in saeculo prevents Augustine from conceiving a similar mapping of the contemporary heavenly city-space. Tapping into a commonplace imagery of spiritual distinction, the bishop-writer wants his people to be content with the existence of their blissful commonwealth without snooping too much around its territory to chart its borders: “he could try to win over his Donatist opponents through a shared view” (van Oort 1991, 275 with reference to Contra epistulam Parmeniani 2.4.9).} I confine myself to the following argument: while unfolding a somewhat conventional, partly even “truistic” (Brown 1967, 287), theological-political trope throughout the ages – even if in an unprecedentedly erudite and far-reaching way –, in the City of God Augustine acts as a systematic leveler of spatial forms. He shows no actual concern for the distinctive properties of city-spaces as determining the specific characters of city life.

2.3 The body as ‘absolute place’ in the City of God

Before moving to the second part of this paper, I will shortly dwell on the City of God’s paramount spatiality, which is neither the city nor the world but the body. I am not gesturing here at the links between “body” and “city”, which, through the Donatist Tyconius’ image of the Church as corpus bipertitum, traces back to the Greek and Roman analogy of the state and the human (O’ Daly 1999, 63). I rather refer to human and non-human bodies as significant spaces per se, that is, in their aerial (demons), earthly (humans), and eschatological (resurrected beings altogether) realities. Somehow endorsing Henri Lefebvre’s argument that “the genesis of a far-away order can be accounted for only on the basis of the order that is nearest to us, namely the order of the body” (Lefebvre 1991 [1974], 405), Augustine displays a painstaking physiology of doom and salvation by arranging human membership in the heavenly city according to three bodily stages and states: before the incarnation of Christ, after Jesus in historical time, after Jesus in eschatological time. Several long excursions (Civ. 5.2–6; 16. 8–9; 21.2–10; 22.4–5 and 10–22) and a whole book (13) are dedicated to the scrutiny of ordinary and freaky bodily constitutions of human beings, as well as of their physical-behavioral constraints and possibilities under different environmental conditions. (nor are demons exempted: Civ. 8.14–16). The history of the two cit-
ies, which starts with the ‘absolute space’ (Lefebvre 1991, 48)³⁵ of Cain’s sacrificial offering and his criminal reaction to the divine rejection (Civ. XV 5 and 7), parallels the story of the body as ‘absolute place’ (Foucault 2006, 229):³⁶ since the eye-opening of the newborn to the resurrection date and even after (Civ. 22.21), heavenly citizens cannot move without some kind of body. They are condemned to such mutable sites of possibilities without other recourse possible than God’s artistic grace (Civ. 22.20).

3 Urban religion in the City of God

3.1 The challenge of an “urban religious approach” to the City of God

The challenge for the second part of this paper is to demonstrate that a text showing such a lack of interest in urban spatiality can nevertheless be of interest for a study on urban religion. Allegedly, Augustine embarked on the project of the City of God to contrast the vengeful theodicy of some people of traditional polytheistic background (Retract. 2.69) who, in the aftermath of the sack of Rome, blamed imperial Christianity as a powerless established/state religion. Augustine’s main preoccupation is therefore the shock resilience, the emotional, social and political upkeep, and the endurance of the state-patronized Catholic Christianity. For this very reason, he gives battle for unveiling, debunking, and thus severing the false from the “true religion (vera religio)” (Civ. 4.1; 7.33 and 35; 8.17; 10.3; etc.) in a combat whose critical move is to conceptually neutralize the so-called “immanentist” political assumption of past and present religions: “the purpose of religion is to access supernatural power for the flourishing of existence in the here and now” (Strathern 2019, 36).³⁷ By making religious truth independent from the mutable fate of mundane institutions, Augustine strives to

³⁵ “Absolute space was made up of fragments of nature located at sites which were chosen for their intrinsic qualities (cave, mountaintop, spring, river), but whose very consecration ended up by stripping them of their natural characteristics and uniqueness” (Lefebvre 1991, 48).
³⁶ “The only thing is this: I cannot move without it. I cannot leave there where it is, so that I, myself, may go elsewhere. [...] It is here, irreparably: it is never elsewhere. My body, it’s the opposite of a utopia: that which is never under different skies. It is the absolute place, the little fragment of space where I am, literally, embodied. My body, pitiless place” (Foucault 2006, 229).
³⁷ Without forgoing recommending to establish the machinery of the state upon both the rulers’ conformity with and a wider consensus on the “true religion”: see Ver. rel. 31.58 and Ep. 137.17, respectively.
safeguard what we could call the Catholic Christians’ “religious right to the city”, that is, to ensure that the Catholic Church will preserve the right to monopolize the management over the urban production and consumption of religious goods and services, no matter the adversities suffered by the citizenry.

Topologically speaking, the result of this confrontational agenda are distinct sets of religious phenomena crystallizing along clearly demarcated borders. On the one side, the “pagan” camp, we find publicly financed polytheistic religions and sets of gods, sacrifices, religiously laden shows, mythological materials, demonology, and tons of philosophically mediated bookish knowledge on religion. On the other side, the Christian-Catholic front, we have episcopal government of churches, “spiritual” liturgies, martyrs and cult relics, angelology, and tons of biblically based bookish knowledge about religion. If the two mystic cities are not spatially mappable in the saeculum until the end of the world, the two fronts must be religiously legible. “Membership of the two cities is mutually exclusive, and there can be no possible overlap” (Markus 1970, 60).

Augustine’s agenda, however, is not mine. While examining his battlefield map, my task is not to stress and restate the dividing line among the two religious camps. Rather, my aim is to recognize some scattered emblems of a shared matrix of religious phenomena that crosscuts the field because – and this is the important difference – said phenomena are to be seen as city-specific rather than inherent to specific religions. This matrix is called “urban religion” (Ruepke 2020). It is not my task here either to define or theorize about the pivotal category of a brand new, cross-disciplinary and –temporal program of research that sets out to survey the millennia to track down the ongoing co-constitution of religion

38 For the concept see Lefebvre 1968. For a critical examination, see Attoh 2011. I follow the collective interpretation of this right proposed by Harvey 2008.
39 Peter Brown has observed that “the City of God contains hardly any reference to those contemporary forms of pagan worship and feeling that interest modern scholars of late paganism – the mystery-cults, the Oriental religions, Mithraism. It seems as if Augustine were demolishing a paganism that existed only in libraries. [...]. In this, the City of God reflects faithfully the most significant trend in the paganism of the early fifth century” (Brown 1967, 305). In fact, however accurately the “paganism” of the late antique antiquarians may have mirrored a vintage religious landscape out there, the City of God is mostly unconcerned with what Heidi Wendt (2016) has called the “religion of freelance experts” – a formula that refreshes and rearranges extensive bits of views and lexic of non-civic/traditional cults, including early Christ religion. Wendt’s book focuses on the first two centuries CE as the epoch when these “self-authorized experts” (Wendt 2016, 39) actually gained momentum.
40 For Augustine’s groupism in general, see Rebillard 2012, 61–91.
and urbanity.¹ I limit myself to saying that something like an urban religion could not be singled out without two conditions being fulfilled: (a) assuming space as condition, medium, and outcome (Lefebvre 1991; Soja 1989) of communication practices deemed religious; (b) taking the city as a ‘genuinely distinct form of sociation’ (Löw 2012) that both enables and constrains religiously motivated actions by producing recognizable, and sometimes durable, effects on religion. In order for an urban religion to surface, the urban spatial organization should make a recognizable difference to how religion functions and changes.

Evidently, I move from the assumption that the City of God itself is the quintessential product of an urban religion. First, authored by a city-based religious authority, the City of God would not have been conceived, written, published, and spread without the material support of the urban educational institutions, social networks, and media industry. Second, Augustine’s main targets are some equally textualized and/or historicized versions of religion (philosophical and antiquarian) that relied on the same material and symbolic infrastructures upon which his big book draws. Third, the writing of the City of God must be contextualized among a broader set of actions taken by religious specialists and practitioners in order to claim, contest, and patrol urban spaces vis-à-vis intra- and inter-religious competitors (Lander 2016). Therefore, the next question is: do the textual material contained in this full-fledged urban religious literary product provide further insights into urban religion out there? I will focus on three examples: cult relics, polytheism, and spectacles.

3.2 Hampering the fame, spreading the voice: miracles, cult relics, and urban religion

To start elucidating the first point, I resort to an example taken from the last book of the City of God. By assembling a series of twenty individual instances (Civ. 22.8), Augustine wants to demonstrate that miracles, which had lent credibility to Christ religion in the earliest times of the Jesus movement, have not ceased to happen, even though they are less widely known than those appearing in the canonized scripts. Then he pinpoints the role that the location of the occurrences plays in the little fame and scarce publicity of contemporary miracles:

See the Introduction to this volume. For the study of Mediterranean antiquity, see Urciuoli and Rüpke 2018. Urban Religion, therefore, designates both a research subject (i.e., a spatially specific and contingent constellation of religious phenomena), an analytical instrument (i.e., the scholarly lenses that permit to point out a religion that happens to be urban) and a research program.
Moreover, miracles are being wrought even now, in Christ’s name, either by his sacrament, or by the prayers or relics of his saints; by these are not distinguished by that brilliance (eadem claritate) which would cause them to be proclaimed with a glory like that attaching to the miracles of the past. For the canon of the Holy Scripture, which it behoved the Church to define, causes the latter to be recited everywhere, and so to dwell in the memory of all peoples. More recent miracles, however, wherever they occur, are scarcely known to all the people of the city, or even to the whole district, in which they are performed. For the most part, they are known only to a very few persons, and all the rest are ignorant of them, especially when the city in which they are wrought is a large one (maxime si magna sit civitas).

After all, Augustine’s argument is one of epidemiology of beliefs (Sperber 1996). He establishes a clear correlation between the spread of the faith in a miraculous event and the spatial setting of its occurrence. He points at something that we, as modern urbanites experiencing a technological age of hyper-connectivity and synchronicity, might have some difficulty in figuring out: the bigger the city, the harder and the more problematic the conveyance of information. The sheer size of a city-space – an issue which is never explicitly thought over by Augustine, as I have shown above – may well produce dispersion and segmentation and thus jeopardize the fame of a genuine divine portent by confining its knowledge to a neighborhood-scale diffusion at best (quocumque commanentium loco). On the contrary, regularly reproduced through diffused religious infrastructures, scheduled liturgies, and canonization, the miracle items of the gospel narratives have been safely stocked in the long-term semantic memory of all believers (et memoriae cunctorum inhaere populorum; Whitehouse 2004; Czachesz 2017, 62–87).

However, a different arrangement of the urban pixels may well produce the opposite effect, namely, an extraordinary broadcasting success of a contemporary urban wonder. This is the case of a miracle happened in Milan at the time when Augustine was dwelling there:

A miracle which took place at Milan while I was there, when a blind man was restored to sight, was able to become known to many because Milan is a great city (quia et grandis est civitas) and because the emperor was there at that time. Also an immense crowd had gathered to see the bodies of the martyrs Protasius and Gervasius – bodies which had been lost, and of which nothing was known until their whereabouts was revealed to bishop Ambrose in a dream – and the miracle was witnessed by all those people. It was thee that the darkness in which the blind man had lived so long was dispelled, and he saw the light of the day.

When performing at their best, cities are “the most effective way to transfer knowledge”, since “urban proximity reduce the curse of communication com-
plexity”⁴² (Glaeser 2011, 24). In this case, a big city like Milan can bring about the successful spread of a miracle (multorum notitiam potuit pervenire) by at once filtering and channeling the mob during the translation of the relics into a newly built basilica (the Basilica Martyrum later renamed Sant’Ambrogio),⁴³ accommodating the media apparatuses of the struggling authorities (the Arian-supporting imperial court and the Catholic bishop), and providing a vast and extremely concentrated audience for the spectacular display of holy power (inmenso populo teste).⁴⁴ The distinctively urban arrangement and synergetic action of a set of elements, notably (1) a principle of spatial organization (density; Löw 2012, 306), (2) a built environment (streets conducive to religious architecture), (3) a physically constrained and topographically oriented mass mobility (procession), and (4) the presence of the main governmental actors (public powers), leads to the production of an “urban miracle” that helps speed up a mass cult of relics.⁴⁵

As Augustine shows in another report of a multiple miracle, in medium-sized cities like Hippo the word of mouth can be so effective that, “wherever they went”, the healed persons “turned the gaze of the whole city on them (convertebant in se civitatis aspectum)”, thus gathering throngs of people in the right place at the right time (Civ. 22.8).

To be clear, there is nothing specifically urban in miracle beliefs. Nor, as Peter Brown as shown, is the boundary-crossing topology of the cult of the saints simply urban (Brown 1981). Yet in all these three cases we can detect modalities to experience and practice religion, as well as to convey knowledge about it, that strictly depend on some urban socio-spatial constraints and possibilities for their rise, outcome, and change. Moreover, the description of the first episode clearly shows Augustine’s awareness of the material effectiveness of city-spaces in the domain of religion.

However, as said before, urban religion is too a promiscuous object and perspective for being confined to the Christian front. Augustine targets at least other two potential foci of an urban-religious approach which are neither Christian nor paradigmatically late antique. I refer to his extensive critique of polytheism and theatrical spectacles. In both cases, but especially when it comes to the spectacles, Augustine’s lines of argument do not necessarily make things easier. Never-

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⁴² That is, “the fact that the possibility of a garbled message increases with the amount of information that is being transferred” (Glaeser 2011, 24).
⁴³ That the miracle happened during the transportation is made clear in Conf. 9.7; also Ambrose, Ep. 22. The same episode is told also in Augustine, Serm. 286.5.
⁴⁴ See also Conf. 9.7 (“inde fama discurrens”).
⁴⁵ In Ambrose’s longest account, the religious competitors, the Arians, react to the large success of the miracle by denouncing its counterfeit character: see Ambrose, Ep. 22.17–23
theless, some selected passages can be used to advocate a perspective on ancient Mediterranean religions that, among other things, highlights and gauges the impact of urbanism on religion.

3.3 Allotting the space: polytheism and urban religion

Greek and Roman polytheistic cosmologies were intellectually designed, socio-politically enforced, and also architecturally instantiated in manifold manners that research has preferably interpreted as structured arrangements of relations among gods as individualized, coexisting, and mutually delimited active powers (Versnel 2011, 23–36). Thinking spatially, they also served the crucial function of ordering and organizing space by placing gods, that is, by fixing them to specific places. By prioritizing topographical concerns over ontological questions, one of the principal functions of the cult epithet system might have been precisely to territorialize the deities via individuation of specific cult sites (Parker 2003). From the spatially informed perspective of urban religion, polytheisms and sets of gods, like other forms of religion in cities, stand out first and foremost as key practices for urban societies insofar as they contribute to “craft place by relating people and space, disrupting continuous space, and selectively appropriating space”. The wider, denser, and the more heterogeneous the space, the more critical the “service” provided by these religious formations for the up-keeping of large-scale nucleated societies (Rüpke 2020, 86). By the same token, cities and the related functional differentiation of urban architecture are critical to the understanding of ancient Mediterranean polytheisms: when sanctuaries are scattered all over in sparsely populated areas, or when worshipping places are not recognizable as such and look all like clustered houses, then the very structure of polytheism lacks visibility and clarity.

Augustine’s critique of Roman polytheism has many facets, including a spatial one. In the fourth book of the City of God, within a larger section dedicated to several stated absurdities of pantheistic positions, we come across a ridiculing rendition of polytheism as system for allotting divine urban abodes (Civ. 4.23).

46 Albeit critical towards both the methodology and the arguments of the book (see Rüpke 2014), Rüpke does not question “the problem” identified by Ara Norenzayan’s evolutionary narrative on Big Gods, that is, whether specific forms of religious beliefs and practices have “ratcheted up large-scale cooperation in a runaway process of cultural evolution”. (Norenzayan 2013, 8; see Rüpke 2020, 77). He rather aims to historically reassess it via a cross-disciplinary and -temporal approach focused on the context-dependent interplay of different types of agencies, all of which are engaged in religiously coping with urban spaces.
According to Augustine’s hierarchical view, the theo-logically soundest method of spatial distribution of the gods would be to assign to the greatest divinities the best places, the most revered divine companies, and greatest and most sub-limes temples. It is at this point that he picks on the very spatial cradle of Roman religion on the Capitoline hill. By retelling the legendary story of the construction of the great temple of Jupiter, he shows how and to what extent preexisting states of affairs in the “perceived space” of the selected site have interfered with the “conceived space” (Lefebvre 1991, 38–39)⁴⁷ of a consistently hierarchical polytheist planning, thus troubling the plans of the most powerful urban actor:

As the written records of the Romans show,⁴⁸ when Tarquin the king wished to build the Capitol and found that the place which seemed most worthy and appropriate was already occupied by other gods, he did not presume to do anything against their will. He believed, however, that they would willingly yield to so great a deity, who was also their prince. Thus, because there were so many of them where the Capitol was built, he asked them all by augury whether they were prepared to grant the place (concederetur locum) to Jupiter. All were willing to give precedence to him apart from those whom I have named: Mars, Terminus and Juventas. It was for this reason that the Capitol was constructed in such a way that these three might also be within it, but with the signs of their presence so well concealed that even the most learned men could hardly know this

(Civ. 4.23)

This text lays bare the city as a stratified palimpsest of finite size, upon which a “multiplicity of histories that is the spatial” (Massey 2000, 231) have left material footprints that may well hamper an ideal logic of planning. However, this is not the only passage where Augustine mocks the way the Romans have allocated their gods within their city. A few chapters above, Augustine was “marvell[ing] at the fact” that, contrary to many other deities specialized in less crucial functions, the goddess Quies received no “public worship” (publica sacra) and her abode was established outside the porta Collina. His sarcastic explanation is aligned with a general argument of refutation of Roman polytheism: where regions of demons rule, no quiet is actually possible for individuals as well as for cities (Civ. 4.16). In general, by looking at the extent to which the “balkanization” of the pagan brain (Veyne 1988, 41) maps onto the compartmentalization of the divine reality (Civ. 4.11), Augustine sets out to show that such a chaotically

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⁴⁷ In Soja’s term: “Firstspace” and “Secondspace” (Soja 1996, 74–82). In Lefebvre’s view, the conceived space, as dominant space of any society insofar it is the space planned by the dominants of all societies, turns into “abstract space” when the homogenizing spatiality of capitalism begins to paper over the whole world. See Lefebvre 1991, 49–53; 285–292; etc.
⁴⁸ See Livy 1.55.4 (only Terminus); Livy 1.54.7 and Dionysius of Halicarnassus 3.69.5 (Terminus and Juventas). Mars is never mentioned in this context by extant Greek and Roman sources.
departmentalized mass of gods cannot claim any credit for the foundation, expansion, and defense of the city of Rome and its empire: “For each of these deities was so busy with his own duties that no one thing was ascribed as a whole to any of them (ut nihil universum uni alicui crederetur)” ( Civ. 4.8).

It is noteworthy that Augustine’s faith-based polemic against the moral laxity and normative deficiency ( Civ. 2.4–16) of Roman religion partly resonates with the value-free criticism voiced by many reviewers of psychologist Ara Norenzayan’s Big Gods thesis (Norenzayan 2013). The argument of a supernatural moral monitoring is mostly inapplicable to the case of Roman religion. Therefore, failing to account for the internal cohesiveness of a metropolis like the pagan Rome and the scaling up of its multi-cultural empire, the religious control exerted by sharp-eyed moralizing deities can hardly be seen as a universal prime driver for the rise of large-scale cooperative communities beyond the stage of face-to-face groups (Thomassen 2014, 671–672; Martin 2014, 631; Rüpke 2014, 647). In Augustine’s own terms, how could such a morally unconcerned surveillance and strictly departmental monitoring of human practices, whereby no overall supervision can be outsourced to any particularly watchful god, have succeeded in binding individuals together in a society led by a megacity and rapidly outcompeting all the others? Alternative explanations must be sought after (see Civ. 5.12–22).

Contrary to both Norenzayan’s Big Gods religion and Augustine’s vera religio, urban religion is not meant to account for the competitive advantage of some religions and societies over others. Nor does it call for whatever kind of superiority of city-based religious practices over religious traditions which are documented in rather rural, desert or wild areas, and/or contain supposedly rural characters, and/or are said to be elicited by “natural” factors – like meteorological phenomena and agricultural risks underpinning fundamental forms of polytheism. Following up Augustine’s description of how the workings of the pantheon ideally resembles the workings of a city workshop or a silversmiths’ neighborhood ( Civ. 7.4),⁴⁹ urban religion should rather delve into this analogy to better illuminate and historicize the nexus between the city’s and the gods’ division of labor, that is, roughly, between polytheism, on the one hand, and the triad of urbani-

⁴⁹ “Certainly, we laugh when we see assigned to them the duties which are distributed among them according to the fancies of human opinion. They are like those who collect small portions of public revenues, or like workmen in the street of silversmiths, where one vessel passes through the hands of many craftsmen before it emerges perfect, although it could have been perfected by one perfect craftsman. But many craftsmen are employed in this way only because it is thought better for each part of an art to be learned by a single workman quickly and easily, so that all are not be compelled to acquire the whole art slowly and with difficulty” ( Civ. 7.4).
zation, urbanism, and urbanity, and the other. Eventually, the main purpose is to provide a new heuristic pattern for locating and accounting for religious phenomena which are hardly explainable with the alternative between de-territorialized “cults” and territorialized “polis religions”.\(^{50}\) For example, the *ludi*.

### 3.4 “Theatrum vero ubi est nisi in urbe?”: spectacles and urban religion

Religion as a component of the “spectacular machinery” (*spectaculorum paratur*\(a\): Tertullian, *The shows* 4.3) of theatres, amphitheatres, and circuses is an excellent test-case for an urban religious approach. In fact, religious communication via mass spectacles is neither fully civic nor cultic. On the one hand, although these urban settings for mass entertainment were normally built, arranged, and orchestrated by individual members of the central and local elites as “spatial forms work[ing] to mark and reinforce social hierarchies” (Maier 2017, 266; also Gunderson 1996, 123–126), they could nevertheless harbor, and even encourage, practices that resisted and violated hegemonic expressions of emotions, meanings, and values – that is, the ordinary means whereby the elites attempt to control and capitalize on the shows. On the other hand, despite Rodney Stark’s influential reassessment of Christian martyrdom as a successful strategy of attraction for the cultural transmission of Christ religion (Stark 1996, 163–190),\(^{51}\) the ways religious representations, practices, and experiences were spatialized in such venues do not fit the traditional scholarly account of the kinds of avenues that a so-called cult religion most frequently and ordinarily used to win followers (Gasparini 2018).

In his old age an overt sympathizer of Plato’s prohibitionist approach (*Civ. 2.14*), the incisive insights and significant changes in Augustine’s attitude to *spectacula* (shows, races, games) and spectators throughout his work have now been thoroughly investigated (Lugaresi 2008, 535–694; Hugoniot 1992; Markus 1990, 110–123; Weismann 1972, 123–195). Yet, as far as an urban religious

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\(^{50}\) Thus duly spatializing the “Lived Ancient Religion” agenda: see Rüpke 2012; Albrecht et al 2018.

\(^{51}\) Stark’s influential book on *The Rise of Christianity* dates back to 1996. Therefore, it sets out the argument without building on the most recent cognitive-experimental studies on the honest-signaling attractiveness and the pro-social consequences of the “martyrdom effect” (for the concept, see Olivola and Shafir 2013; for an overview of the Cognitive Science of Religion on this topic, see Czachesz 2017, 19). Stark eminently – and less conclusively (see already Blasi 1997) – relied on the “rational choice theory”.
approach to the ecology and the infrastructure of spectacles is concerned, the *City of God* proves to be of very little help. Simply put, this work offers almost nothing for a viable theory of spectacle as an urban religious phenomenon. It supplies nothing comparable to the earlier phenomenology of the spectacles as social and economic machinery perfectly nested in the city fabric, which Augustine displayed in the *De catechizandis rudibus* (*Catech.* 16.25; see Lugaresi 2008, 619–621). Nor, “intoxicat[ion]” of the urban follies aside (*Civ.* 1.32), does the *City of God* replicate the detailed analysis of the “teletropic” (Smail 2008, 170–174) force of theatrical fictions as brilliantly conducted in the third book of the *Confessions* (*Conf.* 3.2; see Lugaresi 2008, 549–555).52 This is no fortuitous elision. To a great extent, the agenda of the *City of God* on this issue eventually stands in the way of a theo-logical and religious-moral critique of the *ludi* as a specifically urban phenomenon.

In the second book of his work, Augustine indulges in a long tirade against Greek and Roman spectacles (*Civ.* 2.8–14). Targeting principally at Roman practices, he points out a major contradiction between the Roman religious and legal approach to theatrical amusements. On the one hand, stage performances in honor of the gods are said to have been established “by the authority of the pontiffs” at a divine “command” (*Civ.* 2.8 and 1.32) and there are no restrictions on the shameful ways in which divine behaviors can be represented on the stage. On the other, actors performing such honors are not only prevented from stigmatizing citizens on the scene (*Civ.* 2.9 and 12) but legally treated as infamous, second-class citizens and thus deprived of “civil rights” – being at once barred from any post of honor and removed from censors’ lists (*Civ.* 2.13). Outlined again in the fourth book (*Civ.* 4.26), Augustine’s provocative call for a Roman-pagan consistency towards spectacles climaxizes in the sixth book in the midst of his hand-to-hand combat with Marcus Varro’s *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*. Augustine’s argument boils down to a “take it or leave it” proposition: either Christianity or the pagan theatrical takeover of religion. *Tertium non datur.* Despite Varro’s intellectual efforts, there is no such a thing as a non-theatrical “civic theology” that can be cordonned off from histrionism:

> But where is the theatre, if not in the *urbs*? Who established the theatre, if not the *civitas*? (*Theatrum vero ubi est nisi in urbe? Quis theatrum instituit nisi civitas*). For what purpose was it established, if not for the theatrical plays? And where do such theatrical performances

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52 As Daniel Lord Smail put it, “teletropic,” is “a category of psychotropy embracing the various devices used in human societies to create mood changes in other people – across space, as it were (hence ‘tele’)” (Smail 2008, 170).
belong if not among the divine things which Varro describes with such skill in his books? (Civ. 6.5; transl. Dyson 1998; slightly modified)

One of the main lines of attack that Augustine adopts to tear down the edifice of the so-called Varronian “theologia tripertita” (mythicon – physicon – civile) is to show that the mythical and the civic theology are like conjoined twins (Civ. 6.7–10) and thus Varro’s differentiation between them is eventually confusing and self-delusive. Rather, it is more reasonable to think in terms of a unique, both urban (urbana) and theatrical (theatraca), civic (civilis) theology, with the two departments feeding on each other and often sharing the same calendar (Civ. 6.7–8). Augustine’s reasoning sounds cogent. The theater is an institution of the city (civitas) perfectly nested in the urban space (urbs). The city political leaders (principes civitatis; see Civ. 4.27) mostly overlap with the affluent citizens who patronize the artists and finance the amusements. The highest-ranking priestly personal who has long managed the public city cults belongs to the same institution that is said to have originally established the shows. Moreover, the institutional-managerial contiguity presupposes a deeper gnoseological kinship: Augustine insinuates that there would be no consistent divine cult-imagery, which could sustain “the whole of norms and practices of public and private cult [...] thought necessary [...] by the leading class for the correct cult of the god” (Rüpke 2005, 109), without the representations of the gods that have been constantly forged and shaped by the stage plays (Civ. 6.7). To borrow a famous image from Walter Benjamin, the anthropomorphic and licentious “hunchbacked dwarf” of the theatrical theology guides the more reputable

53 “Next, what does he mean when he says that there are three kinds of theology (tria genera theologiae), that is, of accounts given of the gods? Of these, he calls one mythical, another physical, and the third civic” (Civ. 6.5; transl. slightly modified). For an influential genealogy of this concept, see Lieberg 1982; for a critical reassessment focused on the pragmatics of the theory, see Rüpke 2005.

54 “For the civic and the mythical (et civilis et fabulosa) theologies are both civic and both mythical” (Civ. 6.8; transl. slightly modified).

55 “I think that we have now sufficiently shown, [...], that the theology of the city and of the theatre both belong to the one civic theology (... et urbanam et theatricam theologian ad unam civilem pertineresatis)” (Civ. 6.9; transl. slightly modified).

56 Scholarly technical notions like “cultic theatres and ritual dramas” (Nielsen 2002; see Gasparini 2013 and 2018) have blurred the boundaries between rituals and dramas, thus somehow backing up Augustine’s argument. Note that, concerning the topographical proximity and the functional overlapping of the theatre and the temple of Isis in Pompeii, Gasparini uses almost the same words of Augustine’s more general argument: “the theatre was a functional appendix” of the temple (Gasparini 2013, 192); “huius urbane theologiae [...] illam theatricam [...] membrum et partem fecerunt” (Augustine, Civ. 6.9).
“puppet” of the civic theology by means of its representational strings. The state-theology of the priests and the Roman ruling class has “enlist[ed] the services” (Benjamin 1969, 253) of the stage-theology of people as disreputable as actors and mimes.

Evidently, Augustine is too caught up in his argument about the de facto identity of “civic theology” and “theatrical theology” to dwell upon his repeated use of “urbana” as something ultimately different from, and more specific than, Varro’s civilis (“urbanae theologiae”; “urbanam et theatricam theologiam”). Nor does his polemical agenda invite him to unpack the first two sentences of the passage cited above (“Theatrum vero ubi est nisi in urbe? Quis theatrum instituit nisi civitas?”) and then embark on a reflection on spectacles that would fit well in the explanatory framework of urban religion. Theatres, Augustine says, exist only “in urbe”: “ubi urbs et ibi theatrum” (Lugaresi 2008, 643). Therefore, once may add, religion as taking place in these urban settings is not adequately illuminated either by a focus on public rituals (that is, approximately via our re-descriptive category of “civic religion”) or by a more comprehensive approach on ritual rules, designated religious professionals, and politically entitled supervisors and patrons (that is, roughly according to Varro’s re-descriptive notion of theologia civilis). The establishment and upkeep of theatres by the city political leaders, as well as their management by specific groups of priests, does not tell the whole truth about their use by city-dwellers.

Like most religious phenomena when investigated from the bottom-up and consumer-focused perspective of “appropriation” (Raja and Rüpke 2015), religion in mass spectacles, too, can hardly be explained away as one of the elites’ assorted attempts to monopolize both religious and urban systems of meanings by imposing “cosmetically conspicuous but functionally identical” ways of calling the gods into play (Martin 2014, 50). This would be only possible by systematically ignoring the spatial characteristics. On the one hand, as archeologists have shown for some “theatre-cum-temple” architectural and ritual compounds, the theatricalization of a cult can be situationally connected to, and eventually emphasized by, the physical proximity of a theatre in a dense urban district (Gasparini 2013 and 2018). On the other hand, there is good evidence that the religion staged in city spectacles and the religion administered by traditional city-based authorities can be formally and functionally very far apart. The most obvious and best documented case are the spectacular/ized performances of some Christ-believers in early Christian martyrdom literature.

In this sense – moving from theatrical to amphi-theatrical settings – Augustine’s scattered treatment of Christian martyrdom in the City of God is telling. Since the earliest instances of martyrdom literature, the urban space of the arena has been the “textual amphitheatre” (Maier 2017, 257) where the spatial re-
ality of the material venues has been cosmically augmented, a combating counterculture been staged, and alternative “counterscripts” (Castelli 2004, 122) of the actual events been laid out. Yet in the City of God there is no trace of this confrontational shaping of space. In no case are Augustine’s martyrs the visual epicenters of vivid narratives through which power-filled spatial relationships and practices are questioned and reversed. The nexus between martyrdom and urbanism is never touched upon, neither as a historical phenomenon and literary plot that urban spaces sequence from the setting of the interrogation to that of the penalty, nor as a sensational spectacle in extraordinary situations of coercive visibility that only cities can provide.⁵⁷ After all, although it hints at some urban determinants for the cult of the martyrs, the City of God is not the kind of work that facilitates the study of martyrdom as an element of urban religion.

4 Conclusion: the sabbatical civitas Dei as a “non-city”?

It is hardly possible to write a paper on the city-spaces and city life in the City of God without concluding it where the book ends, that is, in the transfigured cosmos of the final separation of the two cities. Some pages above, I briefly touched on Augustine’s statement that, “when it is condemned to the punishment which is its end”, the earthly city “will no longer be a city (neque enim … iam civitas erit)” (Civ. 15.4). The earthly city’s principle of unity, namely, the search for temporal peace via “a kind of cooperation of human wills” such as to attain life-sustaining goods (Civ. 19.17), will be deactivated once the final judgment has been issued. What the “city of the devil” (Civ. 21.1) as a post-city will ontologically be is not further elucidated. Its elusive spatiality will presumably melt into the even less legible spatial order of the “new heaven and new earth” (Civ. 20.16;

⁵⁷ The two spatialities to which living and suffering martyrs are connected are the world (i.e., imperial) surface and Israel. The first is the “smooth space” (Meyer, Rau and Waldner 2017) filled with the increasing number of the martyrs and dotted with a blood which acts as seed of faith (Civ. 5.14; 10.21 and 32; 18.50; 22.6 and 7); the second is the national space that mothered the first heroes of faith (after Christ: Civ. 17.7; before Christ: Civ. 18.36). The spatiality to which dead martyrs are related is the heavenly abode that their souls temporarily share with God (Civ. 20.9). The only urban space that Augustine’s martyrology plays out is that of the memoriae of the saints, namely, the urban and suburban sites where the martyrs’ bodily remains are offered to mass veneration and procure individual healings (Civ. 1.1; 7.27; 22.8). Yet in most of these narratives the city plays the role of a mere topographic reference – this miracle happened here, that occurred there, etc.
see Rev. 21.1), whose dystopian district, the hell, has no location, no environment, “nor even, properly speaking, any ‘site’ distinct from the overall texture” (Lefebvre 1991, 240), and no topographical clues apart from a “material fire” (corporalis ignis; Civ. 21.10) torturing the damned; excluded from the perfect peace and rest of the vision of God, these latter will be doomed to eternal and real torments. Delving into his favorite spatiality, Augustine consecrates several chapters to the afterlife bodies – human and demonic – whose constitution should guarantee that, in some way, sinners will be excruciated (Civ. 21.2–10).

Fine doctrinal elaborations and urgent pastoral aims meet at the crossroads of the suffering (re-embodied) selves of the wicked: graphic accuracy and ekphrastic imagination cannot be wasted in spatial reveries.

Yet what about the heavenly city? Its citizenry is now clearly defined but, once again, its space remains unprocessed. If the first nineteen books of City of God provide “no hint of how God worked as a city planner” during the historical time (Sennett 2018, 1), the last three show that his author is no planner of the post-judgment heavenly city either. Augustine, indeed, does not follow up on the spatial imagination displayed by his guiding authority in the eschatological realm, the “apostle John”.58 Fully coherent with his lack of concern for the spatiality of the heavenly city before the doom, Augustine’s sustained spiritualization/allegorization59 of most visionary materials of Revelation 20–22 rules out the possibility that he will imitate John the Seer’s “panoptic sensibility” (Maier 2002, 66) along with his detailed description of the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21–22). Deprived of such a “visual feast” (Maier 2002, 65), a sound investigation of what is left of urbanity in a post-historical and post-urban world can only rest on some final considerations on the activities of its blessed inhabitants.

We are told that the citizens of the heavenly city will be immortal, replace the population gap left by the fallen angels (Civ. 22.1),60 and enjoy eternal bliss in a perpetual Sabbath (Civ. 22.30). Thus, arguably, they will do nothing. Herein lies the sacred dilemma of “inoperativity (inoperosità)” upon which Giorgio Agamben has brilliantly expanded. The visio Dei is portrayed as an inoperative praxis characterized by the interruption of the means/ends dialectic and the termination of the teleological dimension of social praxis, which is the logic that sustains human labor (Agamben 2011, 240–251). Since this very logic has been successfully spatialized, and then continuously upgraded, accelerated, and

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58 For Augustine’s shifting, though systematic, use of this guidance in Civ. 20–22, see Maier 1999.
59 For the ambiguity of this received opinion, see both Pollmann 1999 and Burrus 1999.
60 Augustine hypothesizes that these replacement will increase the population size of the heavenly city.
spread all over large-scale societies with the invention of cities (Jacobs 1969), this labor-free population gathered in a post-urban paradise clearly cannot function as a city. The allegorical sense of *civitas* still holds because this is a “concordant multitude” as probably never before. Yet, due to the vanishing of urban forms and the ending of any urban activity, maybe it makes sense to use the concept of “non-city”.

At the end of his commentary on Marx’s and Engels’ scattered insights into urbanism and its division of labor (*La ville et la division du travail*), Henri Lefebvre sketches out the notion of “non-city (*non-ville*)” (Lefebvre 2016, 57).⁶ In these final pages, Lefebvre seeks to spatialize the image of the communist society precisely as a place where “non-work has replaced work”. The “revolutionary time” is a “schedule of ends – ends “of religion, philosophy, ideology, the state, politics, and so on” (Lefebvre 2016, 58). The *revolutionary space* adds “the end of work and the end of the city” to the list:

Work does not culminate in leisure but in non-work. The city does not culminate in the countryside but in the simultaneous surpassing of city and country. This leaves a void that can be filled by the imagination, projections, and theoretical forecasts. But what do non-work and non-city consist of? To answer the question, we must take a step backward, toward creative activities (art) and toward the concepts that analysis has identified in the “urban”, such as meetings, gatherings, the center, decentering, and so on. But one can always respond that the surpassing of work and the city will have nothing in common with what was formerly known by those terms.

(Lefebvre 2016, 58).

Arrived at the very end of his work, Augustine is confronted with the end of the society and the work as we know them, with “meetings” and “gatherings” which are no longer recognizable as such. His apocalyptic imagination reacts by becoming extremely self-reflexive (Maier 1999, 155–156). It first feels compelled to stop and admit hesitation due to his non-empirical knowledge of this shared sabbatical activity (*Civ.* 22.29).⁶² Then it resorts again to his preferred spatiality, the body, for trying to devise the embodied conditions of a state of total contemplation and visibility of God in all beings (*Civ.* 22.29). After hesitating again on

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⁶¹ Lefebvre’s use of this expression is neither limited to this text nor confined to a post-capitalist imagined scenario. In *The Urban Revolution*, he employs it to designate either “the absence or the rupture of urban reality” (Lefebvre 2003, 13). In this latter sense, it refers to the unstructured and thus illegible features of the city as generated by the capitalist-industrial takeover and limitless expansion of urbanism “in a historical process of implosion-explosion” (Lefebvre 2003, 14).

⁶² “And yet, to tell the truth, I do not know what the nature of that occupation, or rather of that rest and repose (*Et illa quidem actio vel potius quies atque otium*), will be. After all, I have never seen it with my bodily sight” (*CIV.* 22.29).
the mystery of the movement of these bodies, it sketches first a bodily motility which perfectly meets any spiritual wish, and then speculates on a spontaneously hierarchical sense of positioning which knows no jealousy and conforms to a sinless free will (Civ. 22.30). Finally, after perception and motility, Augustine’s restrained imagination of how a non-urban civitas will look like culminates in the description of the knowledge of the saints. Freed from the feeling of past evils, the perfection of this knowledge moves the citizenry to execute a most joyful script: the “song of the glory of the grace of Christ” (Civ. 22.30). Eventually, the reader expects that the final “surpassing of work and the city will have nothing in common with was formerly known by those terms” (Lefebvre 2016, 58) since the time when Cain and his kin laid the foundation of urban life. However, one could be tempted to ask Augustine if this non-urban liturgy will be a ritual or a show or, like in Varro’s demolished system, both.

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63 “I do not venture to give any bold account of what the movements of such bodies (motus illic talium corporum) will be in the world to come; indeed I cannot even imagine it (CIV. 22.30).


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