



The Complete Twenty Two Books of the City Of God: With Introduction by Reverend Marcus Dods (With Active Table of Contents)

Saint Augustine

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If it were asked to what this popularity is due, we should be disposed to attribute it mainly to the great variety of ideas, opinions, and facts that are here brought before the reader's mind. Its importance as a contribution to the history of opinion cannot be overrated. We find in it not only indications or explicit enunciation of the author's own views upon almost every important topic which occupied his thoughts, but also a compendious exhibition of the ideas which most powerfully influenced the life at that age. It thus becomes, as Poujoulat says, "comme l'encyclopédie du cinquième siècle." All that is valuable, together with much indeed that is not so, in the religion and philosophy of the classical nations of antiquity, is reviewed. And on some branches of these subjects it has, in the judgment of one well qualified to judge, "preserved more than the whole surviving Latin literature." It is true we are sometimes wearied by the too elaborate refutation of opinions which to a modern mind seem self-evident absurdities; but if these opinions were actually prevalent in the fifth century, the historical inquirer will not quarrel with the form in which his information is conveyed, nor will commit the absurdity of attributing to Augustin the foolishness of these opinions, but rather the credit of exploding them. That Augustin is a well-informed and impartial critic, is evinced by the courteousness and candor which he uniformly displays to his opponents, by the respect he won from the heathen themselves, and by his own early life. The most rigorous criticism has found him at fault regarding matters of fact only in some very rare instances, which can be easily accounted for. His learning would not indeed stand comparison with what is accounted such in our day: his life was too busy, and too devoted to the poor and to the spiritually necessitous, to admit of any extraordinary acquisition. He had access to no literature but the Latin; or at least he had only sufficient Greek to enable him to refer to Greek authors on points of importance, and not enough to enable him to read their writings with ease and pleasure. But he had a profound knowledge of his own time, and a familiar acquaintance not only with the Latin poets, but with many other authors, some of whose writings are now lost to us, save the fragments preserved through his quotations.

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