

Augustine

and contemporary evangelical social thought

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My thesis is that the basic questions about the nature of Christian responsibility for social justice posed by Augustine more than 1500 years ago are still the fundamental ones today, and that the Augustinian formulations of the questions control contemporary evangelical social thought on all sides—Lutheran, Calvinist, Anabaptist, and others.

Let me elaborate. In Augustine's writings at least three different perspectives or points of view on social life, particularly political life, can be found. Not that Augustine wrote separate treatises on social and political life; he was an occasional writer on these subjects, with his arguments appearing in longer, broader works such as the *City of God*, and in some of his letters and sermons. If we look carefully at these writings, we will see that at different points in time and argumentation Augustine actually took three different standpoints that are not fully compatible with one another. As a result, a considerable amount of ambiguity goes hand in hand with his profound insight into these matters. The breadth and depth of his understanding, but also his ambiguities, are our inheritance.

One of Augustine's perspectives is rooted in his understanding of the antithesis between the City of God and the earthly city. Though there are many earthly nations, says Augustine, "yet there are no more than two kinds of human society, which we may justly call two cities, according to the language of our Scriptures" (from *City of God*, XIV, quoted by Paolucci in *The Political Writings of St. Augustine*, p. 5). Motivated by opposing drives, moving in antithetical directions, the two cities have, in fact, been formed by two different loves: "the earthly by love of self, even to contempt of God; the heavenly by love of God, even to contempt of self. The former glories in itself, the latter in the Lord" (p. 8).

Neither of these two cities will become manifest completely in this age. They are not geographically separate, nor can they be identified with particular earthly societies or political entities. In its present condition political life is not fully identified with the

selfishness of the earthly city, nor is the church fully identified with the City of God. But it is clear from Augustine's perspective regarding the two cities that political life in this world does *not* play a positive part in the shaping of the City of God. In fact, without true justice—the justice which exists only in the City of God—earthly kingdoms are nothing more than giant robber bands. "For what are robberies themselves," asks Augustine, "but little kingdoms? The band itself is made up of men; it is ruled by the authority of a prince, it is knit together by the pact of the confederacy; the booty is divided by the law agreed on" (*ibid.*, p. 29, from *City of God*, IV). True justice as a normative principle is nowhere present in earthly republics. "Thus, in fact, true justice has no existence save in that republic whose founder and ruler is Christ . . ." (*ibid.*, p. 43, from *City of God*, II).

Hand in hand with this idea of the antithesis between the City of God and the earthly city goes Augustine's conviction that political society is not even natural for human beings. Originally humans were created for only *non-coercive* social relationships. God instituted political orders after the Fall, on account of sin, as remedial and temporal institutions; so they can never be considered an integral part of human nature in its original goodness or in its redeemed fulfillment in the City of God. By nature God created humans for only one kind of dominion. "He did not intend that His rational creature, who was made in His image, should have dominion over anything but the irrational creation—not man over man, but man over beasts. And hence the righteous men in primitive times were made shepherds of cattle rather than kings of men, God intending thus to teach us what the relative position of the creatures is, and what the desert of sin; for it is with justice, we believe, that the condition of slavery is the result of sin" (*ibid.*, p. 148, from *City of God*, XIX).

So when Augustine considers earthly political life from the standpoint of the antithesis, what we find is essentially negative. True justice is not of this world. The love of God in the republic of Christ cannot be manifest fully on earth. The earth is not the final destination for the people of God. Earthly political life is not natural for the image of God who was created to love God and neighbor non-coercively. Christians may not cooperate with misdirected love, with self-

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love, with the disobedience to God that has required remedial, coercive politics.

So, too, where this stream of Augustinian thought controls Christian reflection on political responsibility, the outcome is primarily negative. Unable to demonstrate that political action can be truly Christian and politically earthly at the same time, such Christian social thinkers are at a dead end, where no creational or redemptive norm can be found for evaluating and guiding earthly political decision-making. The Christian is forced to consider in a normative fashion only the internal life and responsibility of the Christian community; and no norms whatever are provided for judging the political life of the larger human society, except the norms for non-coercive Christian community life. Talk about Christian political responsibility becomes primarily, if not totally, about Christian responsibility within the household of faith and negatively towards the world. The primary practical conclusion seems to be that at various times and places Christians will have to *disobey* Caesar in order to be able to obey God.

But this negative view does not stand alone in Augustine, as we said. It is qualified at certain points by his argument that there are times and places for Christians and non-Christians to cooperate. While they live in this world, Christians can share earthly life cooperatively with others and even find a harmony of interests.

The earthly city, which does not live by faith, seeks an earthly peace, and the end it proposes, in the well-ordered concord of civic obedience and rule, is the combination of men's wills to attain the things which are helpful to this life. The heavenly city, or rather the part of it which sojourns on earth and lives by faith, makes use of this peace only because it must, until this mortal condition which necessitates it shall pass away. Consequently, so long as it lives like a captive and a stranger in the earthly city, though it has already received the promise of redemption, and the gift of the Spirit as the earnest of it, it makes no scruple to obey the laws of the earthly city, whereby the things necessary for the maintenance of this mortal life are administered; and thus, as this life is common to both cities, so there is a harmony between them in regard to what belongs to it" (*ibid.*, pp. 151f.).

It is clear from the experience of the early church, Augustine argues, that the Christian understanding of God as a *unity* is incompatible with pagan polytheism. "The two cities could not have common laws of reli-

gion" (*ibid.*, p. 153). But apart from certain "religious" convictions, habits, and observances, Christians need not be too scrupulous when it comes to "diversities in the manners, laws, and institutions whereby earthly peace is secured and maintained," because all of these "tend to one and the same end of earthly peace." The "heavenly city," therefore,

is so far from rescinding and abolishing these diversities, that it even preserves and adapts them, so long only as no hindrance to the worship of the one supreme and true God is thus introduced. Even the heavenly city, therefore, while in its state of pilgrimage, avails itself of the peace of earth, and, so far as it can without injuring faith and godliness, desires and maintains a common agreement among men regarding the acquisition of the necessities of life.

One can move in two directions with this second Augustinian line of thought—a quietistic attitude more compatible with his negative position, or a more activist posture. Both tendencies are present in Augustine himself. By a quietistic attitude I mean one so oriented toward the eschatological fulfillment of God's rule in Christ that the present "captivity" of Christians in this world is merely endured. The harmony of interests among Christians and pagans arises not so much from active cooperation between them as from mere acquiescence on the part of the Christians. A strain of gnosticism is evident in this tendency.

On the other hand, if one assumes that Christians have a real interest and responsibility in this world, one would strive to cooperate energetically to sustain and preserve whatever peace and justice are possible, even though recognizing that such relative peace and justice as might be attained are not identical with the true peace and justice of Christ's kingdom.

When Augustine tends in this second direction, he tends to reveal certain Stoic and neo-Platonic streams of thought. For example, he discusses the natural moral law as that original order which has been republished in the Ten Commandments and the revelation of Christ. But no longer is it the antithesis which he emphasizes; rather it is the common universality of the law of nature (the eternal law of God), which is binding on all human beings. Of course, due to sin this law was all but effaced from the hearts of human creatures, and it is restored only in Christ. But if we ask how a relative degree of fraternity and concord can be achieved in earthly political life, Augustine answers by referring to the "vestiges," "semblances," or "images" of eternal, natural law

among non-Christians as well as among Christians. Instead of making a *negative* argument that the eternal justice and peace of God are *not* to be found on earth, Augustine makes a mildly *positive* and analogical argument emphasizing that something eternal does remain at work in the world.

A serious problem arises here. Augustine has argued elsewhere that political institutions and certain economic and legal institutions are not natural or original. Thus it would seem impossible to relate unnatural, earthly political institutions to the original natural law. Nevertheless, that is precisely what he does. As Herbert A. Deane explains, even without the renewal and reformation of life that comes through God's grace in Christ,

some "traces" or "vestiges" of true or heavenly justice [*supernae justitiae*] remain imprinted upon the minds of sinful men, and it is these "traces" that form the basis for the human ideas of justice that are embodied in economic, legal, and political institutions. Without these "vestiges" of true justice, there would be no justice among men. . . . These "vestiges," "semblances," or "images" of justice, mutual trust, and equity are the shadowy, though essential, bases of the measure of peace, harmony, and order that human society can achieve (*The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine*, p. 97).

This is not the earthly establishment of the *true* justice and peace which belong to the City of God. Nevertheless, instead of pointing *negatively* to this fact, Augustine now emphasizes that the justice and peace which do exist on earth do so because certain traces or shadows of eternal justice remain, *positively*, at work among men on earth. This is close to the Platonic notion of a shadowy *participation* of the earthly in the eternal realm. Augustine does not try to reconcile the implications of these two lines of argument or account for the radical character of the antithesis when he is discussing the traces of eternal justice that provide for the relative peace of earth in which Christians and non-Christians can share a harmony of interests. He does not try to show what the unique and special love of God among Christians should mean in this cooperative venture with non-Christians, who are motivated by self-love rather than love of God. Augustine does not explain how the true justice of God in the City of God can be both so far from and yet so close to the earthly city.

How does this strand in Augustine influence contemporary Christian thinking? As we saw, it can take

two directions. The quietistic option frequently leads to a passive, status-quo-oriented noninvolvement. At the extremes, Christians following this line find reasons to submit to a Hitler—or to accept without complaint a political system that brings them wealth and power. The worst and the best that the earth has to offer can be rationalized or endured on the grounds that this world is temporary and not deserving of too much special Christian attention. Christians can simply be thankful when the earthly peace and concord correspond to their own interests. In a less extreme fashion this quietistic route simply means that Christians do not give much attention to earthly politics.

The more activistic direction leads to political theories and programs based on the supposed common moral rational vestiges or images of justice in all humans. The antithesis between belief and unbelief, between the love of the City of God and of the earthly city, is nearly lost from view in the realm of politics. Political life will still be viewed as only temporary, as part of this world that is passing away, but Christians will make use of the Augustinian distinction between "religion" and "politics," between *religion* as worship and evangelism, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, earthly *political life* as the arena of our common cause with non-Christians that has little if anything to do with the religious antithesis of the two cities. The Christian's motivation may come from love of God and neighbor in Christ, but the structure and mode of political cooperation with non-Christians will not be sought within the framework of the norms of the City of God. As long as a given political program does not threaten true worship or free evangelism, it can be accepted by Christians to try to maintain "a common agreement among men regarding the acquisition of the necessities of life."

A third stream of thought shows up especially in the last period of Augustine's life, when he was immersed in the Donatist controversy. Early on, Augustine insisted that force not be used against the dissident Donatists, but after years of unresolved turmoil, he finally accepted the argument that force may be legitimate to preserve the unity of the church.

I have yielded to the evidence afforded by these instances which my colleagues have laid before me. For originally my opinion was, that no one should be coerced into the unity of Christ, that we must act only by words, fight only by arguments, and prevail by force of reason, lest we should have those whom

we know as avowed heretics feigning themselves to be Catholics. But this opinion of mine was overcome not by the words of those who controverted it, but by the conclusive instances to which they could point (Paolucci, *op. cit.*, p. 203, from *Letters*, XCIII, 16-19).

Accepting as legitimate the application of force to heretics in order to make them reconsider the truths of the one true Church, Augustine went on to develop an even broader argument about the responsibility of earthly kings who happen also to be Christians. Kings can serve the Lord, says Augustine, "even in so far as they are kings, when they do in His service what they could not do were they not kings. . . . So soon as the fulfillment began of what is written . . . , 'All kings shall fall down before Him; all nations shall serve Him,' what sober-minded man could say to the kings, 'Let not any thought trouble you within your kingdom as to who restrains or attacks the Church of your Lord . . . ?'" (*ibid.*, pp. 213f.). "Nay, verily, let the kings of the earth serve Christ by making laws for Him and for His cause" (p. 207).

The perspective from which Augustine developed his arguments against the Donatists is quite different from the earlier two strands to which we referred. Not only are these arguments far from being merely negative, they are also far more than a logical extension of the argument that Christians should cooperate with non-Christians to secure the common necessities of life in this world. Here Augustine was viewing political life, and particularly the responsibility of kings, from the standpoint of the life of the church and its concern for the life hereafter. The earthly republic, from this perspective, has its most important meaning in relationship to the life and health of the church.

No evangelicals in North America today are calling on the political authorities to punish heretics within the church, though there does seem to be a general civil religious fervor that manifests itself in the United States from time to time which looks to government to protect "legitimate" religions from "illegitimate" ones such as Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church. And even though this third perspective of Augustine's is not generally applicable, there is still a tendency among many Christians to view the political order only, or primarily, from the standpoint of the life and health of the church. Though opposed to medieval church-controlled society, many contemporary Christians still view the state from the vantage point of its service or lack of service to the church, showing little concern for other dimensions of the state's task or responsibility.

It is not possible in such brief space to present an adequate analysis of current evangelical writings on social justice and politics. It might be worthwhile,

however, to point in certain directions with the above sketch in mind, demonstrating the influence of the first and second Augustinian perspectives. At the very least, different streams of evangelical thought should be engaging in a historical dialogue with Augustine—and (one hopes) with one another.

It seems to me that both the more radical Calvinists and the more radical Anabaptists share the first Augustinian perspective as a common root. This comes through in the writings and work of Herman Dooyeweerd (*The Christian Idea of the State*), H. Evan Runner (*Scriptural Religion and Political Task*), Bob Goudzwaard (*A Christian Political Option*), and Richard Mouw (*Politics and the Biblical Drama*), as well as in the writings and work of Mennonite scholar John Howard Yoder (*The Politics of Jesus*) and of *Sojourners* editor Jim Wallis (*Agenda for Biblical People*). These contemporary Protestant writers all reject the implications of the second and third Augustinian perspective. Their differences appear in how they interpret the meaning of the *antithesis*.

The Calvinist authors agree with Augustine that the religious antithesis between the love of God and love of self is biblical. They are simply dissatisfied with Augustine for emphasizing only the *negative* relation involved in this perspective as it bears on politics. If God is truly sovereign, they argue (as Augustine never ceased to emphasize), and if Christ is truly King, then the state has an important, God-ordained role to play in the dynamic unfolding of God's revealed will for his creation. If perfect justice nowhere exists in contemporary earthly politics it is not because the City of God is nonpolitical but only because sinful human beings do not respond faithfully to God's norm for perfect justice. But the norm of justice, as a dimension of true love, is not "afar off" in some other realm. Rather, by his grace in Christ, God's call for justice bears directly on every political authority. With Calvin, these contemporary thinkers insist that political offices are among the highest Christian callings.

The difficulty these Calvinists face, however, is that neither Augustine nor Calvin left a clear doctrine of the state that is obviously biblical in a creational and/or redemptive way. Stoic and neo-Platonic elements were not relinquished by them. Even Abraham Kuyper, the important Dutch Calvinistic political leader, did not clearly enough relate "special grace" and "common grace" to provide the basis for an adequate Christian political theory. If the Calvinists want to clarify and purify Augustine's perspective on the antithesis without following him in his second and third lines of argument, they have a major job ahead of them in clarifying the nature of political

community in relation to creation, fall, and redemption in Christ.

Yoder and Wallis would seem to take another point of departure from Augustine's first perspective. They accept his negative judgment about the fact that *coercive* social relationships are not creational and that they exist "outside the perfection of Christ." Somehow in the mystery of his own providence God may use the "powers" that control the earthly sword, but this fact provides no norm for the life of the people of God. To live faithfully in Christ according to the norm of *agape* love must mean the consistent relinquishing of all uses of power other than the power of Christ's self-sacrificing love. Christians are called out of this evil world to live over against it in its fallenness. Christian faithfulness within Christ means living outside the offices of earthly political powers that exercise coercion and calling those fallen powers critically to account for their pride, oppression, and distortion of human life.

Their difficulty is that the attempt to negate sin and to affirm redemption from the first Augustinian perspective does not clarify what the creation is. In other words, it is not clear what sin has distorted and what Christ is redeeming. In the absence of a clear creation thesis, the opposition between sin and redemption, between power and love, between the City of God and the earthly city, becomes either an opposition between two realms that seems to conflict with the universality of God's sovereignty, or a dialectical relation between two seemingly incompatible modes of God's own operation. But in either case a normative ethic for earthly political action remains unattainable except as part of the church's internal obligation to be the church in its stance over against and in submission to the state. There can be no biblical norm for the state itself.

What of the second Augustinian perspective? It seems to me that many such evangelicals tend to be quietistic, with the consequence that there is no substantial literature on this subject from them. On the other hand, there are a number of evangelicals who manifest the activist tendency of Augustine's second perspective, the most influential and important being Carl F. H. Henry.

Henry does recognize the importance of the antithesis between the true love of God and the antinormative love of self, but the recognition of the antithesis as a "religious" one is interpreted in the second Augustinian sense which distinguishes "religion" from "politics." Henry's basic approach, then, is what he calls a strategy of "regeneration," which calls unbelievers to Christ because it realizes that the "biblical message is basically one of supernatural re-

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demption from sin, and the problem of social justice is placed in necessary relationship to man's need and God's provision of salvation" (*Aspects of Christian Social Ethics*, pp. 22f.).

The political task, in Henry's opinion, is one of "preserving what is valuable in the present social order" (*ibid.*, p. 72). By "valuable" he means essentially what Augustine would identify as the relative peace and justice that Christians and non-Christians can bring about in this temporary, temporal world. Appealing to Jacques Ellul at one point, Henry disagrees with Karl Barth

that the Church's activity in the political realm should be directed toward "the molding of the State into the likeness of the Kingdom of God." The aim of the Christian's political activity is not to produce a utopia, but to preserve justice and promote order in a fallen world. Jacques Ellul expresses this distinction well. The Christian must plunge into social and political problems, he writes, "in order to have an influence on the world, not in the hope of making it a paradise, but simply in order to make it tolerable—not in order to diminish the opposition between this world and the Kingdom of God, but simply in order to modify the opposition between the disorder of this world and the order of preservation that God wills for it—not in order to 'bring in' the Kingdom of God, but in order that the Gospel may be proclaimed, that all men may really hear the good news . . ." (*ibid.*, p. 96).

In response to a review of this book by Bernard Zylstra, Henry comments: "I associate civil government with God's order of preservation in a fallen society, rather than with the order of creation, and hence do not as directly and swiftly link it to the Kingdom of God as does Mr. Zylstra" (*The Guide*, March, 1965, p. 2).

Thus, in Henry's view, political life is not creational or natural, though on account of sin it is part of God's purpose for temporarily preserving *this* world. But given its nonoriginal character, it remains quite

unclear how earthly political life can be related to the Christian's ultimate destination, the City of God. On the one hand a relationship exists between the two indirectly, because Christians are part of this world as well as part of the coming kingdom, by faith. But, on the other hand, there is no direct relationship between the two since the state is neither natural nor spiritual.

Consequently, Henry cannot escape the Augustinian dilemma which appears when he urges Christians to be politically responsible in this world. Henry attempts to solve this dilemma in the same way that Augustine did. On the one hand, in order to have norms for political life he reaches for certain vestiges of God's eternal, objective law (including the revealed Ten Commandments which republish that original "objective" law), since those vestiges alone remain for every human creature; on the other hand, he moves in another direction and urges Christians to give *primary* attention to the spiritual and supernatural life, especially evangelism, rather than to political life.

With respect to norms for political life, Henry argues: "The Church's most important concern in regard to law and order is that government should recognize its ultimate answerability to the supernatural source, sanction, and specification of human rights and duties, and hence of government's limited nature and role as a 'minister' of justice. This recognition implies a congruity between the social commandments of the Decalogue and the principles expressed ideally in the laws of the State" (*op. cit.*, pp. 97f.). Even some ancient pagan legislators classified murder, adultery, theft, false witness, and lack of parental respect as punishable crimes, says Henry, demonstrating the universal common validity of the eternal law.

At another point Henry reiterates the importance of recognizing "the divine source and sanction of human rights; the accountability of men and nations to objective justice and transcendent moral law, and the servant-role of the State as a minister of justice and order in a fallen society . . ." (*ibid.*, p. 124).

But Henry does not explain how the ancient decalogue and the eternal "objective" law it reflects can hold for the modern state (or any state) in view of his Augustinian argument that the state is neither natural nor eternal. Nor does he explain why the state, in particular, should be normed by the decalogue, since the latter is concerned with much more than political life and since it is the high and perfect law of God. If the state is not directly related to the kingdom of God, as Henry seems to suggest, then why is it not viewed as the preserver of whatever order can be achieved in this world, even if such an order with pagans has to include laws for homosexual marriages and no laws at all against adultery? In other words, is the state truly for the purpose only of preserving order in this world, or is it related directly and normatively to the kingdom laws of Israel and Christ? How can the transcendent moral law hold for a state which does not exist by nature and cannot in any case bring about true justice, righteousness, and morality on earth?

The point that must be made emphatically in conclusion is that the authors we have discussed all too briefly have not now been categorized and eliminated. My point is only that Augustinian wisdom and ambiguities are still with us. If I am right, then we all have much work to do in clarifying our reinterpretations of Augustine, the biblical witness, and our contemporary social and political responsibilities.