

Augustinians and the New Liberalism

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Introduction

A few years ago, John Cavadini gave a wonderful talk on the venerable topic of Augustine and the self; or more precisely, the dangers of speaking about Augustine and “the self.” Latin does not have an equivalent word, and Augustine did not have a notion of the self, at least not a self as a stable, inner space. Indeed, the terms are so essentially contested and misleading—premised on an “implicit assumption that Augustine’s ‘philosophy’ can be decoupled from his theology of the Incarnation and his ecclesiology”—that Cavadini called for a moratorium on Augustine and the self.¹

I am tempted to say much the same about Augustine and liberalism since discussions of the topic often are premised on the same implicit assumption. That is, Augustine’s “politics”—ciphered through general claims about anthropology and eschatology—is decoupled from his theology of Incarnation and ecclesiology. Indeed, for the many theological critics of liberalism, there may not be much of a difference between talking about the modern self and talking about liberalism. Liberalism is just a synonym for the bloated ego of the private self, immanent to the core, alongside synonymous terms like Market and Democracy, and one thoroughly in need of Augustinian debunking. We may need another “Johannine” moratorium, but as Cavadini half-joked, I want to put it off at least until the end of this talk.

1. John Cavadini, “The Darkest Engima: Reconsidering the Self in Augustine’s Thought,” *Augustinian Studies* 38/1 (2007): p. 119–132, esp. 119 n. 1. Now also see, Jean-Luc Marion, *Au lieu de soi. L’approche Saint Augustin* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2008).

A more cautious title for this talk might be, “Modern Augustinians and New Liberalisms,” with appropriate scare quotes for good measure. Liberalism, whether old or new, is a fraught invocation among scholars of the historical Augustine rightly wary of anachronism, selective reading, and intellectual fashionableness. Which Augustine? Whose liberalism? Some may anticipate another domesticated Protestant reading which makes Augustine safe for democracy. Others might expect a dissenting Augustinian “no we can’t” to the seductive promise of Barack Obama’s “yes we can.” Or, just as likely, the disenchanting might brace for another prophetic call for mild indifference to the misfortunes of yet another imperial leader channeling a truncated Augustine via the popular image of Reinhold Niebuhr, one of Obama’s “favorite philosophers.”² Indeed, Niebuhr is the figure most responsible for Augustine’s reputation beyond the world of Augustinian studies, even in much of Catholic social ethics given the relative dominance of a certain kind of Thomism indebted to figures like John Courtney Murray and Jacques Maritain. Debates about Niebuhr, especially in the United States, often serve as proxies for the mantle of genuine Augustinianism and reflect the many varieties of Augustinian liberalism.

While there may be wisdom in critical judgments about fleeting Obamamania, I don’t think we need the rich resources of the Augustinian tradition to make them. Ordinary political psychology and sociology will do, even if they might overlap with Augustinian and Niebuhrian counsels regarding the limits of politics and the dangers of worldly enthusiasm. At the same time, Augustinian suspicion—which comes in different political stripes—risks becoming simply an ideology of opposition, prideful in its righteousness, whether by relocating all politics to ecclesiology or unending cultural critique of modernity with a clenched fist, like the elder brother anxious about all prodigal sons. Such has been Augustine’s fate for some time.

Historical and Rational Reconstruction

I want to begin with a perhaps banal, but seldom drawn or clearly followed, distinction between normative theorizing and historical scholarship. It is a general

2. David Brooks, “Obama, Gospel and Verse,” *The New York Times*, April 26, 2007, A25. Recent commentators have seized upon Obama-Niebuhr-Augustine connections. See, for example, Paul Elie, “A Man for All Reasons,” *The Atlantic*, November 2007, pp. 83–96, and Liam Julian, “Niebuhr and Obama,” *Policy Review*, April and May 2009, pp. 19–33. One edited volume on Niebuhr is dedicated to Obama as “he faces challenges of wielding power under God.” For this, see *Reinhold Niebuhr and Contemporary Politics*, ed. Richard Harries and Stephen Platten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. v.

enough claim, but an especially important one for approaching unsystematic and improvisational thinkers like Augustine. Without getting into fairly complicated issues regarding intentionality and reception theory, or trying to police guild divisions, we should distinguish between what Augustine himself believed at one time or another and what he intended to do in writing this or that work, and the different task of how best to retrieve and combine themes from Augustine's writings in our own constructive theorizing about ethics and politics. Augustine himself could adopt the latter constructive approach in his negotiations with a Stoicized Platonism and efforts to weave rival traditions into new combinations. Conflating these two tasks makes both ambitions even more susceptible to distortion—such as fictional claims that Augustine was a “closet liberal.” He was not. Liberalism is a distinctively modern phenomenon, not a perennial philosophy. Liberalism, which is understood here roughly in terms of liberal practices like democratic political arrangements under the constitutional rule of law and not in terms of any one of the various philosophies made to justify them, is contingent on social, economic, ecclesial, and political developments Augustine could not have imagined and certainly did not inhabit.

History and normative theorizing can be related, such that “rational reconstructions” of Augustine might double back at crucial points to be illuminated by, and maybe even contribute to, the labor of historical judgment as we make inferences about concepts implicit in diverse social practices. One focuses on the future of Augustine; the other focuses on Augustine's historical and linguistic setting.³ But what Augustine actually meant does not settle the normative question of what a modern Augustinian thinker, let alone a secular one, ought to believe about liberal societies. Liberalism and Augustinianism are traditions, not revelations.

Historians, Augustine knew, are not always innocent storytellers. In his 2006 Saint Augustine lecture, Claude Lepelley argued that mid-twentieth-century interpreters of Augustine's attitudes toward wealth and poverty were tempted “to read the experience of modern colonization back into this distant, remote past.”⁴ In defending Augustine's “wise and cautious” social doctrine, however, Lepelley

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3. “Rational reconstruction” is described by Richard Rorty as a way of doing philosophy, without historical anachronism, by engaging in conversation with the “re-educated dead.” See Richard Rorty, “The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres,” in *Philosophy in History*, ed. Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Quentin Skinner, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 52. For further discussion of approaches to classical texts, see Eric Gregory, *Politics & The Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago 2008), pp. 2–8. Parts of this of this essay are indebted to materials found in that text.
 4. Claude Lepelley, “Facing Wealth and Poverty: Defining Augustine's Social Doctrine,” *Augustinian Studies* 38/1 (2007): p. 8.

himself argued that “Augustine’s social doctrine could not inspire a ‘theology of liberation.’”⁵ I mention this neither to criticize Lepelley nor to argue that Augustine could inspire a “theology of liberation,” though recent work on Augustine’s actual political involvement based on his various letters and sermons, including the theme of *totus christus* and the normative intimacy of the two love commands, are suggestive for those efforts that dare to read history and politics theologically and can be contrasted to the theological reticence of most Catholic social teaching.⁶ I might also mention Augustine’s criticism of Stoic ideals of self-mastery and freedom from emotion, which provided a break with significant political implications by opening the cultural space for emotional investment with those who suffer injustice.⁷ Indeed, one of Augustine’s modern critics, Martha Nussbaum, admits that Augustinian Christianity helped move society “toward equal concern for the deprived, the poor, and the different.”⁸ But, in the end, no one knows what Augustine might think of modern proposals like liberation theology, the Social Gospel, Christian Realism, Karl Barth’s Christological conception of the State and secular parables of the Kingdom, John Howard Yoder’s nonviolent apocalypticism, Stanley Hauerwas’s church as alternative *polis*, Oliver O’Donovan’s defense of the idea of Christendom as a response to, but not a project of, Christian mission, the Red Toryism of Radical Orthodoxy, the civil rights movement, Benedict’s *Caritas in Veritate*, or indeed, The New Liberalism.⁹ I mention these examples not to condemn us to historicism, but to signal the historicity of scholarship, a point well examined by Peter Brown,

5. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

6. See, for example, Raymond Canning, *The Unity of Love for God and Neighbor in St. Augustine* (Haverlee: Augustinian Historical Institute, 1993); and *Augustine and Politics*, ed. John Doody, Kevin L. Hughes, and Kim Paffenroth (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005).

7. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), esp. Books IX and XIV.

8. Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 248.

9. Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998); Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997); Robin Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Karl Barth, *Community, State, and Church* (New York: Anchor Books, 1960, reprint, Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004); John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972); Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983); Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Philip Blond, *Red Tory* (London: Faber and Faber 2010); Charles Marsh, *God’s Long Summer* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Pope Benedict XVI, *Charity in Truth: Caritas in Veritate* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009); and *The New Liberalism: Reconciling Liberty and Community*, ed. Avital Simhony and David Weinstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

Robert Markus, and James O'Donnell in their remarks on the evolving disciplinary contexts of the study of Augustine.¹⁰

Alongside these massive developments in the socio-historical study of Late Antiquity over the past fifty years, we find a recurring interest in what I see as an ambivalent and provisional relationship between the Augustinian legacy and liberal traditions. Most recently, appropriations of Augustine figure prominently in post-liberal or post-secular “political theologies.” They are critical of conventional discussions of “religion and politics” or “the church and the world” because they are abstracted from distinctively Christian beliefs and practices. These new political theologies recruit older models of Christian political thought in order to gain critical distance from liberal habits of mind which safely privatize “religion” and translate theopolitical vocabulary into the inner life of moral motivation (perhaps a symptom of Luther’s radicalized Augustinianism). These debates now admit their own historiography; again, not so much in terms of what Augustine actually said or counterfactual speculation of what he would say, but applications of heavily interpreted strands of Augustinianism to different cultural and political circumstances.¹¹ Augustinianism, like most traditions, is essentially a contested domain.

Types of Augustinian Liberalism

Against Christian and non-Christian critics of liberalism, we can distinguish various Augustinian defenses of liberalism in the modern period: Augustinian realism (as in Reinhold Niebuhr and his followers), Augustinian proceduralism (as in John Rawls and his followers), and Augustinian civic liberalism (as in Martin Luther King Jr., and his followers). I happen to defend this more ambitious third type by re-reading Augustine’s frequently-repeated theme of “using and enjoying” as a way of getting beyond an exclusive focus on demythologized tropes about original sin and eschatology. On my account, we are distracted by Augustine’s so-called Platonizing of the biblical contrasts of *amor dei* and *amor mundi* in ways that betray his refusal of any subordinationist teleology in which proximate goods are only a means to an ultimate, often solipsistic, good fueled by a dualistic theory of value.¹² Love, it seems to me, does not work that way for Augustine. Throughout his major writings, he worried about *how* one is to love without desperately trying to possess and consume any good, whether finite or infinite. A tournament of competitive

10. “The Study of Augustine,” *Augustinian Studies* 32/2 (2001): pp. 179–206.

11. See, for example, Creston Davis, John Milbank, and Slavoj Žižek, *Theology and the Political: The New Debate* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

12. See Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, esp. chs. 5 and 6 (n. 3).

loves—between God, self, and neighbor—fuels many philosophical and theological criticisms of Augustine’s eudaimonism. But this is precisely what his Christology and ecclesiology reject, especially in Book 10 of *City of God*.¹³ Whether or not I am right about this reading of his vision of a non-possessive divine economy, it is telling that these exegetical debates are seldom joined to interpretation of Augustinian politics, given the preoccupation with isolated readings of Book XIX as a political theory of church-state relations that has afflicted many.

For most of the twentieth century, following this text, Augustinian liberals employed a deflationary rhetoric of sin as a cautionary tale in support of an anti-totalitarian politics of toleration opposed to training in human perfection. The “not yet” of eschatological hope is its primary virtue. But in the twenty-first century, from diverse quarters and unlikely coalitions, we once again hear stirrings of an inflationary rhetoric of civic virtue, including appeals to love that highlight the vulnerability and dependency of human beings, understood as interrelated bundles of love rather than essentially conflicting wills.

Most liberals, notably Kantians, are wary of love, preferring the distance of justice and respect. Others, notably consequentialists, formulate secularized versions of *caritas* as utilitarian benevolence. Other-regarding love includes consideration of outcomes in a world of complex injustices, but utilitarian and excessively chaste realist registers are both inadequate. What is needed, I believe, are correlations of love and sin that avoid arrogant perfectionisms and essentially negative forms of political liberalism. To do so requires distinguishing the strenuous aspiration toward perfection from the prospect of achieved perfectability in an imperfect world and conceptions of politics that simply aim to *maximize* human excellences and the total value of good in community. Augustinians typically hold that the good is prior to the right. Most liberals claim otherwise: they say satisfy preferences, not well-being. The well-worn grooves of this debate frequently seem to generate a stalemate, often without allowing for the interdependence of the right and the good or recognizing that debates about the right are as controversial as those about the good. In fact, alongside a narrow focus on the role of religious reasoning in public debate, Augustinian political theorists often are confronted with an unhappy choice between caricatures of liberalism and communitarianism: choose this day whom ye will serve (Josh. 24:15).

Augustinian politics should be realistic, which is to say adequate to human creatures and their communities, but it should also encourage transformation of

13. For the classic defense of Augustine’s eudaimonism, see John Burnaby, *Amor Dei: A Study of the Religion of St. Augustine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

actual practices. There is imperfection, which admits contests over the human good, and there is imperfectionism, which abandons them in despair. Horrors there are in liberalism; but Augustinian politics need not delight in them. Today, I want to build on these claims in light of what has been called the New Liberalism, a perfectionist strand of liberalism which aims to undermine individualistic assumptions and orient social and political practices toward a common good without abandoning concern for basic rights.

Augustinian discussions of liberalism—for good and for ill—have been most exercised by abstract notions of “neutrality,” “secularity,” and “coercion” in traditional liberalism. These debates, of course, owe much to the groundbreaking work of Robert Markus, especially *Saeculum*, but also *The End of Ancient Christianity*, *Signs and Meanings*, and, now, *Christianity and the Secular*.¹⁴ In response to critics, Markus now explicitly rejects contract-based theories of political legitimacy, state neutrality, and individualist liberalism. Markus’s Augustine is still the “outstanding critic of the ideology of Christian empire” and “the principal thinker to defend a place for the secular within a religious, Christian interpretation of the world and of history.”¹⁵ The “two Cities” remain “inextricably intertwined” in this passing age, fending off ecclesial triumphalism in which the church might “swallow the world,” even as appeals are made to “shared values” and “common objects of love.”¹⁶ This social conception of virtue is not limited to the *ecclesia*. Dogmatic secularism is out of bounds, but images of *corpus permixtum* and porous boundaries are favored against a diaspora mentality favored by many Christian political theologians. Moreover, Markus now agrees with arguments made by Oliver O’Donovan and others defending the claim that political authority may be instrumental, but it is not neutral.

Crucially, for Markus, there are two senses that the earthly city can bear in Augustine’s language: (1) it can be a symbol of the “eschatologically separated” and (2) it can be any “actual, empirical society” which “can be better or worse according to the kind of activity and intentions they promote and the kind of people they help to shape.”¹⁷ I will return to this latter claim, which I want to defend as

14. Robert Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of Saint Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); *Signs and Meanings: World and Text in Ancient Christianity* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1996); and *Christianity and the Secular* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

15. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, p. 10 (n. 14).

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 48, 86, 61, and 69. See Augustine, *civ. Dei*, I,35.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

allowing for trenchant criticism of the loves that characterize liberal societies without embracing the hostility of anti-liberalism, below. I am less confident than Markus in a liberal deployment of Augustine's supposed differentiation of the "two cities" as "eschatological rather than sociological or historical," but I am open to Carol Harrison's suggestion that the text in which Augustine explicitly states otherwise are best seen as moments of rhetorical excess that cut against the grain of his mature theology.¹⁸ On my reading, nothing is neutral for Augustine. The world is saturated with God. For Augustine, it is the (thoroughly-fictional) world that is imagined to exist without God that is unrealistic. There is no religious *adiaphora*. All politics is about fellowship and worship. Politics is either towards or away from God, and our souls are always being shaped in accord with one of the two cities in agonistic struggle. As Robert Dodaro has shown, for Augustine, without Christ—the true statesman and orator—there can be no justice.¹⁹ Like Paul, Augustine held that "the just shall live by faith" (Rom. 1:17; cf. *civ. Dei*, XIX,14). The church gives witness to a truly public civic virtue—even if it too remains on pilgrimage, wounded, at times *in cognito*, and groaning toward fulfillment.²⁰ But the *saeculum* can be described as open and ambivalent, a time of ongoing penitential discernment, even joyful anticipation by pilgrims.²¹ The intense drama of the secular lies in the capacity for good or evil, rather than some autonomous *tertium quid*. There is no "overlapping consensus," and Augustine's transformation of Cicero's definition of a commonwealth can not bear Markus's continued "value-free" interpretation; but like all sin, earthly politics is parasitic on a genuine good, the perfection of our virtues in social life.²²

Part of my concern may be terminological, generated by Markus's ambiguous appeal to spatial and temporal metaphors of the secular. At times, he claims that

18. Markus, *Saeculum*, p. 123, and Carol Harrison, *Augustine: Christian Truth and Fractured Humanity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 216. For a third perspective, see Oliver O'Donovan, "The Political Thought of City of God 19," in Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, *Bonds of Imperfection: Christian Politics, Past, and Present* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), pp. 48–72. According to O'Donovan, that "the two cities are *moral* communities, there can be no doubt; yet the *history* of the earthly city is supremely that of the Babylonian and Roman empires, and the *history* of the heavenly city is that of the faithful in Israel and of the church" (56–57). O'Donovan's nuanced account tries to mediate between "idealist" and "realist" interpretations of *civ. Dei*, XIX, 24.

19. See, e.g., Robert Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

20. Michael C. McCarthy, "An Ecclesiology of Groaning: Augustine, The Psalms, and the Making of the Church," *Theological Studies* 66/1 (2005): pp. 23–48.

21. Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society*, p. 131 (n. 19).

22. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, p. 63 (n. 14).

the secular is “that which belongs to this age” and elsewhere it is “a space that is at the same time a territory in which each of the two parties can allow the other to occupy its own distinct and proper position.”²³ The spatial metaphor can fund problematic notions of autonomy which quarantine the social presence of the church. I suspect we could benefit from further attention to Augustine’s theme of a hidden apocalyptic in-breaking in time rather than those aspects of his thought that are so often construed as counter-apocalyptic eschatological deferral and exhortation for “ethical engagement in the present.”²⁴ Augustinian liberals typically prefer the eschatological deferral to the apocalyptic vision of the resurrected Christ, especially when it promotes apocalyptic secular politics. For Augustine, however, the drama of Incarnation displays Christ’s authority, enacted and realized in the bonds of human community. But Augustine, again following Paul, construes these bonds in terms of love rather than secret knowledge. As Markus rightly recognizes, “there is no morally indifferent action” within the public sphere.²⁵

With Markus, and against Milbank, Augustinian liberals resist the “radical equation of the secular with sin.”²⁶ With Markus, and against O’Donovan, I also think that Pauline eschatology can allow “subordinate identities and loyalties to survive intact under Christ’s rule, with their appropriate institutions, norms, and legitimate scope.”²⁷ Indeed, the civil community, while not a part of creation as (at least some) Calvinists argue, allows for analogies between Christian discipleship and political citizenship, so long as citizens on pilgrimage do not confuse the glory of the coercive earthly city with that of the heavenly one, the “most glorious.”²⁸ Whether civil community can promote true virtue remains an open question for Markus’s Augustine. But I take it that his *Augustinus redivivus* would be sympathetic to maximizing the shared vocabularies and common purposes of a political society in ways consistent with recent efforts to read Augustinianism and Thomism as more closely aligned than stylized contrasts suggest.

Between Incarnation and *parousia*, however, Markus’s Augustine is radically agnostic about God’s purposes in human history. This salutary move deflates sacred pretension. But I think it can degenerate into a spiritualized dogmatism of its own,

23. *Ibid.*, pp. 14 and 39.

24. Karla Pollmann, “Moulding the Present: Apocalyptic as Hermeneutics in *City of God* 21–22,” in *History, Apocalypse, and Secular Imagination*, ed. Mark Vessey, Karla Pollmann, and Allan D. Fitzgerald (Bowling Green: Philosophy Documentation Center, 1999), pp. 165–181, here 179.

25. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, p. 44 (n. 14).

26. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 29. See O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, p. 148 (n. 9).

28. Augustine, *civ. Dei*, praef.

one that unwittingly risks Augustine's belief that Jesus, as God incarnate and the "desire of the nations," used his humanity to love God perfectly in this life, and that God's entering into time normatively binds love for God and love for neighbor together without collapsing the one into the other. To refuse Incarnation, the entry of divine love from eternity, is to refuse creation itself; a refusal which was the fundamental error of the Platonists. In fact, for Augustine, virtues relate to the perfection of temporal goods even as we yearn for the eternal rest of their fulfillment.²⁹ Our mortality is not enough to contain such desire, but it is not the problem, only the expectations that we place upon it. As Augustine claims, even those members of the heavenly city "have a life in this age which is not in the least to be regretted: a life which is the school of eternity, in which they make use of earthly goods like pilgrims, without grasping after them."³⁰ History is no waiting-game, as Augustine's many critics charge. It is the time when our loves are in training in order to begin to learn to love in the right way (i.e., with mercy and humility). The qualification of "begin" here is important since the maturity of love admits no closure, even when "the beauty of the entire temporal universe, with its individual parts each appropriate to its time, will flow like a great song by some indescribably great composer."³¹

Debates about secularity and neutrality will continue, but I think we need more focused attention to those liberalismisms which understand themselves as dialogical striving toward perfection, rendering our practices more perfect, trying to make what is noble democratically available to all. In their introduction to *Augustine: Political Writings*, Dodaro and Atkins argue that in a different age, Augustine "might well have seen the practicability of abolishing the slave trade."³² I suspect Augustine thought it was abolished in Christ, but I agree that Augustine's example serves as a "constant reminder to use and influence existing institutions in as peaceable and loving a direction as possible" and "to put whatever pressure they can on the social structures of a fallen world."³³ In turning to the New Liberalism, I want to amplify this claim.

29. To be sure, these efforts are partial and resist integration. For a contemporary statement of a similar position in philosophical ethics, see Robert Adams, *A Theory of Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). According to Adams (see p. 173), "if a transcendent or infinite good provides the primary ideal or reference point, excellence in being for the good will nonetheless involve being for particular finite goods occurring in the world." It should be noted, however, that Adams is deeply critical of the structure of Augustine's ethics.

30. *Civ. Dei*, I.29.

31. *Ep.* 138. For this trans., see *Augustine: Political Writings*, ed. E. M. Atkins and R. J. Dodaro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 32.

32. *Ibid.*, p. xxvi.

33. *Ibid.*

New Liberalisms

New Liberalism is as contested as Augustinianism, reflecting as it does the internal diversity of traditions, and the resilience of their capacity to reinvent themselves. Most generally, New Liberalism understands itself as that much-promised but never delivered Third Way between one-sided appeals to individual or community, liberty or equality, idealism or realism, progress or conservation. Almost every liberal claims to be a new liberal, whether Alexis de Tocqueville or Bill Clinton, and their Augustinian critics invariably complain it is just an old liberalism: one that totalizes a politics of law and government as the only real site of power rather than the activist yet humbled restraint it claims to honor. They are frequently critical of ones that give into a Pelagian temptation of policy planning and social engineering, creating ever new forms of discipline and alienation.

One “new liberalism,” however, harkens back to the tough-minded Cold War liberalism of Niebuhr, Arendt, and Schlesinger and finds favor among a new generation of centrist liberals wary of the utopian sentimentality in the face of Islamist totalitarianism. It trades on familiar, perhaps too familiar, Augustinian counsel to observe limits yet restrain evil under conditions of necessity. For example, in *The Good Fight: Why Liberals—and Only Liberals—Can Win the War on Terror and Make America Great Again*, Peter Beinart writes:

[Reinhold] Niebuhr criticized the self-congratulatory right for its willingness to “cover every ambiguity of good and evil . . . by the frantic insistence that any measure taken in a good cause must be unequivocally virtuous.” . . . America must recognize its capacity for evil and build the restraints that hold it in check. But it must still act to prevent greater evil. It cannot take refuge in the moral innocence that comes from no meaningful action at all.³⁴

Beinart’s charge comes at the conclusion of his book in a chapter entitled, “A New Liberalism.” He wants his fellow liberals to imagine a better new liberalism, yet he still wants it to be a liberalism of dirty hands in the tradition of Niebuhr. In addition to pride, Niebuhr cautioned against sloth; he worried about sloth (as opposed to laziness) because he feared the consequences of failing to seek justice over the long haul. Limited justice is not the Kingdom of God, but it is a better hope than endless introspection. Augustine was too severe, Niebuhr thought, and he harbored hopes for a progressive justice. These commitments, à la Bernard Williams, may occasion cause for regret, but not the remorse of moral guilt.

An Augustinian might worry about the freedom that today’s Niebuhrians set out to defend, and the means they are willing to adopt, including recent Augustinian

34. Peter Beinart, *The Good Fight* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), pp. 196–197.

defenses of the use of torture in a war on terror. President Obama also defends the war in Afghanistan as a “war of necessity” not a “war of choice,” a rhetorical gesture that belies what critics ironically call his administration’s “striving for moral purity in international affairs” because “it prevents scrutiny of one’s own motives, which in nations, as in individuals, are rarely pure.”³⁵

Historically, however, New Liberalism refers not to this revived popular Nieburhianism, but to a school of late Victorian politics which rejected the laissez-faire implications of classical liberalism of thinkers such as John Locke and Adam Smith, which were defined by strong conceptions of private property, personal autonomy, and limited government. In Britain, it is associated with “social liberalism” and the work of figures like T. H. Green and L. T. Hobhouse. In the United States, New Liberalism refers to the New Deal of the 1930s in response to the Lochner era of deregulation, and can be updated to include the efforts of the political and legal reforms of the civil rights era.

New Liberals reject atomistic assumptions about human beings as fundamentally egotists. With Augustine, they believe that human beings are social by nature. Moreover, New Liberals, by giving the state positive as well as negative duties and by giving citizens positive as well as negative liberties, propose a more vigorous enabling of the general welfare through social and economic reforms in areas such as labor, education, and health. Here, often inspired more by Hegel than Kant, they depart from anything Augustine could have known. They remain committed to democratic institutions and practices, which can be read in terms of familiar Augustinian concerns about idolatry. But, like classical republicans, they try to reconcile these commitments with a common good and redress inequalities that serve as proxies for domination over others—yet another Augustinian concern. In fact, for someone like T. H. Green, the political community could link perfectionist aspirations for moral excellence with a teleological conception of the common good—not through direct promotion by the state which might deepen forms of domination and arbitrary interference—but by removing obstacles to deliberation and maintaining “the conditions without which a free exercise of the human faculties is impossible.”³⁶ According to Green, human beings have ends toward which they are drawn and whose realization brings happiness, but social and personal ills stubbornly prevent such ends from being fruitfully realized. Like Augustine, these theories are interested in promoting those practices that expand human flourishing

35. Robert Kagan, “The President and the ‘Necessary War’ Myth,” *The Washington Post*, August 23, 2009.

36. T. H. Green, “Liberal Legislation,” in *Perfectionism and the Common Good*, ed. David O. Brink (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003), p. 83.

and discouraging those practices that diminish it. They are liberal because they recognize the limited authority of the state and the instrumental quality of the political common good.

Fellow liberals often worry that certain concepts of positive freedom open the door to despotism and dangerous efforts to “make men free” by promoting their perfection. Someone like Green recognized that citizens often are unfree, beholden to corrosive personal and social forces in a turbulent world. He did not want to violate their agency with clumsy weapons of state. But he saw connections, both sociological and philosophical, between the development of virtue and the existence of institutions and communities which, through reforms, foster and enable such virtue. Here we enter into familiar Augustinian terrain—and most notably the problem of coercion—which for Augustinian liberals like Markus simply remains an “unresolved tension” in reading Augustine’s “mature theology of *saeculum*.”³⁷ Much has been written on Augustine and coercion and the tricky reasoning that lies behind his attempt to provide opportunities for others to be healed from the captivity of vicious sins.³⁸ But, at the risk of exacerbating historical concerns, I want to recast aspects of this topic by way of a concluding section on Augustinians and Obama which is motivated by recognition of continued forms of coercion in liberal politics.

Augustinians, Obama, and the New Liberalism

One is tempted by a playful biographical comparison: two middle class kids, gifted in rhetoric with a sense of audience, born on the relative margins of empire, inspired by a great leader of the church to abandon a life of contemplation in favor of ruling an unruly people, unsure of their deepest commitments, threatened by religious violence, aware of standing at a crossroads, who orient themselves by a spiritual conversion that allows them to narrate a mother’s restless spirituality in contrast to a distant father, and who are described by interpreters as a great “enigma.” Like Niebuhr, Augustine and Obama turn again and again to meditations on navigating between hope and despair. Augustine claims that the wise man will take his seat on the judge’s bench and cry out, “from my necessities deliver

37. Markus, *Saeculum*, p. 146 (n. 14). In *Christianity and the Secular* (n. 14), Markus confesses continued uncertainty about how to reconcile Augustine’s views “on coercion and on the functions of civil community, a tension which may indeed prove to be irresolvable”; for this, see p. 66 and n. 48.

38. For a particularly insightful reading that challenges modern prejudices while also highlighting Augustine’s recognition of a need for justification, see John Bowlin, “Augustine on Justifying Coercion,” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 17 (1997): pp. 49–70.

Thou me”; Obama calls for a “new era of responsibility.”³⁹ To be sure, the contents differ; and Augustine’s soteriology surely stands at some distance from Obama’s liberal-Protestant vision.⁴⁰ Augustine spoke out of the particularity of Christian confession; Obama calls Christian citizens to “translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values” so that they can be “subject to argument, and amenable to reason.”⁴¹

But Barack Obama has sought to reclaim the religious voice of liberalism, finding in Niebuhr a realism that is hopeful in the face of human folly as well as a hope that is realistic. He learned from Niebuhr, “the compelling idea that there’s serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief we can eliminate those things. But we shouldn’t use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction . . . we have to make these efforts knowing they are hard, and not swing from naïve idealism to bitter realism.”⁴² While Niebuhr tried to address a culture overly optimistic about social engineering, Obama’s Niebuhr wants again to think about the *possibilities* of politics, not harp on how wicked we are. But in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, to the dismay of both many in the European audience and many on the left around the world, Obama offered a vigorous defense of Niebuhrian politics, claiming the “hard truth that we will not eradicate violent conflict in our lifetimes” in light of the “imperfections of man and the limits of reason.” Like Niebuhr, he contrasted King’s legacy of nonviolence as our “North Star that guides us on the journey,” to the requirements of a head of state sworn to defend the nation. Unlike Niebuhr, he drew more lines in the sand regarding the means he would use in this defense, and called us to “reach for the world that ought to be—that spark of the divine that still stirs within each of our souls.”⁴³

These adventures can be dismissed as traditional civil religion. But just after his election, George Packer argued that Obama’s decisive victory brought to a close a conservative era that rose “amid the ashes of the New Deal coalition of the late sixties.”⁴⁴ Packer and others have found many Obamas: the “post-partisan”

39. Augustine, *civ. Dei*, XIX,6, and Barack Obama, “Inaugural Address,” January 20, 2009. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/inaugural-address>.

40. See Cathleen Falsani, *The God Factor: Inside the Spiritual Lives of Public People* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2006).

41. Obama, “Call to Renewal Address,” June 28, 2006. http://www.barackobama.com/2006/06/28/call_to_renewal_keynote_address.php

42. David Brooks, “Obama, Gospel, and Verse” (n. 2).

43. Barack Obama, “A Just and Lasting Peace,” Nobel Lecture. Nobelprize.org. 16 Jun 2010. http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/2009/obama-lecture_en.html.

44. George Packer, “The New Liberalism,” *The New Yorker* (November 17, 2008): pp. 84–91.

Obama, the “progressive” Obama, the “Alinskyite community organizer” Obama, the “left-wing Burkean” Obama, the “pragmatic” Obama, the “populist” Obama, the “elitist” Obama, and the “technocrat” Obama.⁴⁵ His administrative choices feed growing concerns that a New Liberalism from the bottom up has been abandoned for another managerial class beholden to unchecked corporate power; a charismatic leader pursuing party politics as usual. But I want to look in another direction by way of one example.

That direction is clearly exemplified by the bestselling book, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth and Happiness*, which was co-written by one of Obama’s top executives, Cass Sunstein, who holds the imperial sounding title of “Administrator of the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs.” There is a fair amount of historical distance between *Nudge* and Augustine’s “compel them to come in,” but I want to suggest a theoretical resonance. Augustine’s violent rhetoric of “seizing,” “grasping,” and “compelling” the neighbor to her own good as an act of “tough love” is not a usual resource for Augustinian liberals. In fact (and as I have already noted), most Augustinian liberals simply throw up their hands and label Augustine’s theology of coercion as a contradiction or anomaly. His pastoral and medicinal analogies for political power exercising a “salutary discipline” for fallen humanity are simply too much for most liberals to accept let alone absorb.

What is distinctive about *Nudge* is its effort to join liberal commitments with paternalist ones, aiming not to implement people’s stated preferences or choices but to “move people in directions that will make their lives better.”⁴⁶ They offer various examples, ranging from health care to savings plans to environmental issues. Their language of “choice architecture” may be disturbing to some, but it claims neither “rigid mandates” nor “dogmatic laissez-faire.” It takes its cue from behavioral economics, a sub-discipline which challenges the supposed unbounded rationality of human deliberation. For example, it encourages fruits to be at eye level but does not ban junk food. “Nudging” is part and parcel of the inevitability of judgment and coercion in certain restricted areas of state activity. The question it faces is not whether or not to “coerce,” but the circumstances, forms and limits of legitimate state activity. In a passage from *trin.* that sounds strikingly similar to *Nudge*, Augustine writes: “while to be sure it is hidden from one man what another

45. For a perceptive study of Augustine and Alinsky, see Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 71–125.

46. Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein, *Nudge: Improving Decisions about Health, Wealth, and Happiness* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 6.

man wants, there are some wishes that all have which are known to every single individual.”⁴⁷ I do not want to baptize nudging—especially given appropriate concerns about democratic transparency and accountability. But I suggest that too many of the debates about liberalism operate at such an abstract level that Augustinian social critics remain otherworldly in spite of themselves. Their visions remain mere “oughts” and lack the fine-grained texture of Augustine’s concern for embodied performances of virtue.

Augustine was well aware that benevolence and beneficence are a difficult business. For example, in Book I of *mor.*, one of his earliest works, he laments: “Would that it were as easy to do something for one’s neighbor’s good or to avoid injuring him as it is for the kind-hearted and well-instructed to love him. But here good will alone does not suffice, for it is a work demanding great understanding and prudence.”⁴⁸ Technological and engineering metaphors scare most Augustinians, wary as they are of another Constantinian posture or various heresies of neo-Hegelian progressivism. Augustine also tends to view virtues as damage control against vice rather than as practical skills with an intellectual structure. But, at its best, such approaches are simply fallible practices of human community which give flesh to ideals and values by the formation of habits and skills. Governing, whether in the church or state, is a pastoral art and a social practice, not a science. It is prone to corruption. The liberal state may be a failed church, a parody of virtue, but this does not mean it is a false copy that only good for being tossed aside. The administrative state will not soon give way to a global liturgical polity. It is deficient, potentially idolatrous, but not necessarily demonic. In *trin.*, Augustine observes that the political community is not the “home country of a citizen,” but it can be a “refreshment, or even a night’s lodging for a traveler.”⁴⁹

There could be worse forms of disorder in this “hell on earth” than a new liberalism—especially one which has abandoned utopian and rationalistic aspirations without forsaking virtue. Historians and political theologians might be attracted to more high-energy politics and religion than a perfectionist New Liberalism. I also want radical democracy, but I expect less; and I also worry about setting the world on fire. Augustinian critique can be virtuous. It does well to expose the serpent’s whisper that tempts us to create our own destinies, or, as Rowan Williams helps us

47. *Trin.* XIII,3,6 (CCSL 50A, p.387). See E. Hill, *Augustine, The Trinity, WSA I/9* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1991), pp. 346–347.

48. *Mor.* I,26,51 (CSEL 90, p. 55). See Donald A. Gallagher and Idella J. Gallagher, trans., *Augustine, The Catholic and Manichean Ways of Life*, The Fathers of the Church, 56 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1966), p. 41.

49. *Trin.*, XI,6,10 (CCSL 50, p.347). See E. Hill, *Augustine, The Trinity*, p. 312 (n. 47).

see, to expose the limited ambitions of earthly politics.⁵⁰ But we should also have the courage to be constructive and attentive to empirical realities as we imagine better forms of deliberating about our common life together as hastening pilgrims, longing for that point at which our loves will “know no check.”⁵¹ Augustinians might draw from Augustine in order to imagine that all will be surprised by what true virtue really looks like. Augustinians might be grateful for a new liberalism, which is perhaps better than we deserve, while also being better than pitchforks.

In sum, we may need more realism in political practice, but we need less in theorizing Augustinian politics. If we can distinguish the two, which is psychologically difficult, we will have made a distinction with a difference. Augustine offers a complex psychology of both right loving and patient longing. We need both of those practices for a cynical culture that has learned some Augustinian lessons too well. Lepelly was right to recommend a “wise and cautious” Augustinianism. We should not be obsessed with purity, but even this long view should attend to the contingent and particular, including legal institutions and their social norms, out of concern for loving the neighbor in God.

Today, there are no serious alternatives to liberal democracy in Christian thought. Some Christians come close in their heated discussions about certain democratic practices being perversions of justice, not merely as imperfections. Some advocate monarchy or non-statist socialism, but this advocacy has failed to generate a substantial constituency. Most prophetic challenges, if an alternative is proposed, bear the marks of central features of a liberal democratic tradition—there seems “no other model available to us of a political order derived from a millennium of close engagement between state and church.”⁵² Indeed, the Catholic Church has moved from being one of the strongest critics of liberal democracy to one of its great defenders, especially during the papacy of John Paul II.⁵³ Fights about democracy are often proxies for other debates, like value pluralism or views of morality as mere social agreement.

50. Rowan Williams, “Politics and the Soul: A Reading of the City of God,” *Milltown Studies* 19/20 (1987): pp. 55–72. For Williams, by ironically exposing the injustices of a political society cut off from orientation to God and a genuinely social account of virtue, *civ. Dei* offers “a redefinition of the public itself” (cf. p. 58).

51. *Civ. Dei*, XI,28.

52. O’Donovan, *Desire of the Nations*, p. 228 (n. 9).

53. See, for example, George Weigel, “Catholicism and Democracy: Parsing the Other Twentieth-Century Revolution,” in *Soul of the World: Notes on the Future of Public Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), pp. 99–124; and Charles E. Curran, *Catholic Social Teaching, 1891–present* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002).

Even if we get Augustine right, another ongoing task of reconsideration remains for those who might identify with the tradition he inspires: what does it mean and look like to be Augustinian in the twenty-first century? I have tried to suggest one partial answer to this question that is not relentlessly negative by definition: making use of a new liberalism, but not enjoying it.