

Augustine was born in 354 AD, 30 years after Constantine became the first Christian emperor, and died aged 76 in 430 AD.

Over his lifetime his output was phenomenal, publishing the equivalent of a 300-page book every year for 40 years.<sup>1</sup>

Before his conversion, he was imperial professor of rhetoric at Milan — a post likened to “the endowed chair of government at Harvard.”<sup>2</sup> And while most of his works make no mention of politics, few have shaped Western political thought more deeply than Augustine.

However, his concern was not so much with the institutions of government as with the hearts and loves of rulers and citizens. And while recognising both the possibilities and limits of politics, he considered engagement in public life, especially within pluralistic societies, a means of sanctification for Christian citizens.

And to consider his approach, I want to highlight a few recurring themes.

### 1. The Two Cities

In *The City of God*, Augustine contrasts two interwoven communities of people — the City of God and the City of Man. And these are not political entities, or even secular and religious domains, they’re two orientations of love.

The two cities, he says, ‘were created by two loves: the earthly city by love of oneself, even to the point of contempt of God; the heavenly city by the love of God, even to the point of contempt for oneself.’<sup>3</sup> And the earthly city glories in power and domination; while the heavenly city glories in God and mutual service.

And citizens of both cities are intermingled with each other until the final judgment. And so, for Augustine, the institutional church is not the same as the true church, or the City of God, and neither is the world of politics the same as the City of Man. Instead, their citizens are intermingled, which means no political order can ever be perfectly just, or make people virtuous, or bring true peace.

### 2. *Libido Dominandi* — The Lust for Domination

Augustine argued that a disordered self-love breeds *libido dominandi* — the lust to dominate others. The irony, he says, is that the City of Man, ‘Even as it enslaves people in its quest to dominate, is itself dominated by the very lust to dominate.’<sup>4</sup>

And this desire to dominate, he argues, violates the creation mandate of Genesis 1: God gave man dominion over the beasts, not each other. It also fuels tyranny and civil conflict. And even religion

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Lamb, *A Commonwealth of Hope: Augustine’s Political Thought*, 2022; 5.

<sup>2</sup> Lamb; ix.

<sup>3</sup> *City of God*, 14:28

<sup>4</sup> *City of God*, 1:Preface

is co-opted by those who want to achieve their ends of domination. ‘The good’ he says, ‘use this world to enjoy God, but the wicked want to use God to enjoy the world.’<sup>5</sup>

However, Augustine does not suggest an ideal form of government to limit this lust — to him monarchy, aristocracy, or democracy were acceptable,<sup>6</sup> ‘so long as those who govern do not force [a citizen] to impiety and sin.’<sup>7</sup> In fact, he explicitly rejected Eusebius’s view of Christian theocracy, insisting that religious uniformity was unnecessary for civic well-being.

Instead, even imperfect governments should be respected, provided they did not ‘impede the religion by which we are taught that... God is to be worshipped.’<sup>8</sup>

And he was muted in his praise of Christian emperors - highlighting not their power, but their humility or Christian character.<sup>9</sup> He states: “Christian emperors are happy if they rule justly... remembering that they are human.”<sup>10</sup>

And the fact that God gives power to both the good and the wicked should tell us power is not something necessarily to be longed for!<sup>11</sup>

Instead, Christian rulers should ‘make their power the servant of God’s majesty by using it for the greatest possible extension of his worship... [being] slow to punish and ready to pardon; ... applying that punishment as necessary to govern... and not in order to indulge their own hatred...’.<sup>12</sup> In short, they should rule themselves before ruling others.

### **3. Trust and Hope — Between Despair and Presumption**

Despite his critique of power, Augustine was not cynical. Instead he saw trust as the glue of society, enabling citizens to work together for a common good: ‘If trust... were to disappear from human affairs, who would not be aware of the confusion and upheaval which would follow?’<sup>13</sup> And ‘The foundations would be utterly swept away.’<sup>14</sup>

Instead, to trust others was an act of faith in God. And he listed five grounds for trusting a public figure: their reputation; their track record; whether or not they are embedded in a community with a tradition of service; their office; and their virtuous character.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> City of God, 15:7

<sup>6</sup> City of God, 2.12

<sup>7</sup> City of God, 5:17

<sup>8</sup> City of God, 19:17

<sup>9</sup> City of God, 5:25

<sup>10</sup> City of God, 5:24

<sup>11</sup> City of God, 4:33

<sup>12</sup> City of God, 5:24

<sup>13</sup> *Faith in the Unseen*, 2:4

<sup>14</sup> *Faith in the Unseen*, 2:4

<sup>15</sup> Lamb, 100.

Yet he also warned against excessive hope in temporal goods, including hopes of political success: He wrote, those who ‘never stop hoping for temporal things... are frequently disappointed... they never stop being excited by them before they come, being corrupted by them when they come, [and] being tormented by them when they’ve gone.’<sup>16</sup> And you can imagine how that is true of politics.

But while presumption places too much hope in politics; despair withdraws. In contrast, true hope, Augustine argued, is eternal hope - hope in the heavenly city, where “true glory... and true peace will be.”<sup>17</sup>

However, this eternal hope is never a reason *not* to work for temporal goods - like justice and peace.

#### **4. Justice and the State**

Augustine argued strongly that those with power should pursue justice— giving others what is due them. Because without justice, nations are little more than organised robbery. He wrote, ‘Without justice, what are kingdoms but great robber bands?’ Bands that increase in geographical size, until they ‘assume the title of kingdom — not because greed is removed, but because impunity is added.’<sup>18</sup>

And he retells the story of a pirate captured by Alexander the Great, who when asked by the king what he thought he was doing infesting the sea, replied “What do you think you are doing by infesting the world? Because I do it with one puny boat, I am called a pirate; because you do it with a great fleet, you are called an emperor.”<sup>19</sup>

And so, while only the City of God possesses perfect justice, rulers must still pursue earthly justice; because it’s justice that legitimises authority.

#### **5. The Pursuit of Civic Peace**

Augustine argued that because people seek goods that compete, and those goods are ‘not the sort of goods that cause no difficulties for its lovers,’ political conflict is inevitable in the City of Man, which ‘is most often divided against itself by lawsuits, wars, and conflicts.’<sup>20</sup>

Yet, ultimately, everyone, he said, is seeking ‘a certain earthly peace’ - to have civic life ordered the way they want: ‘everyone seeks peace, even by waging war.’<sup>21</sup>

And though civic peace is always going to be imperfect, it’s worth striving for: Peace is, ‘such a great good that... Nothing is heard with greater pleasure, nothing desired more longingly, and nothing better can be found.’<sup>22</sup> Not least because it allows believers to thrive, and worship freely, just as Jeremiah told the exiles to pray for Babylon’s peace.

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<sup>16</sup> Sermon 157:5

<sup>17</sup> City of God, 22:30

<sup>18</sup> City of God, 4:4

<sup>19</sup> City of God, 4:4

<sup>20</sup> City of God, 15:4

<sup>21</sup> City of God, 19:12

<sup>22</sup> City of God, 19:11

And he defined civic peace as ‘the calm that comes of order’ — when citizens harm no one and do good to all.<sup>23</sup>

But this pursuit of peace begins in the home, which Augustine called ‘the building block of the city.’<sup>24</sup> And domestic peace is crucial for the welfare of the city, with the peace of the city becoming a participation in the peace of the heavenly city.

However, for civic peace to be a reality, Augustine argued that citizens do not need to share religious or moral commitments.

## **6. Politics, Tolerance, and Mercy**

For Augustine, while the desire to dominate corrupts politics, humility does the opposite; his favourite example being the emperor Theodosius, who publicly repented after exacting vengeance on his enemies.

And for Augustine, it’s humility that enables citizens to cooperate across differences. And just as creation exhibits ‘unity in plurality’ he encouraged diverse citizens to unite around common temporal goods, ‘regardless of any differences in customs, laws, or institutions.’ In fact, he says, the City of God, ‘does not hesitate to obey the laws of the earthly city,’ provided they do not impede true worship.<sup>25</sup>

And using the illustration of a choir made up of dissimilar voices<sup>26</sup>, he argued that differing citizens can come together in social concord, when they unite around *proximate* goods that sustain order and well-being, even when they don’t share *ultimate* loves.

But he knew this unity would be fragile: ‘the larger the city, the more is its forum filled with lawsuits’ and civil war is never far away.<sup>27</sup> Yet shared proximate goods, like peace and justice, allow for dialogue and accountability. And if citizens can’t agree on what they *love*, they may come to agreement on what they hate: like injustice and cruelty.

So Augustine was not naive about the difficulties of a conflicted public square. But the answer was neither domination or withdrawal. It was to seek peace by developing friendships with those who shared common proximate goals, even if they desire different ultimate ends, in ways that foster trust.

Plus, he urged tolerance and forbearance as the most effective form of persuasion, toward pagans *and their vices*, not just their virtues. Writing to Marcellinus, a Christian official, Augustine counselled that evil characters should be reformed by goodness and persuasion. And if this fails, ‘we should tolerate those who want the commonwealth to remain with its vices unpunished’ -

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<sup>23</sup> City of God, 19:13

<sup>24</sup> City of God, 19:16

<sup>25</sup> City of God, 19:17

<sup>26</sup> City of God, 19:12

<sup>27</sup> City of God, 19:5

because they too are fellow citizens.<sup>28</sup> And the patience, endurance, and sacrifice this will require of Christians, imitates that of the martyrs, he said.

He also argued that mercy must mark those who wield the sword of justice. Writing to Marcellinus about the Donatists - a schismatic Christian sect who physically attacked, maimed, and murdered catholic Christians, Augustine pleaded that their punishment should not match their deeds. Instead, 'be angry at iniquity in such a way that you remember humanity, not cultivating the lust for vengeance...but applying your will to the healing of wounds.'<sup>29</sup>

However, tolerance was not an absolute for Augustine.

## 7. Coercion and Correction

To compel Donatists back into the catholic church, financial penalties and confiscation of property were introduced against them, which Augustine strongly opposed. However, his position shifted over time to support coercion, before again pleading for mercy.

He writes, 'My original position was that no one should be compelled into the unity of Christ... that we would not have those whom we knew to be professed heretics pretending to be Catholics... this opinion was not conquered through words... but through examples which demonstrate the contrary.'<sup>30</sup> So while he defended coercion from Psalm 2, and by saying that God doesn't just bind up our wounds, he also 'often adds the most stinging medicine of tribulation,' his change of mind was largely pragmatic - coercion seemed to work.<sup>31</sup>

Elsewhere, he suggested that while a virtuous people should be able to choose its rulers freely, if a society becomes corrupt and 'shameful and villainous people come to power,' might it not be right 'if some good and most capable man is to be found, he might remove from the people the power to bestow honours and hand it over to a few good men, or even one?'<sup>32</sup> Which comes close to countenancing revolution.

And yet, Augustine saw value in a pluralistic society as a means of sanctification: 'Citizens of the kingdom of heaven are troubled by temptations among the erring and impious *in order that they may be tried and tested as gold in the furnace.*' In fact, he says, '*We should not want to live with only the holy and the just before the time in order that we might deserve to receive that life in its own time.*'<sup>33</sup>

## 8. Christians and the Public Square

*The City of God* was written after the sack of Rome in 410 AD, an event blamed by pagans on Christianity for making people weak citizens, who love their enemies and are unwilling to defend the empire.

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<sup>28</sup> Letter 138:17

<sup>29</sup> Letter 133

<sup>30</sup> Letter 93

<sup>31</sup> Letter 93

<sup>32</sup> *On Free Choice*

<sup>33</sup> Letter 189

Augustine replied that in previous times of persecution Christians *had* refused to fight back, and as a result ‘they multiplied.’<sup>34</sup> And yet, following a pagan riot against Christians, he wrote to Nectarius, an elderly pagan, and affirmed patriotism as a virtue, arguing that Christians love the nation more than the pagans, because the country will bloom more through piety than impiety. And he urges Nectarius to ‘Consider... whether you surpass us in love for your country, whether your desire for it to bloom is greater or truer than ours.’<sup>35</sup>

And while pagans accused Christians of being bad citizens, Augustine stated that Christ’s teaching produces the very best citizens: ‘Let them [the pagans] give us such subjects, such parents, children,.. kings, judges, and such payers and collectors of public tax... and then let them dare to say that this teaching is contrary to the republic.’<sup>36</sup>

So while Augustine saw political power as potentially corrupting, political life was a way to ‘serve one another in love.’

And in one classic example, he advised the Christian Roman general Boniface, who wanted to leave the army and join a monastery, to remain at his post and protect the commonwealth. However, later, when Boniface joined a rebellion against the established authorities, Augustine rebuked him sharply, telling him ‘now you *should* go to a monastery’ and urging him to lay down his sword or return to lawful service.<sup>37</sup>

So, when Boniface’s loves are rightly ordered, he should serve publicly; but when *libido dominandi* takes hold, he should immediately withdraw from public life and seek renewal.

But Augustine also modelled what it was to be a politically engaged citizen.

## 9. Augustine’s Example

Augustine was willing to collaborate with pagan officials as well as fellow pastors, using whatever influence he had to advocate for the vulnerable, defend the poor, oppose torture, and seek mercy for prisoners - especially those condemned to death. He wrote and preached against excessive tax burdens on the poor and organised with others to intercede with the emperor against the slave trade. In fact, historian Peter Brown states that under Augustine’s leadership the catholic bishops became ‘the most formidable pressure group’ of the time.

Because for Augustine, it’s by loving our neighbour, in God, that we love God. Preaching during the winter, he urged: ‘Attend to Christ lying under the arches, hungry, shivering, needy, a foreigner.’ Because, ‘when you did it for one of these least of mine, you did it for me.’<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> City of God, 22:6

<sup>35</sup> Letter 91

<sup>36</sup> Letter 138

<sup>37</sup> Letter 189 and James KA Smith, *The Benedict Option or the Augustinian Call?* Comment, 2017.

<sup>38</sup> Sermon 25

And so, in a line that still resonates, he preached: ‘Bad times, hard times — this is what people keep saying; *but let us live well*, and times shall be good. *We are the times*: such as we are, such are the times.’<sup>39</sup>

### **Conclusion**

And so Augustine’s political vision was not a blueprint for government but a spiritual posture. We’re to live as citizens of the City of God even while we’re citizens here below. We must beware *libido dominandi* and instead, with others, seek the peace of the earthly city. And while politics cannot save, in a pluralistic society it can be a means of sanctification, as we pilgrim toward the city that’s above.

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<sup>39</sup> Sermon 80:8