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Faith and Politics: An Augustinian Reflection

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FAITH AND POLITICS: An Augustinian Reflection Augustine's World

In the fall and winter of 410 A.D., word of a terrible disaster travelled across the Mediterranean to the Roman cities of North Africa, arriving at the port of Carthage and spreading westward some two hundred miles along the trade routes, until it reached the ears of Augustine, former professor of rhetoric, sometime player in politics, in exotic eastern religions, student of philosophy, and, since 395, Catholic bishop of the city of Hippo Regius. What was reported first by merchants and travellers, and then by a steady stream of refugees, was that Rome had fallen. The city had been looted for three days by an army of Visigoths, who had overrun the Italian peninsula in the first successful foreign invasion in nearly 800 years.

The sense of dread that these events provoked among the people of North Africa had multiple layers: There was simple human sympathy for the refugees who had lost everything. There was a large element of self-concern, since everyone knew that the barbarians could not hold Italy without taking control of the grain supply that came from Africa, so what had happened to Rome could also be the fate of Carthage and Hippo in the near future. There was the question that people inevitably ask when disaster strikes, which is "How could God allow this to happen?" And then there was the more specific form of that question, on everyone's mind in that place and time, which was "How could God allow this to happen *to Rome?*"

For eight unconquered centuries, Rome had been the center of civilization and the symbol of human achievement. To be sure, the administrative center of the empire was now elsewhere, but the meaning of the city was still the same, not only for the people who lived there, but for educated and honorable people all around the Mediterranean from Syria to Spain who thought of themselves as *Romans*.

And there was something more for Roman Christians, who were now a large percentage of those educated and honorable Romans: It was just short of a hundred years since the name of Christ and

the power of Rome had been united under the rule of the Emperor Constantine. At that time, Rome had been at the height of its glory, and this new connection between sacred and secular seemed to promise an unlimited future. The power that had crucified Christ was now itself Christian, and henceforth, it had seemed at the time, there would be little to distinguish the Empire of Rome from the Kingdom of God. "Old troubles were forgotten," Eusebius of Caesarea had written, "all irreligion passed into oblivion; good things present were enjoyed and those yet to come eagerly awaited."¹

Things had not worked out quite as Eusebius expected. Definitely not on Eusebius' list of the good things to come was an army of Visigoths rampaging through Rome, nor would he have known what to make of the complicating fact that many of the barbarians were themselves Christians, albeit with a different, Arian theology.²

Altogether, the decades since Constantine's conversion had not been a good time for Roman aspirations, nor for Eusebius' dream of a Christian empire. Not a few people were saying, secretly or openly, that the old ways and the old gods looked pretty good by comparison, and many Roman Christians were losing their confidence that the tide of history was flowing in their direction. Anyone planning to preach about the enduring power of God to the crowd of distraught refugees and fearful Christians gathered in the church at Hippo would have his work cut out for him, especially if the sermon were going to be overheard by more than a few disgruntled pagans.

¹Eusebius (263-339) is known as the "father of church history" for his chronicle of the persecutions that preceded Constantine's edict of toleration. For his account of the beginning of the new era, see *The History of the Church*, G. A. Williamson (trans.) (London: Penguin Books, 1989), 332.

²Arians, to put a complex dispute simply, held a view of the Trinity that did not quite make the Son one in being with the Father. The Visigoths had learned this heterodox Christianity while in mercenary service to post-Constantinian Roman emperors who were themselves sometimes Arian in their sympathies, despite the consistent preference of the bishops for the theology encapsulated in the Nicene Creed. This sort of theological disagreement between church and state was something else that Eusebius had not expected.

We do not know how Augustine's sermons at this time were received, but we know that he gave his congregation a rather heavy-handed reminder that the trials they were now enduring were nothing compared to the suffering of persecuted Christians who had faced the wrath of pagan authorities in a time that was just barely beyond the reach of living memory.³ The union of faith and power that the Christians of Hippo Regius had come to take for granted had not always been there, Augustine reminded them, nor had the Roman Empire been a source of security for those early Christian martyrs whose faith was commemorated in their churches. The wrath of God sweeps a wide swath, and Christians should not be surprised if they are occasionally caught up in its fury.

Fortunately, the crisis passed before the Christians of Hippo Regius had to face the test of which their bishop warned them. The leader of the Visigoths died of a fever before his invasion fleet could set sail for Africa, and the people of Roman Africa settled back into a routine, though they kept a wary eye over their shoulders for the possibility that the barbarian invaders would reappear.

In fact, it would be twenty years almost to the day after the fall of Rome that a different group of barbarians laid siege to Hippo while Augustine lay ill in the city where he had been bishop for thirty-five years. He died before the siege succeeded, and thus he did not live to see in person the dreadful events he had heard about from Rome three decades earlier, but he had plenty of experience in the years in between with the suffering of refugees and their questions about God's justice. He never let up on the sermons that vindicated God and questioned the congregation in return. But he had his own questions, and it had taken him a long time to get to the answers. He spent fifteen years, from 412 to 427, working them out in the manuscript that became his greatest work, the *City of God*.

³Augustine, "Sermon: The Sacking of the City of Rome," in E. M. Atkins and R. J. Dodaro, eds., *Political Writings* (Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 205-13.

Continuity and Change

If there is a place where realistic thinking about faith and politics begins, it is in this work. Some earlier theologians had imagined a permanent connection between God and empire, Eusebius did. Others, like Tertullian, insisted on the distinctiveness of Christian faith and its incompatibility with Greek philosophy and Roman politics. Augustine saw that the true picture was more complex. He locates the events of his time in a comprehensive framework that can only be provided by a theological understanding of history, and thus provides the continuity for our understanding of religion and politics, but he does that with an acute awareness of the world of our immediate experience. As a result, he sees the impermanence of things we think are permanent and the incomprehensibility of the things we think we understand. Being able to make limited choices wisely, with an eye to what is lasting amid changes and confusion is what Augustine's Christian ethics is all about, and that is what makes him a useful and interesting writer for times like his and ours, when so many of the prevailing certainties have been called into question.⁴

To begin, Augustine reminded his readers that from God's perspective, the fall of Rome was not a particularly noteworthy event. That is not because God takes no interest in human affairs, as the Epicurean philosophers had taught, but because God's relationship to humanity and history extends through all events, so that nothing is beneath God's notice, and even the changes that seem earthshaking to people at a particular place and time have significance only in relation to that all-encompassing whole. Our ability to understand things and relate them to one another depends on these relationships that they already have in God's reality, so that when we say that events don't make sense to us, it is a sure sign that we are not seeing them in their

⁴A number of recent studies of Augustine's thought stress his importance for thinking about politics today. See especially Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008) and Charles Mathewes, *Republic of Grace: Augustinian Thoughts for Dark Times* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010).

real relationships. Just as the prophet Amos warned the people of Israel that they were like the Ethiopians in God's sight, or as Isaiah wrote that God's purposes could be accomplished through Cyrus the Persian as well as through any anointed King of Judah, Augustine reminded Roman Christians that God's will cannot be discerned by considering only the City of Rome or its recently Christianized empire. God's will is not always done in the short run, so it is difficult to read it directly off of events, but God's judgment is final. It is this unchanging horizon that stretches from creation to judgment that provides the context for Augustine's way of thinking about politics. The true meaning of events is the meaning they have in relation to the whole of reality, seen from the end of time. That means that the truth of history will never conform exactly to our judgments made at a particular place and time.

Augustine did not mean by this to say that his view of politics was something completely disconnected from the questions that other people were asking. He knew Greek and Roman philosophy well, and he could repeat its ethical axioms: Happiness is what all people seek for its own sake, and the moral life is concerned with identifying what happiness is, obtaining it for oneself and one's city, and maintaining it over the course of a lifetime. That had been the starting point for thinking about ethics and politics since Aristotle first lectured on the subject three hundred years before Christ. Augustine also agreed that the key to happiness was mastery of the four virtues of prudence, courage, temperance, and justice.⁵ That list was at least as old as Plato, and when Augustine began work on *City of God*, this understanding of ethics as the search for true happiness had been around almost as long as Rome itself. Augustine had no interest in overturning it.

⁵Augustine, "The Catholic Way of Life and the Manichean Way of Life," in Boniface Ramsy, ed. *The Manichean Debate*, The Works of Saint Augustine, pt. 1, v. 19 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2006), 43.

But for a philosopher who was also a Christian, it was important to understand happiness in that wider horizon that stretches from creation to judgment. Aristotle said that we have to move from understanding happiness as immediate gratification to seeing it as a pattern of excellence sustained over a lifetime.⁶ That was a step in the right direction, but does not go far enough. If relationship to God is the measure of what is really worth having, happiness might involve losing your life in order to save it, like those martyrs who suffered under Rome's power, about whom Augustine loved to preach to Christians who complained about how hard their lives were under Rome's weakness. If the barbarian invasions made anything clear, it was that nothing located within the bounds of history was certain, or safe from loss. The aim of any ethics worth living has to be a happiness that cannot be lost, and in unsettled times, it is easy to see the force of Augustine's observation that the only source of happiness that meets that criterion is found in relationship with God.⁷

This point is central to everything that Christians have said about politics and authority from Augustine's time forward. It underlies Thomas Aquinas' idea of the natural law that shapes and limits human laws. It explains why Martin Luther put following his conscience ahead of the authority of the church and why Dietrich Bonhoeffer put the integrity of the church above the authority of the state. But it is also important to understand that when Augustine says that the only source of lasting happiness is found in relationship with God, he understands that objective fact. It is not just a way that Christians talk among themselves. It is what you will learn if you follow the ideas about ethics that you get from Plato and Aristotle to their logical conclusion, especially if you are paying attention to the changes that are happening in the world around you: Nothing within the scope of history will bear the full weight of human expectations – not the pleasures that wealth can buy or the honors that talent and dedication can win; not rank or power, nor ethnicity, nor citizenship, nor even the

⁶Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Roger Crisp (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 10-11.

⁷Augustine, "The Catholic Way of Life and the Manichean Way of Life," 32-33.

church. Creation and judgment are permanent, but within the horizon they mark out no single thing embodies the order they bring into being. Pinning your hopes on any of them will lead to disappointment, and taking any constellation of them to be permanent will give you the wrong answer to your questions about what is happening in history.

Ethics and Responsibility

Once we see that clearly, however, we still have to decide what to do. What sort of goals, and choices, and ways of life make sense in light of the permanence of this horizon of creation and judgment and the impermanence of everything within it?

One answer that Christians have given to that question is that we should focus on the relationship to God, which is the only source of real happiness, and let go of all the rest, which is unreliable and changing. The Christian life is about perfecting yourself in love, so that you become more and more like God, whom you seek, and less attached to everything that is less than God. This movement toward perfection may appear to the rest of the world to be quite passive, as though you were doing nothing at all, but it is a disciplining of desire that finally enables you to see what is really there, instead of what you want.

That is an answer that many Christians have given to the “what shall we do?” question, and Augustine shares it, up to a point. He records in his *Confessions* his experiences as a younger man living in a country retreat where he could contemplate the questions of philosophy with a few friends, and he recalls the excitement these friends felt when they first learned about Christian monasticism.⁸ You mean we actually could leave the lecture rooms and the law courts and the marketplace for good and devote ourselves entirely to God? When he became a bishop, he organized his clergy as a semi-monastic community, and he clearly wanted them to be as withdrawn from the world as their pastoral duties would permit.

⁸Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 143.

But Augustine also lived in a time when the Roman order was weakening, and the tasks of adjudicating disputes, punishing offenders, and keeping the peace that might once have been taken care of by a Roman magistrate fell increasingly to the Catholic bishop, along with all the administrative and educational tasks that went with maintaining his churches through hard economic times and changing morals. In the end, Augustine understood that these political tasks were not altogether distractions from the search for lasting happiness in relationship to God.

In a famous passage in Book 19 of *City of God*, Augustine deals with all the terrible and bloody things that judges and magistrates had to do in the course of their duties, and he asks whether a wise person will have the heart to sit on the judge's bench. The answer he gave was perhaps surprising for a retiring philosopher and an aspiring monk, but what Augustine wrote was, "Clearly, he will take his seat; for the claims of human society, which he thinks it wicked to abandon, constrain him and draw him to this duty"⁹ The judge will do his duty, but given the realities of the situation, he had better not do it with too much enthusiasm. A heavy heart and an awareness of his own limitations are more appropriate to the task.

So Augustine believes that we can only know and have what is truly good in relation to God, but he also recognizes that Christians cannot escape the choices about action that fall to them, as they fall to everyone else. We would like to think that once we see clearly what is going on, once we understand things in their true relationships, we will of course be able clearly to distinguish right from wrong, and we will know what we ought to do. No doubt there have been, from Augustine's time to now, those who have had that kind of certainty about their own moral judgments, and a corresponding enthusiasm for imposing those judgments on others. But Augustine's story of the reluctant judge helps us to see why that kind of politics is mistaken. Moral choice is not a matter of seeing clearly the one right choice and knowing that all of the other possibilities are wrong.

⁹Augustine, *The City of God*, ed. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 927.

The problem is that because nothing within history perfectly embodies the order of creation and judgment, the choices themselves are always imperfect. For the judge, the duty to protect the innocent competes with the obligation to find and punish the guilty. For the ruler, the desire for peace tugs against with the desire for justice. For the merchant, service has to be balanced against profit. For the friend, the demands of honesty have to be weighed against the demands of kindness. And the problem is not that perfect knowledge would give us perfect answers to these dilemmas. The problem is that the choices themselves are incomplete and imperfect, as are the institutions of law, government, and commerce that shape them.

For some, of course, the absence of perfect choices will be an excuse to make no choice, or to choose whatever serves your own interests. It is sometimes hard to see the difference between a choice that is limited and one that just doesn't matter, but Augustine insists that though our choices are imperfect, they are nonetheless important, and they can be made for reasons that go beyond immediate personal advantages.

Reinhold Niebuhr, a more recent Christian thinker whose political realism was deeply influenced by Augustine, focused his work those places where our knowledge of what is going on is brought to bear on limited, but important choices. He said that we need a "responsible attitude, which will not pretend to be God nor refuse to make a decision between political answers to a problem because each answer is discovered to contain a moral ambiguity in God's sight."¹⁰ Though we try to see things as God sees them, we are human beings and not God, and that means, Niebuhr wrote, that "we are responsible for making choices between greater and lesser evils, even when our Christian faith, illuminating the human scene, makes it quite apparent that there is no pure good in history, and probably no pure evil, either."¹¹

¹⁰Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and Politics*, ed. Ronald Stone (New York: George Braziller, 1968), 56.

¹¹Ibid.

There is a profound truth in Niebuhr's formulation of what it means to choose responsibly, but I always hesitate a little at the end when I come to the idea that there is "probably no pure evil" in history. What about Hitler? Rwandan genocide? Shelling a hospital? But Niebuhr would insist that he said it correctly, and Augustine would say that Niebuhr was right. Augustine would, in fact, insist on getting rid of the "probably" in "probably no pure evil." For him, everything that is, is from God and retains some relation to God, however remote. So *pure* evil, something utterly devoid of God's goodness and with no relation to God, would *ipso facto* cease to exist.¹²

What that metaphysical point means in practical terms is that we have to deny ourselves the satisfaction of condemning some people and powers as completely evil in order to stay focused on the more and less that is the object of every real choice.

Faith provides no escape from the political responsibilities which fall on everyone who lives among the partial solutions and imperfect choices which are the only kind we have within the limits of history. This has the further consequence of creating a kind of solidarity between those who share the same part of history, whatever their faith or unbelief may be. Limited and imperfect choices tend to be narrowly restricted in time and space, but widely shared by those who are struggling with the demands of responsibility at any particular point. Philosophers sometimes make a distinction between a *real* and a *notional* choice that is relevant here.¹³ A notional choice is a choice like deciding whether I, as a twenty-first century Christian, would be a Roman legionnaire or a pacifist, if I lived in the second century, or like deciding whether I would be an abolitionist or a secessionist if I lived in the American South in the 1850s. We can imagine the arguments that would bear on those decisions, and we can even

¹²Augustine, "The Catholic Way of Life and the Manichean Way of Life," 73.

¹³See, for example, Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 160.

learn something about our own moral beliefs by thinking about how we would respond to those arguments. But we cannot make a *real* choice about either of those questions. The world of the choice is just too different from our own, and we know too much about what has happened since to face those choices the way people did at the time. A real choice, by contrast, is the choice whether to support a balanced budget amendment to the U.S. Constitution, or to vote for or against a ballot initiative supporting same-sex marriages, or to contribute to a women's health organization that provides abortion services. There we can see the mix of imperfect choices and incomplete knowledge that mark all of the real choices that human beings make in history.

Everybody who faces those choices at the same time faces them in much the same way. We may come to different decisions, arrived at for different reasons, but there is a solidarity in facing the choice that should keep us from putting too much distance between the different religious groups, economic interests, and political ideologies that stand on different sides of the questions. We all have a lot of the same real choices, whatever we believe, and those real choices are very different from the choices that people faced in other times and places, even though their beliefs may have been very close to ours. In that sense, we are in this together with the people who happen to be around us, wherever we find ourselves and whatever relationships we happen to have to them.

Penultimate Politics

This point about solidarity that begins with Augustine has been confirmed by subsequent history. In the sixteen centuries between Augustine's time and now, Christians have, in fact, had a wide variety of relations over the centuries to the societies in which they have lived. Christians have lived as persecuted minorities, surrounded sometimes by hostile pagans and sometimes by hostile Christians who happen to hold to another version of their common faith. Christians have been in a position to set the terms of moral, social, and political life for their societies, in European Christendom, for example, or in the settlements on the edge of the wilderness around Massachusetts Bay. There have been times when Christians have been confident that

the people around them shared their moral assumptions, even when they did not share their faith, as in America in the 1950s, when Will Herberg, the Jewish philosopher teaching at a Protestant seminary, wrote his sociological classic, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*.¹⁴ And there have been times, like Augustine's time and now, when Christians have been divided about their relationship to society, with some hoping for a restoration of the sacred empire of Constantine, some ready to deploy the state's power to suppress irreligion and vice, and some convinced that it is time to abandon the cities and head for the desert monasteries.

The point for an Augustinian politics is not to make any one of those situations normative, as though Christians should at all times and in all places try to create a society that they can relate to in one unchanging way. The point is to deal with the real choices you have in the place where you happen to be.

Augustine had a biblical image for this adaptability, which he took from the prophet Jeremiah's advice to the exiles who had been taken from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters." The arrangement may not be ideal, Jeremiah was saying, but you're going to be there for a while, and he went on to say what Augustine quotes approvingly in Book 19 of *City of God*: "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."¹⁵

There is realistic advice in that not only for those who happen to be forcibly dislocated, but for all who live with an awareness of that ultimate horizon of creation and judgment that keeps them from feeling fully at home in any particular place where they happen to be. Augustine called them *perigrini*, or "resident aliens," a category

¹⁴Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955).

¹⁵Jeremiah 29:5-7. See Augustine, *City of God*, 962.

that would have been familiar enough to his readers from Roman law and their own experience. *Perigrini* are strangers. They are not “from here,” as we say in Texas, and they cannot quite share the conviction of the natives that “here” is the best place on earth. But the *perigrini* know that they face the same conditions as the native citizens and that their hopes are bound up with this place where they are living. Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon have taken this image of the “resident alien” as a perennial image for the Christian life.¹⁶ I think their particular interpretation has a little too much “alien” and not quite enough of the “resident” in it, but the point overall is an important one, if it focuses our attention the fact that there are problems we have to face together in the society we’ve got, instead of distracting us with aspirations to recreate an ideal society according to some model of where we’ve been or where we want to be.

Augustine was aware that it is a limited and imperfect solidarity that binds people together around their common needs and problems. This is not the love and worship of the one true God which alone creates the true commonwealth of the heavenly city.¹⁷ It is perhaps less, even, than the commonwealth of Rome, which inspired great deeds and heroic sacrifices for a common cause, even though the Romans could now see that that cause could not deliver the permanence it promised. But a commonwealth of needs and problems is a commonwealth of sorts, nonetheless, and it can be found wherever rational people are united in pursuit of common objects of love, however elusive or limited these may prove to be.¹⁸

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian who gave his life in a struggle to preserve the integrity of the church against the corruptions of Hitler’s Germany, called this pursuit of ordinary human needs the realm of the “penultimate,” the things that come

¹⁶Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).

¹⁷Augustine, *City of God*, 959-60.

¹⁸On this point, see Olover O’Donovan, *Common Objects of Love: moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

before the last things, the goods and goals that are important, but not ultimately so. “The hungry person needs bread. The homeless person needs shelter, the one deprived of rights needs justice, the lonely person needs community, the undisciplined one needs order, and the slave needs freedom”¹⁹ Even within theological horizon that stretches from creation to judgment, Bonhoeffer insisted, these things make a difference. The world remains under judgment, even after the hungry are fed and the homeless are sheltered, but that does not make the action unimportant, nor does it break the ties that bind Christians to others who confront that problem with them.

One thing more needs to be added about politics that neither Augustine nor Bonhoeffer tells us, though it is implicit in what they say about the limited and imperfect choices we all face. It is in the nature of penultimate choices that they not final. It is likely that they will have to be made again, though perhaps in another context and with other partners and opponents. The hungry tend not to stay fed, and injustices are apt to be done again, though in different ways and to different victims. Because our choices are imperfect, our solutions are incomplete, and it is part of the work of politics not only to answer the question, “What shall we do?” but to sustain the institutions and structures that will allow us to answer it again, when we have to.

Augustine’s Time and Ours

News travels faster now than it did in 410 AD, and there are no Visigoths in the streets, but the number of refugees, physically or psychologically dislocated by events, is probably larger than it was after the Fall of Rome. To take only the population of the United States, we have some millions of people who have lost their homes in the recent economic downturn, and millions more who wonder whether their education and job skills will ever be sufficient to return them to the secure middle class existence they remember. But displacement does not go only in one direction. There are also those

¹⁹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 6; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 155.

who were carried by the updraft of the 1990s into the One Percent, and those who reached those heights briefly, only to find themselves among the foreclosed. Charles Murray, whatever you think of his politics, has documented in his new book *Coming Apart* a dissolution of middle class values that corresponds to the decline of middle class expectations,²⁰ and all of us, whatever our individual economic experience has been, live in an America whose place in the world is very different, economically and politically, from what it was a decade ago.

In this environment, we are often reminded that nothing is permanent, and the imperfection of everything and everyone is readily apparent. It is easy for leaders to lose their footing when the ground is constantly shifting, and even if they retain their balance, they are likely to have to change direction several times over the course of a career. In case you miss any of their mistakes, the next round of attack ads will point them out for you, and the more that political realities require that decisions be changed, the more your opponents will demand absolute consistency from you. Nothing is permanent, and everything is imperfect. Indeed, Augustine's realism has a ring of truth in times of change.

But it is still surprisingly easy for us, as it has been for frightened people in every century, to look forward or backward and invest some other state of affairs with an ultimacy that we do not find in our present situation. Some people think that a republic based on biblical faith provided all the answers that were needed in 1776, and that it would provide all the answers we need, too, if we could just get back to it. Some imagine a utopia in which technology supplies our energy needs and at the same time solves our pollution problems, while others look for a more natural way of life in which we consume less and share more. Still others locate their ultimate commitments in the more recent past, in a nuclear family like the one we all had, or

²⁰Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010* (New York: Crown Forum, 2010).

thought we wanted, in the 1950s, or in a kind of patriotism that was more easily summoned when the world was more neatly divided.

One of the things that happens as our real choices become more difficult is that our notional choices become absolutely clear. We see that especially in today's polarized politics, which focuses on ultimate commitments, rather than imperfect choices. For about twenty years, a time frame corresponding roughly with the accelerated pace of global change that began with the end of the Cold War, political strategists have abandoned conventional approaches that won elections by seeking the middle ground and bringing large numbers of voters to the polls. Instead, they have sought to mobilize a "base," a core group who believe in their cause with something approaching a faith commitment. The opposition, meanwhile, might be lulled into staying home out of indifference or even induced to abstain by creating a negative image of their candidate.

Political polarization demands more and more complete commitment to a tightly defined partisan agenda, and political leaders cannot compromise without losing credibility with the all-important base. Politics, which used to be defined as "the art of the possible" depends now on the appearance of ultimacy.

It is at that point—when the churches start filling up with disgruntled refugees complaining that God has abandoned them, or more likely complaining that somebody else has abandoned God; and when the senators want the old ways back, or want some new way right now, or want anything except the responsible choice between imperfect options that they really have—then we might wish for someone like Augustine, who could explain that there are no permanent answers within history, and that every solution comes with its own limitations. But, that author might add, it is the fact that we share the problems that makes the limited solutions possible, because having the problems gives us enough in common to create something together.

One of the things that Augustine knew, because he watched it disappear, is how important political order really is. That is why wise people will take a seat on the judge's bench, not because they have all the answers, but because they have a duty to help those who are in need. Theirs is the care of the interim, temporal commonwealth

created by those who share the same problems

And we must add one final point that is implicit in Augustine, and Bonhoeffer, and Niebuhr, even if they did not say it in so many words. Caring for the commonwealth means preserving the systems and values that allow it to function, as well as winning elections. Because the sphere of the penultimate is about limited choices made by imperfect people, one of the most important things we do is to make sure that those who come after us will have the resources to understand our mistakes, the opportunities to assess them in open discussion, and the freedom to correct them. Responsible choices require an infrastructure that extends beyond the halls of government, and the things we do in churches and in colleges and universities to keep people learning about their past and talking about their common life is also part of the work of politics.

So, to summarize: Faith is oriented to a constant horizon of creation and judgment, but politics deals with a constantly changing array of problems which must be resolved by choosing between imperfect options. These real choices are narrowly focused as to place and time, but they are widely shared by those who share a political and social space, and though it is important that choices be made responsibly, it is equally important to understand that one mark of a responsible choice is that it gets made in a way that will enable people to make it again if they have to, as they probably will.

That is the outline of an Augustinian approach to faith and politics that has provided continuity over some sixteen centuries. Other approaches have also been tried, but this one has served well, keeps coming back to it, particularly in times of rapid change, like Augustine's – and ours.

THE CARY M. MAGUIRE CENTER FOR ETHICS AND PUBLIC RESPONSIBILITY

The leaders of Southern Methodist University believe that a university does not fully discharge its responsibility to its students and to the community at large if it hands out knowledge (and the power which that knowledge eventually yields) without posing questions about its responsible uses. Through the Cary M. Maguire Center for Ethics and Public Responsibility, SMU strives to foster the moral education and public responsibilities of those whom it empowers by:

- Supporting faculty research, teaching, and writing in ethics that cross disciplinary, professional, racial/cultural, and gender lines;
- Strengthening the ethics component in SMU's undergraduate and professional curriculum;
- Awarding grants to SMU students who wish to study issues in ethics or engage in community service.

SMU also believes that a university and the professions cannot ignore the urban habitat they helped to create and on which they depend. Thus, while not an advocacy group, the Maguire Center seeks to be integrally a part of the Metroplex, attending to the moral quandaries and controversies that beset our common life. To that end, the Center:

- Has created an Ethics Center Advisory Board of professional and community leaders;
- Organizes local seminars, colloquia, and workshops featuring SMU and visiting scholars;
- Publishes occasional papers and books based on the Center's endeavors that will be of interest to both academics and the general public.

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