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Augustine and Corruption

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Abstract: Augustine's political thought or, as it is often called, political theology is a matter of considerable dispute. 'Augustine and Corruption' approaches that dispute by examining the evidence that Ramsay MacMullen presented to substantiate his observation that Augustine 'approved of' corruption. I read that evidence differently and use Augustine's remarks about bribes paid to court clerks, schemes to defraud philanthropists, and tax evasion to support what has been aptly called 'a minimalist' interpretation of his political expectations.

The premise of what has been called Augustine's political theology was clear enough during the last two decades of his life, and it has been of more than passing interest to generations of his admirers and critics. Part of the celestial city, he alleged, was on pilgrimage in time. He trusted that the faithful, comprehending their status as resident aliens on earth — in their terrestrial cities — would come to expect less of this world, that their faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ would kindle not just their repentance but a sense of the impermanence — and relative insignificance — of worldly position and possessions. The pared-down prose near the end of the eighteenth book of his compendious *City of God* left no doubt: the Christians were souls in diaspora, settled alongside misguided others. Shamelessly, those others pursued wealth and fame, rewards that the faithful should have known to devalue.[2]

But they did not, and Rome, overrun in 410, was taken to have signalled divine displeasure. Moreover, the sobs of so many Christian mourners suggested to Augustine that they failed to appreciate the lesson that Rome's humiliation was meant to impart, namely that the prosperity in and of their terrestrial cities was more a respite than a final result. But, even after subsequent setbacks, politically powerful Christians were still governing as if terrestrial cities were their true homes — as if they had the right as well as the power to furnish their places in it at the expense of unfortunate neighbours. Salvian of Marseilles complained later in the fifth century that officials were taking

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[2] *De civitate Dei*, 18.54, in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* (*CCSL*) (Turnholt, 1954–), Vols. 47–8, hereafter, *De civ*. I use *CCSL*, Vols. 38–40, for Augustine's *Enarrationes in psalmos* (*Enar*). But for his correspondence (*Ep*), I use *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* (*CSEL*) (Vienna, 1887–), Vols. 34, 44, 56–7. Editions of Augustine's other works are given with their first citation. All translations are mine, but for texts critical to the argument of this article readers may wish to consult the correspondence included in *Augustine: Political Writings*, trans. E.M. Atkins, ed. R.J. Dodaro (Cambridge, 2001) and, for *De civ*, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. H.S. Bettenson (London and New York, 2003).

every opportunity to plunder the poor, regularly offending God (*nos cotidie cumulamus offensam*).[3] Christian magistrates apparently had not taken Augustine's instructions for pilgrims to heart. His earlier arraignments of fraud, unfair taxes and occasional shakedowns were less ferocious than Salvian's, plausibly because Augustine suspected that nothing worked to disincline power-brokers from greed and extravagance. Pagans, after all, had not heeded their moralists' injunctions, and biblical injunctions were hardly ever applied to improve official conduct. Hence, Augustine appears to have concluded, the faithful in the fifth century, who did value virtue, were destined to endure utterly corrupt governments and to weather the occasionally conspicuous corruption in their churches.[4]

Several of Ramsay MacMullen's perceptive studies of the fourth and fifth centuries exhibit his interest in the 'repeated references' in the literature of late antiquity to corrupt and corruptible officials. Salvian's observations figure prominently, though MacMullen registers 'the din of rage [that] resounded' long before Salvian filed his brief against 'servants of government' who 'continued quietly about their business as usual, the Christians exactly like the non-Christians'. MacMullen sees that they had 'developed a sense of right and title to profits they could demand from persons under their authority' and that the churches' officials had been similarly tempted. 'Wholesale marketing of bishoprics' was but one blemish. Both in regional government and in the churches, the costs that office-holders incurred in purchasing promotions were passed down. The near destitute citizens and parishioners, forced to pay, were not without advocates. Social critics stressed their misfortune to make the case that ambition in the absence of adequate regulation perpetuated deplorably inequitable conditions. MacMullen summarizes the critics' indictment, referring to the abundance yet 'fuzziness' of relevant legislation. To be sure, Salvian's stock rises in MacMullen's portfolio, for the fifth-century critic clearly understood that the system he challenged was formidable, yet he challenged it anyway. But Augustine comes off less well. He knew about the bribes and rake-offs. He witnessed the tax evasion and exploitation of the poor and powerless. MacMullen claims that Augustine 'understood and approved'.[5]

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[3] *De gubernatione Dei* 4.4–4.7; for *cotidie*, 5.9, *Sources chrétiennes*, Vol. 220 (Paris, 1975).

[4] *De civ* 2.19.

[5] R. MacMullen, *Changes in the Roman Empire: Essays in the Ordinary* (Princeton, 1990), pp. 152–3; and R. MacMullen, *Corruption and the Decline of Rome* (New Haven and London, 1988), pp. 143–18, 155–67. Expressions of outrage are collected from a variety of sources, but the orations of Libanius of Antioch document indignation particularly well. Still, Ammianus Marcellinus and Synesius are deployed to excellent effect. One wonders, of course, whether the corruption was as contagious as many virulent con-

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Undoubtedly Augustine understood. His job at the start of his career was to hide the vices of the powerful, to present appealing pictures of politicians and to make it seem that they cared for more than climbing from promotion to promotion. He, too, was ambitious. As orator, he was what today would be called a public relations specialist, controlling spin for clients. A grim business, he later commented, explaining that sensible persons were well aware that he was covering up their leaders' flaws. He knew, however, that encomiastic tributes had earned other orators positions of enormous political influence. Yet Augustine grew so disenchanted that he conspired with friends to plan his (and their) escape. He dreamed of and planned for a comparatively carefree life devoted to philosophical contemplation. His friends shared his new passion and new religion, Christianity. They crossed the Mediterranean and settled on his family estate, remote from the games that politicians played — or so it seemed, until Augustine was purportedly tricked into the clergy, consecrated bishop, and drawn into the noisy scrum of colleagues caught in the conflict between rival African Christianities.[6]

Augustine had renounced ambition in Milan, but his reputation for persuasiveness and, increasingly, for piety made him a desirable candidate for church leadership. He proved to be an agile, effective bishop. One catches him in his correspondence shuttling between feuding parishioners, trying to moderate their appetites, inviting government officials to intervene in religious matters and defending bishops' interventions in government. MacMullen selected several specimens from Augustine's prodigious correspondence to suggest that he countenanced corrupt practices, so, initially, we must look at those damning bits of evidence before determining what others might support a different interpretation of the bishop's attitude towards official misbehaviour.

MacMullen intimates that the rather shifty manoeuvres of Bishop Paul of Cataquas and the predicament of his successor, Boniface, pushed Augustine into a rather compromising position. Burdened by staggering debts, Paul had surrendered all that he possessed, save for a sum that he gave friends to

temporary critics suggested. MacMullen thinks so. Christopher Kelly, *Ruling the Later Roman Empire* (Cambridge, MA, 2004), disagrees.

[6] Claude Lepelley's savvy sifting of Augustine's *Confessions* and calculating what was tendentiously reported (and underreported), is unrivalled. See, *inter alia*, C. Lepelley, 'Un aspect de la conversion d'Augustin: la rupture avec ambitions sociales et politiques', *Bulletin de litterature écclesiastiques*, LXXXVIII (1987), pp. 229–46. Also note Dennis Trout, 'Augustine at Cassiciacum: *Otium*, *Honestum*, and the Social Dimensions of Conversion', *Vigiliae Christianae*, XLII (1988), pp. 132–46; and, for the reliability of the accounts given by Augustine's first biographer, consult Eva Elm, 'Die *Vita Augustini* des Possidius: Wandlungen in der Beurteilung eines hagiographischen Textes', *Augustinianum*, XXXVII (1997), pp. 229–40. The *Confessions*, however — and particularly passages at 6.6.9 and 6.14.24 (*CCSL*, Vol. 27) — reveal the most about Augustine's ambition and disenchantment.

purchase acreage. He sheltered that property from taxes and creditors by declaring that the church owned it. Boniface exposed Paul's swindle yet asked Augustine to help the church keep what Paul tucked into its tally, without penalty. The latter commended Boniface. Revealing all was the right start, Augustine wrote, yet he set aside the remedy Boniface had proposed — that government simply forgive and forget the debt. Augustine advocated a different, circuitous route to a resolution. He urged Olympius, Rome's man in Numidia, to request Paul's property after the government confiscated it and to present it, immediately, to the church of Cataquas as a gift.[7]

True, Augustine connived at a prearrangement that could be construed as somewhat shady. MacMullen imagines that he obscurely winked at Bishop Paul's tax dodge.[8] But the provisions he advocated to assist Boniface had perfectly understandable, if not altogether justifiable, objectives: to avoid the impression that the church and government were trading favours and to spare the laity and the new incumbent at Cataquas the consequences of his predecessor's subterfuge. That Augustine was prepared to collude with Olympius in a complicated, covert, generous gesture is undeniable, yet to emphasize that and to miss the praise for Boniface's disclosure of the previous, more sinister deception do not effectively press the case for Augustine's approval of corruption.

He appreciated that churches and his colleagues who served them were eager to secure material assets. Boniface was being prudent; and to expect Augustine to repudiate prudent efforts to secure parish possessions is unrealistic. At least one contemporary, however, accused him of being overzealous to that end. The accusation, now lost, is known only through Augustine's denial. Still, historians MacMullen and Serge Lancel let the charge stand as evidence of the bishop's 'quasi-connivance with [his] manifestly money-grubbing community' in Hippo.[9]

At the time, churches apparently were vying with each other to attract celebrated philanthropists. Valerius Pinianus, therefore, caused something of a stir when he visited Augustine's diocese in 411. If he could be coerced to stay — detained and ordained — reportedly greedy or 'grubbing' parishioners would profit from having a notoriously open-handed benefactor-in-residence. His presence as priest would keep his resources within reach. But the plot failed, and its failure, chronicled by Augustine, attests the bishop's good sense rather than his complicity or corruption. It is Augustine's story, of course, so some exaggeration and self-justification ought to be expected. Yet his insistence, in no uncertain terms, that he opposed the plans to abduct and ordain Pinianus

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[7] *Ep* 96, 2–3.

[8] MacMullen, *Corruption*, p. 167 and n. 135, p. 271.

[9] *Ep* 126; Serge Lancel, *Saint Augustine* (London, 2002), p. 313. Antonia Nevill's translation of '*presque sa connivance avec une communauté manifestement cupide*', Lancel, *Saint Augustin* (Paris, 1999), p. 441 seems just right.

rings true. He was held in Hippo against his will two decades before, he remembered, and he was compelled to accept an unwanted clerical appointment. Hence, he explained to his accuser, he empathized with Pinianus, ensured that the crowd's 'furor' abated, and preserved his guest's freedom. Augustine did reserve for the philanthropist final responsibility for his great escape, a touch of modesty that lends some authenticity to the account. Pinianus resolved the crisis by pledging to leave Africa if parishioners in Hippo forcibly ordained him.[10]

The letter was intended to vindicate. It must have been difficult for Augustine to write it and foreground his resistance to his parishioners, but he wrote to vindicate them as well. He stressed that the clergy and laity of Hippo were not motivated by greed. They importuned their guest because they wanted a priest in their diocese renowned for regarding wealth with contempt. They should be acquitted of 'grubbing', of 'shameful avarice' (*turpissimo appetitu pecuniae*). 'It is well known, even by our enemies,' Augustine continued, 'that the church's executives do not inordinately desire funds.'[11] Had that been true — had his diocese's indifference to a likely windfall been widely known — one could argue, the melodrama would not have prompted the bishop's rather surging protest. Claude Lepelley, though, gives a new explanation for Augustine's epistolary vindication — embarrassment. Parishioners' tactics embarrassed their bishop. Arguably, he deluded himself and nursed the fantasy that his guest's money mattered less than his exemplary contempt for money. Nonetheless, Augustine could conceivably have written to silence the voice telling him quite the contrary. Whatever his reason for writing, however, nothing supports his 'quasi-connivance' in the attempts to intimidate or his tacit approval of them.[12]

The best evidence that he approved of corruption is certainly the letter he wrote in 413 to Macedonius, vicarius of Africa, to explain why bishops sometimes petitioned that criminals be pardoned and why public officials ought to respond favourably. He crammed biblical precedents for amnesty alongside soteriological justifications and practical reasons into his text. Macedonius had questioned whether prelates were meddling in politics improperly. Augustine answered that religious leaders had a duty to mediate and moderate (*intercessionis officium*).[13] But then, almost as an afterthought, the bishop slipped into the conclusion of his letter a last practical reason for episcopal interventions, reminding Macedonius that secular magistrates could be bought. *Sub rosa* payments to witnesses as well complicated the administration of justice as did bribes paid to court clerks. Augustine might have decided to close with this

[10] *Ep* 126, 2–3.

[11] *Ep* 126, 7–9.

[12] See C. Lepelley, *Les cités de l'Afrique romaine au bas-empire* (2 vols., Paris, 1979), Vol. 1, p. 387.

[13] *Ep* 153, 11.

observation not only to suggest that 'the system' was unwell and that the church should play physician but also to malign court officials and ordinary citizens for having succumbed to temptation and compromised integrity for material gain. MacMullen, though, reads Augustine's letter differently, specifically its final concession that payments to court clerks were so rooted in custom that reform would too radically turn the soil. MacMullen, convinced of its importance, translates the bishop's slap into a headline that is every bit as arresting as tomorrow's disclosures of official misconduct. Augustine of Hippo 'defends clerks who take bribes'; he approved of corruption.[14]

But previous passages in the same letter to Macedonius distinguish between pardoning offences and condoning them. Augustine claimed that bishops ought to urge officials to pardon criminals in custody inasmuch as pardons purchased time for offenders to repent. The latter, approval of the offence, to Augustine's reckoning was something altogether different, neither to be advised nor commended (*nullo modo . . . adprobamus*).[15] Much the same may be said of the bishop's remarks about the court clerks who charged litigants for expediting the resolution of their cases. MacMullen called it bribery. Augustine appears to think of the practice as rather less sinister. The clerks, following custom, solicited or accepted fees or tips, which was regrettable but not as serious as the magistrates' grander larceny or as the damages done regularly by perjury and malicious prosecution.[16]

To Augustine, the bribes or fees were small snags in a terribly tangled system. He tolerated them on one condition, that court clerks charitably pass along their ill-gotten gain to the poor. He despaired of meaningful improvement coming from the courts — from justices, lawyers, litigants and clerks chasing the almighty drachma.[17] In a second, equally mournful letter to Macedonius, he despaired as well that his appeal to the clerks — much as philosophers' buoyant exhortations to virtue — might have the desired effect, given the corruptible character of most officials. A few might be touched and rehabilitated by God, yet even then the result in the terrestrial city would still not be a just society.[18]

Some relief could be expected, short of God's conversion of select rogues. When corruption threatened to swamp the conscience, Augustine suspected, officials' desires to save their good names might dam the flow; even the most roguish (*pessimi*) prefer to put up a good front and cultivate a reputation for decency. As far as Augustine could tell, the force of envy and greed diminished when the prospect of giving them rein risked public humiliation.[19]

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[14] MacMullen, *Changes*, p. 153.

[15] *Ep* 153, 3.

[16] *Ep* 153, 3, 24.

[17] *Ep* 153, 24–6.

[18] *Ep* 155, 6–10.

[19] *Ep* 151, 10 and, at length, *De civ* 5.12–13.

Yet there was an institutional brake on corruption as well, one that Augustine, to an extent, seems to have trusted. Municipal ombudsmen of sorts — *defensores plebis* or *patroni plebis* — were authorized, from the 360s, to protect relatively powerless citizens from their powerful and scurrilous neighbours who ordinarily exercised influence over local magistrates. Two decades later, Emperor Theodosius directed these defenders or patrons to treat their plebeian clients 'tenderly'. Did he assume that these ombudsmen were the answer to ruthless exploitation and corruption?[20] François Jacques now attributes that kind of optimism to Augustine, who, he noticed, had appeared to trust that the *defensores* might become 'guarantors of social justice'. But, Jacques implies, the bishop knew better; his optimism was calculated rather than naïve. By the early fifth century, when Augustine started looking for a remedy for corruption's casualties, defenders were 'cogs' in the municipal administrative machinery. The bishop was certainly aware of that disquieting development, Jacques avers, yet discovered that it was easier to pretend that the situation were otherwise, appeal for the appointment of an ombudsman, and turn to the appointee to arbitrate case by case rather than to turn on — and try to turn out of office — wicked or ineffective officials.[21]

Perhaps so. Requesting a *defensor* for Hippo, Augustine admitted that churches could only advocate obliquely for the victimized. For to do more than sigh (*gemimus*) for the unfortunate was to risk aggravating the influential. Public declarations against magistrates amounted to a terrible marketing strategy for a faith that was still trying to win over pagans and officials who feared that the Christians' churches had excessive political ambitions. Hence, to fight corruption, Augustine told his colleagues, the church ought to find and rely on defenders with the ingenuity (*sollertia*), determination, rank and respect to make a difference.[22]

Historians speculate that parishioners did not look with favour on bishops abdicating civic responsibility.[23] Be that as it may, Augustine kept Christianity

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[20] *Codex Justinianus*, 1.55.4, in *Corpus juris civilis*, Vol. 2 (Berlin, 1929), discussed in Claude Lepelley, *Aspects de l'Afrique romaine: les cités, la vie rurale, le Christianisme* (Bari, 2001), pp. 365–6. Also see François Jacques, 'La défenseur de cité d'après la lettre 22* de saint Augustine', *Revue d'études augustiniennes*, 32 (1986), pp. 58–60.

[21] Jacques, 'Défenseur', pp. 71–3.

[22] *Ep* 22*, 3–4, in *Epistolae ex duobus codicibus* . . . , ed. Joannes Divjak, *CSEL*, Vol. 88. There seems to have been no defender in Hippo when Augustine approached authorities on behalf of citizens from whom funds had been extorted by a corrupt customs official. The bishop spread word of his reluctance: *vestrae necessitates nos cogent venire quo nolumus*; sermon 302, 17; *Patrologiae cursus completes, series latina* (Paris, 1844–), Vol. 39.

[23] For example, see what can be inferred from the tone of sermon 302 in J.C. Magalhães de Oliveira, 'Le pouvoir du people: une émeute à Hippone au début du V^{a} siècle connu par le sermon de saint Augustin pour la fête de saint Laurent', *Antiquité tardive*, 12 (2004), pp. 319–21.

at arm's length from local political activism. Perhaps he was deliberately distinguishing Christian piety from paganism, much of which put public service at the centre of believers' devotion to the gods. Augustine conceded that such devotion was known to have inspired civic virtue. But the cost, he deplored, was common sense. He refused to take seriously the conviction that deities tended to descend from Olympus to attend the local pageants staged in their honour and to reward celebrated citizens of the cities ostensibly under their protection.[24]

However much the thought of an eternal reward for temporal, civil service might tantalize, it paled beside Christians' trademark dedication to the celestial city. Augustine laboured precisely that contrast, because rituals associated with municipal piety seemed to distract citizens — 'to beguile' them, he wrote, and made the faithful forget the brevity of this life and insignificance of its political crises.[25] He heard the opposing view often enough. Nectarius of nearby Calama, for example, explained that pagan pageants drew deities to the city and gave concrete form to its residents' patriotism. The spectacles also assured citizens that public service was rewarded in the afterlife, Nectarius went on, referring to just the kind of assurance Augustine found fraudulently consoling. Who would deny 'a home waits in heaven' for industrious, honourable public servants? Who would deny that, on death, dutiful municipal officials deserved to keep company with their cities' divine patrons?[26] — Augustine.

He insisted that Christianity had no part to play in boosting local patriotism. Municipal pride and piety, in his estimation, had done little to wilt citizens' zeal for personal profit. The result: conspicuous corruption. It was not uncommon for citizens disingenuously to ask defenders to help the *miseri* in their cities while they simultaneously supported (or became) the very persons exploiting them. Ordinary citizens tolerated the powerful and perfidious as long as they maintained public works in good repair and subsidized elaborate civic spectacles.[27]

Augustine was not about to catapult Christianity into campaigns against public corruption, but he was unlikely to object to his parishioners becoming *defensores* if they were of sufficient rank to be effective. After all, he could be fairly certain that Christian ombudsmen would take issue with pagan public servants who presumed that their service to their cities could win them celestial rewards. Hence, the Christians would undertake what Augustine had described as 'the business of Babylon', the business of government in all its forms — judging accused criminals as well as defending the

[24] *Ep* 16, 1 and 91, 1. Also review *De civ* 3.4–11.
[25] *Ep* 17, 3.
[26] *Ep* 103, 2.
[27] *Ep* 138, 14.

unjustly incriminated and judging their judges — with a degree of detachment. The purpose was to limit the damage done by corruptible others.[28]

Or was Augustine more ambitious for his politically involved co-religionists? We know that he preached and wrote to discourage the faithful from putting their faith in political solutions: one ought not to invest too enthusiastically in plans to improve societies that were, as all else in the terrestrial order, dreadfully unstable.[29] Christian magistrates should serve if summoned, yet with the aforesaid detachment; and if it proved necessary to torture to extort truth and thus judge equitably, the Christian official must order what the occasion required, simultaneously praying to be delivered from such responsibility.[30] Historians, however, can draw on a small stash of Augustine's remarks which signal that his political scepticism referred principally to the Romans' 'heroic ideals'. Those remarks intimate that Christian statesmen could do far more to 'evangelize the political sphere' than just pray for it. Robert Dodaro's insightful studies of Augustine's thoughts on the just society, in effect, supply fifth-century Christian magistrates with their marching orders. Conversion puts them on course; each soul repents its 'pretensions to moral strength' and with repentance comes a recognition that tactics hitherto devised to ward off the fear of death amounted to time wasted. Worse still, those tactics (or therapies) — the accumulation of wealth and influence — nurtured others' envy. Such envy led (and continued to lead) officials to corruption. But with conversion and repentance the fear of death dissipates. Statesmen could then collate the traditional civic virtues with the love for their new religion's God, who had conquered death and whose death on the Cross extinguished the fear of death. Hence, Christian magistrates thereupon remove what Dodaro identifies as 'the fundamental threat to the formation of a just society', the obsession with mortality that drives the unconverted to store up treasure on earth.[31]

If Dodaro is right and Augustine encouraged Christian officials to 'evangelize the public sphere', MacMullen and I missed the bishop's call for a war on corruption. But if I am right, MacMullen mistook Augustine's spirit of resignation — a sense that corruption was inexorable, irrepressible — for approval. To be sure, resignation, in this context, did not preclude any bishop's efforts to assist corruption's casualties. Augustine's *City of God* grudgingly acknowledges that corruption and greed, which left neighbours in

[28] *Enar* 51.6.

[29] E.g. *Enar* 39.10.

[30] *De civ* 19.6.

[31] Robert Dodaro, *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine* (Cambridge, 2004), particularly pp. 32–6, 184–7, 211–14. To summarize his position I have also drawn from Dodaro, 'Augustine's Revision of the Heroic Ideal', *Augustinian Studies*, 36 (2005), pp. 141–58 and from the typescript he kindly provided, '*Ecclesia* and *res publica*: How Augustinian are Neo-Augustinian Politics?' (the paper presented in 2006 at the conference on 'Postmodern Neo-Augustinianism' organized by the Theology Faculty of the Catholic University of Leuven.

need, summoned prelates into the world of affairs. Bigger cities meant more crime, more contention, less serenity.[32] For a bishop, serenity was necessary for study and 'sacred' — consecrated by contemplation in pursuit of truth. 'Love for truth seeks sacred leisure [*otium sanctum*], yet love for others compels one to be busy for justice [*negotium justum*].' According to the *City*, church leaders would be wrong to disregard a summons into public life, which they experienced as 'the compulsion of love' for neighbours. Yet neither the summons not the compulsion should be permitted to steal prelates' leisure and suppress their studies.[33]

How could such theft be avoided, though, given Augustine's preference for socio-economic fair play? Granted, his *City* proposes no political reform programme — no one-size-fits-all religious remedy for villainy and its victims. But, as Nicholas Wolterstorff recently ventured, the bishop had grown impatient with *apatheia*. Augustine learned that the corruption and exploitation around him were 'disturbance worthy'.[34]

'If *apatheia* refers to a condition in which we are undisturbed by grief', he wrote, *apatheia* or numbness ought not to be cultivated. 'Who would not think that such insensitivity is the worst of all faults?'[35] The *City* very nearly translates Jesus' displays of grief for others' grief into insurgent compassion, which, if included in a sermon seasoned with righteous indignation, could have inspired a war on corruption. But no war was waged. Augustine delicately advised officials, especially when their policy or practice affected the still opaque future of his church. Occasionally he exhibited frustration — rarely anger. He was no insurgent.

But, wading into the literature left by the pelagian controversy, Jean-Marie Salamito recently spotted sympathies somewhat related to what Nicholas Wolterstorff finds in Augustine's *City*. Salamito, that is, rediscovered the bishop's *plébéisme*. The pelagians were elitists. They stressed the moral virtuosity of their partisans to draw impressionable Christians to their spiritual aristocracy. Piety, in pelagian circles, was predatory, Augustine seems to have argued, recoiling from pelagians' perfectionism and claiming that the stain of sin was so indelible that persons insisting that they were — and others could be — free of it had succumbed to a blinding arrogance.[36]

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[32] *De civ* 19.5.

[33] *De civ* 19 (*caritatis necessitas*).

[34] N. Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton, 2008), pp. 194–8.

[35] *De civ* 14.9.

[36] Jean-Marie Salamito, *Les virtuoses et la multitude: Aspects sociaux de la controverse entre Augustin et les pélagiens* (Grenoble, 2005), pp. 143–4, 296–8. Along similar lines, Robert Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 50–3, suggests that Augustine's reaction turned him into something of an advocate of 'Christian mediocrity'. For my rejoinder, see P.I. Kaufman, 'Augustine, Martyrs, and Misery', *Church History*, 63 (1994), pp. 1–14.

Salamito steered Augustine's recoil so that it carried the bishop back to his base where he distinguished himself as an advocate for '*un christianisme de masse*', which was 'characterized by goodwill toward plebians' (*envers couches plébéiennes*). But that the *bienveillance* did not stir him more demonstrably against the exploitation of 'the masses' tells against Salamito's sense that Augustine had worried about the social as well as the theological implications of pelagianism.[37] His goodwill and *plébéisme* seem seldom, if ever, to have stirred him against corruptible authorities. He doubtless recognized what needed reforming, and the social reformer in him, as we have witnessed, sometimes peeps through his rhetoric of resignation. Nonetheless, he mistrusted motives — not just those of the corrupt, but the motives of every sin-stained person around him, the motives, that is, of everyone; and, inasmuch as his arguments against alleged pelagian perfectionism required him to emphasize the evil that persons do, his mistrust intensified. Pelagians might dream about the spiritual virtuosity of ethical elites, but they could not dance around the pervasive criminality that came with the territory of the terrestrial city, criminality and corruption to which Augustine was resigned.[38]

The world that Augustine depicted in his anti-pelagian polemics was a treacherous expanse, but stressing just that did not stop him from urging Christians to overcome the inordinate desires that had made such a mess of their cities and their souls. He implored them to do good with the goods in their keeping, much as he tried to nudge the court clerks to apply the fees or tips they received to poor relief. Better to give than to grasp or get.[39] Yet John Parrish, in a new book on the paradoxes of political ethics, has the bishop shrinking from enterprises that invest substantial energy in social reform. Giving alms was one thing; making a commitment to end corrupt practices that created inequities and that increased the need for alms, however, was something altogether different — and futile. Parrish summarizes: 'given the risk of moral corruption, Augustine thinks, we should prefer even to endure the rule of an unjust government rather than hazard our own moral purity unnecessarily'.[40] But the summary appears to have overstated Augustine's resignation, though Parrish's sketches of paradoxes elsewhere more convincingly repossess the bishop's sense of 'the profound moral opacity' and the 'mysterious moral blurriness' that held him back from conspicuously agitating against political corruption and drove him forward on two fronts. 'Bringing vice indoors,' as Parrish has noticed, Augustine 'radically internalize[d] the conceived location of moral action.' Within every Christian's corruptible conscience, God's grace and a preacher's (or a bishop's) expressions of grief for corruption's casualties had chances to make changes. On a second front,

[37] Salamito, *Virtuoses*, p. 265.

[38] *De peccatorum meritis et remissione* 1.10.12; *CSEL*, Vol. 60.

[39] E.g. *Ep* 220, 11.

[40] J. Parrish, *Paradoxes of Political Ethics* (Cambridge, 2007), p. 95.

Augustine lowered the horizon of Christian expectations. What Parrish calls 'the core proposition of Augustine's political theory' was informed not merely by a mistrust of motives and by an assumption that corruption was unavoidable but also by his awareness of limitations, by his belief that 'political action of good people is properly directed *not* toward achieving the rational ideal of political community' but at the possibility of 'securing the specific and limited good of temporal peace'.[41]

More often than he mentioned the contributions to that end by the *defensores* or ombudsmen, Augustine referred to the second institutional innovation in the fourth century that, in part, aimed to curb corruption, the bishop's courts or 'audiences'. There, prelates heard complaints and tried to umpire feuds among the faithful. Historians have been sifting the little we know about Augustine's court for evidence of juridical activism, for a sign that he intended to expand its jurisdiction. Elsewhere I have disputed their findings, yet, more recently, Kevin Uhalde has put the predicaments of fourth- and fifth-century episcopal magistrates in fresh perspective. He imagines that they were 'neck deep in the treachery of human society'; they were 'overwhelmed' by 'the many failings of worldly justice' to combat corruption. Bishops' biographers — hagiographers — ordinarily cast their subjects as extraordinary prophets, as forbiddingly austere enemies of the powerful, avaricious and litigious. Uhalde corrects the record. Augustine commiserated with colleagues as they watched their parishioners struggle with each other and with powerful pagans. The bishops saw justice 'bend, twist, and crack under the pressure of social necessity', so they convened their courts as alternatives.[42]

But they do not seem to have represented their alternative venues as replacements or protests. The reason for restraint may well have been as Claude Lepelley supposes: Christian authorities did not want to launch aggressive initiatives that would antagonize pagans, '*encore nombreux et influent*' in North African cities.[43] Conceivable; but resignation rather than fear seems to have motivated Augustine. He conceded that bribes made it difficult to argue that justice was administered fairly. Moreover, perjured testimony in exchange for immunity from prosecution too often destroyed the careers of honourable men, and heretics' renunciations in the bishops' courts were patently insincere.[44] At times he looks to have given up hope that justice could be had anywhere. He never wrote enthusiastically about his tenure as judge. Indeed, in 426, he seems to have staged a small crisis in Hippo to give him an

[41] *Ibid.*, pp. 88, 101–2.

[42] Uhalde, *Expectations of Justice in the Age of Augustine* (Philadelphia, 2007), pp. 52–3, 66–7, 135–7; P.I. Kaufman, 'Augustine, Macedonius, and the Courts', *Augustinian Studies*, 34 (2003), pp. 67–82.

[43] Lepelley, *Cités*, p. 391.

[44] *Ep* 151, 4 and 236, 1.

excuse to excuse himself and to have his esteemed deacon, Eraclius, substitute — more or less permanently. Augustine simply wearied of coping with contentious citizens whose suits were 'cloudy and confused', much as the rest of 'the business of Babylon'.[45]

In that first phase of his phased retirement, had he extricated himself from his court or audience without assigning competent Eraclius to manage his court's docket — or had he more consistently winked at fees paid to minor officials in the secular courts — the argument that Augustine countenanced corruption might gain considerable momentum. Its wheels would come off, however, when it passed over the inhospitable terrain of the second book of the bishop's *City* where Plato, Sallust and Cicero are drawn into a blistering attack on pagans' supposed indifference to sordid behaviour. The pagans worshipped gods who behaved scandalously, and, Augustine continued, worshippers and worshipped alike seemed wholly unconcerned with social justice and public morality. The gods and their devotees despised regulation. The latter, together with unrepentant and imprudent Christians, were content as long as they were at liberty to pursue personal advantage and wicked pleasures and to overindulge themselves, *non dura jubeantur, non prohibeantur impura*.[46]

Historian Philippe Curbelie recently caught Augustine railing against pagans' myths and immorality, *avec rigeur*, coupling the two, touting Christianity's superiority.[47] But the bishop did not try to patch together proof that Christianity demonstrably slaked the elite's insatiable thirst for affluence and influence. Nor did he pretend that transformations during the fourth century — official toleration of the new faith in its earlier decades, then prohibitions of pagan worship in the 390s — had limited the socio-politically corrosive effects of personal corruption. But Augustine posted in his *City of God* exceptionally critical remarks about the pagans' permissiveness without a comparably critical assessment of Christianity's failures to make a difference. But to recommence scolding co-religionists at every turn for their impiety would not have served his purposes, which did not include obscuring those failures. Still, neither his silence in this instance nor his comments on the customary payments to court clerks signalled his approval of or indifference to corruption. True, he did not match Salvian's rage, as MacMullen attests, but not because Augustine was insensitive. He was, if I may coin a term, 'an imperfectionist'. No surgeon could remove that inordinate desire that surfaced as envy and greed, in personal dispositions, and then in corrupt

[45] *Ep* 48, 1 (*caligo et tumultus*). For the crisis and Augustine's retirement, see Conrad Leyser, '*Homo pauper, de pauperibus natum*: Augustine, Church Property, and the Cult of St. Stephen', *Augustinian Studies*, 36 (2005), pp. 229–33.

[46] *De civ* 2.14 and 2.20.

[47] P. Curbelie, '*Injustus* dans le *De civitate Dei*', *Etica & Politica*, 9 (2007), pp. 19–24.

practices. Genuine, lasting improvement, therefore, had to await the faithful's arrival in a celestial city.[48] During their pilgrimage on earth, Augustine held, their religion — specifically, their compassion for corruption's casualties — might achieve some improvement in public morality and, plausibly, measurable reductions in official hypocrisy — damage control, that is — yet Christianity, on Augustine's watch, prepared the soul to relinquish and not to re-order society.

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[48] *De civ* 2.21.