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Peter Iver Kaufman

University of Richmond, pkaufman@richmond.edu

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Christian Realism and Augustinian (?) Liberalism

Surely there is enough kindling lying about in the Bible and in subsequent moral theology to fire up love for neighbors and compassion for countless “friends” in foreign parts--and in crisis. And, surely, the momentum of love’s labor for the just redistribution of resources, fueled by activists’ appeals for solidarity, should be sustained by stressing that we are creatures made for affection, not for aggression. Yet experience, plus the history of the Christian traditions, taught Reinhold Niebuhr, who memorably reminded Christian realists, how often love was “defeated,” how a “strategy of brotherhood . . . degenerates from mutuality to a prudent regard for the interests of self and from an impulse towards community to an acceptance of the survival impulse as ethically normative” (Niebuhr 1964, 2:96).

But he was encouraged after reading Augustine. The late antique African bishop nudged Niebuhr to look for the “formula for leavening the city of this world with the love of the city of God” (Niebuhr 1953, 134). The authors of the books before us are still looking. They concede, as did Niebuhr, that Augustine’s monumental City of God explicitly sets limits on love’s effectiveness on the practice of politics. They refuse, nonetheless, as did Niebuhr, to offer any “blanket judgments about the power of the state,” although they acknowledge that politics tends to trick practitioners to overlook limits and to become “idolatrous[ly]” infatuated with what governments can do (Lovin 1995, 180-84; Lovin 2008, 198-99).

Augustine did indulge in blanket judgments. I shall contend that he yanked his comprehensive condemnation wholly over bed and body politic. True, the contention is controversial, though few historians would dispute that, by the early fifth century, he had swapped whatever was left of his

political optimism for much lower estimates of what his faith could contribute to political deliberations. Why? Rome's military setbacks across the Mediterranean as well as rivalries and insurrections in Africa may account for his disenchantment. Almost certainly, his general sense of humanity's "fallen" condition contributed. The most conspicuous sign of the damage from that fall, concupiscence, was a pervasive, inordinate desire for worldly possessions and for position. Christianity's harping on the impermanence of wealth, social advantage, and domination seemed to have little effect, yet Augustine kept to that course. Still, he believed that while their faith helped Christians offload guilt, nothing could undo what the first sin of humanity's parents and their fall from grace had done. Non posse non peccare; the faithful were unable to behave impeccably.

Pessimism pegged to such observations and the observations themselves are seldom welcome. Early fifth-century idealists, notably the Pelagians and Donatists got shirty with Augustine who scolded them for being naively perfectionist. One finds that his and Niebuhr's anti-utopian imperatives still play today. For their part, Christian realists have been known to trot out the two, assuming that neither meant his emphasis on the pervasive and--for Augustine--a providential presence of evil to lead to moral paralysis. With help, good could come from evil, not in the form of political settlements, Augustine surmised, but as personal sentiments, that is, as promising shoots sprouting from the ruins of a fallen nature. We grow compassion. For that reason, "in the face of a massive and persistent presence of evil in the world," Charles Mathewes notes, "we continue to insist that the basic truth about the world is its goodness . . . if not its justice, at least its **basalt** worthiness and inherent value." That phrase, "if not its justice," appears to me to be a telling disclaimer; in effect--if not also in intent--it puts politics beyond the pale, and it acknowledges that Augustine considered combat against corruption to be first and foremost intrapsychic. The objective was not to reform government or rehabilitate "the state" but to win over the soul--not to sift political malpractice but to correct the "sinful misdisposition of our will articulated in our habits" (Mathewes 2001, 70-74).

Niebuhr's Christian realism seems less severe and more inclined to harbor hopes for "progressive justice." Geoffrey Rees attributes Niebuhr's spiffed-up Augustinianism to his "rejection of any literalistic interpretation of original sin" (Rees 2003, 88-91). The notion that the disobedience of Eve and Adam left an indelible stain on human character was useful in Augustine's campaigns against alleged Pelagian perfectionism, yet original sin precludes neither moral improvement nor the possibility that moral progress could have meaningful political effects. Still, Augustine had little confidence in Roman leadership--imperial, regional, and municipal. He concluded that an eerily irrepressible ambition or desire to dominate drove all political practice. He occasionally wrote as if government might surprise him. He noticed the odd civic official who did not dive like a cormorant into the corridors of power. He awarded Emperor Theodosius high marks for prudence and piety (Augustine 1972, 221-22: 5.26). Hence, it is not inconceivable that Augustine, without thinking that vera justitia, "genuine justice," was possible this side of the grave (74-75: 2.21), could still have hoped for "progressive justice," as did Niebuhr when he departed the slums of industrial Detroit for New York, where he studied the surges of Christian realism in the early fifth century and drafted a "definition of 'realism' [that] implies that idealists are subject to illusions about social realities, which," he added, "indeed they are" (Niebuhr 1953, 119).

Augustine had plenty of chances to see scoundrels around him at work in government in Italy and Africa. He read Livy's accounts of ambition and was familiar with Sallust's brooding over corruption. He was under no illusions about social realities (Harding 2008, 47-83; Kaufman 2007, 115-18). Christians were pilgrims or resident aliens this side of the grave. The nineteenth chapter of Augustine's City of God suggests the tensions they experience when they try to be of service where they find themselves.¹

Gerald Schlabach reads the City's recommendations as an argument for "Augustinian continence," by which he means the "evangelical self-denial" that inspires profound, mutual caring

among Christians (Schlabach 2001, 87). His core **assertion is that such love far exceeds benevolence**, but, elaborating, Schlabach mostly manages lots of notes: “caritas-working-through-continenence” is not domineering, not acquisitive, not manipulative (73-75, 90-91). The difficulty is that Augustine did resort to manipulation and coercion while attempting to take over or, in places, to take back basilicas from Donatist Christians. Schlabach concedes that, “arguably, the effort was an act of incontinence,” acknowledging that his subject was “grasping domineeringly for a good [the reunification of African Christianity and creation of “an order of mutual love”] that Christians must receive rather as a gift” (166). Schlabach is not alone, as we shall see; others, looking for love and liberalism in Augustine’s career, are tormented by evidence that he sanctioned the use of intimidation to bring clerical and lay members of the pars Donati into the supra-regional church from which their forerunners seceded a century earlier. The secessionists’ bishops were unworldly. Less well traveled than their rivals-- Augustine’s episcopal colleagues--they claimed a superior righteousness, even as their provincialism made their sense of superiority and century-long defiance of imperial and church leadership seem ludicrous to more refined Christians. We return to Donatism shortly, because Augustine’s efforts to suppress it and the sometimes surly disposition he showed in **defending them** make it particularly hard for Augustinian liberals to chaffer him into their camp. At the moment, we need only note what Schlabach describes as “an almost Donatist clarity of vision,” which seems to inform Augustine’s understanding of how continence, love, and patience should work within the church. Schlabach has his man flirt with the perfectionism he so criticized. Yet, within a few pages, Schlabach repents having Augustine package the charms of church life too attractively, restoring the “ongoing tension” in Augustine’s ecclesiology. Life as it is in churches, families, and political institutions is not as it ought to be (116-18).

Whereas Schlabach concentrates on inspiring caregivers and compassion in churches, Robert Dodaro’s study of a love that practices patience and politics bears more directly on the interests of

current Christian realists and Augustinian liberals who write to chauffer their favorite bishop into their camp. In Dodaro's Christ and the Just Society in the thought of Augustine, a closely argued but wonderfully readable book, readers can eavesdrop as the late antique prelate counsels Christian statesmen. The title gives away the general content of such counsel--that Augustine made direct connections between virtues commended in the gospels and the kind of political engagement that should make a government progressively more just and, finally, genuinely just. **[You need a transition marker here between your views and your overview of the problems in trying to co-opt Augustine into one political perspective or another and your consideration of the 4 books. I was confused.]**

Dodaro is an excellent historical theologian, too good to overlook those anti-utopian "imperatives" in Augustine's correspondence and in the polemical treatises against perfectionism, to which we have already alluded, yet he locates a cautious, rather obscurely coded optimism in the City of God, despite that text's declarations positioning terrestrial cities far from vera iustitia, true or genuine justice. Justice of that sort requires that **all receive their due**, but, with everyone angling for advantage in this wicked world, God gets shortchanged. Fallen human nature stubbornly refuses to give God divinity's due, reverence expressed liturgically and in self-denying love (Augustine 1972, 882: 19.21). One result, that political practice becomes hostage to practitioners' desire to dominate, means that the servitude of some to others is unavoidable. Where can Christ be linked with a just society, then, save in Dodaro's title? Schlbach's reply is the church; Dodaro's answer, the virtuous intentions of faithful, humble statesmen who accept Jesus Christ as the impresario of their souls' "efforts to overcome obstacles to the true knowledge and worship of God," efforts that become preconditions for the "creation and preservation of a just society" (Dodaro 2004, 31).

The creation and preservation of a genuinely just society? Before the hereafter? Was Augustine striving towards that end? Dodaro elsewhere collects evidence of the bishop's political "activism" in a

tidy, small heap, composed chiefly of advice offered public officials, yet Augustine comes across as a man without a plan. No consistently proposed and argued public policy surfaces. Indeed, as Dodaro admits, Augustine's "activity responds to particular social ills as they arose among the people for whose pastoral care he feels responsible." He was not programmatically political, but he understood that he was pastorally responsible for **statesmen who were--and who, Dodaro tells us, were attracted** by two types of heroism (Dodaro 2005, 110-11).

The first was conventional. Romans' heroes sought glory and popularity in this life and only secondarily, if at all, valued God's approval now and reward later (Augustine 1972, 203: 5.14). The second was apostolic, the heroism countenanced by Christianity's first apostles. It placed pleasing God above all else (Dodaro 2004, 53). Chiding leaders for their attachments to conventional concepts of the heroic, Augustine, according to Dodaro, bent every effort to increase the appeal of the apostolic. Celebrated public servants' popularity occasionally survived their deaths, Augustine said, but popularity was a "surrogate immortality." And celebrity, obsessively pursued, as it often was, kept would-be heroes from pursuing "true piety and the happiness it imparts." Assurances that they were--and would forever be--citizens of the celestial city compensated the Christian statesmen for the know-nothing crowds' adulation. True, Rome's poets had said otherwise. But Augustine charged that the immortality they packaged as fame was a scam. He set heroism and immortality in a scriptural context, defining both as God's gifts. So says Dodaro, and he is right. Statesmen receiving such gifts become known by "public acknowledgment of the limits of their virtue through prayer" and, simultaneously, "by means of this prayer," piety purifies the intention behind other virtues, such as justice, with the result that these, too, are rendered true" (57).

Dodaro stations "true" justice somewhere between intention and realization, implying that the latter, politically, is within reach. But his book's brilliance, to my eyes, shows best in its anatomy of the

former--intention. Dodaro probes Augustine's interests in statesmen's motives, interests that appear to me predominantly pastoral rather than political. Political endeavor and apology have pastoral dimensions, Charles Mathewes points out, citing Lincoln's second inaugural address and the insights bracing it (as the "cultivation of the holy terror that is integral to true piety"). Mathewes has the "public sphere become . . . the forum for an ascetical inquiry," which, in turn, "better shapes" officeholders "more fully to receive God's grace" (Mathewes 2007, 259-60). Dodaro's Augustine tried something a bit different. He deployed a series of contrasts beginning with two distinctive kinds of heroism then peeling back to the different intimations of immortality each implied and to the reigning reactions to mortality. Fortitude trumped faith in the ways Rome's statesmen faced death, because they had been beguiled by their poets. Recent military and political humiliations had gone some distance towards sobering up citizens, yet those resenting the new faith and envying its growing influence blamed Christianity for their empire's setbacks. The first ten books of Augustine's City of God record his answer. Dodaro revisits their rehearsal of the failures of Rome's religions and philosophies to "offer efficacious solutions to the fear of death." Augustine to the rescue: he supplied new "solutions," among them, an authentic, Christian immortality (as opposed to a surrogate, pagan immortality) "in tandem with the rejection of the value of the examples of virtue offered by Rome's most outstanding citizens." Death, Dodaro adds, "is truly defeated only when the soul desires God over all other goods" and when that desire lays at the foundation of a Christianized concept of civic virtue. The City of God becomes that concept's showcase. Therein, old ideas about heroism and public service "are redefined and transformed in a Christian key, thus redefining the just society itself" (35-36).

What might "the just society itself" have looked like in the Christian statesmen's intentions? Dodaro suggests that it could have crystallized as devout politicians' urges to translate "the penitential qualities of their faith's saints" into civic virtues. Augustine, he surmises, would have hoped so. The bishop believed that Rome's old ideas about honor and glory, which had shaped "political discourses,"

were ripe for replacement. Their function as counters to the statesmen's fear of death had been undermined by Christianity. They were obsolete. Their place could be reserved for the new faith and "the penitential qualities" of its saints (183).

Dodaro explains how this substitution and transformation might have worked--if not in political practice, at least in Augustine's political thought. The "technology" was dependent on repentance. Statesmen's sorrow for their sins was "the experiential basis from which to generate sympathy for others." Sorrow built solidarity, initially the faithful statesman's solidarity with fallen humanity. King David and the apostle Peter were the models; agonizing over their sins, they became better rulers (201-202). Politics became, for Dodaro's Augustine, a public penance. He reinvented "the state." He knew no ruler could get that completely right; he was too much a Christian realist, Dodaro admits, to hope for a perfectly virtuous leader. But he was no pessimist. He saved statesmen from the "surrogate immortality" that had long informed political practice, scolded them for sin, mentioned their mortality to inspire them and save them from a "second," eternal death, preached repentance to them, and led them to live "under a divine pardon." For their part, they then governed mercifully and justly (212).

No easy task. Rulers must first learn then teach "truths that are shrouded in the darkness of mystery and within a depth of wisdom that is hidden from reason." They must compellingly present "the spiritual arts of penitence." Dodaro's Augustine grows optimistic as the pages turn. At least, Dodaro seems to grow more optimistic--and less realistic--for his subject. Augustine is said to have dreamed of high-minded authorities, "their attention fixed on the heavenly city," nonetheless promoting the civic virtues of citizens whom they draw "away from concern with the illusory achievement of moral and spiritual autonomy and towards the freedom to live interiorly as citizens in God's city" (218). Dodaro concludes with that crescendo. But the passage from the rulers' probity and citizens' interiority to "the creation and preservation of a just society," **arguably, looked more difficult**

to Augustine [elaborate a bit more?] (Kaufman 2007, 228-30). There is no denying, however, that Dodaro's scalpel has given us a good look at Augustine's anatomy of statesmen's intentions--at what he thought they had been as well as at what he hoped they might become. Christian realists may object to that last bit, but Dodaro will challenge them to reconsider their paladin's views on political virtue. No denying also that Dodaro has stitched up an Augustine who will prove quite useful to Augustinian liberals, who, as one of their cleverest, philosophically well-informed, and articulate new recruits says, believe that their man was devoted to placing "hopeful pressures . . . on all politics" (Gregory 2008, 361).

Eric Gregory's marvelous book, Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship, rakes Augustine's many remarks on, and exhortations to, love into suggestive discussions of civic virtue. When Christian realists comment on the mischief that passes as politics and on establishment values **spiked with dollops** of American exceptionalism, they tend to recall Augustine's stress on sin and self-interest. If liberals looking to rehabilitate political practices relish what Augustine wrote about love, they have a feast in Gregory's expositions, which start, as Dodaro did, with the restructuring of desire: "Love must be trained" (262). Once trained, freshly and highly motivated rulers and citizens pore over the conundrums related to governing, which sometimes stump Christian realists, and register new solutions. Gregory can be rather hard on those stumped, saddened realists who are, he avers, disposed to "denigrate the social functions of non-ecclesiastical communities that aspire to justice" and who forget that love is as formidable as sin--indeed, more formidable--in political theology. Christian realists, that is, do not see how the ordo amoris at the center of Augustine's "true political theology" can become an extraordinary resource for developing "an ethic of citizenship" and civic virtue (136-38).

Politics and the Order of Love does exactly what its title promises; it couples the two, infusing the former with the latter. And Gregory infuses the whole with a sense of urgency. “The time has come,” he says, “to put Augustinian liberalism more explicitly within its proper context of critical admiration of liberal virtues and the aspirations of perfection rather than one of relentless negation” (32). With little evidence, however, Gregory is absolutely certain that Augustine shared his urgency, that the late antique bishop “was consumed with the task of responding to the allegation” that Christianity undermined public order (59). “Consumed”? Augustine more often seems composed than consumed. He as much as conceded some incompatibility between that “true” theology and politics when he explained that the virtues prescribed by Christianity’s sacred texts, “forbearance and benevolence, should be kept secretly in one’s own mind” as one--say a Christian who acquiesces to become a magistrate--upholds a judgment that requires retribution as well as reparations (Augustine 2001, 37: epistle 138.13).

But Gregory is not just troubled by realists’ “relentless negation[s].” He is equally upset by secular liberals’ efforts to close the road “from religious convictions to political commitments” (Gregory 2008, 61). Perhaps the most celebrated, John Rawls, affixes to some of his appeals to “public reason” prohibitions against letting religious faiths that, by definition, are comprehensive and exclusive into the public forum. Such faiths, he argues, cultivate a “zeal to embody the whole truth in politics,” quite contrary to the survival of “an idea of public reason that belongs with democratic citizenship” (Rawls 1997, 766-67). Appeals to public reason foster reciprocity; appeals **to faith have been known to promote “political virtues found in political liberalism”** (794), though religious faith has been known--too often for Rawls--to torpedo “the principle of toleration” so basic to every liberal, constitutional regime. Piety in power is pernicious. It depreciates the liberties of the religiously indifferent and of any who appear religiously different--or deviant (782-83). Rawls therefore consigns debates between comprehensive religious doctrines to a “background culture”--to an obscurity that, Gregory complains,

would effectively proscribe “Christian political advocacy” and thus “domesticate” religion’s “prophetic witness” (Gregory 2008, 65). Close the road from religious convictions to political commitment, and you close an artery through which compassion flows into political deliberations. Love empowers justice; Augustinian liberalism inspires love. So, should Rawlsian liberals succeed restricting religious speech in public life, their liberal societies would--near fatally--neglect “the need to replenish the moral energies that sustain liberalism” (66).

Gregory assembles a small army to punch that point home in his second and third chapters. Objections to our Christian realists and secularizing Rawlsians **billow** from those pages. Jean Bethke Elshtain, Timothy Jackson, Rowan Williams, Joan Tronto, Charles Mathewes, Oliver O’Donovan, and Susan Okin, among others, assist Gregory in making the claim that Augustinian liberalism is vital to the “moral conversation about politics,” which, in turn, is vital to political liberalism (148).

Then he tackles Hannah Arendt. For much of the mid-section of Gregory’s book, Arendt is his prime target. Her interpretation of the concept of love in Augustine’s work, which makes her exquisite doctoral dissertation still worth reading, seems to have had a profound effect on the opinions she later formulated about modernity, forgiveness, and civic responsibility. Gregory, following Mathewes and Elshtain, intriguingly intimates that Arendt’s confrontations with totalitarianism bear comparison with Augustine’s face-offs with imperialism and that his “mature” anti-Manichaean reconceptualization of evil (as deficit) is somewhat analogous to her controversial remarks about “the banality of evil” in the twentieth century (198-99). What disappoints Gregory is Arendt’s depoliticization of Augustine’s ordo amoris. She subscribes to interpretations that distinguish between cupiditas and caritas and that make it difficult to find a place for the love of neighbor in his thinking because caritas turns wholeheartedly to eternity. Arendt’s Augustine, in effect, “obscures the relevance of the neighbor” (233). The title of Gregory’s fourth chapter, “Love as Political Vice,” gives his displeasure away, although he sees that

Augustine's understanding of love, filtered through Arendt, is really less vicious than vacuous. When she finished with her subject, Christian love was so theocentric that "civic virtue" was left undersourced. Love was "worldless"; "rather than providing a founding principle for politics, [it] turn[ed] out finally to prevent politics" (217).

The doctrine of the Incarnation, the union of divine and human natures in Jesus Christ, Gregory imagines, kept Augustine from Arendt's conclusions. The love for God was love for all neighbors, collected, one might say, in the savior. Yet, Gregory claims, Arendt let neo-Platonism colonize Augustine's Christology so that "the Incarnation . . . serves as a distraction from attending to the other in his or her alterity." And "Christ as the divine neighbor absorbs the integrity of all neighbor love" (223). Arendt allegedly quizzed her own conclusions and tried to correct for this "absorption," which, Gregory says, "prevents politics," but she was unsuccessful. Her attempts left him unappeased. At her dissertation's end, "genuine neighbor-love," for Arendt's Augustine, "consists in drawing the neighbor into the stream of God's love" (337); "the concrete horizontal encounter with the neighbor is always only mediated, and finally deferred, to the vertical relation to God" (222).

Gregory dislikes "deferrals" of this sort and supposes that Augustine would as well. But it is (and was?) only one of the two more egregious kinds of "escapism" that could curb plans in the fourth, fifth, and twenty-first centuries to "operationalize" love "as a political virtue" (298). Making "worldless" love superior to affections lavished on beloved friends is one danger. Another makes love too worldly, whereupon spectacles obscure genuine compassion (282). Gregory illustrates that second danger with a story from the fourth book of Augustine's Confessions in which the narrator records his alarm at the grief he expressed on learning of a friend's death. He mourned theatrically and learned later, according to Arendt, that his friendship and extravagant mourning had fettered him to the things of this world. The lesson was an emancipation enabling him, Arendt says--and Gregory disapprovingly repeats--"to

make a desert out of the world and to protect his love for God.” Gregory prefers to think that Augustine’s distress was due to the ease with which “loving love . . . eclipse[d] the particularism of love” (285).

He appreciates that “the particularism of love” can be problematic. With clues from colleagues Rowan Williams and Oliver O’Donovan, he looks for “a more nuanced mediation between the universal and particular.” And he learns that, as love becomes politically “operationalized,” it “continually expands the circle of neighborly concern.” Gregory infers that Augustine intended his distinctively Christian version of friendship to “extend the possibilities of virtue beyond a philosophical elite” and right into the public forum where “an Augustinian ethic of democratic citizenship”--Gregory’s subtitle--can “both democratize . . . and publicize . . . love through a theological (and political) populism” (353-55). Did Augustine do the democratizing? Or is Gregory responsible for the transitions, from love through power to justice, to “the creation and preservation of a just society”? The great virtue of Gregory’s book, I think, is that it positions Augustine’s ordo amoris quite usefully in contemporary political discourse. But Gregory appears to award Augustine too much of the credit for what he, Dodaro, and other “Augustinian liberals” achieve, “plac[ing] the emotions squarely in the context of morality itself” and “plac[ing] morality at the center of political theology” (291). And there, at that center, the moral, political, theological injunction to advance the interests of the weak before those of the strong acquires considerable influence, supported by the liberals’ reading of the gospels and their reconstructions of a “collectivist Christology” that Augustine purportedly promoted on the basis of Christ’s enduring presence in or to humanity, especially to “the least of these my brethren” (348-49, citing Matthew 25:40).

Gregory’s book draws a few practical, political implications. The aforesaid injunction, for example, might “guide practical deliberations in agenda setting for scarce resources” (296). One can

imagine Obama's Augustinian liberals coupling discussions of distributive justice with talk of universal health care coverage. Likely, Christian realists, to some extent setting aside Augustine's emphasis on personal or political fallibility and **marinating** plans for progressive justice, could usefully deploy Augustine's endorsements--in his Confessions, correspondence, and sermons--of a "Gregorian" "love that sees real others," endorsements that, amplified in Gregory's study, seem to me to have settled on the frontiers of utopia. For Gregory, however, those endorsements are sum and substance of a "morally robust Augustinian civic liberalism" and an Augustinian "populism," to boot (298).²

Of course, the terms "liberalism" and "populism" are hard to parse under the best circumstances, which seldom include peering from the present into the remote past. Can we call Augustine a populist? Conrad Leyser, the first named of Gregory's "many recent interpreters" who "emphasize the populist implications of Augustine's theology" (355), does maintain that the bishop, while preaching on the relationships between monasticism and the church, tried "to avoid the appearance . . . of spiritual elitism" (Leyser 2000, 12-13). Yet at no point, does Leyser say that abbots or bishops (or Augustine) prodded or should have prodded municipal, regional, and imperial officials to be more egalitarian and, therefore, more just. When Leyser finds Augustine reflecting on questions of community and authority, in semi-retirement, he "confirmed rather than altered his basic premises. Disillusion with the monastic community in the saeculum," as Leyser would have it, appears "to have made still more sharply focused his vision of the eschatological community of the elect and still more attenuated his estimation of what those in power in the saeculum could knowingly achieve" (26). That sounds right to me, and it will bear repeating. For Augustine's City of God and anti-pelagian treatises leave the impression that, from 410, he grew increasingly skeptical about what people and political systems might achieve. Indeed, one could argue that Augustine's skepticism acquired a sudden ubiquity as Pelagians crossed to Africa along with other Christians trying to make sense of the humiliation of their

recently “converted” empire. But even before 410 and long after, Augustine was also struggling with another problem, with a movement that had mushroomed during the previous century.

We have already been introduced to the Donatists. That they and Caecilianists turned parts of North Africa into a war zone is hardly beside the point, because Gregory concedes that the signs of that struggle in his man’s work somewhat undermine his own attempts to locate an “Augustinian civic liberalism” in late fourth- and early fifth-century Africa. In the late 380s, Augustine returned from Italy to find that Donatists outnumbered their rivals, who sensed they were under siege. Donatism originated as a protest against Caecilian and his “party” early in the fourth century. The Caecilianists were accused of having collaborated with persecutors or of having fraternized with known collaborators prior to Constantine’s conversion--and of cooperating with the government’s initiatives to suppress Donatism. To Augustine’s annoyance, the Donatists refused to listen to (his) reason. The Caecilianists’ leadership was tainted, they said, and Augustine, to take the higher ground, apparently exaggerated Donatists’ contempt for their competition. He gave history a distorted picture of a militantly puritanical sect and gave his admirers among political liberals **with** a prickly problem. As we learned, Augustine eventually sanctioned legislation that amounted to intimidation to tip the balance in favor of Caecilianist or “catholic” Christianity in North Africa, concluding that shaking up Donatist secessionists was the best way to save them (Kaufman 2009).

Gregory joins “those who rightly abhor [Augustine’s] ‘loving’ pastoral logic of coercion” (Gregory 2008, 302-303). Yet Gregory also--and astutely--appreciates that liberalisms, unlike idealisms, cannot transcend politics. Redistributions of resources and power that accommodate changing circumstances and answer to principles dear to liberals always require some coercion. To curb corruption, for instance, authorities may have to penalize bribe-makers and bribe-takers to deter their cronies. Gregory compiles an inventory of situations calling for coercion--for legislation against commodification of sex or against

drug abuse--and for regulations for financial markets or for environmental protection. "Any kind of liberalism," he says, given its "commitment to individual liberty, is perpetually trying to justify the rationality of this coercive public order" (306). Hence, Augustinian liberals must not censure Augustine for having advocated governmental intervention as long as the authorities of his time deprived Donatists of their places for public worship, their other properties, and their liberty. But Augustine's protest against proposals to deprive the most defiant Donatists of their lives saves liberals today from having to pitch him into the pits **to prove their compassion for the underdog**. Gregory nonetheless acknowledges that Augustinian liberals will have difficulty accepting the way Augustine had justified forms of coercion or "state intervention" now considered utterly unacceptable in some circles. Augustinian liberals, that is, accustomed to disconnecting love from force will have a "pressing problem" because their man definitely did not (299).

Contextualizing helps. Augustine believed he was protecting a coalition of churches--thus a catholic or universal church--against a regional, divisive, eccentric movement that could jeopardize the new faith's privileged status. For the Donatists' premise, making a virtue of secession, undermined Christianity itself. In paucis veritas, they declared; the few possessed the truth. Illogical, Augustine answered; that premise or principle would accredit every small fraction of any small faction--and endorse sects "divid[ing] the limbs of Christ" (Augustine 1909b, 480-81 3.66.75 - 3.67.76; Augustine 2001, 177-78: epistle 185.8-9). The secessionists resisted reassimilation, so their nemesis resisted the resistance. And, alas, Donatist casualties have become the chief witnesses against Augustine's Augustinian liberalism.

Gregory is right to dismiss criticism that goes over the top, decrying the bishop's "hegemonic moralizing" and denouncing Christian cruelty (Gregory 2008, 299-300), but the problem remains: Augustine's tough love no longer looks much like love. Augustine embarrasses liberals. Gregory might

have pocketed some profit from the anti-Donatist treatises by connecting love to liberalism as they sometimes did. For Augustine closely associated both with the Caecilianists--hatred and intolerance with Donatists. Love is patient with sin to win sinners' confidence, repentance and--ultimately--reconciliation. Hatred and intolerance lead to secession and enduring enmity. It was infinitely better, in Augustine's judgment, to drive or coerce Christians into a church where charity was practiced, as a rule, than to leave them in the secessionists' churches (or sects) where obsessions with purity obscured both the practice and rule of love (Augustine 1909a, 5: 1.3.4; Augustine 1909b, 385-86: 2.21.26).

Gregory seems to have missed that, yet he does not miss much. He combs Augustine's works for statements and sentiments that service "an ethic of democratic citizenship" to inspire and inform an Augustinian liberal's participation in politics today. To my mind, the results are more liberal than Augustinian, more liberal than Augustine's results. But Gregory's book elucidates exceptionally well the issues prompting Christian realists, feminists, Rawlsian liberals, and their critics to ponder civic virtues and to sift the objectives of political participation. The book's best sentences on Augustine, I believe, speculate on "the sort of perfectionism [Augustine] encourages" and the connections between that encouragement and "the creativity of charity," "enacting . . . love as a way of life and tirelessly reproaching oneself and one's strategies for failing" to follow through (Gregory 2008, 313).

And that tireless reproach brings us back to Christian realism, specifically to the "anti-utopian imperative" Augustine was said to have formulated and Reinhold Niebuhr to have echoed. Robin Lovin's new study unsurprisingly places a "Niebuhrian emphasis on the persistence of evil in social and political life" at the base of what he describes as the antiutopian and counterapocalyptic realisms, which "keep expectations for human progress appropriately limited." The latter less discreetly than the former, it seems, warns those who enthusiastically take up--or take up cudgels against--one or another political project "overestimate their own virtue" (Lovin 2008, 22). Christian realists, ideally, should prevent

governments from “overreaching.” Lovin might just as well be aiming at Eric Gregory’s project as at idealists’ overconfidence when he settles on a realist’s raison d’être, reminding governments “what governments are for”: they “provide a limited justice, which makes people neither good nor loving” (30-31).

Gregory’s devotion to “restore the primacy of love as crucial in remembering Augustine” has him hoisting overboard the “strict dichotomy” between justice and love, which, he explains, “seriously misleads any moral endeavor” (Gregory 2008, 377-78). But Lovin’s realists of all stripes insist on retaining it. “[T]he first step toward a realistic Christian ethics,” he stipulates, “is to make a distinction between love and justice. This requires a recognition of the radical demands of love, which can be seen in Jesus’s imprudent and unreasonable commands.” That seems to put love out of politics and mandate “an appropriate lowering of expectations for justice” (Lovin 2008, 66).

Gregory’s Augustinian liberals occasionally do, yet **sometimes** do not, demand too much of justice and politics, depending on the page they occupy. Lovin’s realists emphasize limits and low expectations rather than love. They contend that the idea of justice provides norms for a “distinctive sphere of life that is governed by different [and lower] expectations from those that mark the highest aspirations of personal life as a comprehensive achievement of human good” (67). According to Lovin, Augustine’s City of God set the “spheres” for subsequent political theorists to ponder. It remains a “great theological study of history, philosophy, and politics”; its author was the “first great Christian realist” (46).

Lovin lavishes “great”s on his subject and on his subject’s subject, although Augustine’s line was that greatness (or glory)--here, now, and for the foreseeable--would not last. Glory, specifically, was overrated. Persons “wise by God’s standards” (Augustine 1972, 963: 20.30) must have learned from God’s revelations in their sacred texts how ill-equipped they were to bring about lasting peace and

genuine justice in their terrestrial cities. They were living through a long draught, but the good news was that their true home was celestial. They were pilgrims in time, disinvested in what the rest of the world considered praiseworthy. And Christians' "low expectations for their achievements in this world" attest their realism and piety (Lovin 2008, 49).

Do they therefore duck under political controversies? Neither Augustine nor Lovin consider(ed) avoidance a respectable alternative to engagement. The former favored practicing "patient goodwill" and converting citizens by example, yet not by decree or by examples of political passion (Augustine 2001, 36: ep. 138.11). Lovin has practitioners approach their responsibilities--as citizens or magistrates--with "neither a religious ideal of social life nor a religious constitution," but he commends "a system of unapologetic politics" (Lovin 2008, 220).

Not for Lovin, then, the prowess religiously-motivated political practitioners need to smuggle comprehensivist sentiments past Rawlsian liberals and into the public forum. He acknowledges that there is something to be said in favor of the Rawlsians' desire to free "democratic politics" from religious fanaticism, but, much as Gregory does, Lovin senses a rather debilitating timidity behind Rawls's rush to shield "reasoned argument" from religious piety. Is rationality such soft butter? Might justice not be well served by prophetic witness? Think of the transparent ire of Jeremiah, Hosea, and Amos! What might politics become if the passionately pious withdrew? If Christian realists checked their faith at the door and practiced politics dispassionately or perhaps apologetically, Lovin insinuates, "fundamental questions about society's prevailing values" very rarely would get raised. The faithful would grow less faithful, more likely to fit in, he continues, than usefully to add to what, echoing Stephen Carter, he calls "the epistemic diversity" that enlivens and enriches public discussion. Lovin and Carter are as certain as Reinhold Niebuhr that Christian realists belong in the game. Lovin urges them **to should** stop trying to accommodate Rawlsian rules (and fears) and to practice politics unapologetically in both senses of that

term. Their “unapologetic theology [ought to] express . . . no regrets for presenting itself in its own terms and [should] expect . . . to be understood” (122-26).

Lovin’s stand could be characterized as unapologetically prophetic—even as messianic. Christian realism’s resolute opposition to “prevailing values” and currents approaches a near perfect, prophetic pitch when he puts into evidence “a rigorous religious ideal of identification with the poor.” Gross inequalities tempt affluent, well-meaning members of society, Lovin says, to settle for “self-satisfied benevolence that takes pleasure in small donations” and “insulate[s]” donors from meaningful contacts with the destitute. Unapologetic politics resists such “dilution” (along with arrogance and inflexibility, towards which prophetic witness tends) and searches for “concrete opportunities for social transformation” (131). Yet an unapologetic religious realist in Lovin’s drama has something of a messianic mission as well, because candor about Christian commitments not only has a chance to transform the tumbledown policies, which, in the example just mentioned, fail to change the ground rules, to redistribute resources significantly, and to end indigence. What is more important for the fate of politics itself—and, methodologically, a more far-reaching, high risk enterprise—such candor can save the public forum itself. Unapologetic theology, that is, fosters “a new kind of political realism that would reconnect . . . familiar governmental politics,” which ordinarily only looks after the most conspicuous casualties of market economies, “to the framework of a larger politics that seeks human goods” (145). Christian realists in public discussions, Lovin imagines, should teach their colleagues by example—colleagues who are partisans of business or of the arts—to “make and answer claims upon one another” unapologetically (138).

Lovin does not write pretentiously and may detest the term “messianic,” yet he obviously thinks that Rawlsian liberals and secularists need rescuing from a rationalism, which is far too narrow. Only when they welcome the religious realists’ “unapologetic assertion of comprehensivist ideas in the public

forum” will that forum truly be “open.” Only then will discussions there be frank. Only then will the consensus reached be more spirited than sedative. What secularists see as confessional thrusting creates the “space” in which a pluralistic society can attend to competing interests and claims in terms that make sense to those who have and make them. Possibly advocates of all stripes could do the job-- **and less offensively to Rawlsian liberals**, but Lovin nominates politically realistic partisans of religious traditions “because they form communities of people . . . shaped by an understanding of the human good and bear witness in the wider society to what that human good requires of all contexts” (148). So it is not too much of a stretch, I believe, to call Lovin’s turn-around of Rawls messianic?

Still, one can expect only small rewards from debates about terminology. More important for the purpose of this paper is the fact that Lovin’s chapter on unapologetic “witness” does not refer to Augustine, leaving behind Lovin’s “first great Christian realist” as it sets some highly idealized preconditions for deliberative democracy. But Lovin’s Realism and New Realities argues that the public forum can indeed be redefined to resolve problems caused by those “new realities”--chief among them, pluralism and “the politics of interest”--and to prevent what Robert Hughes has memorably called “the fraying of America.” “Unless each context in a pluralistic society makes its own claims unapologetically,” says Lovin, we may find ourselves inhabiting the shell of a democracy while coping with “pluralistic totalitarianism” (151).

When she comes across Lovin’s new book, Kristen Deede Johnson may be surprised to learn that Augustine was omitted (evicted?) from the Christian realists’ prescriptions for engagement in a pluralistic society. The late antique prelate was immensely helpful to her as she formulated advice to ethicists and to policymakers facing tensions created by competing interests in pluralistic societies. Augustine, after all, was no stranger to the “fraying” of African Christianity. The Donatists and Pelagians claimed to present more authentic versions of the Christianity they professed alongside leading

spokesmen for churches that came to be called “catholic.” Augustine had no illusion about what citizens of the celestial city could achieve as pilgrims in time. Peace, pro tempore, among warring interests was possible; lasting harmony here and now was not. Still, Augustine can be tremendously useful, Johnson avers, to the faithful struggling “to love, serve and live in the earthly cities”--to serve societies afflicted by a malignant doubt about its coherence when confronted with plural and rival interests--competing “loves and desires.” (Johnson 2007, 159-61).

Augustine was “cautious.” He knew that “the realization of the Heavenly City belongs to the age to come rather than to this age.” So pilgrims, who are citizens of their celestial city and resident aliens in terrestrial cities, “instead of trying to force the eschatological peace of the Heavenly City, can and should enjoy the peace of the earthly city as a good from God” (168). And not just enjoy peace, says Johnson, but they should promote and preserve it. The faithful are “called to be involved,” even as magistrates--called to be “gentle and humble,” yet, on occasion, administering justice, they should be firm (171). Johnson, thus far, values her asset, Augustine, as fairly as the other authors we have visited. She recalls his instructions for Christians in public service, but she eventually throws his caution--and caution--to the wind. Presumably, Christian realists as well as Augustinian liberals could apparently learn from Augustine’s ontology and ecclesiology not just how to love, serve, and live in this plural, disordered world but also “how the diversity of creation can be reharmonized” (173).

To be fair, Johnson seldom crosses this bridge-too-far, setting aside her rather restrained Christian realism to pick up the lighter-weight and somewhat unrestrained ideas of some Augustinian(?) liberals. Before we pin down her confidence in the way Augustine provisions the political imagination to negotiate a route to reharmonization, however, we pause to reassess his alleged confidence that Christian magistrates might “reorder” “a people’s disordered loves and priorities”--then “subsume . . . under justice and love” the lust for domination that drives politics (163-65). Assuming exertion of that

sort, **Johnson sweeps into the infield** ably manned by Dodaro. Both refer to passages in Augustine's City that supposedly monitor the changes one undergoes on becoming a Christian, descriptions that suggest magistrates may shed their eagerness for eminence as easily as a new-baptized philosopher discards "false teachings." And Augustine has consoled himself briefly, identifying "the compulsion of love that undertakes righteous engagement in affairs" as an antidote to tyranny (Augustine 1972, 880: 19.19).

But he wrote there about motives, not about political maneuvers. He placed service (in his example, church leadership) above status yet did not intimate that he had known about (or devised) any stash of specific strategies to hold off "pluralistic totalitarianism," a disaggregation of civil conversation into sets of militantly maintained interests. Augustine's City concedes that terrestrial cities cannot be ruled without rank or "high position." Yet it also advises that such superiority tends to authorize a concomitant servitude that hardly complements Christianity's witness to "the compulsion of love." No additive to the political imagination--not even Christian theology--so shrivels the desires to dominate as to solve the problems of pluralistic societies (868-69: 19.12).

But Johnson, Gregory, Dodaro, and--to a lesser extent--Lovin, as we learned, think Augustine adds critically to the resources available to Christians attempting to address, liberally and realistically, the issues related to social and political dysfunction. Johnson places Augustine's remarks on the celestial city--specifically, his encouraging words about that fraction of it in the church--at the center of current discussions about pluralism, contentious public discourse, and disharmony. The church, "embodied" and "practiced" Christianity, is that place where Christians try to be what they believe, and where "communication and action that occur in witness to the faith" create the sort of "mutuality" that Gerald Schlabach commends. Johnson exports it from the church into the public forum (Johnson 2007, 242-43). Once there, she presses Lovin's and Gregory's complaints about the inadequacy of Rawlsian liberal pieties. She welcomes discourses freighted with comprehensivist sentiments into that forum, and she

promises that they will yield “conversations rich and deep” (233). The exchanges “engage the current realities of pluralism on numerous levels and help foster a hospitable ethos of interaction” (238). Lovin would approve.

In the context of this review essay, Lovin and Johnson make a good team. They comb through the Christian tradition for sources for the “hospitable ethos of interaction” that is obviously dear to both of them. But, as we saw, Lovin’s chapter on unapologetic politics leaves Augustine in the shallows. Johnson takes him on board; Augustine charts the course of her argument that the church should be the model for useful, collegial deliberations in the public forum. His role in her book, however, raises a question that haunts my admiration for her work and for Gregory’s efforts to construct an “ethic of citizenship.” To what extent have the two reclaimed Augustine? Might the transfer of rules of discourse from the church to the “state” (to congressional subcommittees or town councils or multi-party talks on, say, disarmament) be, as Johnson implies, “the church’s political task,” in Augustine’s estimation as well as in hers? That the church should “develop” “virtuous people, formed in a society built on trust rather than fear” seems a defensible proposition--and one Augustine would have defended. That the church should “equip” people “with the skills of discrimination that enable [them] to perceive and interpret the larger society (and its limitations)” (227) seems to hold as well. Johnson’s description of the challenge of developing the skills of discrimination draws on the work of Stanley Hauerwas, and I suspect that Augustine would endorse the result. But that either Augustine or Hauerwas would call the development of virtue “the church’s political task” is unlikely. Few disagree that “generosity toward those who are different” is the precondition for collegial conversations, which, conceivably, could lead to something approximating reciprocal understanding. Nonetheless, expect some defections, among Augustinians, if one marches “love, humility, hospitality, and grace” from churchyards to sites where intolerance, intimidation, and conflict usually rule and gives Augustine credit for inspiring the move (246-47).

Johnson has words for and with others who care little about Augustine's political legacy yet who object to transporting Christian virtues into the public forum. She scolds Rawlsian, secular liberals, much as Gregory does, because their faith in reason leaves "the moral duty of civility" and a concept of a public good sparsely defended (49-52). She has few kind words for reason's critics among post-Nietzscheans, whose infatuation with difference, she says, places "the claims of individuality" and the need for constant "self-revision" above the desire for harmony (126-29). Augustine, moreover, has a horrid reputation among most post-Nietzscheans, who, Johnson and Gregory concur, unfairly have taken him as late antiquity's impresario of intolerance (Gregory 2008, 299-300; Johnson 2007, 36-38).

That bad reputation is built largely on Augustine's anti-Donatist treatises and correspondence, which leave admirers as well as critics cringing, although Johnson leaves the less generous side of Augustine underdescribed and holds that he conveys "the need to be more gentle," "even if [his] conception of conversation is not quite as rich as the one we have been articulating" (Johnson 2007, 245-46). On that count, one might quibble, inasmuch as Augustine's conversations and concept of conversation do impress historians of rhetoric as rather rich. He likely learned from Ambrose of Milan how to reprimand firmly, benevolently, and effectively (Zauna 2005, 99-103). But nothing will turn Augustine into the man who propped up the religious pluralism of his time. I gather that he would have subscribed to Johnson's timely advice that we should be "careful to prevent the church from grafting into its self-understanding ways of thinking that do not allow it to be seen as a site of true common good, around which people can be united in shared purpose as a commonwealth in which justice and peace are actual possibilities" (Johnson 2007, 223-24). But, to repeat, I cannot imagine him agreeing to accompany Johnson as she crosses from the churches, where people "come together united through Christ in such a way that their differences do not become ultimate, nor their political identities decisive" to the public forum where those political identities are decisive (254).

Augustine's instructions on that count were clear. "Mark the contrasts," he said, between the terrestrial and celestial cities. The chief challenge for the celestial city on pilgrimage in time was survival in rough seas--in hoc saeculo maligno, in this wicked world (Augustine 1972, 643 and 761-62: 15.26 and 18.1). Citizens of the celestial city were not to forget that they were pilgrims whose work--as menials, magistrates, and emperors--was, in essence, grief work. The City of God was a reminder, a disorienting device for those who grew too comfortable in time, too confident in tactics aimed to improve public policy, too invested in the fate of their estates, too hopeful. Fidgeting with and fussing over inconsequentials, the concrete yet impermanent, they missed their calling. When Augustine told the faithful among his readers to "rejoice only in expectation," he was referring to their coming home to heaven (831: 18.49).³

As Gregory reminds us, Augustine's disenchantment with their impermanent places on earth was neither "total" nor "final" (Gregory 2008, 361). It is possible for interpreters of his City to stable some of his ideas--especially, the ones that I feature--and to run with others. Augustinian liberals understandably try to pry from his ontology, ecclesiology, soteriology, and pastoral counsels something that makes for a make-over of political discourse or political theology. As long as liberals admit that the "something" is not "a blueprint for life in the earthly city," to borrow Johnson's terms (Johnson 2007, 198-99), they--as she--close companionably with the Christian realists. Johnson seems sometimes to massage hopes that Augustine might help us reform political discourse and deliberations, yet, at other times, she modestly looks only to "move us a little closer to humbly and charitably engaging and reconciling . . . rather than tolerating, ignoring, or indiscriminatorily celebrating our differences" (176). Augustinian liberalism gets out of hand when, pursuing progressive justice, it enlists the late antique prelate in attempts to make civic virtues and liberal values epidemic and to accomplish its mission civilisatrice. Ian Buruma's observation--that "eventually such missions always come to grief leaving ruins

where they meant to build utopias"--sounds very Augustinian (Buruma 2003, 6), if only because, on such missions, arrogance easily overtakes benevolence.

To historians, ethicists, theologians, and political scientists interested in "applied Augustine," his unforgettable warning against arrogance may seem appropriate here as a conclusion. When the Pelagians spread the word that grace received in baptism so reconfigured Christians' desires that they might proceed from that point **unaided by grace to earn salvation unaided by grace**, Augustine answered that baptism only starts what can never be completed in time (renovatio incipit). Human infirmities remained in force (Augustine 1913, 79-80: 2.7.9). In time, the body and--presumably, by extension--the body politic were under the influence of discreditable impulses. As Gregory says, "Augustine's frequent pilgrimage imagery of the journey to our homeland," together with the idea of sin's lasting stain, can undermine an "ethics of citizenship" by imparting "the sense that the neighbor is merely a temporary vehicle for the individual's journey to eternal beatitude" (Gregory 2008, 337). Fair enough! One can so stress the viator theme in Augustine's works, his love for God, sense of sin, and eschatology to make everything else--civic virtue, friendship, and love for neighbor--seem instrumental or, worse, bumps in the road. Yet his City of God lends some support to that end. It musters battalions of examples of injustices, indifference to social justice, and general decadence, which discredit Rome's political idealists (Curbelié 2004, 411-25; Curbelié 2007, 20-24). And it devalues what political theorists and ordinary citizens had heralded as vera via, "the true way," distinguished public service, which earned political practitioners popularity and glory. For Augustine, theirs was the wrong way. Even if civic virtues were diligently practiced enroute and self-interest (privatas res) was sacrificed for the common good (pro re communi . . . contempserunt). That vera via ought not to be mistaken for piety. It was politics. Augustine's City, marking the contrasts, as noted, strives to tidy up those two categories (Augustine 1972, 204-205 and 1065-66: 5.15 and 22.22).

He was not always that tidy, but he discovered in Milan that politics and truth had gone their separate ways. He was at the emperor's Court, among the top-floor bureaucrats, an orator-for-hire, angling for a government appointment, editing and broadcasting clients' reputations, one of the best flatterers in the business, when he conceded that flattering was falsifying and that everyone around him knew as much. He denounced politics as a pack of lies, in effect, reducing praise for progress and for justice to the status of lies told to advance the clients' interests (Lepelley 1987, 112-13).

So, in 386, Augustine strayed from what colleagues in politics considered the vera via. He started down a different path and, much later, measured the distance between the two in terms that he thought corresponded with contrasts introduced by that "wisest of men [who] devoted the whole of this book [Ecclesiastes] to pointing out this vanity, obviously with the sole intention that we should long for that life which is not made up of vanity under this sun, but of verity under the sun's creator" (Augustine 1972, 899: 20.3). When cradled in those contrasts--vanity versus verity; politics versus piety--the routes they signify seem worlds apart, which Augustine--on pastoral rounds--surely knew was not the case. But he usually wrote as if they were. We, too, know the routes, politics and piety, crisscross, but downloading Augustine into realists' and liberals' endeavors to make a difference, politically, to control the traffic along those two routes and improve the conversation at intersections, is tricky. The realists' restrained hopes for progressive justice and liberals' search for a consensus or conversation that encompasses respect for difference typically take Augustine's hopes for souls as hopes for society.

Given the political disintegration around him, which the very concept of late antiquity hides from us (Ward Perkins 2006), Augustine's perspectives on the conflicts plaguing Christianity as well as the Court and empire might fall in line behind those of agonistic political theorists who, Charles Mathewes aptly puts it, "picture reality as an archipelago of alterities" (Mathewes 2007, 267), although he has Augustine heading down a different path (276-77). Still, at times, the prelate's **pessimism bulges**

from the City, as when he compares public officials to thieves (Augustine 1972, 139: 4.4). That comparison, unless the ablative absolute introducing it--remota iustitia--is read as a temporary condition rather than as an essential characteristic of both larceny and political leadership, betrays Augustine as utterly staatskeptisch (Horn 2007, 61-64; Kaufman 2007, 229-30).

Such a conclusion does not preclude his banking into turns that would put Augustine among ethicists and higher-flying social reformers of our time, and the evidence shows his seemingly sincere interests in improving the lot of the destitute, enslaved, and death-row inmates (Lepelley 2006, 213-14). Of course, his skepticism about “the state” and his social concern do not necessarily strike each other from historians’ ledgers, but they do make it difficult to get the sums right. Had Augustine been more politically transparent, his ideas could be tracked more easily. Still, it suits that untidiness remains, because, were it otherwise, applications of his thinking (and faith) to the problems posed by pluralism in democratic societies possibly would not have tested to such good results the intelligences of our four authors. The results may not pass the tests of every historical theologian, but they enrich conversation among historians, ethicists, theologians, and political scientists.

¹ The problem most often cited in studies of such tensions is that of Christian magistrates obliged to torture witnesses as well as the accused to get to the truth. Augustine counsels judges to bear with the system yet to pray for their deliverance from its more onerous and morally dubious tasks (Augustine 1972, 859-61: 19.6). Charles Mathewes discusses the tension in terms of two “ought”s: politics, Mathewes writes, purportedly channeling Augustine, is “an inescapable mode of life in which we ought to be engaged until the eschaton [with the purpose of minimizing its corrosive effects on character], but it is not one [mode of life] we ought to enjoy” (Mathewes 2007, 192). Augustine’s episcopal colleagues had little choice about engagement; Emperor Constantine created diocesan courts or “audiences,” turning bishops into magistrates. And thereafter, they were “neck deep in the treachery of human society,” says Kevin Uhalde in his insightful study of the “expectations of justice” in late antiquity (Uhalde 2007, 136-37). Kaiko Raikas thinks that the development was welcomed as an opportunity to expand episcopal jurisdiction and influence (Raikas 1997, 476-78). Claude Lepelley, however, suggests that bishops, wary of antagonizing pagans in public administration, had little interest in capitalizing on opportunities that brought pagans as litigants into their courts (Lepelley 2001, 391).

² Augustine conceives of justice as a personal virtue alongside temperance, prudence, and courage (Augustine 1972, 535: 13.21; Horn 2007, 62-63). And, as Philippe Curbelié reminds us, he did not think that, on that personal level, the virtues could be perfectly realized. The completion of justification was to be anticipated (*in spe*), not accomplished (*in re*). Much the same applied to Augustine’s hopes for social justice. On that count, Curbelié 2004, 290-91 refers to Augustine’s eschatological orientation. Paul Weithman’s version of Augustinian liberalism appears somewhat more compatible with that orientation and, I believe, with Christian realism, albeit a less “robust” liberalism than Gregory’s. Weithman 1999, 313 plumps for the formation of “habitual restraints on the desire to dominate.” Gregory 2008, 96-99 thinks this too timid. An Augustinian liberalism that cannot overturn the standard view of Augustine’s political pessimism, he insists is neither Augustinian nor sufficiently liberal. Unable to forestall such criticism, Weithman 1999, 318 nonetheless landed a blow before Gregory took him on. It is almost as if he had foreseen Gregory’s objections: “Christians must conclude that Augustinian liberalism is a politics with limited ambitions,” Weithman says, “It does not claim . . . that the mutual respect liberalism engenders comes to some fruition in a Christian love of neighbor.”

³ Charles Mathewes raises three directly relevant questions, answering the first superbly and economically, in the same sentence that asks it. “How should we inhabit authority in order best to remind ourselves that we undertake that inhabitation in fear and trembling, and to signal to others that we recognize the difference between the office we occupy and the person we are” (Mathewes 2007, 186)? The two conditions, translated into adverbs,

“tentatively” and “humbly,” capture the spirit of Augustine’s likely response to the “how to,” but Mathewes’s phrases are spot on. The second and third questions, “how a hopeful politics can be civically mobilizing, while still disconsoling political expectations” and “how more fully to inhabit” hope (241) give Augustinian liberals and Christian realists plenty of room to maneuver. Hope, after all, can be despair’s close companion and have us racing from this hopelessly wicked world into the church as sanctuary, even to heaven as a place where the promises, on which hope feeds, will be fulfilled. But hope can also “fund engagement,” as Mathewes says and “generate the sort of anger necessary for real change now” (238). Schlabach looks to favor the first, as do I, although I would not identify the church as the only or most promising place that hope can develop into compassion and ameliorative action. Dodaro, Gregory, Lovin, and Johnson seem to favor “a hopeful politics [that] can be civically mobilizing.”