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[Introduction to] Augustine's Leaders

Peter Kaufman

University of Richmond, pkaufman@richmond.edu

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AUGUSTINE'S
LEADERS

Peter Iver Kaufman

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Introduction

THE CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF Aurelius Augustine, bishop of Hippo in North Africa from the late 390s to 430, has never been questioned, to my knowledge, although questions about the character of his contributions to religious as well as political thought and practice have inspired lively conversations. In her recent study of late medieval images of monastic identity, historian Anik Laferrière at Oxford gets it right: “Augustine has functioned as the archetypal Christian in various settings,” yet his deployments or placements “reveal much more about the priorities of those theologians” who refer and defer to him than about his interests and predicaments during his tenure.¹

Michael Bruno’s recent, useful expositions of relatively modern interpretations of what he calls political Augustinianism suggest that the desire to establish “a common ethic” and to “ground social relationships”—a desire “central in political and ethical theory”—makes Augustine increasingly influential.² Although Augustine’s colleague and first biographer, Bishop Possidius of Calama, intimated that his subject only grudgingly involved himself in the political life of his see and provinces, Numidia and Proconsular Africa, as Eva Elm reminds us (*nur ungern*), nearly all the the historians and ethicists Bruno interrogates believe Augustine’s legacy ought to inspire “genuine engagement” with political initiatives.³ It should become clear here, as it was to Bruno, that I, along with a few others, dissent

1. Laferrière, “Augustinian Heart,” 492.

2. Bruno, *Political Augustinianism*, 276.

3. Compare Elm, *Die Macht der Weisheit*, 134, with the exposition in Bruno, *Political Augustinianism*, 207–8, which, in this instance, concentrates on Charles Mathewes’ *Theology of Public Life*, but which corresponds with what his survey’s chapter, “Recovering Augustine’s Vision,” claims for Eric Gregory’s *Politics and the Order of Love* and Robert Dodaro’s *Christ and the Just Society*.

from the appropriations or adaptations of Augustine that shuffle passages from his work into an endorsement of some wished-for modern merger of religious piety and politics.⁴ But if Augustine had been more skeptical about the prospects for meaningful political change than those other appropriators suspect, critical questions remain for historians who find their interpretations implausible. What did Augustine see as the proper roles for political and religious leaders of his time? And inasmuch as Augustine explicitly repudiated Cicero's conclusion that justice was the aim and essence of statecraft and declared the opposite, that a lack of genuine justice (*vera justitia*) was the distinctive feature of all secular governments, what did Augustine expect from emperors and other statesmen?⁵ Finally, given his understanding of the church as *permixta*, as an institution that could never be rid of the wicked in this wicked world, what was Augustine's hope for episcopal and pastoral leadership?⁶ The chapters that follow attempt to answer these questions.

Such questions might have been raised differently had Augustine continued on the career path that led him from Africa to Rome, then Milan, where he found the western emperor's Court and became acquainted with the imposing Milanese bishop, Ambrose. Augustine envied him his friends. He had come to find clients and patrons among the affluent and influential in the circles where Ambrose was respected.⁷ Yet he soon reconsidered; the beggars of Milan seemed happier than ambitious courtiers. He learned that orators at Court with his gifts failed to advance, unless they became adept at dissembling. Augustine was expected to stretch the truth. He was hired to invent or inflate the virtues of statesmen in eulogies delivered before those who knew he was exaggerating or lying. Political society, sooner rather than later, if we may trust the account he submitted ten years after—but certainly, later—appeared to be littered with lies and driven by lust. Courtiers coveted gold and prized power over honor. Augustine long remembered the hypocrisy and bribery in Rome and Milan. He also remembered the difficulties he had experienced giving up the corrupt and ultimately inconsequential (*nugae nugarum*) political play in which he once yearned to find

4. Kaufman, "Augustine's Dystopia," and Kaufman, "Depositio Diademate" were published after Bruno completed his presentation of my position in his *Political Augustinianism*, 160–64 and 230–42.

5. See Horn, "Politische Gerechtigkeit," 61, and Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 2.21.

6. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 8.49: *in hoc saeculo maligno*.

7. Augustine, *Confessiones* 6.3,3.

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a part.⁸ But once he surrendered his ambition, he and Alypius, his close friend from Africa, recrossed the Mediterranean. Within years, they were bishops. The religious and political crises in Africa they faced from the late 390s to their deaths in 430 shaped challenges that differed from those that tested Ambrose. And the challenges, of course, framed Augustine's sense of the hazards, limits, and opportunities associated with emperors', bishops', pastors', and statesmen's leadership.⁹

Arriving in Africa, Augustine and Alypius found Christianity there, as they had left it, divided. Donatist Christians, whom we will often meet in this study, outnumbered their Catholic Christian rivals, with whom the two soon affiliated. Augustine became their leading spokesman shortly after his ordination. He preferred to discuss the disunity and his differences with Donatist bishops away from crowds.¹⁰ Perhaps he worried that the laity would find Donatists' fears about contamination more compelling than his conviction that the Christians' churches should become schools for sinners. Augustine—with some exaggeration, no doubt—charged that his rivals wanted to purge congregations of the improperly disposed and that they equated propriety with prelates' willingness to maintain the schism that originated in the early fourth century. Donatists thought they were the progeny of martyrs (*filius martyrum*), because they and their predecessors suffered for having seceded from bishops who allegedly had conspired with persecutors. The secessionists in Augustine's time justified their decision to remain apart and defiant by referring to the refusal of their rivals to repudiate those supposedly sinister church officials.¹¹

After 410, Augustine confronted another, yet much smaller, company of Christians who further complicated efforts to achieve a unified Christian response to African paganism. In that controversy, his position also seemed to put him at a disadvantage in appealing to crowds, insofar as ordinary Christians counted on their efforts to improve morally to please their God and earn salvation. Pelagian theorists catered to such expectations. They relied on a vision reported in the New Testament's final book of revelations to predict optimistically that heaven was ready to accommodate an infinite

8. *Ibid.*, 6.6,9; 6.10,16; 8.1,2; and 8.11,26.

9. Elm, *Die Macht der Weisheit*, 121.

10. Augustine, epistle 49.1. For Augustine's most conspicuous failure at crowd control, which was unrelated to the Donatist controversy, see Lakhilif, "Saint Augustin et l'incident de 411," 1102–4.

11. *Actes de la conférence* 3.116.

number of the morally upright. At first, Augustine's counter would have seemed counterintuitive. He argued that morality did not guarantee entry and that God's grace would determine which few from the terrestrial city would pass to the celestial.¹²

Of course, he developed his arguments, hoping to make them appear reasonable as well as biblical. Donatist and Pelagian adversaries accused him of inconsistency, yet he claimed that only fools would deny him the right to make progress in his understanding and exposition of the faith.¹³ Still, I learned that little changed in Augustine's views about leadership after he became bishop. What follows accounts for the few subtle changes—notably, Pelagians' influence on how he conceived of pastoral leadership—yet the subject of this book seemed best served by adopting a topical rather than a chronological approach. That risked repetition, inasmuch as the Donatist controversy persisted, gave his call for bishops' and pastors' leadership urgency and shape, and inspired his appreciation for emperors' and other statesmen's leadership. What follows resists the temptation to reintroduce in each chapter the origin and outcomes of the Donatists' secession, yet some of their grievances and of Augustine's responses have been strategically placed wherever it seemed appropriate.

The subject also calls for some repetition, inasmuch as it would have been remiss to overlook Augustine's sense that emperors' humility and compassion were assets pastors could use to encourage ordinary parishioners, because the chapter on pastoral leadership followed the one that discussed Emperor Theodosius. Indeed, humility was a constant feature in Augustine's commendations. It molded his judgment about leadership at Court, in the provinces, and in the churches. It kept him from importuning statesmen to evangelize political culture and the social order—as did his sensitivity to civic corruptibility. Self-interest was pervasive. Clusters of civic leaders resembled dens of thieves. The politics of empire was piracy on a grand scale.¹⁴ When Luke Bretherton presumes to glance at government through Augustine's eyes, he sees political practices—and every fellowship derived therefrom—“based on a false ordering of loves.” Yet the bishop would not likely have been consoled by his confidence that the stakes were not nearly as high for Christians as they had been for those pagan political

12. For a discussion of relevant texts, comparing Rev 7:9 with Matt 7:14, see Salamito, *Les virtuoses et la multitude*, 275–76, and the third chapter that follows here.

13. Augustine, *De dono perseverentiae* 12.30.

14. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 4.4.

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theorists who believed that the polis was the principal context for human fulfillment.¹⁵

It should become increasingly clear as this study proceeds that to appraise Augustine's leadership and to sift his appraisals of and advice for religious and political leaders require us repeatedly to confront the difficulties he had trying to unify the church in Africa and to lay the foundations for doctrinal consensus. His sermons, treatises, and correspondence will enable us tenably to contextualize what he professed to be his irenic intent, his general pessimism about political culture, and his widely acknowledged polemical agility. His skills were considerable. Augustine was a trained, respected wordsmith before he disavowed his political ambitions, that is, before he traded his desire to serve the government and himself for a longing to be of use to his church and faith. He had a jingo journalist's nose for what made new news and could turn a single assault on a Catholic Christian bishop into a *cause célèbre*. He sensationalized Donatists' belligerence and made it seem as if most of his secessionist opponents were complicit with terrorists.¹⁶

Pelagian theorists probably figured they had an advantage, foregrounding humanity's apparent abilities to overcome most temptations and the obvious innocence of infants whom Augustine and his allies insisted on baptizing. Pelagians might have wagered that the emphasis their critics placed on human frailty from the cradle to the grave would come across as morbid and mournful (*funesta*) but were outmaneuvered when Augustine added accounts of evils that innocents suffered—and that touched nearly all families in an age of high infant mortality—to the passages from sacred literature lamenting much the same and making Pelagians seem recklessly overconfident.¹⁷ Pelagius, Augustine admitted, was adept at talking his way around the absurdly upbeat statements about self-reliance or sinlessness he and his followers had written; Pelagius was an artful dodger who gave the impression of liking his chances of making the implausible seem reasonable and religious. Augustine plundered Pelagian treatises for statements that, rhetorically rearranged and garnished, could be made to sound outrageous and heretical.¹⁸

15. Bretherton, *Resurrecting Democracy*, 404 n. 74.

16. Augustine, *Contra Cresconium* 3.43,47, and Augustine, epistle 185.27.

17. Augustine, *Contra Julianum opus imperfectum* 3.61, citing Exod 20:5.

18. Augustine, *De gestis Pelagii* 2–4.

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Both political optimism and Pelagian optimism were, to his mind, wholly inappropriate and eminently refutable. Augustine intimated that government and church leaders were correct to conduct their business uncomplaining, but he groused about what Charles Mathewes, purporting to channel the bishop's indignation, describes as "the whole expanse of the miserable necessities of human society." That Augustine would have leaders lead without whining about their chores should not lead us to suspect that he would have them disregard drawbacks. They should know, as he did, that the social order over which they presided was "a fragile thing, always vexed by miscommunication, inattention, and outright malfeasance" (Mathewes, again) and that their "tragic vocation" was to make time in time tolerable.¹⁹

Yet, in what follows, we will see that Augustine wanted something more from his emperors (but would find it in only one), bishops, pastors, and statesmen. He wanted trust in God's sovereignty and divine grace, exemplary humility, compassion, prudence, drams of pessimism about the chances of perfecting righteousness in this world, but a brand of optimism that, he thought, was always in season—optimism about the celestial fate of the faithful.

This is a study and a story of those expectations and of Augustine's frustrations.

19. Mathewes, *Republic of Grace*, 176–77.