

2012

Augustine's Dystopia

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Recommended Citation

Kaufman, Peter Iver. "Augustine's *Dystopia*." In *Augustine's City of God: A Critical Guide*, 55-74. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

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*Augustine's dystopia**Peter Iver Kaufman*

I BAD NEWS

The news from North Africa was bad. The infection had spread long before Augustine proffered a diagnosis and before Rome's capitulations along the empire's borders – before Emperor Honorius had been chased from Rome and the city sacked in 410. Indeed, humanity had been infected even before those multiple enslavements and emancipations reported in the Hebrews' sacred texts, which had become sacred as well for Christians. The apostle Paul's take on the disobedience and disgrace recorded in the first chapters of Genesis (Rom. 5:12) was instrumental in convincing Augustine that humanity's parents had sinned so gravely that all their children lived wretchedly – and, for shame, there could be no returning to the *status quo ante*. Therapies, plausibly, but no complete cures, no way out from the sins and suffering in time (*civ. Dei* 22.24). Envy inexorably led to violence from the time Cain murdered Abel into the fifth century, and violence littered the shrinking empire with conflicts' unburied casualties (*civ. Dei* 1.2). Nature was far from neutral. Storms, earthquakes, rabid animals took a terrible toll. Lives were lost or wrecked. The jeopardy afflicted all with anxiety. Yet all were villains as well as victims. Scratch the ostensibly blameless, and one finds hatred, escalating ambition, and pride, with flattery, adultery, and other forms of deceit, along with cruelty and treachery – in intent and often enough in act as well (*civ. Dei* 22.22).

Christianity and the empire's political culture had become partners nearly a century before Augustine started writing *City of God*. Although a few Christians thought – and others now think – piety and politics mismatched, many of the faithful in the fourth and early fifth centuries trusted that the partnership between their relatively new religion and old Rome would yield tremendous benefits for both. Augustine conceived some good coming from the coupling – especially when its more extreme, puritanical critics in Africa turned militant – yet he was convinced that

Christianity could not redeem terrestrial cities. Life in time was a Gulag or – in current coin – a Gitmo, a detention camp. Christians were fortunate to be passing through to a better place, yet their here and now would always be a dreadfully sad place and time. “The human race’s present condition is a punishment” for its parents’ sin – for and among the sins that followed (*civ. Dei* 22.24). All are oppressed; their shared miseries defy description, Augustine lamented, while describing many that came to mind (*civ. Dei* 22.22).¹

Yet the news from North Africa was not all bad. The steadfastly faithful could look forward to the celestial city as they passed through their terrestrial city as pilgrims, Augustine explained, and, looking around, they would also discover that this world was loaded with “consolations.” Humans were alive, rational, creative, and procreative. *Non in eo tamen penitus extincta est*: a spark within them, an image of God flickering in their reason, had not been entirely doused by the environing evil (*civ. Dei* 22.24). And even their material or corporeal presence – their intricate networks of arteries, veins, and organs – impressed, as did their inventiveness. Augustine’s *City of God*, one might say, finds humanity punching well beyond its weight. The text inventories the results that range from culinary cleverness, advances in navigation, and healthcare improvements to greater efficiency in waging wars. By shuttling between hygiene and combat, vocations in which humans had become especially effective – respectively, preserving and terminating life – Augustine seems mischievous. Arguably, he was apprehensive rather than altogether appreciative, particularly about humanity’s belligerence, but the important point here is that he did identify a number of *damnatorum solacià*, consolations for those condemned to live in time – for a time. They were, above all, “blessings” or gifts from God and only secondarily the outcomes of human industry (*civ. Dei* 22.24). Appeals to prelates, saints, and relics have no prompt payoff, for example, but the faithful now pray for – and should be consoled by – benefits they would have when this wicked world’s evil no longer played havoc with the good (*civ. Dei* 22.22).

Among the “blessings” and “consolations” in time, God deposited virtues, though only faith and properly oriented hope gave pilgrims’ virtues traction in the terrestrial city. But even with that traction, the challenges of cohabitation seemed to unsettle “children of the promise and of the kingdom.” Augustine appeared to be discouraged by the way some of those “children” were meeting the challenge of living as pilgrims among

¹ Tornau 2006: 152.

pagans. Early in his pontificate, he had been asked to sift several related difficulties. Most commercial transactions depended, in part, on oaths. Were Christians complicit in idolatry when they witnessed and benefited from infidels swearing to their gods to uphold the bargains they made? Did Christians at public baths, where their idolatrous neighbors burned incense during feast days, inhale idolatry with the polluted air after those neighbors were long gone? No, Augustine replied, humorlessly dispelling exaggerated fears of contamination. Relying in business transactions on an idolater's oaths did not make Christians idolaters; smoke from pagans' sacrifices could not corrupt Christians, who, on other occasions, applauded the destruction of infidels' idols and thus made their abhorrence of idolatry clear. The faithful need not withhold their credit; they need not hold their breath (*ep.* 47.2–3). True, to some extent, one could distance oneself from amoral and immoral fellow travelers and from the temptation to fall in with (and to fall with) them – nonetheless, the pilgrims must travel through time with unpleasant company and mark time until their emancipation and everlasting felicity in the celestial city (*civ. Dei* 22.23).

As pastor, Augustine tried to resolve problems posed by traveling through time in mixed company. Business and bathing raised questions for ordinary Christians, yet by far the prickliest problems their prelates faced related to leadership. Should their church's lay leaders or, for that matter, its bishops be ruthless policing this wicked world? Could they coerce others, ostracize or incarcerate, *ut non dormiat disciplina*, "to keep discipline from nodding off" and to prevent the spread of evil? (*s.* 164.11). Might influential Christians accept public office, negotiate hairpin turns around the familiar obstacles to achieving just results in the late Roman empire (corruptible colleagues and corrupt courts), and punish offenders with sufficient severity to deter subsequent offenses while remaining faithful to their religion's principles? Surely those principles would not sanction political paralysis! Consolations could be found, *City of God* suggests, if Christian magistrates badger themselves before bludgeoning fellow citizens. For, with God's help, those magistrates, much as ordinary Christians, can be somewhat – yet never completely – successful struggling against "forces of darkness to which they were born subject," forces that infected and enfeebled them (*civ. Dei* 22.22). So the bad news holds, and although any Christian appointed to a position of authority *in hoc saeculo maligno*, "in this wicked world" (*civ. Dei* 18.49), can make a difference, that difference amounts to little more than damage control in dystopia.

2 DYSTOPIA?

By discussing several of the issues that complicated the Christian's cohabitation and political participation in "this wicked world," as Augustine saw them, the remainder of this contribution will garrison the ground we have gained collecting the bad news he conveyed in his *City*. We shall inquire whether the assorted "consolations" he enumerated compensated for the corruption. And we shall consider one reason he might have had for composing his tome as a massive disorienting device. Of course, certainty about authorial intent is impossible to pocket, yet one can make the case that Augustine dropped *City of God* into the post-410 conversation about empires, conquest, glory, and cupidity to put such ephemera in perspective. Might he have wanted to give pause to colleagues who too readily acquiesced in the hot pursuit of trifles in their terrestrial cities? Before attempting to answer, we ought to ask if "dystopia" is the right term to characterize Augustine's city where trifles and the desire to possess them dominated the practice of politics – a city of gaud – or, to be precise, to characterize his depictions of his terribly flawed and "wicked world."

Readers familiar with dystopian fiction will likely conjure up terrifyingly oppressive societies. To take the best examples of the worst conditions: Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, George Orwell's *1984*, and Anatole France's *Penguin Island* offer few, if any, consolations as they describe with memorable flourishes the wretched societies their protagonists protest. Yet the adjective "dystopian" has also been applied to a particular environmental or economic imbalance that has not yet tipped an entire society into chaos or tyranny. If, let's say, the principal architects or overseers of a society's crime-fighting apparatus deliberately misinform the law-abiding and perpetuate their fear of the lawless solely to justify a policing agency's budget or its very being, the situation or predicament could be called dystopian. Or, to cite cinema's frightening tribute to our justifications for overkill, "Dr Strangelove," recall General Turgidson's fondness for unanswerable first-strike capabilities and his flirtation with disaster.

By contrast, if one places *City of God's* inventory of the city of gaud's various "consolations" alongside Augustine's concessions that Christians so inclined could participate in public life, this wicked world seems only mildly dystopian. And, arguably, Augustine's indomitable rectitude, breaking into the text's passages on greed, envy, lust, and larceny, made this world look much more wicked than it usually seemed to him. Perhaps, yet consider the alternative: after surveying the political cultures of the ancient Near East,

republican and imperial Rome, and the new, improved, yet relatively diminished Christian empire, the *City* concludes with all that bad news simply because “this wicked world” looked to Augustine to be utterly, irredeemably dysfunctional and dystopian.

One short chapter can be taken to support both of these alternatives. It recycles the then familiar story of a pirate who had been captured by Alexander the Great. When the captive was scolded for terrorizing travelers, he explained he had only done what the great Alexander was doing. When done with one vessel, it was called piracy, pirates and their captains were called rogues, and no effort was spared to hunt them down. When fleets or armies terrorized settled populations as well as travelers, the devastation was dignified – called conquest – and the captain of it all called “great” (*civ. Dei* 4.4). The ablative absolute, *remota iustitia*, in the story’s preamble is critical. The phrase can be translated either “once justice is removed” or “remote from justice.” So Augustine could have been asking hyperbolically, “once [or when] justice is removed, what are kingdoms but great bands of robbers” or, descriptively, “remote from justice, what are kingdoms are but great bands of robbers?” If the removal of justice had been hypothetical and hyperbolic or, one could say, rhetorical, Augustine could have been warning a sickly, profligate society of a coronary-to-come, if it did not mend its ways. If the prevailing injustices were temporary, stiffening resistance and strenuous criticism might just bring society back from the brink. Customs were not hopelessly corrupt; government was not buccaneering by other means. But if *remota iustitia* was an inescapable characteristic of political leadership as well as larceny, what passed for justice in the city of gaud, this terrestrial city, would appear to be vastly overrated. Matters were doomed to proceed from bad to worse. After Adam and Eve fell from grace, humans lost too much altitude to clear the obstacles to good government that their own infected selves and histories placed in their way.²

Corruption was common; behind it, cupidity. A promising start to end both had been made in Jerusalem with Jesus’ preaching repentance. Faith was then so “fired up” that many of the converted sold what they possessed, gave the proceeds to the poor, and prepared to endure the enmity of the unconverted as well as destitution. Augustine, with help from the biblical narrative, remembers the earliest Christians’ enthusiasm that way (*civ. Dei* 18.54) and defies Christian readers, dispossessed by invading Goths and Vandals more than three centuries after that promising start, to consider their material losses as spiritual gains. One could stretch his recollection and

² Horn 2007: 61–64; Kaufman 2007: 229–30.

argue that his *City* also urged its readers who had yet lost little to become less attached to what they had, less eager for more, and less corrupt in their quest for increase. Fair enough, yet a comparison is in order, a comparison between Augustine and the moralist whose lessons from Rome's humiliation fueled a more ferocious indictment of the Romans' corruption and greed, Salvian of Marseilles.

Salvian registered his complaints several decades after Augustine completed *City of God*. Corrupt officials were then shamelessly auctioning off their influence. The bidders were complicit, Salvian said, yet he seemed most concerned with corruption's casualties, commoners who were over-taxed to pay for the elite's excesses.³ Had Augustine lived to read Salvian's screed, however, he might have called it something of an understatement. For Augustine was well acquainted with the predatory character of public life. Before conscience and Christianity thwarted his maneuvering for political preferment, he was not above indulging in fraud and flattery to get results.⁴ But in Milan, in the mid 380s, Augustine decided to abandon his promising political career and thereafter, on occasion, characterized political practice as a set of snares. He gently mocked correspondents who could not (or would not) see it as such. Yet the tone of his *City's* assessment is different. That tome sometimes displays Salvian's distemper. It recalls how impressively – and for centuries – moral philosophers reprimanded the greedy. The philosophers-turned-critics avoided language that did not invite immediate comprehension; that is, they thundered or “pealed” as prophets, specifying concrete abuses instead of formulating abstract ideas that few could apply to everyday choices (*civ. Dei* 2.19). But little good that did, Augustine pointed out; Christians were destined to pass through their fifth century harassed and scandalized by corrupt government officials and by the gusting corruption in their churches.

Yet did he wink at corruption or – worse – willingly participate, as some scholars allege?⁵ One episode in 411 has been regularly rehearsed to support that allegation. It began with Valerius Pinianus' visit to Hippo. Pinianus, a distinguished philanthropist, was a prize for any parish, and, if an irritable correspondent's accusations can be trusted, Augustine schemed with several parishioners to detain and ordain their guest. Pinianus' plans did not include a long stay; still, he must have known that abductions of prominent persons were not unprecedented, that, twenty years earlier, Augustine was detained and ordained, to good effect, one could argue, although his assets

³ Salvian 1930: 4.4.4–6. ⁴ Lepelley 1987: 99–117.

⁵ MacMullen 1990: 152–53; Lancel 2002: 313; Lepelley 2006: 205–6.

were different from those Pinianus would have delivered. As for the locals' scheming, Augustine insisted that he neither coached them nor connived with them. But he did excuse them after suggesting he helped their prey get away. True, his excuse for the locals seems lame; they were not after money, he said, but wanted to keep Pinianus where his contempt for wealth and his generosity would inspire others. Was Augustine being disingenuous, or should his reply be read as evidence of his embarrassment? Probably he was resigned to his prodigiously opportunistic parishioners' desires for a wind-fall – and possibly he was covering for it; he looks to have been covering up his embarrassment, not his complicity (*ep.* 126).

Augustine's resignation to corruption rather than his approval of it appears to have influenced his comments on influence peddling in the government's courts. The clerks had their palms up, he noticed, but he was more outraged by the courts' higher authorities who accepted bribes and by the attorneys who paid them. The practice of paying clerks to expedite a case's progress through the courts looked less reprehensible. Corruptible clerks were cogs in a dystopian system. Bribing (or tipping) them was less repulsive than paying for perjury, which, Augustine reported, usually went undetected. He deplored the "culture" in provincial, municipal, and manorial courts that encouraged malicious litigants with ample resources to pour buckets of trouble over their less well-connected and under-funded neighbors. He stridently objected to what he considered to be the more monstrous abuses of power, letting lesser offenses pass with a slap, but not with a shrug. He loathed exploitation yet let corrupt clerks follow custom, urging them graciously to share their ill-gotten gain with the poor (*ep.* 153.10, 153.24–26).

Still, for all their imperfections, the courts played a crucial part in maintaining some semblance of order. What there was of peace on earth would disintegrate without courts, clerks, and magistrates. *City of God* concedes as much. "Peace possessed in faith" – and in anticipation of everlasting peace – Augustine explained, consoled citizens of the celestial city during its pilgrimage in time (*civ. Dei* 19.17). Gone from a world without secular laws and courts – hence, without peace – were the props that braced Christians' hopes for their wholly and holy alternative future. And the courts and governments in this wicked world, staggeringly flawed as they were, still helped the pilgrim citizens of the celestial city cope with the wretchedness of their city of gaud. Bishops helped as well, of course, and their assistance will concern us soon, yet what is important here is that Augustine was reluctant to intervene and agitate for government reforms. He once tried but was humiliated (*s.* 302.17). He seems to have preferred to

refer his and parishioners' complaints about corruption to municipal ombudsmen, people's "defenders," who were authorized by law to protect the powerless from the powerful and predatory. As local notables, "defenders" were unlikely to be cold-shouldered by the influential, their social equals. Ombudsmen's integrity and ingenuity (*sollertia*), therefore, gave victims a route toward a remedy (*ep.* 22*.3–4). Still Augustine sees no safety in the streets. Enemies are everywhere. "This mortal condition" is an ordeal; the larger the city, the more crime, contention, lawsuits, and corruption. And whenever some serenity is achieved, the serene are still troubled by thoughts of renewed distress around the next turn (*civ. Dei* 19.5).

Hence, to persevere was to live in fear that the sinful and irrational within will occasionally, if not often, break the restraints that citizens and their societies had devised. *City of God* acknowledges that humans are right to worry about themselves – and not just about others. Furthermore, when the pilgrim citizens of the celestial city worry about others, they should also try to relieve others' distress. They are righteous as well as right, that is, to experience "a serene fear," the "fear that love has." It is both serene and loving because resignation to the inevitability of corruption does not preclude compassion. The apathy Augustine deplored was a wholly inappropriate response to corruption; that and the exploitation of the poor struck him as "disturbance worthy," according to Nicholas Wolterstorff, although many of the bishop's admirers have turned his disturbance into something progressive and astonishingly "populist."⁶

Claude Lepelley is among the more cautious, on this count. He has Augustine campaigning for tenants' rights, yet without directly (and recklessly) challenging socio-economic structures that favored proprietors, permitted forms of fraud and slavery, and ensured Africa would always have an exploitable underclass. But Lepelley's man stood up to scurrilous landlords and slave traders. Jean-Marie Salamito's Augustine is also an aggressive advocate of "the downtrodden" whose goodwill and *plébésisme* never seemed to congeal into a program for social reform. Yet Salamito contrasts his protagonist with Pelagians and stipulates the former's zero tolerance for the latter's – and for all elites' – arrogance. Finally, Eric Gregory's reconstruction of Augustine's "morally robust civic liberalism" argues that it "democratizes and publicizes love through a theological (and political) populism."⁷ Somewhat surprisingly, the interpreters in this small stampede to make Augustine an ardent social reformer either forget or dismiss (as fraying

⁶ Wolterstorff 2008: 194–98.

⁷ Lepelley 2006: 211–13; Salamito 2005: 265, 296–98; Gregory 2008: 355.

pessimism) the bad news from North Africa which introduced this paper. They forget or question the seriousness of Augustine's warnings that practicing politics supersized sin. His analysis was unlike that of Lord Acton. For the bishop, power does not corrupt. Corruption came before power. The desire to acquire power and to use it – even to reform one's dystopian surrounds – amplifies corruption. So Augustine thought it better to “bring vice indoors,” as John Parrish puts it, to “internalize the conceived location of moral action” without battling – and possibly undermining – entrenched social custom and popular political rituals.⁸

Social customs, political practice – which includes strategic bullying – and rituals celebrating order while attempting to generate solidarity generally kept the peace which, as we noted, made it possible for pilgrims to cope with their terrestrial travail and to hope for their celestial rewards. But *City of God* stresses the greater importance of the peace pious pilgrims endeavor to win within. Souls must care for, yet bridle their bodies, much as all horsemen groom, ride, and restrain their mounts (*civ. Dei* 19.3). Reason must govern the vices, and both soul and reason – to be comprehensively effective – must subject themselves to God (*civ. Dei* 19.25). Betrayed by their rebellious bodies – a betrayal they endure, Augustine proposed, as fitting punishment for their first parents' disobedience or rebellion – they fail, and the failures account for this wicked world's wickedness and inefficiencies – and for the fact that whatever peace is achieved is partial, provisional, and far less than what the righteous crave. Still, a modicum of equanimity is available to the faithful, should they practice “Christian self-control” in a world where contention and corruption rule.⁹

Evidence suggests that the apostle Paul believed that extra effort at such self-control paid personal – if not social and political – dividends. But he also specified that their purchasing power, so to speak, was limited. The faithful would remain, in some measure, slaves to sin. Their insensitivity to neighbors' interests would be particularly problematic for a new religion that preached compassion. The apostle instructed that when Christians quarreled among each other they ought to avoid airing grievances in government courts. Centuries later, Augustine said so as well (*en. Ps.* 118.24.3). By then, Christians possessed their own courts. Bishops were meant to preside. Augustine obliged – but unenthusiastically. He might have approved on the grounds that the church courts or “audiences,” as they were called, which Emperor Constantine decreed into existence in 318 to

⁸ Parrish 2007: 95. ⁹ Tornau 2006: 337–38.

give Christians the fair hearing they were unlikely to get before pagan judges, had done precisely what was intended. Augustine might also have approved the bishops' new roles, supposing that the clerical magistrates might be less tempted to sell verdicts. But he knew better and took a different tack. He confided that church courts invited belligerence into the bishops' chambers and put the prelates in a terribly delicate position. Either they must alienate one parishioner by finding in favor of another or, reckoning reconciliation more important than justly assessing reparations, they must turn a blind eye to the truth; they must slight rather than sift certain complainants' claims (*en. Ps.* 25.2.13). "Audiences," moreover, seemed to have turned bishops into consultants or, as Augustine pejoratively insinuated, into co-conspirators. He was appalled to learn from having been asked that parishioners, trusting their bishops had discovered while arbitrating how to distinguish the provable from the preposterous, approached them for advice on how to outfox adversaries and influence other justices (s. 137.4).

He had different things to teach parishioners. He was uninterested in giving them an edge in litigation. The biblical passages that studded his sermons had everything to do with love and little to say about lawsuits, save that they brought shame on all participants and forfeited the higher ground that Christianity staked in its sacred texts. Nonetheless, custom required him to convene his court, to listen to the faithful complain about their coreligionists, and to referee. He recoiled from it all. His audience was an unwelcome, dystopian drip into his career.

3 CAREERS

But Augustine had no alternative. He had to preside and arbitrate, though we catch a glimpse of what might have been, had he been able to reinvent procedures for arbitration. We see him trying to reach an out-of-court settlement when a local landlord accosted one of his tenants. That tenant, Faventius, claimed sanctuary, the protection of the church, for thirty days to put his affairs in order before answering the summons to a provincial court. The landlord was impatient and had a constable snatch Faventius from sanctuary, at which point Augustine intervened. The bishop did not suggest a change of venue. In his version of the tale – the only one we have – he presumed that resolution and reconciliation would have been forthcoming, had Faventius been permitted to remain in sanctuary for the month allowed in such instances and had he – Augustine – undertaken a form of shuttle diplomacy (*ep.* 115). A chapter of his *City* written long afterward may give us

a clue to what he might have said to the litigants. Those passages amount to a brief against the acquisitive individualism which he blamed for most of the contention in this wicked world. People who invest their energy and egos accumulating or protecting property risk “vanishing into vanity,” he said, quoting what passed in sacred literature as the Wisdom of Solomon. Solomon’s statements offered a panoramic view of the city of gaud while categorically declaring that, given “the calamities and errors of this life . . . nothing [is] solid and nothing . . . remains stable” (*civ. Dei* 20.13). May we surmise that Augustine’s out-of-court negotiations would have contained a dollop of criticism of both litigants, criticism that fit comfortably in the slipstream of Solomon’s celebrity and counsel?

Elsewhere in *City of God*, Solomon nudged Augustine to remind Christians plotting their careers as pilgrims that their preeminent concern should be the celestial city, which was held together by passion – by suffering – not by prudence or jurisprudence. Solomon was undeniably shrewd – an exemplary, incorruptible judge – although his tenure as king “ended badly.” The Christian church respected his wisdom yet was not united to him as it was to Jesus Christ, Augustine confirmed, emphasizing that such unity was accomplished by taking the savior’s suffering and sacrifice as the church’s legacy and by recycling both in its sacrament of solidarity and in pilgrims’ self-effacement, respectively (*civ. Dei* 17.20). A pilgrim’s soul burns as a sacrifice with a love for God, and that fire consumes desires for this world’s rewards (*civ. Dei* 10.6). Laws and courts do not inspire pilgrims’ passion (“fire”) and discipline as infallibly as the examples of their savior’s selflessness. Justice – aimed at or administered – does not show that fire and discipline as dramatically as acts of mercy that “pay forward” God’s love for the celestial city in its citizens’ compassion, a sacrifice that *City of God* rates as most agreeable to God (*civ. Dei* 20.24). But careers as Christians and pilgrims begin with contrition, which is kindled by prayer and by what Luigi Alici describes as “a spiritual reconnaissance” or self-inventory (*autoriconoscimento spirituale*), introspection which restructures and stabilizes desire. The result, a desire to share the celestial city as well as God’s love with other pilgrims, fortifies faith, enabling the faithful resourcefully to encounter the “calamities and errors of this life” – the many uncertainties of history.¹⁰

Calamities carpeted life *in saeculo maligno* and challenged agile officials to maintain order. Laws, courts, and constables, as noted, served that purpose, but, notably, when Augustine protested slave traffickers who had kidnapped

¹⁰ Alici 1994: 87–90.

North Africans and sold them on the Mediterranean's other shores, he forwarded his complaints to fellow prelates, not to emperors, governors, and municipal or manorial magistrates (*ep.* 10*.2). He does not appear to have been suggesting that bishops brew and implement remedies in their audiences or that they organize opposition to slavery. Perhaps he thought slavery, much as corruption, was as ineradicable as the lust to dominate. Slavery joined court corruption, domination, and the fascination with the garish or gaudy as symptoms of the sin within everyone. Be that as it may, historians who consider Augustine a judicial activist, who was looking to expand the jurisdiction of the church's courts, have gotten him wrong. True, he inquired about the status of slaves as if he were preparing to tackle related issues in his audience. (Could parents sell their children into perpetual servitude? Was a child of a free woman and a slave free?) But there is no proof that his inquiries constituted the early stages of a campaign to emancipate slaves. He simply seems to have been scratching for information that would make him a more knowledgeable umpire (*ep.* 24*): "we must endure hearing litigants' petitions and must learn this world's laws affecting the temporal conditions of persons." Augustine may have wanted to rid his world of slavery, yet Clifford Ando is surely right to conclude that the courts gave him little reason to think that, in chambers, any morally questionable customs could be changed, and he rejected the conceit that laws and courts would transform a community (or a church) into "the supreme arena for the exercise of human virtue." Ando adds that Augustine's rejection "could not be more stark."¹¹

Yet there was work for magistrates in Augustine's *City*. Their challenge, as we learned, was damage control, although, given the nature of government in a fallen world, efforts at damage control ordinarily involved doing damage. Torture, for instance, often was used to get to the truth; witnesses and accusers were not spared. *City of God* refers to it as "a miserable necessity," a reference that amounts to a grudging endorsement of torture, which accompanies advice to Christians whose careers as justices implicated them in the brutality and suggested to onlookers that faith had not put down roots in their characters. Augustine told magistrates to fret about the inconsistency between their piety and their practice and to pray for deliverance from their distress (*civ. Dei* 19.6). "Deliverance," in this application, did not mean early retirement. Christian magistrates were told to pray for sufficient distance from their unpleasant obligations, for distance that

¹¹ Compare Ando 2006: 143–44, Lepelley 2001: 365–66, and Kaufman 2003 with Raikas 1997: 476–78, Uhalde 2007: 66–67, and Kuhn 2007: 103–4.

delivered some peace of mind to the prayerful who performed disagreeable duties ("necessities") to ensure a modicum of peace "in this wicked world" (*civ. Dei* 18.49).

Prayer itself was a deliverance of sorts. It lifted prayerful pious magistrates' hearts above "miserable necessities." To abridge John Milbank's apt description of the prayers responding to priests' *Sursum Corda* at Mass, prayer "suspend[ed] presence in favor of . . . expectation."¹² During the course of their careers, the Christian magistrates measured out compassion according to the laws they enforced. They could be charitable, to a point. Augustine was known to encourage Christians in government to stretch that point, yet, to repeat, he seems to have had no brief for judicial activism, as we define it, which is to say that he was uninterested in the evangelization of the late Roman justice system. In prayer, he preached, there should be no limit to love. Quite the contrary, the prayerful and faithful ought to ration their devotion to laws and courts but love God limitlessly, as such love requires (*amandi deum modus est sine modo*; s. 2.9).¹³

Municipal magistrates would not have had abundant time for prayer. Historians once believed that they were little more than the local executors of others' policies, but Claude Lepelley's research shows that African authorities were more independent and versatile – and that civic virtues were highly prized.¹⁴ Indeed, pagan Nectarius thought there was no need to persuade Augustine that public service was divinely prescribed and divinely rewarded, that officials who kept their cities safe and solvent "will live closer to God" (*ep.* 103.1–2). Augustine replied (*ep.* 104), correcting his correspondent, who was writing in 408 to ask for the bishop's help. Excessive patriotism was particularly offensive, Augustine noted, when it inspired services that made citizens secure in – and tenaciously attached to – their possessions. Hence, he would not assist Nectarius in saving the citizens of Calama who feared poverty because punitive damages were about to be assessed. They had attacked Christians in that city – thirty or so miles from Augustine's home – and burned the church there in 408, and he predictably commented on the severity of their offense. But he also seized the chance to scold Nectarius for having linked civic virtue with celestial rewards and for having failed to render greater service to the Calama community. To avoid what Nectarius had called destitution might appear admirable, but, as Augustine explained to his correspondent, he could be much more useful to his clients by urging them to repent their crime, accept their punishment,

¹² Milbank 2009: 134.

¹³ Dolbeau 1996: 64.

¹⁴ Lepelley 2001: 105–7; Lepelley 2002: 283–85.

and learn that security, solvency, and civic pride were nothing next to God's goodwill (*ep.* 104.5–6, 104.12, 104.16).

Obsessions with possessions did not please God, Nectarius was informed, and, years later, Augustine said so again, in *City of God*, for the benefit of Christians and pagans who believed one of their most precious "possessions," Rome, had been terribly scuffed. The text named Cain as the fratricidal founder of this world's order. The implication was obvious, but that did not deter Augustine from elaborating: "Cain begat Enoch and built a city in his name: that is, the earthly city, which is not a pilgrim in this world." By trotting out an odd etymology, the bishop pressed his point and discredited efforts to gauge God's (or the gods') favor and disfavor by Rome's or the empire's fortune and misfortune. "Now the name Cain means possession. And Enoch," *City of God* adds (*civ. Dei* 15.17), "means dedication; for the earthly city is dedicated here, where it is built, since the end of what it strives after is here." Careers here are advanced by desires to acquire. The successful engage in a single-minded pursuit of this world's rewards – fame, funds, and power – and pilgrims who work among them must cling to eternity in hope and prayer (*civ. Dei* 21.9).¹⁵

Cain's kin have choices. True, they are unrighteous and lust for power. Much as Cain had, they despise the relative righteousness of others. *City of God*, however, draws on Pauline observations and exhortations to suggest that repentance is a route to conversion and that conversion gives individuals some "mastery" over their sins. A few may cross to a redoubtably devout life. They might overcome some temptations and resist reaching for what others have. Yet envy retains some hold on everyone in time and, sadly, tightens its hold on this wicked world and its governments. Envy held Cain captive. It drove him to murder. Conduct and competition in the city of gaud only occasionally erupted in murderous ways, yet envy was a constant (*civ. Dei* 15.7).

Citizens of the celestial city on pilgrimage in time among the contemptibly envious and impious, yet also in positions of authority among or over them, had their instructions from Augustine. He issued them in *City of God* but also in his correspondence, and no letter is more explicit and telling than the one he wrote to a military tribune who was contemplating a change in career (*ep.* 189). He thought of becoming a monk. Augustine was not about to have the gifts of a good soldier closeted or cloistered while barbarians were at the gate, notwithstanding his own trademark devaluation of worldly security. He told the tribune that his desire to live *cum solis sanctis* – "with

¹⁵ Curbelić 2004: 432–3.

only the holy" – was praiseworthy yet untimely. Only God determines the proper time for such a withdrawal, and all could see that, with the faithful in jeopardy, it was inopportune for a competent soldier, with a celebrated winning streak, to stand down. *Agendo et orando*, "by acting and praying," the tribune in the field could meet the challenges of both the times and his faith (*ep.* 189.8).

What applied to the Christian soldier in combat applied as well to the Christian magistrate in court, and it is quite possible that Augustine commended prayers-in-place rather than retirement to both at roughly the same time. The prayers were spiritual exit strategies that kept the prayerful, materially, at their tasks. Charles Mathewes adroitly summarizes Augustine's approach: advocating prayer, humility, and duty, the bishop reminded those who "inhabit authority" that they ought to "undertake that inhabitation in fear and trembling" and to "signal to others that [they] recognize the differences between the office [they] occupy and the person[s they are]."¹⁶

4 DIFFERENCES

Or was Augustine hesitantly optimistic? When he barked "we are not yet perfect" at the Pelagians, who, to his mind, had infuriatingly overestimated the faithful's abilities to suppress sin, was he looking forward to a time – in time – when Christians "inhabiting authority," could rehabilitate government (*perf. just.* 8.19)? One passage in *City of God* would appear to suggest as much (*civ. Dei* 15.4):

If the higher goods are neglected, which belong to the City on high, where victory will be secure in the enjoyment of eternal and supreme peace: if these are neglected and those other goods [terrestrial peace and prosperity] desired so much that they are thought to be the only goods or loved more than the goods which are believed to be higher [*meliora*], then misery of necessity will follow, and present misery will be increased by it.

The conditional clause seems to press Christian magistrates to bring out the good crystal, make a display of their devotion to "higher goods," and somehow improve public administration. But typically Augustine characterized both political routine and political intrigue as an unsavory and cursedly unstoppable chase after lower and lesser "goods." Hence, the passage just cited looks to be referring to damage control, not to an end

¹⁶ Mathewes 2007: 186.

of misery but to the avoidance of its “increase.” Grief was inevitable this side of the grave. Its “increase” could conceivably be averted, but misery kept humanity company because concupiscence afflicted the human will as the punishment for humanity’s original sin of disobedience. That is the theme of the four books immediately preceding the *City’s* “if the higher goods are neglected,” and a quick thumb-through of the four is sufficient to discover that, for Augustine, the political was just an extension of the personal – that factions in government normalized disharmony.¹⁷

From those telling books that reflect on the origin of sin and evil, Luigi Alici infers that their author believed everything that “fills time” had been infected, that an *inestirpabile insediamente* – an ineradicable parasite – left creation permanently disabled. That point was not lost on R. W. Dyson, who wrote, more relevantly to our discussion of dystopia, that “the state,” in *City of God*, was “an enduring witness to the moral disfigurement of the world.”¹⁸ Christians, as pilgrims, even in the best of times and with coreligionists in positions of leadership, could never be at home in that “state.” Sermons he preached while composing *City of God*, moreover, exhibit Augustine’s awareness of the practical difficulties posed for pilgrims by the state of that “state.” For the temporal order, to which cultivated Romans had grown accustomed, was passing, and authorities looked for scapegoats. Faithful Christians were excellent candidates inasmuch as they “love[d] not the world” and were, in theory at least, reconciled to its passing (s. 96.7–8). Much in *City of God* was written for them, to urge them to beware of this world’s charms (*blandimenta*) and to concentrate on their celestial rewards. Augustine paused occasionally to remind them of the differences between the two (*civ. Dei* 5.18, 18.1).

The celestial was beyond the power of superlatives to describe; genuine justice and spiritual satisfactions awaited pilgrims at their celestial destination. Identifying the courts and commerce in terrestrial cities as particularly problematic, Augustine’s sermons depict this world as “a land of lies” (s. 180.3). Churches were parts of that land, but many bishops in Africa, whose parishes composed the *pars Donati*, aspired to perfection. They touted the courage and moral superiority of their forebears. They claimed numerical superiority in the region. Augustine caught a whiff of arrogance in their perfectionism, exaggerating it and prolifically arguing that neither their history nor their numbers proved their claims about themselves and about the cowardice and contamination of the “catholic” churches.¹⁹

¹⁷ Wu 2007: 24–25. ¹⁸ Dyson 2005: 54–55; Alici 1994: 90.

¹⁹ Frend 1985: 227–43; Brown 2000: 207–21; Kaufman 2007: 71–98.

He assumed that significant portions of the celestial city on pilgrimage could be found in all churches – even outside them, which is not to argue choice of church was unimportant. According to Augustine, pilgrims who lived among the unregenerate, uncharitable, and contentious made the right choice, tolerating, to an extent, the tawdry and imperfect in this city of gaud. Carping and uncompromising, Donatists, who resisted reconciliation with their rivals, created atmospheric conditions that made it difficult for pilgrims in their churches to pay forward God's love in their love for the purportedly less fortunate – less fastidious and discriminating – and climb toward the celestial city. But the pilgrimage, as Augustine appropriated it narratively, was most critical and helped the faithful mark the differences between Christian piety and civic piety – and be patient.²⁰

When he marked those differences, Augustine sounded patronizing about civic piety and patriotism. His correspondence with Nectarius clearly condescends. As for his sentiments about public service, they ranged from icy indifference to tepid approval. The latter – lukewarm approval – was accompanied, in *City of God*, by a call to prayer stipulating that prayerful public servants ask for strength to remain detached from their duties and free from the lust to dominate that motivated politically ambitious and assiduous – and yet religiously remiss – colleagues.

That much we have learned, but *City of God's* last word on political virtues came early in the text and came coated with skepticism as Augustine assessed the earnestness with which the old Roman heroes had achieved impressive results. In the fifth book, he turned scorekeeper (*civ. Dei* 5.15):

The Romans held their own private interests in low esteem for the sake of the common good, that is, for the commonwealth. For the sake of its treasury they resisted avarice, and they took counsel for the good of their fatherland with unfettered minds; nor were they guilty of any offense against its laws, or of any unwholesome desires. By all these arts did they seek honor and power and glory, as by a true way. They were honored among almost all the nations; they imposed the laws of their empire upon many races; and they were glorious among almost all peoples to this day, in literature and in history. They have no reason to complain of the justice of the highest and true God: they have received their reward.

The final line about the sufficiency of the reward echoes the gospel of Matthew, which refers to hypocrites who boast of the alms they grudgingly give “that they may have the glory of men” (Matt. 6:2). Augustine editorialized, and knowledgeable Christians likely caught his contempt. It is impossible to know how many would also have known that Livy had helped

²⁰ Van Oort 1990: 159–63; Alici 1994: 95–96.

him with the history and that Sallust as well as their sacred texts had spurred him to moralize and to put Rome's glory in perspective, a comparative perspective. *City of God* exploits just that comparison to mark the contrast between "the reward of the saints who in this life suffer reproaches for the sake of the city of God" and the rewards of citizens who "so greatly love[d] Rome" and who cultivated what pilgrims should recognize as specious virtues to grow an empire "for the sake of merely human glory" (*civ. Dei* 5.16).²¹

No nostalgia here! Glory and possessions – not God and piety – had been the Romans' preoccupations, and, from a Christian perspective, they were inconsequential. To insist otherwise was to ensure that there could be no genuine justice in this wicked world, insofar as such insistence stole glory from God (*civ. Dei* 19.21): "Are we to call a man unjust if he takes a piece of property away from one who bought it and hands it over to someone who has no right to it" – or, one must add, keeps it for himself? Nearer the start of *City of God*, Augustine summoned Cicero to offer an arresting, luminous response to precisely this question. In his *Republic* (*rep.* 3), Cicero had staged a conversation about the necessity of justice, asking whether and why it was indispensable for "state-making." He had an interlocutor argue that "injustice is advantageous and justice useless" in government, a position that surely qualifies as dystopian and that appears to have struck Augustine as a plausible counter to the proposition that good government – a commonwealth – depended on social harmony, which, in turn, depended on a just distribution of goods and services. Yet the bishop elected to follow Cicero, who adapted the second alternative to serve the evaluation inscribed in the first. In other words, Cicero confirmed the constitutive role of justice in good government but denied that either was present in his time. Augustine went his source one better – or, to be precise – one worse. "True justice," he says, "does not exist other than in that commonwealth whose Founder and Ruler is Christ . . . There is true justice in that City of which [the psalmist] says 'glorious things are spoken of thee, O City of God'" (*civ. Dei* 2.21; Ps. 87:3).

How well did that notion sell? We know that the celestial city fascinated religious theorists from that time forward, many of whom identified it with the church, despite the disclaimers Augustine deposited in his anti-Donatist treatises. We know of bishops who continued to struggle for something approximating genuine justice in their terrestrial cities, and we can now see that their efforts were quite compatible with Augustine's counsel in *City of*

²¹ See Harding 2008: 47–83 for the Sallustian overtones of Augustine's political skepticism.

God and in his correspondence. Bishops, he said, should promote the “wellbeing of those under [them].” He appreciated that his colleagues were often local celebrities yet advised that it would be a mistake for them to relish their star wattage, to become self-important. “A bishop who takes delight in ruling rather than in doing good is no true bishop” (*civ. Dei* 19.20). There was nothing unusual about a bishop becoming a power-broker, resorting to “the threat of human judgment” to move misbehaving parishioners to relent and repent. And that worked, one suspects, only as long as that bishop had enough leverage to make good on his threats. “Emphatically and always,” however, bishops must “use the threat of divine judgment,” Augustine wrote, explaining why the second strategy was preferable in a letter to a local official whose agents had apparently misappropriated taxes collected from his tenants (*ep.* 153.21). The view was widespread that all tax collectors were tyrants, and Augustine’s correspondent seems to have been playing the part, demanding that the tenants pay again the sums lost to or by the collectors. But, for our purpose, the implication of Augustine’s letter is more important than the details of the scam, for the bishop suggested that those victims could not expect remedies from this world’s courts. He did not “threaten” his correspondent or the scurrilous agents with “human judgment” or introduce the possibility of transferring the case to the church’s court. Instead, to get the official to rescind his regrettable orders, Augustine reminded him that God was just. The taxpayers were not to be pitied, he continued, because their rewards for enduring inequity in this wicked world would come in the next – as would the punishment for tyrants making inequitable demands (*ep.* 247.4).²²

Augustine wrote to save his correspondent as well as the overtaxed taxpayers. Impressing his correspondent, “emphatically,” with the prospect of God’s unfavorable judgment should have served both ends, though troubled times inclined the possessive tenaciously to cling to their possessions. And *City of God*, along with most of Augustine’s letters, was written in and for troubled times. The pillars that pagans thought sturdy – Romans’ legions, Romans’ virtues, and Rome itself – were proving undependable. The Christian empire, which Constantine’s conversion and his sons’ support extended many miles inland from the Mediterranean’s shores, looked terribly precarious. Historian Peter Brown, therefore, is no doubt right to put one challenge near the top of Augustine’s to-do list: “creating new loyalty to a yet greater, invisible empire of God.” To associate that loyalty with an invisible, celestial city required an agile mind, for, although

²² On tyrannical taxmen, see Loseby 2009: 145–46.

it was true that “Augustine wielded a weight of authority that was so formidable in theory,” the “social and moral constraints” were such, Brown says, that the bishop’s authority was “far from overpowering in practice.” The world was “confidently profane.”²³ The unprincipled (*improbi*) ruled, and they were shameless. There is nothing, for example, to indicate that the fellow who so cruelly trawled for taxes ever reconsidered as a result of Augustine’s threats. In this wicked world, exploitation, servitude, and corruption reigned, and there was no sign the *improbi* could be “deprived of their freedom to do wrong” (*civ. Dei* 19.21).

The bad news reported at the onset seems to have gotten worse. Augustine’s compendious *City* numbered several consolations, but none bear on the text’s having developed into the most comforting consolation of all. The world mired in mediocrity turns out not to be the final word. That world transformed into many words reads as an occasion for piety, an opportunity to underscore the differences between the terrestrial city and its “opposite” (*civ. Dei* 18.1), the city of gaud and the city of God: unlike the former, which made gods (or idols) of power and possessions, the latter, on pilgrimage in time, is “to be [God’s] true sacrifice. Both cities . . . make use of good things or are afflicted with the evils of this temporal state, but they do so,” Augustine wrote, “with a different faith, a different hope, and a different love” (*civ. Dei* 18.54). And marking the differences, which has the effect of making *City of God* a comfort and consolation, makes all the difference. For the convergence of terrestrial and celestial cities remains dystopian. “Evils of this temporal state” invariably stain every attempt to politicize or institutionalize what the virtues of good pilgrims inspire. But their different faith, hope, and love are portals through which Augustine permits another reality to make itself known.

²³ Brown 2000: 491–92.