

Augustine's Two Cities: A Framework for Political Theology

Faith and Law Intern Reading Group

INTRODUCTION

Are faith and politics separate spheres or connected in some way? What attitude should a Christian have toward secular politics?

These are the questions of political theology – the study and understanding of how one's deeply held religious beliefs influence one's views about politics. Throughout Christian history, the tension between politics and religion has led to serious conflict. This conflict continues today in the United States and around the world.

With these questions in mind, we will examine the following passages from Augustine's *City of God*. The hallmark feature of Augustine's political theology is the idea of two cities: the City of God and the City of Man. Insofar as man desires salvation, he is a citizen of the City of God, which represents the Church and the heavenly kingdom. Insofar as man desires his own glory, he is a citizen of the City of Man, the manifestation of man's pride and lust for earthly power.

In addition to the writings of Augustine, you will find an excerpt from a *Christianity Today* article that touches on similar themes and emphasizes the importance of discussing this topic in the present day.

AUTHORS

Augustine (354-430) was born in modern-day Algeria. He was educated in literature and rhetoric and became a successful teacher and public speaker in Carthage, Rome, and Milan. Deeply interested in the search for truth, Augustine followed and studied many different philosophies before converting to Christianity. Following his conversion, he decided to forsake his secular career, and he eventually became the bishop of Hippo (city in modern-day Algeria).

Kaitlyn Schiess is a graduate of Liberty University (2016) and is studying for her Master of Theology at Dallas Theological Seminary. Her book, *The Liturgy of Politics: Spiritual Formation for the Sake of our Neighbor*, which examines the connection between theology, politics and culture, was released in September 2020. The following excerpt is taken from her article published in *Christianity Today*, [The Stories Our Politicians Tell](#).

CITY OF GOD

The Nature of the Two Cities:

Accordingly, two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord. For the one seeks glory from men; but the greatest glory of the other is God, the witness of conscience. The one lifts up its head in its own glory; the other says to its God, You are my glory, and the lifter up of mine head. In the one, the princes and the nations it subdues are ruled by the love of ruling; in the other, the princes and the subjects serve one another in love, the latter obeying, while the former take thought for all. The one delights in its own strength, represented in the persons of its rulers; the other says to its God, I will love You, O Lord, my strength. And therefore the wise men of the one city, living according to man, have sought for profit to their own bodies or souls, or both, and those who have known God glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful, but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened; professing themselves to be wise, — that is, glorying in their own wisdom, and being possessed by pride — they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things. For they were either leaders or followers of the people in adoring images, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed forever (Romans 1:21-25). But in the other city there is no human wisdom, but only godliness, which offers due worship to the true God, and looks for its reward in the society of the saints, of holy angels as well as holy men, that God may be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28).

On Regime Type:

Concerning this life of mortals, which is lived and ended in a few days, what difference does it make whose governance a man who is about to die lives under, so long as those who rule do not compel him to impiety and sin? Did the Romans harm those peoples on whom they imposed their laws when they conquered them, except insofar as there was a great slaughter in the wars? If it had been done with their consent, it would have been accomplished with greater success, but there would have been no glory of conquest.

Without justice, what are kingdoms but great robber bands? What are robber bands but small kingdoms? The band is itself made up of men, is ruled by the command of a leader, and is held together by a social pact. Plunder is divided in accordance with an agreed-upon law. If this evil increases by the inclusion of dissolute men to the extent that it takes over territory, establishes headquarters, occupies cities, and subdues peoples, it publically assumes the title of kingdom! This title is manifestly conferred on it, not because greed has been removed, but because impunity has been added. A fitting and true response was once given to Alexander the Great by an apprehended pirate. When asked by the king what he thought he was doing by infesting the sea, he replied with noble insolence, “What do you think you are doing by infesting the whole

world? Because I do it with one puny boat I am called a pirate, because you do it with a great fleet, you are called an emperor.”

Nonetheless, the power to dominate is not given even to these men except by the providence of the most high God, when he judges that the condition of human affairs is worthy of such masters. The divine voice speaks openly concerning this when the wisdom of God says, “Through me kings rule, and tyrants hold the earth through me” (Proverbs 8:15)... Although I have demonstrated, to the extent of my ability, why the one true and just God assisted the Romans, who were good according to a certain earthly standard, to obtain the glory of so great an empire, there may be even another, more hidden cause, resulting from the diverse merits of the human race known better to God than to us. Let it be agreed, though, among all who are truly pious, that no one lacking true piety (which is the true worship of the true God) can have true virtue. Let it also be agreed that virtue is not true when it serves human glory. Nevertheless, those who are not citizens of the eternal city, which is called “the city of God” in the Sacred Scriptures, are more useful to the earthly city when they at least have that virtue which serves human glory than if they had none at all. As for those who are endowed with true piety and who lead a good life, if they are skilled in the art of government, then there is no happier situation for mankind than that they, by God’s mercy, should wield power.

If “the kings of the earth and all peoples, leaders and all judges of the earth, youths and maidens, the youthful and the elderly” (Ps. 148:11-12), those of every age capable of understanding, both sexes, even those very tax collectors and soldiers that John the Baptist addressed (Lk. 3:12-14) — if they would hear and obey the precepts of the Christian religion concerning just and upright morals, the republic would embellish the domain of the present life with its own happiness and would ascend to eternal life to reign in supreme happiness. However, because this person hears, that one scorns, and many are better friends with the evil allurements of the vices than with the advantageous austerity of the virtues, the servants of Christ...are commanded to endure even “the worse and most disgraceful” republic, if it is necessary, and thorough that endurance to prepare an illustrious place for themselves in that most holy and majestic assembly of angels, in that heavenly republic where the will of God is law.

Peace:

The peace among human beings is ordered concord. The peace of the household is an ordered concord concerning commanding and obeying among those who dwell together. The peace of the city is an ordered concord concerning commanding and obey in among the citizens. The peace of the heavenly city is fellowship perfectly ordered and harmonious, enjoying God and each other in God.

The household of those who do not live by faith chases an earthly peace consisting of the affairs and advantages of this temporal life. The household of human beings living by faith, on the other hand, looks forward to the future, to those things which re promised as eternal, and makes use of

temporal and earthly things like a traveler. Those things do not seize such a person and turn him away from the path to God. They do not increase the burdens of “the corruptible body which weighs down the soul” (Wis 9:15) but sustain him for more easily enduring them. Consequently, both sorts of men and both sorts of households use the things necessary for this mortal life, but the end of such use is unique to each and varies greatly. So also the earthly city, which does not live by faith, desires earthly peace, and it secures a concord concerning the commanding and obeying of the citizens, so that there might be a certain orderly arrangement of human wills concerning the things pertaining to mortal life. The heavenly city, however, or rather the part of it which journeys in this mortal life and lives by faith, necessarily uses this peace, too, until the very mortality which makes such a peace necessary might pass away.

Because of this, so long as it lead the life of a captive, as it were, journeying within the earthly city, already having received a promise of redemption and a spiritual gift as a pledge of it, the heavenly city has no doubts about conforming to the laws of the earthly city which administer the things required for the sustenance of the mortal life. Because mortality itself is common to both of the cities, concord between them is preserved with respect to those things pertaining to the mortal life...So long as this heavenly city journeys on the earth it calls forth citizens from all peoples and fathers a society of foreigners speaking all languages. It is not troubled at all about difference in customs, laws and institutions by which the earthly peace is either sought or maintained. So long as they do not impede the religion which teaches the worship of the one, supreme, and true God, the heavenly city abrogates or destroys none of them, but indeed observes and follows them, for whatever the diversities of different nations, they nevertheless strive toward the one and the same end of earthly peace.

THE STORIES OUR POLITICIANS TELL

As the height of the 2020 presidential election season approaches, many Christians are asking important questions about our political responsibility: What policies should I support? Do I vote on party lines or on the issues most important to me? In the midst of a global pandemic and racial tension splintering our society, the stakes feel different this year. But important questions about parties and candidates can easily obscure another question at the heart of our political and spiritual lives: What story am I buying into?

Politics is all about storytelling. Picture Ronald Reagan’s iconic 1984 “Morning in America” campaign ad. Light slowly rises over shots of farmers working in the fields and a paperboy throwing the morning paper onto green lawns. A family moves into their new home, a beaming couple celebrates their wedding, and the sun rises over Capitol Hill. The economic statistics listed throughout the ad are secondary to the emotional and visual story of hope, new beginnings, and the American Dream.

In their campaigns, candidates do not merely outline policy proposals, they articulate a vision of a good life: free from certain threats, in community with the right kind of people. These marketable narratives are not content to remain at the penultimate level, shaping our political decisions while leaving our theological commitments and spiritual formation unaffected. Like all persuasive, affective stories, they will fight for ultimate status in our lives.

Most Christians separate their political and spiritual lives into two different realms. One is about the care of our souls, the inner life of the Christian, the way that spiritual disciplines shape us into the people of God. The other is about how we as individuals approach the political world as an external reality we can manipulate. While American evangelicals have a history of overidentifying their faith with a political party, separating our moral or theological obligations from our political ones has been necessary to maintain this singular identity. Any dissonance between the two identities is overcome by dividing the rules for the spiritual and political parts of our lives. The real tragedy of this way of thinking is that we believe we can run headfirst into the political world, armed with our theology, and engage as unaffected outsiders. We fail to see how political stories shape our loves and loyalties more often than they convince us intellectually.

The power of political storytelling has been empirically verified: a study published last year in the American Journal of Political Science found that most people's political ideology was able to accurately predict their answers to moral questions, not the other way around. "We will switch our moral compass depending on how it fits with what we believe politically," said Peter Hatemi, one of the researchers and a political science professor at Pennsylvania State University. Similarly, Stanford political scientist Francis Fukuyama says that most people begin with an "emotional commitment" to an ideology and then process new information with this prior commitment controlling their reasoning.

As creatures deeply formed by our communities, rituals, and affective bodily experiences, we are easily drawn into such stories. Philosopher James K. A. Smith makes the theological case in *Awaiting the King* that our "political and social allegiances trump religious allegiances all the time, whether in presidential primaries, under the grotesque shadow of the lynching tree, or in horrifying cases like the Rwandan genocide." As Smith illustrates, political allegiances are powerful precisely because they are mediated to us through rituals and stories that teach us what to fear and love, how to understand our own identity, and what ultimate good to seek. The scariest thing about these stories is that they form in us desires, fears, and loyalties that we would theologically deny...