

Against Imperialism: The Significance of Augustine's

Philosophy for Politics¹

By Roel Kuiper²

There are few Christian thinkers who have had as much influence on Western political thought like Augustine. At the same time, Augustine's most important political work, *The City of God*, does not deal directly with politics. Roel Kuiper gives us a tour through that book in a search for Augustine's political message.

Did the church father Aurelius Augustine have a political philosophy?(1) Hannah Arendt, who read and re-read Augustine throughout her life, calls Augustine's book *The City of God* his most important political publication. However, she considers his ideas about the human quest for eternal happiness unsuitable as a basis for political action. To be honest, except for *The City of God* and its often quoted 19th book, we find little about his political philosophy in his writings. His thoughts about politics and statehood appear only here and there in passing, as incidental.(2) Anyone who pays attention to the character of *The City of God* must observe that politics is not its primary concern, but rather the virtuous life in an eternal order governed by God. The book is about religion, history, morality and culture, not about politics.

Can Christianity and political power support each other?

Nevertheless, *The City of God* has had great political influence. Medieval emperors had the book read to

² Original title: "Tegen het Imperialisme: Over de betekenis van Augustinus' Filosofie voor de Politiek."

them. Especially the image of the two cities, the earthly and the heavenly, that exist against each other, next to each other and through each other, has stimulated political thought. Also influential is the notion that Christians live in the world and have the task to contribute to earthly peace, while they simultaneously are also strangers with a focus on heaven and eternal life. With Calvin, this is echoed in the distinction between a civil and spiritual domain in human society.(3) 21st-century Christians who base their political involvement on Jeremiah 29, a chapter that speaks about seeking the peace of the city, point implicitly and sometimes explicitly to Augustine.

However, it should be noted that *The City of God* was inspired by politics. The occupation and the pillaging of the “eternal city,” Rome, by Alarik in 410, nearly a century after Constantine the Great had become the first Christian emperor, set into motion doubt whether Christianity was capable of supporting the Roman empire. Was the demise of the empire not blamed on rejecting the Roman gods?(4) Would Christianity with its pacifistic message appear powerful enough to counter the attacks on Rome? Was it not time to revert to the former era with its Roman state cultus of the empire’s gods? Was it not the traditional Roman virtues that formed the foundation for the success of the empire? The doubt that arose was a political doubt that touched upon the question whether the political establishment could survive the storms of world history.

Political instability and genuine happiness

Augustine’s considerations address this political instability. They also address and critique along with it

a current way of thinking about politics in which everything must focus on the preservation of the empire. In this perspective having and holding power is the prevalent attitude. According to Augustine, this conservative opinion neither guaranteed stability nor the good life, for throughout this reality there was much evil, ugly violence and all sorts of injustice. The so-called Roman virtues, namely their lust for heroism and public glory, were in fact weak pillars. The Roman Empire was not kept together by justice or rights, but by self-love and self-glorification (*amor sui*). Augustine turns the question about political stability inside out and addresses a deeper existential question: Where do we find genuine happiness?

The experiences that inspired Augustine's considerations could just as well be ours. For the modern people of the West, accustomed to the *Pax Americana* of the previous century, the feeling of instability is increasing. The golden post-war years of the 20th century were years of prosperity and material happiness. Twenty years ago, after the collapse of Communism, in conservative circles in the United States it was still possible to write with self-assurance, "America is Rome, committed as it is to the preservation and extension of an empire." (5) Since then, this image has been tilted. It is clear that the U.S. is no longer the only superpower in the world. The safety of the European continent is no longer without its threats. The same holds true for Western welfare. Westerners of the 21st century are worried just like the Romans in the fifth century.

Asking for true human happiness in these circumstances looks like shifting attention to a terrain outside of politics. Anyone with modern ears who

hears that the state is not a “happiness machine,” will think that we are sidetracked. This was not the case with Augustine and his contemporaries. The happiness of citizens was tied to the lot of Rome—that was the current thought. Happiness was the main goal of the Stoics, who had their own emperor in Marcus Aurelius (121-180 AD). The Stoics in the days of Augustine still were always talking about happiness as the ideal of a conscientious life. Happiness was to be reached by self-restraint and by a political system. They also spoke of a “city of God,” a cosmopolis. This could be achieved on earth if people lived virtuously according to the prescriptions of nature. Earthly happiness was within reach as a political ideal,(6) one that was closely tied to life in a strong Roman empire.

Augustine must have recognized the totalitarian nature of this kind of imperialistic thinking that, just like Western thought, could entirely dominate the strivings of its citizens. He resists the thought that there is only one kind of nation suitable for living and that must be supported by all powers. The idea of two cities breaks up this image, relativizes earthly power, separates religion and state and opens other perspectives on politics. The two cities or communities each have their own idea of happiness. They love different things and thus have different orientations. For Christians, the heavenly “city of God” is the standard for what must be called justice or the “highest good” on earth. That “highest good” is ultimately eternal life with its own form of peace and happiness. This means that earthly cities and empires with their temporary forms of peace and happiness are of an ephemeral nature. This also held for Rome.

The State Is Not the Source of Happiness

The City of God has sometimes been described as an apologetic document to defend an attacked Christianity. It can just as easily be read as a warning to Christians not to expect too much from politics. Happiness does not come from the state. Earthly power is short-lived. At the same time, Augustine does not reject the existing political order. It is important to serve earthly peace and to honour the documents that support it. Augustine before his time here clears the way for influential voices from the early church, namely the voices of the church fathers Tertullius and Eusebius. Tertullius (160-230 AD) is the source of the sharp declaration that Christians have no business with public affairs. Eusebius of Caesarea (263-329 AD) regarded the Christian emperor as support for Christ on earth with a divine mission (7). Augustine rejects both and attempts to show how Christians are to relate to others in their society, also when they occupy a public office or enter the arena of politics.

Herewith Augustine presents a completely new approach to politics. It is about the functioning of a society, about tolerance and civic duty, about striving for the good. Some of his works are said to be far ahead of their time. That also holds for *The City of God*, which is most likely the reason this work belongs to the body of world literature and Augustine is still being read. The themes he introduces touch upon the central concerns of every political system. The book could be read as a protest against every form of the ideologizing of politics, against the revolutionary glorification of power or, more precisely, against imperialism. He posits the Gospel over against that imperialism. He is sharp when he reminds the Romans that they ran after demons in their old cultus of the

state. At this point the two cities are diametrically opposed to each other. The two orientations, namely the love of God and the love of humans and their demons, exclude each other.

The Search for the Political: Next to and Mixed with Each Other

Which political consequences does Augustine draw from his approach? Does it amount to a political philosophy? Let us examine that in terms of a few political themes. I am thinking about these: forms of states and political institutions, bearing political responsibility, the role of religion in the public domain and dealing with rights and justice, including the rights of minorities.

As to the first of these themes, nowhere does *The City of God* give a Biblical vision on the forms of states or on the role and meaning of political institutions. He deals with many Bible passages, but there is no mention of Roman 13, where the government is called an institution of God. He *does* say somewhere that the power and continuity of the Roman Empire was to be attributed to divine providence, but the interest and significance that Calvin and Luther attach to government as a divine institution is altogether lacking (8). Thus, he does not ask about the task of government as a divine institution. Well, yes, in general he does point to the obligation of the authorities to practice justice, but he does not delve into this issue. The image of the two cities relativizes earthly power, separates religion from state and opens other perspectives on politics. The interest and meaning that Calvin and Luther attribute to the state as a divine institution is totally lacking with Augustine. It is often

a striving “in hope” and not “on the ground,” even for Christian emperors. We do not find in Augustine the declaration that God’s commandments hold for both the spiritual and civil terrains, as Calvin posits later in his *Institutions*. That sort of pronouncements about a government that holds God’s commandments high in public life is too much for him. At this point there is no clear political philosophy.

The same holds for public life. For Calvin and later Christian thinkers, Christians are seen as part of civil society. Christians have a responsibility to bear there. With Augustine, this is a question, an option. Public life is supported by people who, in addition to caring for their household (*oikos*), are occupied with the communal affairs of the city (*res publica* or *polis*). Here the existence of the two cities next to each other is drawn, involvement in public affairs is not incumbent, though Augustine recognizes that people can be called into it. Christians, however, do not focus on that; their love is directed to God and their true happiness in the future. That makes them *use* the world rather than see it as object of their love. Here we meet up with the well-known distinction between use (*util*) and enjoyment (*frui*). There is a certain reserve with respect to political life. Christian use the earthly peace for another goal:, namely eternal happiness that is found elsewhere. This is where the critique of Hannah Arendt comes in, who was already tracing this tension in her dissertation about *Liebesbegriff bei Augustin* from 1929 (9). However, her critique is too strong when she accuses Christians that they, in their search for peace for the city and for creation, are focused especially eschatologically and see the world as a mere tool for their use (10). Political awareness after

Augustine had been strengthened at this point. When today's Christians speak of peace for the city, they mean "shalom," rather than a balanced order of rest (11).

Focusing on the third theme, we see in Augustine a striking tolerance for multiple religion in the public domain. Though Christianity became the religion of the Empire a century earlier, Augustine found that it should not be the only religion in control. This church father was definitely no theocrat (12). However sharp his condemnation of pagan religions and Roman gods—he calls them straight out "evil, unclean demons"—he does not favour a ban on other religions. He acknowledges that public life is the terrain of everyone. That flows forth out of his concept of earthly peace, as an overlapping terrain for Christians with their orientation on the city of God and others with their orientation on the earthly city. The two cities are intertwined. Christians ought not to dominate, for that could become their form of imperialism. Put stronger, it must suffice for Christians when they are in agreement with non-Christians to form an earthly peace together "in so far as this is possible without attacking piety and religion" (13). Thus, Augustine does not claim any special rights and certainly not a monopoly of rights or even a privileged position for Christians, a relatively liberal form of freedom of religion. When it comes to religion in the public domain, he is strikingly generous and we find here a political philosophy that is far ahead of his time.

Justice and Power

Finally, let us pay some attention to the theme of justice. During the course of a long Western history,

modern Christians are accustomed to place justice above power. A healthy politics promotes a public order of justice. Herman Dooyeweerd saw striving for public justice as the centre for Christian politics. These accents are hardly there in Augustine (14). That is a striking omission, especially for one who would like to hear more about Augustine's opinions about the political system. In its place, he pays more attention to a stumbling order of justice, with judges who just cannot arrive at a correct sentence, as well as with political authorities who do not have justice as their mainspring. He even goes as far as to say that there exists no Roman nation if the definition were that the society is kept together by unanimity about justice. There is no such unanimity, for there is no unanimous concept of justice when people do not serve God (15). Here we stumble onto Augustine's famous skepticism with respect to people and their ability to do the good. The political system is a ball of acts and motives, a mixture of justice and power. In the hands of the powerful, this can easily derail, something that happens frequently. Nevertheless, he acknowledges that justice needs to rank above power, but we do not find a positive expectation with respect to a just political order. We read instead about mistrust of power. We do see him in this situation promoting the church's own position and, strikingly, a kind of justice for minorities. He defended the North African Punic language and its use in addition to the dominant Latin (16). As bishop of the church, he defended social liberties as we later see among Christians who raise their voices in the political arena.

A Political Philosophy?

As to the question whether Augustine had a political philosophy, with some reservation we can give an affirmative response. It was a philosophy with reserve concerning public life and with a clearly expressed fear for the power of the Roman empire which, as we can see from the past, could adopt absolutistic characteristics. He certainly did not support a Christian emperor cult and feared the dynamics of power that exists for its own glory. His political philosophy was directed against imperialism that was corrupted with all sorts of evil and that needed an external state religion.

We do not find a political programme or reflections about justice or statehood in *The City of God*.

However, there are all sorts of ideas that later would be given political interpretations. Augustine was far ahead of his time with his attention for morality in public life, for a politics that gave justice priority over power, and for tolerance and religious freedom in a pluralistic society. The political society has to be satisfied with a temporary earthly peace. That peace is not without value, but it points to the future of eternal peace and genuine happiness. People who search for that happiness would do well to direct their earthly desires to the city of God, where all human longings will ultimately be fulfilled.

NOTES

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1 Hannah Arendt, *Vita Activa*, Boom 1994, p. 175.

2 Zie de observatie van A. Sizoo, Augustinus over den staat, Kok 1947, p. 9: "Een werk dat opzettelijk handelt over dat onderwerp [de staat] heeft Augustinus niet geschreven".

3 With Luther there is a distinction between two kingdoms, those of the church and of politics. That distinction does not coincide with Augustine's two cities, though it is frequently attributed unjustly to him.

4 The complaint about Christian pacifism came from Rufius Volusianus, the proconsul of Africa. It was put to Augustine two years after the sack of Rome. Zie: Robert Dodaro, Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine, Cambridge University Press 2004, p. 215.

5 Andrew J. Bacevich, American Empire, Harvard University Press 2002, p. 244: "America is Rome, committed to the maintenance and expansion of an empire".

6 Vgl. Marcus Aurelius, Meditations, Penguin 1981, p. 18.

7 Meer hierover in: J. van Oort, Jeruzalem en Babylon: Een onderzoek van Augustinus' De Stad van God en de bronnen van zijn leer der twee steden (rijken), Boekencentrum 1995, p. 131.

8 Augustinus, De stad van God, boek V, 21.

9 Vgl. Elisabeth Young-Bruehl, Hannah Arendt: Een biografie, Atlas 2005, pp. 137-139 en 616-627.

10 Een variant op dit verwijt geeft Hannah Arendt in Vita Activa, p. 313 e.v.

11 I cannot develop this further, but I am aiming at the work of, among others, Nicholas Wolterstorff and Miroslav Wolf, in whom the striving for "shalom" is a motive for Christian political action.

12 Zie hierover: J. van Oort, Jeruzalem en Babylon: Een onderzoek van Augustinus' De Stad van God en de bronnen van zijn leer der twee steden (rijken), Boekencentrum 1995, p. 77, p. 129 e.v.

13 Augustinus, De stad van God, boek XIX, 17.

14 O'Donovan merkt op: "justice is not at the forefront of Augustine's concerns". Zie Oliver O'Donovan & Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, Bonds of Imperfection: Christian Politics, Past and Present, Eerdmans 2004, p. 63.

15 Augustinus, De stad van God, boek XIX, 21. Augustine will later say that there is a Roman nation if you delete the word "justice" and a people is defined as "united ownership of things they love": boek XIX, 24.

16 Ik ontleen dit voorbeeld aan James Eglinton, 'Let Every Tongue Confess. Language Diversity and Reformed Public Theology', in:

Matthew Kaemingh, *Reformed Public Theology: A Global Vision for Life in the World*. Baker Academic 2021, p. 46.