

REV. ROBERT BARRON

Augustine's Questions: Why the Augustinian Theology of God Matters Today

FINALLY, IT ALL COMES DOWN to a correct description of God. Everything else—culture, politics, nature, human relationships—is properly understood only in the measure that ultimate reality is grasped with at least a relative adequacy. Like all of the other great theologians of the tradition, St. Augustine struggled his life long with this central question. Though his restless mind ranged over innumerable issues, from human psychology, to Roman history, to Christology and eschatology, his primary preoccupation was determining the meaning of the word “God.” And he found answers. Though he was one of the greatest searchers in the Western tradition, Augustine did not have a romantic attitude, regarding the search as an end in itself. Here I think John Caputo, reading Augustine through the lens of Derridean undecidability, has misconstrued his subject.¹ At the end of his questioning, Augustine found a truth in which he could rest, a truth that, he was convinced, had set him free. And this was none other than the conviction that ultimate reality is the Trinitarian God revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. I believe that Augustine's questions and answers are remarkably relevant to our time and that finding for ourselves the truth that he found is of great moment, not only for our personal spiritual fulfillment, but also for the health of our Church and culture.

What I should like to do, in the course of this paper, is to follow, in a necessarily sketchy way, the Augustinian path toward the understanding of God, thinking with him and after

¹ John Caputo, “What Do I Love When I Love My God? Deconstruction and Radical Orthodoxy” in *Questioning God*, ed. John Caputo (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 291-292.

him. And I would like to demonstrate throughout the analysis how Augustine's questions and solutions matter for us, especially for those committed to carrying on and making effective the intellectual heritage of Catholicism. I will undertake this task by looking at three key arguments that Augustine had at different points in his intellectual journey, the first with the Manichees and the Platonists when he was a comparatively young man, the second with the Arians when he was in mid-career, and the third with the Romans as he approached the end of his life. What emerges, as Augustine wrestles with these various opponents, is that very distinctive understanding of ultimate reality that we Christians call belief in the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Augustine's Argument with the Manichees and the Platonists

The work of St. Augustine that has exercised most fascination and given rise to most commentary over the ages is, of course, his great autobiography, *The Confessions*. Relying implicitly on the double sense of the Latin term "*confessio*," Augustine uses this text as a means both to confess his sins and to profess his praise of God. In fact, those two moves are, in his mind, inextricably linked: the more he becomes aware of his sins, both intellectual and moral, the more he is able to acknowledge and thank the true God—and vice versa. Nowhere is this link between contrition and praise more clearly on display than in the seventh book of the *Confessions*. In this densely-textured section of his autobiography, Augustine recounts the tortuous process by which he wriggled free from the influence of Manichaeism, the dualist, quasi-Gnostic system of which he had been, for nine years, a faithful adept. The principal allure of Manichaeism—both in Augustine's day and in ours—is the simple and elegant way that it handles the problem of evil. If the world is, at the most basic level, a struggle between a force of good and a force of evil, then we are not obliged to blame God for suffering. Instead, we should simply side with him in his just and worthwhile enterprise, even as we hate the principle responsible for evil. Manichaeism solves the problem of theodicy by dissolving it.

Now what is the conception of God associated with this Manichaean philosophy? It would not be quite right to say, as most popular accounts have it, that God is, on the Manichaean reading, purely spiritual, set radically apart from the realm of matter. Here

is how Augustine expresses the theory: “I thought of you as a vast reality spread throughout space in every direction: I thought that you penetrated the whole mass of the earth and immense, unbounded spaces beyond it on all sides, that earth, sky, and all things were full of you.”² What is being described here is a kind of materialistic panentheism, God as a force or power running through and uniting all material creation. This view of God is extremely old and remarkably enduring. We can find versions of it in ancient Stoicism and in the peculiarly modern metaphysics of Spinoza, as well as in the mystical religious philosophy of Friedrich Schleiermacher.

And we can very clearly discern it in contemporary conceptions of God, mediated to us by the popular culture. In his many books and especially in his series of interviews with the journalist Bill Moyers, the comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell expressed a notion of God remarkably similar to the one outlined at the beginning of book seven of the *Confessions*. When asked by Moyers whether he believed in a personal God, Campbell replied, “no,” and when pressed to elaborate, he said, “I think that God is the “transcendent ground or energy in itself.”³ He explained, furthermore, that the Hindu meditative exercise of pronouncing the syllable “Om” is nothing other than an attempt to harmonize with this fundamental power.⁴ Needless to say, this conception of God has had a massive influence on the development of various “New Age” philosophies and spiritualities. Joseph Campbell exercised perhaps his most pervasive influence through the efforts of his disciple, the filmmaker George Lucas. In many ways, the *Star Wars* movies are, by Lucas’s own admission, an elaborate narrative and pictorial representation of the world-view espoused by Campbell. And nowhere is this clearer than in the master idea of the *Star Wars* religion, viz. the Force. Borrowing consciously from the Catholic liturgy, Lucas has characters in the *Star Wars* universe regularly greeting one another with the phrase, “may the Force be with you.” It becomes eminently clear in the course of the narrative that the Force is a sort of energy field that runs through and unites all material things and that it can be exploited in either a positive or negative direction, appearing thereby as either dark or light. Here the connection to Manichaeism is quite

² St. Augustine, *The Confessions*, bk. 7, tr. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, N.Y.: New City Press, 1997), 159

³ Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 213.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 230-231.

clear. Thus the young Augustine was devoted to roughly the same idea of God that adepts of the New Age find amenable today: a notion of God as impersonal, intimately tied to the material world, and manipulable through the human will.

Now this idea might delight *Star Wars* aficionados, but, the more he considered it, the more it puzzled and bothered Augustine, for it seemed sorely inadequate to the perfection of God. If God were a kind of quintessential physical energy, then it would appear that he is divisible and measurable. Here is the way Augustine expressed his puzzlement: “A larger part of the earth would contain a larger portion of you, and a smaller a lesser portion, and all things would be full of you in such a way that an elephant’s body would contain a larger amount of you than a sparrow’s.”⁵ Anything as quantifiable and worldly as that, he concluded, couldn’t possibly be the perfect one. But when he tried to think of God as utterly perfect, thoroughly good, he faced the dilemma of explaining the provenance of evil. If God is the creator of all things and God is infinitely good, there should be no evil. And blaming evil on the free will of angels and men doesn’t solve the problem; it only postpones it, for God is himself the author of the will. Similarly, claiming that corruption flows from a flaw in nature only leads us to wonder how the utterly good creator could have given rise to a flawed nature.

And so he found himself stuck: “Such thoughts as these was I turning over in my miserable soul, weighed down as it was by the gnawing anxieties that flowed from my fear that death might overtake me before I had found the truth.”⁶ And then God showed him a way out: “you provided me with some books by the Platonists, translated from Greek into Latin.”⁷ These pivotal texts were most likely treatises by Plotinus and his secretary Porphyry wherein was exposed the great middle Platonic theory of the One and its emanations. According to this philosophy, the immense, unknowable, unsurpassable power of the One gave rise by an automatic emanation to a second hypostasis, Intellect, in which are found all of the forms that Plato spoke of. Then, by a further emanation, Soul separated itself from Intellect and from Soul came the lower regions of mutable

⁵ *Confessions*, 160.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 169.

materiality. The goal of the spiritual life, on this reading, was the gradual escape from the material and ascension through the levels of the spiritual emanations until reaching the point of union with the One, becoming, in Plotinus's famous phrase, "alone with the Alone." This peculiar theory seemed so attractive to the young Augustine precisely because it extricated him from the horns of the dilemma on which he had been stuck. By articulating God as the distant and perfect One, it allowed Augustine to think of ultimate reality apart from materialistic and this-worldly categories. Further, by removing God from this obviously ambiguous realm through a series of ontological buffers, it allowed Augustine to see how God is not directly implicated in evil. He could breathe easy again.

Just as the quasi-Gnostic Manichaean notion of God finds a contemporary resonance, so this Plotinian doctrine remains, *mutatis mutandis*, as an intellectual option on the table today. In the early modern period, just after the Reformation, a view of God emerged that was neither classical theism nor pantheism nor panentheism, but rather Deism, that is to say, the construal of God as the creator and designer of the world, who exists at a remove, both spatial and chronological, from the world that he has ordered. Serious intellectual players—from Locke and Leibniz to Newton and Benjamin Franklin—entertained some version of Deism, and many religious people today, especially in the West, hold to it in one form or another. It exercises still the charms that beguiled the youthful Augustine, viz. the capacity to account for the godliness of God and, at the same time, to keep God free from too much involvement with the messiness and ambiguity of the world. An extremely important side-effect of Deism—and another reason for its attractiveness—is the opening up of a properly secular realm, that is to say, a dimension of being that remains essentially untouched by God. This "secular" space permits people to be vaguely religious, even as they keep God far away from the arena where they actually live, work, and make moral decisions.

Though it has, in its various forms, intrigued people over the ages, this Plotinian doctrine convinced Augustine only for a short time. He certainly tried to follow the Platonic exercises designed to liberate him from matter and facilitate the ascent through the emanations to the One; but he never succeeded in affecting closeness with Plotinus's

God. Though the intellectual idea proposed by Plotinus was clearer and truer than that entertained by the Manichees, it didn't seem to move Augustine appreciably closer to God: "I knew myself to be far away from you in a region of unlikeness."⁸ Augustine realized that to solve the problem of evil by distantiating God from the world is to create a far greater problem: the alienation of the seeker from the God that he desires. And he knew that to preserve the godliness of God by sequestering him in a zone of pure transcendence is to strand the religious person in the disenchanted space of secularity, the "region of unlikeness." So Plotinianism, that proto-Deism, would not do.

What rescued Augustine at this anxious stage of his quest was something that he did not read in the books of the Platonists, but rather something that he found in a letter written by the first-century rabbi Saul who had become, through an extraordinary experience of conversion, the Christian apostle Paul. In his letter to the tiny Christian community at Phillipi, Paul wrote this concerning Jesus: "Though he was in the form of God, Jesus did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at, but rather emptied himself and became a slave, being born in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:6-7). While remaining in the form of God, which is to say, utterly unlike any worldly thing, the Logos, Paul maintained, emptied himself out of love and entered radically into the world. In the wake of reading Paul, a question grew in Augustine's mind, viz. who precisely is the God capable of such a feat, a God who retains his transcendence and perfection (the form of God) even as he displays, in the most dramatic way possible, his immanence? He cannot be the imperfect God of the Manichees, and he cannot be the distant God of the Platonists. He must be a God who can become a creature without compromising his own divinity or the integrity of the creature he becomes, and this means he must be the Creator of all things. If God were a being in or alongside of the universe, he would be, necessarily, in competition with other worldly objects. There is a mutual exclusivity about worldly natures, one thing maintaining its ontological integrity only in the measure that it is *not* anything else.⁹ Therefore, if God is capable of true incarnation—becoming a creature without ceasing to be himself—then God cannot be a worldly nature, a thing,

⁸ Ibid., 173.

⁹ Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 35-36.

one being among many, even the supreme being. God must be other but, if I can put it this way, *otherly* other, enjoying a transcendence that is not contrastive to the world. Nicholas of Cusa would express this notion many centuries after Augustine by saying that God, while absolutely other, is the *non-Aliud*, the non-other.

What Augustine found, through Paul, was a way of combining and overcoming the tension between the Manichees and the Platonists. He found the Creator God who, in his perfection and godliness, is *not* the world and who, in his love, becomes one with the world. He found, in a word, the God of Jesus Christ.

Augustine's Argument with the Arians

We now turn from the *Confessions* to the *de Trinitate*, a doctrinal tour de force that preoccupied Augustine for nearly twenty years. Here, as always, the central concern is a correct description of God. Augustine wants to make plain that the God of creation and incarnation, whom he described in book seven of the *Confessions*, is also the Trinitarian God, the God whose very unity is constituted by a set of relations. The best known sections of the *de Trinitate* are undoubtedly the 8th and 9th books, wherein Augustine lays out his psychological analogies for the Trinitarian persons: mind, self-knowledge, and self-love. But I would like to concentrate on an earlier section of the great opus, viz. the fifth book, where Augustine takes on what he considers a very serious challenge to the orthodox teaching concerning the Trinity. The Arian heresy, which arose in the early fourth century, was debated at a number of local synods in Egypt and then definitively addressed and condemned at the Council of Nicea in 325. Nevertheless, it continued to exert a strong influence both in the East and the West, drawing under its sway any number of bishops and theologians. Accordingly, by Augustine's time, there had arisen a sophisticated intellectual tradition surrounding the central claim of Arian Christology that the Logos present in Jesus was not fully divine, but rather the highest of creatures. And Augustine feels that, before he enters into a detailed account of the Trinity, he must wrestle with a pointed argument that emerges from that tradition. This debate is the centerpiece of book five of the *de Trinitate*.

The book begins with an extraordinary observation: “From now on I will be attempting to say things that cannot altogether be said as they are thought by a man—at least as they are thought by me.”¹⁰ Augustine knows that he is entering that paradoxical space where there is a sharp distinction between—to use Aquinas’s terms—the *res significata* and the *modus significandi*, between the thing to be signified and the manner in which it is signified. He will say what he takes to be accurate things about God, but he won’t know quite what he means when he says them. When responding to the Arians, Augustine will be compelled to move outside of ordinary modes of discourse, to modulate into a new metaphysical key, precisely because he will be speaking of the God who is not a being in the world, not one thing among many.

The argument proper begins with the observation that God is a substance or essence, indeed the fullness of being, since he says of himself in Exodus 3:14, “I am who I am.” Now, according to classical philosophy, substances admit of accidents, i.e., modifications and non-essential attributes, through which and because of which they are capable of change. But God, who is absolute, simple, and unchanging in his reality, cannot admit of such features. With this basic principle Platonists, orthodox Christians, and Arians would be in agreement. But on the basis of the divine simplicity, the Arians forwarded an objection to Trinitarian language that Augustine himself qualified as “cunning and ingenious.”¹¹ Orthodoxy, they said, speaks incoherently, for it characterizes the Father as unbegotten and the Son as begotten, even as it confirms that the Father and Son are of the same substance. But this kind of attribution of mutually exclusive qualities—continues the argument—is possible only if one is referring to accidental modifications of a substance. Thus I can coherently say that I am wearing a black shirt and wearing a white shirt, if I am referring to time-conditioned accidents: a black shirt on Monday, a white shirt on Tuesday. But I cannot say, without contradiction, that I am a human being and an angel, since those terms describe, not accidents, but substance. But, as both the Arians and the orthodox agree, there are no accidents in God. Therefore, it seems to follow that

¹⁰ St. Augustine, *The Trinity*, bk. V, tr. Edmund Hill, O.P. (Brooklyn: New City Press, 1991), 189.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 191.

these terms—“begotten” and “unbegotten,” “Father” and “Son”—must refer to different substances, and this is precisely the Arian position. The Son, begotten of the Father, they maintained, is a creature, a being separate from the Creator. Thus it appears as though the Arian position is logically coherent, whereas orthodox theology is caught on the horns of a dilemma.

What does Augustine do? Compelled by the exigencies of revelation and the pointedness of this objection, he searches for a metaphysical category beyond the pair of substance and accident. The Arians have convinced him, not that Trinitarian language is incoherent, but that whatever these terms “Father” and “Son” refer to must be something other than substance and other than accident. Here’s the way that Augustine stated it: “The negation of accidental predication of God does not mean that everything said of him is said substance-wise.”¹² At this point, he is speaking, in terms of classical metaphysics, so much non-sense, and he knows it. What he implies is that the terms that properly describe worldly things cannot adequately describe the one who is the Creator of the world and therefore outside of the nexus of conditioned things. From the data of revelation, Augustine knows that the Father is spoken of only in relation to the Son (he is the one from whom the Son comes forth and the one who sent the Son) and the Son is described only in relation to the Father (as the recipient of that begetting and that sending). Both Father and Son are constituted, as it were, *ad aliquid*, in relation to one another. It would be quite impossible to speak of the Father in abstraction from the Son and vice versa. At the same time, the revealed Scriptures also teach that neither Father nor Son can be described as subject to accidental modification, since both are clearly described as divine: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (Jn. 1:1). Therefore, both are *ad aliquid*, yet without change, modification, or evolution: “Since the Father is only called so because he has a Son, and the Son is only called so because he has a Father, these things are not said substance-wise, as neither is said with reference to itself...Nor are they said modification-wise,

¹² Ibid.

because what is signified by calling them Father and Son belongs to them eternally and unchangeably.”¹³

So what precisely are these strange things, these relational substances, these substantial relations, unlike anything in creation? Following the lead of the tradition, Augustine chooses to call them “persons,” but he is well aware of the problem inherent in this kind of appellation. To call Father, Son, and Holy Spirit “persons” is to run the risk of giving the false impression that they are three separate beings, three substances standing over and against one another, like three human persons meeting one another across a table. So why use this highly ambiguous term? Augustine’s answer constitutes, I think, one of the great moments in the history of negative theology: “we call them ‘persons’ not in order to say precisely what they are, but in order not to be reduced to silence.”¹⁴ In other words, we give them this name so that we have something to say when we are asked what they are. Centuries after Augustine, St. Anselm would memorably call the Trinitarian persons, “*nescio quid*,” I don’t know what. And Thomas Aquinas would use Zen-like language, describing them as “subsistent relations.”

Now to be fair, a critic might wonder at this point how all of this is anything but logic-chopping, special pleading, and obfuscation. The language that Augustine formulates to hold off the Arian criticism is a gesture in the direction of something quite revolutionary, namely, that to be God is to be a community of relationality. This peculiar set of terms indicates that the ground of existence, the Creator of all things, is a co-inherent *communio* of three persons, each one constituted by its relation to the other two. In his *Introduction to Christianity*, Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, commented that the Trinitarian formula implies that the relative has been absolutized, thereby turning on their heads both ancient and modern philosophy.¹⁵ In most forms of metaphysics, both ancient and modern, and in accord with common sense, substance is privileged over relationship, the latter viewed as a modification of the former. On Aristotle’s reading, for example, substance comes first, since substance coincides with the basic category of being, and

¹³ Ibid., 192.

¹⁴ Ibid., 196.

¹⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 129.

relationships, derivative of substance, come definitively second. But in light of the Trinitarian formula, we see something completely different: at the most fundamental level of existence, substance and relationship utterly coincide. To be is to be in rapport with another, for the Father is the Father only in relation to the Son, and the Son is Son only in relation to the Father, and the Holy Spirit is nothing but the relation between the Father and the Son. Through and through, the divine reality *is* a communion of love. God is like a harmony or a musical chord. Though it is impossible to think three things or objects together as one, without falling into contradiction, it is altogether possible to think three notes together as one, perhaps the A-note played in three different octaves. This we find, not contradictory, but delightful and congruent. And so the three “persons” of the Trinity, the three subsistent relations, might be construed as a musical pattern.

Now even if we have followed Augustine’s argument to this point and find it convincing as an answer to the Arian objection, we might perhaps still wonder why this clarification matters for us today. As I’ve already hinted, the modern world is very much under the sway of a substantialist notion of reality, the conviction that individual things are the basic constituents of being. We can find this individualist and antagonistic ontology in Leibniz’s monadology, Kant’s account of the moral life, and in Nietzsche’s doctrine that plays of power are metaphysically basic. We can also discern it in the assumptions that undergird the political life in most of Western culture, including and especially in our own country. The principal philosophical figure among the founding fathers of this nation was Thomas Jefferson, and the opening paragraphs of the Declaration of Independence are the clearest articulation of Jefferson’s perspective. Society, we hear, is not natural but artificial, a construct of individuals whose pursuit of happiness lands them in the untenable position of violating one another’s rights. Government is instituted, we are further instructed, so as to secure and protect these threatened rights. The chief influence on Jefferson’s political philosophy was, of course, John Locke, but behind Locke stood the pivotal figure of Thomas Hobbes, the first great philosopher to dissent from the classical position that human beings are, by nature, social animals. Hobbes taught that we are, by nature, not social but antagonistic, since we are all striving as fully as possible to achieve our self-interested ends. This condition results in the war of all

against all, the terrible state of nature that Hobbes famously described as “nasty, brutish, and short.” The fear of violent death is what compels individuals, very much against their wills, to enter into a social contract and institute government. Though somewhat softened and nuanced, this same basic form is easily discernable in the ruminations of Jefferson.

My point is this: the Hobbesian account of politics rests upon the assumption of the primacy—both chronological and ontological—of the individual person over the community. Modern politics, like classical metaphysics, is thus rooted in the conviction that substance trumps relationship. What would political philosophy look like were the Trinitarian assumption that relationship is ontologically basic to hold sway? Would social contract theories not have to give way to accounts of society that are far more communitarian and mystical? And would the sovereign individual not have to cede to the self constituted precisely by a set of relationships with others? Would not society, in a word, have to be re-thought precisely as an *imago Trinitatis*?

Augustine’s Argument with the Romans

The two arguments that we have been considering led to a third, one that preoccupied Augustine toward the end of his life and that found expression in the third of his masterpieces, *The City of God*. As is well known, Augustine composed this work in order to counter the charges made after the sack of Rome in 410 that the empire had collapsed because of the nefarious influence of Christianity. His answer was, in a nutshell, that Rome fell, not due to its adoption of Christian thought and practice, but due to decidedly un-Christian vices buried deep within its own body politic. What strikes the modern reader of *The City of God* most immediately perhaps is Augustine’s adamant refusal to dialogue with representatives of the polity of Rome. In so many of the theological engagements with culture today, a correlationist model holds sway, that is to say, the establishment of a correspondance between the concerns and questions of the secular society on the one hand and the data contained in revelation and tradition on the other. But Augustine’s style is not the least correlationist or accomodationist. He is not looking for a way to make the social theory of Rome compatible with an interiorized

Christian piety; rather, he is attempting to show that what passes for justice and right social order in Rome is in fact fraudulent and that the Church alone represents the right political vision.¹⁶

Though it was seen by its own apologists as the paragon of law and justice, Rome is in fact nothing but a collectivity of thieves. The reason is that Roman order is based upon self-love, the fundamental principle of what Augustine calls the *civitas terrena*, the earthly city or the city of man. His argument for this extraordinary—and at the time deeply counter-intuitive—claim has a theological phase and a political phase. Let us consider first the theological dimension. Many contemporary readers of *The City of God* find puzzling the amount of time and space that Augustine devotes to the critique of the Roman gods and goddesses and of Roman practices of worship. In point of fact this critical analysis is decisive to his overall argument, for Augustine is convinced that political rectitude follows as a direct consequence of right religion. Rome is an ersatz political order precisely because it indulges in the worship of false deities. Even the most casual survey of Roman mythology and literature reveals that the gods whom Rome revered were, from a moral standpoint, highly questionable. According to the accounts of their own devotees, they engaged in every sort of immoral activity from rivalry, pettiness, and jealousy, to backstabbing and outright warfare. They seemed hardly gods at all but projections of the worst elements of human beings. Augustine in fact does not hesitate to characterize them as the demons spoken of in the Scriptures.¹⁷ But the point is this: to discover what a society worships is to discover what it values most highly, seeks to imitate, and considers ontologically basic. Rome's worship of violent and antagonistic gods thus gives away the game. Romans must believe that proper social order is a declension of the morally disreputable social order of the Olympian deities, and this means that their justice is, despite its sterling reputation, phony.

¹⁶ See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 389-390.

¹⁷ St. Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, ed. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 61.

And from this theological analysis flows the properly political phase of Augustine's anti-Roman argument. Rome is a social order based upon the *libido dominandi*, the lust to dominate, which is so characteristic of the gods that Rome honors.¹⁸ This particular determination of Roman society can be easily discerned in the founding myth of Romulus and Remus. The twin boys, who were tellingly nursed by a wolf, came into conflict soon after establishing the new city, and Romulus killed his brother, thus establishing his dominance. The political lesson implied in this story is that order is a function of violence and conquest. And this lesson, on Augustine's reading, provided the *leitmotif* for all of Roman history. He remarks that the door to the temple of Mars—the god of war—has been open throughout the Roman centuries, proving that the “justice” of Rome is not the *tranquillitas ordinis*, but a certain quietude born of fear. The *libido dominandi* of the gods and goddesses became the *libido dominandi* of the Roman political authorities, bad worship conducing to bad government. It was due, Augustine argues, to the fundamental injustice of this Roman pseudo-order that the empire dissolved and was overrun.

What Augustine proposes over and against the Roman *ordo* is a different form of worship and a different form of government. Christians believe, not in the dysfunctional and demonic gods of paganism, but rather in the one God of creation, the power who brings the whole of the universe into being *ex nihilo*. In the pagan myths, order comes through a primal act of violence and conquest: Saturn devouring his children, Jupiter conquering and killing his father and then parcelling out earth, sea, and sky to his pliant siblings. But there is none of this in the Christian account, according to which God, who has no need of the world, brings the whole of creation into being from nothing.¹⁹ This means that God does not wrestle anything outside of himself into submission or subject it to conquest, for there is, quite literally, nothing upon which God could impose himself. Rather, in a sheerly generous and non-violent act, God brings the universe into existence, gifting it with a participation in his own act of existence. In a word, *ordo* comes through peace. Augustine insists that when such a God is worshipped, a fundamentally different

¹⁸ Ibid., 225.

¹⁹ Milbank, 391.

form of social order comes into existence, one based upon connection, compassion, forgiveness and non-violence. This other city, this alternative form of political arrangement, is the *civitas Dei* that figures in the title of Augustine's great work. It is an earthly community that mirrors the heavenly *communio* of the angels and saints, gathered in worship around the throne of God.

Augustine affects a brilliant correlation between the founding myth of Romulus and Remus and the Biblical story of Cain and Abel. In the Scriptural account, Cain, in his jealousy slays his own brother and becomes, in a fascinating detail, the founder of cities, thus a blood brother of Romulus. But whereas Romulus is the hero of the Roman story; Cain is cursed in the Biblical account. Both Romulus and Cain are, through their violence, progenitors of the earthly city, but the Bible is under no illusion that that way of arrangement is anything but criminal and unjust. In the Roman myths, the gods sanction the primal violence; in the Biblical story, God sides with the murdered victim.²⁰ Just before commencing his public ministry, Jesus confronts the devil in the wilderness. In Matthew's version of this story, the climactic temptation has to do with power. In one glance, the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world in their splendor and offers them to him, specifying that they are in his gift precisely because they belong to him. That frank Biblical assessment of the nature of worldly power is perfectly in line with the story of Cain and utterly antipathetic to Rome's self-congratulatory conviction that it is the paragon of justice.

Now Augustine's metaphysical vision of creation and participation held sway in the Christian thought world through the high Middle Ages and was given especially convincing expression by Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century. Thomas saw creatures as intimately connected to one another through their common connection to the creator God. As the myriad elements in a Gothic rose window are linked to one another and to the center by the integrity of the design, so all creatures are united to one another by their shared provenance from the God who creates *ex nihilo*. This integrated vision begins to come apart through the metaphysical and epistemological adjustments proposed by Duns

²⁰ *The City of God*, 634-638.

Scotus and William of Occam in the later middle ages. Turning from Aquinas's analogical conception (the epistemological correlate to a participation metaphysics), they opted for a univocal construal of the term "being," thus placing God and creatures under the same ontological umbrella. And this move turned God into one being—however supreme—among many, thereby effectively severing the links between God and creatures and hence among creatures themselves. No longer joined ontologically by the most intimate bonds, creatures and God had to negotiate their relationship artificially and extrinsically, by means of law. That this theological move had a political counterpart in social contract theories of modernity should not, if we are careful Augustinians, surprise us in the least.

Does this final Augustinian argument have a resonance today? Many contemporary theologians—Stanley Hauerwas, John Milbank, Graham Ward, Michael Baxter to name just a few—hold that Augustine's disagreement with Rome remains extremely instructive in regard to our engagements both theological and political. They think that we have largely lost sight of the properly subversive quality of the Biblical revelation that God is love and that all creatures exist in the measure that they participate in the divine love. The modern nation-state, they tend to argue, resting as it does on fundamentally Hobbesian foundations, grows up out of a metaphysical vision at odds with that of authentic Christianity. And one of the principal tragedies of our time, they continue, is the co-opting and positioning of Christianity by the nation-state. Conforming to the banalities of a civil religion, the Christian churches lose their prophetic edge and ratify a fundamentally Deist conception of God and an antagonistic understanding of social relations.

And what the churches should be doing is following the program laid out in *The City of God*, viz. the identification of the contemporary political order as antithetical to the Gospel. And, on a more practical level, they should be following the example of Martin Luther King in this country and John Paul II in Poland. Both of those prophetic figures refused the easy option of correlation and accommodation and, from a Gospel perspective, named the false theologies that undergirded the unjust social practices against which they

fought. John Paul II was consistently careful to root his critique of Communism in an alternative vision of reality, a metaphysics of love and co-inherence. Precisely because God is who he is, the social practices of Communism are de-humanizing. How thoroughly Augustinian, by the way, was John Paul's practice of situating the celebration of the liturgy at the heart of the project of social critique. Both Augustine and John Paul knew that right politics follows from right worship.

Conclusion

Let me bring this already too-lengthy paper to a close with just a few simple remarks. First, as John Henry Newman knew, the theological principle is basic to a healthy Christianity.²¹ This means that a properly functioning Catholicism is a thinking religion. Catholics are not fideists; instead, they stubbornly reflect upon the data of revelation, drawing out their implications and seeing their interrelationships. They take as their model the Virgin Mary who did not simply observe the extraordinary events of revelation, but rather "turned them over in her heart, treasuring them." Throughout his long life, Augustine thought about God, asking the hard questions, pursuing puzzles and conundra that would not have occurred to the average believer. And in the process, he produced a subtle, beautiful and finally revolutionary theology of God. So those of us today who are committed to the propagation of the Catholic tradition in and for the wider society should take Augustine's restless intelligence as a model.

Secondly and relatedly, ideas have consequences. Over the centuries, so-called pragmatists have opined that abstractions have little to do with the real world. Only those utterly blind to history could see that attitude as anything but idiotic. To be sure, they have to find effective mediators, but abstract ideas are practically the engine of historical change. The most potent idea of all, of course, is that of God, and St. Augustine perceived that the correct articulation of that notion can and must have far-reaching practical implications. We, the present-day keepers of the compelling Catholic understanding of God, should share that Augustinian perception.

²¹ John Henry Newman, *Development of Christian Doctrine* (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics, 1968), 336-337.