

Book Reviews

Michael Lamb: *A Commonwealth of Hope: Augustine's Political Thought*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022. Pp. xiii, 431.)

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This monograph is only one of several recent studies that offer new insights on the contribution of Augustine to political thought. It will astound some that such efforts are still conceivable, let alone worthwhile. To read Lamb's volume is to gain an immediate appreciation of Augustine's ongoing relevance, because his political thought is similar in scope to that of the great political theorists of the medieval, Renaissance, and modern periods.

Lamb believes that thinking politically with Augustine suggests a challenge directed at contemporary populism and (what he perceives as) Christian withdrawal from civil society. To his credit, Augustine eschews theory while rooting political goals in virtue, and then rooting virtue itself in true religion. Lamb argues that what Augustine meant was to show how Christian and Roman ("secular") virtue are compatible, to the extent that collaborative action is possible. Augustine exemplified this philosophy by his frequent advocacy before local magistrates. Augustine is an exemplar, according to Lamb, because virtue is framed by hope, which is neither optimism nor mere banality.

Lamb's approach is to interpret Augustine's texts carefully in their historical and literary contexts. He rightly seeks to move beyond the standard views of Augustine's politics, which tend to be shaped by a narrow reading of *City of God* XIX. Yet, the Cambridge edition of Augustine's *Political Works* does not contain an index entry for "hope" and *City of God's* brief references to hope are clearly framed in salvific terms. One might take from these facts that the thesis of Lamb's monograph is underdetermined by Augustine's own views. By speaking of Augustinian hope in terms of virtue, hope in his rhetoric and political hope, Lamb hopes to reframe the overall picture we have of Augustine on politics.

This project is not an easy one to execute since, as Lamb concedes, "Augustine does not provide much detail on the grounds of hope" (99). More promisingly, Augustine does not advance hope as an exclusively theological virtue, one oriented exclusively to the eternal realm, as Augustine's many defenders believed. According to Lamb, hope as Augustine conceives it is a reasoned anticipation in the light of providence, inspiring its adherents in a *via media* between the opposed temptations of presumption and despair. It also serves as a middle term between faith and love. At first glance, what

makes Lamb's claim somewhat implausible is that Augustine reflected considerably on these two other theological virtues, faith and love. Augustine set the terms of an entire biblical tradition of interpretation by stressing the love of God and neighbor. His "ordering of one's loves" is taken to be the form that virtue takes in response to the prideful and delusional character of precisely those polities that hope for justice in the *res publica*. So, hope seems to be an Augustinian afterthought.

But the conviction that animates the volume is constructive and interpretive. Although Augustine never adopted a doctrine of the mean, Lamb thinks that the elements of such an approach are evident in plain sight in the church father's work. Contrary to the Augustinian realists who read him too pessimistically, Lamb believes that citizens can begin to "experience the 'first fruits' of God's kingdom here and now" (173, 200). Hope is key to Augustine's "incompletely theorized argument" (186) against Rawlsian comprehensive accounts of common goods amid deep disagreements. Hope is a virtue that not only permits but cajoles Augustine's Christian audience to engage in "coalitions" with others in the pursuit of common goods. Martha Nussbaum missed this point as did Herbert Deane, for completely different reasons.

Faith permits the hopeful value of temporal goods, not just eternal goods (51). Faith is the reason for hope and it is present rhetorically in a "default and challenge" dialogical style in favor of tradition, against various detractors. Hope, according to Augustine, is vital for "habituating virtue" (128), it is "not incompatible with lament" (134), and it is what "God gives us" to overcome vain beliefs of the City of Man (167). The position Lamb advances on the basis of Augustine is that of a "partially realized eschatology" in which we begin to participate "in the heavenly city in the here and now" (168).

Lamb's argument is keenest when it centers on the disputed points of contemporary secondary literature, which will interest specialist readers. In fact, I wish there were more analysis of Oliver O'Donovan, Robert Markus, Pope Benedict, Jean Elshtain, and John Milbank. Other names are completely missing from Lamb's text, such as the American theologian William Cavanaugh, whose interpretation of Augustine in a critique of democratic capitalism is astute.

This volume contains fine insights on the breakthroughs and the drawbacks of the grandees of this past century's Augustinian scholarship. However, I am unsure whether Lamb has fundamentally shifted the understanding of Augustinian politics very much. The evidence for Augustine's ecclesial sense of Christian identity massively leans away from the "coalition politics" that Lamb seeks to underwrite. The examples cited to support a politics of hope, such as the figure of Roman official Marcellinus, a Catholic, are insufficiently powerful to counter Augustine's main message of the necessity of godliness for virtue. At several points, Lamb "wants to extend" Augustine's rhetoric "beyond the bounds of the church into the realm of public life" (204) to counter the temptation to withdraw from the public realm. Is such logic warranted? Very possibly. But on Augustinian

grounds? Unlikely, especially given the nature of Christian retreat. If we consider current contests over homeschooling, sexual norms, and political participation, religious people often report being suppressed in the public square. Withdrawal is not necessarily voluntary or initiated.

Lamb cites “servant leadership” in Augustine (217) and he claims that Augustine’s citation of the Israelites’ Babylonian exile, reported in Jeremiah 29, is illustrative of the service owed by people of faith to others. Christians must seek peace in Rome, the new Babylon, “forming and being formed by relationships with fellow citizens in a city they now share” (227). While such agreeableness might please contemporary readers who dislike Christian withdrawal from the public square, I am unsure whether Augustine’s advocacy of overcoming evil with good fits easily with such a picture. Augustine was no pluralist. It is glib to associate Augustine with a “vision of the commonwealth that does not necessarily require citizens to order their hopes toward the same ultimate ends” (267). Augustine’s *visio* is different. It concerns the Christian kingdom. Augustine sees the commonwealth as a divine concession, an accommodation. Consistent with that approach is the belief in reform of his opponents rather than subjugation or torture, and Lamb’s analysis (208ff.) appositely shows this in regard to Augustine’s Donatist opponents—Augustine’s letters correct the more punitive tone in *City of God*. However, Augustine’s liberality does not amount to a liberal theory of politics. Commendably, Lamb provides suitable levels of steelmanning the arguments that go against his position. With 133 pages of notes and bibliography, this volume embodies a careful, comprehensive, and clear-sighted form of scholarship that will settle some matters of textual interpretation but not as much in the contemporary application of Augustine’s ideas.

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Mathias Risse: *Political Theory of the Digital Age: Where Artificial Intelligence Might Take Us*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. vii, 258.)

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Today’s technology companies seem to move so fast and break so many things that it is hard for academic scholarship to keep up. Mathias Risse’s *Political Theory of the Digital Age: Where Artificial Intelligence Might Take Us* examines the ethics and politics of various digital technologies, such as deep-fake videos, artificial intelligence (AI), and data collection business practices