

Augustine And The Limits Of Politics

"pacifism," or principled rejection of all coercive force, within the traditions of Judaism and Islam. This volume actually does more, however; it provides a significantly broader overview of the scope of sociomoral issues such as war and peace, as well as violence and nonviolence, thus providing the reader with a context to better understand Abrahamic religious thought.

The intellectual discussion which spawned this volume took place in 1990 at the Center for Interreligious Dialogue at Washington University in St. Louis. Having brought together eminent scholars in the field to investigate the Judaic and Islamic views of quietism and pacifism, the book emerged from a methodology based on scholarly presentation and critical, constructive response.

This work contains a wealth of information for the student of religion and politics as well as political theory. The scholars involved in this project clearly defined and defended their particular religious approaches to conflict in the secular sphere; a fact which makes this book a critical adjunct to the exposition of the diversity of thought mandated by the nature of multiculturalism in the university today and current society as a whole.

The book is organized, at the beginning, around the Jewish interpretations of war and peace, as well as violence and nonviolence. Next, the Christian response is given. Then, the Islamic tradition is laid out and critiqued. Finally, a challenge is offered to all religious groups to influence the development of more moral and humane social policies.

Brody and Gindler begin by presenting two excellent exegeses of the Talmud and the writings of the great rabbinical scholars, while Mirsky and Goodman look at concomitant Judaic principles from historical and philosophical perspectives. All four leave the reader with general standards on which to validate the coercive activity of the state: actions taken in the name of direct divine command; policies implemented by religiously established governments acting under revealed law; and measures taken by secular governments following revealed law.

These principles, however, are challenged by Yoder's piece, "On Not Being in Charge." His contribution serves as a transition in the dialogue and calls on religious nonelites within society to use quietism and pacifism to influence the state to protect the freedom of every religious organization to advance its own salvific mission. He believes that this kind of action will, in turn, bring about a more moral society.

The book then takes up Catholic responses by Langan and Wink, each of whom argues for nonviolence and pacifism based on the Augustinian tradition of just-war theory. About three-quarters into the volume, then, the book finally turns to a justification for violence in Islam by Sachedina. Emphasizing the quandary of the moral imperative to pursue a divinely revealed social order throughout the world, his exegesis clearly defends the religious validity of using force to spread religious truth.

The dialogue ends with a philosophical discussion of the potential for creative nonviolence in Islam by Nagler and a piece on secular pacifism by Gaffney. The entire book, then, is an attempt to educate the reader about the religious traditions of Judaism and Islam and to place their beliefs on quietism and pacifism on a continuum of sacred thinking on the critical issues of war, peace, violence, and nonviolence. Yet, the volume reflects an inherent disparity, a dynamic tension between the legalistic methodology of the Jewish and Islamic scholars, on the one hand, with the relational approach of the Christian respondents, on the other. As a result, the different perspectives reflect the Abrahamic interpretations and commitments to ontological obligations, while the Christian views encompass innovative and creative solu-

tions to the challenges of the secular world. Thus, the chapter entitled "Is There a Tradition of Nonviolence in Islam?" by Nagler, which is the shortest but clearly the most insightful piece in the book, best raises the central but unanswered question of the dialogue: How can God ask humanity to avoid violence and ensure justice at the same time?

This is the problem that stymies the Abrahamic scholars, for the legalistic approach forces them to retreat to religious texts for justifications of violence or pacifism rather than seek ways to pursue the creative solutions between them. It is here that Nagler opens a window and points to the power of positive nonviolence. As preached and practiced by Mohatma Ghandi and Kahn Abdul Ghaffar Khan, positive nonviolence, according to Nagler, contains the seeds of action within both quietism and pacifism. It presents a creative way to "find another kind of power," a power in which religious groups can take part and lead. This includes, but is not limited to, education and other activities designed to transform the very nature of society.

Such creative solutions have been used increasingly by religious groups in recent years to make significant, peaceful change in the world. For example, in Latin America, Catholic lay and religious activists have established Christian-based communities whose purpose has been to empower individuals to develop and practice democracy and a qualified capitalism. As a result, both El Salvador and Nicaragua, specifically, are on the way to transforming themselves, as is much of society in the Southern Hemisphere. Clearly, the U.S. civil rights movement led by Southern Baptist ministers, the establishment of a foreign policy based on human rights led by the National Council of Catholic Bishops, and the sanctuary movement championed by the Presbyterian Church have brought about the development of a more moral domestic and foreign policy in the United States. Furthermore, the Lutheran alignments to bring down the wall between East and West Germany and the Catholic support of the trade union Solidarity in Poland have played a significant role in the demise of Communism in Eastern Europe. The Quaker conciliation of the Nigerian civil war, the role of the Anglican Church in destroying apartheid in South Africa, the activities of the Catholic Church in the Philippines and of the Congregationalists in Zimbabwe, all attest to the creative and positive nonviolent, religious solutions to problems within society. Yet, this volume seems to miss this basic point.

The flaw in this book is that it presents valuable information without considering creative breakthroughs and applications for many of the most volatile problems facing those within the Abrahamic tradition: how to resolve Biblical conflicts over territory in the Middle East, how to bring about respect for ethnic and religious diversity in the area, and how to plan for a future devoid of war as the millennium approaches. This volume is intellectually correct but without vision and relevance for the future. Nevertheless, *War and Its Discontents* is worth reading for the information it conveys, but recommendations for practical solutions clearly must come from the reader rather than the participants who gathered to discuss quietism and pacifism in the Abrahamic tradition.

Augustine and the Limits of Politics. By Jean Bethke Elshaint. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996. 143p. \$21.95.

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Jean Elshaint might appropriately have subtitled her book "An Appreciation." She does not attempt a comprehensive

Augustine and the Limits of Politics

The philosophy of Augustine of Hippo profoundly addresses the intersection of faith and politics, particularly emphasizing the inherent limits of political power. Born in 354 CE in what is now Algeria, Augustine's thoughts emerged during a time of significant social, political, and theological upheaval in the Roman Empire. His works, especially "The City of God" and "Confessions," provide critical insights into the nature of human society, governance, and the divine. This article explores Augustine's views on politics, the role of the state, and the implications of his thought for contemporary political discourse.

Augustine's Context: The Fall of Rome and a New Political Reality

The Historical Background

- The decline of the Roman Empire in the 4th and 5th centuries CE created a backdrop of political instability and moral decay.
- The sack of Rome in 410 CE by the Visigoths was a pivotal moment that shook the foundations of Roman authority and raised profound questions about the nature of human institutions.
- Augustine witnessed the erosion of traditional Roman values and the challenges of integrating Christianity into a predominantly pagan society.

Augustine's Response to Political Turmoil

- Augustine sought to address the spiritual crises of his time by distinguishing between the earthly city (the City of Man) and the heavenly city (the City of God).
- His writings reflect a deep concern for the moral and spiritual state of humanity, highlighting the limitations of earthly governance in achieving true justice and peace.

The City of God: A Theological Framework for Understanding Politics

Two Cities: The City of God vs. The City of Man

Augustine's "The City of God" articulates a dualistic view of human society:

1. The City of God:
 - Represents the community of believers bound together by their love for God.
 - Characterized by justice, peace, and the ultimate fulfillment of human purpose in divine love.
2. The City of Man:
 - Represents those who live according to their own desires and are oriented towards earthly, temporal goods.
 - Marked by conflict, injustice, and a transient nature that ultimately leads to destruction.

Augustine argues that the City of Man is subject to the fallibility of human nature and the consequences of sin, making it incapable of establishing a perfect society.

Political Authority and Divine Sovereignty

- Augustine emphasizes that all political authority ultimately derives from God. Even the most tyrannical rulers are, in a sense, instruments of divine order.
- He asserts that while the state has a role in maintaining order and justice, its authority is limited and should be viewed in light of a higher moral law.

The Limits of Political Power

Human Nature and the Fallibility of Governance

Augustine's understanding of human nature profoundly influences his perspective on politics:

- Original Sin: Augustine's doctrine of original sin posits that all humans are inherently flawed and prone to selfishness and corruption.
- Fallibility of Leaders: Given the sinful nature of humanity, political leaders are also fallible, leading to the potential for oppression and injustice.

This recognition of human frailty leads to a cautious view of political power:

1. Temporary Nature of Political Institutions: Augustine argues that earthly kingdoms are temporary and subject to change, decay, and eventual destruction.
2. Moral Responsibility: Citizens have a moral duty to engage in politics but must do so with an awareness of its limitations and the need for ethical governance.

The Role of the Church in Politics

Augustine's views on the relationship between the Church and the state are complex:

- The Church is seen as a guiding force for moral and ethical conduct, offering a transcendent standard that earthly politics cannot provide.
- Augustine did not advocate for a theocracy; rather, he believed that the Church should influence the state to uphold justice and righteousness.

Contemporary Implications of Augustine's Political Thought

Relevance to Modern Political Discourse

Augustine's insights into the limits of politics resonate powerfully in contemporary discussions:

1. Critique of Political Utopianism:

- Modern political movements often promise utopian solutions, yet Augustine reminds us of the inherent imperfections of human nature.
- He encourages a realistic approach that acknowledges human limitations rather than idealistic fantasies of a perfect society.

2. Importance of Moral Values:

- Augustine's emphasis on moral and ethical values in governance challenges contemporary political leaders to consider the moral implications of their decisions.
- His thought advocates for a politics informed by ethical considerations rather than mere power dynamics or economic interests.

Faith and Civic Responsibility

- Augustine's teachings encourage individuals to engage in civic life while maintaining a commitment to their faith.
- The balance between loyalty to the state and allegiance to God is a recurring theme, urging believers to navigate their political responsibilities with discernment.

Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of Augustine's Political Thought

Augustine's reflections on the limits of politics offer a rich framework for understanding the complexities of governance and human nature. His insights emphasize that while political authority is necessary for maintaining order, it is ultimately limited and should be viewed in the context of divine sovereignty and moral responsibility. In an age marked by political polarization and ethical dilemmas, Augustine's call for humility, justice, and the pursuit of a higher moral standard remains profoundly relevant. By recognizing the boundaries of political power and the importance of ethical governance, contemporary societies can draw from Augustine's wisdom to navigate their own political challenges, fostering a more just and humane world.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are the main themes of Augustine's political

philosophy?

Augustine's political philosophy centers on the concepts of the City of God versus the City of Man, the nature of justice, the role of divine grace in governance, and the imperfection of human institutions.

How does Augustine view the relationship between politics and morality?

Augustine believes that politics should be informed by morality, but recognizes that human institutions are inherently flawed. He argues that while political leaders should strive for justice, they cannot achieve perfect justice due to human sinfulness.

What is the significance of the 'City of God' in Augustine's political thought?

The 'City of God' represents a divine order that transcends earthly politics, emphasizing the idea that true peace and justice can only be found in the spiritual realm, rather than in temporal political structures which are often corrupt and temporary.

In what way does Augustine's thought challenge modern political ideologies?

Augustine's emphasis on the limits of human reason and the necessity of divine grace challenges modern ideologies that prioritize human autonomy and rationalism, suggesting that without a moral foundation, political systems are likely to fail.

How does Augustine's concept of original sin influence his views on governance?

Augustine's concept of original sin leads him to be skeptical of human nature and governance, arguing that because humans are prone to sin, political authority must be tempered with humility and a recognition of the need for divine guidance.

What role does Augustine assign to the state in relation to the individual and the divine?

Augustine sees the state as a necessary institution for maintaining order and justice, but it should always serve the higher purpose of aligning with God's will and promoting the common good, while recognizing that its authority is ultimately subordinate to divine law.

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