

AUGUSTINE'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE NATURE OF POLITICS AS THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION FOR A LIBERAL PLURALIST UNDERSTANDING OF POLITICAL ORDER

Pr. Dr. Lucian Mihăiță FILIP

Facultatea de Teologie Ortodoxă „Dumitru Stăniloae” din Iași

Abstract

Reaching the maturity of his conversion and climbing the stairs of the ecclesial responsibility, Augustine looks to his own spiritual pilgrimage and projects it upon the destiny of the whole world to send a message of hope. He indirectly touches some aspects concerning the politics not for its own sake but due to the moral issues that it poses for Christians that are in the same time part both of Church and of State that is ruled through politics. Ideally the State and the Church should work together towards maintaining the peace among people and help them in their pilgrimage to the City of God.

Keywords: Augustine, political order, politics, De Civitate Dei, The City of God, pluralism, liberalism, theocracy.

Figgis clearly states that „[t]he «De Civitate Dei» is not a treatise on politics”¹. But, if Augustine does not show interest for politics that does not mean that he condemns it. As a bishop of the Church he had to involve many times in political issues, during a period that the conversion of society to Christianity was still encountering many difficulties. The „City of God” represents the peak of his thinking and the peak of the development of his political ideas, bringing together in this book the observations and the conclusions reached in his earlier works. Though he did not set out on purpose to produce a theory of the State, this book has an apologetic character and most of it represents his doctrine of grace applied on the scale of world history².

¹J. N. Figgis, *The Political Aspects of S. Augustine's 'City of God'*, Longmans, Green, London, 1921, p. 3.

²J. N. Figgis, *The Political Aspects...*, pp. 5-6 and 66.

Although there is no debate in the „City of God” about the good and the bad parts of different forms of politics and no clear attempt to sustain an ideal, or a best possible, State³, in this paper I will argue that, because in the „City of God” Augustine presents us some of the components of the political theory, he has a balanced view concerning the political order. Though the „City of God” contains elements that could be used for arguing either for a liberal pluralist understanding of the political order or for theocracy, as a whole Augustine is critically concerning both views. Since Augustine was one of the most original theorists, his ideas about man, State, Church, and political order prove his concern of showing both the power and the limitations of any later political view. His endeavours to show the limitations of the political order on the backdrop of the Christian revelation and radical changes of history during his mandate as head of the Church represent two of the reasons why we should not struggle to find in Augustine’s writings useless political models, but points for certain political philosophies.

The nature of political order

In the „City of God” we find an understanding of political order within a secular pluralism. Augustine’s allusions to political order rise out of his critique of pagan Rome⁴. For this, he made use of the observations made from his role of bishop and built a Christian social theory inspired by theology and self-understanding of the Church. He places the history of man on a linear axis of time that starts with creation of the world and finishes at Last Judgment.

The source for Augustine’s understanding of political order is the biblical event of the Fall⁵. In the beginning, the life of the first people was governed by harmony and the State was against nature. The reality of State corresponds to the reality of the fallen man. A perfect being would not need the law, discipline, or political authority, but because of sin Reason cannot master neither the will nor the body, and a new natural order is needed. In the beginning

³ Augustine, *The city of God against the pagans*, (henceforth *City of God*) edited and translated by R.W. Dyson, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, p. xv.

⁴ R. W. Dyson, *The pilgrim city: social and political ideas in the writings of St Augustine of Hippo*, Boydell, W. Woodbridge, 2001, p. 210.

⁵ *City of God* XIV.10.

of creation, the only authority man had was over the irrational creatures⁶. In heaven there were neither kings nor rulers, but Adam was a shepherd. After the Fall, the human nature being corrupted, man started to exercise authority over his fellow men and thus the society became political through coercive authority, through law and through the hierarchy of rights and obligations. After the Fall, each level of the human society became marked by this political dimension⁷ and the political order became organised and ran based on the idea that it is dealing with fallen men. If man is naturally characterised as sociable, he „is not naturally political”⁸. The political order exists to maintain the earthly peace so that man can live together. This earthly peace is not a true peace and the same for the justice which exists only in the actual City of God, with God, in His Kingdom. This earthly peace is necessary for the citizens of the City of God while they are still in stage of pilgrimage on this earth. Thus, being the case, man must deal with both the responsibilities due to political order and those towards religion and thus: „[p]luralism, equivalence, and relativism necessarily follow”⁹. As we will see, because of these distinct responsibilities of Christians, religion could influence the political order and vice versa.

Augustine’s understanding of political order

In the present study, I disapprove with the liberal pluralist understanding of political order and argue for a more neutral and objective political point of view, based on the fact that Augustine’s political reflections do not comprise neither a deliberate nor even a coherent pattern for one singular political order. This ambiguous understanding of the political order at Augustine resulted in various types of politics during the centuries. The first people that found support in him for their form of politics were those that proclaimed papal authority over the political power. Afterwards, hundreds of years later and during the Reformation, the reformers argued that Augustine was very much in support of a secular, innovative and

⁶ *City of God* XIX.15.

⁷ *City of God* XIV.16.

⁸ Augustine, *The city of God against...*, p. xvii.

⁹ Graham Ward, *Cities of God*, Routledge, London, 2000, p. 233.

authoritarian political order. Finally, in the twentieth century, „liberals” repudiated the illusion of idealism in politics seeing in Augustine a natural master of suspicion¹⁰. All these three ways of understanding the political order show that Augustine did not envisage a particular type of politics. However, no matter how diverse are the forms of political order that found authority in Augustine, they all have something in common, something taken from him: the lack of interest in the political surface, God’s power to intervene in the political events, and a due respect for the rulers that obey the divine commands. The fact that none of the forms of political order previously mentioned can be fully based on the „City of God” is also expressed by others by pointing out the undefined feature of its political ideas. For example, O’Donovan expresses his doubts and makes a reference to Augustine’s understanding of the political order by calling it „the «value-neutral» political order seemingly encountered in the *City of God* 19”¹¹. Therefore, one should treat with caution the political elements of this book. The best way of approaching them is through a more balanced position than one that is clear cut but does not find solid ground in Augustine’s understanding of the political order. As we are going to see further, Augustine’s references to the public and political life are so intriguing that conduct to a variety of interpretations: hard realism, soft realism or authoritarianism¹².

Markus’ liberal pluralism

First, a basic distinction must be made between the form in which Augustine accepted pluralism and the form in which modernity finds it today. Augustine’s understanding of State neither searched for the „neutrality of classical liberalism” nor assumed a form of „maximal unity”¹³. Augustine did not intend at all a perfect

¹⁰ Oliver O’Donovan and Joan O’Donovan, *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Political Thought*, William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., Cambridge, 1999, p. 104.

¹¹ O. O’Donovan and J. O’Donovan, *From Irenaeus to Grotius...*, p. 105.

¹² Joanna Scott, *Political Thought, Contemporary Influence of Augustine’s*, in „Augustine through the ages: an encyclopaedia”, edited by Allan D. Fitzgerald, William B. Eerdmans Pub., Grand Rapids, 1999, p. 658.

¹³ Steven P. Millies, *The Saeculum and Politics: Markus, Fortin, and Augustine*, academia.edu (accessed on March 9, 2015), p. 8.

union between State and Church and neither a neutral-value of the State. Markus understood the term „liberal” political order as opposed to the „repressive policies of the African episcopate and the Roman government” and the term „pluralist” political order that it is „neutral in respect of ultimate beliefs and values”¹⁴. And thus, for Markus, the *saeculum* is a temporal dimension shared by both the believers and unbelievers. Following Graham’s conclusion, Markus is wrong when he affirms that „Augustine’s theology should at least undermine Christian opposition to an open, pluralist, secular society” but still is right in some respect to say that¹⁵.

Being a Christian, Augustine is critical of the pluralism in the *saeculum* and he sees that the only possible way of changing it is by transfiguration, and ultimately passing from this city to the next and the final one. Only then, „[o]nly at the last judgment will the *civitas terrena* be dissolved into its constituent atoms”¹⁶. Figgis also argues for earthly distinctions as symbols at Augustine, where the real separation is going to be made at the Last Judgement in sheep and goats¹⁷. From this perspective, Augustine is not arguing for a liberal pluralist understanding of the political order, but he criticizes and discusses it. He says that in some respects the political authority can damage or limit the damages that the will of man can do, „affecting a social peace which is shared by citizens of both cities”¹⁸. Millies says that, Markus worried that his 1970 book attributed to Augustine „a far more negative view of [the scope of public authority] than he would have intended”¹⁹. The cause for this worry is the rather optimistic interpretation of the political order that we find at Augustine and the possibility of existence of an authority proper ordered to generate the circumstances suitable to a Christian life by directing pagans and Christians alike toward the same object of their love.

Gregory states that „Augustine was not a liberal” but he also argues that if the meaning of liberal is modified and if some understandings of Augustine are also modified, then one can see a sort

¹⁴ R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine*, CUP, Cambridge, 1970, p. 139 and 151.

¹⁵ Graham Ward, *Cities of God*, Routledge, London, 2000, p. 278, n.10.

¹⁶ J. N. Figgis, *The Political Aspects...*, p. 51.

¹⁷ J. N. Figgis, *The Political Aspects...*, p. 52.

¹⁸ Graham Ward, *Cities of God...*, p. 278, n. 10.

¹⁹ Steven P. Millies, *The Saeculum and Politics...*, p. 29.

of liberalism in his writing²⁰. The fact that Gregory identifies in Augustine three forms of liberalism functioning in a pluralist society shows how large and complex is Augustine's view on the political order. The first one is a liberalism that supports the equality of all persons and individual's autonomy against the dominance of the group. The second is one in which the political arrangements must allow every person the maximum liberty as long as it is compatible with respect to the others. The final one is one in which the basic ruling principle is represented by love as a way of overcoming disorder and ideologies of self-interest. If the first type does not fit in the larger picture of the struggle between Augustine and Donatists and third one is very close to a utopia – Augustine acknowledged the flaws of the earthly city due to the sin, the second one seems more likely to fit in Augustine's view of political order. The basis for the pluralist view in Augustine's „City of God” is the fact that the society is made up of sinners, people that often bump up one into the other or hurt one another. But, as long as the liberty that people have do not harm neither physically nor morally the others, peace is being established. This is one aspect of the political life that no one can deny and neither Augustine does it.

Theocracy

This is not to say either that Augustine's understanding of the nature of politics provide the theological foundation for an understanding of political order like the one represented by theocracy. Theocracy sees that the natural law is absorbed by the realm of the supernatural law and consequently the State absorbed by the Church. In this way of reading Augustine's understanding of the political order, he would see Christianity as a political force that transforms the politics and produces something like a theocratic order. Now, the reason why neither the theocracy represents a suitable way of reading Augustine's understanding of the political order is because „Augustine's writings [...] never place the power of the sword in the hands of a bishop or pastor”²¹.

²⁰ Eric Gregory, *Politics and the order of love: an Augustinian ethic of democratic citizenship*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2008, p. 1.

²¹ Steven P. Millies, *The Saeculum and Politics...*, p. 6.

It is perfectly clear that the conditions for a „Christian State” that some commentators seem to think that Augustine regarded as feasible or necessary can never be realized on this earth²². Moreover, if this thing would happen, the political form that would result would not be a State ran by a political order, but a complete absence of the State as we know it. The entire form of organisation of the State – law, coercion, punishment – would be needless because it would be replaced by the paradise of true love, peace, and justice. The result would be that the City of God would be brought down from heaven to earth, which for Augustine is absolute impossible²³. However, in addition to this impossibility, „Augustine was far from taking the step which Gelasius I would take, of positing the pope as the emperor’s opposite number”²⁴.

Augustine does not envisage theocratic politics, a State ordered by the divine law, but he searches for a theocratic society, that divine dimension of man as a creature of God and dependent on His radical Principle. But, because no political form can claim to express this theocratic society that exists without the help of any political structure, we can speak about theocracy at Augustine, but not as a historical and institutionalised structure but as the sovereignty of man upon the State in the virtue of his absolute relation to God²⁵. Christians live their sociality not only protected or obliged by the law, but in the virtue of love for the divine justice that they contemplate through prayer. This does not mean they should be indifferent towards politics, though they could very well be. In Augustine’s view, Christians cannot be indifferent towards fulfilling this ordo of divine justice, of eternal peace, that implies the Universe, therefore the humanity and State.

A true theocracy cannot be possible on this earth because „true justice has no existence save in that republic whose founder and ruler is Christ”²⁶. In one place, Augustine gives a definition of the political organisation omitting the idea of justice²⁷, a definition

²² Herbert A Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St Augustine*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1963, p. 137.

²³ H. A Deane, *The Political and Social...*, p. 138.

²⁴ O. O’Donovan and J. O’Donovan, *From Irenaeus to Grotius...*, p. 109.

²⁵ *City of God* XIV.17.

²⁶ *City of God* II.21.

²⁷ *City of God* XIX.23.

„that permits us to include under it a wide variety of peoples and States with different goals and interests”²⁸. If we would accept it out of context it would certainly sound as a liberal pluralistic understanding of the political order. But, in the next chapter he gives another definition of people seeing it as an „assembled multitude of rational creatures bound together by a common agreement as to the objects of their love”²⁹. Now, if the same multitude of rational creatures, the common ground between the earthly city and the visible form of the City of God, would be Christians and people of God, then this State defined by Augustine would represent the best way of political interaction between Church and State for attaining the desired peace. However, in this State, people’s justice does not exist in its perfect state but in one as good as it can be established by the people who are not yet made perfect. „The justice that emerges in the well-ordered State is a most imperfect replica or image of true justice, no matter how good the intentions of the rulers may be”³⁰. Nonetheless, this is not a value-neutral State as the modern liberals acknowledged it. Nowadays, we see that both in the „national conflict and liberal democratic capitalism, Augustine continues his dual role as authoritative realist or tolerant pluralist at the service of the warring camps in contemporary debate”³¹.

The case may be that the Christians live in a State that is hostile to their presence, a „most wicked and most vicious commonwealth”³², or in one that is very close to a theocratic organisation. Both cases are very well possible but in either of them, Augustine argues for complete obedience on Christian’s behalf. He tolerates disobedience only in the case when the ruler’s commands run counter to the clear commands of God. The inauguration of the City of God on earth takes visible and imperfect form in Church, but that does not mean it asks also a political value. The mission of the Church does not concern the good of politics to heal and restore the politics but the social character of man, that fallen human ontological reality on which Augustine builds his understanding of the political order. The powers of the Church are not the law, but the Grace

²⁸ H. A Deane, *The Political and Social...*, p. 123.

²⁹ *City of God* XIX.24.

³⁰ H. A Deane, *The Political and Social...*, p. 136.

³¹ Joanna Scott, *Political Thought, Contemporary...*, p. 658.

³² *City of God* II.19.

and the Word and the Church represents the City of God by symbol and by identification³³.

Functions of the political authority

Having established the nature of politics at Augustine and the extent to which his understanding of the political order can be described either liberal pluralistic or as theocracy, let us now discuss the functions of the political order in so that we can better understand his political ideas present in the „City of God”.

First, the political order finds a purpose against pride. As Weithman argued „a primary function of political authority is the humbling of those subject to it”³⁴. But, at the same time, that does not mean that the political order can simply replace pride with the true virtue of humility before God. The true humility can be attained only in relation with God’s grace and in the life of the Church. When people are obedient to the political authority they are in fact obedient to God than to man, since God established the authority and the political order. In this way, Augustine’s political order prepares the way for learning the true virtue of humility in Church. Because we now speak about the fallen nature of men, just as a father has the duty to correct or punish his own children to make them better persons if they do something wrong, so the political order has the duty to punish the citizens who do not obey the law³⁵. These coercion and punishment instruments have been designed by God for the sinful condition of the fallen man. In the Christian State these instruments would not be able to be applied because this kind of State is ruled on love and forgiveness that remembers the rulers that themselves are sinners that need forgiveness. Thus, the State is a gift from God and the authority of the ruler is derived from God³⁶.

Augustine is critical about the political order due to „his keen awareness of the paradoxes and ironies that mark every aspect of the human condition, and especially of the political life”³⁷. The

³³ J. N. Figgis, *The Political Aspects...*, p. 51.

³⁴ Paul J. Weithman, *Toward an Augustinian Liberalism*, in “Faith and Philosophy”, 1991, no. 4/8, p. 469.

³⁵ *City of God* XIX.16.

³⁶ *City of God* V.19.

³⁷ H. A Deane, *The Political and Social...*, p. 141.

State should establish the peace of the body „so the body’s peace might produce the peace of soul”³⁸. The mutual relation between State and Church, as the one between body and soul, gives rise to a harmony of life and health, useful for entering in the City of God. Augustine says that „[t]he just man lives by faith. For we do not yet see our good, and hence we must seek it by believing”³⁹. All people seek this final good „that for which other things are to be desired” because it is in people’s instinct to live in peace⁴⁰. Now, the realisation of the earthly political order that can establish the earthly peace for the final good, is an aspect for which Augustine truly argues in this writing. The peace, built within the natural social capacity of man, can be considered the stretch of one’s existence in the existence of the others (i.e. only this „being together” can guarantee the existence of each one of us)⁴¹. Peace is established through this political mechanism because the corrupt nature of man needs to be disciplined and trained not to fall into destruction. However, the real peace that man desires comes only from the unity with God and in God and it cannot be attained in this world but in eternity. The earthly peace is on a short term and vulnerable whereas God’s peace is eternal. However, „it is advantageous to us also that this people [non-Christians] should have peace in this life; for, while the two cities are intermingled, we also make use of the peace of Babylon”⁴². This peace is useful for the things helpful to this life and for the acquisition of the necessities of life⁴³. When Augustine speaks about a king or a ruler which should use his power not only to secure the peace but also to encourage and defend the true religion he is reminding us of the mission of the ruler as a Christian before God. Fulfilling this he will win the salvation of his soul. However, Augustine does not say what the political authority should do or if the Christian ruler should neglect the fundamental functions of the political and legal order⁴⁴.

³⁸ *City of God* XIX. 14.

³⁹ *City of God* XIX.4.

⁴⁰ *City of God* XIX.1.

⁴¹ *City of God* XIX.12.

⁴² *City of God* XIX. 26.

⁴³ *City of God* XIX.17.

⁴⁴ H. A Deane, *The Political and Social...*, p. 133.

Seen from this point of view, the State is not an evil reality, but neither can it be considered an incarnation of the sacred. Objectively, it can be considered a guarantee of the earthly peace, of the material goods, and a reality whose function works within the realm of the man's temporal needs by taking care of them. This earthly peace is necessary for the citizens of the City of God while they are still in stage of pilgrimage on this earth. Thus, the political order offers outside safeness, even though it is temporal and vulnerable, even if it does not offer a warranty of the morality which depends only of man's free will. The State is not evil but is necessary since it secures the social peace, the order without which man would perish.

However, in one place from the „City of God”, in a similar tone to that from „Epistle 93”, Augustine states that the kings or the rulers of the State „might begin to persecute the false gods, for whose sake the worshipers of the true God had hitherto been persecuted”⁴⁵. Here, we find Augustine arguing for using the power of the State for converting to Christianity those that worship false gods. Obviously, this affirmation shakes any argument in favour of an understating of Augustine having a liberal pluralist view of the political order. But, what Augustine does, is to admit that the Church can show itself wiling to seek and accept State aid and protection⁴⁶. The political order is a necessary moral mediation between those that live in virtue and those that are led by vices⁴⁷. We might see a point in this affirmation if we think that Augustine's times were different from the latter ones. However, we do not have to forget that Augustine is critical towards the political order because it is rooted in the fallen nature of men and it is not natural for man. Thus, Augustine is critical concerning the context in which he writes, responding freshly to fresh challenges and conventionally in response to familiar ones⁴⁸.

Limitations

My point is that, in Augustine's view, due to its limitations, the political order should be one somewhere between liberal pluralism and theocracy. The State is limited because it cannot shape

⁴⁵ *City of God* XVIII.50.

⁴⁶ J. N. Figgis, *The Political Aspects...*, p. 228.

⁴⁷ O. O'Donovan and J. O'Donovan, *From Irenaeus to Grotius...*, p. 106.

⁴⁸ O. O'Donovan and J. O'Donovan, p. 105.

the thoughts, the desires, and the wills of people. The State does not seek to make people virtuous, but it is interested in the outward actions and the only thing it can do is to attempt to restrain people from criminal acts. It cannot „inculcate true virtue and wisdom in its citizens”⁴⁹. This limitation comes from the fact that the State is run by men which sometimes take decisions and make judgments based on self-interest and are dominated by passions. „People abide by [the conventions of justice] not because it is intrinsically desirable but for reasons of necessity or self-interest. Down deep, the brightest among them know that it is but a pretence”⁵⁰. Indeed, the political power can be misused but that does not cancel the power of grace.

What the State can do is to let itself influenced by the Church through the men that comprise the political authority. Augustine admits the power of the theological virtues of changing the political life. He speaks about the reason mastering the body by „divine guidance” and „divine aid” and thus ordering the men⁵¹. Extending this to the level of Church and State we can see how the Church can influence and help the State by divine guidance and aid. In the beginning of the „City of God” Augustine says that those people that have as rulers men with „piety of life” are fortunate people⁵². Augustine certainly had a balanced understanding of temporal politics because it can search and find a temporal and an earthly justice. The fact that this does not always happen is because the man that lives in the earthly city and holds the political power is corrupted and clouded either by interest or ignorance.

Augustine is neutral concerning any form of political order because he completely ignores the issue of judging and categorising different forms of politics, as well as the question of how a given system of rule can be changed to make it more just or more suitable. As Millies argues, „[w]e know that Augustine recognized a distinction between spiritual and temporal poles of existence, as we know that he prized the Christian and the eschatological vision of

⁴⁹ J. N. Figgis, p. 221.

⁵⁰ E. Fortin, *The Birth of Philosophic Christianity: Studies in Early Christian and Medieval Thought*, ed. by B. Benested Lanham (MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1996), p. 26.

⁵¹ *City of God* XIX.14.

⁵² *City of God* V.19.

human life more highly than he appreciated the political.”⁵³. As we saw in the beginning of the paper, the argument is that any form of government would be, the Christians should accept as a punishment and a way of reconciliation for their sins. Because the earthly city is materialist and idolatrous, the Church and the State are incompatible. But, even if, the State maintains the earthly peace by using coercion and punishment it is not value-neutral, because the Church supports the earthly peace and the State can maintain the earthly peace from which the Church can grow.

Conclusion

The „City of God’ is a work where both those in favour of liberal pluralism and those against can find their arguments. However, this does not mean that Augustine was in favour of both. A fair reading of Augustine would be an objective one situated in the middle of these two extreme points. Ideally the State and the Church should work together towards maintaining the peace among people and help them in their pilgrimage to the City of God. In the same time the State and the Church should neither identify one with the other, as the same entity nor the Church claim that the authority of the State should be in its power. I propose the see Augustine maintaining an equilibrium at every stage of sociality and especially of political order. In the „City of God” we can find those anthropological principles of a philosophy whose facts are able even today to shape the political system suitable to the present time because both then and now, the political order deals with the fallen nature of man.

⁵³ Steven P. Millies, *The Saeculum and Politics...*, p. 18.