

*POLITICS AND THE ORDER OF LOVE: AN AUGUSTINIAN ETHIC OF DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP.* By Eric Gregory. University of Chicago 2008. Pp. xiv + 417. \$45.00. ISBN: 0-226-30751-4.

“Augustine was not a liberal.” So goes the opening sentence of this prodigious book. But, if one modifies the meaning of liberal and modifies some understandings of Augustine, then an Augustinian liberalism can be envisioned that is well suited for our times. So goes the thesis of Eric Gregory, assistant professor at Princeton and one of the most erudite, young political theologians of our time.

Writing on politics can be inspired by marching in the street or by reflecting on the world seen through television or the internet. It can be done while reading newspapers with their accounts of government activities or while pondering journals with their policy proposals. Or it can be done, as Eric Gregory masterfully does, in the library comparing and contrasting the writings of some of the greatest theorists of present and past history. Readers who are interested in social analysis of current events will find little in this lengthy book. Similarly, Gregory is not concerned about the politics of any particular country. Rather, he sets out what he considers to be the most adequate concept of liberalism for our time.

Thus the book is directed to readers who already have at least a working knowledge of and intellectual interest in a great variety of religious, philosophical, and historical writers. It presupposes that readers are already at ease with large terms such as liberalism, Donatism (304), Kantianism (307), teleology, Christology, metaethics, and the like. In clear but highly condensed prose, Gregory confidently exercises scholarly judgment in three literatures: religion-and-politics, liberalism, and Augustinian studies. His library contains classical, medieval, modern, and post-modern authors; and he engages with them in a heady conversation over an Augustinian liberalism. In so doing, he reinterprets Augustine to show how this most Christian of theologians can improve contemporary secular liberalism. However, he is less concerned about what Augustine really meant and more concerned about how to make Augustinian themes function to support a liberal politics that Christians and non-Christians alike should support.

To Gregory, Augustine’s primary contribution to the political discussion is a two-fold theme: love and sin. (221) Love needs to be

practiced with an awareness that sin infects every good intention and activity. Sin needs to be resisted, but without losing sight that love is the core of human life. With this dialectic in mind, Gregory depicts three forms of Augustinian liberalism.

First, political thought dominated by wariness of sin often leads to a *Realpolitik* that emphasizes the dangerousness of others and the need to be ready to respond to violence with violence, e.g., torture to defeat terrorism. But it also emphasizes the intrusiveness of one's own government and civil organizations which therefore must be limited. Think Reinhold Niebuhr. (11-12) Augustine-the-realist warns against utopian tendencies. He places hope in the "other-world," not in innerworldly projects. Virtue considerations belong to the realm of individuals destined for heaven, not to the rough and tumble of conflicting interest groups. Otherwise, the "benevolent love" of the powerful ends up justifying pogroms, crusades, and slavery, not to mention paternalism and sexism. In response to these dangers, an Augustinian realist supports the equality of all persons and the individual's autonomy against the dominance of the group.

A second form of Augustinian liberalism, faced with the evident diversity of citizens, opts for political life that finds a way to tolerate great pluralism. Think John Rawls. In the naked public square, reason rules. Personal or communal convictions, whether religious, philosophical, or cultural, are not acceptable as public reasons. Justice as fairness prevails. (61) Social arrangements must allow each person to pursue maximal liberty, as long as this is compatible with respect for others.

A third form of Augustinian liberalism—Gregory's own—desacralizes politics, but insists that love and therefore the promotion of virtue in citizens is appropriate to a decent polis. Think Martin Luther King Jr. It insists that love has a place in politics for at least two basic reasons: first, politics should promote human flourishing and not merely restrain human sin; second, politics should have compassion for those who, being dependent, poor, or vulnerable, are not much helped by having "maximal freedom." Still, because of sin, this liberalism should aim at only a moderate perfectionism. (9) Thus, a love-based commitment to improving society has a place not only alongside of—but also as a way of overcoming—disorder and ideologies of self-interest. The virtuous motives of citizens should be an important consideration in Christian political ethics.

Gregory does not neglect those whom he calls the antiliberals, chiefly those in the Radical Orthodoxy school. Think John Milbank. (136) Such theorists denounce any Christian thinker who abandons the distinctive and interruptive Christian witness and instead supports the secular realm. Gregory replies that secular is not secularism. Instead, the secular world is the one embraced in the Incarnation. He agrees that a religious motivation which merely blesses secularism is wrong, but he argues that religious motivation, within a Trinitarian view, leads to better secular practices. Love is not merely an interior or subjective event.

To better situate love in politics—still with an acute awareness of sin—Gregory discusses at length the contribution that both feminists and liberation theologians can and should make to liberalism. An ethics of care corrects the isolated individualism and autonomy emphasized in many versions of liberalism. Human beings are relational through and through. Respect for others' freedom need not preclude active social compassion for their plight. Only a naive autonomy has no place for community and solidarity.

Feminists also correct the rationalism of Enlightenment thinkers who depreciated the emotions and failed to appreciate how emotions contribute both to understanding what is important as well as to commitment to what is valuable. The Augustinian question is not whether emotions are important for ethical life. They are. Humans are constituted by their loves, and so love should not be restricted to a putative "private" sphere. Rather the issue is the proper ordering of these emotions. Liberation theologians such as Gutierrez point out that love works to overcome unjust social structures and to create more just and compassionate systems. (190-91)

Having made the case that various forms of Augustinianisms are compatible with liberalism, Gregory then reverses direction: he tries to show that his "civic liberalism" is in fact compatible with Augustine of Hippo. Gregory begins with Hannah Arendt who argues the opposite. For Arendt, love is a political vice, not a virtue. (197) First, she argues, love has no place in the political sphere. This sphere should be characterized by publicness, not by inner passions such as love or righteous anger. The inner motives of citizens are not relevant; and, when expressed, they hinder rather than help public discussion and decision. Politics is about organizing the world, not the moral lives of its members. Second, when love for God is paramount, as it is for Augustine, in her view, this focus leads to the neglect of the world, not the practice of politics.

Gregory responds by showing that, contrary to Arendt, Augustine holds that, while indeed some passions are *perturbationes*, (278) others are in fact movements of the self toward value. That is, although the self can be tossed about by passions, mature agency depends on emotions. The question is one of well-ordered loves, not the absence of love. Critics such as Arendt can easily give examples of disordered loves, but fail to see that other loves rightly and insightfully shape how human beings perceive the world. Gregory explains, not fully convincingly, that Augustine's criticism of his own grief at the death of his friend was not a condemnation of emotion, but rather a self-accusation that he viewed his friend as a possession and not as God's creation. Thus, he did not have true love.

Gregory's Augustine escapes Arendt's second criticism, namely, that it is so focused on an otherworldly God that it has no authentic place for this world, in particular, for the neighbor. She argues that while Augustine dutifully repeated the second great commandment, his Platonic idea of love as *eros* led him to depict relationships with other people either as a sinful possessiveness or as stepping-stones to God and therefore not genuinely loved for themselves therefore not motivated by genuine love for others. The former treats people selfishly, the latter violates Kantian respect for persons. Gregory gives a novel (and again not quite convincing) explanation of Augustine's famous use/enjoy distinction. (380-81) He reverses the usual interpretation, arguing that to "use" friends is to enjoy them as if they existed for one's own pleasure, whereas to "enjoy" a friend is proper as long as one does so in God. Hence love of God and love of neighbor are united, which means that political concern for others is united with, though not identical with, love for God.

Liberalism recognizes that, especially in a pluralistic society, but above all in a society that is made up of sinners, people regularly bump up against or crash into one another. Gregory's civic liberalism acknowledges this fact of life in this world. His liberalism, however, affirms that often it is good that we bump into one another, engage in conversation, and then walk together as friends, building one another up. What is true of personal friendships also has a bearing on the public friendship that is or can be citizenship in society. Public friendships that insist on complete unanimity and disclosure (e.g., totalitarian systems) are doomed to violate individuals and to succumb to their own sinfulness. Likewise doomed are public friendships which encourage all parties, within minimal limits, to do whatever they individualistically desire. Rather, a liberal civic society should be made up of persons who,

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recognizing that they sin and are sinned against and hence need both restraint and protection, still are also concerned about one another and want to develop a common life that helps its members to flourish.

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