Refusing to Bless the State:
prophetic church and secular state

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'Jesus announced the Kingdom, and it was the Church that came'. The remark (made by Alfred Loisy) locates, with pin-point accuracy, the place of the Church on the map of salvation-history. Its existence here and now, in the time-span between the Lord's first and second Comings, is to be a sign of that Kingdom where there will be no more need for Church. By its very being the Church proclaims the comings of that Kingdom and is committed to being a question-mark set against all earthly societies and against any particular form of social organisation, institution or project. Among Christian thinkers few can have rivalled Augustine in constructing their thought within such an eschatological perspective. A sense of the huge distance that divides 'here' and 'now' from 'there' and 'then' runs like an axis through his mature thought. The first part of this article attempts a brief summary of his view of the nature of human society[*]; the second part is a reflection within such a perspective on the political tasks of a prophetic Church in a modern secular society.

I

Christian thought in the first three centuries was dominated, as it was bound to be, by the Pauline and, for that matter, the rabbinic tradition of thinking about social existence: the Christian, like the Jew, was necessarily an alien in his society, a traveller with no permanent home in it, The one and only just society was that which God would bring about in His Kingdom. In relation to earthly societies, Christians were aliens; in relation to God's Kingdom they were subjects, awaiting God's act to establish the society in which they would be gathered, rather than active participants in its creation, still less, its rulers. The conversion of the Roman emperors, and the accelerating christianization of Roman society in the fourth century, changed this, and changed it dramatically. Fourth-century Christians were not well prepared intellectually or spiritually for the experience of being transformed, almost overnight, from a persecuted minority into a dominant elite. They accepted with gratitude the miracle which turned their persecutors into their patrons, and they rapidly accustomed themselves to living in a society in which Christianity was a source of prestige, wealth and power. Within less than a century of
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Constantine's conversion the vast majority of Christians had come to identify themselves unreservedly, many unthinkingly, with the culture, the values, the social structure and the political institutions of the Christian Roman Empire.

Until the end of the fourth century, Christian thinkers and preachers were sometimes found trying to set limits to the Government's scope for intervening in the Church's affairs; but the prevailing assumption was hardly questioned: the Roman Empire was God's chosen means for the social embodiment of Christianity, with a kind of messianic mission in the world, its emperor the representative of God's own authority over a society which was the image of His Kingdom. The first to question such a model of Christianity in its secular setting was Augustine; and he came to question it only in his old age, having shared until his fifties the views predominant among his fellow-Christians. It is only his mature thought that provides an alternative to the idea of Christian society, dominated by a Christian elite called upon to impose its values on the secular world and to mould its institutions in accordance with its vision of the Gospel and the law of Christ.

The roots of Augustine's alternative lay in Saint Paul's understanding of the human condition. We have Augustine's own accounts which allow us to gauge the huge upheaval that his reading of Saint Paul wrought in his mind. It was some ten years after his conversion to Christianity. At the time of his conversion, he had been a Platonist as much as a Christian: the two bodies of thought blended harmoniously in his mind. As a Christian, he continued to believe in a rational cosmic order, a world hierarchy in which everything had its proper place, in subordination to what was higher and in control of what was below it. All that men had to do to achieve their own proper fulfilment in this ordered world was to follow the rational, cosmic, divine order in their personal as in their social lives. Society existed to embody this order and to direct its members towards their proper goals. By their rational actions and choices, exercised in a rationally ordered and governed society, they would thus attain their ultimate happiness. This is a classical scheme, Greek in origin, a commonplace widely held, not only in the ancient world, and, at this stage, Augustine found it blended quite easily with his Christian beliefs. But ten years later, when he re-read Saint Paul and meditated on what he read, he discovered the fatal flaw in this happy picture.

What the Greco-Roman image left out of account was sin; and it was the power of sin in human life that Saint Paul brought home to Augustine. There was still an order in God's world, to be sure; but it was not an order that one could quite so easily take for granted: it was hidden in the mystery of God's will. Nor could one be sure, even when one understood fragments of the divine order, of being able to realise it in one's own life and actions. Rebellious human wills would always tend to undermine the right order, not only between ourselves and God,

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ourselves and our fellow-men, but even within our own selves: we cannot, by our own rational and moral resources, establish, or rather, recover, that wholeness and harmony which the human race has lost with Adam's sin. We cannot save ourselves from the sway of sin by our own unaided efforts; salvation is not an ordered progression towards a distant goal, but a sustained miracle of divine initiative.

With the collapse of Augustine's belief in a rational order which could be embodied in individual conduct and in the government and institutions of a society, a drastic deflation of the state's function necessarily followed. The state, that is to say politically organised society, could no longer be man's guide to a prescriptive order, and could no longer embody such an order in social terms. Like all human works, it too was irretrievably infected with sin. All the structures of human domination are rooted in that sinful condition into which Adam's fall has plunged his heirs. It is important not to misunderstand this: Augustine does not mean that government, taxmen, police, judges and jails—all the machinery of what we call the state—are bad: they have their place and are necessary and are therefore good. What he means is that they are rooted in sin and belong to man's sinful condition in the sense that they are necessary to cope with the consequences of Adam's sin: with the loss of harmony, the subversion of right order, the disintegration of the primordial wholeness of innocence. The state has a crucially important function in this condition, but it is different from that given it in the Greco-Roman philosophical tradition. It does not embody the true social order and does not lead the individual citizen towards the realisation of his own ultimate good. Its purpose is to contain the disorder, to control the conflict, to secure the shared goods needed by all (we might think of protection from violence from within or outside, provision of public utilities, education, health care, protection of the environment and the like). Its business is to control the distribution and exercise of power, to prevent dangerous invasions and take-overs that might threaten to become oppressive concentrations of power or privilege; to protect the conditions in which individuals, families and groups can pursue their legitimate purposes in their own ways. In short, it provides the framework which makes moral living possible in this tension-ridden world which is the outcome of the tragic dislocation of the original order.

The worst self-deception, on this sort of theology of society, is the belief that there is an ideal society, no matter in what way it is defined, in which justice would be attainable, harmony between men secured, exploitation and oppression abolished. Any notion of an ideal society, just, humane, Christian, free of oppression and exploitation, would have seemed to Augustine a dangerous utopian delusion which risked distracting men from the urgent tasks laid upon them by their society. The administration of the common welfare and of justice, distribution of goods, defence and the rest, were just too important to be left to

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idealists. Augustine was deeply conscious of the precariousness of order in human affairs, the perpetual proximity of chaos and the threat of disintegration; and he thought it an inescapable duty to dedicate oneself to the task of fostering what oases of civilised order could be created in the world, to hold the ring against the ever-encroaching forces of chaos, and to do so in the knowledge that real harmony, order or justice would prove, ultimately, elusive.

In the human condition as it is, all social relations are distorted. Human nature, as Augustine always insisted, was created social. Community is the proper aim of living and the form of human fulfilment, love is its essential condition, and sharing the form of interaction among its members: 'fellowship among men is secured by giving and receiving'. And yet, every attempt of men to live together in organised societies is doomed—not to failure, but to a failure of love, of communication, of peace and concord. 'There is nothing so social by nature and so discordant by its perversion as the [human] race' (*City of God* XII.28.1). Tension, discord, and conflict are endemic in the society of fallen men; the structures of communication turn with grim inevitability into structures of domination, sharing into exploitation. But Augustine would have resisted any blanket condemnation of social structures and institutions on this account. When he wrote that 'human society is generally divided against itself, one part, the more powerful, oppressing the other' (*City of God* XVIII.2.1), he was not anticipating any modern theory of the state as rooted in class-war. He might have conceded that class-war may be an inevitable fact, exploitation and oppression being among the consequences of sin. But government, though itself also among these consequences, need not itself be an instrument of oppression. It can be, indeed should be, an agency by which oppression and exploitation are checked. The citizens of the Heavenly City, as Augustine would say, are not identified with the greed, the violence, the cruelty and the hypocrisy which characterise the earthly city. Full sharing and community exist only in the Heavenly City; the earthly city is structured on the politics of 'possessive individualism'. Augustine's validation of government is precisely that it exists to control the conflict and the insecurity inseparable from social existence on earth. Even though at any moment in time in any given society it will be hard to disentangle the extent to which power is being wielded for the common or for a sectional good, in principle it must be possible to distinguish a sectional from the common good and to ask which of them a government is dedicated to serving. This ambiguity is inherent in the nature of human society in the fallen state: for here the two Cities are inextricably interwoven, until their final separation in the last judgement. How far any political system or institution, still more any particular government, serves sectional interests rather than seeking to balance rival pressure-groups, how far they are instruments of domination and exploitation rather than means of promoting fairness and justice, may in practice be a

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very hard question to answer. But any political theology conceived on Augustinian lines must maintain the theoretical possibility of the distinction.

Augustine's thought on the nature of human society was born in a world in which there was no agreement on the ultimate questions of value and human purpose. After a generation and more of accelerating mass-christianization the culture of his society was still deeply penetrated by its Greco-Roman heritage; the social structure and the political institutions still present in it were determined by a long history of Mediterranean city-civilisation. This was the civilisation which Augustine tried to see in a Christian perspective. His views on the Roman state stemmed from a need he perceived to define it in a way such that it would have a legitimate claim on the loyalties of both its pagan and its Christian citizens. He could neither reject the secular institutions and the culture which went into its making, dangerously though they had been intertwined with a long pagan religious tradition; nor could he, on the other hand, consent to the wholesale way in which most Christians of his generation had come to identify themselves with the culture and the institutions of the fourth-century Empire. What he elaborated, towards the end of his life, especially in the later books of his *City of God,* was a theology in which the institutions and the culture of any human society were necessarily, and would always be, ambivalent. The function, values and aims of an institution or a society were not directly linked with the ultimates of human life, salvation and damnation, but concerned with an intermediate realm, the 'earthly peace': the sphere of the shared interests of its members, the matters which concerned them all equally, however different their religious loyalties, their ultimate values or political ideologies.

This view of the state and its function sprang from a sharp sense of conflicting purposes, conflicting value systems, conflicting ultimate loyalties in his society, and of tensions Augustine knew to be irresolvable in our present existence. I need not labour the point why I think something like his view of the state to be peculiarly appropriate in a secular world such as ours. Augustine's theology of social existence is a theology which comes naturally to people living in a society lacking a homogeneous culture, one in which no agreement can be assumed among its members on their value-systems, their world-views, religions: in short a 'pluralist' society, whose shared values extend only over a restricted area, the area which Augustine would have called 'the earthly peace', that is to say, those matters of everyday life, public order and safety in which everybody equally can be assumed to have an interest.

II

There is a powerful chapter in the *City of God* (XIX.6) in which Augustine asks us to imagine the best possible state and a truly wise man,

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one who is conscious of the uncertainties which beset human justice and the frustration of the best judge's most determined attempts to administer genuine justice even in this best of possible states: will such a man, he asks, dare to sit in judgement in this darkness of social living? 'Of course he will', he answers; 'for this duty is laid upon him by the solidarity of human society which he rightly thinks it wicked to repudiate ...' As Augustine's disturbing parable brings home, the very fragility of civilized order in the world demands that Christians should dedicate themselves to its preservation and enhancement. They must seek to promote, however imperfectly and however uncertain of the outcome of their fumbling, anything that contributes to the 'earthly peace': whatever makes for greater cohesion in society, whatever helps to eliminate conflict, whatever eases tension and confrontation. Augustine was, of course, far from indifferent to the values embodied in and pursued by a society. He devoted a searching chapter of his *Confessions* (III.8) to the conflict of loyalties which could arise from the claims of existing traditions and institutions and the claims of God's overriding authority. Cohesiveness and absence of overt conflict, though always of value, could not be unconditional objectives. Augustine would presumably have been prepared to accept the implication that a peace might be so unjust and repressive as to justify rebellion. If his theology of society can sanction insurgency, it must be in the expectation that it will produce a more inclusive and cohesive order fairly quickly.

Any attempt to construct a 'political theology' within an Augustinian perspective relevant to late twentieth-century concerns will necessarily place a heavy premium on the fostering of consensus and the minimising of conflict, at every level of government and administration. Not an inspiring conception of a task for a 'prophetic church', to be sure; but that is not, of course, what it is intended to be. What it states is not the Church's, but the state's responsibilities. Augustine was often very unclear about where the one ended and the other began (especially in his notorious endorsement of coercion of schismatics by the government); but in principle he saw the distinction very clearly. The earthly city, whose ultimate end cannot be the same as that of the Heavenly City, true worship of the One God, cannot be subject to the law which commands the Church. The state provides the space; the Church occupies it, uses it, acts in it. For the secular state, the Church is a pressure group among others, none of which have the right to expect a special, institutionalised or privileged influence in public life. What they have a right to expect is fair access to the public, reasonable opportunity to exert influence on its opinion through 'the usual channels'. The Church should be the source of a raging torrent of prophecy; the secular state can do no more than to canalise it, keep it flowing within safe banks, and, perhaps, alongside rival streams.

Does such a model of a tolerant secular state which refrains from meddling with matters of religion and religions which refrain from

meddling with the affairs of state foreclose any possibility of the Gospel meeting the world, making its impact upon it, even being rejected by it? This implication would follow only if 'Church' were understood in a way Augustine could never have imagined: as meaning the ecclesiastical institution, clergy or hierarchy. The Church as the community of the faithful is bound to be present and acting within, and upon, society wherever Christians are present and acting in the society. Its action, whether prophetic or not, is anonymous and diffuse, channelled through the committee, the party branch, the board of directors of whatever group the acting Christian happens to belong to.

I have considered only the mode of the Church's prophetic action in a secular society. The content of its prophetic preaching is a matter much harder to deal with summarily. Does an Augustinian perspective help in any way to define it?

There is even less point in turning to an ancient theologian for help in defining answers to the political questions of the 1980s or 1990s than in turning to modern theologians. But if it is pointless to try to extract political answers, it may nevertheless be useful to trace some limiting principles within which such answers might be formulated. Augustine would have begun with the reminder that the only fully humane and fully just society was that of the saints in the Heavenly City. The only form of human association based on the free decisions of human wills, bonded by the mutual love of its members rather than united by what he called 'social necessities', was the monastic community; its purpose was to be a visible reminder on earth of the eschatological society realised only in the Heavenly City. To all other human groupings the monastery embodied a challenge, not a model. The ideal is transcendent, infinitely remote; the gulf between it and the reality too deep to bridge. But his parable of the just judge, already mentioned, should serve as a warning against the desperately easy inference that indifference to the kind of regime in power, or cynical *Realpolitik,* are the only alternatives here. The search for justice, order, peace—'peace' in Augustine's many-layered sense—may have to take place in this 'darkness of social living', but it *must* be undertaken. It will rarely be possible to define the concrete objectives of this search in advance, in a form valid irrespective of the existing institutions, the political culture, the traditions of shared values and aspirations in a particular society. Moreover, Augustine would have been acutely conscious of the variety of the ways in which the Gospel could be understood among Christians. The search for programmes and policies is radically relativized, placed in the realm of what Bonhoeffer called the 'penultimate'. It must be conducted with toleration, even with a pinch of pragmatic detachment, rather than enslaved by ideology or fanaticism. Augustine would probably encourage a consensual rather than a confrontational style of political life.

His theology of fallen nature, would, however, furnish some clues as to the direction such a search might take. Adam's Fall was the epitome
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of human alienation from God, from created nature, from oneself, as well as from the society of one's fellows. Just as alienation from the physical world is revealed in pain, disease and death, alienation from one's own self in the opacity of layers of the self to its own consciousness and in the aching division of the self (reflected in the ungovernable drives of all forms of lust, especially sexual), so alienation from fellow-human beings is revealed primarily in the dislocation of human fellowship. The Fall was the fatal rupture of all community: community with God, with nature, with fellow-human beings and with one's own self. Its roots lay in human pride, which Augustine liked to think of as a retreat into 'privacy'. The self-enclosure he was referring to was 'living according to oneself', 'pleasing oneself', the 'fear of belonging to another, or to others or to God'. Private ownership of property came to symbolise for Augustine the fallen state of human society: here was the most visible symptom of the breach of that community which was constituted by sharing, what Augustine called 'social'. It did not follow that private ownership, any more than lawful use of power, had to be repudiated; but it does indicate the direction in which one might look for hints of a more humane form of society.

The key-note of an Augustinian vision of the social order would be consent. Not, to be sure, in the sense that other commitments are to be subordinated to its pursuit or neglected. A society is defined by the objects of its consent, that is, by the values to which its members have a shared commitment ('loves', in Augustine's vocabulary). The better or the worse the objects 'loved' by its members, the better or the worse the society. Its priorities will define the moral quality of a society, and much of political life is concerned with sorting out priorities. For Augustine consent is not a particular value among others to be aimed at. It is the context within which the commitment to a value is upheld and the search conducted, and the foundation of the society's cohesion around its values. Thus representative institutions are valued to the extent that they not only represent, but evoke the consent of the represented and are experienced by them as responsive to their needs.

The characteristic temper of an Augustinian approach to the question how a prophetic Church can act in a secular society would, I think, appear in the way it would conceive the nature of the political task, and how it would define its context; rather than in pointing to specific goals to be achieved. If this looks like pragmatism, perhaps a measure of prophetic pragmatism is appropriate to a prophetic Church in a secular society.

* The first part of this article is based on my book *Saeculum: history and society in the theology of Saint Augustine* (Cambridge, 1970; 2nd ed. 1988).