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“WE BELIEVE IN ONE LORD, JESUS CHRIST”

PROCLAIMING CHRIST’S LORDSHIP IN THE MIDST OF EMPIRE

The study of empire has become somewhat in vogue of late. In the area of New Testament, particularly Pauline studies, much fruitful work has been done in exposing the manner in which the apostle Paul conveys a Jesus who points us to a kingdom posited in radical opposition to Rome. Recent scholarship has drawn attention to the particular imperial context in which Paul encounters and proclaims Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, as one who offers political liberation from the oppressive political order that is Rome.¹ In this reading, Paul proclaims Jesus as one who has broken the hold of the powers and principalities and who will bring all worldly power under his dominion (Rom. 8:38-39; 1 Cor. 15:24; Col. 1:16; Eph. 1:20-21; 6:12). Such a rereading not only corrects the long and tragic tendency of Christians to de-Judaize Paul, but also offers an insight into the precisely political struggles of the apostle and his community within an often hostile imperial regime. This critique of the system of Roman political power is simultaneously—either implicitly or explicitly—a critique of the prevailing imperial ideologies of our time and, in this, theologians and biblical scholars keep company with a much broader assembly of critics of the new global order that structures contemporary life.

The New Testament writers were by no means singular in their chafing against Roman imperial power; this they share with the postapostolic witness of the early church. While it is often assumed that, after the “conversion” of Constantine, the church lost its critical edge against the empire and grew ever more captive to it, this picture also warrants challenge. Augustine (354–430), of course, is the great commentator on empire, as his magnum opus, the *City of God*, was written as an effort to refute those critics of Christianity who blamed Christians for the

empire's demise. Augustine defended the Christian faith by writing a treatise on the nature of empires. For Augustine, there are two cities: the worldly imperial city (symbolized by Babylon), which is governed by love of self, and the City of God (Jerusalem), which is governed by love of God. The former is ephemeral; the latter, eternal. The former is given over to violence; the latter, to peace.

Yet his is no dualistic reading of history, as though the borders of these two cities were impermeable. In this life, until the coming of Christ, the cities are consigned to being intermingled. When Christ comes again, he will separate out the two cities, the righteous from the unrighteous. But until that time we live as sojourners within the earthly city, yet also as those who are called to follow Christ, and therefore are simultaneously those who properly are heavenly citizens.

Augustine of Hippo shares with contemporary critics of empire a fundamental misgiving about the capacity of empires to sustain the good and to preserve its citizens from violence and death. Yet, throughout this criticism, Augustine also sounds a cautionary note that is worth comparing with the contemporary analysts: the empire is not only "out there," but it is also within. Therefore, its eradication is not for him easily feasible. But this is to anticipate: before we examine Augustine's empire, it is helpful to take a brief detour through the cultural critics who have piqued our interest and shaped our analysis of imperial power in recent times.

POSTCOLONIALISM AND EMPIRE ANALYSES

The emergence of empire analysis is difficult to trace because it appears to have emerged simultaneously within a variety of fields. Certainly postcolonial analysis formed the first line of argument against Western colonialism and the devastating effects that this has wreaked on indigenous cultures. Here we may note the profound impact that literary theorist and cultural critic Edward Said has had upon academic discourse. Said's book *Orientalism*, published in 1978, signaled a profound challenge to the West in its representation of the Orient as the exotic other. Western scholarship and cultural production produces an idea of the Oriental, which it seeks to understand, manipulate, and ultimately annihilate in its otherness. In so doing, it justifies its conquering and domination of other peoples. As he examines the colonial literature, Said uncovers a constellation of forces—ideological, religious, and economic—that sought to bring the Oriental other under Western control:

Imperialism is . . . a commitment . . . over and above profit, a commitment in constant circulation and recirculation which on the one hand allowed decent men and women from England or France, from

London or Paris, to accept the notion that distant territories and their native peoples should be subjugated and, on the other hand, replenished metropolitan energies so that these decent people could think of the empire as a protracted, almost metaphysical obligation to rule subordinate, inferior, or less advanced peoples.²

Said’s analysis of the cultural production and reproduction of Western society found deep resonances among theologians in the two-thirds world who were wrestling with the ideological biases that inhered in a theology which was brought to them by the very people who subjugated them. The Bible and its tools for interpretation (that is, through biblical studies and theology) often became forces for their own domination. Hence, the reading of the Bible in a postcolonialist vein was and continues to be experienced as tremendously liberating for many men and women.³

While postcolonial readings opened up the Bible in profoundly life-giving ways, they tended to treat the colonial era as a period of expansion confined to the past. More recently, contemporary theorists have exposed the manner in which the habits of colonialism are far from a thing of the past; indeed, we belong to an era that is *hypercolonial*; the difficulty, however, is that the colonized space is more difficult to map in a world in which nation-states are no longer defined by clearly demarcated boundaries, and in a world in which the cultural values of the West are ubiquitously promulgated and reproduced through the market and technologies.

CONTEMPORARY RESPONSES TO EMPIRE

In 2001, just after the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, philosophers Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt released a most timely book entitled *Empire*. The purpose of the book is to trace the features of the new global order in which sovereignty rests not primarily with civil rulers or nation-states, but is characterized by invisible and more diffuse power regimes—chiefly, of course, the United States and the G8 countries, as well as multinational corporations that drive public directions and policies.⁴ The power of multinational corporations and those countries that spawned them, particularly the United States, is, according to most analysts, a form of political power that is unprecedented, unregulated, and ubiquitous. The form of such power is evident in the extent of its reach, which Hardt and Negri describe thus:

The machine [of empire] is self-validating, autopoietic, that is, systemic. It constructs social fabrics that evacuate or render ineffective

any contradiction; it creates situations in which, before coercively neutralizing difference, seem to absorb it in an insignificant play of self-generating and self-regulating equilibria. . . . The imperial machine lives by producing a context of equilibria, and/or reducing complexities, pretending to put forward a project of universal citizenship, and toward this end intensifying the effectiveness of its intervention over every element of the communicative relationship, all the while dissolving history and identity in a completely postmodern fashion.⁵

While Hardt and Negri attribute clear danger to the proclivity of empire to absorb territories, they also see within the movement toward globalization certain promise. This promise is located in the capacity of individuals to refuse the arbitrary ascription of identity in that which was imposed by the previous regime of nation-states and opt instead for a global citizenship based upon chosen solidarities and loyalties. In a globalized world, loyalties are no longer confined to nation-states, based upon arbitrary borders, and maintained through coercive sovereign power, but are facilitated and cohered through new technological developments that enable concerned individuals throughout the world to connect and to engage in democratic forums for social change.

Hardt and Negri describe this process of a transition from the nation-state to global empire as “a new world order” in which there has emerged a de-centered and deterritorialized political structure that can also host networks of solidarity across religious, political, and ethnic lines. Hardt and Negri’s Marxist backgrounds enable them to see within this shift in power and in popular politics several dialectical movements that undermine systems of sovereignty. A new political configuration has arisen because of the struggles of the working class, of the anticolonial movement, and the “struggles against the socialist management of capital—the struggles for freedom—in the countries of ‘real socialism.’”⁶ Each of these movements resists the hegemony of sovereign control.

A second movement related to popular citizen uprising against national, economic, and ideological hegemony is the reshaping of boundaries within nation-states. Popular uprising has engendered increased suspicion and surveillance of citizens. At the same time, deterritorialization, thanks to the advent of electronic communications, has prompted heightened perceptions of enemy threats that now lurk inside our borders, aspiring to invade and overcome us from within. As Hardt and Negri write: “The enemy was not, in other words, a stable sovereign subject, but an elusive and amorphous network that could not be contained within boundaries—a contagious virus, perhaps, rather than a bounded, autonomous entity.”⁷ The new norm for conflict in such a world is not the territorial fighting between sovereign states, nor is it any longer revolutionary uprisings against colonial power. The norm for conflict now is the civil war, which is the result of the unraveling of the

old regime of colonial powers, which are now coming home to roost in the new global order.

In such a world, it becomes the task of citizens to discern anew the shape of political resistance and struggle. Several alternatives present themselves. One that Hardt and Negri advance is global citizenship and cooperation. Finding within the fluidity and mass communications of modern culture certain promise as well as peril, in *Multitude*, their sequel to *Empire*, Hardt and Negri urge leftist activists to use the networks and webs of communication and the free-market structure toward the amelioration of society. Through the deterritorialization of the world and through the emergence of new forms of production (informative and affective rather than material), the multitude may be able to control its own destiny without the interference of politicians or even the state. Thus the multitude—of a new form of democratic and economic engagement—can utilize the networks of mass communication, exchange, and mobilization toward humanitarian ends. For Hardt and Negri, multitude is a radical concept for it is the power to create social relationships in common without the mediation of external bureaucracies to regulate these.

The multitude is comprised of singularities, individual political agents, each with a unique political history and set of aspirations. These singularities are often excluded from political processes, but are now "plugged into" global politics and economics in an unprecedented way. They come together to form a "new race," a multitude of global citizens unconstrained by the borders of a nationalistic system that is dying away. One can be an activist in solidarity with other activists from behind a computer screen, ostensibly participating in democracy, or fueling innovation, or moving capital from anywhere in the world. This new collectivity, according to Hardt and Negri, is much like an orchestra without a conductor.⁸ The multitude, so it is claimed, is the first fruits of a new kind of political belonging, for it is one that is governed not by sovereign power—that is, the sovereign governance by the majority or of royalty—but by the immanent autonomy of the multitude itself through a network of global self-governance. Now, suddenly, for the first time in history, radical democracy is truly possible.

This radical democracy is not to be created by a form of global solidarity in any organized sense. For Hardt and Negri, it is precisely the lack of centralized power that contributes to the potential for the multitude to be effective in challenging the new imperial order. This is to be done through local sites of resistance, where there is the free flow of information and communication; but that information and communication do not become hardened into a political program: "It is not true that there can be no multitude without being unified. We have to overturn the line of reasoning: the multitude is not and never will be a single social body. On the contrary, every body is a multitude of forces, subjects, and other multitudes."⁹

As I write this, the philosophical prognostications of Hardt and Negri would appear to be flowering into full force in the “Arab Spring” and beyond. Current protests worldwide for participatory democracy are spreading across North Africa and the Middle East, in countries such as Libya, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, as well as in the recent “Occupy Wall Street” movements that proliferate throughout North Atlantic cities. Throughout, the human struggle for freedom is fueled by global communications that reproduce similar protests within diverse public squares. Hardt and Negri contributed a perspective on these struggles in late February 2011, in the *Guardian*. According to them, what is novel and significant in these protest movements is their lack of centralized leadership. Here, we see their philosophical project attached squarely to specific protests:

The organisation of the revolts resembles what we have seen for more than a decade in other parts of the world, from Seattle to Buenos Aires and Genoa and Cochabamba, Bolivia: a horizontal network that has no single, central leader. Traditional opposition bodies can participate in this network but cannot direct it. Outside observers have tried to designate a leader for the Egyptian revolts since their inception: maybe it's Mohamed ElBaradei, maybe Google's head of marketing, Wael Ghonim. They fear that the Muslim Brotherhood or some other body will take control of events. What they don't understand is that the multitude is able to organise itself without a centre—that the imposition of a leader or being co-opted by a traditional organisation would undermine its power. The prevalence in the revolts of social network tools, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, are symptoms, not causes, of this organisational structure. These are the modes of expression of an intelligent population capable of using the instruments at hand to organise autonomously.¹⁰

Hardt and Negri envisage the expansion of communications through social media as an outcome of an existing reality: one in which the mobile labor of communications has become the chief mode of production within our society. This kind of production empowers young and intelligent members of society who will not settle for anything less than full participation within public processes. For Hardt and Negri, however, there is no teleology to such political participation. Like a living organism that adapts and responds to various assaults upon the body, the multitude is responsive, in flux, but not externally determined. Instead, they call for a resistance to any form of power that might seek to overtake the production and the knowledge that the multitude generates for itself: “[The] multitude . . . resides on the imperial surfaces where there is no God the Father and no transcendence.”¹¹

Although the fullness of this form of citizenship is not realized yet, Hardt and Negri offer some broad brushstrokes of a portrait of global citizenship at the conclusion of *Empire*. Here we get a fuller sense of the telos of human political striving in their vision. According to Hardt and Negri, the new world order will produce the kinds of citizens who demand “the right to control [their] own movement.”¹² According to them, the migration of citizens in the new global order can be turned into a normative and ideal form of citizenship. Nomadism, they argue, is “the struggle against the slavery of belonging to a nation, an identity, and a people, and thus the desertion from sovereignty and the limits it places on subjectivity. . . . Nomadism and miscegenation appear here as a figure of virtue, as the first ethical practices on the terrain of Empire.”¹³ We will return to Hardt and Negri’s concept of nomadism as an ideal ethical subject shortly, but first it is helpful to visit Augustine’s critique of empire by way of comparison.

AUGUSTINE’S AMBIGUOUS RELATIONSHIP WITH IMPERIAL POWER

Augustine had an ambiguous relationship to the imperial power that waned steadily during his life. He was born in the colonial outpost of Thagaste, North Africa (modern Souk-Ahrak), and some have claimed that his experience living on the outposts of colonial power shaped his theology in a decisively anti-imperial way. As Elizabeth Clark has pointed out, however, North Africa was hardly insurrectionist in its relation to Rome. Of all the Roman provinces, North Africa was most thoroughly Romanized. By appropriating African elites into the governing powers of North Africa and through a process of cultural assimilation, North Africa adopted steadily many Roman ideals. Those who were educated in North Africa received a classical education, and Augustine was a clear benefactor of such a practice. Clark analyzes Augustine’s “hybrid” identity brilliantly:

A recently discovered inscription from Roman Arabia reads: “The Romans always win.” In the case of Augustine and others, the “winning” was not through the type of conquest that had demolished Carthage centuries earlier, but through engaging the hearts, minds, and aspirations of young intellectuals and those eager to assume positions of authority at home or abroad: “conquest by book” seems an appropriate description.¹⁴

Augustine had no stake in dismantling colonial power or advocating for the emergence of local identities. Although he did not lament the demise of the

Roman Empire, his vision involved the carrying forth of the booty of pagan knowledge for the sake of a universal church,¹⁵ a church that admittedly took several of its administrative cues from the Roman Empire itself.

It therefore appears to be an odd choice to situate Augustine within a critique of imperial power. After all, in addition to his blithe acceptance of much of Roman education, Augustine hardly eschews the use of hegemonic force by ruling power over the dissident subject, as his invocation of imperial coercion against the Donatists and the Pelagians attests.¹⁶ Certainly Augustine fell short often of his own insights that lauded the political virtue of humility. Nevertheless, the thrust of Augustine's work reminds us ever of the fallen nature of human reason and its capacity to discern justice. So, not through Augustine's own faulty example, but through his teachings on the nature of human justice and our capacity for self-deception as we strive toward that justice, do we find some clues as to how the imperial habits take up residence within our hearts and minds. Indeed, the sheer proof of their tacit work upon us is Augustine's own incapacity to "see" the problem of imposing a coercive silence upon his opponents in the name of the Prince of Peace. Yet Augustine's own insights should challenge any view that would accommodate itself so quickly to the use of coercion in ruling out heterodox teachings. Robert Dodaro sums it up well when considering the frank tenor of Augustine's self-scrutiny at the end of *De Trinitate* regarding his own misapprehension of the norm of Catholic faith:

The reader of *De Trinitate* is rightly surprised at the personal tone with which he concludes this work, and with the frank admission, unique within Augustine's discussions of *regula fidei*, that the bishop's comprehension of the norm of Catholic faith is obscured by his own sin. . . . Augustine does not ascribe his lack of adequate comprehension of the *regula fidei* to a lack of study, to an inadequate application of dialectic to the scriptures or to the theological conclusions of his orthodox predecessors. Here, we need no further "development of dogma" in order to achieve a fuller understanding of the rule of faith. No, instead, Augustine confesses that his deepening understanding of the rule of faith depends upon the extent to which God refashions his self.¹⁷

AUGUSTINE'S POLITICAL THEOLOGY

In spite of Augustine's ambiguous relationship to imperial power, his *City of God* sounds many of the same warnings as do leftist theorists Hardt and Negri. Augustinian political action shares with Hardt and Negri a wariness of worldly empires and a recognition of their violent and unsustainable nature. As Augustine's book is occasioned by the shocking demise of the Roman Empire, he names an

experience very close to that of contemporary North Americans: an incredulity over the fragility of an empire that seemed so impervious to destruction. It is fascinating to recognize that *Empire* and *Multitude* were written around the time of 9/11 and that Augustine was writing *City of God* just after the sacking of Rome by the Visigoths in 410. Both books were influenced by debate surrounding the “new world order”—Christendom in the case of the *City of God* and a globalized world in the case of *Empire*. It would perhaps be an overstatement to say that both were apologetical treatises for the new world order. However, it is the case that both Augustine and Hardt and Negri exposed the fragility and the violences of the old world order—Roman imperialism and state nationalism—and had little nostalgia for these, unlike many of their contemporaries.

Another parallel between the two works is their respective reticence in advocating a particular political strategy for a new world. Neither work is a political treatise in the sense of offering a programmatic way out of the political struggles that citizens face. Instead, they offer broad reflections on the nature and scope of the public sphere. Finally, both books advocate restraint in identifying too strongly with the prevailing political configuration. They understand strong attachment to political configurations as a potential precursor to violence, and thus they advocate a certain distancing and critical posture toward the dominant political agendas.

Augustine is wary of putting too much stock in earthly cities because empires are governed by the *libido dominandi*, the lust for rule, and as such are compelled by prideful self-assertion, which leads to violence in order to secure their own ends. In *City of God*, pride names the character of the *libido dominandi*, which is less an inherent weakness within the psyche or personality than it is an improperly ordered desire, one that aims primarily for personal glory rather than a higher good. Augustine does not altogether condemn the pursuit of glory, that vaunted classical ideal, recognizing that it can produce certain ends that are necessary for the proper ordering of society. Yet, glory, too, can become turned in on itself, as the citizen seeks recognition and praise rather than the truth. Thus the quest for glory is too easily prone to becoming corrupted, and the virtues that it seeks in the ordering of the self and society soon become vices in the seeking of praise rather than higher ends. Therefore, while glory can be useful in directing human will toward the recognition of others, such a quest soon becomes vain as it seeks ever its own ends. There is no peace within such a world, because peace can only be a temporary amnesty so long as the *libido dominandi* remains the primary modality of political life.

Augustine also goes against the grain of the political thought of his time in denying the *Patria* any divinely appointed significance. Indeed, whereas most ancient historians read glory and valor in Roman history as a sign of divine favor, Augustine finds instead in Roman history a long story of violence

and exploitation contrary to divinely appointed ends.¹⁸ Thus Augustine distinguishes the *City of God* from those treatises that would find the providential hand of God or of the gods working straightforwardly within human history. Michael Hanby puts it well:

In denying Rome its noble history, Augustine implicitly denies a conception of progress that would grant a providential purpose to evil, a concept that would grant a providential purpose to evil, a conception that entails a perverse sacrificial economy.

The voices of empire must transmute the war dead into victims and death into noble sacrifice in order to sustain this optimism. They must assuage their grief at the soldier's death, and enlist further victims for the cause, by making him heroic, by consoling themselves that his courage was expended for great cause or for a better future. Evil thus becomes a dialectical moment in the realization of empire, a moment that calls forth its victims' blood in exchange for "glory."¹⁹

In his critical rendering of Roman history, Augustine anticipates the insights of much of contemporary political theory, including those of Hardt and Negri. Like them, Augustine is wary of imperial configurations because of their propensity to collectivize and justify the *libido dominandi*, seeing in it a momentum that, once unleashed, becomes almost impossible to oppose. The unchecked drive of empire for self-sustenance and augmentation gives rise to several form of violence, not least of which is the violence to the truth that is intent on preserving illusions of the empire's rightness, even in the midst of the slaughter of human life.

Interestingly enough, however, neither of these works—*City of God* or *Empire*—represents a full-scale rejection of the political order in which the writers find themselves. Augustine finds within the Roman civic virtues that which is still worthy of recognition, even while that virtue—particularly its pursuit of glory—can far too easily be turned in on itself: "[Glory] . . . is nevertheless puffed up and has much vanity in it. Wherefore it is unworthy of the solidity and firmness of the virtues to represent them as serving this glory, so that Prudence shall provide nothing, Justice distribute nothing, Temperance moderate nothing, except to the end that men may be pleased and vain glory served."²⁰ Within Hardt and Negri's work, we have an even more positive assessment of the possibilities that inhere in a new global order. For them, as we have seen, the habits of internationalism can take a beneficent turn, and thereby use the technologies of mass communication for global good.

Yet the extent to which one appropriates the habits of the secular city is a fruitful point of contrast between Hardt and Negri and Augustine. For Augustine, the *libido dominandi* is likely to assert itself and corrupt individual citizens within the earthly city, for in securing its own good, citizens are trained to immanent and self-serving practices. Therefore immanence, or popular politics, is regarded with a good deal more suspicion by Augustine than by Hardt and Negri, who long for a politics without transcendence, a politics without sovereignty. Thus, according to Hardt and Negri, political possibilities are given only insofar as they are imagined by the multitude.²¹ Such generative capacity is not, according to Augustine, a property of collective life in the earthly city. For Augustine, it is far more likely that citizens will replicate the original violence of empire than subvert it. Augustine reads the history of the founding of empires as a repetition of violence, whether that be the stories of Cain and Abel, Romulus and Remus, or the countless violences that have founded cities since.²² Augustine is attuned to the manner in which city-states repeat violence generation after generation and holds little hope that the peace that governments might secure will be of a lasting or fulsome kind.

Hardt and Negri are far more optimistic than Augustine about the power of the political imagination to transcend the violent context in which it finds itself. To take one example from their theory of global citizenship, Hardt and Negri see statelessness as a possibility of an emancipated future for the multitude, as it affords individuals the capacity to elect social and political solidarities. Yet statelessness, to the vast majority of those who have experienced it, is a nightmarish scenario. And for the millions of refugees and internally displaced persons within the world today, nomadism is hardly an ideal form of citizenship. Further, statelessness, as we have seen amply in the millions of refugees displaced in the past twenty years in Kenyan refugee camps, does not connote freedom of movement, but quite its opposite.²³ One must ask difficult questions of Hardt and Negri such as, Is the African refugee experience accidental or intrinsic to a new world order? Is global citizenship the purview only of a select few, while the majority of the deterritorialized “citizens” of the world attain this status not by choice, but by the violent and cruel effects of political sovereignty in a new global order?

Political theorist Hannah Arendt, herself an Augustinian,²⁴ predicted some sixty years ago the dilemma in which we now find ourselves. Without a sense of place, without a tradition, it is unlikely that citizens can produce a genuine alternative to the violence of refugee society. Arendt, writing as a Jew after World War II, prophetically describes this condition as a new form of citizenship, but is hardly hopeful in her description:

A man who wants to lose his self discovers, indeed, the possibilities of human existence, which are infinite, as infinite as is creation. But the

recovering of a new personality is as difficult—and as hopeless—as a new creation of the world. Whatever we do, whatever we pretend to be, we reveal nothing but our inane desire to be changed, not to be Jews.²⁵

Thus the nomad, far from having an identity of her own choosing, has one that is scripted by the sovereign power that excludes her: to remain a “Jew” is to remain an outcast, to remain hunted. One has to become something else, but that something else is always determined and delimited by the sovereign authority of the state.

It is thus that Hardt and Negri’s proposals appear naively optimistic about the political possibilities of the multitude, for, as Augustine knows full well, the desires of the empire will be reflected in the malformed desires of its citizens. We see this poignantly as we consider with Arendt the manner in which anti-Semitism shapes the Jewish refugee subject. The empire governs people based upon fear of being excluded or abjected from its protection, because sovereign imperial power is not simply an externality but, rather, is internal to an ever-expanding totality that knows no “outside.”²⁶ Thus the stranger becomes a source of cohesion for the totality, as fear of meeting the same fate as the abjected members of society reinforces complicity with sovereign control. In this scenario, like the desperate Jewish refugees seeking to de-Judaize themselves, the subject internalizes the rules of the sovereign and imposes its sanctions within.²⁷

The notion of a nomad as an ideal citizen thus is revealed to be a woefully wanting description. Because there is no common horizon among citizens, the multitude is as at least as likely to form deadly rivalries as it is to forge those allegiances where “cooperation and revolution remain together in love, simplicity, and innocence.”²⁸

While Augustine would agree with Hardt and Negri that overarching attachment to a city-state is perilous to the soul and the city because it is likely to be incited to violence in order to secure preservation and expansion, he would be disinclined to abandon earthly forms of preservation through the political order. Augustine would affirm that even the fallen political order offers a measure of goods that are themselves gifts from God and appointed to God’s purposes in this world (Rom. 13:1-3). Indeed, Augustine takes up Scipio’s (via Cicero) definition of a *commonwealth* as an ideal to be sought based on the commonweal of the people. According to Augustine, while this ideal pertains, Rome was never truly a commonwealth because it was never a people, according to the definition of people as “a multitude united by association by a common sense of right and a community of interest.”²⁹

Therefore, where there is no true justice there can be no ‘association of men united by a common sense of right’ and therefore no people. If,

therefore, a commonwealth is the ‘weal of the people’, and if a people does not exist where there is no ‘association by common sense of right’, and there is no right where there is no justice, the irresistible conclusion is that where there is no justice there is no commonwealth. Moreover, justice is that virtue which assigns everyone his due. Then what kind of justice is it that takes a man away from the true God and subjects him to unclean demons?³⁰

In arguing against the existence of a true commonwealth within Roman society, Augustine argues for a revision to the Ciceronian ideal. For Augustine there cannot be a commonwealth without justice, for justice attributes to all that is due to everyone, but because the people fail to give God what is due, it fails to be true justice and is inclined to become merely a throng. The multitude becomes a throng by being united by those things that are unworthy of it—unclean demons, yes—but Augustine is making more than a pious point here. For a commonwealth to have as its end merely its own self-serving is to deny citizens virtues that exceed mere instincts for self-preservation. This is both a form of idolatry and a guarantor of the corruption of the city. Augustine therefore argues that a true commonwealth is possible not only when it is united in the objects of its love but when it is united in the objects of its love *that are worth loving*. Thus Augustine brings together love and justice in his political theology as he implies here that the objects of the city’s and its citizens’ love will determine the virtues practiced within the city, and those virtues will become corrupted if they are not ones that have a telos beyond an immanent and self-serving frame.³¹

The connection of the republic to the goods it loves makes worship the basic form of human action. But worship can be performed to many gods, and in our culture, the devotion of hearts and minds seems to be regularly drawn to love of things. Desire for good is also a political tendency for individuals, and nations will strive to secure the good that they seek through a variety of means. Questions of the good, of the moral telos that animates political programs, need to be brought to greater articulation, for all political programs have an implicit overarching love that animates their actions, even while such a love or such loves remain hidden beneath the surface. Without bringing the objects of a city’s love to articulation, it is possible that false loves, such as the love of annexing possessions, are really the decisive political motivators of a specific soul or city. Reflections upon the good, the “background picture” that shapes our political actions, are necessary in order to ensure that the good that we are pursuing are actually loves worth loving.

Philosopher Charles Taylor has pointed out the manifold ways in which contemporary politics is characterized by a reticence to articulate the background

picture that shapes our moral and political action. Without an articulation of the good that orients our political actions, contemporary politics is given over to “negative freedom,” that is, maximalizing the rights of individuals or community to resist heteronomous control of any kind. Therefore, the predominant note of contemporary politics is protest, challenging the status quo, undermining sovereignty, but it never really fleshes out what a life beyond oppression might look like. This modality of politics, of aiming at the securing of freedom from heteronomous constraint, characterizes Hardt and Negri’s work. In both *Empire* and *Multitude*, there can be no loyalty of association that trumps the individual will. Thus the global citizen is governed primarily by her will; and it is a will that supposes it can elect political loyalties in something of the same manner in which it can elect a brand of automobile.

In this way, Hardt and Negri differ quite strongly from Augustine, for whom true political power, the power of the citizens of the City of God, is not yet a full possession of the inhabitants of the earthly city. Hardt and Negri wish not to posit a heavenly utopia, for such a utopia would merely replicate imperial sovereign power. In its stead, they believe that sovereignty of a new kind will emerge precisely by the disavowal of a transcendent sovereign power that is posed against people’s wills. True sovereignty will be the sovereignty of the multitude—of singularities participating truly in democratic reform and in capital exchange.

It is the very absence of a transcendent object toward which desire might be directed that truncates the political possibilities of such a project. This lack of clarity has everything to do with a lack of vision, a lack of a transcendent object to our desire who might propel our future actions, but might also exceed them. Without such a vision, it is likely that the multitude will simply tacitly elect to reinstate the status quo. Further, when freedom is identified so squarely with individual choice, it is hard to imagine how durable and effective political solidarities might emerge, or how the market notion of choice as the capacity to elect the object(s) of my consumption from an infinite set of products can be overturned toward a more substantive kind of freedom.

What binds citizens together in the City of God is also the object of their love, and in the city, this love is eternal; it is God. That God be praised is the highest task of the citizen of the city, and for those who wish to approximate it, worship of, giving honor to, and lauding God (rather than *Patria*) are the chief activities. The City of God exceeds the grasping of political subjects. It is not a utopia inaugurated by concerted political will, but a heavenly and eternal gift that, in exceeding our grasping, also calls forth desires for justice and peace which are not easily appeased by the partial justice and the temporary amnesty that the world gives.

Just so, Augustine lauds humility as the primary civic virtue of citizens of the City of God. Augustine construes humility not as a form of self-abasement,

but as a practical and other-worldly agency embodied in Jesus Christ. It is an agency that is displayed in Christ’s receptivity to the Father, which is also a receptivity that seeks nothing less than God as the object of his desire. Humility for Augustine is also the practical political virtue that is necessary in order to enable justice to flourish. The citizen who is trained in the virtue of humility will be one who will not only assign what is due to God but also assign what is due to other humans, and this virtue will engender peace in the city. Such a capacity is not merely a political virtue that is cultivated but one that arises from right praise of a God who himself displays and makes possible humility in God’s self-sacrifice.

Christ is both *exemplum* and *sacramentum* of humility. That is to say that his life, death, and resurrection are appropriated by the Christian as exemplary, a subject worthy of emulation. However, Christians affirm also that Christ’s subjectivity is somehow active still long after his ascension, through his body, the church. Christ thus displays a personhood that exceeds the capacities of the multitude, because his life is not merely a singularity; it is instead a source of giftedness that does not cease being poured out for the sake of others. By the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ remains active in the world, even “to the end of the age” (Matt. 28:20). In other words, his life is not that of a singularity within a multitude, but his life is plenitude (or in the Greek, *pleroma*), for “in [him] the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col. 1:19). The *pleroma* is, in turn, gifted to his body, which is not to be construed as an organic unity, each with one’s own singular identity and entitlements, but as a community endowed with the capacity to serve one another through the “putting on of Christ.”

Augustine derives the notion of plenitude from Paul, who made use of a concept that had great currency within Gnostic philosophies. Paul writes of the *pleroma* as a fullness or completion that describes the Son’s relation to the Father and, in turn, the sanctification of the community or lover of God.³² Augustine understands the fullness of the world in all its variety to be a manifestation of the divine gift. But such a gift has its own integrity; each of its agents has its own capacity for freedom and self-direction. Thus the *pleroma* is the fullness of God working within the fullness of singularities, bringing them to a proper completion, which is a profoundly intricate and interdependent system in time.

Plenitude, or *pleroma*, in the Christian story, unlike the Gnostic view of it, is not the transcendent, other-worldly sphere that the world of materiality conceals, nor is it a gift grasped and attained by a select few who have pressed on beyond this vale of tears. Instead, it is an at-once proximate, intimate, and erotic awakening in us of a desire that stirs up the self; while it also refuses assimilation or appropriation. As Augustine writes, “all creatures subsist from the plenitude of Divine goodness.”³³ The fullness of God poured out upon us in God’s coming among us in Jesus both awakens desire in the subject for the object, thus affirming a subjective and human love and vulnerability, while the object always

remains ungraspable, always exceeds containment or possession. Which is to say that the object is also a subject. It is only in allowing the other subject to be subject that we are freed to love him or her. As Graham Ward puts it:

Christian desire moves beyond the fulfillment of its own needs; Christian desire is always excessive, generous beyond what is asked. It is a desire not to consume the other, but to let the other be in the perfection they are called to grow into. It is a desire ultimately founded upon God as triune and, as triune, a community of love fore-given and given lavishly.³⁴

As such, the proper posture of the lovers of God and citizens of the City of God is renunciation; it is exile, but it is exile that all the same loves and seeks to heal the earthly city. Therefore, although a perfect justice cannot be fully known in the earthly city, it can, through the prayers and *askesis* of the citizens of the City of God, be approximated, not in the sense of merely reflecting the heavenly city dimly but by finding within its common life traces of eternity to be shared among the citizens of the earthly city. We turn to Augustine to discover the possibility of such a power and such a community under Christ's Lordship. Such a community, united by the *exemplum* and the *sacramentum* of Christ, will cultivate virtues quite unlike the earthly city. Citizens will seek not the simple advancement of singularities within a multitude, but will turn themselves toward the other with a like generosity to that which was once poured out upon themselves. John Milbank describes it thus:

[T]he only thing really like heavenly virtue is [our constant attempt to compensate for, substitute for, even short-cut this total absence of virtue [i.e., in a human life dominated by conflict and violence], by not taking offense, assuming the guilt of others, doing what they should have done, beyond the bounds of any given "responsibility." Paradoxically, it is only in this exchange and sharing that any truly actual virtue exists.³⁵

Milbank's description of Christian virtue is of a gift given in excess. Yet it is also a gift that subverts the sacrificial economy that funds earthly cities. Christ's sacrifice is different from the death of Abel or from the countless sacrifices that constitute violent histories because his sacrifice arises from the eternal and ceaseless love of the Triune God. The motion of gift within the Trinity is a making room for the other, a perichoretic love in which the three persons of the Godhead are constituted by their self-giving relationship. God's love for the world in creation is an analogous motion, of pure, unmerited love toward that which is not God. The motion is repeated once again upon a hill in Golgotha

in which Christ's sacrifice is a recapitulation of that self-same eternal gift spoken into the world. The difference in tone and tenor of the gift has to do with the recalcitrance and violence of the world into which it was spoken. But this does not deplete the divine gift of the cross: it speaks into the violence of the world and renders it silent, a surd (i.e., something that is toneless), nonbeing, as God's eternal love is vindicated at Easter. Such is the economy of sacrifice into which we are called to participate in Christ. It is a life that does not keep stock of offense, but offers itself gratuitously to others in patience and humility. These are not just lessons learned, but they are virtues that are divinely endowed because the nature of that gift is a transcendence which has the power to act beyond and within our creaturely capacities and transform them. Augustine reveals Christ to be the perfect sacrifice upon whom the City of God is founded, not because it was upon his immolation that a city was built in war and enmity, but because his divine gift for the sake of worldly cities constituted another form of political sacrifice and political belonging that arises from plenitude. Christ's sacrifice founds the City of God as a city in which earthly sacrifices are not required, because the perfect gift of self-giving is one in which the one sacrificed is also the one whose life cannot be exhausted. For Augustine, humility is not primarily a moral position so much as it is a supernaturally endowed virtue that is given to humans as the benefit of Christ's suffering love. Christ, in uniting himself to humans, creates the possibility of this other-worldly virtue: "Against this arrogance of the demons, to which mankind was enslaved as a deserved punishment, is set the humility of God, revealed in Christ. But the power of humility is unknown to men whose souls are inflated with the impurity of inflated pride."³⁶

Thus the city does not mete out justice as compromise; but justice, like love, is given abundantly from a source that has no end. God's plenitude in Christ always exceeds the gift received by the City of God, and thus the proper response to it is a certain confident dispossession, a knowledge that human life and human security are supported by an inexhaustible gift that transcends human efforts at securing justice and peace: "Christ's exemplary status therefore does not exhaust the plenitude it reveals. Rather the very structure of the exemplum reveals this plenitude to be inexhaustible, to be more than we can grasp. Thus our grasping must itself take the form of a letting go, a gift, which makes us partakers in the Son's response to the Father."³⁷

The Nicene teachers spoke of the realistic capacity of God to transfigure this earthly vale of tears through the doctrine of participation. Participation connotes the eternal self-giving love of the Triune God as that which transforms and sanctifies human relationships. Participation in God's eternity in the world of fallen time is made possible by Christ's own identity as eternal and human, as he serves as the bridge that traverses us humans to the divine life. For Augustine, evidence of participation in God is the counterintuitive capacity of

self-absorbed humans to care for others in a self-sacrificing manner. In order for persons to do this without resentment or violence, they must be recipients of divine grace: “That is why humility is highly prized in the City of God and especially enjoined on the City of God during the time of its pilgrimage in this world; and it receives particular emphasis in the character of Christ, the king of that City.”³⁸ Political life, for the Christian, is thus not a resolute determination of outcomes so much as it is a willful renunciation of the self for the sake of others’ flourishing. Although Augustine is reticent in using the language of participation, he does so here because he believes that participating in God’s divinity through the incarnation is most likely to be manifest in humans’ capacity to abjure the prideful *libido dominandi* and take on Christ’s mantle of humility.

Unlike Hardt and Negri, Augustine sees as the model of citizenship within the earthly city not the nomad, but the pilgrim. The pilgrim is a sojourner on the earth because she belongs to a pilgrim church, a community *in via*, on its way to becoming whole, and doing so by participating in discrete practices that shape citizens in the heavenly virtue of humility. The pilgrim’s final allegiance then is not, finally, to the earthly city, but to the heavenly one. Nevertheless, she must dwell in the earthly city, which offers real and tangible goods. The earthly city also contains those who have not been called to citizenship in the heavenly city, and who have reconciled themselves to its partial ends. In these times in between, the cities remain mixed and all citizens benefit from the earthly peace that is procured in this life: “Meanwhile, however, it is important for us also that this people should possess peace in this life, since so long as the two cities are intermingled we also make use of the peace of Babylon—although the people of God is by faith set free from Babylon, so that in the meantime they are only pilgrims in the midst of her.”³⁹ Clearly, one cannot make Jerusalem from Babylon. The people of God do have to transcend Babylon, but such a transcendence does not eschew or negate the goods that a city-state can offer toward a peace. The pilgrim “makes use” of the goods that the earthly city has to offer even while she awaits a more perfect peace.⁴⁰ Indeed, as Augustine shows, it becomes the work of the citizens of the earthly city also to strive for such a peace, while also knowing that the peace that the world brings will be a compromised and ephemeral one. This engenders a critical view of all earthly programs,⁴¹ as pilgrim citizens recognize that the earthly city has not yet attained that peace toward which it strives.

The self-critical capacity is stirred by an awareness that our political actions fall short of the peace that God wills, yet such self-criticism ought not to engender apathy or hopelessness; rather, self-criticism will issue properly in confession. Confession is a self-critical awareness of our need for God’s grace; it is a referral of these shortcomings to God, who, it is prayed, will reorient our political aims toward God’s end. Christian hope contains a proper lament,

a confession that partakes of the humility that is hope’s source and end. As Michael Hanby writes: “To those who would identify themselves as citizens of that other city, he extends a call to self-examination, to sort out the claims made upon our affections and our complicity in the distortion and disorder of the earthly city.”⁴²

CONCLUSION: CONFESSING CHRIST AS LORD IN THE MIDST OF EMPIRE

Without confession, cities are easily given over to the habits of the *libido domnandi*, justifying their power through coercion. Sovereign power therefore becomes a self-legitimizing religion which seeks through ideological means to convince its citizens that there is no higher good than the good of the city. Throughout history, cultures and communities have always been founded upon sovereign power. Without a sovereign, there is no people. The body that is the people has always been tied in their allegiance, for better or for worse, to another body: that of its sovereign power, a rule that both transcends and embodies the equilibrium of the community—or seeks to do so. In our quest to rid ourselves from a rule that is foreign to our interests, we seek, as revolutionaries have always done, the slaying of the sovereign. But of course, history has shown amply that, as with Hydra, the cutting off of one head is likely to spawn another. The key is an allegiance based upon another kind of sovereign—one that does not sacrifice the one to the many, or absorb the singularity into the multitude, but who, as Lord, gives rise to a people through the preservation and care of “the least of these” through the heavenly virtue of humility. To confess Christ as Lord in the midst of empire is to belong to the church in which every knee shall bow before him, not because of his triumph and glory and majesty, but because he comes in the form of a slave, and through that very particular condescension, he reveals to us God’s glory.

To confess Christ’s Lordship in the midst of empire is to belong to a body that is not closed and self-contained, but open to welcoming the stranger who is also a sojourner. The stability that is offered the righteous in the City of God is sabbath rest. At the end of all our sojourning, there is a vision that animates political life in the time “in between”: “He will be the goal of all our longings, and we shall see him for ever; we shall love him without satiety; we shall praise him without wearying. This will be the duty, the delight, the activity of all, shared by all who share in the life of eternity.”⁴³

This heavenly vision is a welcome one, in my view, for all those who are wounded, those who have been caught under the heavy weight of imperial oppression—including especially in the North American context aboriginal persons—and those within the two-thirds world who have heard the gospel only

as the story of one nation's victory. After all, the one who calls us to praise him is precisely the one who has suffered under the blows of imperial violence, of a myth that states that we should be willing to sacrifice the poor for the good of the many. Any cultural representation of Christ's church that is too comfortable within the orders of the fallen world must always be reminded that God's love has been poured to all those who have been rendered broken by the world's political machinations. This community is not a closed body, but neither is it a ghostly or insubstantial one.

To confess Christ as Lord in the midst of empire is to abjure citizenship in a city that trains us merely to dominate over others through the imperious consumption of the fruits of cheap labor from the two-thirds world. Confession in this context involves repenting precisely in the imperial practices that we engage in today as well as in our historical past. And so, to proclaim Christ's Lordship in the midst of empire is to be humbled as Christ was humbled, taking the form of a slave, not so that we can wallow in an indulgent guilt over our privilege. Rather, in confessing our sin against the neighbor who is also our brother or sister, we are freed then to receive the grace of God, so that we are never destined to be an empire of violence and exploitation, but to be a pilgrim people whose boundaries are open, but not erased; to be heralds of God's gracious restoration that we await, even as we journey toward it.