
Mindful of the great value of an essay that carefully reviews the state of the literature on some important question, we can be all the more grateful for a book-length account of the vast range of the modern interpretations that have been offered on some classical position in philosophy or theology. In the present volume Michael Bruno has done precisely that for Augustine’s political thought by discussing the scholarly literature to be found not only in English but in other modern European languages.

That Augustine’s De civitate Dei contributed some of the crucial terms for discussing modern questions like the proper relation of Church and State is clear: the Two Cities, the City of God and the City of Man, the Earthly City and the Heavenly City. His classic definition of peace as the tranquillity of order and his question about whether Rome could be counted a genuine res publica absent fitting worship of the true God will be perennially significant aspects of political philosophy.

But determining Augustine’s own stance on questions of faith, politics, and society is more tricky than might at first appear, not only because there is need to take into consideration various other texts from Augustine besides the City of God (e.g., his interventions on the question of the use of force against the Circumcellions and the Donatists) but also because of the complexity of his argumentation and the range of the questions he treated in his magnum opus. That there has been quite a range of views among modern interpreters is no surprise, given the diverse ways in which the texts of Augustine have been read in earlier ages. One could, for instance, contrast the inclination of Alcuin to interpret Augustine for the court of Charlemagne as a master of Christian statecraft and the inclination of Marsilius of Padua and William of Ockham to take Augustine as providing justification for the separation of political authority and morality.

Bruno’s volume reviews the main positions that have been taken in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and provides a helpful typology that groups together those interpreters who have taken the same general stance on the substantive questions even while noting important differences among them and identifying the particular historical circumstances relevant to the interpretations they offer for Augustine’s texts.

Throughout this review of the literature on Augustine’s political thought, Bruno identifies the classical fontes relevant to the thinking of Augustine himself and of his interpreters, including Christ’s distinction between what belongs to God and what belongs to Caesar, Paul’s justification for rendering obedience to legitimate authority in Romans 13, and Cicero’s definition of a res publica. Bruno’s recurrent reminders about the dangers of reading modern questions back into patristic, medieval, and renaissance texts provide helpful guidance both
for understanding Augustine’s own views and for grasping the ways in which later theorists want to appropriate and employ his ideas and his seminal terminology.

Worthy of special mention is Bruno’s elaborate discussions of such thinkers as Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Ramsey, Herbert Deane and Ernest Fortin, Robert Markus and Joseph Ratzinger, among many others. In Niebuhr’s view, for instance, Augustine counts as a representative of “realism” in contrast to the “impossible” ethical “idealism” of Christianity. Convinced of the human proclivity to cupiditas and libido dominandi and of the self-love invariably involved in human superbia, Niebuhr stresses the model he thinks needed for post-WWII “world community” that is provided by the “political realism” of Augustine’s earthly city. For Niebuhr, Augustine’s form of realism about the actual motivations of political regimes avoids medieval “sentimentalism” about the prospects of achieving justice through grounding politics on the natural law. Augustine’s text thereby exemplifies what Niebuhr thought needed in his own age, a clear distinction between morality and secular power, so as to prevent the hard work of securing peace in the actual world from being blinded by religious idealism.

Despite his clear respect for Niebuhr’s contributions, Paul Ramsey stressed the urgency for Protestant theology to recover ethical and political principles that would counter the relativism that so much marked Niebuhr’s realism. Bruno shows that Ramsey’s openness to the employment of idealistic moral principles led him to a quite different reading of Augustine. In particular, Bruno sees in Ramsey’s recourse to Augustine’s views on just war an appreciation for the way in which one can justify the use of force in the service of our neighbor and on behalf of others. Augustine’s justification of coercion against the Donatists, for instance, provides a model for Ramsey’s arguments on the proper extension of caritas within a context that sees political community as morally necessary for the service of the public good and as entailing a moral obligation on individuals to carry out its mandates.

Bruno’s extensive treatment of Herbert Deane’s emphasis on the importance of bearing in mind the fallen condition of humanity after Original Sin provides a clear account of yet another distinct interpretive stance. For Deane, the State and the political order are “remedial institutions” that emerged after the Fall, so as to keep sinful human beings in check. Bruno helpfully compares the views of Deane with the account of Augustine’s political vision provided by the twentieth-century Catholic political philosopher Ernest Fortin.

Recognizing the impossibility of any perfect reconciliation between Christianity and classical thought, Fortin advocated the urgency of recovering Augustinian and Thomistic principles to counter the failure of “modern secular” views. Fortin stresses the centrality of virtue in Augustine’s political doctrine. Lamenting the reduction of modern discussions of political and social ethics to the consideration of rights that are best secured by law, Fortin sees in Augustine a defense of the need for citizens to have their relationship with the State ordered by the virtue of justice if there is to be peace and real protection for the common good. In commenting on the practical impossibility of achieving perfect human justice because of sin, Fortin commends the Augustinian remedy in terms of the Church’s provision of grace and sound teaching. Bruno expounds at length on the Augustinian idea of the twin citizenship that a Christian must cultivate: citizenship in both of the Two Cities, albeit with a sturdy sense of the need to honor our higher loyalties in the inevitable cases of conflict.

While one might wish that Bruno had also included in his book the insights on Augustinian political thoughts that can be derived from figures like Charles Norris Cochrane and Robert Kraynak, we can be grateful for his extensive comparison of the thought of Joseph Ratzinger and Robert Markus. Ratzinger’s consideration of Augustinian political theory can be found not only in his doctoral dissertation but in such papal venues as his 2011 address to
the Bundestag and the second half of his first encyclical, *Deus caritas est*. Ratzinger stresses the need for rejecting the Caesaropapist options of making the State a branch of the Church and of nationalizing the Church. Without in any way turning a blind eye to the moral void of postmodern society, he urges the wisdom of respecting the legitimate autonomy of the secular state in modern democratic forms of government and of demanding that it promote so far as it can the administration of justice and rights. At the same time he holds that the Church needs the protections that are secured by a robust right of religious liberty, so as to be able to be a moral teacher for democracy and a source of grace for the transformation of sinful humanity.

By contrast with Ratzinger’s view of the secularity of the state within Augustine’s doctrine of the Christian’s dual citizenship, Bruno sees Robert Markus as advocating a secularist reading of Augustine that gives positive valuation for the secular realm precisely insofar as it is independent of religion. For Markus, Augustine envisions a Christian presence in society without any attempt to dominate that society. Bruno rightly wonders whether Markus’s stress on the radical autonomy of the state as a way to prevent the tensions that he worries as likely to arise from anything like a Constantinian imperial Christianity might be unduly influenced by an acceptance of the privatization of religion that he seems to think needed for peaceful co-existence in a religiously pluralistic world.

In choosing to provide the above examples, this reviewer is mindful that they are only a sample of the rich analyses to be found in this volume. Bruno is to be commended not only for the comprehensive nature of his review of modern interpretations of Augustinian political thought but also for the clarity of his exposition as well as the prudence of the evaluations that he offers.

*Fordham University*  

*Joseph W. Koterski, S.J.*