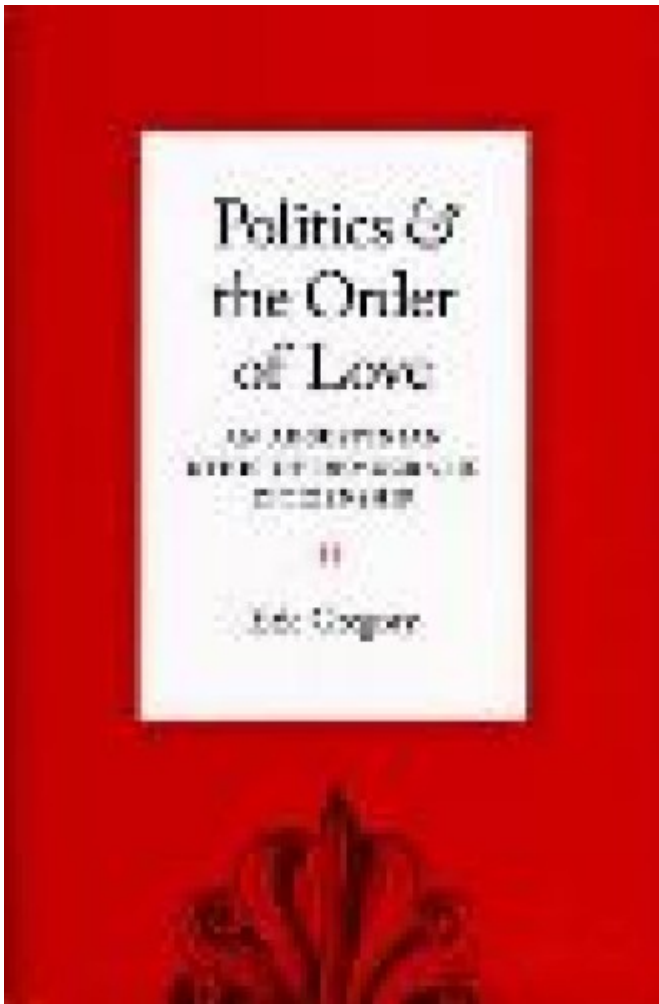


Public love

By [Jason Byassee](#) in the [November 4, 2008](#) issue

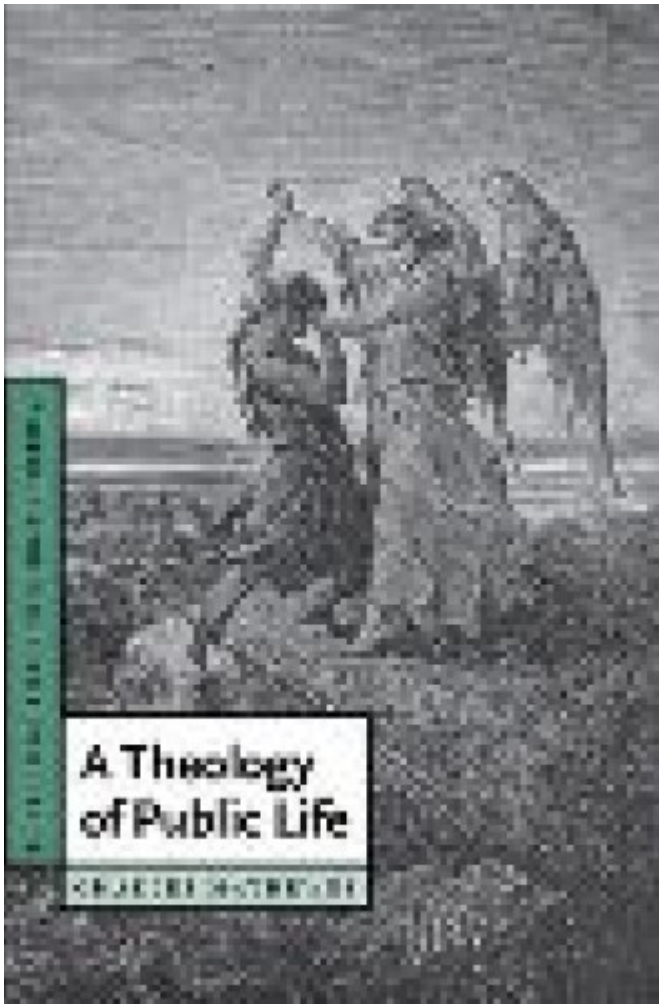
In Review



Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship

Eric Gregory

University of Chicago Press



A Theology of Public Life

Charles Mathewes

Cambridge University Press

At an otherwise innocent potluck during the primaries, a beloved former parishioner turned to me and asked, out of the blue, “So whom should we vote for?”

Her look was both mischievous and serious. She didn’t know what to do politically on Election Day, and perhaps she didn’t really want her former pastor to tell her. She was mostly just signaling her uncertainty about how her faith should affect her politics, and perhaps a certain dissatisfaction with the options on offer.

Eric Gregory and Charles Mathewes share her unease with current political options—and even more with how academic theology discusses politics. The choices seem either to be a bare-knuckled version of Christian realism, with Richard John Neuhaus and Jean Bethke Elshtain using Reinhold Niebuhr to cheer the troops in

Iraq; or a sort of Democrats-for-Jesus approach, with Jim Wallis making the case for Barack Obama in terms uncomfortably familiar to watchers of the religious right; or a retreat from the messiness of public life into the clean hands and unworried conscience of neomonasticism or the academy, with Stanley Hauerwas and John Milbank leading the way. Surely there are more options, aren't there?

These two books, part of a remarkable resurgence of interest in St. Augustine, point a new way forward. For a generation or two the great North African church father has been treated more often as a whipping boy than as an inspiration on issues ranging from politics, sex and gender to the Trinity, love and biblical interpretation. Two generations ago Reinhold Niebuhr christened Augustine the patron saint of Christian realism, with its attention to the brute facts of politics, its shouting down of pacifists and its refusal to grant that the kingdom has come in full. More recently the favorite way to introduce a book (especially if the author has a proclivity for something called Celtic Christianity) is to say that Augustine got it all wrong.

Mathewes and Gregory will have none of it. Like their forebears in the Augustinian resurgence (Rowan Williams, Lewis Ayres, Robert Dodaro and many more), they read Augustine as a theologian and not simply as a philosopher uninterested in the particulars of Christ, the scriptures, the church or the neighbor. They make quick work of the sort of hasty dismissals common to many survey course introductions: that Augustine is more Platonist than Christian, that he reduces other people to mere means to be used in pursuit of the greater love of God, that he offers theoretical justification for Christian empire. Unlike Niebuhr, who had little time for the particulars of doctrine or scripture, these Augustinian liberals embrace both, for Christians who enter the public sphere had better have something distinctive to say. And they do Augustine the favor of seeing God as the fulcrum of his thought. This One is not a being among beings, the biggest and baddest thing around, but a fully triune act of love, incarnate in Christ, poured out in the Spirit, approaching us ecstatically in grace. If our day's liberals are as theological as this, theology is in danger of becoming a good deal more interesting.

Both Gregory and Mathewes teach in religion departments in elite universities (Princeton and Virginia, respectively), perhaps the only two such departments located in major secular universities in which one can still be a confessional theologian. Both of these young authors write out of passionate Christian commitment and love of public life, and they succeed in showing how rich and how maddeningly indeterminate Augustine can be on politics—after all, characters as

disparate as Neuhaus and Hauerwas draw support from him!

Gregory and Mathewes both argue forcefully for a renewed place for love in political life, in accordance with the “theology of love [that] is explosively outward and communal” in Augustine’s work (Gregory)—a trait that lends his theology a “pro-creation dynamism” (Mathewes). These descriptions run against the grain of recent Augustine-bashing, and with that of more careful historical readings of Augustine—of which both authors make abundant use.

Gregory’s is the more modest book of the two. He simply wants to tell his fellow liberals that love is a good idea. This is no minor task. The great philosopher Hannah Arendt argued against love playing any part in liberalism, saying it simply yields sentimentality and so opens us up to the dangers of totalitarianism. Other liberal political theorists also mistrust love, saying it clouds reason and forsakes justice. Gregory maintains that this leaves liberals no way to shape people’s affections and renders liberals speechless in the face of illiberal motivations (like religion).

To contend for a place for love in politics, Gregory deftly uses feminist criticism of liberalism in concert with Augustine. Feminists and Augustine both argue for a place for affections, as against the liberal autonomous self, and for a place for love alongside justice. One hopes that Gregory will be successful here—for if there is one thing most obviously lacking on the far left wing of political discourse in the U.S. (and the right wing, for that matter), it is love.

Gregory also argues with his fellow Augustinians about whether liberalism is a good idea. A primary motivation here seems to be to beef up the theological aspects of Augustinian liberalism in order to leave no quarter for the likes of Hauerwas and Milbank: “Augustinian liberals give too much comfort to their more theologically confident critics when they abandon talk about God.” To demonstrate this more confident use of dogma, he draws on the two natures of Christ as a model for the reciprocal relationship between love and justice, insisting that Augustinians have “no luxury of simply condemning liberal democracy.” Christians have to be involved in public life, and they have to do so in Christ: “Christology shapes a way of seeing the world that offers insights for political citizenship.” In a particularly nifty move, Gregory takes Augustine’s distinction between love of use and love of enjoyment—much derided in anti-Augustine scholarship—and argues that Augustinians can love the civic order without bowing to it subserviently. Take that, Hauerwas.

Mathewes's book aims a bit higher than merely injecting a correction or two into longstanding academic conversations. His is a dogmatics of public life, a "mirror for Christian citizens," a theological reflection on the way in which politics needs Christians and Christians need politics. Christians have to be engaged in public life lest they fall prey to escapism and think that their faith is merely for their own private benefit, the world be damned. And the world needs Christians, for "church basements may just save us from bowling alone." More substantively, whereas the state constantly seeks to overstep its bounds and make totalizing demands on citizens' allegiance, the church naturally resists those demands and so reminds the state of the limited scope of its sovereignty "during the world"—in the time between Christ's two comings.

If Gregory keeps pretty close to academics' arguments, weighing in here and there, Mathewes operates outside the guardrails, arguing at length about the nature of faith, hope and love—each of which occupies a long chapter. Unusually for a theologian these days, he writes with God as the subject of his sentences: "God is always faithful, but God is also a living God, always able to do an utterly surprising new thing." This God is forever community in the inner-trinitarian relations between Father, Son and Spirit. One of the Trinity plunged into life among us in the flesh; just so, we Christians must enter into the thick of the world's life in the deepest sense, bringing love as God did in flesh among us. When we participate in the world as citizens, we praise God, we perform a kind of liturgy, we even take steps toward deification. We also open ourselves to judgment, which keeps us from closing off our faith prematurely.

Because Mathewes worries about the scornful academic repudiation of public life in the U.S., he pulls out this heavy dogmatic artillery to chase people out of the sanctuary and faculty meeting and into the public square. If Martin Luther King is Gregory's icon, the eastern and central European revolutions of 1989 are Mathewes's. We can have high, hopeful expectations of what may result when Christians get involved in civic life: "Real community can happen; miracles can occur; politics can eventuate in something more akin to a wedding or a festival than an election." The eschaton can break forth in time. Indeed, it long since has. We should act accordingly.

Though these books are lengthy, they are a joy to read. They represent a return to an Augustine that Augustine himself would have recognized: realistic about sin, to be sure, but full of wonder at God's enfleshed answer, in Christ, to our sin. Apologist

for empire and violence and mediocrity in this world, no doubt, but also aware that a living God ever works wonders and that holiness breaks out in unexpected places. Gregory even calls himself a “perfectionist” Augustinian—such a thing would have been deemed impossible in the scholarship a short time ago. But now in Augustine studies new things are happening all the time.

As to whom my former parishioner should vote for, or whether she should vote at all, or whether she should be marching like King in the 1960s or Havel in the 1980s, a definitive Augustinian answer is tantalizingly out of reach. But with works like these it's a bit closer.