

Wisdom from Augustine in an election year

Our so-called Christian politics have been captivated by the liturgies of the earthly city rather than the city of God.

by [James K. A. Smith](#) in the [November 2024](#) issue

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(Illustration by Scott Shellhamer)

I am an immigrant to this country. I moved here with my young family almost 30 years ago. In 2018 we finally became citizens of the United States. As a younger man, in particular as a young academic, I couldn't have imagined this. For a long time I was an earnest player in what Richard Rorty called the "America Sucks Sweepstakes." Some of my theological inclinations led me to be suspicious of the

state (and of these United States in particular). Yet my journey led me to become invested as a member of this flawed but noble project that we call the American experiment, which welcomed me and enabled me to forge a meaningful life.

And so we chose to become citizens. Our naturalization ceremony at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library was beautiful and moving, with scores of new citizens from 27 different countries, many of whom endured much more arduous journeys than we did. The presiding judge's speech was a soaring, inspiring invocation of the better angels of the republic. As we left the auditorium, the secretary of state provided an opportunity for every one of us to register to vote. We voted in our first presidential election in 2020.

Perhaps that's why, watching the events of January 6, 2021, unfold live on television, I was rattled and shook in ways that surprised me. The institutions and practices I had just signed up for seemed to be eroding and under threat—those hallmarks of liberal democracy that include the separation of powers, the rule of law, the constitutional protection of rights, and a representative voice of the people. I felt like Tony Soprano: "It's good to be in something from the ground floor," Tony once said. "But I came too late for that. . . . I came in at the end. The best is over."

As a philosopher and a Christian, it is particularly disconcerting to me how many Christians seem to be suspicious of liberal democracy. And conversely, it is unsettling how many fellow citizens imagine that Christianity is an inherent threat to democracy—though sadly, I can imagine why they have reached that conclusion. I want to deconstruct these perceived antitheses between Christianity and democracy. In many ways, liberal democracy is the fruit of Christianity. This is something that a lot of Christians *and* secular progressives seem not to appreciate.

Perhaps a fifth-century African doctor of the church can help us engage with the constructive relationship between Christianity and liberal democracy as we attempt to survive this election year. Augustine of Hippo's sprawling masterpiece *The City of God*, written in the early 400s, has enduring relevance for us today. I believe that its wisdom can teach us to inhabit the fractious, polarized time in which we live.

At the heart of Augustine's political wisdom is an awareness of what time it is. Late in his life, he counseled Boniface, a Roman general governing the precinct of Africa. In a letter from 418, Augustine addresses Boniface's frustrations with uprisings and incursions by those who despise the Christian faith. Boniface thinks he knows what

the kingdom of God is supposed to look like, and he's tempted to impose it—to make the kingdom come. Augustine cautions the impatient ruler: "We ought not to want to live ahead of time with only the saints and the righteous." Trying to "live ahead of time" means imagining we can achieve some ideal embodiment of justice—whether it's utopia or the kingdom—by imposing our will. Politics, Augustine counsels, demands patience. Politics is the art of forging a life together in the now. The institutions of our republic and the practices of democracy are eroded precisely when we imagine that we can live ahead of time. Political liberalism is accumulated wisdom about how not to live ahead of time.

*The City of God* is still read in political theory classes today. But if it offers what we might call a political theology, it is embedded in a way of reading history. And because *The City of God* is a theology of history, it is crucial to see it as a work of eschatology, rooted in future expectation. In other words, Augustine's political theology is a theology of time and history.

Perhaps what we can learn from him is the importance of politics as a mode of timekeeping, a particular way of inhabiting time. For Augustine, we cannot answer the question "What should we do?" unless we first answer the question "*When* are we?" Augustine offers a tool kit to help us forge a common life and commonweal in this long meantime of our existence. Some of these tools were picked up centuries later and put to work in the founding conceptions of political liberalism. All of them help us to understand when we are.

The first tool is Augustine's notion of the saeculum. Unlike our use of the word *secular*, which we tend to associate with space (as in the "secular public square"), for Augustine the saeculum is an era, a chunk of history. The divine irruption in history that is the incarnation, cross, resurrection, and ascension—the Christ event—becomes the Greenwich Mean Time of all history. In its shadow is the time in which we find ourselves: the saeculum, this age between cross and kingdom come. Our time is in the parentheses between God's incarnation in history and the eventual second coming.

Why does this make a difference for politics? Because to see the time of our political endeavors as the saeculum shapes political expectation. For Augustine, it means that we should expect pluralism. We shouldn't be shocked or scandalized by deep disagreement in the commonweal. While God's Spirit has been unleashed in history

and in the church, the kingdom is not here yet. And so politics is the hard work of forging a life in common despite the fact that we, as fellow citizens, might be animated by fundamentally different visions of the good.

When Boniface gets impatient and wants to impose the kingdom (or his version of it), Augustine tells him, *Stop trying to live ahead of time. Stop trying to live as if we're not in the saeculum*. Given when we are, politics requires persuasion, compromise, and tempered expectations. Politics is not indifferent to the good, but neither is it the means by which the kingdom arrives. Rather, politics is a mode of bearing witness to the good and enacting love of neighbor in the meantime of the saeculum.

The notion of the saeculum is related to the second tool Augustine provides: the idea of earthly and heavenly cities. *The City of God* is really a tale of two cities (in Latin, *civitas*, or republics) which he describes as the earthly city and the heavenly city, or the city of man and the city of God. These two cities are not distinguished by realm or jurisdiction or levels, as if the earthly city were material and the heavenly city were spiritual. Rather, the two cities are distinguished by their loves.

The origin of the two cities is not creation, Augustine argues, but rather the Fall. The earthly city did not begin with time; it began in time, as a result of Adam and Eve's sin. The two cities are two fundamentally different ways of organizing human community, centered around two very different sorts of love. The earthly city revolves around love of self and the lust for power and domination (the *libido dominandi*). The city of God revolves around love of God and engenders sacrifice for the neighbor.

Because he is deeply aware that we live in the saeculum, Augustine doesn't want the city of God to colonize the earthly city. He would argue against theocracy—and against the right-wing Catholic philosophy called integralism, which sometimes appeals to Augustine for justification. A third tool he offers is his recognition that we live in the *permixtum* of two cities. We find ourselves thrown into shared territories that are occupied by citizens of both cities who need to figure out how to live together. The saeculum is a long season of mixing with neighbors who share very different visions of the good. Ours is the time of wheat and tares, sheep and goats, deep differences lived out in close proximity.

These tools can help us shape a healthy relationship between our faith and our politics. Augustine would caution that Christians are not immune to “earthly city” politics. He is as sharply critical of deformed Christianity as he is of monstrous Roman practices. *The City of God* is a critique of Rome’s liturgies, which form and deform the loves of Augustine and his contemporaries. In his preaching as bishop of Hippo, he constantly admonishes his congregations to realize that the rituals of the empire are not merely civic or political—he calls them “fabulous theologies.” Politics is never neutral.

But neither is politics optional. Augustine is no fan of the so-called Benedict Option. He never recommends the formation of a sectarian enclave for the city of God to live out its own politics. Rather, citizens of the city of God are called, as an expression of loving their neighbors, to contribute to the common good by collaborating in the messiness of the *permixtum*.

What difference does the saeculum make for how we ought to live? Contra the utopianisms of the left and right, Augustine would emphasize that Christians are an eschatological people. That’s what it means to not live ahead of time. If Christians remember that they live in the saeculum, in this contested time of waiting for the full realization of Christ’s reign, they should not fall into the trap of thinking the kingdom has come. They shouldn’t uphold any earthly regime as ultimate. Those who thought the fall of Rome meant the collapse of God’s kingdom failed to see the distinction Augustine was making. Instead, they gave up their eschatological hope by settling for a present reality. For Augustine, expectation is essential to heavenly citizenship: as long as Christians pray “Thy kingdom come,” it’s not here yet. That should undermine any temptation to identify a particular regime, party, or movement with the arrival of the kingdom—even as discernment also requires us to try to be attuned to movements that bear the Spirit for a time and place.

Augustine counsels a kind of holy impatience. On the one hand, we pray and labor for a world that looks more like the just, flourishing kingdom we long for. The waiting of Christian eschatology is not the same as what Martin Luther King Jr. called “the tranquilizing drug of gradualism,” which uses *waiting* as a code for enshrining the status quo. On the other hand, even a properly prophetic desire and hunger must avoid the hubris of thinking we could socially engineer our way out of the world’s brokenness by our own ingenuity. As Immanuel Kant would put it centuries after Augustine: all of our human political constructions are built with the crooked timber

of human beings.

In *The City of God*, Augustine reads history, looking for the contrails of the Spirit in the waning empire around him, the seeds of possibility left by God's providence, and the snowballing effects of the people of God in history. He asks, "For what ends, the true God, in whose power are all kingdoms, deigned to assist the growth of the Roman Empire," and he trenchantly critiques that same empire. In *The Desire of the Nations*, British theologian Oliver O'Donovan describes such an endeavor as a kind of archaeology: "Like the surface of a planet pocked with craters by the bombardment it receives from space, the governments of the passing age show the impact of Christ's dawning glory." Our political institutions are not immune to incursions of grace and have not been left untouched by the influence of Christianity.

Augustine counsels a kind of holy impatience. We pray and labor for a world more like God's kingdom—even though we know we can't socially engineer our way out of the world's brokenness.

To carry on Augustine's project means trying to discern the ways that our institutions and practices and habits bear the mark of God's grace. Such a genealogical exercise—tracing the theological legacies of political liberalism—complicates the demonization of liberalism by some Christian movements today. It also challenges secular dichotomies that demonize all religious influence on political life. In many ways, the institutions and practices of liberal democracy are fruits of Christianity's impact on the political institutions of the West and now the wider world. The political goods of representation, respect for rights, checks on power, and even mercy in judgment are distinct effects of the encounter between the gospel and political life. And the legacy of that impact on our common life is a gift that benefits those of other faiths and those with no faith at all. It is a legacy that shines upon the just and the unjust.

However, this legacy has been erased from our collective memory. One of the tasks of Christian public theology is a kind of amnesia therapy for our neighbors who prize the goods and institutions of democracy but somehow imagine they sit in tension with Christianity. Public theology must also speak to the growing number of Christians who seem attracted to the fickle fiat of strongmen. Christian political theology has a public role to play simply by re-narrating to late-modern liberal

societies their religious and theological inheritance.

What a properly liberal secular society should hope for is a politics that is more Christian, not less. A properly Christian politics will be one animated by a deep awareness of what time it is, of the fact that we inhabit the *permixtum* that characterizes the saeculum. This will stand in marked contrast to what calls itself “Christian politics” today, which too often amounts to little more than Jesuified renditions of the *libido dominandi*.

When I suggest we need more Christian politics rather than less, I can imagine my secular progressive neighbor getting anxious, as if theocracy is around the corner. But in fact, the opposite is true. All should hope for a more Christian politics. What currently passes for Christian politics is a sub-Christian syncretism that prays to a vaguely moralistic god who plays favorites, a deity of our making whom we trot out to license nationalism and self-interest. This politics shows no signs of being disturbed by the cross, the ascension, or the eschaton. It is concerned only with winning, revenge, and resentment. In other words, our so-called Christian politics have been captivated by the liturgies of the earthly city rather than the city of God.

A more robust Christian political witness would be a gift to a pluralist society, even if it is also a prophetic challenge. Christian citizens will bring a life-giving imagination to our public life when they are nourished by Christian formation in the polis that is the church. Christians, of all people, should be the least inclined to treat temporal political allegiances as ultimate—which is precisely why we should resist demonizing our political adversaries. As O’Donovan provocatively puts it, “the most truly Christian state understands itself most thoroughly as ‘secular’”—not a godless, atheistic state but a politics that understands when we are, in the meantime of the saeculum.

This sort of eschatological orientation to time changes our expectations, not our goals. The work of public life—building institutions to organize and administer our shared life, collaborating to maintain libraries and economies—all of this is part of our creaturely calling to unpack and unfurl the possibilities of creation itself. That creaturely calling is renewed and directed by the cross and resurrection, and the biblical images of the kingdom of God in the prophetic texts are sketches of what flourishing looks like revealed by the One who made us.

What might such a Christ-haunted, biblically saturated politics look like? Well, it looks a lot like the civil rights movement: unapologetically biblical, rooted in the practices of the church, and speaking to the public in the cadences of the prophets. The civil rights movement believed it had something to say to a nation. The witnesses and martyrs of that beloved community learned to long for a better country, as the author of Hebrews puts it (Heb. 11:16), but they also imagined that *this* country could look more like it. That is the posture of an Augustinian politics.

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