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# A Theology of Public Life

CHARLES T. MATHEWES

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## A Theology of Public Life

What has Washington to do with Jerusalem? In the raging debates about the relationship between religion and politics, no one has explored the religious benefits and challenges of public engagement for Christian believers – until now. This ground-breaking book defends and details Christian believers' engagement in contemporary pluralistic public life, not from the perspective of some neutral "public," but from the particular perspective of Christian faith, arguing that such engagement enriches both public life and Christian citizens' faith itself. As such it offers not a "public theology," but a "theology of public life," analyzing the promise and perils of Christian public engagement, and discussing the nature of civic commitment and prophetic critique, and the relation of a loving faith to a liberal politics of justice. Theologically rich, philosophically rigorous, politically, historically and sociologically informed, this book advances contemporary discussion of "religion and public life" in fundamental ways.

CHARLES MATHEWES is Associate Professor of Religious Studies, University of Virginia. His other publications include *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition* (2001).



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# A Theology of Public Life

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*This book is for my mother*

*Martha Thomas Mathewes*

*IX.30.1935 – I.1.2006*

*She loves me like a rock*

*– Paul Simon*

*Saeculum autem hoc eremus est*  
Augustine, *sermo*. 4.9.9

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## *Acknowledgments*

The tale grew in the telling. It began with reflection on a sermon, given by Revd. Sam Portaro at Brent House at the University of Chicago, on the oddities of the agenda of “putting Christ back into Christmas” – the upshot of which was that Christ would not get into Christmas by some sort of willed politico-cultural imposition, but rather by being found already there, in the vulgar and kitschy desires that we various theological snobs sniff at. I have written this always thinking of his last line: “That, after all, is how Christ got into Christmas in the first place.” That sermon, hundreds more, and the liturgies of which they were a part, shaped this book decisively; and so I thank Revd. Portaro, Revd. Bruce Epperly, Revd. Jeffrey Fishwick, Revd. Paula Kettlewell, and Revd. Jonathan Voorhees, and the communities of Brent House at the University of Chicago, St. Paul’s Charlottesville, and Christ Church Charlottesville, for teaching me the way of Christ, albeit as awkwardly and abashedly as Episcopalians do that sort of thing.

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Several journals, and one publisher, were good enough to allow me to reprint material that first appeared in their pages. I have drawn on the following in this book: “On Using the World,” in *Having: Property, Possession, and Religious Discourse*, ed. Charles Mathewes and William Schweiker (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2004); “Reconsidering the Role of Mainline Churches in Public Life,” in *Theology Today*, 58.4 (January, 2002); “Faith, Hope, and Agony: Christian Political Participation Beyond Liberalism,” in *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 21 (2001); “Augustinian Anthropology: Interior *intimo meo*,” in *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 27.2 (June, 1999); “Pluralism, Otherness, and the Augustinian Tradition,” in *Modern Theology*, 14.1 (January, 1998).

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Our daughter Isabelle was born during the composition of this book. Before she arrived, we never imagined working so hard, or being so happy. She is an ever-present reminder both of this book's immediate urgency and of its ultimate unimportance; I am not sure for which I am more grateful.

My mother, Martha Thomas Mathewes, has been with this book since before it began and with its author for some time before that as well. She is the person who first oriented me to the world, and she has always been my guiding star. If this book expresses an attitude, a way of living in the world, it is as much hers as anyone's. I hope she will approve.

Charlottesville, Virginia  
January 6, 2006

## *Abbreviations for works by St. Augustine*

<i>ad Gal.</i>	<i>expositio epistolae ad Galatas</i>
<i>conf.</i>	<i>confessiones</i>
<i>contra acad.</i>	<i>contra academicos</i>
<i>DCD</i>	<i>de civitate Dei</i>
<i>DDC</i>	<i>de doctrina Christiana</i>
<i>de mor.</i>	<i>de moribus ecclesiae catholicae</i>
<i>de pat.</i>	<i>de patientiae</i>
<i>de Trin.</i>	<i>de Trinitate</i>
<i>DUC</i>	<i>de utilitate credendi</i>
<i>DVR</i>	<i>de vera religione</i>
<i>ennar.</i>	<i>enarrationes in Psalmos</i>
<i>ep.</i>	<i>epistulae</i>
<i>Gen. ad litt.</i>	<i>de Genesi ad litteram</i>
<i>in Io. ep.</i>	<i>in Iohannis epistulam tractatus</i>
<i>sermo.</i>	<i>sermones</i>



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## Introduction: Life in the epilogue, during the world

### **A mirror for Christian citizens**

What has Washington to do with Jerusalem? This book aims to answer this question. It provides Christian believers with one way to understand why and how they should participate in public life. It does so by offering a broadly Augustinian “theology of public life,” a picture of Christian life as it should be lived in public engagement.

The title foreshadows the argument. The book studies “public life,” not simply “politics.” “Public life” includes everything concerned with the “public good” – everything from patently political actions such as voting, campaigning for a candidate, or running for office, to less directly political activities such as serving on a school board or planning commission, volunteering in a soup kitchen, and speaking in a civic forum, and to arguably non-political behaviors, such as simply talking to one’s family, friends, co-workers, or strangers about public matters of common concern.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, this study is undertaken as a “theology of public life,” not a “public theology.” Typically, “public theologies” are self-destructively accommodationist: they let the “larger” secular world’s self-understanding set the terms, and then ask how religious faith contributes to the purposes of public life, so understood. In contrast, a theology of public life defines “the public” theologically, exploring its place in the created and fallen order and in the economy of salvation.<sup>2</sup> Hence, whereas public theologies take as

1. See Shapiro 1990: 276, and Stiltner 1999.

2. For an analogous contrast between a theology of nature and a natural theology, see Schreiner 1995: 122.

their primary interlocutors non-believers skeptical of the civic propriety of religious engagement in public life, this theology of public life takes as its primary audience Christian believers unsure of the religious fruitfulness of civic engagement; and it argues to them that they can become better Christians, and their churches better Christian communities, through understanding and participating in public life as an ascetical process of spiritual formation.

Yet while Christians are its primary audience, all persons of good will who are interested in public life can read it with profit. Non-Christians will find explications of (what should be) the rationale for many of their Christian fellow citizens' public engagement, so they may use this book as a Baedeker, a dictionary to a language that many of their interlocutors employ; and they may also find that the book's theological analysis illuminates the structures and patterns that form (and deform) public life in advanced industrial societies. Furthermore, readers in other traditions may find help of a different sort; because the book offers an unapologetically particularistic approach that speaks to public matters without assuming that all its interlocutors share its local categories, they may find useful provocation, viable support, and a suggestive model for analogous projects undertaken from within their own perspectives.

"Unapologetically particularistic" is key: using the first-order vernacular of Christian faith, it argues that Christians can and should be involved in public life both richly as citizens – working for the common good while remaining open, conversationally and otherwise, to those who do not share their views – and thoroughly *as Christians* – in ways ascetically appropriate to, and invigorating of, their spiritual formation, not least by opening their own convictions to genuine transformation by that engagement.

Such a project involves two distinct undertakings. First, it entails a theology of faithful Christian citizenship, which will unpack how the basic dynamics of faithful Christian existence promote Christians' engagement in public life during the world and inform their understanding of the shape and purpose of such life. Second, it offers an ascetics of such citizenship, an analysis of how that citizenship should be lived by Christians as a means of training them in their fundamental vocation as citizens of the kingdom of heaven, particularly considering those forces – material, structural, institutional, cultural, and intellectual – that mis-shape our engagement in public life today.

For many centuries there was a genre of political writing called the “mirror for Christian princes,” wherein potentates could see what they should be striving to emulate as “godly rulers.” This book is a mirror for Christian citizens. In public engagement, Christian believers do not seek simply to do the right thing; they also undertake a properly “ascetical” engagement with the world. Interpreting and endorsing that ascetical engagement is my ultimate aim here – a task captured in the phrase “during the world.”

Explaining this will take some time.

### **Why (and which) believers need a dogmatics of public life**

The book builds upon previous debates on religion’s role in public life, but does not contribute to it. It assumes that those debates have by and large ended, and that what we may call the accommodationists won, and the “public reason” advocates lost.

This was not supposed to happen. Once upon a time, the consensus (or near-consensus, anyway) was that religion was declining, increasingly marginalized, and in any event simply a mask for ideological debates more properly about material interests. Hence, most thinkers believed, religious convictions should be translated into a more properly “public” vernacular before entering the public sphere. A small minority – a faithful remnant, if you will – insisted that public life should accommodate particularistic religious voices; but they too were seen as relics, merely of antiquarian interest.

What a difference the last few decades have made. Each premise of the “public reason” argument has proven false. Quite clearly, religion is not, *pace* expectations, going away. Against predictions of inevitable secularization – and the concomitant marginalization of religious believers, languages, and arguments – sociologists, political scientists, and historians have shown that in modernity religion can and does remain vital in both private and public life, even as it changes its character.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, religion *qua* religion seems often quite “functional” in modern societies. Given the substantial

3. See Asad 2003, Berger 1999, Casanova 1994, C. Smith 2003b. For a rival account see Norris and Inglehart 2004. For a good discussion of the mesmeric power that the “secularization frame” still has over the knowledge classes, from government bureaucrats to academics to journalists, see Cox 2003.

changes – some would say precipitous decline – in both the quantity and the quality of associational life, religious associations are increasingly important on purely secular “civic” grounds; church basements may just save us from bowling alone.<sup>4</sup> Finally, religious engagement is inescapable; much of our public life consists of debates concerned with the proper boundaries of religion, the “political legibility” of religious believers’ concerns (Bivins 2003: 10).<sup>5</sup> The sociology behind the heretofore dominant “public reason” argument about religion in public life has simply been wrong. Furthermore, alongside the sociological evidence, philosophers have argued convincingly that there are no good normative reasons generically to constrain religious voices’ participation, *qua* religious, in public life. They argue that such voices best contribute to public life when left to determine for themselves – on grounds determined by their own particular, local conditions – how precisely to frame their arguments.<sup>6</sup> Such philosophers see us entering an age of “post-secular” public discourse, in which the unapologetically robust use of patently particularistic languages will provide a genuine basis for a real dialogical openness (Coles 1997: 8).

But so far these thinkers have made this case only partially, from the perspective of the public sphere. Such civic arguments are important, of course. But faithful citizens must be convinced to act and speak in explicitly faithful ways. A theological case must be made to encourage civic action by such believers; and no one has yet tried to make it.

There are many believers who could be swayed by such arguments. They seem invisible in recent discussions about religion and public life, discussions that make much of divisions among and within religious communities; but that is because of a methodological mistake. The many recent taxonomies, in the United States and outside it, of believers’ attitudes towards politics are too finely grained: they underplay the fact that most believers are

4. See Elshtain 1995, Sandel 1996, Putnam 2000, Verba *et al.* 1995, Bivins 2003, Casanova 1994, Hart 2001, Mahmood 2005, Mathewes 2002b, Macedo 2004 and Gibson 2003. I thank Erik Owens for discussions on these matters.

5. See Hunter 1990, Layman 2001, and Uslander 2002.

6. See Placher 1989, Jackson 1997, Wolterstorff 1997, Eberle 2002, Thiemann 1996, Connolly 1999, Perry 2003, Weithman 2002, Ochs and Levene 2002, and J. Stout 2004. For more social-scientific arguments to this effect, see Post 2003 and C. Smith 2003a.

more committed to their faith than to any political program flowing from their faith, that they recognize that asymmetry of commitment, and are comfortable with it. These believers populate crude categories like “religious right” and “religious left,” “crunchy cons” and “progressive orthodox,” in considerable numbers; in fact they make up the large majority of Christians – Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Mainline Protestant or Evangelical Protestant – in the developed world (and beyond it) today.

But by sorting them into those groups, we miss what they all fundamentally share – namely, a common sense of the obscure distance, and yet obscure connection, between their religious beliefs with their civic lives. Such believers are unseduced by the sharper (and false) clarity of right-wing religious ideologues, because they seem too immediately tied to a concrete political program; nor would they accept similarly rigid left-wing theologies, were any on offer.<sup>7</sup> Religious beliefs, they realize, do not typically translate immediately and easily into political behavior, and anyone who says otherwise, they suspect, is doing more salesmanship than theology.

To some this suspicion looks like hesitancy, and the hesitancy looks like it is anchored in tepid believing. And many of these believers’ faith is all too frail. (More on that in a moment.) But the frailty of their belief does not cause their political hesitancy. If anything, the causality may go in the opposite direction: their hesitancy may be partly to blame for the tepidity of their faith. For they realize that there is *some* connection between their faith and their civic lives. Many of them are deeply interested in finding ways to render intelligible to themselves and to their neighbors the meaning and implications of their putative religious commitments. But the only models for faithful engagement they see are much too

7. This is most pointedly so for Mainline Protestants; see Wuthnow 2002 and Wuthnow 1997: 395: “the percentage of evangelicals who want mainline Protestants to have more influence is higher than the percentage of mainliners who want mainline Protestants to have more influence.” But it is also true for Roman Catholics and Evangelicals; see Hollenbach 1997, C. Smith 1998 and 2000, Bramadat 2000, Noll 2002, G. Hughes 2003, and Steinfels 2004 (especially the essays by Murnion, and Legee and Mueller). It may seem odd to group Protestants and Catholics together, as well as mainliners and evangelicals, but it is practically accurate; significant ecclesial, political, and even theological differences no longer map onto denominational differences, but instead transect the denominations. For more on this see Wuthnow 1988.

tightly tied to immanent political agendas, and so they hesitate to engage their faith in civic life. Hence they judge that faithful engagement means a quite tight connection between belief and action, between faith and works; and from the works they can see, they judge that the faith that funds them is not worthwhile.

Can these bones live? Less likely resurrections have occurred. For such an event to occur, they need a better model of faith as a way of life, and a better model of how that faith may guide public engagement. That is what this book offers.

Still, their resurrection will not be an easy one. No resurrections are. To be precise, any attempt to encourage these believers towards richer engagement faces two large problems.

First, such believers are among the last adherents to the “public reason” view. They assume that public religious action is inevitably expressed in absolutist and intolerant fashion by the self-appointed spokesmen of the religious right and (again, however rarely seen) religious left. Because they find such action both civically imprudent and theologically impious, they think that religion should stay out of public life.

It may be that some readers of this book share this worry. So the following is directed as much at you as at such believers: no necessary connection exists between the public use of thick religious discourse and intolerant intellectual, cultural, or theological positions, or between “thin” modes of speech and open-minded and conversational ones. After all, the most visible case of religious believers accepting a Rawlsian etiquette of restraint in public life is precisely in the superficially secular “family values” strategy of quite conservative religious organizations; the 1960s United States civil rights movement was saturated with overt religious rhetoric; and anyway, the Roman Catholic Church’s statements – some apparently “liberal,” some “conservative,” and all expressed in a largely undefensive, dialogical tone – are often welcoming and stern at the same time.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, and speaking of the USA in particular, evidence suggests that such believers’ hesitancy about explicitly religious engagement, out of concern for rising theologically inflected intolerance, has actually amounted to a self-fulfilling prophecy. Their shunning of religious rhetoric in public has

8. See Hertzke 1988.

permitted, and perhaps encouraged, the rising prominence of more strident and intolerant voices in public speech. It is not that there was no religious discourse in public until the “religious right” introduced it; to the contrary, the “religious right” was quietist from the 1920s until the 1970s, and its current activism was provoked by concerns about the “loss of our culture” after the successes of progressive movements, themselves typically saturated with often strident and intolerant religious discourse, up to that point. What has actually happened in the last few decades is that those religious voices attuned to the complexity of religion in public life have effectively ceded the rhetorical high ground of thick discourse to extremist and often reactionary (whether right-wing or left-wing) voices. Culture, like nature, abhors a vacuum, and bad theology drives out good.<sup>9</sup>

These voices’ self-imposed silence is much to be regretted, for without them public life seems doomed to an ever sharper and more damaging polarization. The changing religious demographics of North America and Europe over the past several decades suggest this. Some scholars have argued that immigration will transform American religion into more pluralistic, eclectic, and tolerant forms than any society before. Others, less sanguine, see immigration as important, but not because it will make American religion more diverse and eclectic; after all, the large majority of immigrants to the USA are and will continue to be conservative Christians, from Africa and Latin America – hardly obvious candidates to revolutionize religion in the USA, at least in the way that the starry-eyed prophets anticipate. Meanwhile, Europe faces the emergence of ghettoized immigrant populations who have been excluded from the national cultures into the public sphere, and the rise of reactionary ethno-nationalisms (often with a religious patina) in response.<sup>10</sup>

In short, believers’ alienation from civic-religious engagement will end only when they stop reinforcing the extremists’ monopoly on religious discourse by shunning such discourse, and instead take it up again. Speaking civically, today we need to cultivate the public

9. See Hofrenning 1995, Apostolidis 2000, Harding 2000, Hart 2001, McCarraher 2000, R. L. Wood 2002, and Marsh 2005.

10. See Eck 2001 and Wolfe 1998 for the optimistic view; see Gardella 2003, Jenkins 2002, Nicholls 1989, and (implicitly) Noll 2002 for the more pessimistic one.

discourse of religious citizens, not further constrain it. Thoughtful secularists and sincere believers can agree that we need, not *less* religion in public, but *more*, of a richer kind – for such believers would be a welcome addition to civic discourse.

Any attempt to encourage such believers towards a richer religious engagement with civic life faces a second problem: these believers are often, to be frank, lousy believers. Their grip on Christian faith and life – or rather, Christian faith and life’s grip on them – is often quite anemic, sadly confined to a mere spirituality. Many churches have become deeply co-opted by the therapeutic ethos of the culture, leading to declining membership and looser commitment even among those who remain. These churches, and their believers, are perceived, not without reason, as collaborating with these social trends, rather than offering any real resistance to them. They are in deep need of reformation, of a new Great Awakening – indeed, of any awakening at all.<sup>11</sup> Provoking these believers would have a powerful effect, not only on our common public life, but also on their own religious belief; but in this case, the cause of the improvement is indistinguishable with the improvement itself.

Yet all is not lost. Despite the many correct criticisms that thinkers from H. Richard Niebuhr to Stanley Hauerwas have leveled against those believers’ ways of believing, we need not despise the noise of their solemn assemblies. For latent in their religious convictions is a sense that their beliefs should shape the way they live in this world. Even now they profess a deep commitment to justice, genuine community, and respect for others, albeit emerging most of the time in vague moral pieties – what Nancy Ammerman calls “Golden Rule Christianity.” Furthermore, they have developed a particularly rich “style” of civic participation, one built on a strategy of stewardship and “bridging,” creating spaces in which the events that constitute civil society – the town meetings, small groups, soup kitchens, and campaign rallies – can happen. Latent in their convictions are powerful motives for a style of public engagement that is both theologically profound and civically

11. See Fowler *et al.* 1999, McGreevy 2003, C. Smith 2005, Wuthnow 1997 and 1998a, Witten 1993, Hout *et al.* 2001. In Europe, see Gill 1999.



constructive.<sup>12</sup> Nor could this be easily changed, for it is wired into their churches' very being, and not just a bit of software in their minds. It is part of their *habitus*, too deep-rooted and organic to be painlessly or easily exchanged for another style of engagement. Theologies of the latter sort – often on offer by the received churches' harshest critics today – are hydroponic, unrooted in the lived realities of these churches' traditions. As such, such criticisms are symptomatic of our consumer societies' identity politics, which offer little more than the bad faith of a too-easy particularism. Real particularism is an achievement, the realization of a distinct character that can take a lifetime to develop; it cannot be simply purchased and put on instantaneously, like a pair of pre-faded stonewashed jeans, or a mass-produced “antique-looking” vase from Pottery Barn. At least these churches' style, in having a real past, offers the possibility for a real, concrete, future particularism – even if it too often fails to deliver on its promise.

Furthermore, while such critics attack the style, the style itself is not the problem; the problem is the absence of a theological rationale for it. These believers continue to volunteer and engage in civic activities at rates higher than other citizens (and particularly more than overt secularists and more rigid theocrats), but they lack a theological rationale for their civic engagements – an explanation for why they, as Christians, and members of these churches, should do this. They suffer from what Charles Taylor has called “the ethics of inarticulacy”: a way of life guided by moral convictions whose articulation is blocked by its adherents' incapacity to express their metaphysical and theological background. And such activity must be complemented by some rationale, if it would be an intentional and organic part of a church's life, and handed on to new generations of the faithful.<sup>13</sup>

Such a theological rationale should explain why such Christians should care about public life, how they should be engaged in public life, as Christians, and what they should expect to have happen to them, as Christians, in that engagement. It would urge them toward a thicker appropriation of their faiths, an appropriation that would

12. See Ammerman 1997, R. S. Warner 1994, and Theusen 2002. See also Wuthnow on the importance of membership in more politically active congregations for training in skills for civic engagement (1998b and 1999b).

13. See Taylor 1989 and C. Smith 2005.

energize and inform their public engagement. Instead of arguing for the legitimacy of religion in public life, it would argue for the legitimacy of public life in religion. It would not ask, “What does God have to do with politics?” (see DiIulio and Dionne 2000), but instead, “What does politics have to do with God?” It would be a dogmatics of public life, which is what this book seeks to offer.

### **During the world: the dogmatics sketched**

What will this dogmatics look like? First of all, it will not propound a system but sketch a communal way of life. Christian life is a life of inquiry into God, and the practices in which Christians engage do not simply assist that inquiry, they embody it. A “theology of public life” therefore includes a more concrete ascetical spirituality and ecclesiology of public life, which are manifest in and reinforced by a set of concrete practices, “spiritual” and otherwise.<sup>14</sup> Such a theology is well described as a normative ethnography of religious practices.

To do this we must confront the concrete challenges facing our attempts at ascetical formation, especially the fluidity and increasing marketization of our occupations, our relationships, and even our identities. In confronting these challenges we find that the best way to use them is to *endure* them – to see them as inescapable facts about our lives, realities which we experience most fundamentally by suffering them. Endurance is the crux of this proposal; it embodies the overall practice, the ascesis, that anchors this “theology of public life.”

#### *Enduring: an ascetical strategy*

In talking about an asceticism based on an understanding of life as endurance, I have used two terms that need some unpacking before going further. Today “asceticism” suggests very thin, very bearded, near-naked men doing strange things to their bodies. All of those things can be part of an ascetic regimen. But none of them

14. See Greer 1986, Hadot 1995 and 2002, Charry 1997, Wuthnow 1998a and 2003, Sedgwick 1999, and Volf and Bass 2002. For challenges to such a spirituality, see Roof 1999, and M. F. Brown 1997.

gets to the heart of the matter. For all our interest in altering our bodies today – through physical exercise, surgery, even drugs – we are ignorant of the deep history of reflection on and practices of asceticism, so that, as Gavin Flood puts it, “the residues of ascetic practice in our culture have become mere technique” (Flood 2004: 1). Proper asceticism is a matter of vulnerability more than toughness; it is not so much about learning to grit one’s teeth and bear it, but rather of learning to suffer in the right way, in order for the whole person, body and spirit, properly to be able to bear the weight of its ultimate destiny – which in Christianity means able to bear the weight of glory that is humanity’s eschatological destiny.<sup>15</sup>

“Endurance” also needs some explanation. An ascetics of public life, built on a program of “enduring,” uses engagement in public life to discipline one’s dispositions. It does so by seeing that engagement most fundamentally as a form of suffering, of reception. Our lives in this world are more a matter of being acted upon than of acting. Such endurance is not fundamentally inert; passivity and activity are complexly intertwined therein, in a habituated receptivity, an alert waiting. The very etymology of waiting gets at this complexity; as Michael Raposa points out, the word *wait* “derives from the verb *to watch* and is associated with *wake*” (1999: 195 n. 1). This watchful waiting endurance is a positive mode of engagement with the world and with God in and through the world – an active, anticipatory, and welcoming responsiveness – organized through the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity.

Yet the virtues so understood are not so much positive moral achievements as habits of resisting “making” anything out of ourselves; this is why we can talk about moral agency without falling into Pelagian presumptions of the necessity of moral heroism. Furthermore, they are not static states or conditions, they are dynamic and temporally organizing. They orient us most fundamentally to the temporal structure of our being, and of being itself. They give us our sense of timing, our “rhythm,” and thereby order our desires and discipline our dispositions, teaching us to be properly vulnerable to God’s grace, and especially the gift of Creation, given

15. See Asad 1993: 111–15, and Wimbush and Valantasis 1995, Charry 1997, Harpham 1987, and Roberts 1998. See P. Brown 1995 and 1992 and Lawless 2000 for Augustine’s ascetical strategy, and DDC I.24.24–5 for Augustine’s account of proper asceticism.

through the medium of time.<sup>16</sup> To endure virtuously means that we, as best we can, accept the gift that time most basically is. To imagine our life in the world as a matter of endurance is to see this life as a pilgrimage; it is to see oneself as a voyager, a *viator* in the world, in history. Pilgrimages are activities, but traditionally they are understood as a form of suffering, a way of traveling through the world that renders one vulnerable to presence – the presence of God, of the world, of others, even of oneself – in a new and self-altering way.<sup>17</sup>

To be so ascetic – to endure virtuously, to wait properly, to watch wakefully, to undertake what Augustine calls the “pilgrimage of our affections” (DDC 1.17.16) that this endurance entails – requires training, a training in how to inhabit time, how to take time, how to be patient. Anyone who has spent time around young children knows that to be patient requires serious discipline. We are like little children as regards this training, no matter how old we are. The most fundamental subject matter of our training, and in a way our most immediate tutor, is our desires: we must learn to desire aright. Yet the disciplining of our dispositions is at least as much a negative task as a positive one; at least as much about cultivating appropriate dissatisfactions as it is about realizing certain accomplished states of character; at least as much about the disruption of achievement by the recognition of our ongoing need for patience and waiting as it is about the apocalyptic presumptions of moral achievement. Our impatience is a general fact about the human condition, no matter what era or culture we inhabit; but it is made especially pointed for us by our contemporary consumer culture. “Consumer culture” is aptly named, for in it we are consumed with (and by) the idea of immediate gratification – whether of one’s

16. For more on resisting the heroic and agonal temptations in the languages of virtue and practice more generally, see S. Jones 2002: 57–70 and Coakley 2002b.

17. See Augustine, *de pat.* My understanding of enduring parallels Coakley 2002a and 2002b and de Certeau 1992, and has some similarities with Hauerwas 2002, though as will become clear, I think that at times Hauerwas surrenders to the temptations that the language of “enduring” means to resist. On waiting see Vanstone 1983. On disciplinary practices, see Asad 1993: 134. On pilgrimage see Dyas 2001, especially the distinction between “life-pilgrimage” and “place-pilgrimage” (245–46), Constable 1976, for discussions of early Christian theologians’ concerns regarding geographic pilgrimages, and Campo 2002; I thank Jason Danner for discussions on this.

physical appetites, one's intellectual habits, or one's existential identity.<sup>18</sup> Our typically manic-depressive lifestyle renders such pilgrimage almost unimaginable. In the face of an advertising culture that screams at us that we can, indeed must, "have it all," and have it all *now*, we have to learn to long, to long for the right – and in this life, impossible-to-"acquire" – "things." We must be "trained by our longings" to understand ourselves and others as beings whose longings, their persistent lacks, are crucial to our being (Harrison 2000: 97). Indeed "the whole life of a good Christian is a holy longing" (*in Io. ep.* 4.6), for we seek a goal unattainable in this world. We must learn to feel and dislike our condition of *distensio*, our experience of being overstretched, extended in confusing and disquieting ways. We must cultivate the right sorts of dissatisfactions – attending to the moments of dissatisfaction and, instead of dismissing them or downplaying their significance, we should acknowledge them as telling us something of the truth about our world, and our hopes for full and permanent happiness within it. We should feel an appropriate measure of "restlessness," a longing for something we know we will not fully find here, and a refusal to accept the false idols that we throw up for ourselves as distractions. We must learn to live during the world, not ultimately to expect to like it – in fact we must learn to allow ourselves, by and large, *not* to like it, where "liking" it means trying to find ourselves fully at home here.

This training is not easy, and has many pitfalls. We must not use it to confabulate a false wistfulness or a metaphysical nostalgia. The cultivation of dissatisfaction cannot be the cultivation of the snob, trained to sneer at all they come across; it is not a preemptive prophylactic against experience, but rather the implication of our increasingly profound inhabitation of our experience of desire – an experience that, on this account, we normally do not let ourselves fully feel. We should cultivate dissatisfactions with our dissatisfactions. (A saint can be all sorts of things – sad, angry, crabby, happy, dumb, cantankerous, beatific – but she or he cannot be complacent; coming to appreciate the difference between being at peace and being complacent is one of the most basic lessons saints can teach us.) We need a constant dispositional dislodgement; we must keep

18. I have been much educated on consumerism by V. Miller 2004 and Campbell 1987.

our disenchantment perpetually in motion. We should learn to live, as it were, in suspense, in resistance to closure. To borrow from Nietzsche, we should avoid being stuck, even to “avoiding being stuck” (which is precisely where most of Nietzsche’s contemporary groupies fail to follow Nietzsche). With Augustine, again, we should learn to live as mendicants, begging constantly for forgiveness (*sermo*. 56.6.9), for in this life our justice lies in forgiveness of sins, not perfection of virtue (*DCD* 19.27). To do this, in other words, requires something more than skill; it requires grace.

This practice expresses, and reflexively relies upon, profound metaphysical and anthropological convictions. Metaphysically it means that “the world,” insofar as it exists (or, better, claims to exist) autonomously, is a deeply compromised and compromising reality. And we also learn that the world is actually something other, namely, God’s Creation.<sup>19</sup> When Creation fell and became “the world,” it became less than what it once was, what it should be and what it will be yet again; it lives on “borrowed time” (Cavanaugh 1998: 228). And in inhabiting it so do we, who are the foremost exemplars of what was once great about it, and of what has gone so profoundly wrong with it. Anthropologically it affirms that the human is, as Rowan Williams puts it, “a creature animated by desire, whose characteristic marks are lack and hunger, who is made to be *this* kind of creature by a central and unforgettable absence, by lack and hunger” (1987: 69).<sup>20</sup> Because of this, we must be patient with our impatience; even as we recognize that this is not the home of our longings, we must not silence our hopes for real consummation, for a real realization of what we most deeply and truly desire. We are not seeking, as perhaps in Stoicism, to extinguish our hopes, but rather just the opposite – to learn to endure their persistence, and their irresolution. We must feel these hopes’ full force and not seek to satiate them with the false consolations of consumer culture, to acknowledge that their satisfaction is deferred

19. See Davies 2004

20. See *sermo*. 38.1–2. See also Peter Brown on the psychology of politics in 2000: 322–25, and Markus on “eschatological restlessness” in 1970: 170. On *distensio*, see *conf.* 11.26 and the helpful discussion in O’Daly 1977, and Ricoeur 1984: 26–30. On pilgrimage in Augustine, see Claussen 1991 and Halliburton 1967. For the role of the community see van Bavel 1991 and Cavadini 2004. This insight extends behind Augustine, of course, even if he most fully develops it; see Betz 2000.

to a time beyond the ages of this prefab world, and to give that acknowledgment the weight it deserves.

Such a project – built on cultivating a sense of our own incompleteness, dissatisfactions, and even failures – may seem dissatisfying. But that dissatisfaction is part of what it aims to treat. We impatiently, apocalyptically expect solutions for our problems. But such “solutions” are generally snake oil. And as Franz Rosenzweig suggested, Christianity is best understood as providing a structure to our passion and suffering, not a solution to it (1985: 376).<sup>21</sup>

To endure our life in this way is to be attentive and wakeful, patient and long-suffering, to refuse to let the world have the last word on what it means, and yet to refuse also to presume to know what that last word will be. It is to live in the world, without accepting its immanent self-presentation. It is to live eschatologically within the world – to live *during the world*.

### *During the world*

The phrase “during the world” may sound novel, but it is quite old. It appeared as long ago as 1435, in the will of one Richard Beauchamp, Earl of Warwick, who asked therein that a chapel be built with money from his estate, and “that there be said every day, during the Worlde . . . three masses” in the chapel (G. Holmes 1962: 180). And the idea behind it is older still. The struggle to grasp the idea expressed by that phrase has been one of the primary tasks of Christian thought from its beginnings. A whole cosmology is packed into those three words, one suggesting a way of treating our earthly condition as crucially contingent, at least in the sense that our lives’ significance is not absolutely determined by the immanent forces that both press upon us and (seem to) sustain us. The language of “world” suggests that we, as the namers of “the world,” have an ability to step back and see it as a whole, to gain something like a perspicuous conceptual grasp on it. On this picture, we have some sort of ability, however partial, to transcend the world; the “horizon” of the world is not our absolute horizon, and does not ultimately define us. Indeed, by naming it, we define it (van Fraassen

21. See Batnitzsky 2000 and Santner 2001.

2002: 5–25). Our immurement in the world is in some way then not the whole story about us.

This capacity for transcendence is typically misunderstood. Many recognize it, only to get caught on the horns of a dilemma. If we are not absolutely in this world, how should we conceptualize our relation to it? Some suggest that we are made not for this world, but for some “other” one; for them we should struggle to understand how to relate to this world while we are in it, but seek ultimately that other world which is in some radical discontinuity with our existence now. Others insist that this world is the only one there is, and we should see our tendencies towards estrangement from it as temptations to be resisted. The options are stark: either this world or another. We are properly at home in this world, or we are “resident aliens.” But both options are inadequate. It is simply bad faith to deny our world-transcendence, our recognition that the material conditions of our material lives are not all there is to say about us. Yet nor are we otherworldly, made for another place – a metaphysical Mars, perhaps – and for some obscure reason trapped in this one; the fantasy that we could be “altogether elsewhere,” in a way that would be free of worldly engagements, makes our relation to the world altogether too accidental. Indeed, the temptation to think of ourselves as otherworldly in this way does not speak simply of our historical failures of imagination; that we experience it as a temptation reveals that our condition as “worldly,” as existing in an environment in which we remain in complex dialogical relation, reaches to the depths of our self-understanding.

What such positions seem to forget is our conditioning by time as well as by space. We normally orient ourselves most primordially in space. We live after the triumph of *mathesis*, the mathematical spatialization of reality that was accomplished in early modernity.<sup>22</sup> But such a conceptualization is superficial. It implies that the world as we find it is a permanent and unalterable reality, in relation to which we are ultimately defined. This not only accepts our sinful belief that the way the world is, is “the way the world really always has been and will be”; it may also delude us into thinking that there is some place – namely, “the church” – in which we can stand that is fundamentally uncontaminated by “worldliness.”

22. See Pickstock 1997: 135–66.



Christians should be oriented not by Newton's onto-theological grid but rather the biblical-historical narratives, and they should reconceive the world fundamentally temporally, as a duration. Christians are not otherworldly, but most fundamentally "other-temporalitied." "The world" is more primordially an era than a place.<sup>23</sup> More fundamental than the question of where we live is the question of when, and on this account we live in the "epilogue," the "after-Word," speaking Christologically (G. Steiner 1989: 93–4). We are, in the most profound way, *belated*; everything important to our fates – our sin and our salvation – has already occurred, or at least (in the latter case) has been inaugurated, if not fully accomplished. Our fate is secure, the victory is won; we are simply waiting for the final consummation. Given this condition as belated and yet waiting, we must, through grace, begin to learn to live in a new way in this passing age. We should understand the world as something we fundamentally must endure – not an absolute and unquestioned "given," but rather a contingent configuration of reality that will one day pass away.

This is what the phrase "during the world" is meant to bring to the fore. It suggests a period, episode, or era – a non-permanent condition, but one inescapable, for now – in which we find ourselves, and which we must live through. By so picturing the world temporally, many of our most cherished escapist metaphors are immediately rendered defunct. We cannot stand "outside" or "against" the world; we cannot fully participate in God's condescension *vis-à-vis* the world, because what the language – God's language – of "the world" condescends to is, in part, ourselves. Yet we know that this condition is impermanent: we must live in time, but we cannot rest content with(in) this dispensation as conclusive.<sup>24</sup>

So understood, "during the world" disabuses us of believing that the world is what we make it. Not at all: we are more fundamentally witnesses than *ex nihilo* agents. But we are not witnesses in the sense of innocent bystanders, whether to a crime or a car wreck; we are more like the audience in Greek tragedy, necessary for the play's realization, implicated in its truths, but not able to act to alter the

23. For a sociological deconstruction of "otherworldliness," see McRoberts 2003.

24. For discussions of the import of temporality, see Rudenfeld 2001, Coles 1997, D. Harvey 1990, G. Steiner 2001, and Baudrillard 1994. For a powerful alternative to this account, see Jenson 2004.

basic story. Yet it is not a tragic story, though the interim often does seem, at best, tragic. We live “in the middle,” and it is from the middle that we have to begin. We must endure the present time and stand fast into an indeterminate future. The fact that the world will one day end, that it is not our ultimate frame of reference, does not entail the apocalypse’s imminent arrival. Eschatology without imminent apocalypse: that is the tensive structure of commitment and longing that should shape human life here, during the world.<sup>25</sup>

### *An Augustinian worldliness*

So we need a dogmatics of public life; and such a dogmatics will be fundamentally ascetical; and such an ascetical dogmatics will cultivate our ability to perceive our condition as one of living “during the world.” But why would we seek to find inspiration for such a program in Augustine?

In an important way, the decision is simply pragmatic. Augustine’s theological vision, vocabulary, and (to a lesser degree) attitude have shaped the traditions of Western Christianity more profoundly than any thinker other than St. Paul. To offer a theology of engagement able to speak to the audience this book wants to reach, splintered ecclesially and doctrinally in myriad ways, it is wise counsel to find a common root for all of them. Augustine is that root.

But there is a deeper, principled decision. Not only is Augustine’s thought more readily apprehensible by the book’s core audience; his thought is also especially fruitful for thinking about public life and “worldliness” more generally. This may be surprising, given Augustine’s reputation as a metaphysical escapist and gloomy worldly pessimist. Thus part of this book’s task is to explain why his reputation is wrong; and so the book insinuates, and occasionally explicitly urges, a particular revision of our understanding of the Augustinian tradition of Christian thought. I should briefly sketch this revision here.

25. For life “in the middle,” see Bonhoeffer 1997: 28. Von Balthasar’s contrast between “epic” and “dramatic” modes of theology is relevant here as well; see von Balthasar 1988a and Healey 2000. For more about the contrast between “eschatological” and “apocalyptic” modes of being, see the Introduction to Part I.

By using the phrase “the Augustinian *tradition*,” I mean to draw guidance from Augustine’s thought, without being trapped in the historical cul-de-sac of debates about what Augustine “really meant.” The diverse interpretations are importantly due to different interpreters’ judgments regarding Augustine’s textual center of gravity, which typically begin from *de civitate Dei* or the *Confessions*.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, I argue that it is best to read Augustine as centered not around those texts but instead around his sermons, scriptural commentaries, and especially his one truly “gratuitous” work, *de Trinitate*. These texts depict the self as an active agent within a community in a continual process of conversion towards or away from the divine Trinity, of which it is itself an image and which is the soul’s true origin and end. Such a picture of Augustine’s thought is becoming increasingly common now, as these more centrally doctrinal writings have begun to receive the scholarly attention they deserve.<sup>27</sup>

So understood, Augustine’s thought was developed by various descendants, from Cistercians such as Bernard of Clairvaux and Franciscans such as Bonaventure, and by the Reformed traditions, from Calvin to Edwards (and in a different way Schleiermacher), emphasizing the conversion of the affections as the fundamental site of the workings of grace in the world. In the twentieth century these themes were developed by the Niebuhrs and their intellectual descendants such as Paul Ramsey and, more recently, Oliver O’Donovan, Gilbert Meilaender, and Timothy Jackson.<sup>28</sup> This tradition offers a vital theological approach to the convictions and practices that shape Christian life.

This reading of the Augustinian tradition entails two things, one consonant with and one conflicting with current trends in theology

26. Methodologically see Mathewes 2001a, esp. Chapter 2; historically, see Dodaro 2004a.

27. This view is encouraged by recent historical work on Augustine by scholars such as Lewis Ayres, Michael Cameron, Robert Dodaro, Michael Fiedrowicz, and Thomas Martin; it will become increasingly common as the impact of the New City Press translations of the Augustine corpus into English make palpable for readers the enormous iceberg-like mass of sermons and commentaries heretofore kept from contemporary readers’ easy appropriation. For a careful development of the importance of *de Trin.* for Augustine’s “political” thought, see Dodaro 2004a: 147–81.

28. For a nice discussion of Niebuhr’s legacy, see Werpehowski 2002. For a good analysis of Ramsey as not just Niebuhrian but Augustinian, see Davis 1991.

and ethics. First of all, it supports the popular emphasis on understanding moral life as a matter less of principles than of our dynamic inhabitation of some set of moral virtues or dispositional attunements. Augustine allows that one can be a Christian without access to the Bible – such were the desert fathers and mothers – but only if one’s life is already governed by the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love. These virtues are not a superficial optional interpretation of the Christian life for Augustine; they provide something like a fundamental structure for understanding the shape of human existence for him. This is so because of his understanding of the human as a temporal creature; as all the virtues are forms of *caritas*,<sup>29</sup> perhaps *caritas* is the fundamental mode of inhabiting time, and thereby the fundamental mode of created being itself. In this way this project emphasizes the dispositional and conversionist character of religious commitment.<sup>30</sup>

Second, the “political” Augustine here presented proposes an unusual assessment of the nature of the significance of “worldly” political existence – and through this, a surprising picture of the significance of “worldly” existence *tout court*. One typical problem of political developments of Augustine is that they start with his political prescriptions and do not see the theological sources of those prescriptions; because of this, they often misunderstand even his political prescriptions. But in fact at its core Augustine’s thought has no fundamentally political content at all, but is simply theological; and yet, precisely because Augustine’s political insights have no “natural” home in some properly political region of his thought, coming to appreciate Augustine’s “political” proposals, such as they are, enables a deeper appreciation of the pro-creation dynamism of his theology in general.<sup>31</sup>

Most concretely, many scholars attempt to impose a Procrustean schema of “natural” and “supernatural” on his thought. For scholars

29. *De mor.* 15, 25, and Carney 1991: 33–34. For a specifically political development of this point, see *ep.* 155 and 138, and Dodaro 2004b.

30. See *enchiridion* for more, and Studer 1990. For more on the value of thinking about the moral life fundamentally in terms of virtues, see Porter 1990: 100–22.

31. As Robert Dodaro argues, Augustine was always at pains in his correspondence with secular authorities to note the connections between even the most mundane matters and the new life to which God calls us. See Dodaro 2004a: 7–10, 196–212. Also see Kevin Hughes’s very insightful comments in 2005b: 145–46.

committed to this framework, Augustine seems to deny any genuine “natural” goods in politics, which they take to reveal his deep animus towards the conditions of our “worldly” life as a whole.<sup>32</sup> On such readings it can appear that, in Quentin Skinner’s words, “Augustine’s view of political society had merely been ancillary to an eschatology in which the life of the pilgrim on earth had been seen as little more than a preparation for the life to come” (1978: 50). If this were true, it would present a deep challenge to any attempt to argue for an Augustinian endorsement of public life. But in fact it is not true. Augustine’s picture of the dynamics of divine sovereignty and intimacy, captured in his understanding of grace and love, happily stymies Procrustean categorizations such as “nature” and “supernature,” and offers a more nuanced view of this-worldly life in general, and of public life in particular. Augustine certainly diverges from Aristotle insofar as the bishop insists, against the philosopher, that the human good does not climax in the parochial community of the human polis, and insofar as he affirms that a human life untouched by political sovereignty can still be a flourishing life. But Augustine is not so bleak as many have taken him to be about the possible benefits of worldly, communal, and perhaps even genuinely public, life. He was fully appreciative of the goods of worldly community and worldly things; his love for music, for example, is deep and abiding. The life of the saints in paradise, after all, is social and embodied, and the sociality and embodiment mark not only their relation with God, but their relations with one another as well. Some scholars have recently begun to realize this, but it remains an insight not yet fully digested.<sup>33</sup> Augustinians can affirm that public life can be a way for humans to come to participate in God. It can be understood ascetically, as a means of purifying the soul for God: the asceticism of citizenship can be understood as part of the asceticism of discipleship. This is a strongly postlapsarian vision of politics, yet it avoids any collapse into despair or anomie. Genuine goods can be pursued, and even partially achieved, through public life, but they are not properly secular political goods; no such goods exist.

32. See, e.g., Weithman 1992. For a broad survey of criticisms of Augustine’s purported “otherworldliness,” see Kirk 1966: 133–37.

33. For evidence that Augustine thought of politics as a good, see Burnell 1992 and von Heyking 2001.

More importantly still, Augustine's potentially positive assessment of public life is anchored in a deeper positive assessment of worldliness than the received accounts allow. In fact, Augustine is in many ways better positioned than Aquinas, conceptually speaking, to make sense of Christian existence in the world; for unlike Aquinas, Augustine was blessedly innocent of the conceptual dichotomy of "nature" and "supernature" that burdened the attempts of so many, including Aquinas, to interpret human existence. As God's love is the source of all being, we all always participate in God's love; even Satan is held in existence by God's love. The split-level "nature" and "supernature" account, which neo-Thomism found in Aquinas's thought (whether or not it is actually in Aquinas himself) has no purchase in Augustine's. He could not imagine that God's gratuitous creative activity for the world could be quarantined from any space of "sheer nature" in the *saeculum*. This is why so many thinkers inspired by Augustine in the past century found the language of "nature" and "supernature" so foreign to his thought, and tried to overcome its deleterious effects by running the terms together – so that Paul Ramsey argued for a "this-worldly supernaturalism" and John Milbank demands that we "supernaturalize the natural" rather than "naturalize the supernatural."<sup>34</sup>

Augustine's refusal to confabulate a nature-supernature distinction has many benefits for his theology. Most generally, it means that the conceptual structure Augustine employs implicitly underscores the continuity between our present "worldly" condition and the greater life yet to come. More specifically in political terms, it reflects an ultimate overcoming of all boundaries, and a deep conceptual resistance to positing ultimate limits – based finally on conceptual resistance to any concept of an ultimate "outside" or exteriority to the divine providential plan. Even Satan in hell serves God. This reveals that Augustine is a profound critic of what we might call "the mythology of the exterior" – and suggests that that mythology is, in some fundamental way, essentially a political mythology. Augustine's is not a "politics of limits," at least not ultimately; indeed, he is the greatest thinker of the idea that the

34. See Ramsey 1950: 132, and Milbank 1990b: 207. See also van Bavel 1987: 28, TeSelle 1970, De Lubac 1969, and Burrell 2004: 208–9.

problems that vex politics do not finally come from “outside” or “the other” or any sort of exteriority, but from inside – from us trying to escape, to get outside. Outside of what? Of God, ultimately. But for Augustine there is no outside; there are no ultimate enemies; all we must do is learn to love ourselves, one another, and God. In this way Augustine is the ultimate theorist and therapist of escapism.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

A project like this one runs just off the grooves carved by many previous texts in religion and politics. Hence it is likely to be misread in several different ways. Here I want to resist several misreadings of the book before readers settle comfortably into them.

First, this is not an apology for democracy. Tocqueville said, “Americans so completely confound Christianity with liberty that it is almost impossible to induce them to think of one without the other” (2004: 338). It is a wise warning. Democracy is not the “ideal” institutional state of Christian believers. Political life in the world has no “ideal” state. It is too *ad hoc* a condition for that. Democracy is not our divine destiny, and heaven is not a New England town meeting. Christians have survived many different political structures during the world. Good Christians live as subjects of the tyrannical autocracies of East and Central Asia, in the oligarchic kleptocracies of the Middle East, in the semi-democracies of Latin America, even in the completely “stateless” conditions across much of Africa. Public life can occur (imagine!) even where democracy is not. (Consider the “antipolitics” of Eastern Europe in the last decades of the Cold War or the “street liturgies” by Roman Catholic resisters in Chile under Pinochet.<sup>36</sup>) For most readers of this book, democratic structures exist and should be defended, sustained, and extended. But my goal is not to use faith to support our democratic culture, but the reverse, and more – to use our civic interactions with one another to deepen faith.

35. See Phillips 2001a.

36. See Konrád 1984 and Cavanaugh 1998.