
French Interpretations of Augustine's Social and Political Thought

The twentieth century was marked by two World Wars, a Cold War, economic depression, decolonization of over half the globe, social and political upheaval, and new challenges posed by new technologies, not the least of which was the development of nuclear weaponry. From this tremendous amount of turbulence, and in light of unparalleled human bloodshed, there arose varied responses based upon the application of Augustine's social and political principles. While at times unnoticed, we must remember that a tremendous amount was written by twentieth century thinkers who sought wisdom and guidance for their troubled historical contexts from the Bishop of Hippo. However, those efforts often yielded different conclusions, and from those differences a debate, which is the topic of this project, emerged. The evolution of this discussion of Augustine's political and social thought, therefore, reflects the wider history of theology in the twentieth century, as a utopian and optimistic liberal

theological approach quickly yielded to a dialectical and realist school.

Furthermore, within Catholicism, the interpretation of Augustine's thought moved from a traditional understanding of continuity with the Scholastic interpretation of Augustine to a political and social reduction of the Bishop of Hippo's work. Such a reduction saw the removal of Augustine from his larger theological context, and sought to draw from his corpus political and social principles often without their theological context. Henri de Lubac was a consummate critic of this shift, and so he serves as a voice of dissent in a number of sections throughout this chapter, especially where the reduction of Augustine's thought can be observed. Finally, the mid-twentieth century, especially the 1960s and 1970s, proved another crossroads for this entire discussion and the context for an Anglo-American shift. This shift will be discussed at the end of this chapter with a discussion of its origins.

We will begin examining the work of Gustave Combès, who writing after the First World War, interpreted Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* under the lens of political authority and the question of its nature and origins. At the end of the 1920s, Étienne Gilson interpreted Augustine within a Thomistic context, viewing Augustine's commentary on political and social questions within the categories of nature and desire. Providing us with a general moniker for this line of Augustinian interpretation, Henri-Xavier Arquillière and his notion of "Political Augustinianism" connected Augustine to the Gregorian Reform and posited that Augustine's thought was foundational for the modern state. Arquillière's work provoked debate and further discussion, especially in the work of Henri Irénée Marrou. Marrou in the middle of the twentieth century would examine the relationship between Augustine's two cities, offering the possibility of a *tertium quid*, which would be another

source of future reflection and exegesis. Finally, Henri de Lubac engaged these various interpretations of Augustine, and cautioned against hermeneutical tendencies that strayed from Augustine's fundamental goal, namely conversion of the soul to God.

Gustave Combès

Gustave Combès in his 1927 work, *La Doctrine Politique de Saint Augustin*, presented what has been characterized as a "traditional" interpretation of Augustine's *City of God*. Miikka Ruokanen describes the significance of this categorization, writing "according to the traditional school, the political authority among men is based on the just order of nature given in the creation . . . in *De Civitate Dei* political order is understood as an inherently good order of life. . . ." ¹ The work of Combès and the traditionalist school has been related by Ruokanen and Robert Markus to the earlier work of Otto Schilling, especially his *Die Staats- und Soziallehre des hl. Augustinus*, and the later legal analysis of Anton-Hermann Chroust. ² The work of Combès is, therefore, of significant importance in understanding an early school of interpretation in post-World War I Europe. However, it is also an interpretation often debated among Marrou, Markus, and other subsequent interpreters. As a result, Combès's interpretation is important in understanding the progression of this debate as a whole.

1. Miikka Ruokanen, *Theology of Social Life in Augustine's De Civitate Dei* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 11.

2. Otto Schilling, *Die Staats- und Soziallehre des hl. Augustinus* (Freibourg: Herder, 1910). Anton-Hermann Chroust, "The Philosophy of Law of St. Augustine," *The Philosophical Review* 53, no.2 (1944): 195-202.

Combès Augustinian Interpretation of Political Authority

The central element of Combès's argument remains the nature and origin of political authority, which would also prove to be his interpretation's most controversial legacy. In Augustine's reception of Cicero's definition of a republic as a "multitude united in bonds of harmony," harmony is identified as a "union of hearts" that creates a *compositio voluntatum*.³ This composition of wills is both moral and material, and for Combès it is consistent with man's very nature, which tends to the union of hearts, wills and interests in order to create a *pactum societatis*. This social tendency in man from which society emerges, grows into "a reciprocal engagement," where "rights are recognized, needs are met, and a code of obligations and sacrifices are agreed to."⁴ The origin of power, therefore, in Combès's reading of Augustine, lies in nature and is manifested concretely in human society from its most primitive and earliest manifestation, the family. Combès clearly states that for Augustine, "Political authority derived from the familial authority."⁵ To justify this interpretation, Combès cites Augustine's *Contra Julianum* IV, 61:

But we must recognize the different forms of command and of obedience. The soul commands the body and all the passions; but it commands the body as a king his citizens, a father his children, and all the passions like a master to his slaves: it reprimands them, and tames them. The king, the general, the magistrate, the father, the victorious nations exercise their authority over citizens like the soul over the body.⁶

3. Gustave Combès, *La Doctrine Politique de Saint Augustin* (Paris: Plon, 1927), 78. English translation is my own.

4. *Ibid.*, 78.

5. *Ibid.*, 79.

6. *Ibid.*, 80. *Contra Iulianum* IV, 12:61. Nam ut animus corpori dicitur imperare, dicitur etiam libidini: sed corpori, ut rex civibus suis, aut pater liberis; libidini autem, ut servus dominus, quod eam coercet et frangit. Sic regum, sic imperatorum, sic magistratum, sic patrum, sic populorum imperia civibus sociisque praesunt, ut corporibus animus.

Combès argued that Augustine put forward a hierarchy of authority that included three levels (soul and body, father and family, and king and citizenry), but all three were grounded in one source: the divine will manifested in the social nature of creation. Relying on Augustine's *De Libero Arbitrio* I, 15, Combès argued

The power belongs to God, he knows the order of all causes, but it does not follow that all depends upon his will . . . He is the author of all powers, but not all wills. Evil wills, indeed, do not come from him, because they are against the nature that comes from him.⁷

The divine will combined with free human will, therefore, transmits and vests authority in human society. However, Combès allies his understanding of Providence to that of Jacques Bénigne Bossuet (1627–1704), who believed it was providence that led to the succession of governments. Indeed, Combès cites the principle, “*Prorsus divina providentia regna constituantur humana.*”⁸ Such a view, however, promoted by Bossuet was also problematic, as it led to a secularization of the Christian sense of history and helped to deflate the boundaries of Augustine's two cities.⁹ Combès, unlike Bossuet, recognized an ambivalence in Augustine as to the form of governance employed by the subjects of human authority. He argued:

Monarchy, aristocracy, democracy. These words mean nothing to him. He starts deliberately outside and above human institutions, and from the heights from where he examines them, they all seem to him equally capable of administrating the city. The only requirement: to maintain justice and respect religion. But this reservation having been established, they all recognized the same rights, granted the same benevolence and demanded the same submission.¹⁰

7. *Ibid.*, 82.

8. *Ibid.*, 83.

9. This will be central to our discussion of below of Marrou and his effort at establishing a renewed Augustinian based “theology of history.”

While the type of government utilized was not essential to Augustine, Combès notes that the necessity of justice remained absolutely essential. It is no coincidence that justice is of central importance in the first five books of Augustine's *City of God*. Augustine believed that justice remained the foundation of power, assuring that any government remains balanced and stable. However, if the subject of authority lacks restraint and allows desires and passions to overcome justice, inevitably tranquility is lost and credibility wavers. As Combès argues, Augustine believed "the great Platonic thesis. Justice being the mother of all virtues, power which denies justice forsakes prudence. Force must be tempered, and condemned in its excess. For it is only a caricature of authority."¹¹ For this reason, Augustine envisioned the ruler as bearing a duty, a responsibility, and not simply an honor.

Augustine believed that too often love of glory in the exercise of courage and patriotism led directly to vice, as the charge to preserve justice and order leads often to the desire to domination as well.¹² It is for this reason that Combès sees Augustine's call for virtue as central. The exercise of virtue must be encouraged and promoted in both the wielding of power and in the submission of citizens to it. Combès summarizes this vision of power:

This text has the happy privilege to summarize these expressive formulas of the nature and the roles and purpose of power: power comes from God, it is exercised in the name of God; it is just and merciful in obedience to God and serves God sincerely, it sacrifices itself to collaborate with God, it seeks order, unity, peace, to establish the City of this world, on the model of the City of God.¹³

10. *Ibid.*, 86.

11. *Ibid.*, 93.

12. *Ibid.*, 98.

13. *Ibid.*, 109. This virtue perspective will be recovered later in the work of Dodaro and others, and we will return to it in both chapter 4 and chapter 5.

The Reception of Combés's Work



In his work *Theologies d'occasion*, Henri de Lubac cites Gustave Combés as an author who early on recognized the true nature of Augustine's *City of God*. De Lubac notes that Augustine is not concerned with a "state founded on evangelical justice," but rather he is reflecting on the "holy City where God reigns." De Lubac continues, this holy city is "essentially hidden *here below*, even though some of its radiance can be detected, and its invisible borders are constantly changing."¹⁴ In this work, Augustine "takes up, develops and deepens the allegory of the "two ways" that had served to frame the first descriptions of life in conformity with the Gospel . . . The antagonism of the two 'cities,' which Augustine always keeps in mind, has no political overtones."¹⁵

De Lubac agrees with Combés's analysis of political authority in that both the authority of the divine Law contained in the Scriptures and the positive law decreed by rulers derive from God because "*ipsa iura humana per imperatores et reges saeculi Deus distribuit generi humano*."¹⁶ De Lubac, like Combés, agrees that Augustine is ambivalent towards the type of government utilized in human society, and notes that no where can it be shown that "theocracy" is the ultimate goal of Augustine's work.¹⁷ De Lubac writes, "In that thin slice of history that Providence gave to Augustine to live, regardless of the emperor in power—pagan, Christian, or apostate, hostile or favorable to his views—he remained 'a faithful subject of

14. Henri de Lubac, *Theological Fragments*, trans. Rebecca Howell Balinski (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 245.

15. *Ibid.*, 251.

16. *Ibid.*, 254. "God gives human laws themselves to the human race through the emperors and kings of this world."

17. *Ibid.*, 255.

the great Roman Empire.”¹⁸ De Lubac also would have no objection with Combés’s assertion that a reflection of Aristotle’s idea of justice could be observed in Augustine’s use of justice in *City of God*. In fact, de Lubac agrees with Étienne Gilson, who we will discuss below, that a natural law understanding of justice is present in Augustine. Combés as well observes this in *City of God*, and he argued that Augustine’s vision is consistent with and expanded in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas.¹⁹

A critique of this position has been presented by Herbert Deane, who objected to Combés’s assertion that positive law must conform to the natural law in order to be valid and hence submitted to by Christians. Combés argues rather that a law not in accordance with the divine or natural law is deemed by Augustine, “only an inert and empty formula, unable to demand an obligation or command. . .”²⁰ Elsewhere, Combés writes, “Augustine teaches that an unjust law is not a law and hence a citizen must refuse to obey it.”²¹ Deane argues that such an interpretation is inconsistent with Augustine’s later work, especially *De Vera Religione*, which stipulated that a “good and wise” ruler will consider the “immutable rules” of eternal law in legislating.²² Deane sees the interpretation of Combés as an untenable position. It would require a relative judgment in every case as to whether a law is valid or not, and hence whether the Christian should or should not obey it. This would make governing impossible and it would render civil law irrelevant. Ernest Fortin, however, clarifies the issue by noting, “The Church Fathers did not make any clear-cut distinction between the natural order and the supernatural order or

18. *Ibid.*, 255.

19. *Ibid.*, 251. Also, See Combés, *La Doctrine*, 105-106.

20. Combés, *La Doctrine*, 152.

21. *Ibid.*, 416.

22. Herbert Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), 90. We will treat Deane independently in the next chapter.

between the natural law properly so called and the divinely revealed law. The tendency was to look upon the realm of morality as a single whole and to treat it in the light of those truths which come to us through divine revelation.”²³ Deane’s concern, therefore, is partly anachronistic, as Augustine’s criteria of whether a law was or was not consistent with the “divine law” was not a subjective one, but was based in *id quod in lege et evangelio continetur*.²⁴

The interpretation of Augustine’s vision of political authority in Combés has also been met with resistance and debate on other points. Combés’s assertion that there is a hierarchy of authority manifested in the soul, in the family, and in the state is a clear point of contention. Donald Burt agrees with this premise arguing, “Augustine believed that it was natural for the child to be subordinate to its parents . . . Augustine believed that parental love for the child must be exercised through much command and correction in the early years . . . To refrain from such discipline is to invite chaos.”²⁵ Rowan Williams, as well, sees this conclusion as a fair reading of Augustine, writing, “Augustine makes it plain . . . that the *pax* of the household is to be ‘referred’ *ad pacem civicam*, even that the *paterfamilias* should derive his standards from the law of the city . . . the *civitas* is itself, like the household, ideally a creative and pastoral community . . .”²⁶

However, this point of view is rejected by Robert Markus, who sees the family as an exception to the earthly city in Augustine’s vision. Markus argues that such a vision does nothing but allow the political subjugation of others and continue the cycle of domination

23. Ernest Fortin, *Classical Christianity and the Political Order: Reflections on the Theologico-Political Problem*, vol. 2, ed. J. Brian Benestad (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 226. We will discuss Ernest Fortin in the next chapter.

24. *Ibid.*, 226.

25. Donald X. Burt, O. S. A., *Friendship and Society: An Introduction to Augustine’s Practical Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 92-93.

26. Rowan Williams, “Politics and the Soul: A Reading of The City of God,” *Milltown Studies* 19/20 (1987), 64.

and pride that Augustine clearly disdains. “The human family differs fundamentally from political society. The family, in Augustine’s view, was founded in human nature. In this it contrasted with slavery, an institution brought about by the Fall . . . Political institutions were in their nature more like the latter than the former: that is they belonged to man’s fallen state.”²⁷ Miikka Ruokanen also dissents from Combés on this point, arguing that Augustine had neither a concept of a “naturally good structure of political power,” nor “an analogy between domestic order and political structure.”²⁸ Ruokanen argues that Augustine’s discussion of natural moral law is peripheral to the discussion of “coercive social power in human society.”²⁹ Ruokanen also goes on to reject, as Combés suggests in his work, that Augustine completes Cicero’s definition of commonwealth and perfects the idea of “natural justice” by introducing love as its realization. Ruokanen argues, “The very idea of replacing justice with an non-idealistic conception of love, characterized by his understanding of sin, gave Augustine the uniqueness of his own definition and . . . an incredible amount of dynamism and flexibility . . .”³⁰

The primary contribution of Gustave Combés, therefore, within this discussion remains his focus on political authority in Augustine’s thought, and his theory of political authority emerging from man’s most basic relationships. However, Combés also maintained that Augustine was fundamentally ambivalent towards the form of government by which such authority was exercised. However, unlike the accusations of Augustine’s later critics, Combés argues with de Lubac that theocracy is not the goal of the Bishop of Hippo, but rather a government striving towards justice. Such ambivalence in

27. Robert Markus, *Christianity and the Secular* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 58.

28. Ruokanen, *Theology of Social Life*, 103.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, 133.

the form of government would be a sentiment echoed in various contemporary interpretations of Augustine's thought. Like Combés, the focus is placed not on the virtue of the government, but on the virtue of those governing. Combés, de Lubac, and Gilson remain in agreement that throughout Augustine's work is a natural law understanding of justice, which allows for an argument of continuity between Augustine and his later Scholastic interpreters. This, however, would be contested by Herbert Deane, Robert Markus and other contemporary authors. Nevertheless, the assertions of Combés, like that of Gilson, would largely be overshadowed in this area of Augustinian interpretation by the debate surrounding a work published six years later, namely Henri-Xavier Arquillière's *L'augustinisme politique*.

Étienne Gilson

In 1929, eight years after the publication of John Neville Figgis's work on Augustine, Étienne Gilson published his own study of Augustine entitled, *Introduction à l'étude de saint Augustin*.³¹ Gilson, known for his scholarship in Medieval Philosophy and Thomistic thought, was drawn to Augustine on a philosophical level, as the Bishop of Hippo grounded Western thought in a realism that later would be taken up by St. Thomas Aquinas. Francesca Murphy has noted that, "Augustine, [Gilson] says, conceives the 'natural desire,' not as a generalized wish to catapult from nature into supernature, but as an orientation, a finality, built into human nature by its Creator. God-given faith directs humanity on its journey through nature to God."³² Gilson, therefore, throughout his work seeks to

31. Étienne Gilson, *Introduction à l'étude de saint Augustin* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1929).

32. Francesca A. Murphy, *Art and Intellect in the Philosophy of Étienne Gilson* (Columbia, MO: Univ. of Missouri Press, 2004), 109.