
Politics and Beatitude

Studies in Christian Ethics
2017, Vol. 30(2) 199–206

© The Author(s) 2017

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0953946816684448

journals.sagepub.com/home/sce



Eric Gregory

Princeton University, USA

Abstract

The limits and secularity of political life have been signature themes of modern Augustinianism, often couched in non-theological language of realism and the role of religion in public life. In dialogue with Gilbert Meilaender, this article inverts and theologizes that interest by asking how Augustinian pilgrims might characterize the positive relation of political history to saving history and the ways in which political action in time might teach us something about the nature of salvation that comes to us from beyond history. This relation of continuity and discontinuity eludes dogmatic formulation, but the goal of the present article is to see where a shared Augustinianism and a shared commitment to aspects of the liberal political tradition might find illuminating disagreement.

Keywords

Meilaender, Augustine, Augustinianism, politics, eschatology, salvation

I remember the anxiety in seeing Gilbert Meilaender raise his hand to ask the final question. It was one of my first conference presentations many years ago at the Society of Christian Ethics. I was a graduate student ruminating on the nature of desire and the relation of the love commands. Like the Israelites exploring Canaan, I felt like a grasshopper among giants in the land. Meilaender's frank question about my reconstruction of Augustine characteristically revealed basic issues about Christian tradition and human experience. But he asked in such a way that it opened a common conversation about things that matter. That style is one of the virtues of Meilaender's work that we are right to honor in this volume.

The field of Christian ethics is sometimes preoccupied with an abstract interest in distinctiveness. Meilaender, one of our finest Protestant essayists, no doubt shares the concern that theology draws from its own resources in a world that has largely forgotten

Corresponding author:

Eric Gregory, Princeton University, 1879 Hall/Religion, Princeton, NJ 08544, USA.

Email: gregory@princeton.edu

them. But he resists any sectarian temptation in reflecting on the freedom of the human person and the freedom of God.¹ He writes with elegance as if non-Christians might be interested in what moral theology could offer our mundane reflections—whether it be thinking about euthanasia, torture, stem cells, a sense of place, sex, eating, friendship, or the role of religion in public life. In so doing, he also *shows* what practical reasoning looks like rather than merely *theorizes* about it. Learned and wise, he is a master of this neglected art in both scholarly and popular form. That is one reason why I include so many of his essays in my undergraduate syllabi, especially for those convinced by another artful essayist that religion is a conversation stopper.² Without stuffy footnotes or academic jargon, he helps me help them eavesdrop on a conversation that—often to their surprise—expands their conceptual repertoire and encourages them to take responsibility for their own commitments.

Meilaender does theology without reducing it to exotic intellectual history. With a host of secular thinkers, his conversation partners include Martin Luther, C. S. Lewis and Paul Ramsey. They all stand this side of Augustine's reading of Paul. Meilaender suggests that one reason Augustine is so stimulating is his ability to *worry* about things. According to Meilaender, listening to Augustine 'worry over a subject can set us free from the limits that confine us'.³ Meilaender's work, even where I disagree, also helps us worry about the right things.

He refers to them as perennial problems. Such language would make many of my colleagues in religious studies squirm. But unlike other defenders of tradition who appeal to the perennial, he does so in sometimes surprising directions. He does so without subsuming all theology into soteriology. He leaves room for analogies between divine and human action that respect both transcendence and historicity. He is not driven by concern for the distinctiveness of Christian ethics or a Christian contribution to Western civilization. He is animated by sturdy fidelity to the complexity of truth found in the story of cross and resurrection.

The relation between politics and beatitude is one route into this complexity. My remarks will frustratingly wonder about this relation in different ways. As far as I can tell, it is a relationship of continuity and discontinuity that does not admit precise dogmatic formulation.⁴ Ecclesial bodies do not assign it confessional status. But different approaches reveal fundamental theological orientations emerging from different incarnational and eschatological stories. How one speaks of a salvation that is political,

1. Gilbert Meilaender, *Faith and Faithfulness: Basic Themes in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), pp. 1–34.

2. Richard Rorty, 'Religion as a Conversation Stopper', in idem, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), pp. 168–74.

3. Gilbert Meilaender, *The Way that Leads There: Augustinian Reflections on the Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), p. x.

4. Continuity and discontinuity are enduring biblical themes in Meilaender's work: 'the language of continuity—that God intends to perfect rather than destroy our created nature—can be believed, and we may trust that retrospective vision will one day see its truth. But the language of discontinuity—that death and resurrection of our self-understanding is necessary—must often be the experience of Christians.' Meilaender, *Faith and Faithfulness*, p. 27.

unfolding from Babylon to Jerusalem, tells us about how one understands God's saving action in Christ. For example, those who separate the two might be called Nestorians. Those who identify the two might be called Eutychians.⁵ The goal of the present article is to see where a shared Augustinianism and a shared commitment to aspects of the liberal political tradition might find illuminating disagreement without heresy.⁶ I suspect moments in this exploration will provide occasion for Meilaender to worry. Montanism is a heresy that tempts me. I doubt it tempts Meilaender. It would be interesting to know which heresy, if any, tempts him.

Meilaender joins his fellow Augustinians in the hope for a city of which glorious things are spoken. God is the author of all things, including that city now hidden under a cross. Here, in time stained by sin, we are veiled in exilic pilgrimage of loss and death. Politics operates more in the modality of healing than elevation, our solace rather than our joy. It cannot offer genuine reconciliation of the broken human condition or an answer to sin's consequences in death. The satisfaction of the human spirit awaits a home 'in which all are loved personally by One who has infinite resources to love all in that way'.⁷ Resisting apocalyptic mentalities, we should distinguish proximate and final ends in this time between the times. These commitments regarding the limits of politics in a secular age have sponsored a variety of responses to modern political arrangements.

Meilaender consistently affirms that Christian belief about human destiny and the end of history set limits on political aspirations and goals. They are limits that warn against usurping divine prerogative and falsely imagining we can master death and suffering through a technology of politics. The presence of a church that bears witness to Christ's Body 'announces that political rule can never be redemptive and must therefore be limited'.⁸ Recognition of such limits is both constraining and liberating:

political life can be preserved from its totalitarian temptations and, at the same time, given its just due only when we are willing to hope for more than political communities can ever offer—to hope, in short, for a day when no one would call another person 'citizen' or 'comrade' but each would call the other 'friend'.⁹

These confessions afford a certain peace with secular constitutional politics and its imperfections. Indeed, they might be affirmed theologically precisely as a proper abandonment

5. I borrow these analogies from Meilaender's description of various political traditions in terms of Christological heresies. His use trades on the relation of ethics and politics rather than politics and salvation. See Gilbert Meilaender, *The Limits of Love: Some Theological Explorations* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987), pp. 140–43.

6. For a similar effort in response to the work of another conversation partner for Meilaender, see Eric Gregory, 'The Boldness of Analogy: Civic Virtues and Augustinian Eudaimonism', in Robert Song and Brent Waters (eds), *The Authority of the Gospel: Explorations in Moral and Political Theology in Honor of Oliver O'Donovan* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), pp. 72–85.

7. Meilaender, *The Limits of Love*, p. 143.

8. Meilaender, *The Way that Leads There*, p. 116.

9. Gilbert Meilaender, *Friendship: A Study in Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), p. 85.

of godlike pretension that is responsive to the God of Abraham. But, fundamentally, it offers a social vision of genuine yet partial happiness that demythologizes any notion of political community as our home.

In fact, in a revealing review of Oliver O'Donovan's *The Desire of the Nations*, Meilaender expressed some reservations about the centrality of the eschatological image of the city in Christian political thought.¹⁰ He does not deny the notions of authority and power such an image brings to mind. But he finds them at best incomplete without the imagery of marriage, the post-political communion of a bride adorned for her husband. The marriage supper of the Lamb is the redeeming intention for creation beyond history. It is an image suggesting less command and judgment (those features of our temporal existence) and more love and receptivity characteristic of our intimate fellowship in virtue with God and neighbor. Politics is simply located in the flux of history. Civic virtues may have their proper ends. But the future rather than present dimensions of salvation limits these ends.

So far, so familiar. These broad strokes may be compatible with any Christian political theology, but they are certainly consistent with dominant themes in modern political Augustinianisms. Where might interesting differences lie? To draw in cartoons, let me cast it in terms of the Lutheran and Reformed sides of the Augustinian political tradition with respect to both the *possibilities* and the *limits* of politics. Fidelity to divine sovereignty sets limits to political aspirations. But, throughout Christian history, it also has enlarged the scope of human responsibility for our political arrangements. That is why Augustinians often confound any easy classification in terms of what H. Richard Niebuhr long ago termed *conversionists* or *dualists*.¹¹ They can allow charity to permeate natural loves, yet also remain wary of identifying the spirit of the age with the spirit that confesses Christ.

One way to achieve greater clarity about a spectrum internal to this Augustinian tradition is to invert familiar questions about the limits of politics and virtue. How should we characterize the *positive* work of God in the political realm? What is the *positive* relation of political history to saving history? In *Democracy and Tradition*, Jeffrey Stout poses a similar question: 'is it not possible to discern the workings of the Holy Spirit, and thus some reflection of God's redemptive activity, in modern democratic aspirations?'¹² Or, in a more Ramseyan fashion, how do we speak of the diversity of love's work in politics?

10. Gilbert Meilaender, 'Recovering Christendom', *First Things* 77 (November 1997), pp. 36–42. See also Meilaender, *The Way that Leads There*, p. 90: 'Augustine does indeed depart from the classical characterization of the city as the final and self-sufficient community—the place where individuals fully develop their humanity and come to flourish.'

11. H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 2001 [1951]). For example, Meilaender argues that C. S. Lewis ought to be numbered among the conversionists. But he admits 'there is something to be said for classifying Lewis as a dualist'. Gilbert Meilaender, *The Taste for the Other: The Social and Ethical Thought of C.S. Lewis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1978), p. 175 n. 31.

12. Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 104.

Meilaender admits that the hand of God works through government to fashion a modest peace. But it is always a penultimate work, and one that primarily makes room for the mission of the church. Politics is postlapsarian. This, I take it, is a classical Protestant position on politics under the rubric of providence and divine judgment rather than redemption and sanctifying grace. He worries that Stout's democracy itself might become a *spiritual association*, especially for those who forget they have another city to love. Christians have a different hope and a different faith. They should not forsake their discipleship to the primacy of citizenship or a salvation immanent within either nature or history.¹³ The value of politics in sanctification may be an *ascesis* that creates social room for virtue. But it is not itself a form of virtue. In a sense, politics as a shared activity is merely instrumental to those things relevant to mortal life. It is not on the main stage of the biblical drama. Yet, and here is my Reformed question, might not civic righteousness participate in, or be properly referred by pilgrims to their eschatological righteousness?

Following his reading of Augustine's insights about the Roman empire, Meilaender suggests the answer is no. He holds that 'we too should draw back from claiming decisive religious significance for any political achievement'.¹⁴ God has given us his Christ, and 'nothing decisively new is to be anticipated within our history'.¹⁵ Christ alone brings salvation in the fullness of time, not political progress or the process of time. Empires, like democratic elections and struggles for justice, come and go. The main question I want to raise is whether or not there is *any* religious significance to our political achievements. If so, of what kind? Cotton Mather was wrong to think New England had an Advocate in Heaven, Meilaender rightly notes, but were the marchers in the civil rights movement wrong to think that movement had something to do with getting right with God? Were they wrong to see here an act of vocational service to God in the church through politics, enabling a wider and fuller practice of virtue both in civic and private life? I could add to the list of examples. Can politics be a witness to divine self-disclosure, or less provocatively, can the exercise of political virtue be part of the life of piety, proleptically referring to those virtues perfected in heaven?

Positing a shared Augustinian bent that fellowship with God and neighbor is our final human destiny, let me suggest we find no quarrel with the claim that Christian beliefs set limits on our political aspirations and goals. In fact, even among the most revolutionary, it would be hard to identify any theological voice to the contrary. Some Christian thinkers of the twentieth century baptized earthly politics in discerning the signs of the times in misguided efforts to build the kingdom of God. Meilaender worries too many Christians continue to be preoccupied with civic virtue in ways that risk a Christological center. They are intoxicated with pagan ideals of citizenship rather than Christian friendship. Churches are consumed with false prophets who mistake penultimate political witness for the gospel. I am less certain of that sociological judgment, which may reflect our

13. See Gilbert Meilaender, 'Talking Democracy', *First Things* 142 (April 2004), pp. 25–30.

14. Meilaender, *Faith and Faithfulness*, p. 134. For Meilaender, 'when we recognize the limits of politics, we will not claim for political achievements—even ones as important as advancement of justice or freedom—the status of events in the history of salvation' (p. 135).

15. Meilaender, *Faith and Faithfulness*, p. 134.

generational, pedagogical and denominational differences rather than deep theological ones.

Augustine's own meditations on forbidden fruit tend to sponsor gradualist rather than revolutionary ambition. Following Romans 13, politics is ordered by providence after the fall to restrain the wicked. We should be grateful for whatever order might be found in our collective life. Any politics is supererogatory. Most Augustinians follow Meilaender's deflationary rhetoric of sin as a *via negativa* to toleration rather than training in perfection. They worry about self-deception in all things. But they especially worry about politics, given the threat of both totalitarianism and democratic tendencies to think we can grit our teeth and make everything right. Politics cannot satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart, Meilaender echoes Augustine, in taking to task utopian visions of aspirational politics perfecting nature.¹⁶ The world is a place that breaks your heart if you are willing to love in this world. Its beauty is too vulnerable. Its political relations too destructive. Politics cannot save or perfect us.

That politics cannot make us happy may be the first thing Christians should say about politics. But is it the only thing? In Meilaender's words, the limits of politics are clear: 'No human society free of distrust, free of the need for force. No harmonious community achieved by free and willing consent alone. Against the backdrop of these truths political judgments must be made and human societies ordered.'¹⁷ For Meilaender, 'the best we can hope for, and a mark of political wisdom, is that our divisions and disagreements be channeled and controlled in creative and fruitful ways'.¹⁸ Resisting Eusebian triumphalism and sectarian withdrawal, we are to be agnostic about the course of history moving to its final end.

Augustine is famous for his account of original sin, humanity's deformation, our ignorance, pride and weakness. His restless heart yearned for something more than the dreams of even the best politics. Yet we need politics because of our lost innocence. This Augustinianism appeals to those who want to wage wars of sad necessity and lament the technocratic optimism of liberal democracy. Still others suggest Augustine's postlapsarian darkness is responsible for turning Christians away from concern for the common good of the city because of their desperate otherworldly desire for a heavenly one. Augustine's rhetoric, which often turns life itself into a tomb of punishment, gives these critics plenty of fodder.

Henry Kissinger once quipped that the secret of success in life is low expectations, something psychologists have labeled *defensive pessimism*, a strategy of damage control to manage anxiety and despair. Things can always get worse, but they are always better than we deserve. In politics, as in the rest of life, there are no good choices, only lesser evils, full of sacrifice, loss and unintended consequences. Despair, as later Augustinians like Kierkegaard observe, may be a true sign of godliness.

Few authors are aware of their embeddedness in time more than Augustine. *The City of God* is Augustine's reflection on a world going through hell on earth. He offers a cautious

16. Meilaender, *The Way that Leads There*, pp. 77–116.

17. Meilaender, *Faith and Faithfulness*, p. 133.

18. Meilaender, *The Way that Leads There*, p. 93.

wisdom to use politics for the goods it can deliver. I could go on telling that now old and familiar story, updating it with a little Niebuhr, a little Thielicke, and a little more Meilaender. Old and familiar stories are not always wrong. I tell it to my latter-day Pelagian students, confident that politics can heal our ills and transform our disordered bundles of loves. But I get about one such student every couple of years. Most see weak, feckless political institutions, marked by moral compromise, subject to their mastery of suspicion rather than utopianism. For many of them, politics is not the solution. It is the problem.

For some time now, the modern Augustinian story of the limits of politics has relied on imprecise language of realism and idealism, as if the only choice were Sisyphus or Prometheus. Spatial metaphors about church and state, as well as philosophical construals of nature and supernature, have also played a distracting role. In addition to neglecting Augustine's actual advice to public officials, I think these stories about religion and politics too often evade interesting theological questions of time's relation to eternity, of love's descending and ascending.¹⁹

Meilaender's theology certainly chastens politics. But he does not strip it of value or render discrimination mute about the better and the worse. Politics is a part of the moral life. It cannot be sterilized of religious beliefs in some fictional liberal neutrality. At one point, he calls for a Chalcedonian politics, 'which will neither separate nor confuse the ethical and the political'.²⁰ True virtue is never sufficiently defined by good citizenship. Yet there are virtues in political action. It is to his credit that Meilaender is not among the many Protestants allergic to law, virtue and moral formation, leaving us bereft of agency. He also is not afraid of politics.

Politics represents fallible human practices that give flesh to ideals and values, responding as best we can to injustice we too often take for granted. In a world that wants to step out of Augustine's shadow, either to celebrate more radical sacralizing proposals or more secularist ones, we might be reminded that the best politics knows something other than politics. Neither theology nor politics can heal the rupture. But, to raise my one question in one final variation: how do the morals of the *res publica*, the public thing, relate to beatitude, if at all? Might not the common good pursued in our politics participate in, and even have as its object, our eternal good?

Meilaender provocatively suggests social bonds 'offer intimations' of salvation.²¹ The practice of politics is also grounded in networks of relationships, some more direct than others. Classical Reformed thinkers spoke about politics in terms of mutual covenants and the sharing of goods. These ongoing practices need not be statist, though the state remains necessary given the challenges of securing shared goods of actual peoples. The ways of God are mysterious in time. But since God is always on the move in history, I want to suggest that political bonds and actions might also teach us something about the nature of our salvation that comes to us.

19. For a detailed historical account of these terms and their use in Christian political thought, see Eric Gregory and Joseph Clair, 'Augustinianisms and Thomisms', in C. Hovey and E. Philips (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 176–96.

20. Meilaender, *The Limits of Love*, p. 140.

21. Meilaender, *The Limits of Love*, p. 141.

Theology alone cannot support the change required to address the distinctive challenges of modern political communities and their economic arrangements. It does not take a lot of imaginative work to be a modernity critic these days. Augustinians would do well to not only psychologize and theologize the limits of politics. We should historicize actual injustices with a view to constructive alternatives until that final act of judgment closes history. The debate over political liberalism, which has dominated so much of Christian political theology, has been a debate worth having. It may be, however, that it also has truncated our creativity both in thinking theologically about politics and practically about the decay of our political forms and institutions. To speak of salvation need not erase time's virtues, including those we learn by anticipation through a politics that will be consummated. In that dramatic transformation of the generations, we might hope with Meilaender that 'the God revealed in Jesus will complete what remains incomplete in our own achievements'.²²

22. Gilbert Meilaender, 'Divine Grace and Ethics', in G. Meilaender and W. Werpehowski (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Theological Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 88.