PREFACE

Why Augustine? Why Hope?

AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO is one of the most influential thinkers in the history of political thought. A North African bishop and theologian who lived in the Roman Empire at the turn of the fifth century and was later recognized as a saint in the Catholic Church, Augustine served as an essential bridge connecting Greek and Roman philosophy with medieval Christianity.[1] One prominent political theorist describes him as "the first and perhaps the greatest of Christian synthesizers."[2] Another observes that "Augustine's importance to the subsequent history of Europe is impossible to exaggerate."[3] Even fierce critics acknowledge the extent of his influence.[4] Apart from perhaps Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero, no other ancient thinker has had more influence on Western politics.[5]

Much of Augustine's influence came through appropriations by medieval philosophers and theologians.[6] Roughly 80 percent of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, a widely used textbook in the medieval period that became a required source for lectures and commentaries for students seeking to become professors of theology, consists of quotations from Augustine.[7] One of those students was Thomas Aquinas, who did more than anyone to integrate Aristotelian ethics with Augustinian Christianity.[8]

Augustine's impact has not been limited to the Roman Catholic Church.[9] From the beginning of the Reformation, Protestants have drawn on Augustine to advance their accounts of theology and politics. Before posting *The Ninety-Five Theses*, Martin Luther was a friar and priest in the Order of St. Augustine and held a chair established by the Order at the University of Wittenberg, which identified Augustine as its patron saint.[10] Luther quoted Augustine extensively throughout his works and, like Aquinas, had studied Lombard's *Sentences*, noting on the first page of his copy that "Augustine can never be praised enough."[11] Similarly, John Calvin referred explicitly to Augustine approximately

1,700 times and quoted, paraphrased, or alluded to him an additional 2,400 times.[12] "Augustine is so completely of our persuasion," Calvin wrote, "that if I should have to make written profession, it would be quite enough to present a composition made up entirely of excerpts from his writings."[13]

Prominent political thinkers have also engaged deeply, if sometimes critically, with Augustinian ideas.[14] In Italy, Dante drew on Augustine's *Confessions* to inform his spiritual autobiography and laced *The Divine Comedy* with themes of love, history, and politics drawn from Augustine's *City of God*.[15] In England, John Milton not only integrated Augustinian accounts of creation, free will, and the Fall into his "Augustinian epic," *Paradise Lost*, but also cited passages from *City of God* to challenge opponents who had used Augustine instead to defend the divine right of kings.[16] In France, Christine de Pizan invoked Augustine's *City of God* to call medieval princes to virtue and construct a "City of Ladies" to elevate the virtues of women,[17] while Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote his *Confessions* as a direct reply to Augustine's.[18] In early America, one scholar suggests, Augustine might have "exerted the greatest single influence upon Puritan thought next to that of the Bible itself."[19] Later, another scholar notes, some African Americans looked to Augustine as one of the "specifically African classical forbearers" whose work informed and inspired their own.[20]

Augustine's complex legacy extends into contemporary political theory.[21] It is striking to see how many prominent political theorists—both religious and secular—engage Augustine's work. These include representatives of the most influential strands of contemporary political theory: liberalism,[22] conservatism,[23] communitarianism,[24] realism,[25] republicanism,[26] and radical democracy.[27] The sheer variety of these accounts reveals the "Proteanism" of Augustine's authority.[28] Even if many of these theorists contest Augustinian ideas, the fact that they take up his work at all highlights the need to continue grappling with him.[29]

Augustine's political influence is not confined to the academy. Public intellectuals ranging from David Brooks, E. J. Dionne, and Jon Meacham to Roosevelt Montás, Cornel West, and Molly Worthen have invoked Augustine in their analyses of religion, politics, and culture,[30] while politicians, pundits, and public officials have occasionally trotted out Augustine to defend public policy positions. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Jean Bethke Elshtain cited Augustine to provide intellectual support for the Bush Administration's decision to invade Iraq, while opponents invoked Augustine to challenge the decision.[31] In 2008, the Speaker of the US House of Representatives, Nancy

Pelosi, made national news when she recruited Augustine to defend her pro-choice stance on abortion in the first trimester, while pro-life Catholics cited Augustine's authority to contest Pelosi's claims.[32] US President Barack Obama enlisted Augustine's understanding of "just war" to defend his administration's use of drones, a statement that led one philosopher to wonder if the policy could be reduced to the question "What Would Augustine Do?"[33] More recently, President Joe Biden cited Augustine's vision of the commonwealth in his inaugural address to encourage Americans to unite around "common objects" of love, while critics quoted passages from *City of God* to suggest that Biden "misreads Augustine."[34]

Augustine's authority is apparent in the Christian church and broader public culture. Before becoming Pope Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger wrote his dissertation on Augustine, and Pope Francis has described Augustine as one of his favorite saints.[35] Within the Anglican Church, Rowan Williams wrote extensively about Augustine's moral and political theology before serving as the Archbishop of Canterbury.[36] Meanwhile, universities and monasteries claim their place in the Augustinian tradition, while scholars have highlighted Augustine's relevance for politics, psychology, philosophy, literature, history, science, education, and environmental studies.[37] Even poets, artists, and musicians see Augustine as a muse. How many other thinkers are the subject of poems by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Mary Oliver and ballads by Bob Dylan and Sting?[38]

Yet, if modern political culture remains in the "shadow of Augustine," as one scholar put it,[39] this Augustine is largely an Augustine of shadows. Darkness and pessimism prevail. The world is a vale of tears, and government is nothing but a remedy for sin. Politics remains tragic, limited, and hostage to necessity. Citizens must either do the "lesser evil" so that good may come or retreat from politics altogether, finding refuge in an otherworldly vision of heaven or the purity of the institutional church.

This was the portrait of Augustine I encountered in college. As I read fragments of *City of God*, I learned more about Augustine's "two cities"—the earthly and the heavenly—and how this contrast was intended to direct us away from the world and toward heaven. The picture that emerged was of an otherworldly, sin-obsessed pessimist who encourages us to renounce the world and seek the City of God.

As I pursued graduate work, however, a more complex image of Augustine began to take shape in my mind. Here was a thinker who grew up in a rural farming community in North Africa on the edges of the empire, far away from

the center of "civilization" in Rome.[40] His father, Patricius, was Roman, and his mother, Monica, was likely Berber, so Augustine was of mixed ancestry, and his family was what we might now call middle-class.[41] Augustine excelled in school, but his family's resources were limited.[42] He was able to pursue further study only because a patron, Romanianus, supported his education.[43] In Carthage, Augustine became the top student in rhetoric,[44] and after teaching in Carthage, Thagaste, and Rome, he was appointed the imperial professor of rhetoric in Milan, a prestigious position that one commentator compares to "the endowed chair of government at Harvard."[45] Augustine had an ambition to become a lawyer and serve in political office, potentially as governor of a local province, but after two years in the rough-and-tumble world of the imperial court, he became disillusioned with politics and accused rhetoricians of being more committed to flattery than telling the truth.[46] So, in the process of converting to Christianity in 386, he abandoned his political ambitions and retreated to a friend's villa in Cassiciacum, where he enjoyed philosophical dialogues with close friends and family. He wrote about the happy life and sketched plans to develop an entire curriculum in the liberal arts.[47] But he would not stay long in his retreat. After being baptized by Ambrose in Milan and spending another year in Rome, he returned home to North Africa,[48] where for roughly forty years he served his people and his place, teaching farmers, merchants, and monks in Hippo, advocating on behalf of the poor and vulnerable, writing letters, sermons, and books on theology, ethics, and politics, and encouraging diverse citizens to share a common life together. For me—a student of political theory who grew up on a small farm in rural Tennessee, received a scholarship to a liberal arts college that my family could not otherwise afford, took a leave from graduate school to manage political campaigns, and returned to study politics, ethics, and religion with a desire to go back to my home region to teach and write—Augustine's life acquired a relevance that was missing, even as some of his complicities and commitments came to seem more disturbing than before.

As I took more courses and analyzed sermons, letters, and treatises often neglected in political theory, I also began to suspect that the pessimism often associated with his name was anachronistic. I kept coming across passages explicitly extolling the virtue of hope or implicitly designed to encourage his readers cultivate it. But I could not discover a single book-length treatment of Augustine's account of hope in English. So I set out to write such an account, one both sensitive to his historical context and concerns and capable of correcting, or at least complicating, the received image of his pessimism.

On the question of hope, Augustine is an especially valuable, if unlikely, ally in our contemporary moment. In the face of political division, racial injustice, economic inequality, and ecological devastation, many citizens are understandably tempted to despair, wondering if politics can offer any hope in our troubled times. Others are tempted to downplay, neglect, or reject the real challenges we face. Augustine offers another way. He criticizes pride, presumption, and the lust for domination while also resisting cynicism, resignation, and despair. Recognizing both the limits and possibilities of politics, he encourages a realistic hope for a better form of community not only in heaven but on earth and actively works to instantiate it through his service and citizenship. By holding together a robust critique of injustice with a legitimate hope for concord, he shows the importance of finding the mean between presumption and despair. Despite my many disagreements with him, I have found this feature of his work instructive, even inspiring.

To uncover this account, I will need to challenge the pessimistic reading of Augustine, integrate evidence from multiple sources, reexamine overlooked texts, and revisit more familiar ones, all while questioning some assumptions that most interpreters have taken for granted. Throughout, I will try to view Augustine's all-too-familiar ideas as if for the first time. As he himself once asked, "Isn't that what happens when we show beautiful scenes which we have often gone past with a careless glance, but which give us fresh joy as we share others' joy on first seeing them? . . . The more, by the bond of love, we enter into each other's mind, the more even old things become new for us again."[49] My hope in this book is to make Augustine new for us again.

A COMMONWEALTH OF HOPE