

Faithful Politics, Week 4 – The Political Visions of Augustine & Aquinas

I. Contrasting Augustine & Aquinas:

	Influenced By:	Influenced:	Principal Political Works	Historical Context:	General View of Human Nature
Augustine	Plato	Reformers (esp. Luther & Calvin)	<i>City of God</i> , esp. books IV & XIX	Conflict amidst a collapsing, still-quite-pagan Empire	Pessimistic
Aquinas	Aristotle	Natural Law, Catholic Social Thought	<i>Summa Theologica</i> , esp. Part II-I, qq. 90–108	Relative peace in a thoroughly Catholic Europe	Optimistic

II. Augustine’s Political Thought

- a. Legitimacy of government:
 - i. Government is driven by shared *appetites*, which undermines the idea that real-world states are morally different from other groups.
 - ii. Kingdoms without justice are little more *latrocinia* (raids), and *all* earthly kingdoms are unjust: justice is a matter of giving each their due, and no kingdom gives God *His* due.
 - iii. Alexander the Great meets a pirate and asks how he dares molest the seas. The pirate replies: “We share a common practice. But because I do it with a small boat, I am labeled a pirate; while you, with a great navy, molest the whole earth and are labeled an emperor.”
- b. Expectations of government:
 - i. The value of government lies in how it secures the peace and good order necessary for everyday human life to proceed.
 - ii. Augustine does not expect much from political life, and his one categorical demand is that worldly authorities not impede religion: All the externals of life are unimportant if churches can obey Christ.
 - iii. Augustine (later quoted by Aquinas) says in *De Libero Arbitrio*: “The law that is framed for ruling the people rightly permits many things that are punished by Divine Providence.”
- c. X-ians response to government:
 - i. “The ignorance of the judge frequently involves an innocent person in suffering . . . If such darkness shrouds social life, will a wise judge take his seat on the bench or no? Beyond question he will. For human society, which he thinks it a wickedness to abandon, constrains him and compels him to this duty.”
 - ii. Augustine does not exculpate the judge for the evils he causes, but says he should feel these evils *as evils*: “Surely it were proof of more profound considerateness and finer feeling were he to recognize the misery of these necessities, and shrink from his own implication in that misery; and had he any piety about him, he would cry to God, “From my necessities deliver Thou me.”

III. Aquinas's Political Thought

- a. Legitimacy of government:
 - i. Law must be directed towards the *common good*: Lawmaking "belongs either to the whole people or to a public personage who has care of the whole people: since in all other matters the directing of anything to the end concerns him to whom the end belongs."
 - ii. Laws are just when (1) they direct to the common good, (2) they do not exceed the lawgiver's power, and (3) their burdens are proportionate.
 - iii. Unjust laws are "acts of violence rather than laws"
- b. Expectations of government:
 - i. Aquinas quotes Cicero's *Rhetoric* "justice has its source in nature; [from nature] certain things came into custom by reason of their utility; afterwards these things . . . were sanctioned by fear and reverence for the law."
 - ii. "Man has a natural participation of the eternal law, according to certain general principles, but not as regards the particular determinations of individual cases . . . Hence the need for human reason to proceed further to sanction them by law."
 - iii. Law must also *make men good*: Aquinas quotes Aristotle, who says "lawgivers make men good by habituating them to good works."
 - iv. "Laws imposed on men should also be in keeping with their condition, for, as Isidore says law should be 'possible both according to nature, and according to the customs of the country.'"
 - v. "Human laws do not forbid all vices . . . but only the more grievous vices from which it is possible for the majority to abstain; and chiefly those that are to the hurt of others, without the prohibition of which human society could not be maintained."
 - vi. Law's purpose "is to lead men to virtue, not suddenly, but gradually."
- c. X-ians response to government:
 - i. Unjust laws opposed to *human* good "do not bind in conscience, except perhaps in order to avoid scandal or disturbance, for which cause a man should even yield his right" (quoting Christ: "If anyone would sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.").
 - ii. Unjust laws opposed to *divine* good "must nowise be observed" (quoting Peter: "We must obey God rather than men.").

Discussion Questions

1. How might have Augustine's and Aquinas's contexts affected their political thought?
2. How can we see the different views Augustine and Aquinas represent in contemporary political disagreements among Christians?
3. Augustine's and Aquinas's view of human nature directly affected their political thought, particularly their view of the proper role of government. How does your view of human nature affect your political views?