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Augustine, Aquinas and the Culture Wars

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Abstract

Augustine and Aquinas are points of reference in the so-called "culture wars" about how Christianity should think of its relation to modern liberal culture. "Postmodern Augustinian Thomists" (PATs) appeal to Augustine for their choice of a dialectical relation to liberalism, and those nicknamed "Whig Thomists" are more ready to see an alignment between liberal democratic capitalism and Aquinas' view of politics. In this paper, some points relating to how Augustine thinks of "the City of God" form the basis of a consideration of the way PATs argue for their position.

Keywords

Augustine, Aquinas, Tracey Rowland, Culture Wars

> *To believe in progress does not mean believing that any progress has yet been made. That would be no real act of belief.* (Franz Kafka, *Aphorisms* 48)

Marshall McLuhan wrote that "the Western world is living through its own past and the pasts of many forgotten cultures."[1] I interpret: our contemporary "living" is a "living through", probably in an unacknowledged way, patterns that we have inherited from the past. Modernity would then be a palimpsest in which the letters of past writing still shine through as tasks, without our knowing where they come from. It is a point similar to that which Nietzsche makes, that post-Christian Europe still carries the features of the rejected religion. Without our realising it, the "present" is the past. (Augustine would have loved the conundrum.) Milan Kundera says:

> People are always shouting they want to create a better future. It's not true. The future is an apathetic void, of no interest to anyone. The past

[1] Marshall McLuhan, in *Essential McLuhan*, ed. by E. McLuhan & F. Zingrone (Routledge, 1995), p. 298.

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> is full of life, eager to irritate us, provoke or insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it. The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past.[2]

Do not ignore the assumptions in that last phrase: can the past be changed, "repainted"? Yes, by its being reinterpreted and read differently, by its being appropriated for present concerns, and inevitably that means getting the past wrong by reading it with too sharp an eye on its usefulness for the present.

The issues in the Culture Wars are old: we are not the first generation to be aware of an intellectual and spiritual ambivalence at the heart of our social life. Augustine opens his discussion in the *City of God* by speaking of "the city of this world, a city which aims at domination, which holds nations in enslavement, but is itself dominated by that very lust of domination" (I.1). I offer the view of Leszek Kolakowski that "if Europe had lived indefinitely under the umbrella of the Augustinian tradition, the greatest minds and the most splendid creations of modern centuries would probably never have appeared". Fortunately, says Kolakowski, modernity is a secularisation of a Pelagian mentality at odds with Augustinian gloom, putting into circulation "a belief in human freedom conceived as an unconstrained ability to choose between good and evil; it made possible the habit of trusting in our spiritual prowess and our unlimited potential to better our lot, to inquire fearlessly into the secrets of nature, to create and expand, to apply our curiosity to anything we can think of . . . it made possible the great achievements of modern European civilization in the arts, the sciences, and social institutions".[3]

On this reading, the modern world was designed from the start to be an Augustine-free zone and a good thing too. That Augustine should be appealed to by those who dislike the modern world in all its seductions makes sense. Kolakowski's remarks come from his book on Pascal who takes a dim view of the transformative effects of social life:

> All men naturally hate each other. We have used concupiscence as best we can to make it serve the common good, but this is mere sham and a false image of charity, for essentially it is just hate. We have established and developed out of concupiscence admirable rules of polity, ethics and justice, but at root, the evil root of man, this evil stuff of which we are made, is only concealed; it is not pulled up.[4]

[2] Milan Kundera, The Book of Laughter or Forgetting.

[3] L. Kolakowski, *God Owes Us Nothing* (University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 183–4.

[4] Pascal, *Pensées*, S.243–4; L 210–1; cf. also S. 150; L. 118). Augustine "took the sinful will so seriously, and because its improvement through its own or other creaturely resources seemed impossible, Augustine had difficulty envisaging any basic change in the human condition" (E. TeSelle, 'Toward an Augustinian Politics,' *Journal of Religious Ethics* 16 (1988), pp. 87–108; p. 93).

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These are sentiments echoed by those who call themselves "post-modern Augustinian Thomists". (I am going to call them the PATs.) If Pascal is right, the Enlightenment project of arranging society in order to achieve human well-being is doomed from the start, a parody of true charity. What is the role of states and governments in this fallen world that is divided, according to Augustine, into two cities? I quote from Burnell who summarises what he calls the "intermediate" view shared by a number of modern scholars; this will be partly disputed by the PATs who dislike the idea that the modern liberal world is in any way "neutral" towards God and goodness. Burnell writes that "because civil institutions are a necessary response to sin, they are not something natural in the full sense; in the end civil life is theologically neutral and serves ephemeral ends; it constitutes 'an area of indeterminacy' between the City of God and the City of this world".[5]

So the Augustinian legacy is more subtle than the Pascalian reading of it: Hollenbach speaks of Augustine's being "marked by a deep sensitivity to the fragility and incompleteness of the political order and the dangers which beset it.... Augustine's thought on the possibilities of politics, however, is considerably more complex than a stance of unrelieved pessimism."[6] He points to the discussion in Book 19 of the *City of God* about the nature of a republic, the *res publica*, the commonweal, the common good, in which Augustine asks about the conditions that must be present for there to be a *res publica* at all. Augustine turns to Cicero's definition to show that it is not "any and every association of the population" that can be called a *res publica*, but only "an association united by a common sense of right and a community of interest", or as Hollenbach puts it, an "agreement with regard to justice and partnership for the common good". But where this justice does not exist, there is certainly no "association of men united by a common sense of right and by a community of interest". Therefore there is no commonwealth; for where there is no "people", there is no "weal of the people"' (*City of God*, 19.23). Part of Augustine's argument is that Rome had never been a true republic at all because it failed to create a moral consensus with respect to justice and a shared partnership for the common good. Where people lack a moral consensus about justice and the common good, there is no *res publica*, neither in ancient Rome according to Augustine, nor in modern America according to the PATs. Dwight. D. Eisenhower

[5] P. J. Burnell, "The Status of Politics in St Augustine's *City of God*", *History of Political Thought* 13 (1992), pp. 13–29; p. 14. Cf. J. Von Heyking, "Decorating and Deforming the Universe with Man's Moral Beauty: Recent Interpretations of Augustine's Political Thought", *The Review of Politics* 69 (2007), pp.668–80; p. 669).

[6] D. Hollenbach, "The Common Good Revisited", *Theological Studies* 50 (1989), pp. 70–94; p. 79. I draw upon his excellent presentation in what follows.

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summarised his view of the American way of religion when he said in 1954: "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith – and I don't care what it is".

It will be one of the assertions of the PATs that modern liberal culture has no way of adjudicating what is right and just, and what a common good might actually be: how would you work this out from liberal principles? Their guiding spirit is Alasdair MacIntyre's powerful indictment of such attempts in *After Virtue* and *Whose Justice, Whose Rationality?* Augustine, of course, asserted that the justice necessary for a *res publica* includes a rendering to God what is due to God, namely worship and love. Thus a true *res publica* is an assembly of people united in the worship and love of the one true God, and bound together by a love whereby each citizen loves his neighbour as he loves himself.[7] It will come as no surprise to you that the only republic that embodies Cicero's description faithfully is nothing less than the City of God itself, the *res publica* of right and justice and unswerving commitment to the shared lasting human good that God is. Later Aquinas will say: "The good of the whole universe is that which is apprehended by God who is the Maker and Governor of all things. Hence whatever he wills, he wills it under the aspect of the common good; this is his own goodness, which is the good of the whole universe".[8] Where is justice to be found? Augustine answers that it is "where God, the one supreme God, rules an obedient city according to his grace". Just as the individual lives on the basis of faith active in love, so "the association, or people, of righteous men [lives] on the same basis of faith, active in love". The excluding condition, paramount in evaluating the moral health of a society, is that where this justice is absent, there is no "association of men united by a common sense of right", and hence no commonwealth or "weal of the people". (*City of God*, 19.23)

But much will depend on what we think "the City of God" is. The important point to make is that the City of God is not a visible polity, and hence it will not come to identifiable social expression. Civil society is identified neither with the *civitas Dei* nor the *civitas terrena*. The distinction between the City of God and the city of the devil is primarily an eschatological way of classifying human beings; it is not a contrast of rival social institutions.[9] The City of God is simply the heavenly Jerusalem of the book of Revelation, the completed Kingdom that Christ hands over to the Father (I Cor. 15. 24) and it belongs more to the genre of apocalyptic mythology than to political theory. Elements of the kingdom of God – genuine

[7] Hollenbach, *op.cit.*, p. 81.

[8] *ST*, 1a2ae, q.19. Art. 10, resp.

[9] R. Martin, "The Two Cities in Augustine's Political Thought", *Journal of the History of Ideas* 33(1972), pp. 195–217; p. 203.

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concern for justice and right and a commitment to the genuine good of all – are features found in all dimensions of civil society, mixed up of course with elements of self-love and the lust for domination.

Now if Augustine is right that human fulfilment is attainable only in the communion of saints in the City of God, then to make civil society the bearer of hopes for happiness and justice would be a form of idolatry; the good of the *polis* is not the highest human good. Robert Markus writes that for Augustine "the sphere of politics is relative and restricted; within its restricted area it is autonomous".[10] You will recall Burnell's description of civil life constituting "an area of indeterminacy" between the City of God and the city of this world. Augustine's highly theological view of the City of God as the true *res publica* has the consequence of desacralizing ordinary politics. Joseph Ratzinger appealed to Augustine to argue that an authentically Christian approach to the political order should be based on ethics as a rational undertaking, not on a religious vision of the kingdom of God. "The New Testament", he writes, "is aware of political ethics but not of political theology".[11]

But the bar should not be set too high: Augustine realized pragmatically, says Hollenbach, "that it would be somehow absurd to insist that all societies and states that lack the full faith and love of the City of God are not cities at all".[12] A "republic of a certain kind" might exist that is manifestly short of the Kingdom of God, and so Augustine offers a more feasible definition of a true *res publica*: "A people is an assemblage of reasonable beings bound together by a common agreement as to the objects of their love" (*City of God*, 19.24). And of course the better the objects of this agreement, the better the people. Societies united by unworthy objects of love, such as the cult of celebrities, football, Facebook and binge-drinking may be of less merit than societies such as the Catholic Theological Association, dedicated to good theology and modest alcohol consumption, but there may be overlapping goals. Hollenbach calls Augustine's "a pluralistic-analogical understanding of the meaning of the common good", and he speaks of "a pluralistic ensemble of goods", none of which may be absolutized or allowed to dominate all the others. Augustine's thought, he says, "provides a theological basis for affirming that the political domain has the potential to become a partial embodiment of the full human good". And this means that there will

[10] R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine* (CUP, 1989), p. 70f.

[11] "Ratzinger argues that an overtheologized approach to politics is a sort of false messianism and quickly leads to fanaticism and tyranny. It is rooted in an inability to come to terms with the imperfection and imperfectability of worldly existence". (Hollenbach, *op.cit*., p. 82).

[12] Hollenbach, p. 83.

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be "a pluralistic form of politics". Hence, he says, "it must respect many of the values and institutions of the liberal tradition".[13]

Hollenbach's is a mediating perspective that allows that culture and society will be internally diverse, with a certain autonomy in relation to religious faith, and that fosters plural social goods more or less well. The sources of culture will be plural, and the outcomes of culture no less plural and incomplete. The unity of the virtues in social expression will be indefinitely (eschatologically) deferred. Because neither the City of God nor the city of the devil can be identified with civil society, elements of both cities will be found in all dimensions of social order: there will be self-sacrificing love of neighbour alongside abusive exploitation (*libido dominandi*) and these will co-mingle in society and church until the end of time, as wheat and tares in Christ's parable. There will be no definitive progress towards realising the Kingdom of God in any social or stable form, no accumulation of goodness across the generations, but no accumulation of badness either. Hence the American way of life is not a signal achievement by which the City of God is promoted on earth, as Michael Novak and the Whig Thomists seem to suggest. Whig Thomists speak as though democratic capitalism flows directly from medieval teachings on natural law and the Thomist treatment of politics, via the Scottish Enlightenment, into Wall Street: for them, Adam Smith and Aquinas lie down together as the lion and the lamb in the peaceable American republic.

The PATs are critical of attempts in the post-Vatican II Church to allow space for an autonomous culture of liberty and rights that the Church then has to deal with. The mistake is the acceptance by some Catholics of "the autonomy of the profane, or the order of culture – that is to say, all human development – and the ambivalence of all": a quotation from Bernard Lambert, a peritus involved in drafting *Gaudium et spes*, quoted disapprovingly by Rowland.[14] The Whig Thomists are all too keen, misguidedly according to the PATs, to elide the Thomist approach to natural law with the liberal natural rights doctrine; Jacques Maritain's approach, and John Courtney Murray's defence of the American "settlement", influential of course at Vatican II, come under suspicion of being wrongly conceived, naive attempts to deal with modernity. The PATs see Whig Thomism as endorsing a "frank acceptance of secularity", justified by reference to *Gaudium et spes* paragraph 36:

> by the very circumstances of their being created, all things are endowed with their own stability, truth, goodness, proper laws and order.

[13] Hollenbach, p. 85.

[14] T. Rowland, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition: After Vatican II* (Routledge, 2003).

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How, asks Tracey Rowland, can such a statement be used to "defend a positive judgement on the processes of secularisation"? The alternative vision put forward by David Schindler is that the Church is "destined to form from within everything in the cosmos: every act, every relationship, every cultural or social or economic order".[15]

Rather than accept a marginal role within modern culture accorded to it by liberal secularism, Rowland portrays the Church as not merely "the teacher of truth" but "the creator (mother and guardian) of culture".[16] These images, "creator, mother and guardian" of culture are highly revealing: for the PATs, the Church can settle for nothing less than being the progenitor, nurturer and monitor of culture. (Neither, I suspect, can Islam, but that is another story.) It is what Levinas would call a "totalising" perspective in which otherness and plurality are "out-narrated" and diminished. This is high ecclesiology in a very arrogant mood, a velvet glove covering a knuckle-duster.

Hollenbach's and Burnell's reading of Augustine differs from that of the PATs who set an Augustinian tradition in radical opposition to the modern liberal state. Where Hollenbach, for example, sees scope within the Augustinian heritage for Christians to recognise a plurality of cultural forms within different, perhaps liberal, instances of the *res publica*, the PATs are more single-minded and less nuanced. The issue is how to think of the relation between Christianity and liberalism because the culture wars that are our topic offer different answers. Matthew Lamb distinguishes between three different ways in which one might connect one tradition with another. The first is to relate traditions in a *complementary* way: the traditions of Christianity and liberalism are not fundamentally antagonistic and incompatible but simply focus on different issues, and so one can expect that a synthesis of the two may be reached, now or at some point in the future. In this perspective, *traditions converge*, and so one can, for example, think of a not impossible compatibility between liberalism and Christian teaching. The second type of relationship is *genetic*, in which one tradition happens to be more developed than the other, but the latter may catch up with the more developed tradition as it develops its depth and range. *Traditions can mature and connect with one another*. The third is a *dialectical* relation in which there is a fundamental antagonism between two traditions and no real prospect of aligning them. It is not the case that agreement will be reached if only we keep on talking. Because the starting points and assumptions are so different, this incompatibility will extend all the way through the life of these traditions. *Traditions are mutually hostile*.

[15] Quoted in Rowland, *op.cit.* p. 30.
[16] Rowland, *op.cit.*, p. 28.

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"Whereas Whig Thomists see the relation [between liberalism and Thomism] as in some ways genetic and in others complementary", says Rowland, "the proponents of a postmodern Augustinian Thomism see it as dialectical."[17] The incisive issue, as Ernest Fortin puts it in relation to Augustine's *City of God*, is not whether civil society could survive Christianity but whether Christianity itself can survive its integration into civil society, and on what terms.[18]

Why be so uncomfortable with liberalism? Because the liberalism at issue asserts that a just and well-ordered society requires arrangements and policies based only on "public reasons", namely those reasons to which all citizens may be expected reasonably to subscribe, at least in those societies that, in the wake of the wars of religion, promoted the transfer of religion from the public to the private sphere, accorded a priority to individual freedom of conscience and brought about a separation of church and state. Hence, the public reasons that underpin society cannot be religious reasons because pluralism of religion and the right of people to have no religion must be taken into account. Religious reasons are declared to be not "shareable". For the PATs, modernity and its liberal tradition are really toxic to the flourishing of the faith and cannot avoid a slide into nihilism. Rowland writes,

> There are thus two different readings of modernity, and with that, two different readings of how the Church should engage the contemporary world. While the Whigs want the Church to accommodate the culture of modernity, the Augustinians favor a much more critical stance. Whig Thomists want to supplement the Thomist tradition with doses of Enlightenment values.[19]

Earlier, I promised you that we would find ourselves adrift in a sea of slogans and clichés. You may well judge that we are in this sea already. So be it, but I now want to cut you loose from the mother ship, while you reflect on this quotation from Tracey Rowland,

> In the post-conciliar era, the Greco-Latin cultural patrimony of the Church was gambled on the belief that the post-war *Pax Americana* signalled the arrival of a new era analogous to that of the *Pax Romana*, in which Liberalism is the common philosophy, the rights discourse its common jurisprudential framework and a homogeneous international 'mass culture' its embodied social form. With little or no theological justification for taking such a gamble, some naively supposed that God had provided a new world order in which Christianity would

[17] T. Rowland, *Culture and the Thomist Tradition: After Vatican II* (Routledge, 2003), p. 143.

[18] E.L. Fortin, "Augustine's *City of God* and Modern Historical Consciousness", *Review of Politics* 41 (1979), pp. 323–43; p. 430.

[19] T.Rowland, 'Benedict XVI, Thomism and Liberal Culture Part 2,' *Zenit* (July 25, 2005).

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> flourish as an equal alongside any number of other creeds, including Enlightenment secularism, and would be usefully informed by those creeds while in turn influencing them. The division between the Whig Thomists and the proponents of a postmodern Augustinian Thomism is in part a difference over the prudence of this gamble and the value of what Leo XIII called 'Americanism'.[20]

Now this is pretty bad, an instance of rhetoric blunting understanding. The scenario is the poker table where the prodigal Catholic thinker takes his inheritance – nothing less than the best of Greek and Roman culture – and bets it all on red, gambling that the American empire based on liberalism, human rights and mass culture (however that sniffy term is construed) will be better than the Platonic-Aristotelian legacy it already has. Apparently there were "some" (theological soixante-huitards? Rahnerians? we are not told) who wanted the church to become a subordinate partner in a new world order designed by Enlightenment secularism, creating a secularist/Christian equivalent of Caesaropapism, an alliance of the church's enemies and Catholics who are dis-spirited, in all senses of that word.

This passage is, I think, is the volitional centre from which the theoretical elements of Rowland's case proceed, evoking the conflict in seventeenth-century France between the Augustinians of Port-Royal and the Jesuits whom they accused of abandoning true Christianity in order to achieve an accommodation with royal and aristocratic culture. Jesuits were accused by Pascal of blurring the boundary between the gospel and modernity, thereby dispensing people from the difficult obligation of loving God. The French Jesuit philosopher Jean-Yves Calvez said to me that the parts of France today that are most deeply de-Christianised are the parts that had been most under the influence of Jansenism. There is a straight line that leads from Port-Royal to von Balthasar's attack on Rahner in his book *Cordula*, where I think the nasty sniping that has always been just below the surface of *Communio* theology shone through, to Rowland's picture of the theological casino where Catholic thinkers went, as they say in Glasgow, to "sell the jerseys".

Is it really correct to think that "there is a specifically Catholic form or forms of culture distinct from a Protestant form or forms of culture" as Rowland suggests?[21] I wonder. Now if you're going to do this properly, you need to do a lot of spadework, both in relation to your categories and in relation to some form of empirical data that might support your distinction. What are we talking about, where does it occur and when? The one sure thing we know about "Catholic cultures" is that they can disintegrate within one generation: a mile

[20] Rowland, *Culture*, p. 165.
[21] Rowland, *Culture*, p. 40.

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wide and an inch deep as someone put it. Instead, Rowland refers to Christopher Dawson's use of two categories from Werner Sombart: the "bourgeois" and the "erotic". The erotic type par excellence is Augustine, and while erotic culture is characterised by a passionate desire for spiritual perfection, bourgeois cultures are characterised by instrumental rationality (boo!) and the priority of economic concerns (again, boo!). In case you're wondering, erotic culture is Catholic and bourgeois culture is Protestant. It is as though Catholic culture forms Baroque saints, whose desires lift them through the clouds of heaven, while Protestant culture produces men in suits with laptops. According to Cardinal George, cited by Rowland, Protestant cultures such as the United States at its inception and in its present form are by this sociological definition "non-erotic", founded on the Reformers' distinction between "secular" and "sacred" and therefore giving rise to liberal secularism and the elimination of spiritual desire. Modern American secularism therefore flows directly from the Reformation. No, this really won't do. The genealogy of ideas should not be so crudely done. As Joyce Grenfell used to say in one of her monologues, "George, don't do that". Rowland goes on,

> Dawson concluded that the Gospel is 'essentially hostile to the spirit of calculation, the spirit of worldly prudence, and above the spirit of self-seeking and self-satisfaction', and indeed, that the Pharisee is the archetypical 'spiritual bourgeois'.[22]

It was only a matter of time before the Pharisees made an appearance, those good Jewish friends of mine, this time strangely linked to Protestant calculation, technological advances, worldly prudence and self-seeking, all of which are set in opposition to the Catholic "erotic" culture of spiritual perfection. In its clumsy way, it is a variation on Max Weber's distinction between "this worldly" asceticism that gives rise to capitalism and the "other-worldly" asceticism that directs hearts elsewhere, poor but holy. The Pharisees are a cipher for a lot of things that Dawson, and apparently Rowland, do not like about the modern world, but they always get a bad press. Protestants fare no better, poor souls. There is an astonishing sleight of hand here in which modern technology, bourgeois life, Protestantism and Torah-observant Judaism are clustered on one side of the board of cultural options, under the heading "bad things", and at the other side is a much more seductive, but unspecified Catholic culture that is said to be "erotic" and is called "good things". It is this "Catholic" culture that is meant to be the "creator (mother and guardian)" of the world culture leading to the City of God. For the PATs, being Catholic seems to mean being against everyone else rather than connected to everyone else.

[22] Rowland, *Culture*, p. 41.

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Rather than the dialectical polarities of Augustinian Thomism (separating Catholicism from Judaism, Protestantism, Liberalism, etc. and understanding them as outside the dynamic inherent in Catholicism), why not follow Charles Taylor in exploring a Matteo Ricci approach to Enlightenment liberalism? (Ricci was the great Jesuit missionary to China whose strategy was to establish points of contact within the alien culture that could form the co-ordinates of fruitful dialogue.) Taylor points to two features of our present experience: on the one hand, we feel at home here, "in this civilization which has issued from Christendom, so what do we need to strive further to understand?" On the other hand, "whatever is foreign to Christianity seems to involve a rejection of it, so how can we envisage accommodating" to it? But the mistake, he says, is to think that "whatever is in continuity with our past" should be given the status of "legitimate Christian culture", and consequently that "the novel, secularist twist to things is simply incompatible [with it]".[23] If you view it in this way, then what is Christian is what has been *already* known and learned, and what is modern and what is emerging is experienced as an alien intrusion on a perfectly realised cultural and religious template. Our society might be better described as "post-Christendom" than as "post-Christian".[24]

Why not muse over the idea that our society is "incipiently Christian"? There are, Taylor points out, positive features in modern liberal political culture that could not have arisen as long as we were living in Christendom:

> [I]n modern, secularist culture there are mingled together both authentic developments of the gospel, or an incarnational mode of life, and also a closing off to God that negates the gospel . . . [M]odern liberal political culture is characterised by an affirmation of universal human rights – to life, freedom, citizenship, self-realization which are seen as radically unconditional, that is, not dependent on such things as gender, cultural belonging, civilizational development or religious allegiance, which always limited them in the past. As long as were living in Christendom, we could never have attained this radical unconditionality.[25]

But what we bring from the past might not actually be all that central to Christianity and the City of God: damaging distortions can be

[23] C. Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?* ed. by J. L. Heft (OUP, 1999), p. 16.

[24] *Ibid.* The work of S. N. Eisenstadt on "multiple modernities" is relevant here: "Multiple Modernities", *Daedalus* 129 (2000), pp. 1–29; "Multiple Modernities in an Age of Globalization", *Canadian Journal of* Sociology 24 (1999), pp. 283–95. Cf. B. Thomassen, "Anthropology and its Many Modernities: When Concepts Matter", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 18 (2012), pp. 160–78; B. Thomassen, "Anthropology, Multiple Modernities and the Axial Age Debate", *Anthropological Theory* 10 (2010), pp. 321–42.

[25] Taylor, *op.cit*, pp. 16–7.

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deeply embedded in fundamental teachings about God and humanity which circulate in "Catholic cultures". 'Christendom', thus far expressed, is not a normative realisation of the universalist impulses behind the project of Catholicism. Catholicism, after all, is not a sect distinct from Protestantism; neither is it an opposition party ready to go to war with forms of liberalism. Catholicism is an impulse out of Judaism, a universalist project at the heart of Christianity to form a unified community that signals and mediates Jesus Christ's significance for human beings in their relationship with God and with one another. It works with a sense that Christ is "Head of all" and not just Christian believers, and if I read Augustine correctly, Catholicism is the *Ecclesia ab Abel* whose boundaries we are not given to know. Only a sectarian distortion of Catholicism views it as antagonistic to other Christian traditions and to Judaism, and indeed to the elements of truth carried in the philosophical and cultural forms of human flourishing articulated *extra ecclesiam*.

The insight carried in the idea of the *ecclesia ab Abel* is that humanity, even liberals intent on keeping religion out of the public forum of shareable ideas, is touched by a single stream of grace from beginning to end, by which a community is formed of those who have faith and love according to the measure and character of God's gift. From this point of view, the project of Catholicism seems to me to be identical with what Augustine means by the City of God. And just as the City of God is a regulative and eschatological notion never fully instantiated in social form within time, so Catholicism can be distorted if it becomes tied irrevocably to particular social and cultural agendas that it inhabited at one time in the past. All this may be a round-about way of saying that I find the treatment of "Catholic" and "Catholicism" in postmodern Augustinian Thomism to be sectarian. Nor do I have confidence that this hermeneutic of culture will do much good, either inside or outside the church.

Back in the late 80s, the late Colin Gunton, the Barthian Professor of Theology at King's London and a URC minister said to me that the problem with Liberation Theology was that it was "bad theology and bad economics". I think he would have had little time for the way in which the PATs go about their business: a stilted and questionable set of theological principles, he would probably have judged, and a shoddy form of cultural analysis. The fundamental Barthian question about how to ensure that the gospel does not become distorted by the culture it is meant to challenge is still there, but I do not think that the PATs give us a good way of answering it. They see the question, but their answers are intellectually unpersuasive and, probably unworkable as a plan of action and reform.

I do not want to end negatively. At the beginning of this paper, I quoted Marshall McLuhan's remark that "the Western world is

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living through its own past and the pasts of many forgotten cultures". Possibly so. How far back do you want to go to find what we are living through? In *The Open Society and its Enemies*, his study of detribalization in the ancient world and retribalization in the modern world, Karl Popper speaks of how tribal or closed societies began to be broken "open" in the sixth-century BC by 'the invention [then] of critical discussion, and in consequence of thought that was free from magical obsessions. At the same time we find the first symptoms of a new uneasiness. The strain of civilization was beginning to be felt.' The uneasiness, he said, continues to be felt: a "strain created by the effort which life in an open and partly abstract society continually demands from us . . . . We must, I believe, bear this strain as the price to be paid for every increase in knowledge, in reasonableness in co-operation and in mutual help . . . . It is the price we have to pay for being human".

We are living through the same uneasiness as earlier generations of the City of God: the strain of civilization – what Augustine referred to as the "winepress" – is still felt while the "open and partly abstract society" of liberal modernity cocks a snook at us. We are not trusted and there is no general confidence that what we have to say is at all credible. We are no longer masters of the culture, in a condition of exile and displacement, a diaspora church that has been pushed away from dreams of Christendom and Constantinian settlements: this is where we are and this uncertainty might be the price we have to pay for being Christian.

How we open up this "open society" – and of course one of the things we have to recognise is that in fundamental ways it is not "open" at all (here the PATs are absolutely right) – is a central question. In many ways, the "open society" of liberal modernity is deeply illiberal and is unaware of its illiberality. What is promoted is a "retribalization" of a genuinely open society in which the mind becomes closed, locked down and zipped up within boundaries of acceptable discourse that in principle exclude religious perspectives. When secularists have the conch (the symbol of the right to speak in Golding's *Lord of the Flies*), the parameters of thought and speech become restricted to those who hold this perspective.

How might we use the tool of "critical discussion" to prise open perspectives on the roots and limitations of liberal modernity? Can modernity become self-critical in relation to its assumptions and pre-judgements? Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor are the daunting presences pressing this question within modernity, and Taylor seems to me to offer a more nuanced examination of currents within modernity than MacIntyre who is widely invoked by the PATs. A conference devoted both to Augustine, the master of the phenomenology of the self in relation to a mysterious God

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("What do I love when I love my God?"), and to Aquinas, the master of how critical rationality finds its proper place within faith in this mysterious God, should help us think about how to move forward.

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