

Interview with Charles Mathewes on Republic of Grace: Augustinian Thoughts for Dark Times

The Project on Lived Theology (PLT): Early on, readers are told that this book “is nothing if not a big picture book” that offers an “interpretation of our condition” and “one way in which we might fruitfully inhabit it.” What prompted you to write such a book, particularly in a time of so much renewed interest in “religion and politics,” “political theology,” and so on?

Charles Mathewes (CM): Well, I began writing this book soon after 9/11, in the expectation that the turn to interest in religion and politics, which was then only just beginning, would inevitably go off in a wrong direction, lured by distractions of the moment and the momentum of the previous arguments in which both authors and audiences had been engaged. We were, you’ll recall, kind of still working out the culture wars (not like they have gone away, or anything), and it seemed that a lot of work at the time was caught up in the kind of red/blue America stuff. That argument continues, of course, and I have some favorite horses in that race; but while I think that that debate in the US does touch on matters that are quite important, I also think that our habit of fixating on that debate and that debate alone, both narrows down and distorts our spiritual, religious, and even political lives tremendously. God knows I’m not alone in this suspicion. People worry about the distorting effects of consumerism on our ability to make sense of our commitments to love, friendship, marriage, family, as more than simply choices. People wonder about how to work with others around the world to make the world a safer and more stable place—especially given the many challenges, of different kinds, that we will face in coming decades. People worry about violence and terror and want to know what to do about it, how to ensure that new Empires are not reinforced nor that violence be allowed to fester and grow. And in all this, we can use some new language, some new ways of thinking. The book suggests that there are powerfully illuminating historical resources—resources that we don’t actually lack—that we ignore to our own detriment. If we attend to those resources, and let them shape our ways of thinking, both *what* we care about and *why* we care would be different; some of the things that captivate popular attention now would be less important, some things that are ignored now would be more important, and so on.

PLT: Before we get into that, can you say a bit more about the subtitle of the book: “Augustinian Thoughts for Dark Times?” Is there any relation between this potential for the events of the day to *distract us* and your sense that we live in “dark times?”

CM: Yeah, that’s a good point. Let me put it this way: we struggle through the trivia to the darkness, but we cannot rest there. Think of it in stages. First of all you experience yourself swarmed by events, by minutiae and trivia and the just endless stream of crap that hits you

from all directions in our world; it's like a million fire hydrants of information aimed at you at once. Then, after a little while, you begin to despair (or I despair) of any of this stuff ever amounting to anything usefully intelligible. Then after a little while longer, you begin to wonder if it *will* amount to something intelligible, but something that is bad, or dark. The gloom of our times, as the gloom of all other times, is where a lot of us spend our deepest moments. Think of the way old chronicles used to begin: "the world is in its old age, people are corrupt, societies are decaying," etc., etc. Nor is this a genre that's gone away; the social critic Jane Jacobs's last book was entitled *Dark Age Ahead*, and I don't think that was just crankiness on her part. Many of the best thinkers brood in this darkness, and on it, for most of their careers. But I think there's something beyond this apprehension of our darkness, and we can get a hint of it because the darkness never seems to go thoroughly away—it's always there, in every age—and yet we all *recognize* it as darkness, as how things are *not* meant to be; so that our very recognition of the screwed-up-ness of our world is a sign of hope, paradoxically enough. And that's where Augustine can help us. How are we to live in our own dark times—East, as it were, of Eden?

PLT: When you say that Augustine is "misread unless he is read as primarily offering counsel" to residents of the late modern world, what do you have in mind?

CM: Well, first of all, credit where credit is due: This distinction between information and counsel is something, by the way, that I've learned from Walter Benjamin by way of Alan Jacobs, with whom I have spent much joyful time because of the work of the Project on Lived Theology. I think Alan would mostly agree with what I'm saying I learned from Benjamin, but I want to make sure both to recognize my debt and give him space for plausible deniability. As a crude rule of thumb, "counsel" is in a way what you *cannot* get directly from the Internet. I get a lot of emails every morning—newspaper headlines, various briefing emails, some blog posts, some columns, from places like the New York Times, Foreign Policy Magazine, POLITICO, and the like; and I read newspapers and listen to the radio. All that is like a fire-hydrant of information, and much of it is "data" of one form or another. But most of what passes for insight in our culture is really the textualized ejaculations of the spasmodic St. Vitus dance of hypercaffeinated, narrowly career-oriented twenty-somethings (or people who are past their twenties but have not matured, intellectually or emotionally, since then). I have had the blessing, and the bane, of knowing many people who went into what we can call the "mediocracy" of our world—that hybrid high-school chat room that fuses politics and journalism; and by and large these are not people I respect as repositories of wisdom. This sort of information has all the intellectual substance of potato chips. I find it easy to glut on it every morning, but then by mid-day I'm hungry again.

At the same time, I don't get enough counsel. When I read *Proverbs*, or Machiavelli, or Augustine, or Grotius or *Luke* or Thucydides or Tacitus or Calvin or Edwards or anyone like that, I am not getting something that gives me gobbets of data immediately applicable to the instant I receive it. What I am getting is something altogether deeper—not merely factoids about today, but something that orients me in a certain way towards reality, something that helps me discern what is important in the torrent of information I receive, what can be dismissed, what

can be discarded.

I think this distinction between information and counsel has been lost today. Peddlers of information are caught up in the immediate flood of the moment, and never, as it were, look up from the momentary to ask larger questions—what are we doing, in being so obsessed with these minutiae? Why are we doing it? Where are we headed, if we stay fixed in this obsession? And where might we go instead? Counsel helps us seek to answer these questions. Information directs us, once we have found answers to these questions.

PLT: So, what would a uniquely Augustinian approach to political existence endorse within our contemporary political culture? What would it condemn?

CM: Well, I don't know that an Augustinian picture wants centrally to approve or fix civil discourse; rather, Augustine offers a way for Christians to inhabit as faithfully as possible the public culture in which they find themselves. This is not necessarily something we find good about such a picture, but it is inescapable. Most Augustinian political thinking, it seems to me, is less concerned with offering an ideal template for a political culture and more concerned with seeing what can be done.

Working to improve the political culture is one important task, but such aims are never more than interim aims for Augustinians; the ultimate this-worldly aim is the gracious cultivation of persons so as to turn them into what they were created to become: citizens of the true polity, the Kingdom of God, the republic of grace.

PLT: On that, it is both interesting and important (I think) that the book is organized around the relevance of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love for political life. Why not utilize the moral virtues of justice, prudence, temperance, and courage instead?

CM: I used the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love instead of the moral virtues for a very serious reason. I wanted to underscore the priority of these three virtues, and especially love, to Augustine, over the other, more immediately (but I suspect also shallower) "moral" virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and courage. I think the two languages are not properly speaking merely complementary, but rather rivals languages that pick out subtly different aspects of the human person, and offer distinct pictures of the human person—not totally opposed, for Augustine thinks the moral virtues can all be folded into the theological ones, but genuinely distinct and not entirely overlapping. The priority of these theological virtues—the way they enfold the moral virtues—is, for Augustinians, obviously psychological. Our deepest psychic energies, our thoughts and affections, are more properly apprehended and brought up to careful moral, psychological, and spiritual scrutiny by recourse to the theological virtues and their opposites (idolatry or disbelief; despair or presumption; and enmity or apathy). It seems we are more fundamentally beings before God than anything else; so our lives are organized fundamentally *coram Deo*.

Furthermore, I try to make these virtues do some work for Christians, and thus help them see how to inhabit those virtues better, by showing that we can understand the "levels" of

challenge that genuine Christian faith faces in the world by recourse to these virtues as well; so that faith confronts a dangerous kind of tempting hyper-patriotism or—the opposite temptation—politicized demonization; hope faces a certain kind of despair or failure to imagine a genuine future at all; and love faces a certain kind of annihilation by a destructive consumerism, so prevalent in so many ways in our world today. Since I wanted to write a book about how the soul can be shaped by engagement with the world, it seemed to me best to talk about the sharpest, most powerful tools for that shaping; and those are these virtues.

PLT: Can you say a bit more about that? For example when you say that though “Christians have much that is good to contribute to public life,” it is also the case that “public life can be a means of deepening their own appropriation of faith, hope, and charity,” what do you mean by “public life?” What sort of venues do you have in mind?

CM: Well, “public life” is a rich and contested term. I don’t mean simply “politics,” if we construe that as merely voting, or direct legislative activity, or even if we expand it to include talking directly about political matters currently in the news with our friends. And yet I don’t mean to leave politics in those common senses behind; I just want to expand the sense to include more.

By “public life” I mean something more like what “politics” meant for old-school feminists back in the day, when people could say things like “the personal is the political” and not think they were just repeating a cliché. What counts for “public life,” then, is a matter of fairly broad construal. In general I would say it should speak in some sense, more or less directly, but at some distance, to matters of common concern—about the “common good,” say, or about issues if not of universally common concern at least of sufficiently common concern to concern the people in the discussion.

It can include all sorts of things: the ranking of movies recently seen; discussions of childrens’ education and our hopes for such; assessments of sports teams; celebrities’ charity work; watershed plans in local municipalities; neighborhood watch groups and the like. (I may draw the line at a discussion between co-fanatics about model trains, or the best translation of a French novel. But then again I might not.) By including all of this in my sense of “public life” I am trying to develop a term that captures that life lived *in common*. And furthermore, a debate about what exactly constitutes “public life” is itself part of public life.

The crucial word is *public*—there’s something that is held *between* people, and is no more ultimately the proper possession of one than another, and so concerns all parties in a relatively equal manner. And when we engage in such conversation or activity, we do so with tacit criteria of what is better or worse, right and wrong, and those criteria may have application beyond the immediate context, and our conversation may speak, indirectly or at times directly, to what we think those criteria should be.

When you and I talk about snarky baristas in local coffee shops, or the relative merit of musicians, *and* we talk about what makes them snarky, or good, and use criteria in those

discussions that are relatively portable—so that we talk about, say, polite baristas in a way analogous to how we could talk about polite interlocutors, we are engaged in a way in a public discussion—about public criteria for evaluating what is good and bad.

But it's not just discussion. We engage in public life when we go to political rallies, or work on a political campaign, or go to town hall meetings, go to a mall and say hi to people, maybe have a brief conversation, or (arguably) go to meetings with our colleagues, or work on a neighborhood improvement project. I am not trying to whitewash these situations—they entail a lot of stuff that is not “public life,” and they are never perfect or even straightforward sites of public engagement; but public life can happen in them.

In all of these venues, in all of these ways, there are opportunities for people to be more than merely private citizens, autistic before one another in their individual isolation. They have the chance for genuine communion—however thin, however partial, however potentially perverted. That's what I mean.