Introduction

When you hear we live in terrible times—that all political options are unappealing and that prospects run from bad to worse—you are also likely to hear pundits, meaning to console, recall that the same claims have been made for millennia. Civilization, they say, rarely, if ever, lacks critics ready to add a dab of doom to their objections to the moral insensitivity that sadly passes as political necessity and political wisdom. But pundits-turned-historians will tell you that enemies eventually become allies, resentments regularly scab over, and tyrannies are soon upended. Pessimists persist, of course, and some among them in every generation are sure their contemporaries are the very first to have encountered the very worst. Still, I was surprised recently to read George Kateb’s observation that “the canonical writers,” from Plato forward, have been insufficiently pessimistic. Kateb complains that the canon has left us unprepared “to take in and comprehend” “the ferocious power” of the invidiously “hyperactive” political imagination. We must have a new and more emphatic pessimism, he proposes, if we are to appreciate how the passionate sense of possibility in politics—a gruesome “political aestheticism” that experiences its momentum as mission and destiny—inexorably leads to domination and devastation.1

This study of two versions of an old, deeply perceptive pessimism was just about done when I came across Kateb’s call for something new. I had been arguing that the theorists who interested me, Augustine and Thomas More, had gotten where Kateb hoped the “inadequate” canon might have gone. The two acknowledged that the “hyperactive” political imagination was irrepressible—and terribly dangerous. They registered how grim public life could and would be. But students of history, religion, and political philosophy appear not to have sensed how sordid political practice seemed to the two. And scholars still accentuate the positive, latch on to the affirmative, and bring
gloom down to the minimum, as the old song instructs. More has become pa-
tron saint of the politicians; Augustine, close to a Clinton Democrat.

A glance at Kateb’s favorite pessimist, Hannah Arendt, suggests how this
makeover takes over. In 1951, Arendt published an extraordinarily discerning
and influential analysis of our “tragic era,” from Dreyfus to the “death facto-
ries” and the Gestapo. She explained how and why “political systems make
humanity superfluous.” She accepted that the ideologically driven craving “to
make the world consistent” would continue to give us ruthless, brutal regimes.
But she refused to give tyranny, terrorism, fanaticism, and fascism the last
word in her first edition. She reserved that for Augustine who had indeed
averred that every person was created as “a beginning.” To Arendt, “each new
birth” suggested that meaningful political change was possible. According to
Augustine, however, fresh souls were born into misery to be purged of their
worldliness rather than to change this wretched world. He said as much in the
chapter Arendt cited. He stressed that a new start was made at each birth, be-
cause he was trying to correct popular philosophers who believed in reincar-
nation, a “ceaseless to and fro of souls” that struck him as silly and sadistic.
Would a good God cruelly bring souls back to life after they had been liber-
ated by death? Augustine was certain that they were brought to life but once
in this terrestrial city to experience, in their “hellish mortality,” how truth and
justice had been perverted, and to learn to yearn for both, for absolute truth
and genuine justice, and for the beatitude of the celestial city.2

Each soul, each birth, was “a beginning,” but Arendt has Augustine’s cer-
tainty articulate what was left of her optimism. Theorists as prolific as Augus-
tine and Thomas More can be made to say just about anything, because they
said so much. For a time, in ways that were readily recognizable to their con-
temporaries, they were politically ambitious. They thought that politics might
yield solutions to fundamental, moral problems. Both changed their minds,
and either could be subpoenaed to prove that one old saw still has teeth: that
if the young do not tend to optimism, something is wrong with their hearts,
and if the old do not tend to pessimism, something is wrong with their heads.
Historians, however, are right to call for inquests when parts of the deceased
are resurrected to stand for the whole, when what Jean Elshtain calls “count-
ervailing” comments are collected or assembled from More’s or Augustine’s
texts according to collectors’ needs. If a collector wants Augustine to herald
new beginnings, advocate social reforms, plump for a benevolent political pa-
ternalism or, instead, for political pluralism, relevant remarks can easily be found. If a collector wants More to be a paladin for personal liberties, a me-liorist of sorts, a purveyor of patently humane, Renaissance humanist political sentiments, a foil for Machiavelli, that More is on offer—in places. Such profiles in courage, ideal types, and cameo appearances can be enlightening. They may generate useful conversations that inform historical study, but historians, when possible, should supply contexts that make the best generalizations about characters and careers more plausible, balanced, and sturdier. I was moved to reread and write by sketches of Augustine and More that turned them into political progressives and that seemed only remotely related to the trajectories of their careers, careers that coursed through an assortment of remarkably contentious theological disputes, raced ahead with—then more or less without—political ambitions, persevered after disappointments, and imaginatively confronted everyday circumstance as well as grisly crisis. Incorrectly Political tries to repossess the conclusions to which Augustine and Thomas More came and to suggest how they arrived.3

It is tricky tracking the early stages of More’s career. Unlike Augustine, who sensed that he had been groomed by God to overcome doubts, personal ambition, and arrogance—and who wrote to tell that tale—More mentioned little about himself while preparing to participate in public administration. We know he admired the Carthusians and that he dropped in on them—and may have been tempted to drop out of the Inns of Court and the practice of law. Yet More also admired less reclusive religious officials who dared to make a political difference, Cardinals and Chancellors John Morton and Thomas Wolsey.

More was not blind to the reign of self-interest in the realm’s courts and councils. His early correspondence with scholarly friends and the first book of his Utopia acknowledged that public administrators were closed to good, new ideas. He was troubled by the “pettiness” of political intrigue. He conceded that flattery and “fierce hatred” rather than talent governed who governed, which factions and coalitions thrived, and whose reputations were wrecked. He lectured on Augustine’s City of God at a parish church near the Guildhall in London while studying law. He would have known that similar observations led the legendary bishop to trade a promising political career for seclusion, conversation, and contemplation with friends and then later, as an influential diocesan, to reflect, in his City, on the failures and frustrations of
Christian magistrates. Yet More marched straight into the courts, into city government, and into the king’s council.

Augustine swerved. If we may trust his Confessions, composed ten years after the facts reported, he had every reason to be pleased with his political progress when he was in Milan and at the imperial court in 386. Influential courtiers had hired him to tout their virtues and those of their friends, and a hardworking orator with powerful patrons could end up a provincial governor. But he grew disenchanted, he said; his familiarity with the rich and powerful bred contempt just when he was becoming more seriously, solemnly interested in Christianity. He learned of others who rather impulsively renounced their ambitions to become special “friends of God.” But, according to the Confessions, his own retreat from political deceit was not impulsive at all. It was fitful and grudging—strenuous and, only then, suddenly done.

He admired Ambrose, governor of the Ligurian province before he became bishop of Milan. Augustine wanted to consult him, but the bishop was just then caught in one of the political crises that marked his pontificate from 374 into the 390s. Ambrose, in effect, became something of a contrast rather than a consultant and friend, and he functions as a contrast in the narrative that follows. For Augustine chose to avoid public service. Even when nudged into the African episcopacy, he only rarely and reluctantly intervened in the government’s business. He took no pleasure in administering justice in the bishop’s court or “audience.” Pessimism had drawn him to Manichaeism before he left North Africa for Milan. Pessimism made him suspicious of political activism and distinguished him from Ambrose. And years later, responding to the Pelagians’ optimism, he became more convinced of the pervasiveness of human decadence. He fluffed out passages from the Bible to prove it. Laws were unlikely to lead to lasting improvement. Laws “came in” that sin might be recognized as transgression (Romans 5:20). History, moreover, proved the ultimate insufficiency of laws and the regimes that made them. Neither could keep worthwhile intentions from unraveling. All that government could do was damage control.

For Augustine, it was obvious and incontrovertible: political cultures were driven by politicians’ lust for dominion. Regimes, therefore, could never achieve the peace and justice that depended on obedience freely offered to those in authority, obedience based on reciprocal respect and affection, which, in turn, were founded on love for God. The government’s damage control,
nonetheless, was important, particularly in the early fifth century. Secessionists known as Donatist Christians were then harassing Augustine’s parishioners and his allies among African bishops. Not surprisingly, the competition between the rival Christianities for basilicas and souls complicated the authorities’ efforts to reach consensus. Augustine happens to be the source for nearly all we know about those complications, and he tended to editorialize and exaggerate to score off his adversaries. Relying on him, historians will more often be wrong than boring, yet the earlier critics of Donatism and several Donatists themselves have left enough to allow us to reconstruct something of those secessionists’ positions. They argued that their churches honored the perseverance and more faithfully followed the practice of the very first Christians. They were more courageous than their rivals, they said; their ancestors’ choices to resist persecutors in the early fourth century, their choices to stay away from churches whose long-dead officials had been less heroic, and their choices throughout the fourth and early fifth centuries to repudiate government efforts to end their secession constituted congregations of more perfect Christians.

Augustine scolded those “more perfect” Christians for having overlooked the fact that God had seen fit to convert their persecutors. Arguably, that meant the church would never again be as pure as it once was, but conversions to Christianity did mean the church might become universal, catholic. Government’s association with the churches extended Christianity’s reach. Municipal, provincial, and imperial governments were God’s blunt instruments in every age. Despite their officials’ irreligious drive to dominate, governments kept the world in some semblance of order. But for the catholic Christians, the biggest story of the fourth century was that coreligionists, as magistrates, were superbly positioned to protect their churches. And there were no better places on earth than their churches to struggle with the effects of sin.

Donatists, in Augustine’s view, altogether misperceived, and thus misrepresented, that struggle and the challenges facing every Christian. The secessionists, that is, spoke as if perfection were possible if only the aforesaid political choices—joining the right church and resisting regimes that persecuted it and churches that criticized it—were made as they advised. He chronicled the inconsistencies between Donatist perfectionism and Donatist practice and looked forward, he said, to opportunities to discuss logic, exegesis, ecclesiolog, and order. He was terribly concerned, though, that, increasingly in the
early fifth century, his adversaries refused to argue and continued to out-
number catholic Christians in Africa. He preferred persuasion. But, for his
colleagues’ and parishioners’ protection and the Donatists’ correction, he
came to depend on the government’s coercion.

Protection and correction preoccupied Thomas More as well, but he was
more directly responsible for both than Augustine had been. Augustine ap-
ppealed to government; More became the government. As noted, he learned
early on that public service was usually compromised by political intrigue.
The irrationalities of political behavior and the precariousness of acquired
privilege were even more apparent to him soon after he joined the king’s
council—certainly by the 1520s. But just then Martin Luther’s talk about the
invincibility of faith and the invisibility of the “true” church seemed extremely
dangerous as well as reprehensible. Evangelical anticlericals in England under
Luther’s spell “openly inveyeth agaynst good and faythefull thynges.” Latter-
day Donatists, they promised perfection. More heard them say that faith with-
out “good endeouvre” pleased God, perfected repentance, and redeemed
souls.

He remembered that Augustine warned against perfectionists and tried
arguing with them before appealing to the government to correct them and to
protect his friends from them. Like Augustine, More seems to have believed
that political intervention was never better than the best of a bad lot of choices
forced on Catholics by the stubbornness and virulence of their critics. Still,
perhaps more quickly than Augustine, he pitched his one-sided “dialogues”
with antinomians and anticlericals—much as Augustine drafted a set of ex-
changes with leading Donatists—to acquire and retain political support.
Hence, what has been said of More’s efforts, to that end, almost certainly ap-
plies to Augustine’s: “dialogue offers not so much a vehicle for, as an alterna-
tive to, reasoning with heresy.”

That literature, nonetheless, helps historians reconstruct the controver-
sies More and Augustine confronted. One intricate, infinitely interpretable
text by each, however, seems to soar from its polemical context and to en-
lighten readers about the predicaments they are likely to face. Thomas More’s
_Utopia_ could be an indictment or endorsement of socialism, capitalism, as-
ceticism, and cynicism. Although conclusions or closure on just about any
count appear to cheat his fiction of its genius, I shall propose that _Utopia_ takes
a dim view of confidence expressed then and now that timely political coun-
sel and incremental changes produce unselfish societies. But More also looks to be skeptical about sweeping changes and planned societies that purport to incubate virtue. To say, for the moment, that his *Utopia* is a story of a Shangri-La that aestheticizes social control only begins to explore its place in More’s story and its importance for ours. Still, introductions are the proper places for beginnings.

Arguably, we should go no further. *Utopia* may have been just a joke. More was fond of riddles and amusements. In this instance, he had a man named Nonsense (Hythloday) describe and tout utopian alternatives to early modern European politics. His odd protagonist also professes how ludicrous it is to approach politics with expectations that leadership, counsel, or diplomacy might make meaningful differences, save for compromising the integrity of anyone who tries. Could this Nonsense be trusted? More wrote him into existence, after all, as his own political career was taking off. He was getting close to those closest to the king, would soon be among them and later become the king’s Lord Chancellor. Besides, when More wrote *Utopia*, in 1515 and 1516, he was far from learning firsthand the perils of political celebrity. So, was the text a game or a guess? I suspect that *Utopia* rather was a repository for lessons More had already learned from having read Augustine’s *City* and, likely, from having witnessed backroom maneuvering at Mercers Hall and in London’s courts, traces of what he later lamented as the “dedly desire of ambiose glory.” Nonsense serves notice that More will not be gulled by political colleagues who “frame[d] them self a conscience” and spoke of civic duty to camouflage self-interest.

But More elected to work among them, persuaded—as was Nonsense, if I am correct—that it was impossible to make improvements of consequence to “our dwellyng citie here.” Yet persons of faith and conscience sometimes had to serve. They were imprisoned in public life. God was their jailer. History was his jail and plan, “so subtilly biltyed” that the incarcerated imagined they were free. Likely, the best of them would appreciate that their time could have been better spent repenting yet accepted that their churches had to be protected—the wicked and heretical, corrected. Nonetheless, most chose instead to “garnysh with gold and make . . . gloriose” the penitentiary of this world. More, I suspect, “did” politics as a penance.

This is not to suggest that he was as consistently aware of that as he would have been sensitive always to the chafing of the hair shirt his son-in-law said

© 2007 University of Notre Dame Press
he wore under his more status-appropriate apparel. And I cannot tell whether
the prison metaphor occurred to him before he was confined in the Tower of
London. Yet More seems to have learned from Augustine that God’s peace
could not be realized politically anywhere on earth, *hic nusquam*. Sentiments
of that sort were certainly identifiable soon after he lectured on Augustine’s
*City of God*, where magistrates and martyrs jostle each other—with the one
who summoned them urging the former to think like the latter. He urged all
Christians to think like martyrs, be as pilgrims in the terrestrial city and keep
their hearts and minds set on the celestial. *City* is the culmination of August-
ine’s political disenchantment. He would have been “a world-denier,” Jo-
hannes Spörl guessed fifty years ago, had faith and circumstance allowed it.
What he did deny, however, was that there could be significant political im-
provement in this world. Governments were to be used, not meaningfully
improved. For what Thomas More decried as “dedly” ambition and Augustine
described as the sinister “lust for domination” kept politicians preoccupied
with reputation and riches. They were demonstrably of Cain’s kind—Abel
was the martyr, and Cain, the would-be ruler—because politics amplified
what there was of Cain in every creature. Augustine seemed surprised that the
philosophers of antiquity saw civic duty and political passions as solutions
rather than as problems. They had not learned from reading Plato how much
ordinary people and princes mistrusted wise counsel and how hard it was
to find.

Still, Augustine persisted in offering counsel. He flattered the influential
to hold their attention and improve the chances that his advice would be
well received. He came close, on occasion, to conflating their political and
religious duties, yet his *City* is critical of pagan nostalgia for the time when,
purportedly, their gods were the custodians of their governments, even as
it puts Christian emperors in his God’s good graces. The year 410, however,
was shock therapy. It proved, above all, that political regimes were only
instruments—and, being political, were not at all admirable instruments. I
trust Augustine’s sadness was as genuine as his relief when he repeatedly re-
called during the long Donatist crisis that God had turned political authori-
ties from persecutors of the catholic churches into persecutors for them. But
he expected and got that kind of help from the government, and from his
God. Nonetheless, he remained anxious about the false sense of security
spawned by the church’s collaborations with regional, municipal, and im-

perial regimes. He was reluctant to have Christian magistrates wholly dis-affected, but he urged them to reduce their emotional investment in what was politically possible. I imagine that Thomas More saw as much in Augustine's *City*.

The very best evidence for More’s “sighing for the celestial city”—Augustine’s phrase—comes mostly from the final months of his life. Yet the sprawl of his previous polemical work shows, among many other things, his resentment at having been sucked into political service. Like Augustine, he accepted that government was a part of God’s saving work. But, also agreeing with Augustine, he presumed that politicians’ rare surges of selfless sentiment and good counsel could not save politics from itself “in this wepyng world,” this “calamity to be bewailed.” What then? I suspect Augustine and More looked for alternatives to mere survival, yet that suspicion is probably better aired during our stretch with the two than in an introduction, which, as an invitation, is already too long.
Chapter One

Augustine, Ambrose, and Ambition

Christianity?

Augustine was bishop of the coastal town of Hippo Regius for but a few years, and a fervently committed Christian for barely ten, when he preached an unexceptional sermon in 397 on confession. Confession, he explained, encompassed self-revelation, remorse, and repentance. All three were good for the soul. Candid disclosure of one’s flaws and shortfalls made for modesty, and a sufficiently self-lacerating remorse saved the remorseful from God’s more devastatingly punitive judgments. Repentance was the beginning of rehabilitation.1

At roughly the same time, Augustine was chronicling and confessing his misspent youth: mischief, intellectual arrogance, and ambition for reputation and for political influence. His Confessions are still widely read and considered to be the first Christian spiritual autobiography. Like all autobiographers, he imposed a “fundamentally anachronistic” perspective, which, as Carol Harrison says, “whilst informative, can be misleading.” We must be mindful that Augustine, confessing in the late 390s, exhibits a more mature remorse and repentance as well as a more systematic understanding of the faith than his protagonist Augustine possessed during the 380s. And the latter was not simply the narrative’s subject. It became an object of religious reflection and a way to suggest the transcendent was present or implicated in the concrete.2 In the most often read and reread portions, the Confessions’ midsection, Augustine detailed how he finally traded his contempt for Christianity for a budding commitment to the faith, hopes, and love commended in its sacred texts. At
first he thought those scriptures unrefined and somewhat silly—harmless distractions for his credulous mother, perhaps, though too rudimentary and insubstantial for her learned son. The text has him probe and pass his twenties and turn thirty waiting for more compelling explanations of the origin of evil and of the reality and incorporeality of God, waiting among the followers of a third-century Mesopotamian master, waiting among the Manichees.3

Textbooks today variously call Manichaeism a cult, sect, philosophy, and heresy. Its dualism sometimes extended to a belief in two gods, and its materialism made malevolence a palpable force or monstrous mass lurking on earth.4 Augustine claimed he became disillusioned the moment he met Faustus, a much-admired itinerant seer, celebrated among Manichees around the Mediterranean for his wisdom and erudition. Augustine long looked forward to his visit yet quickly discovered, he later said, that there was little to celebrate, save the seer’s taste for fine wine and his way with words.5 By 397, he regretted his discussions with Manichees nearly as much as he regretted his political ambitions, yet, in his final analysis, he believed that both his philosophical conversations and his pursuit of position were parts of God’s plan to bring him to the Christian faith. At the time, though, he knew only that he had a filial duty to take seriously the trajectory his family set for his career.6

Patricius, his father, was a public official in Thagaste, a city of small importance several days journey from the North African coast. He supervised tax collection, occasionally attended to public works, and obviously wanted more for his son. He was not a particularly wealthy man, yet he had at least one household slave who escorted Augustine to the local school. When the schoolboy turned bishop, he was known to allude to his parents’ “poverty” if that recollection served his sermon’s theme, but the family orchards and fields appear to have yielded a reasonable return. Still, it took time to accumulate funds to send Augustine elsewhere for a higher education. And while Patricius saved, his son seems to have relished the leisure. His Confessions rehearse the pranks and pitfalls of his late adolescence. His parents must have been tempted to arrange an early marriage to anchor their boy to the conventional responsibilities of husband and father, yet marriage into any of the curial families of Thagaste would likely have kept their promising son among the provincials. More was possible. Even before he excelled in the study and teaching of literature in Carthage—and before his gifts of persuasion developed
there, in Rome, and in Milan—he was thought to be a young man with excellent prospects.7

He was studying in Carthage in 372, when his father died. Apparently, by then, there was no difference between what Patricius had planned for his son and what his son expected of himself. Augustine started to teach rhetoric, continued to look for recognition, and set his sights on a career in public administration. In 383 he crossed to Italy and settled in Rome to acquire fame and influential friends. His mother hoped he might warm to the Christian faith. He had been a catechumen for some time, “under instruction,” we might say, but he had not seemed serious about making a more complete commitment. He gave no thought to baptism, for example, even when he was taken seriously ill. Having recovered, however, he did make a significant change. He tired of Rome and moved to Milan, where the presence of the imperial court offered obvious opportunities.

Only later, composing his *Confessions*, did he reflect on his ambition for position and aversion to piety, writing in general terms about the preoccupations that keep persons from Christianity. He blamed what we might call “the high life,” extravagances to which he became accustomed in the early 380s. And he blamed mortals’ exaggerated opinions of what they achieved and planned to achieve. Distracted by it all, he and they were unlikely to understand just how badly they needed God’s grace—and how it came to them from one who had descended and died so they might live.8

Augustine remembered that he remained suspicious of much that passed for Christianity. But he also recalled that he was intrigued by the humanity of Jesus and especially struck by how he lived, by accounts that emphasized his willingness to forgo material or temporal advantage to earn immortality. Others admired that in Jesus and tried to imitate him. Possibly, as historian Ramsay MacMullen imagines, their daily lives, “governed by a more insistent moral standard than could be found in any other non-Christian association,” gradually drew Augustine to the faith, much as they drew pagans of various stripes during the fourth century.9 Yet the *Confessions* reports only that he was baffled by what Christians said about their savior when they tried to explain how or why a word became flesh. If we may trust the text, Augustine and his friend Alypius talked about the obscurity of theories spawned to account for the incomparability, divinity, yet humanity of the faith’s central figure. To Augustine, Jesus was a man, the closest a person could come to the truth but not
“truth in person.” Christians who spoke of Jesus’ flesh as if it were a coat, put on and shrugged off—just to make the mysteries of the incarnation and resurrection seem sensible—made Christianity look ridiculous to Augustine, who only later learned that the ideas he had mocked were not those of most Christians, but of the few and heretical. He learned as well that God allowed heresies so Christianity’s efforts to discredit them might enable it to grow. And it did indeed grow on Augustine. He soon gave up his opinion that Jesus was just an exceptional man; that, too, was heretical. He might have been told as much on his arrival in Milan on meeting Ambrose, the city’s bishop and the religion’s foremost advocate in Italy for the christology formulated sixty years before at the Council of Nicaea. The bishops then, and Ambrose subsequently, declared that Jesus the son and God the father were equal, consubstantial. But the Milanese Christians knew their bishop better as a pastor. Like Augustine, they were uninterested in christology.10

Augustine’s first visit was a courtesy call. He and Ambrose apparently exchanged conventional compliments and not ideas. Ambrose had a wonderful reputation in Augustine’s line of work, so the young orator from Africa naturally wanted to meet him. And what the Confessions tells us is indeed plausible: for a while after their first encounter, Augustine listened more to how the renowned bishop of Milan spoke than to what he said.11

That likely changed when Monica arrived to oversee her son’s social and professional progress. To see that her son got ahead, she dismissed his concubine and arranged a good marriage for him in Milan. She worshiped in the city, and she met Ambrose, who impressed her tremendously. Augustine saw signs of it. His mother had fixed notions about what was proper and improper in the practice of her faith, he recalled, hence it came as a surprise to him when she abruptly stopped bringing food and wine to martyrs’ tombs as soon as she heard that the bishop disapproved.12 She asked her son to relay questions about Christianity in Milan to learn from Ambrose whether she should fast on Saturdays as the faithful did in Rome and Africa or to feast with the Milanese. (Many years later Augustine remembered the bishop’s reply, recycling it in his recommendation that a correspondent follow local custom.)13 Ferrying Monica’s inquiries, he likely asked as well about the ambitions and uncertainties that kept him from making a more complete commitment to Christianity. Unless the Confessions misleads, his detachment was just then giving way to devotion, although the narrative will not allow us to measure
displacements with any confidence. Still, it gives us reason to suggest, with a phrase borrowed from one of his later meditations on ambition and politics, that Augustine looked to his developing love for wisdom to temper his lust for position.¹⁴

He looked to Ambrose. To be candid and get counsel, he had to approach when the bishop was “completely at leisure,” yet Ambrose was always busy. People crowded around him to solicit his help or simply to watch him study. Such was the price of celebrity and influence. By 386, he had been the mainstay of the Christian community in Milan for more than a decade, the bishop whose leadership other bishops in the region accepted in the 380s, and a powerful prelate, both trusted and feared at court. An anguished Augustine could only get so close, and it was not close enough.¹⁵

Ambrose and Power

Ambrose certainly ranked among that century’s most politically engaged religious leaders. Augustine met him just as his own pursuit of a political career seemed near a successful end. Curiously, after the young orator became a bishop, back in North Africa, he wrote rather little about the man in Milan whom he admired. We have to look elsewhere to learn that Ambrose’s advance started, as many then did, with a resourceful patron. Petronius Probus, like Ambrose, was a native of Rome. Thanks to family wealth and administrative skill, Probus accumulated prefectures in Gaul, Illyricum, and Italy. Ambrose was on his staff in Sirmium on the Danube in the late 360s and until Probus sent him as governor to Italy where, in 374, Milanese Christians were having difficulty reaching agreement on a candidate for bishop. Ambrose intervened to umpire the deliberations and ideally to break the deadlock. The story told later was that during the heated discussions a child nominated the governor-turned-umpire who, notwithstanding his wishes to the contrary, became the consensus nominee. He was elected, ordained a priest, and consecrated the bishop, in that order. And despite his protests, which were likely fashioned “for the cameras,” to show his humility, Ambrose took to his new role quickly, seeming, seldom if ever during an eventful twenty-three year pontificate, to regret the apparent derailment of his promising career in imperial administration.¹⁶
Were the nomination and election rigged? Was Ambrose sent from Sirmium by his superiors “to seize” the church? Could the child who suggested his candidacy have been a government “plant,” as Clementina Corbellini now imagines? Or was Ambrose “the creature of a party,” the favorite of the local Nicene faction, as Neil McLynn suggests, and not a pawn for Probus? Was the Milanese consensus stage-managed—rather than spontaneous—and stoked by the governor’s feigned reluctance to accept? The best contemporary evidence for these conspiracies is the opinion of Palladius, bishop of Ratiaria in what is now Bulgaria, who proposed that Ambrose owed his nomination and election more to the conniving of his friends than to the content of his character. Palladius’ observation is admissible, but be aware that he was profoundly embittered, “rancorously resentful,” Sergio Tavano now says. Why? Ambrose opposed the subordinationist christology Palladius and other Illyrian bishops advocated and went to great lengths to discredit their anti-Nicene position within a decade of the Milanese “miracle” that started his own pontificate. The story is worth a synopsis because it seems to attest how politically adroit the winner could be.

Emperor Gratian was determined to resolve the christological disputes that divided the church for more than fifty years. He first solicited Ambrose’s opinions, then asked Palladius to submit a written reply, and finally scheduled a general council in 381 to discuss the differences. Aquileia, the venue, was a commercial center on the Adriatic coast with a thriving Christian community in close contact with the faithful in northern Italy just to the west and with those in the Danubian region to the east. Palladius prepared to score for inequality in divinity, but developments further to the east preempted Gratian’s council. Theodosius, who ruled the empire in the east, perhaps to establish his control over the church as well, summoned eastern bishops to deliberations in Constantinople. Ambrose, Gratian, and Palladius presumed that bishops would proceed west after a round of preliminary talks. They did not, and Palladius was the last to hear of it, arriving in Aquileia to find an assembly much smaller than expected and packed with Ambrose’s partisans. As the emperor’s delegates and fewer than thirty bishops looked on, Ambrose seized control of the deliberations from the local patriarch and pelted Palladius with accusations. Ambushed and alone, save for one subordinationist colleague, he tried to avoid debate over doctrine by claiming that a conference so constituted was not a legitimate council. But Ambrose repeatedly insisted that whoever
subscribed to the christological “madness” condemned with the arch-heretic Arius at and after Constantine’s council of Nicaea in 325 ought to be condemned. Predictably, the prelates present at Aquileia agreed, and Palladius, nursing a grudge, returned to his see.20

Political instincts that may or may not have been instrumental in getting Ambrose the see of Milan in 374 were certainly evident at Aquileia seven years later. Then and there, he demonstrated persistence, belligerence, and, of course, leadership. He forged the bishops into a united front before the conference and continued to lead them afterward. He and Milan were the center of the episcopal network that improved the church’s economic position in most cities in northern Italy and thereby increased its political significance in the region. He urged other bishops to target affluent citizens for conversion, and his correspondence advised them how to do it. Well into the fourth century, people of means and local position in Lombardy and the Piedmont retained their attachments to the traditional Roman religions. That devotion, they would have said, was the stitch that attached them as well to Rome and its Senate, which had been notoriously slow to accept Christianity. Ambrose all but announced three related objectives: to curtail the public religious expressions of allegiance to Rome, to win over the souls and thus the wealth of the wealthiest of northern Italy, and to build and fill basilicas with the proceeds. Surely that would be the proper and providential culmination of what started seventy years before with Constantine’s conversion.21

When Augustine paid his courtesy call, Ambrose was well on the way to realizing his objectives. The court, often in residence in Milan, brought many of the empire’s most influential and affluent citizens to his churches. Equally, if not more important, Christians connected with the court gave the bishop access to privileged information. He was in an excellent position to play patron and to represent the interests of friends elsewhere in Italy. He commended candidates, embroidered reports of their virtues, and interceded for petitioners—for friends or for the friends of friends. Commenting on Ambrose’s “immersion in court society,” Neil McLynn concludes that he was “as poised and comfortable in the Milanese praetorium as in his own basilica.”22

His influence at court was naturally closely related to his influence on the court. Petitioners asked him to solve their problems because he was successful in solving his own and those predicaments he identified as Christianity’s. Augustine and anyone else who spent time in Rome must have known, for
instance, that the bishop of Milan had blocked an effort by prominent Romans in 382 to restore the altar of Victory at the entrance to the senate house. Constantine, suitably cautious, left it standing in 312, rather than alienate pagans in the old capital. He never got around to taking the goddess down. That task fell to his son and successor in 356; not yet baptized, Constantius, according to Ambrose, feared that seeing her would “contaminate” him. But Victory was back on site a decade later, when Emperor Julian, an “apostate” to Christians, engineered a short-lived pagan revival, and her altar managed to outlast that last pagan emperor, remaining at the senate house until Emperor Gratian had it removed in 382, shortly before he died. The imperial chancery had to decide with or for his younger brother, Valentinian II, whether Victory was to be restored. Ambrose assumed restoration was the thin edge of a perilous wedge, if only because it signaled that prospects were good for another pagan revival and for further resistance to Christianity. He bent every effort to have the petition rejected. He did not want to see the Senate’s superstitions set in stone once again. He told Valentinian that, if his government appeased the petitioners and resurrected the goddess, the emperor was unlikely to find a bishop when he next came to church. Or, worse still, he might find an enemy in the pulpit.

Enmity was not what Ambrose wanted. He thought of the government as a partner. His ultimatum to Valentinian notwithstanding, he hoped to cooperate with the court. There was nothing diabolical about political power, he noticed, although persons who exercised it seemed particularly susceptible to being seduced by the devil. Powerful persons, that is, while they often kept their inordinate desires for money and pleasure in check, nearly always succumbed to lust for more power, to their ambition. They must be closely watched, carefully counseled, occasionally opposed. The Bible suggested to Ambrose how valuable sovereigns might become: a second Solomon would consecrate “temples” to his God; another David, contribute worthily to the wider circulation of his faith. Yet sacred texts and subsequent history also proved how often princes found and fell down the slippery slope from compassion, honesty, and creativity in government to corruption.

Ambrose’s answer to ambition and corruption was humility, a sensible precaution and, he figured, a sure prophylactic. The powerful need only practice submission. Bishops might preach to them—as Ambrose did—that “he is blessed who glories in humility more than in power.” But to be sure the faith-
ful and powerful appreciated such counsel and sought that blessing, the bishop of Milan dedicated patches of his biblical commentaries to persuading them that power was a fickle mistress. She was certain to deceive and forsake those who lust for her and think themselves fortunate to possess her for a time. By contrast, humility is constant.

Yet, despite what he wrote and preached about power and humility, Ambrose left tracks that lead in a different and, according to some historians, a contrary direction. Touting the hygienic effects of humility, he seems doggedly to have pursued power, opportunistically embraced it, and ferociously defended what he managed to get of it. We briefly touched on the possibility that his election as bishop was premeditated and pragmatic rather than impulsive or “miraculous.” Frank Kolb stretches that possibility, suggesting that Ambrose, while he was governor, was inclined to give up his promising career in imperial administration because he suspected that, as bishop, he might dictate to the very people at whose pleasure he would otherwise have served as provincial administrator. Kolb also adds a strange twist to Ambrose’s resistance to the Romans’ petition to give Victory back to the Senate. The symptoms of a pagan revival undoubtedly concerned him, Kolb admits, yet this extraordinarily crafty politician, as bishop, reprimanded the emperor—whose regime in 382 (or may not) have been on the verge of ordering the altar’s restoration—because Ambrose wanted to establish as fact the principal part a powerful prelate ought to play in any religio-political ruling. Clues to motives are hard to decipher, yet some consequences of Ambrose’s interventions were clear in 386, when Augustine observed that “the most powerful men respected” the assertive, activist, and effective patron and bishop of Milan.

Ambrose had what we might call “clout.” Gone was what Ernst Dassmann describes as “the reserve” that characterized the first Christians’ attitudes toward political culture—“reserve,” which in this application denotes a careful blend of deference and indifference. The faithful tended to make a virtue of necessity. With Constantine’s conversion, however, all that changed. Christians contemplated a kingdom of God on earth—or at least a Christian empire. At first the changes and outlook for further change were exhilarating. Even during the 380s, the faithful were excited about what the future might bring. Ambrose, as we learned, understood that ambition and arrogance attended the power that church officials had lately acquired, but, “he spoke
with the accents of a man who knew that in the transformations taking place he was on the side of triumphant novelty.”

He spoke, that is, to fashion a new identity for bishops. Part administrator, part prophet, a bishop “on the side of triumphant novelty” must not expect imperial and local officials simply and selflessly to relinquish the reins. In the run-up to real change, indignant bishops play Jeremiah or Isaiah to instruct the powerful on the proper and pious uses of power. Occasionally a bishop’s tone must be ominous and his bearing defiant. His prophetic persona will grate on some sensibilities. But Ambrose explained that bishops could not, at their discretion, either pronounce or withhold what God gave them to reveal. They must say their piece, though it may be more prudent to keep their peace, and they must say it or preach it “with authority.”

And Augustine knew that Ambrose was not all talk. He watched—and his mother, Monica, participated in—the bishop’s conflict with the court in 386, which demonstrated he could withstand harassment and choreograph stunning protests that went well beyond preaching “with authority.” Nothing prepared either the church or the government for what occurred. Competition between bishops and magistrates was to be expected. The competence of the church’s courts were at issue, as was the alleged inviolability of its immunities. Resolutions were almost certain to irritate one party or the other, to sacrifice the interests of the church or those of municipalities, manorial officials, provincial governors, or perhaps emperors. Far-sighted officials proposed remedies in advance. Yet there was no anticipating the difficulties that developed when, at Holy Week, Christians in Milan closely associated with the imperial court tried to take over and use a church just beyond the city’s walls, the Portian basilica that was later dedicated to St. Lawrence.

Ambrose was alarmed. The Christians who coveted the church had already appointed as their bishop one of Palladius’ avowedly anti-Nicene acquaintances. He and they successfully importuned the court for the freedom to worship. They were sure to initiate new members at the Portian at Easter, to steal souls from Ambrose, despite the rescript against rebaptism in 379. That prohibition had been Gratian’s doing, but he had died. His brother and their mother ruled from Milan in 386, and they favored the local anti-Nicene party and its plans for the basilica and its baptistery.

To oppose those plans was to oppose the government. It could not then and cannot now be proven beyond a reasonable doubt that Ambrose orchestrated the opposition and asked his partisans to occupy the Portian while
workers from the palace were hanging imperial banners there. We know, though, that, as the crisis intensified, he refused to call off the “sit-in.”³⁴ The government thought the Portian was its church. Closest of all Milanese churches to the imperial palace, it was constructed with government money during the pontificate of an anti-Nicene bishop and functioned, *inter alia*, as the imperial mausoleum. Valentinian II’s father was buried in the south chapel. The bishop’s refusal to surrender any church would have been newsworthy; withholding the Portian, historian Marcia Colish confirms, was especially risky.³⁵

To the argument that emperors owned everything in their empire, Ambrose offered his personal property, even his life. He tried to soothe the court, noting that churches dutifully paid tribute on demand. He granted that the church’s lands were the government’s to sequester. But “render unto Caesar,” he explained, stopped at the church door. Churches belonged to God. Unsurprisingly, court support for the subordinationists triggered yet another of Ambrose’s defenses of the Nicene faith, yet, on this occasion, he appended an expansive commentary on the limits of any government’s proprietary interests.³⁶

For the regime was ready to risk a confrontation. Armed soldiers surrounded the bishop’s basilica; Ambrose feared the worst, and with good cause. The imperial garrison was stocked with troops from the Danubian region, subordinationists who swelled the ranks of the anti-Nicene faction in Milan conspicuously unsympathetic with those staging the sit-in and lockout. Ambrose was ordered to restrain “his people,” yet he would do nothing that might put the Portian in the wrong hands and could do little without implicating himself as the squatters’ leader. The court was short on incriminating evidence, and Ambrose preferred to keep it that way. Still, authorities tried to isolate him. Soldiers allowed persons to enter the Portian with supplies but let no one leave with information. Fines were imposed on the bishop’s friends; some were imprisoned. The people within the Portian grew impatient and took down the imperial banners, nearly provoking what Ambrose feared would be a violent end to the standoff. He sent priests to the besieged basilica, giving the government what it wanted, that is, implicating the bishop in his most zealous partisans’ defiance. More mild-mannered Milanese Christians—who were also ostensibly the emperor’s loyal subjects—had a choice. They must abandon their bishop or betray their emperor, and the court must have left little doubt that the repercussions of the latter treachery would be swift and severe.
It gave Ambrose one last chance to relent. Still civilly disobedient and passively resistant, he answered that he would neither surrender the church nor fight for it.  

A bloody conclusion to the crisis was still conceivable when, suddenly, the government blinked, lifting the siege and returning the fines it collected. Its soldiers’ resolve had been sorely tested; some defected. Moreover, Valentinian and his associates knew that the Nicene faction had friends in Trier and in Constantinople who could have been expected to mop up a messy result and end the little independence left to them. Their plans for the Portian were set aside. Ambrose had gone about as far as he could have without becoming a casualty, yet he understood that the episode branded him. He wrote to his sister that the court thought him a tyrant and expected him to pay another day for the contempt he had shown for the emperor.  

Was he contemptuous? That is hard to say. Defiance does not always signal contempt. Clearer by far were the bishop’s declarations of the church’s independence. A more circumspect prelate might have hedged statements round with polities and not have suggested that emperors were “sons” of a church in which bishops were fathers. Did he consider that the disadvantages outweighed any advantage he could have gained reminding the emperor that he was “in and not above” the church?  

And what did Augustine think? Still hoping for a career at court, he may also have had misgivings about the bishop’s behavior. His mother had none; he tells us that she kept vigil with Ambrose at his church the night before soldiers lifted the siege. But the short report in the *Confessions* reveals neither what he thought at the time nor what he was thinking a decade later when he wrote so little about the sit-in and standoff.  

Augustine’s silence is stranger still because the years between the basilica crisis and the composition of the *Confessions* were so eventful for Ambrose and for Christianity. Confrontations between Emperor Theodosius and the bishop of Milan in 389 and 390 concluded with what historian John Moorhead now calls “victories” for the latter, who first protested the court’s insistence that a bishop of Callinicum on the Euphrates rebuild a synagogue destroyed by Christian thugs. Descending from the altar for a private conference with the emperor, Ambrose threatened to stop worship unless he received assurances that the Callinicum decision would be reversed. He got his way and returned to pray. Soon after, Theodosius publicly atoned, as the
bishop of Milan required, for having demanded reparations. Afterward, on hearing that a mob had murdered Butheric, the commander of the imperial garrison in Macedonia, the emperor precipitously ordered a retaliatory massacre of the inhabitants of Thessalonica; he thought better of it, sending a second message very soon after the first and lethal one, but his stay of execution arrived too late. Ambrose required that formal repentance be added to remorse before readmitting Theodosius to communion, and, well into the early modern period, special emphasis was given the emperor’s humiliation and reconciliation whenever prelates wanted to echo the bishop of Milan and illustrate his dictum, “in and not above the church,” to educate their Christian princes. Augustine, writing his *Confessions*, would have known that Ambrose’s showdown with the government over the Portian in 386 was by no means the last time he forced the court to back off.43

But Augustine also undoubtedly heard about the miscalculation that complicated Ambrose’s relationship with Theodosius. For a time, the former appeared to acquiesce rather than resist when Arbogast and Eugenius seized power in the west and located their headquarters in Milan. Arbogast had been Valentinian II’s chief of security, so when that young emperor died in 392, he was understandably concerned how Theodosius, who shared authority with the deceased, would take the news. The surviving emperor was unlikely to accept a verdict of suicide, which meant that Arbogast would be held responsible and considered expendable. So he declared for Eugenius, a Roman rhetorician with a long record of public service and “a suitably civilized front for the regime of a barbarian general,” as historian John Matthews now says, reflecting on Arbogast’s perceived unsuitability for rule. Ambrose left Milan rather than meet with the usurpers. He later claimed that he had been loyal to Theodosius, yet the fact is that he failed to oppose the two whose coup was over within months.44

Theodosius criticized him. Ambrose replied that he would never have been so blind as to miss the signs of “heaven’s consent,” signs that God was on Theodosius’ side. The emperor, after all, had earned celestial assistance, according to the bishop, because he lived so modestly and reverently. God could do no other than undo the enemies of so pious a prince.45 Ambrose said that he could not imagine God disappointing an emperor who asked that prayers rather than processions, orations, or triumphal arches commemorate his conquests, an emperor who cared more for piety than for pomp.
Theodosius’ request for prayers reached Ambrose shortly after the usurpers were defeated, and when he took it to the altar, he confided, he sensed a presence, a miraculous ventriloquism at the mass: Theodosius was expressing his faith with Ambrose’s voice! It would be rather preposterous to argue that Ambrose cut a tragic figure in this short, rapturous, yet servile suggestion of mysterious intimacy, but he certainly seems more calculating than heroic. He looks to have become a willing instrument and, as Neil McLynn claims, the “impresario” responsible for yet another of the public relations ploys that marketed images of a powerful imperial church and a pious Christian emperor. He was a powerful bishop who could, on occasion, play the pawn.

A Word Peddler’s New Purpose

When he first met Ambrose, Augustine was acquiring a reputation for public relations, but he would have us believe that he was disenchanted with his job and disillusioned with his clients at court. He was confident, soon after he gave it up, that he had mastered the art of marketing. His public appearances and addresses honoring the regime’s most exalted officials established his notoriety, and notoriety attracted students. Students’ connections meant more commissions and additional opportunities to toss words of praise conspicuously and generously, as if they were confetti, to turn the heads of those who might help him advance further in government. He imagined he was on the very threshold of promotion from public orator to provincial governor and, as he said, could have “sailed to the Sirens” had he not charted a different course.

Perhaps he was put off, doubtful that any orator could make the feckless regime of Valentinian II look good. Long afterward he recalled that the boy-emperor was a powerless and pitiable figure whom Theodosius could have deposed with a flick. It is anachronistic yet not at all unreasonable to suspect that the prospect of parading the virtues of the government’s leading men was entirely uncompelling. What Augustine remembered ten years after the fact, however, was that he became troubled by the pride and deceit associated with his profession. Deceit and pride were the Sirens that charmed his ambitious soul; unless he decided to change course, they would wreck both his ambi-