

Charles Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Anyone who studied the work of sociologists and cultural theorists like Peter Berger any time from the 1960's to the 1980's will be aware of the widespread consensus that religion was declining, being marginalized and becoming increasingly secular (whether we agreed with it is another matter). In that context any notion of a 'public theology' was irrelevant. Religion was seen as retreating into the domestic isolation of home and personal opinion. But against these predictions religion has actually grown in influence in the public sphere, and 'public theology' has developed as a re-assertion of the intrinsic value of public ministry. Charles Mathewes, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia and author of *Evil and the Augustinian Tradition* (2001), has made a fine contribution to this growing realm of thought through an extensive treatment of a broadly Augustinian 'theology of public life' – a way to understand why and how believers should participate in public life.

Anyone who assumes that 'public theology' means 'politics' should immediately note the greater breadth under consideration here: public life includes everything concerned with the public good, from overt political actions to less directly political community-based activities and even to casual conversations and actions about public matters of common concern. Mathewes can claim to cover all this because he deals not with the detail of engagement but, in true Augustinian fashion, with the underlying *psychology* of those active within the community. And here 'psychology' refers to the fuller, more original and spiritual sense of *psyche*, rather than its more common secular sense: it is an exploration of the inner life, the motives, virtues, goals and spiritual dimensions of the Christian in public.

This is deliberately a 'theology of public life' rather than a 'public theology' as Mathewes believes (perhaps unnecessarily) that the latter are 'self-destructively, accommodationist' because they allow the secular world to set the agenda and then ask how religious faith contributes to it. This has perhaps been a feature of certain strands of an older form of 'social ethics' whereby the church has been allowed the role of the community's social conscience on the condition that it does not question the underlying parameters which determine the fundamental nature of society. This has formed part of the common 'ethics and evangelism' approach to culture, the inadequacy of which became part of the rationale for developing the broader and more insightful 'public theology' of today, to which Mathewes contributes.

His project involves, firstly, a theology of faithful Christian citizenship in which he seeks to help people go beyond their admirable commitment to justice and "Golden Rule Christianity" to move towards 'a thicker appropriation of their faiths, an appropriation that would energize and inform their public engagement. Instead of arguing for the legitimacy of religion in public life, it would argue for the legitimacy of public life in religion' (9-10). In so doing the most notable part of Mathewes is his use of Augustine to develop a view of Christian citizenship as asceticism. Asceticism is about learning to suffer in the right way, in order to achieve our human destiny. To endure virtuously, to wait properly is to undertake what Augustine calls the 'pilgrimage of our affections' – a training in how to inhabit time, be patient and exercise serious discipline. The public Christian life is not about

self-justification, triumphalism, personal gratification or social control. As Augustine said, 'the whole life of a good Christian is a holy longing' (13) for we seek a goal which is unattainable in this world.

This means that we must cultivate the right sorts of dissatisfactions – attending to them rather than dismissing them and acknowledging them as telling us something of the truth of our world. It is very Augustinian to suggest that we should feel an appropriate measure of 'restlessness', a longing for something we know we will not fully find here and a refusal to accept the false idols that we throw up as distractions. This reading of the Augustinian tradition entails supporting the popular emphasis on understanding the moral life as less a matter of principles and more as a set of moral virtues or dispositions.

What does this lead to? Does this emphasis on the inner dispositions of life take the believer away from engagement with the world? Not at all, but it does immediately re-direct one's attention away from any notion of the public world as the goal, to the more deeply theological understanding 'that public life can be *a way for humans to come to participate in God (my emphasis)*. It can be understood ascetically, as a means of purifying the soul of God' (21). Thus the content of Augustine's thought at this point is not so much concerned with political prescriptions as much as theological insights. Only then can one return to consider the world. Our motives to love are not elicited or merited by what we call the world, and hence do not need final validation there. But this means that it is now possible to love the world more deeply – with a love that has its origin *in God*.

So, if one asks how love can guide life in this world Augustine's answer, according to Mathewes, is through a basic disposition of confession, initially of one's sin, but also praise of God. This is a 'liturgy of citizenship – an activity that the body of Christ undertakes in doxological praise of God which communicates God's redemptive and consummative gift to the world. This, argues Mathewes, stands in contrast to other public theologies which adopt the intellectual poverty of contemporary liberal political theory by attempting to establish a consensual communal framework that fundamentally autonomous individuals will find legitimate. But Mathewes is convinced that the aim of articulating political structures that can be affirmed by all is both dangerous and dubious. The conceptual framework underpinning this fixation on consensus focuses attention on a secondary question while ignoring the more fundamental question of how to shape human life:

'We properly participate in the political realm, not by recognizing the sovereignty of God as communicated through the political structures in which we find ourselves, but rather by recognizing the sovereignty of God indirectly and obliquely, through our resistance to those structures' implicitly imperialistic tendencies. It is an eschatological, not apocalyptic, mode of civic engagement: we properly participate in public life by resisting the 'closure' of what passes for politics today, that is, by resisting the inevitable gravitational tug of any political order towards claiming final sovereignty over every other possible locus of human attachment, including especially the church, the neighbor, and the stranger' (159-160).

When considering Mathewes' use of Augustine as a primary resource in comparison with that of other contemporaries (such as Oliver O'Donovan and Paul Helm) we are inevitably reminded again that in Augustine we have the one who has influenced more theologians in western theology than any other. And such is his thought that those influenced by him are capable of moving in a number of directions. It might be surprising to some that Mathewes has less affinity with O'Donovan's affirmations concerning the state than he has with the more paradigmatic approach of J.H.Yoder. Mathewes sees O'Donovan's argument concerning Christian obedience to the political authorities as fundamentally flawed in that it produces *subjects* when the need is for genuine *citizens*. What would be of great interest at this point would be an extended dialogue between Mathewes and Ray Plant

concerning the possibility of an overlapping consensus of Christian faith and secular and other religious perspectives in a liberal society.

Having explored the ramification of *faith* for political life, Mathewes proceeds to discuss the other two great biblical virtues: *hope* and *love* (or *charity*). How should hope shape public engagement given its perennial lack in public life as a result of the inevitable tension brought about by the pragmatic moral compromises that public life frequently requires? In the Old Testament prophetic hope calls for the transformation of the present order. But there is a difficulty if the biblical critique simply becomes yet another part of the existing, contemporary culture of social criticism. There are, indeed, very many good reasons for a fundamentally hostile stance towards our contemporary commodified world, and there are good reasons to fear that the present culture does not realise its fundamental insanity (even, I might add, as the world reaps the results of a socially irresponsible, fundamentally selfish and morally dubious global financial system which worships the commodification of everything). Today we face an increasingly commodified world but most contemporary criticism proceeds without any attention to possible positive resolutions. This is Mathewes alliteratively alluring 'contemporary cultural criticism's cynical cul-de-sac' (228

All the contemporary radicals can do while drawing critical attention to the particular injustices that exist in every place is to gesture indirectly at goodness and justice. But Augustine's 'hopeful charity' acts as a model for interpreting the world in which love (in Christ) is the fundamental interpretive principle. Christian hope is neither optimism (which is fundamentally presumption, a pre-judgement that imposes on the future) nor fatalism (which accepts everything as it is) but a fundamentally ascetic way of life, which, through communion with God changes our perception of the external world and allows us to inhabit time while accepting that it is not ours to control. To live in hope is genuinely to live in history. Hope is not about being in charge. It does not promote political zealotry, fanaticism or any of the other apocalypticisms which constantly tempt us. A public Christian life then inevitably leads to contemplation of providence and the sovereignty of God. For those interested in this approach note that although this is an attempt to build an Augustinian approach to public life it is by no means a detailed exposition of Augustine's writings on the matter. Mathewes draws from the most fundamental elements of Augustine's thought but his exposition of these virtues proceeds by way of interaction with contemporary authors and an analysis of present culture. Historians may look for more in the way of an examination of Augustine but those interested in the situation with regard to present culture will appreciate the structure.

Finally, how can love operate in the public realm when public, especially political, life is typically understood as corruptive? Mathewes reveals a deep sense of the inner life of contemporary culture, its frustrations, despairs and searchings. An Augustinian approach means avoiding presumptuously apocalyptic socio-political programs and any desire for a final ending in time. Christians should not want to 'win' because Christ has 'already' won. Thus our present reality has more to do with communion than conflict. Political ambitions will only ever be realised proleptically, and very occasionally. But, although faith expects less of politics in the present, it expects more eschatologically. This actually allows Christians to care about the world *more* because love expressed in public life is not just a rehearsal but is an actual, though distant, partial and proleptic participation in God's love for creation.

Thus, in an Augustinian eschatology there are public ramifications for a belief in heaven. It influences how we live now. Altogether, Mathewes' understanding of Augustine's message is that grace, and perhaps especially grace understood as the presence of the Holy Spirit in and among believers, is the true *res publica*, the true 'public thing'. At the end we will at last see God as all in all, in the meantime

our task is to sharpen our waiting, to be brave and strong, staying firm in faith and doing all our work in love.

Mathewes has written a fine book, but anyone looking for a more detailed plan for engaging the world will not find it here. He rejects any such program in favour of a public life of virtue. Of course, in the end, even the virtuous person has to determine how to act, even when the focus falls on the life of the church community rather than the whole of society. A policy of caring for the community has to find its way into actual practice and so I doubt that the church can do without the public theologies which Mathewes finds accommodationist. Nonetheless, finishing a review on that point would be carping: Mathewes has well reminded us of the role of the inner, spiritual life in public theology.

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