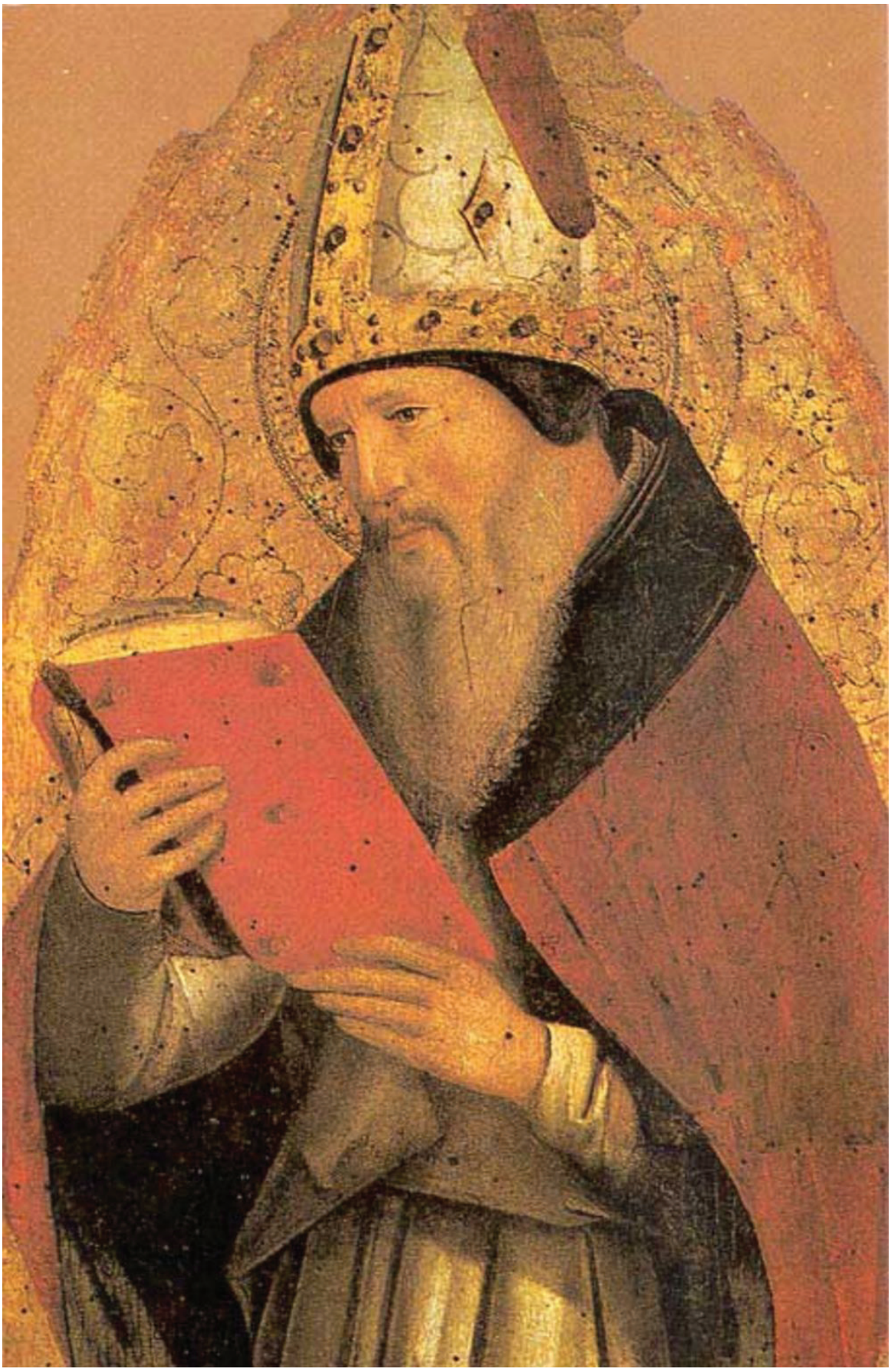

Saint Augustine, *by Antonello de Messina, circa 1472. Galleria Regionale della Sicilia, Italy. Source: Wikimedia Commons.*

READING AUGUSTINE

James Turner Johnson

Augustine's influence runs deep and broad through Western Christian doctrine and ethics. This paper focuses on two particular examples of this influence: his thinking on political order and on just war. Augustine's conception of political order and the Christian's proper relation to it, developed most fully in his last and arguably most comprehensive theological work, *The City of God*, is central in both Catholic and mainline Protestant thinking on the political community and the proper exercise of government. Especially important in recent debate, the origins of the Christian idea of just war trace to Augustine. Exactly how Augustine has been read and understood on these topics, as well as others, has varied considerably depending on context, so the question in each and every context is how to read and understand Augustine.

Paul Ramsey was right to insist, in the process of developing his own understanding of just war, that in Christian thinking the idea of just war does not stand alone but is part of a comprehensive conception of good politics. This also describes Augustine's thinking. Those writers on just war who separate it from the larger context of good politics—and in recent debate there have been a good many of these—omit something essential to both: for the just war idea, its direct connection to political order, justice, and peace, the three goods classically defining the nature and purpose of politics; and for the sphere of government and statecraft, the necessity of a just but limited role for the use of coercive force. To treat each of these topics properly requires treating them as connected. When they are separated, one or another kind of distortion is the result.

It is, of course, possible to approach either or both of these topics without taking account of Augustine's thinking or its influence, or indeed any form of Christian perspective at all. My focus on Augustine here reflects my judgment as to the impossibility of doing full justice to either without attending to his influence, so deeply imbedded is he on these topics in Western experience and ways of thinking. But to take account of his influence also requires recognizing and coming to terms with the different ways Augustine's thinking has been used in different contexts. How to make useful sense of these differences? This is the fundamental problem for any reading of Augustine on these subjects.

My discussion begins by examining the use of Augustine by two prominent recent thinkers on just war, Paul Ramsey and Jean Bethke Elshtain, in the process of beginning to look more closely at Augustine's thinking in his own context. Then I turn to a very different way of reading Augustine and examine the way his thought was carried (and in the process, transformed) during the Middle Ages up to the coalescence of a systematic understanding of just war in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, again setting this over against Augustine's thought in its own context. Each of these historical contexts yields a different picture of Augustine's

thinking, and so I conclude this discussion by suggesting how to use these varied perspectives to shape a reading of Augustine and his influence for the present context.

PAUL RAMSEY'S READING OF AUGUSTINE

Among recent thinkers on just war, Ramsey has a seminal role. Not only did his two books from the 1960s *War and the Christian Conscience* and *The Just War: Force and Political Responsibility*[1] take the first major step in recovering and redefining the just war idea for the context of contemporary warfare, but his use of Augustine, especially in the first of these books, set a pattern for later thinkers to build on. In chapter two of this book, titled "The Just War According to St. Augustine," Ramsey undertakes a theological exegesis of Augustine on Christian love (which Ramsey here calls "charity," following the King James Version and reflecting Augustine's term *caritas*). From this he develops his own distinctive conception of just war built on the Christian's obligation to love the neighbor, employing Augustine's discussion of love in *On the Morals of the Catholic Church* XV, a passing reference to *City of God* V, and then, in numerous citations and at more length, *City of God* XIX.[2]

Ramsey is not deterred by the fact that the first of these works says nothing at all about just war or the use of force as an instrument of neighbor-love. His argument is rather that the conception of love defined there serves as the theological basis for Augustine's entire ethic. After establishing the foundations of Augustine's theology in this way, Ramsey then devotes the rest of his chapter to an extended discussion focused on *City of God* XIX, developing Augustine's concept of just war as an element in his understanding of political ethics and particularly his conception of justice. This choice is interesting because Augustine says relatively little directly about war here, and he does not make the connection to divine charity that Ramsey regards as central. So one must follow Ramsey's reasoning, not simply Augustine's words, to find this connection.

How Ramsey understands and draws out the connection to Augustine's theology of charity is especially well illustrated by his use of *City of God* XIX, chapter vii. Here Augustine directly discusses war, but his purpose is to show how war contributes to the misery of human life in sin. In this passage, which Ramsey quotes at length, Augustine writes, "For it is the wrongdoing of the opposing party which compels the wise man to wage just wars." Here the problem is sin, and Augustine links the justification of opposing it to prudence, not charity. Yet Ramsey argues that charity is present nonetheless in that wisdom. His thinking here reflects the description of Augustine's overall methodology given by Ramsey's doctoral mentor H. Richard Niebuhr in his book *Christ and Culture*,[3] where Augustine's theology is characterized as an example of "Christ the transformer of culture." Ramsey puts his own version of the idea this way: "[S]ince the nature of that city in which men together attain their final end is divine charity, as a consequence even earthly cities began to be elevated and their justice was infused and transformed by new perspectives, limits, and principles."[4] That is, charity draws human justice towards it; its effect is present even when unacknowledged. This understanding permeates Ramsey's discussion throughout his chapter on Augustine on just war, and he carries it forward into his own conception of just war as centered on the Christian responsibility of love for the neighbor threatened or harmed by injustice. Ramsey's reading of Augustine is that of a theologian seeking to draw out the meaning of Augustine's theology for the idea of just war.

Yet Ramsey the theologian was also working out of his own theological context, which was one in which the centrality of love for Christian ethics was defined in terms shaped by late nineteenth-century Protestant liberalism, the Social Gospel movement of the early twentieth century with its drive to transform society toward the Kingdom of God on Earth, and the influence of Reinhold Niebuhr, with his emphasis on love transforming justice. In this context Augustine's own focus on love was especially attractive.

But Ramsey's reading of *City of God* XIX as an expression of a theology of love as one in which divine charity is drawing human justice towards it reflects Ramsey's own theological context rather than Augustine's position. As R.A. Markus has observed,[5] Augustine did in fact hold a view something like this for a time during the middle period of his life, when the imperial establishment of Christianity as Rome's official religion promised reforms that would gradually change the nature of society towards the good. This changed in the last period of his life, when his duties as a bishop, his struggle against the Donatists, a shift in the imperial religious climate back toward paganism, and finally the

A page from the City of God *by Augustine of Hippo, originally published in 426 AD. This copy dates from 1475. Source: Wikimedia Commons.*

combined military-political-religious threat posed by the Arian Vandals all fed a darkening of his attitude toward the possibilities of history. Peter Brown calls this change in Augustine "the lost future."[6] By the time he wrote the last books of *City of God*, including Book XIX, Augustine was thinking in terms of this darker conception of human history, not his earlier optimism. Markus describes the change in these words: "In the *City of God*, and especially in its last books, Augustine turned his back on the mirage of the 'Christian Empire' of the Theodosian dynasty, and on the assumptions about God's hand in human affairs which had sustained it."[7] His conception of the justification for Christian participation in a just war accordingly shifted to a more modest one: to help maintain the order of the world, however fatally marred by sin, until God's purposes for it had finally been realized. Again to cite Markus: "[W]ar now became for him one of the tragic necessities to which Christians must at times resort in order to check the savagery which is liable to break out between, as well as within, political societies."[8] This is a somewhat different understanding of the nature of the Christian moral justification for participating in just war than that read out of Augustine by Ramsey.

JEAN BETHKE ELSHTAIN'S READING OF AUGUSTINE

I turn now to a briefer look at Jean Bethke Elshtain's reading of Augustine. Unlike Ramsey, Elshtain was not a theologian but a political scientist, though she made significant use of Christian ideas in her work. This is especially true for her thinking about just war, most fully given voice in *Just War Against Terror*, chapters three and seven.[9] As she shows here, her understanding of just war is fundamentally shaped by Augustine, and two comments she makes—"The origins of this tradition are usually traced from St. Augustine's fourth-century masterwork, *The City of God*" (actually completed in 425) and "For Augustine, a resort to force may be an obligation of loving one's neighbor, a central feature of Christian ethics"[10]—correspond to the two features highlighted in Ramsey's reading of Augustine on just war.

But a fuller look at her references to just war and its use shows a close fit to the references to Augustine provided in Aquinas'

question "On War." The parallels include her characterization of just war on just cause, right authority, and limits on means;[11] the citation of Romans 13 as providing the scriptural basis for Christian authorities to use force; the rejection of certain motivations for resort to war;[12] the aim of resisting evil;[13] and Augustine's connection of just war to the end—aim—of peace.[14] She makes these references without citations to Augustine, suggesting that this understanding of just war has become so imbedded in her mind as not to need such justification, though a look at Aquinas' corresponding citations from Augustine shows that they come from a variety of works (letter 138 to Marcellinus, *Contra Faustum*, his commentaries on the Heptateuch and on the Sermon on the Mount, and letter 189 to Boniface). Moreover, none of these references directly links just war to the idea of Christian love of neighbor. The one citation of Augustine Elshtain does provide, supporting one of her comments on the relation of just war to peace, is to *City of God* XIX.[15] Aquinas cites letter 189 to Boniface on this topic. The diversity of Aquinas' citations of Augustine on just war reflects the way the historical tradition from which he drew recalled Augustine's teachings on just war, while Elshtain's readiness to root Augustine's just war thought in the *City of God* mirrors the influence of Ramsey in American Christian just war thinking.

MODERN READINGS VS. MEDIEVAL READINGS

Neither Elshtain nor Ramsey refers to the way the historical tradition between Augustine and Aquinas defined and carried what Augustine said about just war and how it manifested the diversity in Augustine's thought on this topic. How Augustine was read here differed in major ways from the readings offered by these recent interpreters. The development of this medieval tradition of interpretation reflected important facts about its historical context and the changing nature of Christian religion.

First, there was an enormous difference between that age and our own in literacy and in the availability of published material. Today one can affordably access online all the major works of Augustine, other Fathers of the Church, Aquinas' *Summa*, and other resources, either in the original Latin, English, or other major languages. Most of these were already in print before the advent of the internet: Ramsey's reading of Augustine depended on the availability of a somewhat excerpted version of *City of God* and *On the Morals of the Catholic Church* in a Random House two-volume collection published near the beginning of his academic career.[16]

By contrast, during Augustine's lifetime and increasingly as the Middle Ages developed, only a narrow range of people could read and write: the educated elite, a range of clergy, and some among the monks in monasteries. This situation was aggravated as the Roman Empire in the West came apart by the emergence of regional vernaculars and the decline in general knowledge of Latin, the language in which the Christian authorities had written. Moreover, during this period books were extremely expensive, a consequence mostly of the hours required to produce each copy but also to a lesser degree the materials composing them. Peter Brown comments that in the fourth century (that is, during most of Augustine's life) "each copy of the Gospels cost as much as a marble sarcophagus,"[17] and this relative cost carried through the following centuries. When even individual volumes were so expensive, only the wealthy and, increasingly as the Middle Ages developed, monastic houses and major bishoprics could afford to own and maintain libraries. At the same time, these were the places where knowledge of Latin could be maintained. Augustine's writings themselves made up an extensive library, and even in his own time not all his works were generally available. After his death this became a more acute problem—not only for his writings but also for the works of other important Christian authorities.

The character of Christian religion in Europe also changed in this period. During Augustine's lifetime the Christian ideal, strongly influenced by Platonism, was the life of seclusion and contemplation. Augustine sought to follow this pattern in his early life as a Christian and never gave it up as an ideal even after accepting the office of bishop, with its necessary involvement in worldly affairs and the lives of his priests and congregation. This ideal remained for the medieval Church, but it was increasingly channeled by a distinction between those who had received the particular vocation to the "religious" life—monks and nuns—and those who had not, the majority of people of all social ranks. The religion of the latter had to be defined in some other way than by worldly renunciation, seclusion, and contemplation.

These three needs—the great expense of books, widespread popular illiteracy, and a simplified

form of religious and moral guidance for the majority of the population who had not received the calling to monastic life but still wanted to live as Christians—were met by the emergence of a new kind of Christian literature: collections of selections from the teachings of Christian authorities gathered and laid out as *canones*, canons or ritual and ethical rules for Christian living. The resulting volumes could be relatively inexpensively reproduced and circulated among bishops and clergy to use in their guidance of the faithful.

AQUINAS' READING OF AUGUSTINE, THROUGH GRATIAN

Collections of canons began to be circulated, according to Peter Brown, coincident with the collapse of the Western Empire, which provided a vacuum of unity and leadership the Church sought to fill. There were numerous such collections, building on one another as older volumes disintegrated from use and time, and most of them have been lost. In the twelfth century, their legacy was preserved and represented in two major collections, those of Ivo of Chartres and Anselm of Lucca, which provided the basis for the first systematic compilation of canon law, Gratian's *Decretum*, completed in 1148. The discipline of canon law effectively began with this work, and so does a comprehensive, systematic conception of just war.

Among the topics specifically treated by Gratian was the topic of just war,[18] which earlier had been defined only in a scattered, non-cohesive way in the collections of canons by selections from various works by various authors. The *Decretum* brought the canons together and organized them to address particular issues with the use of armed force. After two generations of canonists, Gratian clarified what was meant in particular cases and added content where there were gaps.

Aquinas' question "On War" came at the end of this process and directly reflected and summarized it with its definition of just war by three requisites (princely or sovereign authority, just cause, and right intention, which included avoidance of evil purposes and the aim of producing peace) and his heavy reliance on references to Augustine to provide authority for the main elements of the just war idea. All of Aquinas' references to Augustine came from Gratian. These references were, as noted earlier, from works of a wide variety of sorts: polemical treatises, biblical commentaries, and certain of Augustine's letters. In addition to these, all of which Aquinas took over, Gratian's references included selected biblical passages as well as various other works of Augustine: additional commentaries and sermons, Book I (but not Book XIX) of *City of God*, additional use of the *Contra Faustum*, and *On Free Will*. All these he placed alongside selections (that is, canons) from other early authorities, notably including Isidore of Seville and Pope Gregory the Great.

None of the passages Gratian included in this first systematic compilation on just war mentioned love of neighbor, and indeed there was no effort to give them a theological context. Rather, these passages were taken simply for their own content, and their authority as rules for Christian life was assumed because of their authors. Contrary to Ramsey, Elshtain, and a good deal of recent Christian thought on the just war idea, when this idea first coalesced into a systematic form, it was not presented as deriving from love of neighbor, and it was based on citations from a broad variety of Augustine's works, not Book XIX of *City of God*.

Two major concerns were reflected in this medieval conception of just war, in the canons chosen to define it, and in how they were interpreted. These concerns were the disorder and violence endemic to the society of the time and the nature of the relation between the Church and the temporal authorities in governing society. The canonists' definition of just war addressed both these concerns by giving lexical priority to the responsibility of sovereign temporal authority in the just use of armed force, then hedging this by defining this use as requiring a just cause and direction to the end of social peace. The result was a conception of just war that, as noted earlier, mirrored the understanding of the goods or final purposes of politics as inherited from the classical world. This first systematic understanding of just war was thus placed inseparably within an overall normative conception of politics and its purposes.

The immediate implication of this way of thinking about just war was to limit the right to use armed force to the sovereign authority in each political community—a major step in a society in which every male member of the knightly class claimed the right to use the sword on his own choosing, and particularly to settle disputes. Gratian set aside this claim by using canons from Augustine and Isidore to define the sovereign in every political community as the judge of last resort in all cases of disputes,

and to place the right to use armed force in the hands of this ultimate authority alone to enforce his judgments. Any and all uses of arms by persons not in sovereign authority here became a disordering of the justice and peace of the political community, and Gratian here cited Augustine on the need for just war to respond to injustice and restore justice and peace—a topic addressed in several of the Augustinian canons he cited.

The canonists after Gratian reached outside Augustine and other Church fathers to Roman law, recently rediscovered and being examined by some of the same canonical thinkers who were working on the just war idea first shaped by Gratian. From Roman law they drew the idea of natural law, defining the sovereign's responsibility in terms of being guided by the natural law in determining justice in particular disputes and in establishing and enforcing justice in the political community as a whole. Any political authority who flouted the natural law was not properly a sovereign but rather a tyrant, subject to removal and replacement by others within the community or, under special conditions, by other sovereigns.

Underlying the canonists' thinking on all these matters was their handling of the relation between the churchly and temporal authorities regarding the government of society. Some of Augustine's writings, including his correspondence with two high Roman authorities in Africa, Marcellinus and Donatus, could be read to place the authority of the Church over that of the temporal authorities. The canonists of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries instead distinguished sharply between these two kinds of authority,

Consecration of Saint Augustine, *by Jaume Huguet, circa 1463 – 70. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona, Spain. Source : Google Art Project, via Wikimedia Commons.*

giving the temporal realm autonomy in its own affairs and reserving Church authority to the spiritual realm. To do this they drew on a letter from a late fifth-century pope, Gelasius, to the Eastern Roman emperor of the time, in which Gelasius made exactly this distinction. His purpose, in context, was to assert his authority in spiritual matters while granting that the emperor had all authority in temporal matters. But the medieval canonists' theory of politics and conception of just war turned the emphasis around, using this "Gelasian principle" to assert the autonomy of temporal sovereigns within the sphere of temporal government and reserving the authority of the Church to spiritual matters. The effect was to further strengthen their idea of sovereign authority and the responsibilities it entailed.

When one reads Gratian's *Decretum* on just war, one finds a conception of just war built mainly on passages drawn from a number of Augustine's works, with selections from other Church authorities playing supportive roles, all drawn

together in a systematic frame determined by Gratian. His immediate successors, while honoring the pride of place given to Augustine, drew from additional sources—most importantly the idea of natural law and the Gelasian principle—to interpret the implications of this canonical collection and to reinforce it. There is no indication they were seeking to replace the authority of Augustine, but rather to draw it out, place it in a larger context, and thus apply it to the context of life as they knew it.

WHAT'S LOVE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Theirs was a very different reading from that which has been commonplace in Christian understandings of just war since the work of Ramsey, which begins with Augustine's theology of love and defines just war as proceeding from the idea that Christian love of neighbor ought to be manifest even in the use of armed force toward another. In the work of the medieval canonists, the idea of just war is imbedded in the goods of politics as defined by the law of nature. In Ramsey and much other recent Christian just war thought, just war results from the Christian obligation to love one's neighbor. In the former, just war does not stand over and against the practice of politics but embodies and serves the goods of politics. In the latter, by contrast, it is necessary to find some mediating connection between the ethic of Christian love and the secular arena of politics: hence the idea that love has entered history and is inexorably transforming history towards God's ends for it. There is much power in the idea that Christians ought to seek to express love of neighbor in their dealings with others, but this is not itself a guide for the use of armed force in the service of politics in an unchristian world.

Both the readings of Augustine found in these different conceptions of just war extend and transform what Augustine himself did with the idea of just war, though they do so in very different ways. Augustine himself never wrote a systematic treatise on just war (by contrast, for example, with his numerous distinct treatises on aspects of sexuality). Rather, his thoughts on just war were occasional, scattered through works of various sorts, and conditioned by context. In most of these cases, Augustine's observations about war are functionally secondary, illustrating whatever larger point he is aiming to make. So what he says about killing in war in *De Libero Arbitrio* I serves to illustrate his larger point about the presence of *libido* (lust, or self-centered love) in acts of self-defense by contrast with its absence in the action of a soldier acting on orders from a superior; his enumeration of wrongful motivations in war in *Contra Faustum* 22 is part of a larger argument against Faustus over whether the Old Testament deserves to be a guide for Christians; and the comment about the necessity to wage just wars to oppose evildoing that appears in *City of God* XIX provides an illustration of his larger point about the violence, chaos, and injustice in the world as he knows it. In his commentaries on various books of the Old Testament, what he says about war comes from that period of his life in which he believed Roman imperial policy was doing the work of God in this world. And in other cases, notably his letter 93 to Vincentius, letters 133 and 138 to Marcellinus, and letters 185 and 189 to Boniface, his references to the idea of just war reflect the context of the ongoing struggle with the Donatists and his effort to enlist imperial Roman military help in this. Pulling these together to produce a systematic view of just war requires a reading that imposes a common purpose and order on them, and that is what both the modern readings I have been discussing provide.

Each of these readings' strength is also the source of problems. For Christians, Ramsey's reading of Augustine on just war has the important strength of the central place it gives to the idea of love of neighbor and the connection of this moral obligation, through Augustine, to the New Testament, and particularly to the parable of the Good Samaritan. It also, as indicated above, fits squarely within a century and more of Protestant thought about the ethical nature of Christian life. But its special Christian character makes it appear sectarian and irrelevant to non-Christians, and it is difficult to extend it to the needs of secular politics.

The conception of just war read out of Augustine by the medieval canonists has the strength of placing just war squarely within the sphere of temporal political life and its responsibilities, but its intentional sundering of this conception from the sphere of the Church and its reliance on natural law rather than an ethic drawn from the Bible opens it to the criticism that it is non-Christian and paves the way for alternative ways of thinking about Christian responsibility in the face of violence and injustice. As to the centrality of natural law in this conception of just war, Protestants have long been uncomfortable with the idea of natural law, and Reinhold Niebuhr's explicit rejection of

the just war idea in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*[19] came in the course of an extended criticism and rejection of the Catholic conception of natural law as he understood it.

In my own work on just war, I have focused on its development and transmission as a tradition within Western culture as a whole, with the specific Christian contribution one element alongside others in the overall tradition. On this conception there have been multiple kinds of inputs into the overall tradition, and in the modern period this has resulted in somewhat different ways of carrying the tradition in the arenas of Christian theology, academic philosophy, military theory and praxis, and international law. The problem here is taking pains to bring these different streams into mutual communication, which I have tried to do not only by identifying present-day commonalities among them but by showing how they are connected to the unitary pre-modern conception. This approach makes use of a reading of Augustine, but my reading has sought to show how Augustine in himself and as seen through his interpreters fits within the tradition of just war as a whole. It is not an approach that produces a privileged Christian conception of just war, but it seeks to understand the Christian element in the tradition as a whole and to bring contemporary, specifically Christian, conceptions of just war into conversation with the disparate other streams of just war tradition and with the moral traditions on politics and war developed in other cultures.

This work seeks commonality not only in the particular outcomes of these various streams of moral reasoning but also in the moral bases for such reasoning. Providing a moral base was the function natural law played for the medieval canonists who produced the classic systematization of the idea of just war and, *pace* Niebuhr, something that functions like this is needed in contemporary reasoning about just war. I have argued that positive international law on war serves in somewhat this way for contemporary discourse on war and political order, but the commonality expressed there remains relatively thin, and it is an intellectual reach to assume that a particular state's agreement on a specific point of the positive law genuinely or fully expresses that state's underlying values.

For these reasons I have increasingly argued for an effort to develop a thick dialogue across cultures on fundamental moral values and their implications for politics and war. I believe any such effort must take special pains to explore the thinking of important historical figures in the moral traditions of each culture. For the West, this must include Augustine and not only the variant readings discussed above but also the influence of other ideas potentially relevant to the subjects of war and politics. That is, much remains to be done in exploring how to read Augustine. P

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(Endnotes)

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