

## Author Meets Critics: A Theology of Public Life

Opening remarks by **Charles Mathewes**

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Thanks to Erik and Alan for inviting me to this, and to everyone at the Boisi center for making it happen, and thanks to David and Ron for being willing to undertake the onerous task of reading the book and finding something relatively polite to say about it. Erik and I have been talking about these issues for years; and though they may not know it, Alan and Ron and David have been major figures in my mental world for just as long. It's an honor to talk with you all face to face. I hope everyone will come away having learned something of value. I know I will.

The basic idea of my book is simple. Today, debate around "religion and public life" is typically about whether religious convictions should play a role in public life. I want to change the terms of the debate and ask how religious convictions can be involved in public life--and how, conversely, participation in public life can strengthen believers' faith. To do this, I offer one way to think about how Christians can be so involved: an empirically realistic, civic republican Augustinian theology of public life.

My book makes this argument in two parts. Part One explicates a "theology of engagement" that deploys a distinctively Augustinian account of God and God's relation to the world, built around a metaphysically vigorous affirmation of God's simultaneous immanence and transcendence. This account, affirming God's radically free sovereignty over creation and also that same God's intimate involvement with and sustenance of creation, gives Christians a way to understand themselves as participating in the divine dynamism in their existence in the world. For this account, the basic problem afflicting humans is a kind of escapism--the attempt to flee from God's presence, and concomitantly from the presence of

the neighbor and even from creation. (For Augustine, sin is fundamentally an attempted retreat into privacy.) But such escape is impossible; in every way we are more intimate with one another than we "naturally," in our fallen state, imagine. Divine grace puts us in right relation to God and the neighbor by turning us toward one another, and the story of fallen and redeemed Creation is the story of God's gracious subverting of the boundaries we impose--or rather, it is the story of God's revealing to us that our attempt to impose such boundaries is misguided from the beginning.

This theology illuminates our lives as a form of participation, through Christ, in the Church, in the Divine life in its creation, sustenance and redemption of the created order. This participation, while distorted by the fall, still remains genuine participation, mediated through the world, through our condition as creatures. That is to say, creation is not the "background" to our redemption, ultimately to be discarded in the eschaton; it plays an essential role within it. Our anticipatory participation in this redemption, available even in this life, is most vividly brought to self-consciousness, and deepened in our lives, by understanding our existence through the tripartite structure of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love.

Part Two specifies this theology by detailing how Christians might understand and inhabit public life, civically and ascetically, during the world. It offers an eschatologically-inflected theology of citizenship as integral to our ascetic transformation for the coming Kingdom of God. It does this by arguing that citizenship is usefully understood as a liturgy, the collective act of a community. Yet by engaging in political activities, we also participate in properly theological activities; thus this liturgy of citizenship will find its fullest meaning only before the Lord at the Judgment day. Because the concept of "citizen" is the fundamental political category of modernity, the book argues that political theology must change its fundamental question from the received question of proper obedience to authority, to the question of proper participation in public life. Understood as a question about the proper character of our participation in public life, the theological virtues serve again as a useful prism for understanding that participation. They thereby craft a distinctively Christian, and fruitfully civic, practice of citizenship.

But because our present participation in this political liturgy should fit us for our role in that greater liturgy to come, the virtues also equip Christians with an ascetics of public life. They help us discern how best to inhabit the multitudinous cultural and political forces of our world so that they may best shape our character. Against what Augustinians see as our culture's pervasive tendencies (as hard as it may be for some to believe, even in the churches!) towards apocalypticism and consumerism--both of which tempt us towards false conclusions, false "ends," fantasies of escape--the book argues that through the virtues' cultivation through engagement in public life, the souls of Christians may be purified in and through their public engagements in ways that train their longings here, while also offering a foretaste of their participation in the eschatological kingdom to come.

And that's about it. There's more to say, but that gives you a sketch of the whole in a way that will hopefully make the conversation to come more fruitful.