

## Book Review

### Michael Lamb, *A Commonwealth of Hope: Augustine's Political Thought*

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### Introduction

Written by Michael Lamb, *A Commonwealth of Hope* is a challenge or a counternarrative to the commonly held assumption that for Augustine, the eminent bishop of Hippo, earthly goods and therefore political goods do not have much value. Using detailed, well-supported and nuanced arguments, Lamb compellingly challenges Augustinian pessimism and the pessimistic value of political goods it sponsors.

Born in 354 AD, in what is now Algeria, Augustine is “one of the most influential thinkers in the history of political thought” (Lamb 2014, abstract). His “importance to the subsequent history of Europe is impossible to exaggerate” (Ryan 2012, 149), and even critics as fierce as Bertrand Russell (1972, 334-335) recognize the magnitude of his influence. Despite the fact that Augustine explicitly extols the virtue of hope and implicitly encourages it, Lamb argues that later scholars anachronistically misappropriate Augustinian works as pessimistic in light of devastating events such as the World Wars and the Holocaust (xii, 4). By situating Augustine in his actual historical, political, and rhetorical contexts, rather than reading him out of context, this book aims to correct Augustine’s image of pessimism and thus offer much needed hope in the public square.

Dr. Michael Lamb is an award-winning teacher who currently serves as the Executive Director of the Program for Leadership and Character as well as an Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies at Wake Forest University. He holds a doctoral degree in politics from Princeton University and for over a decade has researched, written, and taught on Augustinian political thought among such other topics as ethics, leadership, and character development.

### Summary

In the first chapter of *A Commonwealth of Hope*, Dr. Lamb offers an Augustinian conceptual grammar of faith, hope, and love. Lamb’s purpose in beginning this book by offering nuanced distinctions of these concepts is to challenge common interpretations that omit the distinctions that Augustine himself draws (31). According to Lamb, “recognizing the relations among faith, hope, and love permits a tentative specification of hope’s structure and function” (31).

In the following chapter, Lamb demonstrates that Augustinian love is not as otherworldly as critics assume. Augustine validates love for temporal goods. Since God is the supreme good, everything that he creates is good. Hence, according to Augustine, rightly ordered love for temporal goods is valid. Rightly ordered love is love for temporal goods as well as loving others “for God’s sake” as opposed to loving for selfish gain which is sinful and leads to pride or *superbia* (34). In fact, Lamb notes that for Augustine evil is not an independent force but the “wrongful use of a good for improper ends (perversion)” (39).

Similarly, in the third chapter, Lamb demonstrates that Augustinian hope is not only for the world to come but is also valid in this world. Hope, just as love, says Augustine, has to be properly ordered. Rightly ordered hope allows us to hope for temporal goods for the purpose of participating “in God’s goodness here and now” rather than for selfish gain (63).

The next two chapters are analyses of objects of and grounds for Augustinian faith and hope respectively. In these analyses, Lamb demonstrates that Augustinian hope relies on faith and can be rationally justified (112). Additionally, “contrary to assumptions about Augustine’s otherworldly account of hope,” Lamb highlights “how Augustine allows hope in human neighbours as long as that hope is properly ordered” (112).

Years before Augustine became a priest in Hippo, he was a world class rhetorician and as such he was appointed to the incredibly prestigious position of professor of rhetoric in the imperial court in Milan in 384 AD. In the sixth chapter, Lamb expertly uses Augustine’s oft ignored voluminous corpus of homilies to demonstrate how the master rhetorician used rhetorical practices such as repetition and rhyme as pedagogies of teaching hope to his congregants and audiences. In so doing, Lamb situates Augustine within his highly philosophical and oral historical context. Lamb convincingly argues that, in order to read Augustine correctly, one must first understand this historical context in which he lived.

The Bishop of Hippo’s most political book is the *City of God*. Scholars often cite Book 22 of this magnum opus as evidence of Augustinian pessimism (151). However, in the seventh chapter, Lamb situates Book 22 in its appropriate rhetorical and historical contexts and demonstrates that it offers much temporal hope rather than pessimism. Augustine’s emphasis on temporal hope therefore pushes back against prevailing notions of his worldly pessimism. In this pushback, Lamb observes that decontextualized reading “ignores important contextual and structural features of this passage” (152).

The following chapter demonstrates how Augustine’s “inaugurated or partially realized eschatology enables participation in the heavenly city here and now” (168). Moreover, this participation is not only for the institutional church, as communitarians argue, but for all the members of the public or the commonwealth. This public participation is because “a commonwealth (*res publica*) is simply the property, or public thing of [the] people” (178). According to Augustine, a city belongs to the public. The public therefore ought to pursue civic peace for the good of all in the city. In this way, participation in the heavenly city has been inaugurated in this *saeculum* or “secular age” and will be fully realized after the eschaton, in heaven.

In the ninth chapter, Lamb further strengthens his case for Augustinian hope by drawing from Augustine’s extensive correspondence with Roman officials, Catholic bishops, and friends who solicited spiritual as well political advice (203). As evidenced from this rich corpus of letters, “Augustine often sought the welfare of his city, conversing and collaborating with diverse citizens and leaders—both Christian and non-Christian—to challenge injustice, combat domination, and pursue hopes they shared in common” (227).

Finally, in the tenth chapter, Lamb tackles the controversial question of whether non-Christians can actually possess “true virtue” and therefore true hope. In answering this question, Lamb demonstrates that a correctly understood Augustinian account of hope allows for non-Christian virtue and therefore hope as well.

## **Evaluation**

Michael Lamb is a political theorist of note who has coedited volumes on virtue and on ethics. Moreover, his work has been published in several edited books and academic journals. In addition to having studied political theory for over a decade, he has also practised it. He has served as chief of staff on election campaigns for state senate, governor, and U. S. Congress in his home state of Tennessee (Wake Forest University n.d.). Lamb has also been an adviser of universities on civic engagement. His ground-breaking scholarship and practical experience in political theory contribute to making him an authority in this discipline. In particular, he stands out as an expert on Augustinian political thought.

Published in 2022, *A Commonwealth of Hope* is a welcome and timely reminder of how to live out Augustinian hope in our deeply divided world. Just as in the greatest biblical commandment, this book is a reminder that rightly ordered hope i.e., true hope, is hope that glorifies God and serves man. Whether it is in the deeply fractioned public square in the United States, the highly corrupt and dysfunctional institutions in African countries, or even the ongoing wars in Europe and the Levant, this book is a timely call to “active citizenship, not only in the heavenly city but in the earthly commonwealths where citizens seek civic peace in the secular age” (273).

As a counternarrative that offers hope by challenging pessimistic trends that seemingly dominate current political culture, this book finds a home within the discipline of political theory. Political theory is “the study of politics, concepts, and the historical record of political thought” (University of Massachusetts Amherst n.d.).

More broadly, students of a variety of disciplines will find this work to be of much interest. In writing this book, one of Lamb’s aims is “to make Augustine new for us again” (xiii). As such, students of disciplines such as religious studies, theology, world Christianity, classical studies, patristics, and Augustinian studies will find this volume to be of much benefit. As a book that prescribes hope not as an emotion or attitude, but as active citizenship through practising and pursuing justice along with speaking out against oppression, this volume is also encouraging and beneficial to general readers, particularly those interested in issues such as social injustice and civic peace.

The list of sources that inform this study is impressively lengthy. The book’s listed bibliography spans about thirty pages. Unsurprisingly, the author draws primarily from Augustine’s titanic corpus and also from secondary works on the Bishop of Hippo. In addition to *City of God*, Augustine’s sermons and letters feature prominently. Moreover, because this book is a challenge against prevailing Augustine-based pessimistic scholarship in political theory, the author draws from many prominent political theorists such as Hannah Arendt, Martha Nussbaum, John Rawls, and Reinhold Niebuhr. Lamb skilfully and diligently explicates their interpretations of Augustine and then challenges those interpretations by developing “an alternative interpretation that unsettles these common ways of reading—or misreading—Augustine as a pessimist” (10). Renowned ancient philosopher Cicero, as well as distinguished Italian priest Thomas Aquinas, also feature prominently in this study.

A major strength of this book is that Lamb makes Augustine fresh again and presents him as contemporarily valid by especially drawing from his large body of sermons and letters that spanned the length of his career as a priest in Hippo. His sermons, for instance, are “the largest body of oratory surviving from any ancient speaker” (O’Donnell 2005, 137). Despite the fact that Augustine’s sermons and letters span his whole career and form the very heart of his life and work, they are “significantly underanalyzed, especially in political theory, where scholars focus instead on more systematic treatises” (118).

Along with being well-researched, another major strength of this book is its interdisciplinary nature. In order to present a more complete and nuanced view of Augustinian political thought, the author strengthens his arguments by drawing from disciplines such as classical studies, religious studies, theology, philosophy and rhetoric. Regarding this multidisciplinary approach, Lamb explains that Augustine lived in a period before academic specialization, thus accurately situating the Bishop of Hippo in his context means that “his views on politics cannot be easily excised from his reflections on religion, ethics, and theology” (6).

### **Conclusion**

In producing this volume, Michael Lamb has painstakingly worked to reveal to us an Augustine who was not passivistic nor defeatist. Even though Augustine’s political philosophy cannot be mapped neatly on a contemporary right-wing and left-wing political spectrum, we can learn much from the bishop. He “advocated and modelled engagement in public life, frequently collaborating with other citizens, pastors, and political leaders to reduce poverty, fight injustice, and resist domination by wealthy and powerful elites” (12).

Through this book, Lamb stands out as an exemplar of academic rigour. Despite the fact that Augustine’s “efforts to preserve freedom, equality, and community fall short of contemporary civic ideals,” the author ought to be commended for carefully presenting a hopeful Augustine, who is able to inform us in our current political complexities and to help guard us against both presumption and despair (12).

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