



Bookshelf

2020

On Agamben, Arendt, Christianity, and the Dark Arts of Civilization

Peter I. Kaufman

University of Richmond, pkaufman@richmond.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.richmond.edu/bookshelf>



Part of the [Leadership Studies Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kaufman, Peter Iver. *On Agamben, Arendt, Christianity, and the Dark Arts of Civilization*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020.

NOTE: This PDF preview of *On Agamben, Arendt, Christianity, and the Dark Arts of Civilization* includes only the preface and/or introduction. To purchase the full text, please click [here](#).

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by UR Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Bookshelf by an authorized administrator of UR Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact scholarshiprepository@richmond.edu.

UR
FAC
BT
83.59
.K38
2020

On Agamben, Arendt, Christianity, and the Dark Arts of Civilization

LIBRARY
UNIVERSITY OF RICHMOND
VIRGINIA 23173

1

Augustine and Agamben

To Caecilian

Some historical theologians along with colleagues in political theory and political ethics have been trawling in Augustine's correspondence for resources and endorsements for what one, Charles Mathewes, describes as "hopeful citizenship." These scholars have clear favorites. They nearly always reel in and draw into their arguments for Augustine's critical though progressive approach to political practice Augustine's two long letters to Magistrate Macedonius and a third to Tribune Marcellinus.¹ But one that got away is especially

¹Augustine, ep. 138 (Marcellinus), ep. 153 and ep. 155 (Macedonius). Abbreviations in references to Augustine's correspondence, sermons and treatises conform to those in the *Augustinus-Lexikon*. Access to J. P. Migne's edition of Augustine's works in *Patrologia, series Latina* is convenient—<http://www.augustinus.it/latino/index/htm>—though I have also consulted the more recent critical edition, *Corpus scriptorium ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*. For "hopeful citizenship," see Charles Mathewes, *Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 214–18, 242–60 and his *The Republic of Grace: Augustinian Thoughts for Dark Times* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 68–73, 220–43. Augustine's apparent contributions to an equally hopeful "democratic citizenship" are featured in Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 107–48 ("Augustinianism as Civic Liberalism") and 350–84 (for Gregory's analysis of a purportedly "Exhausted Politics of Pessimism"). For Augustines who resemble Clinton and Obama Democrats, see Joseph Clair, *Discerning the Good in the Letters and Sermons of Augustine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 80–106 and Michael Lamb, "Between Presumption and Despair: Augustine's Hope for the Commonwealth," *The American Political Science Review* 112 (2018), 1036–49, respectively.

relevant for my purpose in this book, an ambiguous, perplexing letter that a rather demoralized Augustine wrote *about* Marcellinus. It was omitted from the volume of Augustine's "political writings" in the Cambridge University Press series, "Texts in the History of Political Thought." But that letter to Caecilian, an imperial commissioner in Africa—as was Marcellinus—seems a perfect place to crank up a reconsideration of Augustine's interest in citizenship and our assessment of his hopes for late fourth- and early fifth-century Christians who, repudiating obsessions with possessions in this wicked and punishing world, accepted his characterization of their fate as pilgrims.²

Augustine wrote after (and about) Marcellinus's execution in late spring, 413. Caecilian's close associate, Marinus, was responsible. He had sailed from Italy to Africa, ostensibly to mop up remnants of what looked to the Roman Senate to have been a consul-elect's conspiracy against the government. Apparently Marcellinus and his brother and fellow statesman Apringius were implicated at the time, although Augustine insisted (and a subsequent exoneration suggests) that they were unfairly accused. He condemned Marinus for having them killed after agreeing to submit the charges against both to judicial review and to await the result of a collateral appeal to the emperor that other African bishops were ferrying to Italy.³ Augustine was saddened to learn Caecilian and Marinus remained friendly. Their friendship, he wrote, suggested Caecilian had been complicit in the preemptive executions. Augustine prudently—if perhaps disingenuously—dissociated himself from such suspicions; he had heard Caecilian's relations with Marcellinus and Apringius were strained, but he remembered how unnerved Caecilian had been when he brought the bishops news of the terrible crime (*immanis scelus*).⁴

Still, Caecilian's attachment to Marinus obviously irritated Augustine. He appreciated that politics made strange bedfellows, yet

²Augustine, ep. 151 was omitted from *Augustine: Political Writings*, ed. E. M. Atkins and R. J. Dodaro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). Augustine's comments on the wickedness of this world and the punitive character of ordinary life surface often in his *City of God*. See, for example, Augustine, *civ.* 18.49 (*in hoc saeculo maligno*) and *civ.* 21.14 (*vita ipsa mortalium tota poena sit*).

³Augustine, ep. 151.6.

⁴Augustine, ep. 151.10.

he warned Caecilian against amity with Marcellinus's unrepentant executioner, advising that crime was contagious in the corridors of power. Marinus's reprehensible behavior may well have shocked Caecilian as well as Augustine, but the former's ongoing relationship and politic familiarities with Marinus, if conspicuous from then on, would "compel us," Augustine wrote, obviously numbering himself among those concerned—"compel us"—to believe otherwise and to believe the worst of his correspondent.⁵

The letter appears to break off abruptly. The last surviving lines berate Caecilian for being reluctant to proceed from the catechumenate to baptism. Did the imperial commissioner believe he could not simultaneously be a good Christian and a proficient politician?⁶ Augustine occasionally encountered concerns of that sort and warily argued that faith and civic piety were not incompatible.⁷ Yet the letter to Caecilian contains, in addition to what verged on political pandering, questions and conditional clauses (*si verum quaeris audire*) indicating that Augustine doubted the commissioner's probity and candor. He apparently thought Caecilian had given an inadequate account of his ignorance and innocence. He pressed the commissioner to let on where he had been during Marcellinus's execution. If absent, how did he hear of it, and what did he say to Marinus when he learned of the executioner's deceit and rush to misjudgment?⁸ The letter's tone is respectful, to a point. But for a stretch, it becomes an inquisition, as if Marinus's intrigues and Marcellinus's murder jolted Augustine and stirred him to recall the loathing of political necessities, niceties, and frauds that moved him years before to repudiate his own political ambitions. Marinus's ruthlessness, its fatal consequences, and Caecilian's questionable conduct prompted Augustine to leave Carthage quite soon after Marcellinus's and Apringius's deaths to avoid the compliance and courtesies expected of the province's bishops, despite the outrages committed by political officials.⁹

⁵Augustine, ep. 151.7: *Sed plane fateor, si etiam posthac in ea familiaritate estis in qua antea fuistis, pace tua sit liber dolor, multum nos quod nolebamus compellit credere.*

⁶Augustine, ep. 151.14: *Unum est autem . . . quod in te molestissime fero.*

⁷Augustine, ep. 138.12-13 and ep. 189.5-6.

⁸Augustine, ep. 151.12 and 14.

⁹Augustine, ep. 151.3: *Cum tantum malum nullo pectoris robore potuissem tolerare, discessi.*