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Politics Between the Earthly City and the City of God in Christianity

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Ever since Jesus stated his kingdom was not of this world, Christians have been struggling to determine the appropriate relationship between political power and the church.

Responses to this problem have ranged from one extreme to the other. One extreme is a total rejection of political authority as having any kind of moral purpose. This was the view of many early Christians during the persecutions under the Romans, and continue today among groups who take their bearings from the Schleitheim Articles, as well as some conservative Protestants who have washed their hands at the culture wars by retreating into moral enclaves insulated from the broader, and corrupted, modern society. I will call this view of politics as the *propter peccatum* view ("because of sin"). This perspective views politics as the result of human sinfulness and the task of political authorities is restricted to restraining the wicked, and not to instilling anything like civic sense of virtue and concern for the common good.

The other extreme is often referred to as the Constantinian view, named after the first Christian emperor of Rome, Constantine. Despite being in some way conceptually opposed to the *propter peccatum* view, it is also its consequence. Constantinianism says that even though politics is itself immoral, one cannot get away form seeking moral guidance, and the church must be the institution to guide the state and its citizens. This also means that the church necessarily gets itself entangled with the *raison d'état* of the state. Much of church-state cooperation during the Middle Ages followed this pattern, and the contemporary doctrine of church-state separation in liberal democracies is mostly a reaction against this arrangement. However, the Constantinian view has another dimension to it. The church's entanglement in political affairs ends up increasing the state's prestige and power. As the church gets too distracted with political imperatives, those very imperatives become sanctified by the sacred institution, the church, handling them. As the church retreats, the state takes over the now sanctified political imperatives and then makes its own moral claims upon human beings that the now weakened church used to claim. One could summarize this historical sketch as the difference between medieval church dominance over the state that gets replaced by modern dominance over the church.[1]

The current controversies between church and state move within this Constantinian matrix, and this paper suggests some ways to think outside this box. When the faithful hear supporters of the secular Constantinian state advocate changing the definition of marriage or denying tax-exempt status to religious organizations for defending their rights, they hear the divinized claims of the Constantinian state. On the other hand, secularist supporters of the divinized state think Christians make their own Constantinian claims when they argue for anything else besides a strict separation of church and state. They would regard – wrongly - any cooperation between church and state a departure from the fundamental principles of liberal democracy.

A way to untangle this mess is to think through some of the limitations of the Constantinian position in both of its dimensions, which includes considering how the claims of Christians can be made intelligible to non-Christians. This will be done by considering the ideas of two non-Constantinian political thinkers, St. Augustine of

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[1] The story of this search for balance has been told many times. Most recently, Michael Burleigh, *Earthly Powers: The Clash of Religion and Politics from the French Revolution to the Great War*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2006). For a more theoretical treatment, see Eric Voegelin, *Modernity Without Restraint: The Political Religions; The New Science of Politics; and Science, Politics, and Gnosticism*, *Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, vol. 5, ed., Manfred Henningsen, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000).

Hippo and Alexis de Tocqueville. The former was a critic of political self-divinization of both pagan and Christian Rome, and the latter was a critic of political self-divinization of the modern liberal democratic state.

AUGUSTINE

Augustine wrote his magisterial *City of God* shortly after the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410, as a response to accusations by Roman aristocrats that Christians were to blame for the sack.[2] They claimed Christian otherworldliness and humility made them too meek to be patriotic citizens willing to defend their fatherland. In response, Augustine claimed that Christians make the best kinds of citizens because their religion prepares them better to practice justice and love. Left unchecked, politics has the tendency to divinize itself by laying total claims upon the moral lives of individuals. Augustine pushed back at this divinization but still admitted politics lays a moral claim upon us. His challenge, like ours, was to clarify the nature of this moral claim.

Augustine developed two symbols to express the tension between the Christian life and the earthly life: the city of God and the earthly city. These do not represent specific institutions, such as the Christian church versus Rome (or Canada), but rather two different types of soul. Members of the city of God love God at the expense of themselves, while members of the earthly city love themselves at the expense of God. All human beings must struggle to have the love of God dominant over the love of self. Because the struggle is inner, one cannot say with finality whether someone is a member of one city or the other. Augustine observed that Christian churches are filled with members of the earthly city. He objected to claims, such as those made at the time by the Donatists, that mere membership or communion is sufficient for salvation. He also suggested some non-Christians could be members of the city of God, including the Greek philosopher Plato and the Roman general Regulus. Augustine saw in Plato a genuine love of the transcendent Good which Augustine took to be equivalent to the Christian understanding of God. While Plato and his philosophical successors could not know Christ, Augustine saw in some of their metaphysical speculations a readiness to view the Good as incarnate. Regulus kept his oath to the enemy Carthaginians in a prisoner exchange in which he assented to them executing him. Augustine saw in his keeping of the oath, his selflessness, and his love for the common good, a noble model for Christians to look up to, and then to surpass.[3] As these examples show, the important question is not that of idly speculating membership of either city, but in determining the meaning of these two loves and to orient oneself to the higher one.

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[2] Augustine, *City of God Against the Pagans*, trans., R. W. Dyson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). I have provided a fuller account of his political thought in John von Heyking, *Augustine and Politics as Longing in the World*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001); "Disarming, Simple, and Sweet: Augustine's Republican Rhetoric," in *Talking Democracy: Historical Perspectives on Rhetoric and Democratic Deliberation,* eds. Benedetto Fontana, Cary J. Nederman, and Gary Remer, (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2004), 163-86; "Soulcraft, Citizenship, and Churchcraft: The View From Hippo," in *Cultivating Citizens*, eds. Dwight Allman and Michael Beaty, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2002), 29-42.

For Augustine, love of God gets primarily expressed through loving one's neighbor. Interestingly, he thought Scripture is in agreement with the highest ideals of friendship among the Greek and Roman philosophers.[4] For Augustine, as for Plato and Cicero, the standard for any ethical and political theory is determining the extent to which it recognizes and encourages friendship. For these thinkers, politics necessarily falls short of fulfilling our deepest spiritual longings because it is not about friendship. When the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, was a mere commentator of texts, he observed that Augustine criticized politics because it is insufficiently social.[5] This is why his great book is titled, *City of God*, and not *The Isolation of the Solitary Mystic*. The view that religious experience is friendship, and not solitary, is what distinguishes Augustine from modern Christianity and modern liberal thinking. For instance, Canadian scholar Charles Taylor (also a critic of liberal individualism), referring to theologian William James, describes the modern religious experience as standing on a cusp, "about what it's like to stand in that open space and feel the winds pulling you now here, now there."[6] And so, for Augustine, the goal of religious organizations is to inculcate the life of friendship in which friends recognize each other as the image of the Good and of God, share the Good, and tell each other stories about their mutual encounters.

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[3] On Plato and God, see *City of God* 9.16 and 10.12. On truth as incarnational, see *Confessions* 7.9 and *City of God* 10.29. On Regulus, see City of God 1.15 and 1.29.

[4] Carolinne White, *Christian Friendship in the Fourth Century*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

Augustine saw greater agreement on friendship between Scripture and the ancient philosophers than later Christians, especially Protestants, who either forget about friendship or are hostile to it. Martin Luther and John Calvin, for example, never discuss friendship in any meaningful way. One of the reasons Canadian Christians struggle in making a public case against same-sex marriage issue is because they too have forgotten the language of friendship. Their emphasis on the sinfulness of homosexual behavior, and their language of "thou shalt not," eclipsed the positive good of friendship with which Christian and non-Christian thinkers have contrasted homosexual behavior.[7] As we shall see with Alexis de Tocqueville, Christians are more effective making their case among liberal democrats by serving as yea-sayers of a higher good, and not as nay-sayers of sin; they need to recall

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[5] Rowan Williams, "Politics and Soul: A Reading of the *City of God*," *Milltown Studies*, 19/20 (1987): 55-72.

[6] Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 59. Taylor's assessment of modern religious experience as individualistic is confirmed by Peter Emberley's study of the religious views of Canadian baby-boomers (*Divine Hunger: Canadians on Spiritual Walkabout*, (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2002).

[7] A key exception to this is the essay on same-sex marriage and friendship by noted Dante scholar, Anthony Esolen, "A Requiem for Friendship," *Touchstone Magazine*, September 2005. See also my "Why Exclude Oedipus?: On the Statist Incoherence of Same-Sex Marriage," *The Interim*, September 2006.

Rabbi Novak's insight that the Decalogue's prohibitions also point toward a positive definition of human dignity.[8]

Even so, while Augustine agrees with his non-Christian friends, Plato and Cicero, that friendship is the highest good of human life, he did not think political life could itself reach as high as the noblest of friendships. Instead, politics can aspire to create the conditions in which the highest kinds of friendships can be cultivated. These conditions include the habits of just conduct, fair-dealing, and trust. Put in terms of ancient political philosophy, justice precedes and is lower than friendship, but at the same time one cannot expect someone to practice fair-dealing when that person is not practiced in friendship.[9] While maintaining contracts and promises do not rise to the level of deep acts of sacrifice and love required by friendship, we are more likely to maintain those contracts and promises if we are the sort of person habituated to act with generosity and love. Thus, Rome, Canada, or any political society cannot be identified with either the city of God or the earthly city. The two cities are first and foremost symbols for opposed longings in the soul: love of God and love of domination. As such, Augustine thought most political societies reside someplace between because, like churches, they are filled with people belonging to both cities. Put another way, politics and religion are always interconnected because both are where the manifold of human longings and ambitions get expressed in their most comprehensive form.

Augustine sometimes gives the impression he thought politics is *propter peccatum* – due to sin. He relates a famous meeting between Alexander the Great and a pirate he had captured. Alexander chides the pirate for terrorizing the high seas. The pirate responds by claiming that he, the pirate, only does on a small scale what Alexander does on a grand scale. Augustine comments on this episode: "And justice removed, what are kingdoms except great robberies" (*City of God*, 4.4). While Augustine's gloss has been read as a reflection of his general attitude toward political life, and as grounds for claiming that Christians must either confront or withdraw from politics, the determining idea in this statement is in the first clause: "And justice removed." As it happens, Augustine thought justice is never removed from political societies, regardless of how bad they are. Political societies always reflect a higher order and contain at least a modicum of justice within them. A political society with absolutely no justice would be no society at all. It would be anarchy or wilderness. Even a gang of pirates requires at least some degree of fair dealing among them.

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[8] David Novak, "Human Dignity and the Social Contract," in *Recognizing Religion in a Secular Society*, ed., Douglas Farrow, (Montréal-Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2004), 66.

[9] The relationship between justice and friendship is complex and paradoxical. For a succinct comparison, see Robert Sokolowski, "Phenomenology of Friendship," *Review of Metaphysics*, 55 (March 2002): 451-70.

The less justice in a society, the more likely that political society, like Alexander the Great, would be committed to the life of exploiting and dominating others. The best type of political society is a kind of friendship, which Augustine expressed by comparing a well-ordered city to one of King David's songs: "For the rational and moderate harmony of diverse sounds insinuates the compact unity of a well-ordered city" (*City of God*, 17.14). A just political society would respect the dignity of each individual, as when he compares a just city to a well-constructed sermon: "for each single human being, like one letter in a sermon, is as it were the element of a city or kingdom, however wide is the occupation of land" (*City of God*, 4.3). Augustine was enough of a realist to understand most cities at most times do not meet these high ethical standards. However, he regarded this as a matter of falling-short of their own goal of obtaining a political friendship based on justice, common stories, and experiences.

We learn from Augustine a way of thinking outside the restrictive dichotomy of *propter peccatum* and Constantinianism. One can be skeptical of the moral claims of politics without dismissing them altogether. One can affirm a moral ethic that is suitable for politics that Christians and non-Christians can share, and therefore share a common citizenship while each faith group works out its own unique way to salvation. Following Augustine, one can defend a cooperation of church and state without falling back on the misleading canard that Canada was, or remains, a "Christian nation" because the symbol, "Christian nation," is beside the point.[10]

TOCQUEVILLE

Alexis de Tocqueville traveled throughout the United States in the 1830s and published his findings in his monumental *Democracy in America*, which remains today the classic account of the moral aspirations, and dangers, of liberal democracy.[11] His insights pertain to democratic rule in general, and are not restricted to the United States. For instance, one of Canada's most notable scholars of Tocqueville is former Liberal Cabinet Minister Stéphane Dion, who drew from Tocqueville's thinking to assert liberal principles against Québecois separatism.[12] Tocqueville's relationship with Christianity was complicated, as one would expect with a major figure of the French Enlightenment. Evidence suggests he died without being in full communion with the Catholic Church. However, his biographer observes his faith was imbued with the skepticism a Jansenist pietist would hold toward religious dogma and toward metaphysical certainty which he shared with his philosophical hero, Blaise Pascal.[13]

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[10] Frederick Vaughan explains the problematic role the symbol, "nation of Christians," has had in Canada's constitutional history in *The Canadian Federalist Experiment: From Defiant Monarchy to Reluctant Republic*, (Montréal-Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2003), 134-51.

[11] Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans., Harvey Mansfield, Jr., and Delba Winthrop, (University of Chicago Press, 2000). Hereinafter DA.

[12] Stéphane Dion, "Tocqueville, le Canada français et la question nationale," *Revue Française de Science Politique* 40(4) (1990): 501-520; "Tocqueville and the Civic Virtues of Nationalism," Notes for an address by the President of the Privy Council and Minister of Intergovernmental, Canadian Political Science Association, Quebec, Quebec, July 29, 2000 (http://www.pco-bcp.gc.ca/aia/default.asp?Language=E&Page=pressroom&Sub=speeches&Doc=20000729_e.htm) (last accessed: August 21, 2006).

Tocqueville wrote that religion has a paradoxical relationship with the liberal state. On the one hand, the great achievement of liberal democracy was its legal separation of political from religious power. On the other hand, the legal separation of church and state requires a social and cultural cooperation between the two.

Legal separation allows religion greater freedom to find its own authentic prophetic voice, which therefore enables citizens to restrain the moral claims of the state, thereby ensuring limited and free government. On the other hand, Tocqueville also argued that of all types of regime – including monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy – it is democracy that requires the greatest amount of moral virtue from its citizens. In terms of moral action, it is easy to be a subject of a monarchy because one simply needs to obey the monarch's demands. Being a citizen of democracy demands self-government, and thus moral judgment, which is considerably more difficult to practice. Being a subject of a monarch simply requires moderation which gets expressed in acts of obedience toward the monarch. Being a democratic citizen demands practical wisdom, courage, justice, as well as moderation.

This heightened moral demand on democratic citizens depends on a close social and cultural cooperation with religion. Being a democratic citizen especially demands religious faith for basic three reasons.

First, public opinion is so much stronger in democracy than in other types of government. It is one thing for a despot to attempt to indoctrinate you. A healthy skepticism toward the powers-that-be can limit that. But what if the powers-that-be represent you? What if the voice of the majority crowds out your own conscience?

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[13] André Jardin, *Tocqueville: A Biography*, trans., Lydia Davis, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 62-3, 528-33.

So much more difficult it is to dissent against your friends and neighbors and seemingly everyone around you, than your unrepresentative ruler. He writes: “kings often make one obey, but it is always the majority that makes one believe” (DA II.1.5). This is why Tocqueville regarded public opinion a more insidious and seductive tyrant than older forms of tyranny.

For this reason, Tocqueville thought that the most important task for liberal democrats, and especially members of religious traditions, is to create and sustain civil associations – those groups, organizations, colleges, churches, unions, and parties that we belong to and whose purposes help to challenge and reinvigorate political debate. Religious associations, including churches, schools, and charities, are especially crucial voices of dissent against public opinion because they take their authority from moral sources older and higher than that of public opinion. Public opinion, guided by a form of enlightened self-interest, inclines toward seemingly pragmatic technical solutions to public policy, and thus avoids the deeper moral concerns in which religious traditions are well-versed. Tocqueville referred to the “mother science” of establishing and maintaining civil associations as a “holy enterprise” to provide a counter-balance against the attitude of *vox populi, vox Dei* taken by public opinion. The “mother science” would be difficult because it obliges religious associations, as Augustine did centuries earlier, to find ways of engaging culture in a constructive fashion. Neither domination nor withdrawal is an option.

Second, religious associations draw from traditions of friendship teachings that run deeper than the utilitarian teaching of enlightened self-interest that liberal democracy usually draws on. For Tocqueville, liberal democracy teaches us to avoid harming others. This is sufficient for a day-to-day ethic of mediocrity, but it hardly suffices for the hard cases of moral reasoning we are often obliged to decide. Christian organizations lead by example in teaching faith, hope, and charity, in addition to justice, practical wisdom, courage, and moderation. But because liberal democracy is in part a product of the philosophical Enlightenment, the prophetic voices of religious organizations must also appeal to rational argument. They must provide a positive teaching, and justification, for their interventions into public debate. They must show why their way is better than that of others. Claiming "because God says so" or "because Scripture says so" is a non-starter, and a needless one at that, as the example of Augustine shows. Both Tocqueville and Augustine agree that a fundamental part of political persuasion, in addition to rational argument, consists of showing concretely and by example how one's way of life promotes happiness. For instance, Tocqueville observes that the surest way for religion to have a salutary effect on political society is for governments to act as if they really believe religious precepts. These include the immortality of the soul, which, among the manifestations of this belief, promotes a concern for the future of society and of mankind that challenges the general democratic inclination to base public policy on short-term considerations (DA 2.2.15). The presence of individuals acting faithfully and justly is more effective than exhortatory arguments made to democrats already skeptical of religious and "metaphysical" claims. Religious groups need to tell their own stories to have their presence appreciated in society.

Third, despite the tendency of liberal democrats to act on short-term considerations, democracy makes its own faith-claims. One frequently hears references to progress and to the adjective "progressive" is meant to signify someone who is tolerant, cosmopolitan, open-minded, creative, and generally on the left-wing of the spectrum. However, faith in "progress," in a future that is evermore perfect than what has come before, is just as much based on an act of faith than faith in the death and resurrection of Christ because it postulates a perfect utopian society – a democratic utopia – that our current elites are supposedly bringing about. Georgetown University political theorist Patrick Deneen summarizes the condition of this "democratic faith":

> If faith is a belief in that which is unseen, then it may be that democracy is as justifiably an object of faith as a distant and silent God. This is particularly the case for those who perceive a radical gulf between that system of government that we now call democracy – rife with apathy, cynicism, corruption, inattention, and dominated by massive yet nearly unperceivable powers that belie claims of popular control – and the vision of democracy as apotheosis of human freedom, self-creation, and even paradisiacal universal political and social equality that coexists seamlessly with individual self-realization and uniqueness. In absence of such a faith, ambitions might wither amid cruel facts and hopes dissipate in the face of relentless reality.[14]

According to this analysis, democratic faith in an immanent democratic utopia becomes more aggressive when other forms of faith, including religious faith during times of secularization, wane. Or as Tocqueville and others have observed, faith remains constant even while the objects of faith change.

So, for Tocqueville, liberal democrats are characterized by a tendency to place their faith in a utopian hope for a society based on perfect equality and individual self-realization and creativity. Christians can do something to moderate that utopianism by advancing their own ideas of political society. But they need to do it in such a way that appeals to common sense, natural reason, and, finally, to witness. Therefore, opposing the democratic faith in progress with the Christian hope for redemption will not be as effective as simply pointing out the deficiencies of the faith in perfect equality and self-creativity.

Of equality, Christians can simply observe that democrats cannot overcome the diversity of talents that nature has given to everyone. The perversity of trying to obtain perfect equality can be seen in a play, *The Assemblywomen*, by the ancient Greek comedian, Aristophanes, who points out that perfect equality would demand forced coupling of beautiful and ugly people, especially since contemporary economists have proven that the so-called beautiful have more wealth and career-success than the so-called ugly.[15]

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[14] Patrick J. Deneen, *Democratic Faith*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), xvi). Janet Ajzenstat criticizes a Canadian version of democratic faith (which she refers to with its more conventional term, “romanticism”) in, *The Once and Future Canadian Democracy*, (Montréal-Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2003).

Of expressing individuality, Christians can simply observe that loving another depends on perceiving something to share. Assertions of individuality aggravate the loneliness and disconnectedness people regularly experience.[16] Our culture is saturated by assertions that the most intimate form of sharing is physical, and so it has lost an older language of friendship that enables people of the same sex to express their intimate – but not sexual – love for one another. It is fashionable today to consider Abraham Lincoln a homosexual because he often slept in the same bed with his friend, for whom in his letters he also expressed profound love. Rather than fruitlessly speculating on private desires, some insightful commentators have conversely observed Lincoln's ability to love his friends profoundly – in Platonic fashion - is precisely what made him a great president because it enabled him to divine the good in his political rivals, and transform them into his friends.[17] At the risk of offending the ideologues of sex in our society, our sexual liberation comes at the cost of becoming illiterate in love and friendship.[18] Our sexual liberation also prevents us from thinking meaningfully of the common good. Additionally, historian Mark Noll has called Lincoln the greatest theologian in nineteenth-century America, which suggests Lincoln's example provides insight not only about understanding how our moral commitments stand with the common good, but also how our religious commitments stand with the common good.[19]

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[15] Daniel S. Hamermesh and Jeff E. Biddle, “Beauty and the Labor Market,” *American Economic Review*, 84(5) December 1994: 1174-94.

[16] Miller McPherson et al., “Social Isolation in America: Changes in Core Discussion Networks over Two Decades,” *American Sociological Review*, 71 (June 2006): 353-75.

[17] Scott W. Johnson and John H. Hinderaker, “A Genius for Friendship: Lincoln as Lawyer,” The Claremont Institute, June 30, 2000 (http://www.claremont.org/writings/000630hinderaker_johnson.html). See also, Doris Kearns, *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005).

[18] See Esolen, “A Requiem for Friendship.”

CONCLUSION

Augustine and Tocqueville teach Christians that they must practice special insight in balancing the claims of God and of Caesar. God affirms the claims of Caesar, and the proponents of God's claims must also make their case to Caesar in a way Caesar can understand while showing Caesar his authority extends only so far. Fortunately, God has given Christians the means to do that without undermining their faith. One does not undermine faith if one depends on reason; one does not undermine Scripture if one appeals to science. Faith and reason, Scripture and science, are part of God's creation. Because God wants Christians both to know him and to love him, there is no impiety in understanding creation, especially as it pertains to living a righteous life. Augustine once chided his fellow Christians for treating Scripture as a source of physics or literal history. He warned them not to be so impious in reading Scripture in such a limited way. Moreover, treating Scripture for what it is not is a great way to get non-Christians to ridicule the faith, which is the last thing Christians should want. Instead, Augustine thought to know God is to know as much of Him and of His creation as one can possibly know, even if non-Christians supplied the insights.[20] He liked to encourage Christians to emulate the Israelites by stealing gold from the Egyptians.

To that end, it comes as no surprise that the problem of cooperation of church and state is first and foremost a problem of education. As Plato argued centuries ago, politics is the cultivation of souls and this means first and foremost one must spend their life seeking what the good life is about. In the middle of the twentieth-century, Simone Weil stated the problem concisely for Christians worried about reason possibly conflicting with their faith. She stated that before we seek Christ we must seek Truth, because before Christ is Christ, He is Truth. If we diligently and prayerfully seek Truth, we will not go far before falling into the arms of Christ.[21] These thinkers and prophets teach Christians their willingness to think of church-state cooperation should not be limited by their own doubts about the life of reason.

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[19] Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 422-38.

[20] For example, Augustine would be able to converse with Charles Darwin when the former observes the tendency of weaker creatures to take on the attributes of stronger ones (*City of God*, 12.4).

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[21] Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, trans., Emma Craufurd, (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1951), 69.