There is an intellectual problem associated with the shared understanding of Catholics since the Second Vatican Council that the secular domain has its own autonomy and that certain forms of faith-based intervention are inappropriate. For instance, we agree that it is mistaken to intervene in political debate or in economic policy-making by appealing only or primarily to ‘The Will of God’, or by grounding our proposals exclusively in ‘The Teaching of the Church’. The problem arises because at the same time we confidently affirm in faith that there is no dimension of our human existence which is immune from religion or God’s grace. Our faith commitment, we say, should animate and inspire our whole lives, including our economic, social and political existence. Our faith should animate our politics, and make its impact there. Hence the question: while in practice it might be possible to live with the tension – and it would be very useful to gather the experience of believing women and men in public life – is there not an intellectual incoherence in holding both positions at the same time? How can we integrate the views that ‘faith should influence politics’, and ‘the secular domain of the political should be autonomous, i.e. free from religious influence’?

The question arises at present from a variety of sources. It is not only a problem for Catholic Christians. We expect of the adherents of other religions that they also exercise restraint in the manner in which they contribute to political debate. But from within their own worldviews they must experience a similar tension. For instance, Muslim voices remind all people of faith that the will of God is sovereign, and that no dimension of creaturely existence can be hidden from His demands. Pope Francis in \textit{Laudato Si’} engages in a vigorous way in contemporary scientific and political debates and calls on Christians and all people of good will to make their voices heard. Some object that this is unwarranted interference by religion in the secular, while others applaud the vision which sees religion as relevant to every day and not only Sunday (or Saturday or Friday). There is a need to revisit this question and articulate a theological as well as philosophical answer which takes seriously and sympathetically both views.
This question has several presuppositions and it may be useful at this point to articulate them so that possible misunderstandings are avoided. Needless to say the question cannot arise for anyone who accepts what William Cavanaugh calls ‘The Myth of Religious Violence’, namely, the belief that violence arises from religious differences and that the secular state is the solution to what is an inherently religious problem (Cavanaugh 2009). Cavanaugh’s arguments in exploding the myth will not be repeated here, but the question will be addressed on the assumption that an intellectual problem remains for all people of faith who wish to remain faithful and yet support a shared secular political order. In other words, this discussion is not primarily addressed to secularists who seek ways of controlling the destructive forces of religion, nor is it primarily addressed to religious enthusiasts who strive to capture state power by whatever means so as to implement their vision of a divinely willed regime. Such audiences and their concerns deserve attention, but it is not given here. There are many contemporary discussions of religious conflict but this paper does not engage in any of them. Instead it is addressed to people of religious faith who experience a conflict within themselves, who ask how it is possible that they remain faithful to their own religious tradition and yet endorse the claims of a secular political order. It is therefore another assumption of this discussion that they will have good non-religious reasons persuading them to accept the justifiability of a secular state. The question then is about the possible coherence of their religious and non-religious reasons, despite their apparent incoherence.

The question is an old one. Augustine in *The City of God* (Bk IV chapter 4) identified the problem and gave it its classical formulation. He narrated the story of the pirate who had been arrested by Alexander’s forces and brought before the emperor. Challenged to explain what he was up to by engaging in piracy on the waters of the eastern Mediterranean which Alexander dominated, the pirate answered that he was doing nothing different from what the emperor himself was doing. The only difference was one of scale. The pirate pursued a life of robbery and pillage on a single small ship, and they called him a pirate, while Alexander pursued the same goals of conquest and theft with a vast fleet and a big army, and was called commander and emperor. Augustine reflects on this story and asks if there is really any difference between the two. Isn’t political power the same as organized crime except on the largest scale? Isn’t it simply domination and exploitation which can succeed because there is no higher power to control it?

There seems to be something very modern about this fifth century question. It seems to contain a familiar form of anti-establishment critique, which is suspicious at every point of state authority and its claims to obedience (Chomsky 2002). But Augustine’s answer doesn’t evoke the same echo. He agrees
that there is no difference in principle between organized crime and political power unless the latter is characterized by justice. ‘In the absence of justice, what is power but organized crime?’ To explain what he means by justice Augustine draws on the Roman law traditions which saw it as the constant inclination to give each one his due. This is the familiar definition from Justinian developed later by the scholastics especially Aquinas. But Augustine makes a daring move at this point. A city which failed to give God what is due to God could not claim to be just. And what is due to God is submission, obedience, and conformity to His will and purpose. What is due to God alongside obedience to his will is worship, shown in the offering of sacrifices and the prayers of praise and petition. A political power which saw itself as sovereign, i.e. as the highest authority, without the need to submit to the authority of God, could not be just, since failing to give each his due, and so would be no different from organized crime.

We have to acknowledge the relevance of Augustine’s answer for our contemporary situation. How can a modern secular state deserve respect and obedience if its claim to these is solely based on its ability to coerce its subjects with the threat of punishment? And if its claim to obedience is based on its success in delivering benefits to its people, how far can such authority extend? As Alasdair MacIntyre puts it, how can a modern state which claims for itself no other grounding than the provision of services and security ask people to make sacrifices and even die (or kill) on its behalf? It is like being asked to die for the telephone company! (MacIntyre 1994, 303).

Let me repeat the dilemma formulated at the beginning. I do not want to take the simple implication of the story so far, that the state to deserve respect must give God worship and service and implement His will. I acknowledge the force of this argument, but at the same time I don’t want to be a citizen of a republic or a subject of a monarch which imposes a religious discipline on me or on my society (we have had that in Ireland in the centuries following the reformation. Some would say we have had it also in the decades following independence when the Catholic Church was particularly influential in the ethos of the country). I see the value of liberal democracy and the self-restricting principles of constitutionalism, and I want to uphold these. The challenge is to articulate an understanding of my position which is respectful of both poles, the theological as well as the political.
In an earlier publication on this topic I surveyed the different models used to accommodate both concerns (Riordan 2008). Since I am both religiously observant and politically committed, and there are appropriate ways of speaking about both religion and politics, the question is how the two can be integrated in one single perspective. There can be no solution in a perspective which denies the validity of one or the other. Both religion and politics must be respected. The familiar poles of Theocracy and Civil Religion have in common the tendency to subject one dimension completely to the other (Beiner 2011). Theocracy makes the political subordinate to the religious such that law-making and social policy are driven primarily by the requirements of the revealed will of God. Civil religion on the other hand, recognizes the important social contribution of religion in fostering social cohesion and civil virtues and so harnesses the religious dimension to serve the interests of the political. Neither pole can be acceptable if we wish to retain respect for the validity of each dimension (Riordan 2015). We need a model which respects both, in their essence and their difference, but allows a way of speaking of both in a unified way. I suggest that five such models are familiar.

1. **Private – public**
2. **Augustine: Ultimate peace and justice – temporal peace and justice**
3. **Aquinas: Common good – public order**
4. **Civil society – state**
5. **Rawls: Reasonable comprehensive doctrines – overlapping consensus**

For simplicity sake I associate the first term in each case with religion and the second with the political. Three of these are linked with named thinkers while two are more generally espoused. In that earlier discussion I favoured Aquinas’s model of common good and public order; however, in this paper I will return to Augustine’s model. I will argue that there is a valuable theological point which may be lost in the adoption of the more philosophical language of common goods. In the following I will briefly outline the five models with their advantages and disadvantages. Then I will consider Augustine’s argument at greater depth.

1. **Private – public**

The ‘private – public’ model describes the realm of the political as the public arena, and relies on philosophical attempts to articulate what can be presupposed as shared in the public arena. Depending on the account offered, standards of argumentation for the public sphere are laid down (Audi 2000). Participants in the public forum are required to conform to these standards. The diversity of ultimate
commitments makes it necessary to secure a public domain in which people can be free from the threat of oppression in the name of another’s religion. The price for this freedom and security is that they must forego the possibility of using the public power to impose their own religious convictions or practices on others.

This distinction allows a legitimacy and validity to religion, by confining it to a realm apart from that of the public. The disadvantage of this confinement is that religion is deprived of some dimensions of its self-understanding, insofar as it considers itself to have a public role. Nonetheless, many religious people have found it a useful compromise since it secures for them a space in which to hold their beliefs and practice their religion without interference from others or from the state. It should be noted also that the public domain is disadvantaged to the extent that it is deprived of some resources for dealing with relevant problems when it excludes the religious from the life of the public square.

2. Augustine: Ultimate peace and justice – temporal peace and justice

Augustine’s conceptualization of the relationship between religion and politics is particularly privileged, because he could be said to stand in both camps. As a scholar in the Roman cultural world, he had a deep appreciation of the history and ethos of the political (TeSelle 1987). As a bishop of the Christian Church, he had a sound theological appreciation of created reality within the divine economy. Augustine worked out his position in response to the allegation that Christianity had destroyed the proper balance between religion and politics (Markus 1970). Pagan refugees from Rome maintained that Rome’s defeat was due to the city’s abandonment of its traditional religious practices. Rome’s divine patrons had supposedly withdrawn their favour and protection because the city had transferred its worship to the God of the Christians. Augustine’s argument in the collection of books known as The City of God hinges on a contrast between two communities, the City of God and the earthly city. The contrast is drawn in terms of the motivating goods and the typical psychological states of the members of both communities. Love of God is contrasted with love of self, the desire to serve and obey is contrasted with the desire to dominate, the pursuit of God’s glory is contrasted with the pursuit of fame and honour, the harmony of peace and justice is contrasted with the constant battling for domination among nations and within nations. These two cities are in conflict with one another, but it is a conflict of a different order to that found within the earthly city. The battle lines are drawn through the hearts of men and women as well as through societies and states. The victory is assured, the Bishop Augustine affirms, but beyond history.
Within history, in this age (*saeculum*, the origin of our word ‘secular’), the human political community is not identical with the earthly city, but is a complex of the dynamics of both cities (Markus 1970, 58). Far from denying the goodness of the historical community, Augustine acknowledges that it pursues temporal peace and justice, which provide the conditions in which people can pursue their calling to love their neighbour and to serve God. The flaw in temporal peace and justice is that it must inevitably rely on domination, on coercion. The assertion of human will is at the core of Augustine’s understanding of sin, and the rebellion of human will against the divine will is the ultimate source of the disorder he analyses. But for order to be maintained in the political community, there must be a dimension of domination.

3. **Aquinas: Common good – public order**

Aquinas distinguished between a limited good as the proper object of political order and the unrestricted common good as the ultimate object of human striving (Finnis 1998). The questions which arise require investigation into the relationship between temporal goods of justice and peace, and the unrestricted goods of beatitude. If that relationship is one of subordination, or instrumentality, does it follow that there is an obligation to apply the means appropriate to the inferior good so that they also bring about the higher good? In other words, should the political regime use the coercive instruments of human law to ensure that its people obey God and do his will?

Aquinas deals with this question by means of parallel distinctions, first between different levels of good, and second between divine and human law. His definition of law as an ordinance of reason directed to the common good, made by one who has responsibility for the community, and promulgated (S.th. 1a2ae q90 a4), leaves open the possibility that there are different goods in common for different communities. It also leaves open the possibility that the methods to be employed in the application of law are different. The law of a political community is for the good of that community, and so it prohibits actions which threaten the peace and stability of the community. Divine law is for a different and higher good, and so requires an interior submission as well as outward conformity. ‘And so what suffices for the perfection of human law, viz., that it prohibit wrongdoing and impose punishments, does not suffice for the perfection of divine law; what that needs is that one be made completely ready for participation in eternal fulfilment’ (S.th. 1a2ae q98 a1c, quoted by Finnis 1998, 177). In contrast to divine law which has eternal beatitude as its purpose and expects the interior submission of subjects, human law is for the sake of social peace, and is satisfied by outward conformity.
For Alasdair MacIntyre the context of these reflections are the policies adopted by King Louis IX of France, and the Emperor, Frederick II in the Kingdom of Sicily. Aquinas encountered Louis’ rule in Paris, that of the emperor Frederick while a young student at Naples. Louis IX understood his royal authority in theological terms, considering it his duty to enforce the moral and religious teachings of Scripture and the Church. Against his use of law as an instrument of moral education, Aquinas argued that human law should not attempt to repress all the vices, or indeed to enforce all the virtues. Where Louis appeals to Christian theological sources, Aquinas argues from human reason, generating standards which should apply to all rulers, whether Christian or not. It is not necessary for valid human law that it be made by a Christian prince using Christian principles. It is necessary that it be reasonable, and recognizable as such by rational citizens. Similarly, Aquinas’s difference with Frederick was based on the emperor’s view of his authority to make law. The emperor claimed a divine source for his authority, as the providential instrument to correct the weaknesses of fallen humankind, presenting himself as the only source of peace and justice (MacIntyre 1996, 73).

This third model for conceptualizing the relationship between religion and politics draws on Aquinas’s parallel distinctions between divine (moral) law and human law, and between the unrestricted common good of God’s kingdom and the restricted common good of any political community. In his use of these distinctions, he denies that the restricted is simply instrumental to the unrestricted, so that he explicitly rules out the use of the instruments appropriate to human law (e.g. coercion) so as to ensure the achievement of the goods corresponding to divine law (e.g. salvation).

4. Civil society – state

The revival of interest in the notion of civil society provides a new context for considering the place of religion within the polity. Two major developments have precipitated the renewed interest in the topic of civil society, the collapse of the Soviet bloc, and the process of globalization. In presenting this model I rely on the usage of the term in the literature of the social sciences, in which civil society, the state, and the market are seen as three domains alongside and intertwined with one another, but without any priority among them. With the new visibility of religion in the public space Churches and religious bodies are spoken of as belonging to civil society, as the realm of socially organized activity and participation (Casanova 1994, 71). Among the valued contributions of civil society on this view is the creation and maintenance of social capital. The literature recognises the contribution of the Churches in some societies in fostering the constituent elements of democratic culture, in facilitating the formation and education of citizens to engage in argument and to accept conciliation in conflict. Religion is
acknowledged to contribute to the development of civil society in providing an institutional space, a wealth of symbols, metaphors and stories, an international dimension, and an intellectual heritage (Herbert 2003, 70). This very positive evaluation of the role of religion in fostering the social capital which is essential for liberal democratic politics makes this model particularly useful for the citizen who is at the same time a believer and seeks ways of integrating the two aspects of life. In the global context, the model also offers particular advantages, especially as the major faiths have world-wide distribution, and so find a ready-made category for the collaboration of churches and faith groups in the international forum.

5. Rawls: Reasonable comprehensive doctrines – overlapping consensus

The fifth model is taken from the late writings of political philosopher John Rawls. There has been a significant development in his understanding of the relationship between religion and politics. This is clear from an article entitled ‘The Idea of Public Reason Revisited’ (1997) in which he reworked the position as presented earlier in Political Liberalism (1996). In dealing with the question of religion and politics in Political Liberalism, Rawls imagines several reasonable comprehensive doctrines, including religious ones, coexisting in a liberal, pluralist polity, each with its view of the good life and its notions of justice and truth. The polity is only possible, however, because the adherents of a comprehensive doctrine exercise restraint, not insisting on their view of the true and the good, but willing to accept the content of the overlapping consensus between the reasonable doctrines as a basis for regulating the common life (Rawls 1999, 172). Citizens who endorse a reasonable judgment in the overlapping consensus will hold it to be true or right on the basis of their comprehensive doctrine. It is important to note that the overlapping consensus is not assumed to be secular. It is neither religious nor secular, but is capable of being accepted by proponents of both religious and secular comprehensive doctrines (Rawls 1999, 143). Rawls insists therefore that secularism is not the neutral ground for the meeting of different faiths, but is itself a possible comprehensive doctrine which might sustain the overlapping consensus.

Rawls admits many possible political conceptions of justice and also many forms of public reason. His own proposal, ‘justice as fairness’, is one candidate among others. Rawls also includes within the family of possible political conceptions ‘Catholic views of the common good and solidarity when they are expressed in terms of political values’ (Rawls 1999, 141f.). He also includes Habermas’s discourse conception of legitimacy. Acceptable political conceptions of justice propose principles which apply to the basic structure of society, which can be presented independent of any comprehensive doctrine, and
which are grounded in such fundamental ideas as the freedom and equality of citizens and the idea of society as a fair system of cooperation. Far from excluding religious considerations, Rawls allows them to be part of political debate, with the proviso that if any policy or legal measure is being advocated that the appropriate public reasons be provided also, possibly at some later date (Rawls 1999, 143f.) Religious reasons are not being excluded; but only those religious reasons may be advanced in support of political proposals which are capable of being translated into public reasons in the strict sense.

Rawls’s discussion of public reason suggests that religious arguments do not have to remain confined to the non-public realms of civil society. Believers, speaking from their faith convictions, do not have to be on the defensive within liberal political communities. However, the condition under which their contribution is welcome is that citizens of faith continue to abide by reasonable norms of argument and reasonable standards of participation in public discourse.

The advantages of this model are notable in that the distinctiveness of politics is preserved, the narrow sense of public reason is protected, and the use of coercive force is limited and controlled. At the same time, the background culture of civil society as so conceived provides the private sphere in which the diversity of religious cultures can be tolerated. However, religion is not confined to the private domain, but its contribution to political discourse is welcomed both within the political culture broadly conceived, and also within public reason in the narrow sense. This model can accommodate the kinds of questions which religiously committed citizens might wish to raise in dialogue with fellow citizens. Such questions can be asked and pursued rigorously in the wide public political culture, without thereby intending to impose on fellow citizens answers, or more specifically, constitutional arrangements and coercive laws derived exclusively from those answers.

Conclusion

Two of the five models are rooted in theological world-views, namely, those associated with Augustine and Aquinas. Common to both is a recognition of the need to limit the claims of religion so as to allow the proper sphere for the political. Aquinas does it with more of a positive regard for the secular domain. Both of them challenge theological accounts which would claim to have the overriding say on the purpose of human law and rule, Augustine facing down the pagan cosmological views, as well as the Christian interpreters of the fall of Rome, Aquinas denying the pious and centralizing claims of King Louis and the Emperor Frederick. The Churchmen appear in defence of the secular, over against other theological voices.
There are significant advantages of both the private-public distinction and the concept of civil society as locus for Church involvement in public life. Both secure recognized space for religion, but both tend to exclude religion from the specifically political arena, and that is a disadvantage. The private/public model effectively silences any distinctively religious voice in the sphere of politics. The civil society model risks confining the religious contribution to a restricted area of public life, one which is possibly in tension with religion’s own aspirations. Rawls’s late model which includes the idea of public reason in the narrow sense preserves something of value from the private-public distinction. It also incorporates a concept of civil society with its background culture, so that it can carry forward whatever is of use in the civil society model. Rawls’s model goes beyond the other two in providing a place for the religious contribution to public life. The notion of the broad sense of public political culture releases religion from any confinement to the private, or to civil society as the background culture. It is thereby recognised as capable of making a contribution to public political life beyond a merely narrow or sectional interest, but potentially of relevance to the whole political sphere. Rawls’s later thought is very accommodating and respectful of religion, while limiting religion at the same time. His views facilitate a contribution to public discourse on the basis of religious commitments, while setting standards to which religious contributors must adhere. Those standards, however, are not such as to deprive religion of its voice in public life.

What Rawls contributes from a political philosophical standpoint, complements what Aquinas contributes from a theological standpoint. Aquinas, writing from a theological perspective, respects the autonomy of the political. At the same time he provides reasons for restricting religious authorities or political leaders who claim to speak with religious authority. Rawls, writing from a political philosophical perspective, respects the autonomy of religion. He provides a view of public reason in the narrow sense whereby it is confined within definite parameters as to persons, content and context. There is a further complementarity between these two models. Rawls himself has acknowledged the usefulness of the language of the common good. The common good / public good distinction which Finnis finds in Aquinas parallels and is complementary to the distinction of reasonable comprehensive doctrines / overlapping consensus in Rawls.

III

In that earlier discussion I preferred Aquinas’s model of the common good and found it could be complemented by Rawls’s distinctions. However, I now wish to return to Augustine in the hope of
finding a more theological answer to my fundamental question. I am encouraged to do so by Brian T. Trainor’s articles (2010; 2015) in which he argues for a re-reading of Augustine. As noted, Augustine had set a very high standard with his remark about justice and the importance of rendering to God what is due to God. He himself was unhappy to end his reflections at his point, since he could not completely accept their implications. He did not shy away from facing them, however. He faced the conclusion that if Cicero’s definition be accepted that the city or political entity consists of a multitude of reasonable beings united in the agreement on what is required by justice and the common good, then the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire never was such a political entity. The reason being that Rome never gave to God the submission due to Him, but worshipped idols and conducted its public life in violent conquest and conflict, contrary to God’s command. As a former teacher of rhetoric in the Roman world Augustine appreciated how shocking such a conclusion must be. He offered a way out by proposing to apply another definition, also rooted in Roman literature, which would allow him to make his critical case while at the same time preserving something of the respectability of Rome.

As noted already, his strategy was to focus on the definition of the city as a multitude of reasonable beings united in love of the same object. With this definition he could distinguish between the City of God as the community of those who love God and are thereby united, and the earthly city as the community of those whose love is of themselves. This latter form of love while shared does not in fact foster unity, but leads to dissension and division. Contrasting the two forms of love Augustine can highlight the worthiness of one city while exposing the flaws and shortcomings of the other. But this latter critique does not require a dismissal of Rome’s entitlement to qualify as a political entity in the first place.

The question which arises for commentators on Augustine is whether or not the change of definition requires him to abandon the emphasis on justice as a defining element of a city. Oliver O’Donovan classifies the reactions as either ‘idealist’ or ‘realist’. Idealists want to stress that Augustine continues to hold the view that the true republic to be just must be Christian, or at least monotheistic, and committed to serving and implementing the Will of God. A commonwealth united in love of its preferred objects would be a city only in name or appearance, not in reality. Realists, on the other hand, according to O’Donovan, see in Augustine’s shift of emphasis an anticipation of the later modern understanding of the liberal polity as accommodating diverse comprehensive doctrines and welcome it accordingly (O’Donovan 2004, 55f.). Trainor takes a typically Catholic ‘both-and’ stance, recognizing the novelty of the shift to a more open definition, without assuming the other understanding was abandoned. His task
then is to explain how the two conceptions, idealist and realist, can be combined in a coherent understanding of the political entity. He attempts this by presenting Augustine’s thought in such a way that the different distinctions and their coherence emerge (Trainor 2010, 547).

For Augustine, a well-ordered city is one in which God’s will is observed and the divinely intended order prevails. However, even for a city which would want to achieve this ideal, it is not possible within history given the condition of human fallenness and sin. It will be achieved in the Parousia, beyond history. But within history there are different kinds of city, those which strive in various degrees to be well-ordered in the sense of giving each including God his due, and those which turn their backs on God. Trainor uses the convenient images of ‘facing towards’ and ‘facing away from’. The cities which deliberately face away from God he suggests are not on the scale of best-better-good-poor, but are ‘to be characterised as unjust/unrighteous, as beyond the sphere of the truly ethical/just, rather than as inadequate in light of the ideal’.

‘Augustine then does not present us with a new definition of the commonwealth that replaces an understanding of the commonwealth in terms of mutual consent to right (ius), but presents us rather with a new way of characterising a society that (i) does not serve the one true God, (ii) worships false gods, (iii) has no understanding or respect for the right (ius) that flows from its divine source and which alone constitutes a true commonwealth but that (iv) nevertheless continues to function and to be a society in some sense, even if it has only a bastardised form of existence’ (Trainor 2010, 548).

Functioning as a society in some sense means that believers can nonetheless appreciate the measure of peace which is secured by that society. This sustains a space in which individuals and households (a private space?) can pursue their life of faith.

On Trainor’s reading of Augustine it is helpful to make explicit two sub-distinctions implicit in the argument of The City of God following the basic distinction between the two cities, The City of God and the earthly city. The first is the distinction between the City of God as it is in itself, and as it is in the form of Church, empirically, within history. The second is the distinction between the earthly city as God oriented, as receptive to God; and the earthly city as God denying, opposed to the true God and his city. This allows him to argue that the true earthly city is the heavenly directed one, and the only one which can be considered just and in accord with the will of God.
With this complexity, then, we are not dealing simply with a two-term pair of ‘religious’ and ‘secular’, and this was an over-simplification of my earlier treatment of Augustine in the classification of positions on religion and politics summarized above. The secular for Augustine is not a univocal category but comprises a range of stances which may be distinguished between those that are facing towards God, and those that are facing away from him. Among those facing towards God are a great range of specimens depending on how well they incorporate values and virtues. But as pilgrims or wayfarers they recognize their condition as in progress towards an end, which may only be inchoately and vaguely known. To my delight Trainor uses the term ‘heuristic’ in this context without elaborating on it. But insofar as the common good is that end striven for (which may be understood as God as the highest good, or as The Good, simply, or as the human fulfilment of each and of all persons), it might be named but will not be fully comprehended (Riordan 2008a). All these forms of regime which face God realise justice in some degree, but within history and given human sinfulness their realisation will be always incomplete. ‘Either the soul is turned towards God, in which case it can be just to some degree, or it is turned away from God, in which case it cannot be just at all...’ (Trainor 2015, 375). Their achievement of justice will always be restricted, relative to the justice of the City of God. But even so, they can be understood in terms of both definitions offered, as a multitude united in a common view of what is just, and a community united in love of some good. In proportion as the good loved is superior or inferior in the hierarchy of good, so will the corresponding community be better or worse. ‘The best city is erected and safeguarded on the bond of faith and an unbreakable concord. This happens when the common good is loved, when God is the highest and truest good, and when men love each other most sincerely because they love themselves for sake of Him...’ (Trainor 2015, 375). It may seem strange to refer to such a good city as secular, since it appears to incorporate many religious elements, in the recognition of God as ultimate source of good, for instance. But secular is not distinguished from religious, necessarily, in Trainor’s reading of Augustine. He is attempting to explain how Augustine’s two definitions of ‘city’ might be compatible and jointly applicable to some cities in history, but not to all. That the members of the city are united in their pursuit of temporal and earthly goods (peace, justice, material wellbeing) does not preclude their being united also in doing the kind of justice which is prepared to give God what is due to God.

Some political communities are turned away from God, and they too can be labelled secular. At the extreme are cities whose existential orientation is away from the fullness of being, and towards the abyss, and non-being. The good they pursue, perhaps power, domination over others, accumulation of wealth without regard for the needs or wellbeing of others, occupies the position of ‘highest good’ for
them and so is equivalent to an idol, or false god. For such cities their injustice is absolute, in contrast to the relative justice of other secular cities facing the other way. This is an analytic device. It remains a question whether any such city could possibly exist, namely, one in which there is no redeeming good present, in which the natural virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance are completely absent. Doubtless there are and have been in history regimes in which the whole political and legal order is based on crime. The regimes responsible for the holocaust (Nazi Germany), the gulag (the Soviet Union), genocide (e.g. Rwanda) and the killing fields of Cambodia spring to mind as possible candidates.

Many of Augustine’s commentators have wanted to read him as generalizing this form of the secular as applicable to all political communities in history. Hence they have seen in him an anticipation of the stance of Thomas Hobbes and more recent liberal thinkers. In their cases the label ‘secular’ is to be understood, Trainor notes, as meaning ‘only secular’, or ‘secular against the sacred’, or ‘intrinsically secular’. But this reduction is false to Augustine’s texts and his understanding of the city in history.

Trainor’s point is summarized in the slogan ‘sacred reign – secular rule’. Where the political authorities know themselves to be subordinate to higher standards that they do not set themselves then they acknowledge the limitations of their sovereignty. These standards are operative in citizens’ expectations that their governments and legislatures will make and apply laws and edicts that deliver justice and serve the common good. The exercise of rule in the presence of higher claims does not mean the enactment of revealed prescriptions from Sacred Scripture, but the exercise of political responsibility in the consciousness of serving a higher goal ultimately. Trainor makes the point by contrasting his view of the Augustinian secular state with a Theocratic state. Where the Augustinian regime is summarized as ‘sacred reign – secular rule’, the theocratic state is summarized as ‘sacred reign – sacred rule’. The possible inclusion of religiously sourced law in the law of the state would be decided solely by the secular authorities in an Augustinian earthly city, while in a theocratic state the religious authorities would decide. It is not difficult to imagine examples. For instance, religiously motivated groups campaigned for the recognition of conscientious objection to military service in the United States of America, and in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. The legislators in these jurisdictions adopted the principle of religiously motivated conscientious objection, and eventually expanded the category. Their reasoning was based on the respect for the principle of individual liberty, and the desire that no one should be forced against his will to undertake what s/he held to be morally objectionable. This was very different from a possible incorporation in the civil law at the behest of religious authorities for religious reasons. Other examples might be found in the development of the principles and practices of
punishment. The elimination of ‘cruel and inhumane’ forms of punishment was argued for by religiously motivated groups (the Society of Friends – Quakers – have always been interested in reforming the practice of punishment). Religious conceptions of reconciliation may have inspired the development of practices of restorative justice. But the decisions by lawmakers to adopt forms of restorative justice and to ensure humane treatment of those punished were made for reasons perfectly accessible to non-believers (justice, respect for human dignity, effectiveness). They were made by secular authorities, and not by the religious authorities for religious reasons. Yet the human, secular, reasons for the changes in law were such that they were open to the higher, more ultimate reality: human dignity, justice, solidarity of humankind, and divine mercy.

Augustine’s thought is complex, and has suffered from the tendency to simplify in order to make it accessible. Trainor argues that the images and symbols used to convey Augustine’s thought, especially as received in the medieval period, have contributed more to confusion than to clarity. For instance, talk of the two princes, Priest (or Pope) and King, might be taken by some to represent the pair of City of God in its fullness, and the human community in history. However, Trainor notes that for Augustine these two can also represent the human community in history, ‘Priest’ standing for that portion of the City of God which is still on pilgrimage and making its way in history (the Church), and ‘King’ standing for the political community (Trainor 2015, 377). Insofar as the political community is secular but facing towards the ground of its truth and being in God, King and Priest are not opposed or warring symbols, but both represent in their own ways the service of the sacred. The assertion of an appropriate autonomy of the ‘King’ from the ‘Priest’ does not entail an assertion of absolute autonomy from the divine source of truth and good and social order. To be secular does not require being turned away from God. Trainor insists that the Augustinian view of secularity requires a ‘firm distinction in principle between religious law and state law. Church and state are properly distinguished and “separated” when it is publicly acknowledged that what aspects if any of religious law are to be enshrined in state law is a matter for secular authorities alone to determine’ (Trainor 2015, 381).

There is a very similar vision of possible relationship between the sacred and the secular in The Second Vatican Council’s Pastoral Constitution when it speaks of the Church and the Political Community as possible partners in service of the same human persons but offering different but complementary service. ‘The political community and the Church in their respective fields are independent and autonomous; but under different titles they are both helping the same men to fulfil their personal and social vocation. The more they co-operate reasonably, with an eye on the circumstances of time and
Trainor argues that his reading of Augustine can be helpful in meeting the challenge formulated by Jürgen Habermas concerning the truth-deficit of modern secular liberal democracies. Insofar as unease is widely experienced in Western polities because of the lack of grounding in substantive truth, the Augustinian model of sacred reign – secular rule is a source of reassurance. More interesting to me is the argument he makes concerning the attitude of Muslims to secular modernity. For many religious Muslims the operative model of western liberal secularity is not attractive, seeming to foster practices and behaviour which violate traditional moral, cultural and religious norms. But if the secular is understood in an Augustinian sense, then the embracing of liberal democracy need not entail in principle an abandonment of religious conviction, and it offers a real and practicable alternative to a purely theocratic view of politics.

Trainor’s re-reading of Augustine is challenging, requiring us move away from a simplistic conception of the secular as the arena opposed to the sacred. We are asked to consider the term as varied in meaning, since it can refer to the domain which is separated from the sacred but facing towards it and open to God, or it can refer to the domain which is separated from the sacred and facing away from it, opposed to God and closed off to the impact of the divine. The term can fluctuate in meaning, and refer to diverse realities along a spectrum. We should not be surprised by this, since our whole vocabulary exhibits the feature of analogy. Graham Ward (2000) is cited as making this point about so many of the important terms we use in theology which in the religious context acquire particular meaning not unrelated to their ordinary usages. Examples are not only ‘justice’, but also ‘community’, ‘people’, ‘peace – salaam – shalom’, ‘virtue’ and ‘the good’ itself (Trainor 2015, 229). Another important example is the term ‘law’, which is capable of analogous predication from divine law, revealed law, old and new, natural law, canon law, civil law, moral law, and so forth (Porter 1999). Neglect of the range and of the reality reflected here results in the reduction to one instance which is made to be paramount and absolute, to the exclusion of other instances. This tendency is typical of a ‘falling’ secularity, turned away from God, and Trainor, citing Barth, claims to recognize it in the absolutization of one value above others in human rights discourse, for instance, where liberty, or sometimes equality, becomes the single important standard. ‘There is no uniformly practical meaning of natural law but that its meaning, intent and practical application is always subject to a personal or political determination that takes us in a particular direction or along a particular line, namely, towards or away from the City of God’ (Trainor
That determination is likely to favour individual or group interests, and so the good of a section is preferred to the common good.

IV

The attempt to rescue the secular and reinterpret it as not necessarily opposed to the sacred requires me to re-evaluate the models for understanding my dual position as believer and citizen, as living in two worlds. This new look at Augustine facilitated by Trainor’s studies suggests that the ‘two worlds’ presupposed by the question is a simplification. A more complex comprehension is needed. Being believer and citizen requires holding a view which encompasses four perspectives: there is the City of God in its completion; there is the community of believers on pilgrimage through history; there is the secular domain as oriented to and open to the sacred; and there is the secular domain when it is opposed to and turned away from the sacred. This more complex model requires of me a broader vision. The familiar pair of Church and State, for instance, can refer to a range of cases, depending on whether the State is open or closed to the transcendent, and even if open, as will be the espoused case with the Church, there will be gradations in the extent to which the standards of justice and truth are incorporated in the entities within history.

It is understandable, then, if ‘idealistic’ interpreters of Augustine are dissatisfied with the ‘realist’ reduction of Augustine’s thought to an anticipation of modern (Hobbesian) concerns. At the same time, an option for a purely ‘idealistic’ interpretation would reduce the believer’s possibilities for a principled engagement with the reality of politics. It was not Augustine’s intention that good people would withdraw from the turmoil of the public arena and it is certainly not the thrust of Pope Francis’s engagement with important current issues such as global climate change. The model of ‘sacred reign – secular rule’ advocated by Brian Trainor is a valuable resource for religious believers who are called to serve their communities in public life, whether as citizens or as officials.

References


Riordan, Patrick. 2015. ‘Neither Theocracy nor Civil Religion can serve the Common Good’ in Tambara 32.1, pp. 85-106.


