

# Religion and Liberal Democracy:

reflections from the city of God

Kent Greenawalt

**S**t. Augustine wrote *The City of God* nearly sixteen centuries ago. The classical Roman Empire, which by then was officially Christian, was in precipitous decline. No one had conceived of liberal democratic societies rooted in principles of religious liberty. Do Augustine's thoughts have any relevance for the issues of law and political philosophy that trouble us now? The answer is "yes." Although we would be ill served by seeking to apply all his recommendations for political life, his profound insights about human nature and about the fundamental tasks of a political order can help us evaluate how our society should resolve issues of church and state, religion and politics.

I shall discuss three intersections of government with religious beliefs and institutions. First, should the state support religious groups? Second, should people who violate ordinary laws out of religious conviction receive exemptions? Third, should people bring their religious convictions to bear in public debates over what laws to adopt? The first two questions involve areas of constitutional law and legislative choice; the third question is mainly one of political philosophy, not law. The deepest themes of *The City of God* can illuminate our understanding of these issues.

## deep themes and a critical cross current

*The City of God* contrasts a worldly city with a heavenly one. Members of the worldly city are moved by greed, lust for domination, and pride; members of the heavenly city by love for God. The primary task of civil government is to achieve a degree of earthly security. "[T]he earthly city which does not live by faith seeks only an earthly peace, and limits the goal of its peace, of its harmony of authority and obedience among citizens, to the voluntary and collective attainment of objectives necessary to mutual existence" (St. Augustine, 464). The earthly city "has a finality of its own, it reaches such happiness by sharing a common good as is possible when there are no goods but the things of time to afford it happiness" (327). Members of the City of God live by faith; they serve one another in charity. Augustine is careful not to identify the City of God with the visible church; indeed, one of his major disagreements with the Donatists was over their ideal of a "pure" church. Augustine regarded the Roman Catholic Church as inclusive, embracing many who were not actually saved. For Augustine, the members of the City of God, "wayfarers" in the world, are intermingled with members of the worldly city, and no one can identify just who they are. "Both of these cities alike make use of temporal goods and both are equally affected by temporal ills—but how different they are in faith, how dissimilar in hope, how unlike in love. They will go on until they are to be separated in the last Judgment, when each shall receive its appointed end. . . ." (425). Before that time, "as mortal life is the same for all, there ought to be common cause between the two cities in what concerns our purely human living" (464).

Although Augustine, a man who greatly prized friendship, accepted the classical notion that human beings are inherently social, he decisively rejected the classical conception that the purpose of the state is to promote the good life. As Herbert Deane wrote,

The traditional view of the early Church that the state was an essential instrument for repressing the consequences of sin and that it was not the vehicle by which men could attain true justice, true virtue, or true happiness was thoroughly congenial to Augustine's own leading conceptions—the sinfulness of human nature, salvation by unmerited divine grace, and the view that private property, slavery, and the political and legal systems are punishments and remedies for the depraved condition of mankind after the Fall. (10-11)

*Living by faith  
and living by law  
may not collide  
if we are  
patient enough  
with our  
distinctions.*

*An earlier version of  
this essay was  
featured at the  
National Lilly  
Fellows Program  
Conference at Baylor  
University, whose  
theme was "The City  
of God  
Re-Visited: Church  
and State in the  
Twenty-first  
Century."*

The passages I have read comport with a civil state that provides benefits that people of diverse religious views require, a state that stays away from matters of the spirit, for which it is incompetent. Surprisingly, this vision of political life is not so different from that of John Locke—a political philosopher one does not commonly associate with Augustine. Locke had a more optimistic view of human nature and was less disparaging of secular goods than Augustine, but his First Letter Concerning Toleration treats salvation as the most important human good, a good that cannot be trusted to civil authorities (See Locke).

The following passage sums up the crucial cross current in *The City of God*. “We call those Christian emperors happy who govern with justice. . . . We call them happy when they think of sovereignty as a ministry of God and use it for the spread of the true religion. . . .” (118). Augustine had no illusion that persecution could directly produce true faith, but he had shifted from his earlier view that imperial force should not be used against the Donatists. When he wrote this book, he believed that civil coercion could help prevent the spread of heresy; he also thought that some people who initially joined the Catholic Church out of fear later came to voluntary acceptance of the faith. Like later defenders of physical force against heresy, Augustine, in a 408 letter, made reference to the parable found in Luke (xiv, 26-29), of the master instructing his servant to compel strangers to come to his banquet. As Augustine conceived the crucial question, it was whether civil authorities should promote the true faith. Locke and his French contemporary, Pierre Bayle, asked a different question: should one endorse a principle that rulers enforce what they understand to be the true faith? Locke and Bayle saw clearly that if all rulers acted on this principle, many rulers would end up not enforcing the true religion, given widespread disagreement about what religion is true. (Bayle, 41) Professor Deane speaks of a “fundamental contradiction” between Augustine’s general attitude toward the state and his final approval of legal punishment for heresy.

Since state use of coercive force to support any particular religion is unthinkable in our society, this tension within Augustine may seem to have only antiquarian interest, but some people do now seek milder forms of support for religion. They typically suppose that religion is of great intrinsic importance for human life and that religion helps to promote virtuous citizens. They also suppose that the government can contribute constructively to the religious life of its citizens. In what follows, I shall concentrate on the Augustine who conceives of the state as aiming at civil peace, governed by officials most of whom are residents of the worldly city; but I shall also attend to the Augustine who urged Christian rulers to promote the true religion.

### I. state support of religious groups

Should a modern liberal state support religious institutions? We need at once to make distinctions. As option a., the state could support particular religious groups or ideas because they are true or because they provide more solid assistance to the state than competitors. As option b., the state could support religious groups only insofar as they perform secular functions, such as running hospitals, with aid limited to the secular functions. Or, option c., the state could support religious groups as such because they fall into some larger class of supported groups, leaving religious groups free to use state assistance as they please.

First, on option a., if we were guided by Augustine’s recommendation that rulers suppress heresy, we would accept milder support of the true religion; but one of the basic premises of our political order is that officials should not identify true religion. It is easy to see why. If officials are mainly members of the earthly city, they cannot be trusted to make perceptive judgments about religion. With our diverse religious perspectives, struggle for the government’s favor could produce intense conflict, even if losers avoid persecution. The religious incompetence of officials and the divisive effects of efforts to win endorsement are two extremely powerful reasons for religious liberty and nonestablishment.

What if officials picked religions to support according to their contribution to moral virtue and political good health? That would not be much better. Religious life often does contribute to the morality of citizens, and it both supports political institutions and serves as a check on tyrannical

government. But the prospect of government endorsing particular religions because they perform these functions especially well can fill no one with enthusiasm. Few seriously religious persons want officials judging between religions on the basis of moral and political merit. Further, it would be unseemly for endorsed religions to shift with the political winds, for Republican grants to the Christian Coalition to be followed by Democratic funding of the National Council of Churches. Aid to groups on the basis of religious merit is barred by our Constitution, and few would have it otherwise.

A softer version of the position favoring aid does enjoy substantial support. The state could assist religion in general, so long as it does not discriminate among denominations. As appealing as this idea is to many people, it is at odds with a principle of nonsponsorship the Supreme Court has developed for the religion clauses. And it is not finally defensible. Proponents often assert that the Establishment Clause was originally seen as allowing nonpreferential assistance to Christian groups. But the country is now much more diverse than it was then, and immigration keeps drawing more non-Christians within our borders. We are still dominantly Christian in religious belief and practice, but do we want to label all non-Christians as failing to follow religions the government endorses? I hope not. A plausible proposal to aid all religions needs to include more than Christians. But how can the government endorse religions with mutually incompatible beliefs? It might, of course, give money to all religious groups or announce that religious practice is healthy; but government does far better to refrain from endorsing religion. That, with minimal exceptions, is what the prevailing principle of nonsponsorship requires.

Continuing to option b., we consider whether the state should be able to support secular functions of religious groups? In modern societies, governments do much that is beyond what Augustine regarded as the core of state responsibilities. Given the pervasive concerns of many religions, a substantial overlap exists between their concerns and those of government. Since one way for the government to act is by supporting private endeavors, the state may finance private efforts to improve personal and social life, by hospitals, adoption agencies, soup kitchens, and schools. If religious groups provide these services, should they be given or denied assistance afforded other private groups? If support assists the secular service, and criteria for support are based on the secular service, not religious soundness, the state may treat religious groups like other private providers. This general principle, indeed, is rarely disputed.

Schools, however, present a special problem. One worry has been that general aid will promote a school's religious mission as well as secular service. A second worry is that because the vast majority of private schools have been religious, and most of these are Roman Catholic, general aid for private schooling would go overwhelmingly to religious groups. A third worry is that funding for parochial schools will draw students away from public schools, crucial institutions in forging unity out of cultural diversity. A final concern is that aid would generate divisive battles over funding. The Supreme Court has referred to some of these factors in adopting a position that no general aid may be given to religious schools. In recent decisions, however, the Court has emphasized the requirement that the state must be neutral between religious and nonreligious providers of services. What it will say about assistance to religious schools as part of voucher programs is not certain, but the prospects for approval look better than they have for a long time.

One point that has emerged in school aid cases has more general relevance. Any extensive administrative intermixture between government and religious organization is highly undesirable, even if the aim of the contact is to ensure that state support goes for secular services. When officials become deeply involved in reviewing the efforts of religious organizations, the risks of insensitivity, prejudice, and favoritism are great.

For option c., we must ask whether government support to religious groups may include direct religious activities, so long as the government gives general aid to nonreligious groups on the same basis? The Supreme Court has long spoken as if a state cannot make monetary grants to assist worship and other central religious activities; but recent decisions cast some doubt on this constitutional principle. In the most important case, the Court insisted that the University of Virginia must

help finance a student journal with a proselyting Christian message if it finances other student publications. Most Justices recognized a tension between a principle of no support and a principle of neutrality; but Justice Thomas's concurrence argued that any neutral aid is acceptable (Rosenberger).

Imagine the following program: Congress becomes convinced, possibly as a result of reading Robert Putnam's now-famous analysis in "Bowling Alone," of the general value of private, intermediary organizations as seedbeds of moral virtue and democratic participation, and is worried about declining involvement in these organizations. It decides to give grants to all private, nonprofit organizations according to membership, with no strings attached on the use of money. The idea is that this will promote the health of our political life. It turns out that about half of the participation in private groups in the United States is in churches, synagogues, mosques, etc. They receive half the funds, and can use them to finance new facilities, costs of worship, or any other purposes. Since the grants have no strings, little administrative supervision is needed. For churches, the economic benefit is like that they already receive from tax exemptions and deductions. Nonetheless, such a program is deeply troubling. Tax funds collected from everyone are paying for indisputably religious activities, and churches will join other groups in seeking more funds for private intermediary organizations. If distance between government and religious institutions is usually desirable, this direct support would be a large step in the wrong direction.

In thinking about government support for religious activities, we should take careful stock of the vitality of religion in the United States as compared with much of Europe. Why is religious belief and membership much higher here than in most European countries? Does state support, as it exists in those countries, stultify religion? One cannot be sure, but I suspect the answer is yes. In modern society, government may help religion most over the long run by not getting involved.

## II. exemptions for religious claimants?

Should a liberal, democratic state create some exemptions from ordinary laws for people who have strong religious reasons not to conform?

In its two most important cases, the Supreme Court has taken opposite positions about the Free Exercise Clause. In *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, it said that a state cannot require Amish children to attend school after the eighth grade if the Amish have a deep-seated religious understanding that such education is spiritually harmful, and if they provide an alternative vocational education that well prepares young men and women for Amish life. (*Yoder*) In *Employment Division v. Smith*,<sup>12</sup> the Court said that for valid secular laws, religious claimants have no more right to disobey than anyone else. Although using peyote lies at the very core of the worship services of the Native American Church, its members may not use peyote, if use is generally illegal. A court need not consider whether any state interest warrants such a massive interference with worship; the church members are out of luck. (*Employment Division*)

This striking reversal of basic free exercise principles dismayed most religious leaders and religion clause scholars. By an overwhelming vote, Congress reenacted the *Yoder* approach, under which a state had to show a compelling interest in enforcement if a law would substantially burden a person's exercise of religion. Otherwise, the religious claimant was exempted from the law's application. The Religious Freedom Restoration Act applied to government at every political level. In June, 1997, the Court held that Congress lacked authority under the Fourteenth Amendment to reach state and local laws. (*City of Boerne*) In brief, Congress had no authority to expand rights the Supreme Court had declared. The Court's opinion is murky about the law's application to federal legislation and executive acts. Nothing in the Court's language indicates that Congress lacks power to adopt such a law for the federal government or that state legislatures lack power to adopt such laws within their own domains.

Although the Supreme Court has sharply reduced constitutionally compelled exemptions, it has consistently said that legislatures may adopt specific accommodations to the free exercise of a religion. Without doubt, states may adopt explicit exceptions to the rules against peyote use for the

Native American Church and similar churches, just as governments at all levels allowed use of wine for communion when sales of alcoholic beverages were prohibited.

Perhaps Augustine's thought can help provide perspective on our constitutional law. For him, religious concerns were the most important aspects of human existence. Secular states will sometimes make demands at odds with the guides of true religion. These conflicts will increase as the domains of secular regulation expand. Is it not obviously desirable to minimize those conflicts with feasible exemptions? Before we embrace that conclusion, we need to address two obstacles in Augustine's own thought and two matters he did not consider.

Regarding obedience to the state, Augustine had a virtually absolute view of when people should obey the law. Only if believers were told to proclaim a false god or deny true religion should they refuse to obey. Even then, they should passively refuse rather than resist authority. If people obeyed to the extent Augustine recommended, few outright conflicts between secular and religious demands would arise.

As a possible objection to exemptions, this claim about submission to authority is misconceived. Our modern notions of deference do not fit Augustine's. Most people think unjust laws should be disobeyed on some occasions; after Hitler and Stalin, few of us subscribe to near absolute obedience. Even more important, outright disobedience is not the main issue. The state should not severely deprive people of religious freedom, even if they will (and should) submit to the state's authority. The overriding concern for religious freedom does not depend on the attitude of believers toward obeying laws.

More difficult to deal with is a second worry about Augustine's position: he was concerned about the true religion, not religion in general. We have already seen that in modern conditions the state cannot say what is the true religion. If exemptions are to be granted, they must go to religious claimants generally (or to classes of claimants chosen in some manner other than the truth of their religious understanding). We have three bases to move from Augustine's concern for true believers to broader exemptions. First, among all the religious believers who will receive exemptions will be believers in the true religion. They will receive exemptions that they would otherwise be denied. Second, many of us now feel more modest than was Augustine in our ability to identify the true religion. We not only may doubt *which* particular religion has got things right, we believe many religions have some true insights. If we believe truth is dimly perceived and scattered, we would be very hesitant to see exemptions restricted to one religion. In any event, our government cannot take the view that one religion is right. The third basis for broader exemptions is that religious convictions matter tremendously to many people, however close their opinions may be to ultimate truth. Avoiding unnecessary conflicts in their perceived obligations is desirable.

A major concern about any judicial standard that depends on substantial burdens and compelling interests is that applying such a standard is very difficult. How do courts decide what burdens and state interests are great enough to tip the balance one way or the other? Further, someone must say if a claimant's assertions are sincere; in occasional instances, judges have to decide whether a sincere claim is "religious" or not. These worries about applying a flexible standard partly explain the Supreme Court's shift from the approach of *Yoder*. If a legislature explicitly provides that members of the Native American Church may use peyote in worship services, the law's application is clear for judges; but legislators then have had to make hard choices. Responsive to voters, legislators may care mainly about dominant religions. Dry counties will make exceptions for Christian use of wine in worship; some states forbidding use of peyote may be less attentive to the minuscule Native American Church. Leaving these choices to legislatures invites unfair discrimination through neglect. That constitutional approach also invites discrimination in a stronger form—laws directly targeted at unpopular religions. Such discrimination remains unconstitutional according to Supreme Court doctrine; a city cannot forbid animal sacrifice if people are allowed to kill animals for all sorts of other reasons. (*Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye*) However, courts often cannot determine why legislatures acted as they did. Legislators can attack some hated religion under the facade of neutral, secular purposes, and courts will accept their stated (acceptable) purposes. A free exercise test that

provides real protection for freedom of religion is difficult for courts to administer. Nevertheless, the underlying value of religious liberty condemns the Supreme Court's insensitive withdrawal from that task.

Even after these obstacles have been dealt with, there remains a serious worry about religious exemptions in that they may be unfair to people with nonreligious claims of conscience. This is a complex topic. For some religious claims—for example, not to work on Saturday or to receive blood transfusions—it is hard to imagine nonreligious claims with the strength of the religious claims. For other claims, such as not to kill in war, some individuals who are not religious in any ordinary sense do have convictions with a strength like that of the convictions of religious pacifists. Such individuals should be afforded a similar exception, either by constitutional right or legislative decision. The issue of nonreligious conscience is delicate, but the solution is not to refuse all exemptions. That “solution” does not help those with nonreligious conscientious claims; they are not going to feel much better in knowing that religious claimants will also go to jail.

In sum, the critical importance of religion in people's lives, a central premise of all Augustine wrote, argues strongly in favor of exemptions for sincere religious claimants from the application of some otherwise valid laws. No objection we have examined calls for a contrary conclusion.

### III. religious convictions and politics

My third subject is the relation between religious belief and practice and our society's political and legal life. Should citizens and officials rely on their religious understandings in debating and resolving political problems? (What follows is a brief account of views I have developed more fully in *Private Consciences and Public Reasons*, 1995.)

Think of some recent issues before Congress. Should it try to forestall the advent of human cloning? Should it reduce the capital gains tax? Should it propose a constitutional amendment about abortion? Should it expand medical insurance? Should it provide the death penalty for serious federal crimes? Should it accept or reject same-sex marriage (so far as it can influence that)? Many citizens believe that their religious perspectives speak to these issues. This is strikingly true about abortion, same-sex marriage, and capital punishment. People's religions also influence their notions of what society owes its least fortunate members and of the acceptable gap between rich and poor. Someone might say, for example, “the Bible, as exemplified particularly by the parable of the Good Samaritan, teaches us God's wish that we love our neighbors; that obligation must be fulfilled by greater aid to the poor.” Should people bring religious arguments into the political forum or keep them out? I shall first summarize more extreme positions, and clarify what is not at issue. I shall then present my own position.

Some people believe, for example, that religion should be excluded from politics. They claim that in pluralist liberal democracies, political decisions should be based on shared premises of liberal democracy and on methods of justification that are accessible to all citizens. Whatever the exact components of religious understandings, citizens do not share any single religious perspective, and none rests on methods of justification that are accessible in the required way. Religious belief depends partly on faith, personal experience, and distinctive tradition. “Logical” arguments alone will not persuade outsiders to embrace a religious view. Religious perspectives may enrich cultural understandings as well as personal lives, but the state should not coerce citizens unless it has reasons that have force *for all of them*. Since religious reasons do not have such force, they do not belong in democratic politics. Their exclusion is required by fairness and political stability. Neither citizens nor officials should rely on religious reasons as they discuss and determine political issues. One might think of this exclusive position as a kind of extreme embodiment of Augustine's idea that religious and nonreligious citizens can unite in achieving the requisites of a common social life.

This “exclusive” position concerns politics, not broader public culture. It does not insist that religion belongs in a private, wholly nonpublic sphere. Second, the position does not claim that people *can be wholly uninfluenced* by their religious understandings. People should not rely on religious reasons when they discuss political issues in public and they should attempt to develop

their views without reference to those reasons. What the “exclusive” position urges is “self-exclusion.” It does not propose punishing or silencing those who make religious arguments. People should voluntarily refrain from making religious arguments because these arguments do not fit with how liberal democracies should work.

The competing “inclusive” position suggests that citizens and officials may rely on the sources of understanding they trust most. This position resonates with Augustine’s view that religious understanding is of overarching significance. If a respected religious authority, or a divine text, or a personal sense of God tells someone that society should help the poor, she should feel free to rely on that for her judgments about medical insurance. Shared premises and methods of justification fail to resolve many political issues in a society as diverse as our own. Fairness consists in everybody relying on what they think is most convincing. A democracy will be healthiest if religious arguments are part of political discourse. The inclusive position need not claim that every ground for a political position is appropriate. Some grounds may be contrary to premises of liberal democracy. We now suppose that racism and other denials of equal worth fall into this category. But religion has never been so regarded in our country. From the beginning, religious belief and practice have been thought fully compatible with the underpinnings of our political order.

Let me recapitulate four matters that are not seriously at issue, but are sometimes confused with what is. The fundamental dispute is not over whether: (1) justifications that genuinely conflict with basic liberal democratic premises belong in liberal democratic politics; (2) religious belief and practice should be purely private, (3) people’s religious convictions *will* influence their politics to some degree; (4) the law should forbid people from expressing religious premises in political discourse.

My analysis of this subject differs from Augustine’s writings in an important way. He started with a particular overarching view—his understanding of Christianity—and examined its implications. Outside the context of this paper, with its reflection of Augustinian views, I mainly attempt to do “detached” political philosophy that does not rely on any particular religious (or other overarching) view about the nature of human life. This section of the paper mainly follows that approach. I hope, of course, that my comments will appeal to those who hold diverse religious views. There is nothing in this detached approach to political philosophy that necessarily leads to one conclusion or another about political discourse and judgments. That is, one might adopt an approach that itself does not rest on any religious view and arrive at an exclusive, inclusive, or intermediate position about the place of religious grounds in politics. (Similarly, one who begins from underlying religious premises might arrive at any of the three positions.)

I am focusing here on uses of religious grounds to support political measures that do not impose a religion on others. This requires a moment of explanation. If a government forbids all religious practice except that according to Islam or Catholicism, the law involves an unacceptable imposition of religion. The same is true about class prayer in public schools; it is wrong because of what it does, not because people may have religious reasons for supporting it. But abolition of capital punishment, assistance to the poor, and many other pieces of legislation might be based on religious grounds without imposing religious views on anyone. It is these instances I want to discuss.

Each of the two basic positions about using religious grounds is strongly attractive. On examination, we can see that the strength of the competing arguments varies with people’s political roles. I want to defend a more nuanced, intermediate position for the United States at the end of the twentieth century.

Before presenting my own approach, I want to mention two other intermediate positions. According to the first, views that are open, not too dogmatic and sectarian, play a useful role in politics. Views that leave no room for dialogue do not belong. The problem with this position is that self-exclusion is at stake. Most people don’t label their own views narrow and dogmatic; even if they do, they won’t think it is fair for them to refrain from relying on religion when their liberal, perhaps heretical, brothers and sisters can do so. A different intermediate position is taken by John Rawls in *Political Liberalism*. Rawls would sharply restrict the place of religious and other overar-

ching views in resolving issues about constitutional essentials and basic questions of justice, but he believes that "comprehensive" views may be used more directly for ordinary political issues. They also support the basic premises of liberal democracy as part of an overlapping consensus. (For my critique of this approach see *Private Consciences and Public Reasons*, n. 16 supra at 106-20, as well as "Religious Expression in the Public Square," 1996.)

My approach distinguishes advocacy and public justification from grounds of judgment; it also distinguishes officials from ordinary citizens.

Most people would find it very hard to exclude deep religious convictions from political judgments. They cannot disentangle what they believe on religious grounds from what they *might* believe if they relied only on shared techniques of understanding. They can, however, *speak* without reference to religious convictions. I have never heard a specifically Christian, Jewish, or atheist argument for a decision of our faculty. Yet, I doubt that colleagues try rigorously to remove the threads of their religious understandings about the nature of society and education for a profession when they deliberate on legal education.

People are aware if others make arguments from explicit religious premises; they can tell if restraint on their own part is matched. They can never be sure if others are purging their silent deliberations of religious influence. Such uncertainty is a shaky foundation for restraint that should be reciprocal.

Consider some differences between officials and ordinary citizens. Officials have a lot more to do with the law that gets made and applied than do citizens; citizens greatly outnumber officials. Officials frequently make judgments and offer reasons that do not include all that is relevant to them personally. Citizens less often practice such restraint. For officials to practice restraint about religious bases impinges much less on a population's religious liberty than for citizens to do so. Official restraint has more effect on the quality of political life. If any self-exclusion is justified, it is self-exclusion for officials in their public statements. That is the core of my position.

Among officials we can divide roughly between those who apply law and those who make law. Judges and quasi-judicial officials often provide reasoned justifications for decisions. We do not now find explicitly religious grounds in opinions. A judge may examine religious sources to ascertain the community's attitudes about a practice or its deep moral assumptions, or a judge may employ a familiar religious story to illustrate a point; but she will not reason in this manner: "Given this religious truth, these conclusions about social good follow." Opinions are less than candid about the comparative strength of arguments, but judges rely on arguments they think should have force for all judges. That excludes arguments that rest on particular religious premises.

The story is not so simple for legislators. Members of Congress typically do not make religious arguments on the floor of Congress or before their constituents, but we have no settled understanding that they should avoid giving weight to their own religious convictions, and to those of constituents. Legislators should give greater weight to reasons that are generally available, but some reliance on religious reasons is all right, especially since generally available reasons are radically indecisive about some crucial social problems. Present practices among national legislators reasonably accommodate their inclination to rely on all they believe with the needs of a religiously diverse citizenry. If legislators rely on religious understandings more than their public advocacy reflects, are they not lacking in candor? Does restraint impoverish discourse and leave voters less well informed than they might be? Realism counsels that much legislators say is far from fully candid, so self-restraint about religious grounds is hardly a *major* contributor to lack of candor. In any case, even the value of self-restraint overrides this drawback and whatever reduction in information voters suffer. Let me be clear: I do not say legislators should deny religious bases that motivate them, only that they should not develop public arguments in these terms.

On the other hand, most citizens are not used to practicing this kind of self-restraint and they do not participate actively in politics. They should not regard themselves as constrained to avoid relying on or stating religious grounds. Citizens with a much more public role should conceive themselves as subject to constraints like those for legislators.



Religious leaders and organizations have a special place. They properly develop religious grounds that bear on political problems and take part in direct efforts to win support for particular positions. On the other hand, when religious leaders endorse parties or candidates, that is usually unfortunate; those who become important public officials should not simultaneously hold themselves out as religious spokesmen.

Our society now has some loose conventions about religion in political life. Those conventions represent one appropriate approach within a liberal democracy, one that is well suited for our society at this time. Within the larger culture a kind of sharp division exists between serious religion, which affects many people and has a considerable influence on political life, and the broad culture, which has become largely nonreligious. That is regrettable, and would certainly be lamented by Augustine, as well as every other serious religious thinker. Greater dialogue in the broad culture about a religious or spiritual dimension of life would be healthy. But that does not mean substantially increased injection of religious premises into discussions of particular political issues would be desirable. Our present approach is by no means the only set of practices that could carry out Augustine's vision of earthly government fulfilling essential tasks for citizens of varying religious perspectives and commitment. But it serves that vision reasonably well.

#### conclusion

I have suggested that religion should neither be excluded from politics nor play a part similar to every other source for political judgment. I have argued for a generous attitude toward exemptions for religious believers from secular laws that impose demands at odds with their religious understandings. I have supported aid to religious organizations only when the reason for aid concerns secular benefits, the aid is directed to those benefits, and religious groups are within a larger category of beneficiaries. I have expressed some doubt whether these conditions are sufficient to warrant substantial aid to private religious schools. I have not claimed that any of these conclusions follow in some straightforward way from Augustine's positions; but I have argued that they fit reasonably well with his central theme. Of two things we may be sure; *The City of God* will remain a source of deep insight and problems of religion and government will remain perplexing, long after the difficulties on which I have focused have faded. †

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Kent Greenawalt is  
University  
Professor at  
Columbia University  
and author of  
several books on the  
intersections of  
private and  
public life.  
He is a former  
president of the  
American Society of  
Political and Legal  
Philosophy.