

# Christian History Meets Constitutional History: John Courtney Murray’s Augustinian Political Theology of the American Founding

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*Much has been written of John Courtney Murray’s reception of Thomas Aquinas. Although not totally misplaced, this near-exclusive attention to Aquinas’s role in Murray’s thought has obscured the contributions of an equally important figure—Augustine of Hippo—to Murray’s political theology. This article thus offers a novel survey of Murray’s seminal *We Hold These Truths* and reveals that Augustine’s theory of Divine Providence, as articulated in *The City of God*, circumscribed Murray’s Thomism. With the hope of reconciling differences between American Catholics and non-Catholics at mid-century, Murray relied upon two of the most influential theologians in western Christianity to assert that Divine Providence led the Founding Fathers to place the natural law and religious liberty at the foundation of the American republic.*

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[The Christian’s] religious life is being given two orientations—towards God and His eternal city, and towards earth and the city of man. They are enjoined to work out their own salvation, keeping themselves immaculate from the world; and they are enjoined to immerse themselves in the world and work at its salvation. These two sets of injunctions are seemingly opposed; but their principle of synthesis is in the nature of Christian faith itself.

—John Courtney Murray, SJ (1948)<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction: Political Theology and the American Founding

John Courtney Murray was a singularly important figure in the history of the twentieth-century Catholic Church. The moral theologian and legal

<sup>1</sup> In John Courtney Murray, SJ, “The Roman Catholic Church,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 256 (March 1948): 36–42.

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scholar Cathleen Kaveny, for instance, has compellingly argued that Murray, John Henry Newman, and Karl Rahner were three of the most impactful “theological progenitors” of the Second Vatican Council’s teachings on church-state relations.<sup>2</sup> Cardinal Robert McElroy once described Murray as “the most significant Catholic theologian the church in the United States has ever produced.”<sup>3</sup> From Donald Pelotte and J. Leon Hooper to Thomas Ferguson, Todd David Whitmore, and David Hollenbach, thousands of pages have been devoted to uncovering the complexity of Murray’s reflections on modern politics and Catholic philosophy and theology.<sup>4</sup>

When Murray famously appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1960, his portrait was characteristically placed atop a treatise of Robert Bellarmine—an intellectual disciple of Thomas Aquinas known for his leadership in the Counter-Reformation.<sup>5</sup> Though born in starkly different historical circumstances, Murray and Bellarmine similarly turned to Thomistic resources to make sense of the church’s relationship to the modern world. Consequently, commentary on Murray in the half-century since his death has almost exclusively focused on how he employed Aquinas in twentieth-century debates over religious freedom, church-state relations, and other similar issues that presented themselves in the decades before the Second Vatican Council. In Hollenbach’s words, “Murray drew on the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas to present an overall framework for how morality should be related to human or civil law.”<sup>6</sup>

It is undoubtedly true that Murray’s Thomism was central to how he approached Catholic philosophy and theology. As the historian Philip Gleason

<sup>2</sup> M. Cathleen Kaveny, *Ethics at the Edges of Law: Christian Moralists and American Legal Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 32.

<sup>3</sup> Robert W. McElroy, “He Held These Truths,” *America*, February 7, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> See Donald E. Pelotte, SSS, *John Courtney Murray: Theologian in Conflict* (New York: Paulist Press, 1975); J. Leon Hooper, SJ, *The Ethics of Discourse: The Social Philosophy of John Courtney Murray* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1986); Thomas P. Ferguson, *Catholic and American: The Political Theology of John Courtney Murray* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1993); J. Leon Hooper, SJ, and Todd David Whitmore, eds., *John Courtney Murray & the Growth of Tradition* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1996); David Hollenbach, SJ, “Religious Freedom, Morality, and Law: John Courtney Murray Today,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 1, no. 1 (2012): 69–91.

<sup>5</sup> See “To Be Catholic and American,” *Time*, December 12, 1960.

<sup>6</sup> Hollenbach, “Religious Freedom, Morality, and Law,” 83. Hollenbach’s view that Murray turned to Aquinas can also be found in, for example, John W. O’Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 213–14; John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 192–94; D. G. Hart, *American Catholic: The Politics of Faith During the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), 38–40.

has observed, Murray's "thinking was steeped in the Thomism that had been the official Catholic philosophy since Leo XIII's *Aeterni Patris* of 1879."<sup>7</sup> Aside from the fact that the influence of Murray's Thomism can be identified throughout his vast corpus of writings on the Trinity, Incarnation, and other traditional doctrinal topics, Murray's Thomism also decisively shaped his political theology of the American Founding.

Murray's political theology of the Founding was inextricable from a Thomistic account of natural law philosophy. In his seminal collection of essays, *We Hold These Truths*, for instance, Murray proceeded from the classic Thomistic view that there is a "certain body of objective truth" known as natural law that is "universal in its import, accessible to the reason of man, definable, [and] defensible."<sup>8</sup> Because the United States, in Murray's eyes, was organized "in an era when the tradition of natural law and natural rights was still vigorous," he concluded that Americans had a particularly unique responsibility to respect the natural law-informed contours of the "American Proposition."<sup>9</sup> Importantly, this belief that the Founding cannot be understood apart from natural law philosophy not only shaped Murray's political theology, but also that of many of his most influential twentieth- and twenty-first-century interpreters.

Perhaps the most compelling example of how Murray's Thomism has shaped Catholic political theology in the United States can be found in the work of Peter Augustine Lawler, a prominent American political scientist who authored, among other works on Murray, the introduction to a 2005 reprinting of *We Hold These Truths*.<sup>10</sup> Paraphrasing a statement that the American Catholic bishops issued in 1884 (which Murray often cited himself), Lawler became most well-known for popularizing the claim—especially in politically conservative circles—that the Founders "built better than they knew" by placing natural law at the foundation of the American political

<sup>7</sup> Philip Gleason, "American Catholics and Liberalism, 1879–1960," in *Catholicism and Liberalism: Contributions to American Public Philosophy*, eds. R. Bruce Douglass and David Hollenbach (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 66.

<sup>8</sup> John Courtney Murray, SJ, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1960), x. All subsequent citations to *We Hold These Truths* are from the 1960 edition, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>9</sup> Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 30. This view was echoed in John Courtney Murray, SJ, "Freedom, Responsibility, and Law," *Catholic Lawyer* 2 (July 1956): 214–23, 276.

<sup>10</sup> See Peter Augustine Lawler, "Critical Introduction," in John Courtney Murray, SJ, *We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition* (Lanham, MD: Sheed and Ward, 2005), 1–22. For further discussion of Lawler, see Ken I. Kersch, *Conservatives and the Constitution: Imagining Constitutional Restoration in the Heyday of American Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 330–33.

tradition.<sup>11</sup> Lawler's association with natural law philosophy and the Founding was so pronounced that Richard Reinsch—a fellow conservative admirer of Murray—memorialized the five-year anniversary of Lawler's death by recalling how Lawler spent “much of his career building a philosophical foundation for a school of thought he dubbed ‘Built Better Than They Knew Studies.’”<sup>12</sup> Unsurprisingly, an entire chapter in Lawler and Reinsch's coauthored book, *A Constitution in Full*, is devoted to “Constitutional Thomism.”<sup>13</sup>

Thomism's centrality to Murray's reflections on modern politics and Catholic philosophy and theology is undisputed. Though certainly of different ideological dispositions, Hollenbach and Lawler, for example, would agree that understanding Murray cannot be done apart from understanding his employment of Thomistic intellectual resources, and especially natural law philosophy. While this near-ubiquitous focus on Murray's reception of Aquinas has made important contributions to our understanding of the late American Jesuit, it has simultaneously obscured the contributions of an equally important thinker—Augustine of Hippo—to Murray's political theology. No study of if (or how) Augustinian presuppositions shaped Murray's political theology has, in fact, been written to date.<sup>14</sup>

Contrary to the implicit consensus that Murray's thought was not meaningfully indebted to Augustine, private documents and public writings from a near-three-decade-long period in Murray's professional career reveal that his political theology was substantially informed by Aquinas *and* Augustine. In particular, this evidence demonstrates that Murray self-consciously employed Augustine's theology of history, especially as articulated in *The City of God*, to assert that natural law is a providential feature of the American

<sup>11</sup> See, generally, Lawler, “Critical Introduction,” *We Hold These Truths*, 11–15.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Reinsch, “Recovering the American Proposition with Peter Augustine Lawler,” *Public Discourse*, May 18, 2022.

<sup>13</sup> See Peter Augustine Lawler and Richard M. Reinsch II, *A Constitution in Full: Recovering the Unwritten Foundation of American Liberty* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2019), 125–45.

<sup>14</sup> The scholars who have self-consciously engaged with Augustine and Murray have either briefly suggested that the two theologians shared similar political theologies or have attempted to contrast aspects of their thought. Edmund Santurri, for instance, has suggested that “pre-Vatican II Murray” and a “modern Augustinian” inspired by Book 19 of *The City of God* could share a “similar spirit in approach to [the First Amendment and religious neutrality].” From a more critical perspective, William Cavanaugh has placed Murray and Augustine in conversation to highlight how “some deficiencies” in Murray's conceptualization of political space can be rectified by Augustine's “tale of two cities.” See, respectively, Edmund N. Santurri, “The Proximity of Hippo to Harvard: A Very Belated Reply to Gilbert Meilaender,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 30, no. 2 (2017): 185–86; William T. Cavanaugh, “From One City to Two: Christian Reimagining of Political Space,” *Political Theology* 7, no. 3 (2006): 299–321.

political tradition. By repeatedly emphasizing Divine Providence's intervention at the Founding, Murray brought Christian history into conversation with American constitutional history, thereby forging a political theology of the Founding that was distinctly Augustinian.

Murray's assertion that natural law is a principal feature of the American political tradition has exerted significant influence on contemporary Catholic political theology because Murray framed the Founders' purported Thomism as a product of God's direct intervention in American constitutional history. Crucially, this was a claim made possible by Murray's employment of Augustine's providential theology of history. Although one may disagree with how Lawler or Reinsch, for example, have practically invoked Murray's providential reading of American constitutional history to serve conservative political ends, it is indisputable that they have drawn on a feature of Murray's thought that began to be identified as constitutive of his political theology as early as the 1950s. A 1952 anthology on "the important passages and principles of John Courtney Murray," in fact, featured an entire section on the "Providential Situation" in which, Murray had argued, Catholics in the United States found themselves.<sup>15</sup>

Previously overlooked archival evidence of Murray's engagement with Augustine aside, this article's novel interpretation of Murray's political theology is confirmed by recent advancements in the Augustine literature that have begun to undermine the "portrait of pessimism" that has long-dominated studies of the bishop of Hippo.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, because Murray decidedly rejected the principal assumption undergirding pessimistic readings of Augustine—that "earthly goods, and hence political goods, have little or no value," in one scholar's telling—his is an Augustinian political theology that looks quite unlike the typical renderings of the late North African bishop's.<sup>17</sup>

Placing Murray in conversation with this new Augustine scholarship reveals that both Murray and Augustine shared a conviction that Divine Providence enjoins participation in historically established political communities. In light of this providential theology of history, Murray encouraged Americans to turn to the Thomistic natural law philosophy of the Founding to organize political life in the United States. And, with the benefit of the First Amendment's providential assurance of religious liberty, Murray

<sup>15</sup> Victor R. Yanitelli, ed., "A Church-State Anthology: The Work of Father Murray," *Thought: Fordham University Quarterly* 27, no. 104 (Spring 1952): 23, in box 20, folder 6, NCWC/USCC/USCCB Legal Department/General Counsel Records, Special Collections of the University Library, The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC.

<sup>16</sup> See Michael Lamb, "Beyond Pessimism: A Structure of Encouragement in Augustine's *City of God*," *Review of Politics* 80, no. 4 (Fall 2018): 592.

<sup>17</sup> See Lamb, "Beyond Pessimism," 593.

concluded that Christians would be consequently enabled to transform American culture through evangelization.

To illustrate how Murray employed Augustine's providential theology of history in his own political theology, this article will proceed in two steps. First, it will describe the constitutive dimensions of Augustine's theology of history as articulated in *The City of God*—especially vis-à-vis Divine Providence's intervention in human history—drawing not only on *The City of God* itself, but also twentieth-century texts that Murray appears to have engaged with himself. Then, this article will highlight how Murray self-consciously drew from and built upon Augustine's theology of history to explain the Founding's providential association with natural law philosophy between the start of his professional career in the 1940s and its end in the 1960s. As the epigraph to this article suggests, proceeding in this way will reveal that Murray relied upon Augustine to show Christians in the United States not how to abandon a world hopelessly marred by sin, but rather “immerse themselves in the world and work at its salvation.”<sup>18</sup>

### **Augustine's Providential Theology of History in *The City of God***

Ten years after assuming the editorship of *Theological Studies*, John Courtney Murray was named Visiting Professor of Medieval and Scholastic Philosophy at Yale University, demonstrating—in the journalist Emmet John Hughes's words—that “Catholic learning could stand tall beside secular learning in America.”<sup>19</sup> As the Yale Department of Philosophy's 1951–1952 internal annual report noted, Murray's courses offered students an opportunity to “enter imaginatively into the world of the medieval and Christian tradition and to learn one of the great philosophical syntheses in its original form.”<sup>20</sup> Though Murray's courses at Yale were principally focused on Thomism, the Trinity, and other doctrinal topics in which he had a long-standing interest, extant documentary evidence from his time in New Haven suggests that Murray also prepared a reading list for his students on the theology of history. Perhaps used in one of his courses or provided to his undergraduate advisees, this “Selected Bibliography on the Theology of History” seems to not only offer evidence of

<sup>18</sup> Murray, “The Roman Catholic Church,” 37.

<sup>19</sup> Emmet John Hughes, “A Man for Our Season: An Address for the John Courtney Murray Forum at Hunter College,” box 161, folder 6, George Gilmary Higgins Papers, Special Collections of the University Library, The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC (hereafter GGHP).

<sup>20</sup> “The Annual Report of the Department of Philosophy, 1951–1952,” box 5, folder 354, John Courtney Murray, SJ, Papers, Booth Family Center for Special Collections, Georgetown University Library, Washington, DC (hereafter JCMP).

Murray's general appreciation for Augustine's magnum opus, *The City of God*, but also reflects Murray's specific appreciation for Augustine's providential theology of history as articulated in *The City of God*.<sup>21</sup>

On Murray's alphabetized, five-page suggested list of readings on the theology of history, four recommended texts are especially helpful for understanding his heretofore unacknowledged debts to Augustine. The first of these texts is, of course, Augustine's *The City of God*—of which Murray particularly highlighted the first eight books. Notably, these opening books feature Augustine's most poignant response to the pejorative claim that Christianity had been responsible for Rome's decline. Indeed, these opening books of *The City of God* offer a detailed rereading of Roman history and conclude by asserting that it was not Christianity, but rather Roman immorality (and especially Rome's lust for glory) that led to its decline.<sup>22</sup>

Augustine's apologetic account of Roman history in *The City of God's* opening books allowed him to introduce a theme that decisively shaped the rest of his magnum opus: what one scholar has helpfully described as "God's providential role in the success of empires."<sup>23</sup> In fact, Augustine proposed no less than three times in Book Five alone that God establishes—and, by extension, destroys—human kingdoms.<sup>24</sup> These suggestions in Book Five followed

<sup>21</sup> "Selected Bibliography on the Theology of History," box 5, folder 354, JCMP. Given that this reading list is not marked with a name or course number, it is unclear exactly who (or what) the list was for. In the context of Murray's scholarly background, the texts recommended on the bibliography (many of which were authored by Jesuits), and Murray's teaching and advising responsibilities at Yale, however, we can reasonably infer that the list was likely prepared by Murray for the undergraduate students with whom he worked during the 1951–1952 academic year. Moreover, because none of the recommended texts were published after 1951, the evidence suggests that Murray—who certainly kept himself apprised of new theological scholarship as part of his *Theological Studies* editorship—attempted to offer his students at Yale both classic and contemporary scholarship in this area.

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1.4, 3.14. All citations to *The City of God* are formatted by book and chapter number in the Dyson translation. For further scholarly discussion of Augustine's reading of Roman history, see, for example, Ernest L. Fortin, "St. Augustine," in *History of Political Philosophy*, 3rd ed., ed. Leo Strauss and Joseph Cropsey (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 198–99; L. G. Patterson, *God and History in Early Christian Thought: A Study of Themes from Justin Martyr to Gregory the Great* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1967), 126–31; Michael Lamb, *A Commonwealth of Hope: Augustine's Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022), 175–76.

<sup>23</sup> Gerard O'Daly, *Augustine's City of God: A Reader's Guide*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 79.

<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Augustine, *The City of God*, 5.1, 5.19, 5.21.

an equally clear statement in Book One that Divine Providence “corrects and destroys the corrupt ways of men by wars, and tests the righteous and praiseworthy by such afflictions of this mortal life, either conveying them to a better world when they have been proved, or detaining them still on this earth for further service.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, Augustine consistently counseled that Divine Providence is at work throughout human political history.

The second relevant text that Murray recommended to his students on the theology of history was written in 1934 by the historian Felix Fellner.<sup>26</sup> Focused on Otto of Freising, a twelfth-century bishop, Fellner’s article began by sharply differentiating between modern and medieval “methods of historical investigation.”<sup>27</sup> Unlike moderns who “seek to find everywhere the first beginning of events,” the medievals, Fellner argued, believed that an “all-ruling Providence” directs political and ecclesiastical development.<sup>28</sup> Given this methodological divergence, Fellner concluded that modern historians refrain from writing universal histories because certain events are inexplicable with reference to “only natural causes.”<sup>29</sup> By doing so, Fellner implied that modern and medieval historians operate with different understandings of Divine Providence: the medievals, unlike their modern successors, presupposed a providential character to human history and were therefore able to weave natural and supernatural events together into universal historical narratives.

Beyond Fellner’s historiographical discussion of Providence, his direct engagement with Freising’s work reveals his recognition that Augustine’s providential theology of history was given especially clarifying exposition in *The City of God*—a recognition we can likewise impute to Murray because of his recommendation of Fellner’s article and citations to *The City of God* in his own work. Tellingly, Fellner proposed that “Divine Providence” was shown to an “eminent degree” in Freising’s “universal history from Adam to the year 1146,” the *Chronicon*, and that Freising’s text “used principally Augustine’s *City of God*.”<sup>30</sup> Moreover, Fellner acknowledged that the “Augustinian ideas of Providence and Church dominated the whole historical literature of the Middle Ages.”<sup>31</sup> In doing so, Fellner thus correctly observed that Divine

<sup>25</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, 1.1.

<sup>26</sup> See Felix Fellner, “The ‘Two Cities’ of Otto of Freising and Its Influence on the Catholic Philosophy of History,” *Catholic Historical Review* 20, no. 2 (July 1934): 154–74.

<sup>27</sup> Fellner, “The ‘Two Cities’ of Otto of Freising,” 154.

<sup>28</sup> Fellner, “The ‘Two Cities’ of Otto of Freising,” 154.

<sup>29</sup> Fellner, “The ‘Two Cities’ of Otto of Freising,” 154.

<sup>30</sup> Fellner, “The ‘Two Cities’ of Otto of Freising,” 170, 161.

<sup>31</sup> Fellner, “The ‘Two Cities’ of Otto of Freising,” 159, 164.



Providence was a central (and influential) theme in Augustine's magnum opus.

The third relevant text that Murray recommended to his students was a reprint of a lecture on Augustine's theology of history delivered in 1950 by the French historian Henri-Irénée Marrou. The organizing principle of Marrou's lecture was that time, for Augustine, is radically ambivalent—in other words, that any historical event's place in God's salvific plan is ultimately inscrutable to the human mind.<sup>32</sup> Despite this inscrutability, Marrou concluded that Augustine's theology of history offers an eschatologically hopeful assessment of the earthly human life because, in Augustine's view, human persons are made witness to the “progressive building of the City of God, the growth, the slow maturation of the Mystical Body of Christ which grows little by little” in the course of time.<sup>33</sup> Crucially, Marrou's reading of Augustine's theology of history therefore did not lead him to Hannah Arendt's “world-lessness” or David Billings's “hope against the world.”<sup>34</sup> Rather, as one reviewer of Marrou's lecture wrote, “Temporal progress can be considered as a means of building the eternal dwelling,” even if the “relation which unites [the earthly and the heavenly] dwellings can only be the object of hypothesis.”<sup>35</sup>

Contrary to Augustinian pessimists such as Arendt, Billings, and Martha Nussbaum—who have often claimed that Augustine discouraged “this-worldly striving” because life on earth is hopelessly marred by sin—“time” can, on Marrou's account, be a “source of supernatural optimism” because it “leads us to the realization of the Reign of Christ” in the course of human history.<sup>36</sup> In another formulation, “Time, as it is experienced in history, presents itself to us

<sup>32</sup> See Henri-Irénée Marrou, *L'Ambivalence du temps de l'Histoire chez S. Augustin* (Paris: J. Vrin, 1950), 57, 76. For further scholarly discussion of Augustine's thinking about the ultimate inscrutability of God's salvific plan, see Herbert A. Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine*, 2nd ed. (Tacoma, WA: Angelico Press, 2013), 68; Lamb, *A Commonwealth of Hope*, 169, 237, 240; R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 170), 158.

<sup>33</sup> Unsigned review of *L'Ambivalence du temps de l'Histoire chez S. Augustin*, by H. Marrou, *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 56, no. 3 (July–September 1951): 354.

<sup>34</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 53–55, and David Billings, “Nativity or Advent: Hannah Arendt and Jurgen Moltmann on Hope and Politics,” in *The Future of Hope: Christian Tradition amid Modernity and Postmodernity*, eds. Miroslav Volf and William Katerberg (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 135–36. Both Arendt and Billings are discussed in Lamb, “Beyond Pessimism,” 592.

<sup>35</sup> Michel Coenraet, review of *L'Ambivalence du temps de l'Histoire chez S. Augustin*, by H. Marrou, *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 50 (1952): 626.

<sup>36</sup> See Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 550–56; Coenraet, review of

under its double aspect: it is both the time of (wounded) nature and the time of grace; the time of sin and the time of salvation . . . these values belong in vain to two ontologically distinct orders; they are practically, concretely associated in an inseparable way for the moment.”<sup>37</sup> Put more simply, the ontological divisions between the *civitas Dei* and the *civitas terrena* cannot overcome the fact that the cities are inextricably linked during human history because it is in the very course of human history that God performs God’s saving work.

Marrou’s reading of Augustine illuminates important dimensions of Augustine’s theology of history that Murray would later employ himself. Most importantly, Marrou’s situating of temporally bound human history within the supratemporal, eschatological arc of God’s salvific plan follows what *The City of God* described as God’s providential “designs” that direct the historical realities of earthly existence toward their ultimate fulfillment in the completion of the Mystical Body of Christ.<sup>38</sup> In the words of Ernest Fortin, Augustine’s connection between human persons’ living of their earthly lives and God’s ultimate salvific plan reflects the bishop of Hippo’s emphasis on the “fundamentally historical character of human existence,” an emphasis that led Augustine to make sense of human history within a framework of “purposive unity.”<sup>39</sup>

Mindful of the fact that, for Augustine, Providence is at work throughout human history and governs the establishment and destruction of political communities, it is clear that the bishop of Hippo understood Providence to serve a pedagogical function. Insofar as God offers human persons “freedom and responsibility,” Mary Keys has therefore rightly concluded that human attributes are developed in response to “the Creator’s providence.”<sup>40</sup> Indeed, “divine agency and human agency are not mutually exclusive,” Keys has observed.<sup>41</sup> “Rather, the former creates, sustains, and perfects the latter.”<sup>42</sup>

*L’Ambivalence du temps de l’Histoire chez S. Augustin*, 626. Nussbaum is discussed in Lamb, “Beyond Pessimism,” 592.

<sup>37</sup> Gustave Bardy, review of *L’Ambivalence du temps de l’Histoire chez S. Augustin*, by H. Marrou, *Revue d’Histoire Ecclesiastique* 46 (January 1951): 737.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Augustine, *The City of God*, 17.4.

<sup>39</sup> See Ernest L. Fortin, *Classical Christianity and the Political Order: Reflections on the Theologico-Political Problem* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 117. Herbert Deane has likewise argued that Augustine believed that there is a “meaning and purpose in history.” See Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine*, 68.

<sup>40</sup> Mary M. Keys, *Pride, Politics, and Humility in Augustine’s City of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 35.

<sup>41</sup> Keys, *Pride, Politics, and Humility in Augustine’s City of God*, 35.

<sup>42</sup> Keys, *Pride, Politics, and Humility in Augustine’s City of God*, 35.

Augustine exhorted his fourth- and fifth-century audience to attempt to understand and learn from God's providential operation in human history. Doing so, he thought, would lead Christians to develop inward dispositions that would enable them to respond well to the reality of existence within God's "order of nature."<sup>43</sup> In Book Eleven, for instance, Augustine counseled that Providence "admonishes us not to condemn things thoughtlessly, but rather to inquire with diligence into the utility of things," a process that can "exercis[e] our humility or overcom[e] our pride."<sup>44</sup>

For Augustine, the pedagogy of Divine Providence is one of inviting human persons into greater love of God.<sup>45</sup> Importantly, however, this love of God is realized through love of neighbor and, in this way, builds a holy fellowship in human history through which the City of Man becomes ever-more like the City of God.<sup>46</sup> As Augustine observed, "'It is good to draw near to God.' And those who are sharers in this good have, both with Him to Whom they draw near and with one another, a holy fellowship. They are the one City of God, which is His living sacrifice and His living temple."<sup>47</sup> Detailed in Book Ten of *The City of God*, the love of neighbor constitutive of the love of God is undertaken during the course of human history through evangelization:

We are taught to love [clinging to God] with all our hearts, with all our mind and with all our strength. We ought to be led to this good by those who love us, and we ought to lead those whom we love to it . . . [When one is] commanded to love his neighbor as himself, what is being commanded then that he should do all that he can to encourage his neighbor to love God?

<sup>43</sup> Contrary to scholars who have argued that "by the time Augustine writes the *City of God*, 'the natural order' only refers to 'the physical world,'" I follow Veronica Roberts Ogle in reading Augustine's "order of nature" as referring to the "whole of God's providential design." See Veronica Roberts Ogle, *Politics and the Earthly City in Augustine's City of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 160.

<sup>44</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, 11.22.

<sup>45</sup> Augustine's belief that Providence seeks to teach human persons to grow in love of God should come as no surprise. As Herbert Deane has rightly observed, Augustine was himself a "pastor and a preacher, who was seeking to turn men away from themselves and the things of this world and to call them back to God." See Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine*, 13.

<sup>46</sup> Richard Munkelt has likewise advanced this view of how Augustine understands the act of loving God through the act of loving one's neighbor: "Right love . . . ultimately points to the love of the triune God and of neighbor, which is the responsibility of individuals and political communities alike." See Richard A. Munkelt, "Foreword," to *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine*, xxii. For further scholarly discussion of the relationship between love of God and love of neighbor, see, for example, Lamb, *A Commonwealth of Hope*, 38, 44.

<sup>47</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, 12.10.

This is the worship of God; this is true religion; this is right piety; this is the service which is due to God alone.<sup>48</sup>

The final text on *The City of God* that appeared on Murray's bibliography was published in 1951 by the German historian Theodor Mommsen.<sup>49</sup> Described in the bibliography as "an excellent background article" that is "especially useful [and] significant," Mommsen's piece used *The City of God* to better understand the "Christian idea of progress."<sup>50</sup> After acknowledging that the opening books of *The City of God* offer an apologetic rereading of Roman history, Mommsen stated his interest in Augustine's view of "how history take[s] its course and [if] there is any meaning to be found in the sequence of events from the beginning of this world to the present age and to the day of the Last Judgment."<sup>51</sup>

To elucidate Augustine's "theology of history," Mommsen's article began by articulating its basic structure in *The City of God*: "To Augustine . . . history takes its course, not in cycles, but along a line. That line has a most definite beginning, the Creation, and a most definite end, the Last Judgment."<sup>52</sup> As such, Mommsen proposed that "from Augustine's conception of the course of history[,] it follows that every particular event that takes place in time, every human life and human action, is a unique phenomenon which happens under the auspices of Divine Providence and must therefore have a definite meaning."<sup>53</sup> In another formulation, human history is "the *operatio Dei* in time, it [is] a 'one directional, teleological process, directed towards one goal—salvation."<sup>54</sup> The earthly and heavenly cities—which are ontologically distinct but have been cotemporal since the fall of Adam—consequently follow their own courses "to the terminal point in time, the Last Judgment."<sup>55</sup>

Mommsen's emphasis on the cotemporality of the *civitas Dei* and the *civitas terrena* serves as a helpful reminder that this cotemporality is a necessary precondition for understanding Divine Providence's evangelical pedagogy. Because the two cities are, as William Cavanaugh has argued, "not two institutions, but two performances, two practices of space and time," Augustine's theology of history hoped to inspire Christians to respond graciously to Divine

<sup>48</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, 10.4.

<sup>49</sup> See Theodore E. Mommsen, "St. Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress: The Background of the *City of God*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12, no. 3 (June 1951).

<sup>50</sup> See "Selected Bibliography on the Theology of History," JCOMP.

<sup>51</sup> Mommsen, "St. Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress," 352–53.

<sup>52</sup> Mommsen, "St. Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress," 355.

<sup>53</sup> Mommsen, "St. Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress," 355.

<sup>54</sup> Mommsen, "St. Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress," 370.

<sup>55</sup> Mommsen, "St. Augustine and the Christian Idea of Progress," 372.

Providence by undertaking actions—practices—that could contribute to the enlarging of the City of God on earth and prepare the way for the completion of the Mystical Body of Christ.<sup>56</sup> Thus, Michael Lamb has correctly observed that Augustine “does not conceive of the City of God as an entirely transcendent realm . . . He constantly notes how pilgrims participate in the heavenly city ‘even now, albeit in a far different and far inferior way.’”<sup>57</sup>

As Veronica Roberts Ogle has argued, Augustine concluded that we contribute to the enlarging of the City of God on earth by *latreia*, “the worship due to God alone.”<sup>58</sup> Given that the City of God is marked by its members’ love of God (*amor Dei*) and the City of Man is marked by its members’ love of self (*amor sui*), Ogle has persuasively asserted that *latreia* “is our induction into a love that spreads outwards in order to invite inwards: it is where Christ teaches us to incorporate all our living acts into his own.”<sup>59</sup> Following Ogle, Lamb has proposed that practices that “instantiate and encourage ‘love of God and neighbor’” are constitutive of the *latreia* that enlarges the City of God during the course of human history.<sup>60</sup> In Augustine’s words, “Both the individual just man and the community and people of the just live by faith, which works by love: by that love with which a man loves God as God ought to be loved, and his neighbor as himself.”<sup>61</sup>

It bears repeating that, for Augustine, Divine Providence creates the historical circumstances in which *latreia*’s constitutive practices must necessarily be realized. By virtue of God’s constant providential intervention in human history, the bishop of Hippo’s syllogism therefore suggests that human persons must embrace their evangelical responsibilities within the context of existing political communities, even when those political communities express hostility to Christians. As Mary Keys has emphasized, because Augustine presented “political life as among the natural human realities created and governed by providence,” it is within the confines of existing, providentially ordained political communities that Augustine concluded love of

<sup>56</sup> Cavanaugh, “From One City to Two,” 302.

<sup>57</sup> Lamb, *A Commonwealth of Hope*, 159.

<sup>58</sup> Veronica Roberts Ogle, “Healing Hope: A Response to Peter Iver Kaufman,” *Augustinian Studies* 53, no. 1 (2022): 48; Ogle, *Politics and the Earthly City in Augustine’s City of God*, 137.

<sup>59</sup> Ogle, “Healing Hope,” 49. For further discussion of the role of *amor Dei* and *amor sui* in Augustine’s political theology, see Fortin, “St. Augustine,” 195.

<sup>60</sup> Lamb, *A Commonwealth of Hope*, 221.

<sup>61</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, 19.23. For further scholarly discussion of this “faith which works by love,” see Lamb, *A Commonwealth of Hope*, 94–96.

neighbor—and, by extension, God—can be realized.<sup>62</sup> In light of the fact that God’s eschatologically inscrutable Providence uses both good and wicked persons and events to effectuate God’s salvific plan, scholars have therefore rightly observed that, for Augustine, Christians are commanded to respect even the worst forms of government (*flagitiosissimamque rem publicam*).<sup>63</sup> “God makes use even of the wicked,” Augustine remarked, “[to] ensure that ‘all things work together for good to them that love God.’”<sup>64</sup>

Like the other texts that Murray recommended to his students, Mommsen’s article offers helpful insight into how Murray approached Augustine’s theology of history. In particular, Mommsen’s emphasis on the one-directional character of Augustine’s theology of history—or, in Herbert Deane’s formulation, Augustine’s belief in the “straight-line development” of human history—reveals the centrality of pilgrimage to Augustine.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, according to Augustine, all human persons are on a pilgrimage through human history; this is a pilgrimage that, for some, ends in the Heavenly City, but for others, in eternal damnation.<sup>66</sup> Insofar as Providence orders the entire universe, this necessarily means that all human persons, political communities, and events have an irreplaceable place in God’s salvific plan, even if the place of any one person, community, or event in this plan is ultimately incomprehensible to the human mind.

As Charles Norris Cochrane has remarked, “[earthly events are] a manifestation of divine providence [that] constitute an essential part of the necessity of things . . . Augustine asserts that each and every occurrence in the manifold of events bears witness to the activity of God.”<sup>67</sup> Consequently, human persons are enjoined by Divine Providence to respond to that which God has ordained

<sup>62</sup> Keys, *Pride, Politics, and Humility in Augustine’s City of God*, 35. Augustine’s emphasis on Providence’s ordaining of earthly political communities explains his consequent belief that Christians must accept those powers which God has ordained, even when those powers repress Christians for their testament to the Gospel. See, for example, Augustine, *The City of God*, 5.21, 18.2, 18.51. In fact, for Augustine, all political rulers, even those who reject the Gospel (such as the Romans) serve divine ends. See, for example, Augustine, *The City of God*, 18.22.

<sup>63</sup> See Henry Paolucci, “Introduction,” to *The Political Writings of St. Augustine* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 1962), xx–xxi. For further scholarly discussion of Augustine’s thinking about how God uses even wicked persons and events to serve divine ends, see Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine*, 67–68, 70, 144–45, 157; Fortin, “St. Augustine,” 203.

<sup>64</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, 18.51.

<sup>65</sup> Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine*, 71.

<sup>66</sup> On human pilgrimage, see, for example, Augustine, *The City of God*, 1.29, 14.9. For further scholarly discussion, see Lamb, *A Commonwealth of Hope*, 130.

<sup>67</sup> See Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture: A Study of Thought and Action from Augustus to Augustine* (New York: Liberty Fund, 2003), 529.

in human history—including Providence’s ordaining of political communities. Guided by *amor Dei*, Augustine ultimately exhorted Christians to participate in their political communities by practicing love of neighbor, thereby building a “holy fellowship” that enlarges the City of God in the course of human history and prepares the way for the completion of the Mystical Body of Christ. In Ernest Fortin’s words, “It is *only* by associating with his fellow men and forming with them a political community,” for Augustine, “that man attains his perfection.”<sup>68</sup> Hence, “Citizenship in the city of God does not abrogate but preserves and complements citizenship in a temporal society.”<sup>69</sup>

As the documentary evidence from his time at Yale indicates, Murray turned to Augustine’s magnum opus as an important source of wisdom on the theology of history. Through an analysis of Murray’s writings on the American Founding, it will become evident that Murray self-consciously employed Augustine’s providential theology of history to illustrate *why* Christians should participate in political life and *how* they should do so. Contrary to the existing historiographical consensus, these two dimensions of Murray’s political theology followed not only Aquinas, but also Augustine.

### **Murray’s Augustinian Political Theology of the American Founding**

Between the start of his professional career in the 1940s and its end in the 1960s, Murray self-consciously drew from and built on Augustine’s theology of history to evidence the Founding’s providential association with natural law philosophy. By repeatedly emphasizing Providence’s intervention at the Founding, Murray argued that Americans were directed to use natural law philosophy as a means of ordering political life in the United States. And, with the benefit of the First Amendment’s providential assurance of religious liberty, Murray concluded that Christians would be enabled to transform American culture through evangelization.

In anticipation of exploring how Murray channeled various aspects of Augustine’s theology of history in his own political theology before the publication of his most influential text, *We Hold These Truths*, it is helpful to describe the basic structure of Murray’s political theology of the Founding as set out more systematically in *We Hold These Truths*.

<sup>68</sup> Fortin, “St. Augustine,” 180; emphasis mine. It is worth noting that this reading of Augustine—which Murray, as we will see, adopted—runs directly counter to the once-dominant understanding that “social arrangements [have] . . . no immediate relation to perfection or salvation” in Augustine’s political theology. See Markus, *Saeculum*, 98.

<sup>69</sup> Fortin, “St. Augustine,” 197.

Murray's political theology of the Founding began with an endorsement of the American bishops' claim (c. 1884) that "the establishment of our country's independence, the shaping of its liberties and laws, [w]as a work of special Providence, its framers 'building better than they knew,' the Almighty's hand guiding them."<sup>70</sup> Drawing on this statement, Murray proposed that the "providential aspect" of the Founding was that the nation was organized "in an era when the tradition of the natural law and natural rights was still vigorous."<sup>71</sup> While Murray consistently held that the Founding was generally a product of God's providential intervention in human history, especially distinctive about the Founding, Murray thought, was the First Amendment's assurance of religious liberty to the Catholic Church in the United States. Described as having "providential importance," in fact, Murray asserted that the Founders' belief in the limited role of earthly political governance had assured "the Church a stable condition of right and of place within society" and "guarantee[d] to her a full independence in the fulfillment of her divine mission."<sup>72</sup> Put simply, Murray concluded that Divine Providence had created a religiously disestablished historical context in the United States that allowed the church to prosper.<sup>73</sup>

Having argued that the First Amendment's assurance of religious liberty was a product of God's providential intervention in American constitutional history, Murray turned to how the institutional separation of church and state should inform Christians' participation in American political life. After positing that the United States is in need of a "constitutional consensus [predicated on natural law] whereby the people acquires its identity as a people and the society is endowed with its vital form," Murray invoked Augustine to demonstrate how to achieve this "consensus" (or "social unity").<sup>74</sup> Indeed, Murray argued:

Since St. Augustine's description of the "two cities," it has been realized that societal unity may, broadly speaking, be of two orders—the divine or the demonic. It is of the divine order when it is the product of faith,

<sup>70</sup> Reproduced in Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 30.

<sup>71</sup> Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 30.

<sup>72</sup> Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 67, 69–70.

<sup>73</sup> Despite the fact that Murray was largely preoccupied with the successful American experience of religious liberty, he also posited in other writings that Divine Providence had led many other nations to institutionally divorce church from state—a divinely ordained historical reality to which the church was bound to respond. See, for example, John Courtney Murray, SJ, "Contemporary Orientations of Catholic Thought on Church and State in the Light of History," *Theological Studies* 10 (June 1949): 177–234.

<sup>74</sup> Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 9.



reason, freedom, justice, law, and love. Within the social unity created by these forces, which are instinct with all the divinity that resides in man, the human personality itself grows to its destined stature of dignity at the same time that the community achieves its unity. Societal unity is of the demonic order when it is the product of force, whether the force be violent or subtle.<sup>75</sup>

Murray's claim that creating societal unity of a "divine order" is not only desirable, but actually enabled by God's providential activity in human history, brought his Thomism into direct conversation with his Augustinianism. In the United States, Murray believed that natural law offered the philosophical framework necessary for Americans to organize their political lives constructively and that the First Amendment maintained the temporal peace necessary for Christians to embrace their evangelical responsibilities. Because Divine Providence, according to Murray, created the historical circumstances in which natural law and religious liberty were incorporated into the American political tradition, however, both of these seemingly Thomistic features of Murray's thought were, in fact, reliant upon an Augustinian theology of history. It was therefore Augustine's theology of history that also shaped how Murray theorized the Christian's appropriate response to God's providential activity in American constitutional history. In the language of *The City of God*, Murray counseled Christians in the United States to contribute to the enlarging of the City of God in human history by forging fellowship through evangelization.

In Murray's view, preparing the way for the completion of the Mystical Body of Christ in human history is ultimately made possible by the "Master" of history "who causes all things within it to work together towards a good that is not of this world."<sup>76</sup> Following Augustine, Murray consequently concluded that Divine Providence enjoins and empowers Americans to contribute to the building of the City of God in the course of human history by respecting religious liberty and natural law—not least because these providential

<sup>75</sup> Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 133.

<sup>76</sup> Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 186. Murray labeled God "the Master of history" in a 1965 radio prayer for Radio-Luxembourg. For the context of this prayer and the text thereof, see John Courtney Murray, SJ, to Ernest J. Primeau, July 26, 1965, box 13, folder 3, Ernest J. Primeau Vatican Council II Collection, Special Collections of the University Library, The Catholic University of America, Washington, DC (hereafter EJPVCC); Murray to Primeau, August 2, 1965, box 13, folder 3, EJPVCC; Primeau to Jean Boundaries, August 30, 1965, box 13, folder 13, EJPVCC.

features of the United States had consistently facilitated the church's pastoral success.<sup>77</sup> In graciously responding to God's providential intervention in American constitutional history by respecting religious liberty and natural law, Murray argued that societal unity of a "divine order" could be forged in the United States, contributing to the building of the "City of God" that is also, according to Murray, "the proper city of man."<sup>78</sup>

While Murray's reliance on Augustine was sometimes made explicit through his direct citations to *The City of God* in *We Hold These Truths*, evidencing the extent of Murray's debts to the bishop of Hippo is made similarly possible by tracing the implicit invocations of Augustine in Murray's writings before *We Hold These Truths*. Over the course of a near-three-decade-long period in Murray's professional career, there are numerous examples of how he channeled Augustine's theology of history to forge his own political theology of the Founding. These earlier debts to Augustine become particularly clear by foregrounding the three features of Augustine's theology of history on which Murray most frequently relied: that Divine Providence (1) governs the establishment of political communities, (2) enjoins human persons to begin building the City of God on earth through *latreia*, and (3) constructs the path through human history on which human persons, as pilgrims to the Heavenly City, travel.

One of the earliest indications of Murray's debts to Augustine is a 1942 book review he authored of the theologian William R. O'Connor's *The Layman's Call*.<sup>79</sup> With a preface by the Thomist Jacques Maritain, O'Connor's book, Murray argued, "satisfactor[ily]" addressed the problem of whether the actions taken by the lay person during the course of his or her human life reflect a dedication "to something apart from the Kingdom of God."<sup>80</sup> In his summary of the book, Murray noted O'Connor's discussion of "the pertinent doctrines" of "providence, predestination, nature, [and] grace," as well as O'Connor's argument that "a Christian is called to super-naturalize the whole secular order by

<sup>77</sup> Though this article is principally concerned with Murray's political theology of the American Founding, his reflections on American politics also had international implications. In a 1944 pamphlet prepared for the Catholic Association for International Peace, for instance, Murray asserted that natural law should lie "at the heart of a new political and socio-economic order in national and international life." This employment of natural law, Murray thought, would contribute to the "ordered tranquility of the earthly city of man." See John Courtney Murray, SJ, *The Pattern for Peace and the Papal Peace Program* (Washington, DC: Paulist Press, 1944), 11.

<sup>78</sup> Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 186.

<sup>79</sup> See William R. O'Connor, *The Layman's Call* (New York: P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1942).

<sup>80</sup> John Courtney Murray, SJ, review of *The Layman's Call*, by William R. O'Connor, *Theological Studies* 3 (December 1942): 608.

doing full justice to all the requirements of human existence.”<sup>81</sup> Describing O’Connor’s analysis of how lay vocations are “a providential meeting of a suitably disposed nature with right opportunities” as “highly illuminating” and “of enormous practical help,” Murray endorsed O’Connor’s view that the layperson has “tremendous responsibility” in this life.<sup>82</sup>

Murray’s complimentary review of O’Connor’s text is a revealing indication of his early—if not entirely explicit—employment of an Augustinian theology of history. Like the bishop of Hippo, Murray’s review accepted not only that Divine Providence creates “opportunities” to which human persons respond, but also that those actions undertaken by human persons in the course of human history are not set apart from the kingdom of God. “God, the Father of all, does indeed fix by His own authority the times and the seasons,” Murray would later remark, “but their advent is not wholly unrelated to the strivings of men.”<sup>83</sup> This conviction, articulated as early as this 1942 review, that actions undertaken in the course of human history are inextricable from the human person’s supra-temporal destiny, tracked Augustine’s belief that “it is by his actions in this life that man merits the blessedness of eternal life.”<sup>84</sup> Moreover, Murray—following Augustine—conceded that laypersons have an obligation to transform the “secular order” by undertaking certain actions in this life that comport with the (presumably Christian, and therefore evangelical), “requirements of human existence.”

In a widely distributed 1945 *Theological Studies* article on the ethical problems implicated by freedom of religion, Murray likewise demonstrated his Augustinian understanding of the relationship between the providentially ordained course of human history and the Christian’s responsibility to contribute to the building of the City of God on earth.<sup>85</sup> “Under the direction of a particular providence,” Murray observed, God seeks to lead human persons

<sup>81</sup> Murray, review of *The Layman’s Call*, 608.

<sup>82</sup> Murray, review of *The Layman’s Call*, 609.

<sup>83</sup> Murray, *We Hold These Truths*, 191. This view was articulated in “The Christian Idea of Education” (c. 1955), in which Murray proposed that the Church Fathers were prompted to question the “relation between the service of an earthly city and a citizenship in the Kingdom of God.” See John Courtney Murray, SJ, “The Christian Idea of Education,” in *Bridging the Sacred and Secular: Selected Writings of John Courtney Murray*, ed. J. Leon Hooper, SJ (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994), 134–35. Unsurprisingly, God’s fixing “by His own authority the times and seasons” is likewise discussed in Augustine, *The City of God*, 18.50.

<sup>84</sup> Fortin, “St. Augustine,” 177.

<sup>85</sup> See John Courtney Murray, SJ, “Freedom of Religion, I: The Ethical Problem,” *Theological Studies* 6 (June 1945): 229–86.

to heaven from a life of “sanctity” that is to be “begun on earth.”<sup>86</sup> As such, Murray concluded that the “basic issue” involved in church-state debates is “the freedom of the human person, Christian and citizen, to live at peace in Christ and in society, that he may thus move straight to God.”<sup>87</sup> This, Murray asserted, is a debate over the freedom to live a life that is “true,” “personal,” “social,” “religious,” and “civic.”<sup>88</sup> And, this life, crucially, is ultimately the “*inchoatio vitae aeternae*” (“beginning of eternal life”).<sup>89</sup>

In explicit Augustinian terms, the life that Murray described in this article is lived during the course of human history, in political community, and under the direction of Divine Providence. Precisely by virtue of its being undertaken in the course of human history, however, this life participates in and contributes to the building of the eschatological City of God that ultimately extends beyond human history and earthly political communities. (The *civitas Dei*, we must recall, “transcends any terrestrial commonwealth.”)<sup>90</sup> Indeed, Murray’s contention that Providence aids human persons in their pilgrimage from this life to the next by providing them with historical opportunities in which to live a life that is “social” and “civic,” a life that is the *inchoatio vitae aeternae*, aligns precisely with Augustine’s conclusion that the building of the City of God begins in human history, and particularly in political community with others, but ultimately extends beyond time and earth itself.

Despite the fact that much of Murray’s work operated in the realm of theory, his practical writings also reveal his employment of Augustine’s theology of history. In a private 1945 memorandum on racial desegregation, for instance, Murray predicated his support for racial equality, in part, on the fact that Divine Providence had facilitated African Americans’ historical movement toward equality in civil society. True to Augustine’s notion that human persons are bound to respond to providentially ordained historical circumstances, Murray asserted that African Americans’ movement toward equality was a historical fact to which American Christians—and especially Catholics—were bound to respond. In fact, Murray wrote that progress toward racial equality “must be conceived as being under the supernatural providence of God” such that “we cannot say that” racial segregation “expresses the full will of God for the negro.”<sup>91</sup> In a 1945 article on women’s social vocations,

<sup>86</sup> Murray, “Freedom of Religion, I: The Ethical Problem,” 236.

<sup>87</sup> Murray, “Freedom of Religion, I: The Ethical Problem,” 237–38.

<sup>88</sup> Murray, “Freedom of Religion, I: The Ethical Problem,” 238.

<sup>89</sup> Murray, “Freedom of Religion, I: The Ethical Problem,” 238.

<sup>90</sup> Louis Duprè, “The Common Good and the Open Society,” in *Catholicism and Liberalism*, 175.

<sup>91</sup> John Courtney Murray, SJ, “Memorandum on the Admission of Negro Students to Saint Louis University, to School Dances, and to the Society of Jesus,” box 8, folder 585, JCMP.

Murray likewise asked, citing Pope Pius XII, if women's entry into "civil and political life" should not be considered a "disposition of Divine Providence."<sup>92</sup> Just as in the civil rights context, this observation about women's social vocations framed Providence as responsible for particular historical circumstances to which Christians were seemingly directed by God to respond.

Murray's practical reflections on civil rights and women's social vocations can only be understood within the context of his heretofore unacknowledged Augustinian political theology. Although these two social questions were of particular importance to Americans during the course of Murray's life, he consistently applied Augustine's theology of history to other historical circumstances too. For instance, Murray argued that theological "errors [were] derived" from the Hellenistic period, thereby "enabl[ing] and oblig[ing] the Church to render explicit what had always been implicit in the word of God" through the development of the Nicene Creed.<sup>93</sup> Tellingly, these "errors" were, according to Murray, the "occasion and cause, under the providence of God," for the Creed's development.<sup>94</sup> Following Augustine's theology of history as articulated in *The City of God*, Murray's observations about the development of the Creed proceeded from a belief that Divine Providence intervened in human history to create certain historical circumstances to which the church was enjoined and empowered to respond.

After the Second World War's conclusion, Murray authored two especially insightful articles on the role of Christianity in cultural transformation that continue to demonstrate his conviction that human history is a forum in which Divine Providence is always at work—or, in Murray's words, that human history is a "theatre of Divine Action" such that this Divine Action, "both creative and provident, is universal in its scope, extending over the whole world of nature and of man and including under its dominion all processes whatever, whether cosmic or historical."<sup>95</sup> Both published in March 1948, these articles not only offer evidence of Murray's implicit channeling of Augustine's theology of history, but also his explicit turning to *The City of God* to illustrate *why* Christians should participate in political life and *how* they should do so.

First published in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* and later republished by at least two popular Catholic

<sup>92</sup> John Courtney Murray, SJ, "The Real Woman Today," *America*, November 3, 1945.

<sup>93</sup> See John Courtney Murray, SJ, "The Status of the Nicene Creed as Dogma," in *Bridging the Sacred and Secular*, 327.

<sup>94</sup> Murray, "The Status of the Nicene Creed as Dogma," 327.

<sup>95</sup> John Courtney Murray, SJ, "God's Word and Its Realization," *America*, December 1945, xix–xxi; John Courtney Murray, SJ, *The Problem of God: Yesterday and Today* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964), 35.

magazines, Murray's March 1948 article on "The Roman Catholic Church" sought to articulate what the Catholic Church "want[s] in the temporal order of human society."<sup>96</sup> Rejecting the "nineteenth-century liberal thesis" that "social, political, and economic processes are immune from regulation by the heteronomous norms of religion and ethics," Murray asserted that it was wrongheaded to believe that one's faith "should have its sole flowering in personal piety; that he must keep his own hands clean by refusing to grapple with the grimy machinery of society."<sup>97</sup> Rather, Murray proposed that the Christian faith is not "exhausted by personal piety" and actually demands "positive action" in civil society.<sup>98</sup>

Murray's conviction that Christians are obligated to undertake certain "positive action[s]" in civil society may appear at first glance to not be uniquely Augustinian. Murray did, however, offer both implicit and explicit evidence of his employment of Augustine's theology of history by remarking that these "positive action[s]" must include the establishment of "institutions in the temporal order as will be favorable to the growth of the seed of eternal life planted in baptism."<sup>99</sup> Drawing explicitly on Augustine, Murray encouraged his readers to contribute to the building of the City of God in human history by pursuing the fellowship constitutive of *latreia*:

Though Christian faith sanctions no myth about the city of God as realizable on earth, it allies itself strongly with the human hope for unity in the city of man. And for no mere sentimental reason. The Greek Fathers taught that the process of realizing mankind's "given" unity made a new beginning, on a plane higher than nature, in the fact of the incarnation: in asserting His oneness with man, Christ asserted the oneness of all men in Him.<sup>100</sup>

Here, Murray endorsed what Augustine articulated centuries earlier as the relationship between the *civitas Dei* and *civitas terrena* in the context of the providentially directed course of human history. First, Murray, following Augustine, observed that the City of God is not entirely "realizable" on earth, but that the forging of human unity (i.e., fellowship) in time participates in the creation of something that extends beyond human history itself. With these background principles, Murray decidedly rejected the exclusively

<sup>96</sup> See, again, Murray, "The Roman Catholic Church," 36. See also John Courtney Murray, SJ, "What Does the Catholic Church Want?," *Catholic Digest* 13 (December 1948): 51–53; John Courtney Murray, SJ, "The Roman Catholic Church," *Catholic Mind* 46 (September 1984): 580–88. Hereafter, all citations to "The Roman Catholic Church" come from the version published in the *Annals*.

<sup>97</sup> Murray, "The Roman Catholic Church," 39.

<sup>98</sup> Murray, "The Roman Catholic Church," 40.

<sup>99</sup> Murray, "The Roman Catholic Church," 40.

<sup>100</sup> Murray, "The Roman Catholic Church," 41.

otherworldly focus of Augustinian pessimists who have since advanced the claim that “earthly goods, and hence political goods, have little or no value.” Contrastingly, Murray argued that Christians must both “seek . . . the kingdom of God in the heavens” and “collaborate towards a Christian civilization of earth.”<sup>101</sup> Instead of abandoning a world hopelessly marred by sin, Murray advanced the evangelical claim that Christians must “gain the whole world on peril of losing their souls.”<sup>102</sup>

Even without ever explicitly invoking “Divine Providence” in this article, Murray drew from and built upon Augustine’s providential theology of history to forge a political theology that enjoins participation in existing political communities. As Murray himself observed, the Christian’s religious life is given “two orientations—towards God and His eternal city, and towards earth and the city of man. They are enjoined to work out their own salvation, keeping themselves immaculate from the world; and they are enjoined to immerse themselves in the world and work at its salvation.”<sup>103</sup> Despite the fact that “these two sets of injunctions are seemingly opposed,” Murray concluded that their “principle of synthesis is in the nature of Christian faith itself”—a principle that directs Christians to contribute to the continual building of the City of God in this life by pursuing a civic unity, practically ordered by natural law, that will itself lead to the fellowship constitutive of *latreia*.

In a second article published in March 1948 on “The Role of Faith in the Renovation of the World,” Murray continued to leverage an Augustinian theology of history to connect this-worldly striving to the eschatological completion of the Mystical Body of Christ.<sup>104</sup> Discussing the postwar recovery of Europe, Murray posited that “the new City can be built only by new men,” and particularly those who accept “God’s gifts, to which man has access only by faith.”<sup>105</sup> Elsewhere in the same piece, Murray remarked that the Holy Spirit “does not descend into the City of Man in the form of a dove; He comes only in the endlessly energetic spirit of justice and love that dwells in the man of the City, the layman.”<sup>106</sup> Situated in a postwar context in which members of all faith communities questioned how to recover from the horrors of the Holocaust, Murray exhorted Christians—and specifically charged the church—with the

<sup>101</sup> Murray, “The Roman Catholic Church,” 37.

<sup>102</sup> Murray, “The Roman Catholic Church,” 37.

<sup>103</sup> Murray, “The Roman Catholic Church,” 37.

<sup>104</sup> See John Courtney Murray, SJ, “The Role of Faith in the Renovation of the World,” *Messenger of the Sacred Heart* 83 (March 1948): 15–17.

<sup>105</sup> Murray, “The Role of Faith in the Renovation of the World,” 15. Murray also discusses “building a City” through human hands in John Courtney Murray, SJ, “Reversing the Secularist Drift,” *Thought* 24 (March 1949): 36–46.

<sup>106</sup> Murray, “The Role of Faith in the Renovation of the World,” 17.

task of constructing a new “City,” one that would mark “a new era in Christian civilization.”<sup>107</sup>

Murray’s proposal for Christianity’s renovation of the world can be understood only within the context of his Augustinian theology of history, one that views human efforts to pursue fellowship in political communities as a means of graciously responding to Divine Providence’s temporal operation. Indeed, Providence, we must recall for Augustine, constructs the path through human history on which human persons, as pilgrims to the heavenly city, travel. As Murray himself once wrote, there is a “providential path of history and circumstances” that encourages transformation in this life.<sup>108</sup> Only Christianity, and especially the evangelization of the Gospel, Murray thought, can authentically effectuate the transformation of souls required to enlarge the City of God on earth.

In a series of *Theological Studies* articles published in 1953 on Pope Leo XIII’s thinking about church and state, Murray further demonstrated how God enjoins and empowers Christians to respond to providentially ordained historical circumstances in their political communities.<sup>109</sup> Explaining that Leo’s approach to the institutional union of altar and throne in France was a product of “fidelity to a providential history and destiny” that brought France and the church together “under the providence of God,” Murray posited that even church–state theories unlike his own might have been providentially ordained means to best undertake the church’s evangelical mission in other circumstances.<sup>110</sup> Such a view that Leo’s response to historical circumstances in France was as appropriate as Murray’s own in the United States followed Murray’s longstanding Augustinian belief that the church must recognize and respond to “spiritual [and] pastoral needs” in novel, but nevertheless providentially ordained, temporal contexts.<sup>111</sup> Even during the Second Vatican Council’s debates over religious liberty, Murray answered concerns—especially popular among Spanish bishops—that some church–state unions could remain pastorally effective by acknowledging that the “work of divine

<sup>107</sup> Murray, “The Role of Faith in the Renovation of the World,” 15.

<sup>108</sup> See Murray, “Contemporary Orientations of Catholic Thought on Church and State in the Light of History,” 213, 218, 224–25, 229.

<sup>109</sup> In chronological order, see John Courtney Murray, SJ, “Leo XIII on Church and State: The General Structure of the Controversy,” *Theological Studies* 14 (March 1953): 1–30; John Courtney Murray, SJ, “Leo XIII: Separation of Church and State,” *Theological Studies* 14 (June 1953): 145–314; John Courtney Murray, SJ, “Leo XIII: Two Concepts of Government,” *Theological Studies* 14 (December 1953): 551–67.

<sup>110</sup> Murray, “Leo XIII: Separation of Church and State,” 177.

<sup>111</sup> Reproduced in John T. McGinn, CSP, “Father Gustave Weigel, SJ,” *Guide* 185 (February 1964): 2, in box 5, folder 7, EJPVCC.



providence” has, at times, permitted the “emergence of [some] Catholic societies” with church–state unions.<sup>112</sup>

Murray’s 1953 *Theological Studies* series on Leo XIII offers additional evidence of his debts to Augustine because of Murray’s reflections on Leo’s Encyclical on the Christian Constitution of States, *Immortale Dei*—a document replete with appeals to the bishop of Hippo.<sup>113</sup> Reflecting on *Immortale Dei*, in fact, Murray proposed that God’s “providence” not only establishes both civil and ecclesiastical powers, but also “marks out a course of action for each in right relation to the other.”<sup>114</sup> Given that this “providence” has “will[ed] that the [church] should be endowed with [spiritual gifts]” and that God “has providentially set both the civil and sacred power over the human community,” Murray concluded that the tradition of the church, from Augustine through Leo, distinguished between church and state.<sup>115</sup> According to Murray, this tradition, however, also defended the notion that church and state should remain harmonious for the betterment of both the civil and sacred orders, a defense of institutional separation and harmonious cooperation that was “most providential” because it ultimately provided for the church’s pastoral freedom.<sup>116</sup> Evidently, Murray’s observation here that Providence intervenes in human history and creates conditions suitable to the church’s growth represents a theoretical exposition of the Augustinian theology of history that Murray most concretely employed with respect to the history of the American Founding. Like Leo vis-à-vis France or the Catholic bishops in twentieth-century Spain, Murray counseled that American Christians were to accept those historical circumstances—respect for natural law and religious liberty—that Divine Providence had incorporated into the American political tradition so as to facilitate the enlargement of the City of God on earth.

<sup>112</sup> See John Courtney Murray, SJ, *The Problem of Religious Freedom* (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1965), available from the Woodstock Theological Library at <https://library.georgetown.edu/woodstock/murray/1964e>.

<sup>113</sup> See Murray, “Leo XIII: Separation of Church and State,” 194. For references to Augustine in *Immortale Dei*, see Leo XIII, Encyclical on the Christian Constitution of States *Immortale Dei*, §2, 20, 36–37 (1885), at The Holy See, [https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_l-xiii\\_enc\\_01111885\\_immortale-dei.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_01111885_immortale-dei.html). For Murray’s further reflections on *Immortale Dei* and its relationship to *The City of God*, see John Courtney Murray, SJ, “The Issue of Church and State at Vatican Council II,” *Theological Studies* 27 (December 1966): 600.

<sup>114</sup> Murray, “Leo XIII: Separation of Church and State,” 195.

<sup>115</sup> Murray, “Leo XIII: Separation of Church and State,” 196, 199.

<sup>116</sup> Murray, “Leo XIII: Two Concepts of Government,” 561.

### Conclusion: Murray the (Imperfect) Student of Augustine

In a series of lectures delivered at Loyola College in Baltimore during February of 1940, John Courtney Murray articulated his view of how to construct a “Christian culture.”<sup>117</sup> At the outset of these lectures, Murray acknowledged that “the task of constructing a culture is essentially spiritual,” that human persons must discover the existing “spiritual order” by “intelligence,” and one must “submit to it” by his or her will.<sup>118</sup> After critiquing American individualism and materialism, Murray asserted that “even in the sphere of terrestrial and temporal life, with which alone culture is directly concerned, man cannot live on bread alone.”<sup>119</sup> “We shall surely perish,” Murray continued, “unless we turn for nourishment to the Living Bread that came down from Heaven, and gave life to the world, His Eternal Word, made flesh.”<sup>120</sup>

Murray’s lectures at Loyola were not aimed at recapitulating the argument for Christendom—during which the alliance of church and state once facilitated Catholic Christianity’s temporal prosperity. Rather, Murray’s lectures sought to encourage Americans to create a Christian culture organized around the “eternal hope” of the Incarnation, “somehow native to the human soul, of becoming like God.”<sup>121</sup> Throughout the remainder of these lectures, Murray thus gave practical exposition to how the Christian should respond to his or her hope, eventually leading Murray to what he would posit almost a decade later is the “nature of the Christian faith itself”: “keeping [oneself] immaculate from the world . . . and immers[ing] [oneself] in the world and work[ing] at its salvation.” Indeed, these lectures consistently praised “human solidarity,” the fact that “the individual was not made for isolation, but for community,” and, most importantly, that “only in union with humanity can [the individual] save himself.”<sup>122</sup> To Murray, this was the portrait of a full human life “made in the image of God’s life,” a life “full of selfhood, that is found in community with others.”<sup>123</sup>

Delivered shortly before assuming the editorship of *Theological Studies*, Murray’s Loyola lectures on the construction of a Christian culture offer

<sup>117</sup> For the text of these lectures, this article references the edited transcription prepared by Joseph A. Komonchak: John Courtney Murray, SJ, *The Construction of a Christian Culture*, ed. Joseph A. Komonchak, available at <https://jakomonchak.files.wordpress.com/2020/03/jcm-loyola-lectures-1940.pdf>.

<sup>118</sup> Murray, *The Construction of a Christian Culture*, 2.

<sup>119</sup> Murray, *The Construction of a Christian Culture*, 8.

<sup>120</sup> Murray, *The Construction of a Christian Culture*, 8.

<sup>121</sup> Murray, *The Construction of a Christian Culture*, 11.

<sup>122</sup> Murray, *The Construction of a Christian Culture*, 17.

<sup>123</sup> Murray, *The Construction of a Christian Culture*, 21.

abundant confirmation that his political theology was not one that counseled a departure from existing political communities to save oneself from a world helplessly marred in sin. As these lectures demonstrate, Murray's, contrastingly, was a political theology that enjoined participation in political communities through "active self-giving [that] has the name of love; and hence the mystery of God."<sup>124</sup> Though initially paradoxical, this is an immersion into the world that points toward extra-worldly salvation because "by his power of love, man can direct himself outward to a destiny that is greater than he, and give himself into communion with the larger whole, humanity, of which he is a part, God, of whom he is the creature."<sup>125</sup>

Creating Murray's "Christian culture" is what Augustine, many centuries earlier, proposed was a step toward the enlargement of the City of God on earth and the preparation for the Mystical Body of Christ's completion. Murray did not cite *The City of God* explicitly in his Loyola lectures, but their substantive features were nevertheless informed by the bishop of Hippo, and particularly his theology of history. Indeed, Murray acknowledged that an earthly "Christian culture" is "dominated by the idea of another world, to which this world is wholly relative," just as Augustine observed in his magnum opus that the City of Man and City of God, while ontologically distinct, are cotemporal and thereby relationally inextricable because it is in human history that God performs God's saving work.<sup>126</sup> As Ernest Fortin has helpfully highlighted, for Augustine, the City of God "does not replace civil society," but instead "supplement[s] it by providing, over and above the benefits confirmed by it, the means of achieving a goal that is higher than any to which civil society [alone] can lead."<sup>127</sup> Augustine certainly did not believe that the City of God will be "ultimately fulfilled" in human history, but Murray, following Augustine, nevertheless counseled that human persons can and must be "active citizens participating in the City of God during this passing age."<sup>128</sup>

In light of the two cities' cotemporality, Murray warned his audience not to first seek the "kingdom of earth" because doing so leads "millions upon millions [to be] disinherited, from both the Kingdom of earth and the Kingdom of God."<sup>129</sup> Instead, Murray exhorted Christians to seek first the kingdom of God such that we can move "outward, to the souls of others, and to union

<sup>124</sup> Murray, *The Construction of a Christian Culture*, 21.

<sup>125</sup> Murray, *The Construction of a Christian Culture*, 22.

<sup>126</sup> Murray, *The Construction of a Christian Culture*, 26.

<sup>127</sup> Fortin, "St. Augustine," 197.

<sup>128</sup> Lamb, *A Commonwealth of Hope*, 171; emphasis in original.

<sup>129</sup> Murray, *The Construction of a Christian Culture*, 32.

with them” in the course of human history.<sup>130</sup> In a more direct Augustinian formulation, Murray encouraged his audience to embrace a “faith, which works by love: by that love with which a man loves God as God ought to be loved, and his neighbor as himself.”<sup>131</sup> It can therefore be said that Murray’s plan for the construction of a Christian culture—a culture that can “redeem the world”—began with and from Augustine’s *latreia* as necessarily realized within the context of providentially ordained political communities.<sup>132</sup> This, quite obviously, is not the Augustinian pessimist’s encouragement of “retreat from the diseased body politic” precisely because it requires the evangelical fellowship and transformation uniquely enabled by immersion into our political communities.<sup>133</sup>

To date, scholars of Murray have failed to recognize the extent of his debts to Augustine, debts that began to appear in Murray’s thought even before he assumed the editorship of *Theological Studies*. Alongside his Loyola lectures, in fact, the private documents and public writings discussed in this article reveal that Murray’s political theology was informed by Aquinas and Augustine. In particular, this evidence demonstrates that Murray self-consciously employed Augustine’s theology of history, especially as articulated in *The City of God*, to assert that natural law is a providential feature of the American political tradition. Operating within the context of the First Amendment’s providential assurance of religious liberty and the Founding Fathers’ integration of natural law into the American political tradition, Murray argued—following Augustine—that Christians in the United States could be agents of cultural transformation. It was the First Amendment’s service as an “article of peace,” for instance, that had allowed the church in the United States, Murray frequently recalled, to freely undertake its pastoral mission: the creation of a Christian culture.

Similar to any other theologian or philosopher, Murray was an imperfect student of those whose thought he invoked, including Augustine. While this article has shown how Murray employed Augustine’s theology of history to articulate his political theology of the Founding, it is nevertheless true that Murray emphasized certain aspects of Augustine’s theology of history at the expense of others. For example, Murray often remarked that arbitrary and capricious political authorities are illegitimate, whereas Augustine

<sup>130</sup> Murray, *The Construction of a Christian Culture*, 34.

<sup>131</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, 19.23.

<sup>132</sup> See Murray, *The Construction of a Christian Culture*, 36.

<sup>133</sup> Lamb, *A Commonwealth of Hope*, 3.

asserted in *The City of God*—citing Rome as the most prominent example—that God providentially empowers good and evil rulers to serve divine ends.<sup>134</sup> In Augustine’s words, both good and evil rulers are used by Providence to suit God’s will insofar as “in His providence and omnipotence, God distributes to each what is due to each, and knows how to make use of good and evil alike.”<sup>135</sup> For this reason, even when “good men suffer” and “divine justice is not apparent,” it is nevertheless true that “divine doctrine conduces to our salvation.”<sup>136</sup>

Murray may have emphasized certain aspects of Augustine’s theology of history at the expense of others, but the particular ways in which he did so—and their implications for scholars who today seek to use Murray in the articulation of normative political theologies—are outside the scope of this article. Indeed, as this article has nevertheless shown, Murray was a keen student of Augustine, albeit perhaps imperfect. This being the case, the attentive reader of Murray remains on firm ground in concluding that the late American Jesuit’s political theology of the American Founding was, in fact, Augustinian by virtue of its bringing of Christian history into conversation with American constitutional history. Perhaps such a conclusion can begin a novel conversation about how reading Murray as an Augustinian might confirm or challenge how scholars have heretofore understood his political theology in other contexts.<sup>137</sup>

<sup>134</sup> See “Editorial Information,” *National Catholic Welfare Conference News Service*, December 6, 1963, in box 5, folder 7, EJPVCC.

<sup>135</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, 14.27.

<sup>136</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, 20.2.

<sup>137</sup> I would like to thank Mark Massa, SJ; Ryan Patrick Hanley; Horizons’s anonymous reviewers; and the participants in the March 2023 convening of the Advanced Seminar in Philosophy and Theology at Boston College for their comments on earlier drafts of this article. I would also like to thank the University Fellowships Committee at Boston College for its financial support of this research.