What Has Athens to Do with Jerusalem?

The Christian Church and Political Philosophy

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The second century Christian apologist Tertullian of Carthage famously asked, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?" At issue was whether and how scripture should be accountable to questions posed by Greek philosophy. The relationship between supernatural revelation and natural reason has occasioned various and deep disputes among Christians throughout the Church's history. These are often implicated in, although not identical to, a more pressing question, namely, "What is the relationship between theology and politics?" We are conspicuously aware that neither is a subject for polite dinner conversation, and when combined they can prove volatile. This is, in part, a sign of their importance, and few doubt that these are indeed important topics. However, fewer realize just how deeply intertwined theology and politics are, even for us advance modern citizens who live within Western democracies that have long separated church and state.

Consider a central theoretical problem in western political thought. Aristotle recognized that humans come together into society for the sake of life—to secure the material necessities of food, shelter, clothing, and reproduction—but he thought people stay together for the sake of the good life. To be happy, he argued, one needs to have good teachers in order to become excellent in various practical and theoretical pursuits. Above all, one needs good friends with whom to share and refine one's achievements over time. Thus "Political Science" was in his mind the most important "science," because it was concerned with coordinating and interrelating human activities so that individuals and communities could flourish as a whole. But such social harmony is difficult to create and sustain. Why?

Aristotle thought that the way for people to interrelate—the requirements of what we owe to one another in terms of property and honor—was rooted in the rational order of nature. This view of natural justice had two significant implications. First, it suggested there could be an arrangement in which everyone does what they are best suited for. Like bees in a hive, no one's personal good need be in conflict with the society's common good. Secondly, it suggested that the requirements of justice could be rationally known and translated into law. Although some laws would be based only on convention, all would be accountable to natural law, which provides foundational principles of justice like don't steal, cheat, murder and so on.

This picture raises some questions, however, about the necessity of law and the conditions for rational knowledge. If the law is good and natural why don't people follow it automatically? Why does law need to be posited as law in the first place? Two sorts of answers developed in the ancient world. On one account, endorsed by Plato, the problem has to do with knowledge. People don't know what is genuinely good for them. Law serves as a teacher about the best way to live and helps efficiently coordinate otherwise difficult information problems. Indeed the more intelligent we are, the less law seems like a constraint – it's just perceived as good sense. But what if people don't think a law is good? Does this mean the law is bad, or that people simply aren't intelligent enough to understand it?

To be asked to obey a law is to be entitled to reasons as to why it is good. Suppose, however, that there is no common good as Aristotle understood it, but only *what's good for me* and *what's good for you*. Reason will then be on a fairly short leash. If we also think that "my good" is always self evident to me and consists of material advantage, the leash will be shorter still. There is also the dark thought that someone could act independent of any reason whatsoever, and arbitrarily choose to go against even the best ideas. The diminution of the capacity of reason to bring us to common judgments that motivate our behavior poses an obvious problem for politics. The 17th-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes was emblematic of a shift in modern political thought when he wrote that "authority, not truth, makes law." Justice, in his view, could not be based on any truth about a common good, since people will never agree because of their divergent private interests. Rather, if political order were to take shape it would mean appealing to the most immediate self-interest of individuals, namely their interest in avoiding violent death. Thus the only ultimate "reason" to obey law is because you'll be beaten or killed if you don't. In the absence of compelling reasons about our common ends, law becomes intrinsically coercive, although it might make individuals better off in the long run. However, it is unambiguously better in this scheme to be the sovereign, the person who is free precisely because he is not beholden to any law.

Much political thought in the modern period has tried to square the proverbial circle: How can someone be both free and subject to law? One solution, developed in different ways by both Rousseau and Kant, was to locate the validity of law in consent. If I give myself a law or explicitly consent to a law then it isn't a coercive imposition. But this returns us to the initial question—why have law at all? Why don't people simply act that way automatically? When applied to a political body, the notion of consent becomes even more complex. Although we may hope to draw on "the wisdom of crowds" to augment individual ignorance, how is consent to be measured, and how often, and by whom? Moreover, aren't there some things that simply are wrong, which should trump even the majority's will? Most political thinkers today champion "democracy and human rights," but there is an endless debate over which of the two has priority. Whether they can be compatible depends on a more fundamental sociological reality, namely how democratic peoples conduct themselves and which rights they assert. Despite its sophisticated institutional arrangements, much of our politics still depends on the character, desires and decency of citizens. Perhaps then it is not the quality of the threats behind our laws that are of fundamental importance, but the qualities of character that make persons into good neighbors.

Most political scientists today think politics is about power and the conflict of self-interest. This is misleading. What is more important is what people take their self-interest to be and the ways in which they think about power in the first place. Understanding and changing that, however, is difficult, whereas mapping out economic incentives is easy. That is not to deny that analysis of incentives—the *modus operandi* of Political Science—is useful, but its power is generally confined to narrow circumstances in which law is already operative. We are bad at predicting wars and developing third world countries. Even within stable legal contexts, however, political science is poorly equipped to understand the "cultural" foundations of politics, so we talk about fictions like "social capital." At the end of the day, much social science has inherited a strictly "instrumental" view of human reason, which makes the discipline blind to fundamental questions about the first order goods and ultimate ends through which people direct their lives.

This means that something important is missing from political science's understanding of society, for few societies are held together simply by the mutual satisfaction of private interests. Rather, most are built upon a widespread set of beliefs that link social practices with things that people think are of ultimate significance.

This is something that Saint Augustine of Hippo understood well. In his book *The City of God*, he famously criticized the political foundations of the Roman Empire, arguing that the rulers of its kingdoms resembled bands of robbers (Augustine thus anticipated the insights of rational choice analysis by some 1600 years). Although political institutions are important for the way we relate to other people, he argued there was a more fundamental issue rooted in the nature of our loves.

Knowledge for Augustine (following his neo-platonic education) was intimately related to love. We come to know the world through the things we love in it; and, in his view, becoming virtuous entailed developing and refining the right kind of loves. A community, he argued, was defined by sharing "common objects of love" not by simple biological, geographical, or economic borders. By virtue of their constitutive place in a community's desires, such objects of love provide a common measure akin to what Aristotle hoped a rationally ordered universe could provide. Obviously, much depends on the answers people give to the question "what do you love?" *As one loves, so one acts*. This inspires further questions about what things are worth loving and what makes them lovable.

Augustine was certain that the highest and most rewarding loves require formation and refinement—which although laborious could be a labor of love. As a consequence, he held that law and love could be mutually supportive. Moreover, Augustine thought that history itself was a medium through which God communicated his love, above all by making creatures with a unique capacity for love and inviting them into a drama through which their desires would be elevated and consummated in his own divine life. This vision of a community united by the love of God, in which loves

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of created things were ordered in harmonious peace, is what Augustine called the "City of God" and believed was prophesied in the book of Revelation. His vision was profoundly social and drew on range of scriptural accounts and Christian practices. Indeed, if one finds the Christian narrative compelling, it has some obvious implications regarding what is worthwhile, noble and obligatory. So, he argued, Christian communities have an intrinsically political comportment towards the world (and that's before one even considers that their members get together every Sunday to worship a king).

The larger implications are, at first sight, modest. All this shows is that Christian convictions have provided one sort of compelling source for first order allegiances among some peoples. Other religious traditions and philosophical schools have done as much. However, an important question for any of these traditions concerns what intellectual resources they can contribute to our current political predicaments. Although it is not the job of Christians to solve the world's problems, there is a rich legacy of incorporating Christian thought into the relationship between freedom and law, love and knowledge, dignity and service, and so on. These are invaluable resources for both plain persons and political philosophers as we try to think through the fundamental commitments that structure the priorities and aspirations of our politics—commitments about which political science can say substantively little.

Is it the case that Christian thought has a distinctive contribution to make to vital questions about the nature of the good, of rationality and of love? The answer is yes, but for reasons that both secularists and believers may not like. Theological reflection has much to contribute to our political understanding in part because behind many of our inherited disagreements lie old theological disputes. More than a few scholars have pointed out that modern political theory is built upon secularized and hollowed out theological concepts. Sovereignty is something we now attribute to states, but no state is truly sovereign in any precise definition of that term. This language was first developed as way to talk about God's omnipotence and only later transferred to political analysis as states tried to articulate their own powers, which never could be absolute. Likewise law makes sense as law in a theological context in which its ultimate goodness is guaranteed by the omniscience of God. However, if God has no credibility as a law giver, either because he is dead or because, like Milton's Satan, we think the legislator is tyrannical, then we need to rethink nature and promise of law. Also, beliefs central to our understanding of human rights, like "all people are created equal," are arguably theological claims—not simply because of the word "created," but because our ever expanding scientific knowledge provides us no credible avenues through which to defend human equality.

In brief, then, our political life is haunted by the ghosts of dead Christian concepts. Moreover, many of these concepts died because of the inability of Christians to come to agreements about them. Often these disagreements became reflected in political fallouts within the Church itself. Some, like Nietzsche, have thought there was never any hope of a defensible Christian synthesis in the first place. But Nietzsche was one of many late modern thinkers who also lamented that modern life was destined to become increasingly nihilistic in the wake of God's death. Some have tried to rehabilitate notions of human dignity, meaning and nobility in a universe bereft of divinity and purpose. Others hoped for a greater articulation and awakening of faith.

Obviously religion can be politically important because of the motivation it provides for peoples' actions at a fundamental level. This is religion's promise as well as its danger for society. Between the unappealing characters of fanatic fideists and soulless consumers one hopes that a theological vision of goodness might bridge the gap between what political scientists call "self interest" and what Tocqueville called "self interest rightly understood." Does the Christian witness have the beauty and power to inspire a more humane civilization? That remains to be seen, and the proof will be in the pudding, as it were. Can politics rid itself of theological horizons? This also remains to be seen, although it would be a politics unlike any we have ever known.

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