This collection brings together thirty-five letters and sermons of Augustine, bishop of Hippo from AD 396 to 430, that deal with political matters. The letters and sermons are both practical and principled and treat many essential themes in Augustine's thought, including the responsibilities of citizenship, the relationship between the church and secular authority, religious coercion, and war and peace. These texts complement Augustine's classic *The City of God against the Pagans* (also available in the Cambridge Texts series), and give students direct insight into the political and social world of late antiquity with which Augustine was immediately involved. The slave trade, tax collection, clerical harassment, and murder are amongst the topics with which he deals. The volume contains clear, accurate modern translations, together with a concise introduction and informative notes designed to aid the student encountering Augustine's life and thought for the first time.

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Editors’ note

There has been consultation and collaboration between us on every aspect and at every stage. The primary division of responsibility, however, is as follows. The Introduction was the joint responsibility of Robert Dodaro and Margaret Atkins. Robert Dodaro furnished the list of Principal dates, the Bibliography, the Biographical notes, and most of the annotations on the text. The translation was the work of Margaret Atkins, who also prepared the Translator’s notes and the map. She also contributed to the annotations.

Three scholars deserve our particular thanks: Peter Garnsey read the whole manuscript and gave invaluable advice at each stage; George Lawless also commented helpfully on the entire manuscript; Peter Glare read a draft of the translation and suggested numerous improvements. In addition, we are grateful to Caroline Humfress for advice on Roman law, Claire Sotinel for help with the Biographical notes, and Aldo Bazan and Allan Fitzgerald for technical assistance and advice.

This volume is dedicated with gratitude to our respective parents.
Introduction

Why letters and sermons?

‘I beg you as a Christian to a judge and I warn you as a bishop to a Christian’, wrote Augustine in a letter to Apringius, proconsul of Africa. In the *City of God* Augustine lays out on a vast canvas the themes of Christianity and paganism, providence and power, empire and church, and divine and human justice, writing as a learned Christian apologist, an intellectual addressing his peers. It is easy to forget that he was also, and before all else, a Christian pastor. As a bishop, he struggled with the daily reality of political life in a society in which ‘church’ and ‘state’ had never been, and could not conceivably be, disentangled. In this context, ‘justice’ referred not to the rise and fall of empires, but to the decision whether to punish or to pardon a Donatist thug who had beaten up one of his priests. ‘War’ was not merely a theological construct: an instrument of divine wrath or divine education. It was happening in the next province, where one of Augustine’s old acquaintances was responsible for warding off the barbarian raiders. ‘Civic power’ may have been embodied symbolically in the emperor in distant Rome, but here in north Africa it was men like Augustine’s correspondent Apringius who made the decisions that mattered.

The exigencies of daily life raised large political questions: how can punishment be justified at all? Is the gentleness of Christ compatible with responsible government? Ought the force of law to be used to deter those tempted by heresy? Augustine wrote about such matters, but not in the *City of God*. To discover the everyday political thinking that constituted both the background to and the outworking of the large-scale ideas of his
Introduction

magnum opus, we need to turn to the occasional writings of the busy bishop. In other words, we need to read his letters and his sermons. Here we find Augustine reflecting on practical issues as they arise, as he answers a request, intercedes with an authority, debates with an opponent, or advises a friend. We also hear him encouraging, teaching and chastising his congregation from the pulpit in reaction to current events. The bishop is thinking on his feet, and his answers are often *ad hoc* and *ad hominem*. He does not articulate grand theory in these documents. Yet to read through them is to become aware of the way in which fundamental ideas about God and humanity, filtered through Augustine’s pastoral experience, shaped a distinctive and challenging intellectual response to the problems of his society.

Between the two cities

The consequences of the conversion in 312 of the emperor Constantine upon relations between Christians and the secular powers were complex, and took time to develop. First, the laws, which had always favoured the official religion, now protected the property of Christian churches and privileged Christian priests; by the late fourth century they also forbade pagan practices and rendered heresy illegal. Secondly, as public careers were opened to Christians, the successful were faced with the problem of how to exercise civic power in a manner compatible with their faith. Thirdly, the bishops who led the Christian congregations, which came to constitute a majority in many towns of the empire, wielded great influence, individually and collectively, both as moral guides and as public figures. Fourthly, it had begun to matter how the mass of ordinary people lived their lives, and not only for reasons of public order. For the virtues of the ordinary man and woman were both a sign and an integral element of their faith; moreover, both bishops and emperor believed themselves responsible for the souls of their people. Bishops, therefore, had no choice but to involve themselves in political matters, as intercessors, advocates, advisers, teachers, preachers and leaders. Fortunately, Augustine’s early life had prepared him well for the more worldly aspects of his eventual career as a bishop.

Augustine was born in 354 in Thagaste, then in the Roman province of Numidia, today the town of Souk Ahras in Algeria. His father, a modest landowner and town councillor, was ambitious for his clever son, and his ambition fuelled Augustine’s own. The boy was clearly gifted with words,
and one route to social and economic advance was the art of public speaking; for oratory in Augustine’s world was a means to impress the powerful, to persuade the masses and to exert influence on legal and political decisions. Augustine’s parents encouraged his further schooling, and sent him at the age of seventeen to the city of Carthage to study rhetoric. By 376 he was himself teaching rhetoric in Carthage, and soon he wrote the first of his many books, on this very subject.

At the age of twenty-eight, dissatisfied with the students in Carthage, and eager to further his career, he crossed the sea to Rome. Before long he had caught the eye of Symmachus, the prefect of the city, and when Symmachus was asked to find a professor of rhetoric for the city of Milan, where the Western emperor had his court, he recommended Augustine for the job. The political and religious tensions in the imperial city at the time would have given Augustine a taste of the complexities of power in the Christianised empire. The young emperor, Valentinian II, was under the sway of his mother, a so-called Arian rather than orthodox Christian, while further west in the empire the usurper Magnus Maximus, who presented himself as a staunch Catholic, had taken control. Augustine also witnessed direct conflict in Milan when Arian imperial troops attempted to seize a Catholic basilica, with Ambrose, the Catholic bishop, inside.

Augustine’s new position enabled him to make influential friends. His duties included delivering panegyrics on ceremonial occasions in honour of important citizens, and he made at least one speech in praise of the emperor and another for his commander-in-chief. The lad from the provinces was rising to fame, and his hope that one day he would secure a provincial governorship was not unreasonable. Yet his success did not satisfy him. He became increasingly disenchanted with the intrigues and infighting inseparable from public life, and he found the orator’s need to compromise the truth through flattery increasingly burdensome.

Augustine’s restless intelligence had always been seeking more than worldly success. He had looked to philosophy, and to the Manichaean religion, to satisfy his spiritual longing, and neither had proved adequate. At last, in Milan itself, he found what he was looking for, in the sermons of Ambrose, which finally eased his way back to Christianity, the religion of his mother and of his childhood. Two years after arriving in Milan he decided to resign his post, seek baptism and abandon Italy for a religious and philosophical retirement with a group of like-minded friends in Thagaste.

Augustine, as he himself later put it, had left the service of the emperor.
for the service of God. He thought that in doing so he had exchanged the anxieties of political ambition for philosophical calm. However, the church was as eager as the empire to exploit the talents of its citizens, and few men possessed Augustine’s combination of intellectual penetration, political acumen and skill to persuade. The church needed him, though, as a pastor: within a decade of his conversion, he reluctantly accepted the positions of first priest, and then bishop of the port of Hippo, near to his birthplace. His new responsibilities, contrasting so sharply with those he would have had either as a public servant or as a private philosopher, were to dominate his thinking and writing for the rest of his life.

Scripture was the basis of the Christian’s life and thought; as a new priest Augustine had requested time from his bishop to study the Bible in order to equip himself to meet his congregation’s needs. Now, as a bishop, one of his main functions was to mediate to his people his understanding of the word of God. Many of his extant sermons and numerous commentaries on scripture reflect this role.

Augustine also became involved in combating both paganism and heretical or sectarian movements within the church, in particular Donatism, which was local to north Africa, where it commanded strong support (for the origins of this movement see pp. 127–8). Again, Augustine’s extant writings include a number of pieces of polemic directed against such non-Catholic groups. His role in tackling such problems extended beyond his own diocese: the bishops of north Africa met in annual councils which decided matters of ecclesiastical discipline, which included promoting common strategies for dealing with groups like the Donatists. On occasion, the councils petitioned the emperor himself for legislation to assist in this work.

International affairs also impinged upon life in Hippo. In 410 an army led by Alaric the Visigoth sacked the city of Rome, an event which was in fact more of a symbolic than a material blow to the Romans. However, Roman refugees fleeing the barbarian forces poured into Hippo, and exaggerated reports of the attack frightened the Africans. Augustine’s Sermon on the sacking of the city of Rome, included in this volume, provides a formal theological explanation of God’s decision to allow such events to take place. Thus, it foreshadows one of the major themes of the City of God. The consistent pressure from the movement of barbarian tribes through Europe and north Africa meant that warfare was never far from Augustine’s mind; indeed, as he lay dying in 430 Hippo itself was under siege from the Vandals.
Augustine transferred his allegiance when he converted, but he did not abandon his weapons. He employed his oratory in the pulpit, his legal knowledge in judging disputes and opposing heretics, his political experience and contacts in negotiating with statesmen and winning their support. He added to these skills regular meditation upon scripture, which constantly shaped his use of them. Moreover, as a Christian he returned to his African roots. He never rejected the imperial machine with which he had worked so closely, but as a provincial on the margins of the empire he could view it with a degree of detachment. Milan, like any other human authority, was there to serve the purposes of God.

A couple of years before Augustine began to write the City of God, he exchanged letters with a pagan called Nectarius, who was pleading with him to intercede on behalf of the population of his native town, Calama, not far from Hippo. Nectarius tried to flatter Augustine by comparing him with the Roman statesman and political thinker Cicero. Augustine, however, saw clearly that Christianity required the transformation of the classical Roman understanding of civic virtues. Nectarius' earthly patriotism was certainly commendable, but unless he came also to accept that his true homeland was 'the heavenly city', it would remain misdirected and fruitless, for he could not help his fellow citizens to flourish in the fullest way while still encouraging them in false religious belief (Letters 90, 91, 103 and 104).

In particular, the fundamental role played by Christ sets Augustine’s political thought apart from the classical tradition. Augustine believed with orthodox Christianity that Christ was fully human; therefore he was able to exemplify a just human life, which consisted in love of God and neighbour. Yet the incarnation meant that Christ was also the unique instrument of grace by which God assisted human beings in living justly. They needed such grace because they had inherited the effects of the sin of Adam, and, consequently, left to themselves were unable to know completely, or to want whole-heartedly, what justice required. Christ, though, was free from original sin, and thus able to offer to the rest of humanity the cure, a life in full communion with God, which was established through baptism. However, baptism did not entirely eradicate the effects of original sin before death; even the saints had continually to struggle against these effects during their lives.
Only in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, therefore, can civic virtues such as piety and courage be seen perfectly fulfilled. Consequently, it is natural for Christians to use Christ as a model to imitate, as Augustine suggests when he repeatedly commends gentleness by referring to the story of the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8; cf. Commentary on the gospel of John, 33, Sermon 13 and Letter 153).

On the other hand, because Christ in Augustine’s view was both divine and sinlessly human, we cannot simply imitate him. In the first place, we can never possess the virtues as fully as he does. Secondly, we can do so at all only by a process of conversion and continuous acknowledgement of our failures and dependence upon his justifying grace. Augustine, therefore, uses the apostles and martyrs as role-models for the Christian. In this, they function as the Christian equivalent of the ancient Roman civic heroes, whose acts of selfless courage inspired other citizens. Yet they are not, and no human except Christ could be, flawless heroes. So, for example, where the Romans represented a man like Regulus as perfectly brave, Augustine argued that the Christian martyrs could not completely overcome their fear of death. Even the great saints, then, must confess their weaknesses; thus Augustine proclaimed Daniel, for example, as virtuous precisely because despite his heroism he was prepared to do just that (Sermon on the sacking of the city of Rome).

The theme of the Christian’s need to confess both his own sin and his dependence on grace appears regularly in Augustine’s correspondence with those in authority. For example, he writes to Macedonius, the current vicar of Africa, responsible for the legal administration of the region, to whom he has just sent the first three books of the City of God. An important theme of the letter is the contrast between Christian teaching on grace and the pagan philosopher’s belief in the self-sufficiency of the wise man (Letter 155).

This letter also sets the traditional Roman virtues in the context of the ‘heavenly commonwealth’, the communion of the angels and saints who live in blessedness with God. Faithful Christians on earth are journeying towards this commonwealth, moved by a desire to share its happiness. In this eschatological perspective, the civic virtues are transformed into aspects of the love of God and neighbour. Furthermore, in heaven they will no longer be needed, or, rather, they will dissolve into the simple act of loving and enjoying the presence of God.

At the same time, Augustine does not deny the value of civic virtues for purely earthly purposes: Christian and pagans alike benefit from just,
peaceful and orderly societies. Indeed, he both defends Christianity against its detractors and criticises paganism by arguing that only true religion can in fact protect even the narrowly civic functions of the virtues. Similarly, he argues to Nectarius that the paganism of his protégés encourages vices which damage the very town that Nectarius claims to love. Civic virtues are as necessary for well-being as Cicero himself thought; they are best secured, however, in Augustine's view, by the Christian churches, in which public exhortations to peace can regularly be heard (Letters 91 and 104; cf. Letter 138).

The responsibilities of power

Augustine's belief in the falleness of human nature was not based purely on abstract theology; the evidence for it could be seen all around him. In many modern societies the violence that underpins social harmony is implicit or unacknowledged: it hides in inaccessible military bases, in prisons and law-courts, in slums and in streets that we avoid. Our long-distance wars are mediated to us through the softening lens of television. Augustine, however, could not afford to neglect the question of violence, in practice or in theory. For him, it constituted the most urgent and the most basic problem of politics.

Violence was a problem for two reasons. First, it destroyed the fragile 'earthly peace' which was the condition for the flourishing of any society, religious or secular; the need for physical security, sustenance and freedom to cooperate was recognised by everyone. Secondly, to engage in violent behaviour was to disobey the Christian summons to live in gentleness, to return good for evil, and to forgive. It harmed the perpetrators as much as the victims, or, rather, it harmed them more, for it drew them away from the path to eternal life.

The Christian, however, seemed caught in a dilemma. Those who disturbed the peace could be restrained only by the use of force. Was it possible for officials committed to mercy to protect their society either from enemies without or from criminals within? In particular, therefore, Augustine was forced to ponder the justification for and the role of the two types of violence normally seen as legitimate: warfare and institutional punishment.

Augustine's response to the dilemma was to distinguish sharply between authorised and unauthorised use of force. He appealed to the well-known thirteenth chapter of St Paul's letter to the Romans, where
Paul argued that ‘higher authority’ is ordained by God, and urged the Romans to respect it. From this Augustine deduced that those who had specific responsibilities – as governors, judges, soldiers – were justified in employing or authorising the use of force for the purposes of their office. It was important for others, therefore, to respect their right to do this: Christians should obey the laws. However, the point of distinguishing the legitimate use of force was not to encourage rulers to employ harsh measures without fear of acting unjustly. The function of law was to restrain violence and secure peace: its use should be impersonal and never vengeful, and limited to the minimum necessary. Augustine interprets Romans 13 in the context of Psalm 2.10, ‘Be instructed, all you who judge the earth’, which he took as a warning to earthly judges against corruption (Sermon 13). Moreover, it was the legitimisation of specific uses of force that made it possible for Augustine to insist firmly that unauthorised violence could have no justification.

When Augustine reminds rulers of their own obligation to justice, he is not mouthing empty pieties. For he believed that on the day of judgement, each of us would be called to render an account of our lives. Those in positions of responsibility over others, whether governors or bishops or fathers, would have to account for any injustices they committed in exercising them. Moreover, they were accountable to God for the well-being of those in their care. Consequently, Augustine took the responsibilities of power with enormous seriousness. For the same reason, he also argued that those subject to specific authorities should not try to usurp their role: each will have to render his own account to God.

At this point, it is important to recognise the practical context of Augustine’s comments about law. In his society, laws were not proposed and passed by a centralised government, then automatically applied and enforced by an impersonal police force and separate judiciary. First, while there also existed a body of inherited law, much of the law was made by the emperor in response to appeals from the provinces, from officials, or from influential groups or individuals. Secondly, the extent to which a law was promulgated and followed was partly up to the local governor and partly up to the initiative of local communities. Moreover, the same officials who were responsible for governing provinces presided over legal trials. Finally, although much of the late Roman penal system seems by our standards grimly barbaric, there was no requirement on judges to impose a set minimum penalty: they were free to respond to appeals for leniency.

There was, then, room for discretion and for initiative. This flexibility...
increased the seriousness of the burden (as Augustine termed it) of responsibility: one would be judged not by the simple criteria of obedience or efficiency, but on one’s judgement in employing or applying law fairly and mercifully, with consideration for the well-being of all those involved, both individuals and groups.

What, however, counted as ‘well-being’? For Augustine, of course, this included not only basic physical welfare and communal peace, but also moral and religious flourishing. All of these should be taken into account. Augustine does not, in principle, exclude any of these considerations from the responsibilities of any particular office, by, for example, limiting the churchman’s concern to religious issues, or the statesman’s to social. The emperor makes the laws, and that includes laws relating to religion; the bishop may seek to enforce or mitigate the laws, and that includes laws relating to secular peace.

However, each office had its own specific duties and its own emphases. What, then, was the primary responsibility of a Christian who held secular office? He must, of course, protect the peace and requite injustice by means of the established laws. He could, and should, use force where authorised and where necessary. He should do so to protect his community both materially and also religiously. In all of this, Augustine shares the general assumptions of his society, even if the clarity of his rejection of unauthorised force is unusual. What is distinctive, however, is his repeated reminder to the powerful of their own flawed nature. Those who judge will themselves be judged, and they should recognise with fear and trembling their own injustice. Without self-examination, confession and repentance, no earthly judge can hope for the God-given wisdom to make sound decisions (see e.g. Sermon 13). Such repentance, however, will encourage the judge to exercise his office with a justice that is properly imbued with humility and mercy.

In all this, Augustine speaks as a Christian to Christians. In the letter to Apringius, he is interceding for a criminal to ask for a merciful verdict. He makes it clear that he would have interceded also with a non-Christian official, but that his arguments would have been different. The Christian ruler is under the obligation to exercise mercy, and also, although Augustine presses the point only gently, under an obligation to listen to the bishop’s advice (Letter 134).

The primary responsibility of the bishop himself, was, of course, religious. Yet at least two of his pastoral duties had clear political implications. The first was education in the virtues, exercised on his congregation
through preaching: Augustine describes the churches memorably as ‘sacred lecture-halls for the peoples of the world’ (Letter 91). He also counselled individual Christians in political matters; moreover, as he suggested to Apringius, the bishop could give orders as well as advice even to a Christian proconsul.

A second important role was that of intercession, a traditional duty of a priest (indeed, even the pagan Nectarius invoked this fact (Letter 90)). It was the bishop’s role to intercede both for individuals, for example to seek to mitigate a sentence (Letters 134 and 153), and also on behalf of the community, for example to protest about an oppressive official (Sermon 302). Relatedly, the bishop assumed a right and a duty to try to influence the application of law in the cause of effective justice. A striking example comes in Letter 10*, where Augustine asks his fellow-bishop Alypius to appeal to the emperors to authorise punishments of slave-traders which would be less cruel than those applicable in theory under present law, and therefore at the same time far more practicable and efficacious.

The bishop was naturally more likely to get involved in cases which had a religious dimension, for example, where members of the rival Christian group, the Donatists, had physically attacked Catholic Christian priests (Letters 133 and 134), or where there was a dispute between rival groups about the ownership of church property. However, as the cases discussed in Sermon 302 and Letter 10* show, there was no theoretical limitation on the bishop’s area of concern.

In another area, custom inherited from the pre-Christian world gave the bishop unsought political responsibilities. Christian churches, like pagan shrines before them, were respected as places of asylum, and protected as such by both civil and religious law. On one occasion Augustine was asked to intervene in a dispute between a citizen who was alleged to have breached the right of asylum and the bishop who had disciplined him. We include here the two letters Augustine wrote, one to each man; these show him mustering all the moral pressure he can to make peace between them (Letters 250 and 1*). Asylum provides a clear example of a more general truth about Augustine’s political thinking. For the most part, he assumes rather than argues for the rights and duties of a bishop. Civic responsibility was not something that he and his fellow-bishops actively sought. It came with the job, and with social expectations of the job. It was up to them to respond, making use of the law and the authorities as best they could.

What of the ordinary citizens? It will be clear by now that Augustine...
emphasised their duty both to obey the established authorities and to refrain from taking the law into their own hands by indulging in unauthorised violence. There were, however, critics of Christianity who saw Christian gentleness as hopelessly idealistic: how could a society defend itself if its members turned the other cheek to their enemies, and only returned good for evil (Letter 136)? In reply, Augustine pointed out the political benefits of a society in which citizens did in fact return good for evil. Peace was the basis of the existence of a city, as Cicero himself had believed. Truly benevolent citizens would both maintain peace, and also seek the genuine well-being of fellow-citizens who had harmed them. Augustine exploits Cicero and Sallust to argue that the great pagan Romans had themselves acknowledged the civic value of the gentler virtues (Letters 91 and 138).

The Christian citizen also had positive ethical duties with their own political implications, such as almsgiving. In the documents included here, Augustine suggests these indirectly, by recalling the example of the martyr Laurence, whose dedication to the poor contributed to his condemnation (Sermon 302), and by satirising those who prefer temporary earthly wealth to the lasting treasures of heaven (Sermon 335c). Finally, ordinary citizens (or at least those who were fathers) had their own burden of responsibility. It was their job to educate the members of their households to be peaceable citizens themselves; where they had not yet succeeded in educating them, they ought to control them. Augustine rebukes his congregation sharply after a local mob has lynched an unpopular imperial officer: if every member of a Christian family had been restrained from violence, the outrage would not have occurred (Sermon 302).

The ambiguities of punishment and war

The Christian is permitted to resort to violence only in the exercise of specific, publicly authorised, roles. Yet authorisation does not remove the tension between the grim necessity of war and punishment and the persistent Christian longing for peace and pardon. Augustine refuses to resolve the tension by giving simple precedence to either justice or mercy; once more, the complexity of his ideas reflects the complexity of his actual experience.

Judgement was one of the responsibilities of both secular and ecclesiastical rulers, and Augustine repeatedly returns to this theme.
Furthermore, the secular authorities must punish the guilty, which might seem to conflict both with their own exercise of Christian gentleness, and with the bishops’ practice of interceding on behalf of the condemned. Augustine’s most extended reflection on punishment is in reply to Macedonius, who raises a series of questions about the compatibility of judgement and forgiveness (Letters 152 and 153; see also Letter 95). Augustine emphasises the impersonal nature of political punishment: the judge must never be tempted to think of himself as effecting revenge. He recognises two legitimate purposes of punishment, to deter future wrongdoers and to stir the convicted person to repentance. Deterrence requires strict judgements; repentance, however, may best be secured by leniency. In particular, capital punishment conflicts with the purpose of securing repentance (cf. Sermon 13). To advocate forgiveness is not to condone the crime: the judge is to hate the sin, but love the sinner as a fellow human being. Moreover, the judge will be more inclined to responding mercifully to intercession the more that he remembers that he too is a sinner, equally dependent upon the forgiveness of God. Augustine uses the parable of the woman caught in adultery to powerful effect in reminding judges of this (Commentary on the gospel of John, 33, Sermon 13 and Letter 155).

Augustine is reluctant to accept not only the death penalty, but also punishments that threaten the bodily health or basic needs of the wrongdoer. In his reply to Nectarius, he argues that he wants the pagan rioters to be fined, but not reduced to poverty, let alone punished physically. They may be deprived of ‘the means to live badly’, but not of the means to live (Letter 104). When he writes to Apringius and Marcellinus to beg them to spare the Donatist thugs who had savagely attacked his own priests, he appeals both to the aim of persuading the criminals to repent, and to the principle of refraining from bloodshed (Letters 133 and 134). His request to the emperor to modify the harsh penalty for illegal slave-trading, while primarily pragmatic, is also in keeping with this second principle (Letter 109; cf. also Letter 100).

The primary justification for punishment was for Augustine the repentance and conversion of the transgressor. Furthermore, neither he nor his society distinguished sharply between secular and religious responsibilities. There was, then, in principle no difficulty with using the law to suppress paganism, or even to persuade heretical or sectarian Christians to join the church of the Catholics: for this would be in their own true interests. It is worth noting here that Augustine has little time...
The ambiguities of punishment and war

for the view – which many today would take for granted – that our freedom even to harm ourselves should be respected. He argues against this explicitly with a Donatist who is being prevented from burning himself to death (Letter 173), and in another context he endorses Cicero’s praise of the ruler who ‘pays attention to his people’s interests rather than their wishes’ (Letter 104).

Is it, then, justifiable to see Augustine as the first Christian apologist for religious coercion? Christian bishops in both East and West had readily accepted the occasional use of imperial power to enforce various forms of religious conformity at least since the council of Nicea in 325, and several important theologians before Augustine reflect this. Augustine’s African predecessor Optatus of Milevis, albeit somewhat inconsistently, had defended on scriptural grounds a much fiercer use of secular force than he himself would ever approve. However, Augustine treats the subject more extensively and reflectively than any other early Christian writer.

At the same time, it is a mistake to interpret Augustine’s attitude to coercion as a fixed theory. It developed as a series of ad hoc responses to specific situations, and, as so often with his thought, was marked by his awareness of the tension between different aims and ideals. Centuries later, quotations from Augustine would be used to justify religious persecution by institutions and in circumstances unimaginable in his day. The later medieval and post-Reformation writers who were eager to exploit his authority were less attentive to the nuances and the context of his arguments. His rejection of the death penalty, of course, was also often ignored.

It took time for Augustine to accept the need to compel the Donatists in particular to return to the fold. He was persuaded to do so by his fellow-bishops primarily on pragmatic grounds. In the early letters included here he prefers to oppose the Donatists only with argument (Letters 51 and 66), for, as he later explained, he did not want people pretending to be Catholics through fear of the law. Two things above all changed his mind: one was the persistent violence of certain groups of extreme Donatists, which, it seemed, could not be kept under control while the Donatist church continued to flourish. The second was that experience showed him that individuals who became Catholics through fear of the law often grew into a deep and genuine faith (Letter 185). Coercive laws, therefore, could be used for the proper purpose of bringing about true repentance, to the benefit of the former sectarian. Law, however, is a blunt instrument,
and Augustine’s defence of its use did not allow him to distinguish the lukewarm Donatists who might well become sincere Catholics from peacable but deeply convinced opponents. The latter would be forced either to compromise their principles or to suffer for them, and would in either case lose their freedom to worship as Donatists.

One final point: it is worth noting also that the Donatists were on weak historical grounds when they attacked the Catholics’ use of imperial laws, for they themselves, as Augustine repeatedly pointed out, had been the first to appeal to the emperor when the dispute originally arose (see further pp. 127–8).

The question of war was no simpler than that of punishment. Here too, Augustine is often seen as an innovator and described as ‘the first Christian just war theorist’. In this case, the label is certainly misleading, for at least two reasons. First, no major Christian theologian since the time of Constantine had been a pacifist, and Christians had for a long time taken it for granted that war was permissible. In such a context, of course, to insist on the need for justice in war is to limit, rather than encourage, violence. Secondly, Augustine had no systematic theory of what would count as a just war, or a just way of waging wars. The nearest he comes to this is when he is defending the authority of the Old Testament by arguing that the leaders of Israel were justified in fighting wars at God’s command; here, he assumes as common ground with his opponents the idea that properly authorised human wars, fought with the aim of securing peace, are acceptable. On the other hand, he was indeed clear that there were unjust ways of fighting, and that Christians should no more act unjustly in war than in other areas of life.

The choice between accepting and rejecting the legitimacy of war was not a choice between biblical idealism and empirical pragmatism. Both scripture and experience provided evidence on either side of the debate. On the one hand, sayings of Jesus such as ‘turn the other cheek’ suggested that Christian gentleness should exclude all violence whatsoever. On the other hand, Augustine points out, practising soldiers are accepted as faithful believers in both the Old Testament and the New (Letter 189). On the one hand, in a sinful and violent world it was possible to protect society only by military force, as was all too clear in an age marked by barbarian invasions in both Europe and north Africa. On the other hand, the direct experience of warfare brought home its horror: both the brutality of the fighting itself and the suffering of its refugees. War might be a necessity, but it could not, in Augustine’s world, be idealised.
Three letters to soldiers included in this volume illustrate Augustine’s approach to the question (Letters 189, 220 and 229). He keeps clearly in mind that the goal of any war should be peace, and moreover that where possible peaceful methods of securing peace should be preferred to fighting. Yet at the same time he recognises the genuine courage of soldiers, and the value of the security they offer to both church and society. The Christian should accept the hardships of war as a temporary necessity, and not be over-impatient for the perfectly just society of heaven.

In 427 Boniface, a Roman commander in north Africa whom Augustine had known for many years, rebelled against the imperial authorities. Augustine writes to him urging him to renew his loyalty to Rome: he is neglecting his duty to protect the province against barbarians, he is allowing his soldiers to indulge in plunder, and he is breaking his oath as soldier. In the conduct of war, no less than in the rest of life, irresponsibility, theft and breaches of promise are wrong. (Cicero, after all, had argued, using the notable example of Regulus, that one should keep promises even to an enemy.) Augustine’s recognition of the ambiguity of war does not allow him to relax the moral demands upon the Christian soldier, or forget that the individual is called to sanctity.

Scripture and experience

Augustine reads his experience through the lens of scripture, and scripture, in turn, through the lens of experience: each enlarges, limits and guides possible interpretations of the other. Consequently, his political ideas are not static, rigid or idealistic, but instead flexibly pragmatic. The interpretation of scripture, he is well aware, is a task both subtle and provisional. Moreover, human society as it actually exists contrasts so sharply with what it would be in a fully redeemed and Christ-centred world that it is not possible to draw political answers from the Bible in any simple way.

The interpretation of scripture is complex simply on account of the quantity and variety of texts, quite apart from the obscurity of individual passages. Augustine consistently refuses either to simplify the meaning of specific texts or to gloss over the tension between those that appear to conflict. For example, when discussing the injunction ‘turn the other cheek’ (Mt 5.39), he explains why this cannot be taken literally. For when Christ himself was struck (Jn 18.23), he did not in fact turn the other cheek, but instead rebuked his assailant (Letter 138). In the first place,
then, the phrase is to be understood metaphorically. Secondly, it cannot be understood without taking into account a range of other relevant texts, some of them clearly incompatible with pacifism; moreover, this range of texts is, in principle, open-ended. On the other hand, the command must not be brushed aside: ‘turn the other cheek’ both licenses the church to preach non-violence in certain situations and, more fundamentally, constitutes a constant reminder of the Christian’s obligation to ‘train the heart’ to peaceful purposes. Augustine’s method never allows him to reduce the message of the New Testament to easy or straightforward slogans. It also prevents him from treating his conclusions as closed to the possibility of revision in the light of changing experience or further scriptural reflection.

Again, the Bible should not be used as a blueprint for the perfect society. For Augustine, politics is indeed the art of the possible, and his political thinking is neither utopian nor revolutionary. He is firmly convinced that the lives of individuals may be transformed by holiness, but he does not expect the Christianisation of the empire to produce whole communities of saints. Therefore, one must work within the limitations of the existing systems: so, for example, although it never occurs to Augustine that slavery might be abolished (or even voluntarily renounced by individual Christians), he attempts to influence legislation so that it can effectively combat the cruel, and illegitimate, slave-trading in Africa (Letter 10*). In a different age, he might well have seen the practicability of abolishing the slave trade, and supported it whole-heartedly; his actual political efforts, however, were directed to goals that were limited and achievable. In other words, he did not see scripture as defining a fixed political ideal. Rather, it offered broad guidelines for thinking through decisions, and a constant reminder to use and influence existing institutions in as peaceable and loving a direction as possible.

Conclusion

Sermons and biblical commentaries are perhaps unexpected sources for political thought. Many of the documents translated here are not exclusively, nor even primarily, on political topics. Yet it is important to study whole texts rather than short extracts, so that Augustine’s ideas are not abstracted from the context in which they are embedded. We need the theological context in order to understand how the model of Christ and biblical exegesis shape Augustine’s views; we need also the practical
context in order to grasp clearly both the precise issues at stake and the range of responses available to him. Augustine's pastoral writings do not include clear-cut and systematic political theory, but they are underpinned by a consistent and coherent view of humanity and society. On the basis of this he tackles fundamental questions of political authority in the form of concrete practical problems. Sometimes, this leads him to articulate uncompromising principles; more often, he allows Christian ideals such as mercy to put whatever pressure they can on the social structures of a fallen world. That pressure, in turn, will only be maintained if Christian leaders are faithful to their call to constant conversion. Augustine is never tempted simply to reduce politics to ethics. On the other hand, without an ethics grounded in faith and humility, political society, in his view, has little hope to offer.
Translator’s notes

Traduttore, traditore, say the Italians: ‘the translator is a traitor’. I hope that the following notes will alert the reader to some of the ways in which the vast differences between Augustine’s world of thought and our own are reflected in the language that he uses.

Courtesy titles

The etiquette of late antique letters was elaborate. A large number of honorific titles was used which conveyed, more or less specifically, a range of social nuances which we cannot now recover in all their subtlety (for a comprehensive survey, see O’Brien, Titles). Some of these terms were technical: *illustris* (‘illustrious’), *spectabilis* (‘admirable’) and *clarissimus* (‘renowned’) referred to three levels of rank in the late imperial élite, *illustris* being the most senior title, then *spectabilis*, then *clarissimus*. Certain epithets, such as ‘holy’ and ‘blessed’, were normally reserved for Christian ecclesiastics; others such as ‘beloved’ were also specifically Christian in usage.

Such language should not, of course, be taken at face value (we ourselves rarely feel affection for those we address as ‘Dear Sir’). Abstract nouns were also used honorifically; I have translated such phrases as, for example, ‘your holy self’ rather than ‘your holiness’.

Commonwealth, government, empire, public life

*Res publica* means literally ‘public thing’. In Letter 138.10 Augustine refers to Cicero’s well-known definition, which may be literally translated: ‘the
“public thing” is a thing of (belonging to) the people’. Concretely the phrase can refer to public affairs or to the organs that administer public affairs (roughly what we would call ‘the state’), or to a political society as a whole. Sometimes, therefore, it has been natural to translate as ‘public life’, sometimes as ‘government’ or ‘empire’. In Letter 138 in particular, where Augustine plays upon Cicero’s definition, the word ‘commonwealth’ has proved to be the most convenient translation.

Hand over, handers over

The Donatist controversy arose when certain bishops were accused of handing over the scriptures to the authorities under persecution. They were described as traditores, from the verb tradere, to hand over. Tradere, significantly, can also mean ‘betray’; traditores were both ‘handers over’ and traitors. (Judas’ act of handing Christ over to the authorities was the supreme act of betrayal; the Latin New Testament uses tradere for this.)

Just, justice; unjust, injustice

The virtue is a complex one. Augustine inherited Cicero’s analysis of justice as the supremely social virtue: the just man puts the good of society first. As a trained lawyer, he was conscious too of the narrower sense of iustus: just according to the code of human or of divine law. In Christian texts the word is also deeply influenced by biblical usage: the just man is righteous and honest. St Paul in particular infused the word with a further nuance: the just man is the one justified by the grace of God. Augustine allows the terms ‘just’ and ‘justice’ to convey all these nuances simultaneously. He tends to use iniquus and iniquitas as the contraries of iustus and iustitia.

Love

Augustine uses interchangeably several words for love: caritas; amor, amare; dilectio, diligere. He himself agreed that these words were not used with distinct senses in scripture (cit.14.7). In general, therefore, I have freely used ‘love’ to cover all these, occasionally preferring ‘charity’ for caritas (which is rarely used in non-religious contexts). In Sermon 333c.2ff., however, Augustine self-consciously defines his terms to distinguish desire for what is good from desire for what is bad (see note ad loc.).
Piety, pious, devoted; impiety, impious

Pius can mean ‘loyal, devoted’ and Augustine sometimes uses it in this way, especially of familial affection; where I have translated, for example, ‘devoted father’, the association with piety should be kept in mind. However, he normally uses pius and pietas to refer to loyalty to the church. To be ‘pious’ is to embrace the life and orthodox faith of the Catholic church. Not only people, but also beliefs, practices and laws may be pious; they are ‘impious’ when they are either directed against (orthodox) Christianity or used to promote a false sect or false gods. Sometimes, therefore, impius means roughly ‘heretic’ or ‘unbeliever’. The reference need not be narrowly religious: in Letter 10*-3, slave-trading is described as impietas, in Letter 153.3 it is a mode of pietas to love a sinner qua human being.

Pursue, pursue action against, harass; pursuit, legal action, harassment

The root meaning of the Latin persequor (noun, persecutio) is ‘follow through’ or ‘follow persistently’. In a legal context, persequor is neutral in tone, meaning simply, ‘to pursue action against’, without the implications of malicious or sectarian attack that the English ‘persecute’ conveys. (The Donatists protested that the Catholics’ pursuit of legal action against them was unjust, but they were prepared to resort to legal action in their own interest.) The words can also be used in a non-legal context to mean pursue, or harass (whether justifiably or not). Sometimes they connote hostile or illegal actions (cf. Letter 88.1). Letter 185.6–11 in particular exploits the range of senses of persequor and persecutio.

Security

Salus means security, health and well-being. In Christian Latin the term also covers what we describe as ‘salvation’: the ultimate security and well-being of eternal life with God. Because Augustine likes to compare heavenly and earthly salus, I have used an English word that can cover both types. (In many cases ‘salvation’ would have been a possible, and perhaps more natural, translation.) A third use of salus was to address the recipient of a letter. Here I have used the translation ‘greets’ or ‘sends greeting’. However, Christian writers were sensitive to the triple sense (see the greeting of Letter 220, below, p. 218).
Augustine frequently contrasts what is eternal and everlasting with what is *temporals*. The usual English translation is ‘temporal’, but ‘temporary’ better catches the sense of unease that Augustine conveys. The problem with things that are in time is, precisely, that they change and disappear.

I have translated Augustine's own text of the Bible, rather than use a modern version, because the precise wording is often important to his argument. Where the Latin text, or the Septuagint (LXX) which lies behind it, differ from the Hebrew, I have noted this in the reference.
## Principal dates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AD</th>
<th>Ecclesiastical and political events</th>
<th>Augustine</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>354</td>
<td>Birth at Thagaste.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>370</td>
<td>Rogatist schism within Donatist church.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>371</td>
<td>Goes to Carthage to study rhetoric.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>373</td>
<td>The emperor Valentinian I issues an edict to Julianus, proconsul of Africa, banning rebaptism (<em>C. Th.</em> 16.6.1) (20 February).</td>
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<tr>
<td>375</td>
<td>Gratian and Valentinian II succeed the emperor Valentinian I in the West.</td>
<td>Returns to Thagaste to teach grammar.</td>
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<tr>
<td>376–7</td>
<td>Virius Nicomachus Flavianus vicar of Africa at Carthage.</td>
<td>Returns to Carthage to teach rhetoric.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>380</td>
<td>The emperor Theodosius I issues an edict making Catholic Christianity the religion of the empire (<em>C. Th.</em> 16.1.1).</td>
<td>Writes <em>De pulchro et apto</em>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>383</td>
<td>Rebellion of Magnus Maximus.</td>
<td>Goes to Rome to teach rhetoric.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>384</td>
<td>Quintus Aurelius Symmachus appointed urban prefect of Rome.</td>
<td>Appointed by Symmachus as orator of the city of Milan. Leaves Rome for Milan. Delivers panegyric in honour of the emperor Valentinian II.</td>
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<tr>
<td>385</td>
<td></td>
<td>Delivers panegyric in honour of Flavius Bauto, magister militum or military commander-in-chief to the emperor Valentinian II.</td>
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<tr>
<td>386</td>
<td>Imperial troops surround a Catholic basilica at Milan in a foiled effort to seize it for the use of Arians.</td>
<td>Conversion to Catholic Christianity. Resigns post as orator of the city of Milan.</td>
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<tr>
<td>387</td>
<td>Magnus Maximus invades Italy.</td>
<td>Baptism at Milan by Ambrose, the city’s bishop (24/25 April).</td>
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<tr>
<td>392</td>
<td>Theodosius I issues an edict recognising limited right of asylum in churches (C.Th. 9.45.1), and one imposing a fine of ten pounds of gold on all clerics of heretical sects (C.Th. 16.5.21).</td>
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<tr>
<td>395</td>
<td>Death of Theodosius I at Milan. Division of empire into West and East. Honorius becomes emperor of the West. Stilicho becomes magister militum, military commander-in-chief to Honorius.</td>
<td>Consecrated coadjutor bishop to Valerius at Hippo Regius.</td>
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<tr>
<td>395/396</td>
<td></td>
<td>Succeeds Valerius as bishop of Hippo Regius.</td>
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</tbody>
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