

Christian realism - current debates and origins

Introduction

Christian realism is a crucial phenomenon of modern political thought. Although several authors can be termed as Christian realists (e.g. John C. Bennett or Robin Lovin), there is a consensus in the scientific literature that “Reinhold Niebuhr was the most important voice of this movement” (Lovin, 1995, p. 2).

But what is Christian realism? Beginning as a reaction to the Social Gospel movement, Christian realism wished to provide answers to the central social and political drama (e.g. consequences of industrialization and capitalism, World Wars, and Cold War) of the 20th century. Although definitions differ, Christian realism is generally treated as an approach, perspective, or a way of thinking that focuses on human sinfulness/selfishness, political and social realities, while it aims to reach some specific moral goals (usually justice) that are present in Christian ethics.¹ The practical historical relevance of Christian realism is most visible in its struggle against both pacifism and the different forms of extremism. It was used to confront radical anti-war movements, or political and religious utopias (e.g. “liberal idealism” of the 1920s or the Social Gospel movement); but, at the same time, to oppose the crude use of power in politics.²

In this way, Christian realism still seems relevant: an approach that may be utilized as a guide to tackle current social and political issues. The leading figure of Christian realism, Reinhold Niebuhr, is still an inspirational character for both Democrats and Republicans in the United States, from John McCain to Barack Obama (Brooks, 2007).

¹ One of the most authoritative scholars of Christian Realism (who is also treated as a Christian realist), Robin W. Lovin emphasizes three parts as well, when he claims that “Christian Realism is a combination of different “realisms” – political, moral and theological...” (Lovin, 1995, p. 28).

² There is a very similar notion for this crude use of power in the current realist debates. Nowadays, political realists term it as *realpolitik* or as the stance of “might is right”. According to Matt Sleat, *realpolitik* can be understood as a “reduction of politics to violence by making the de jure right to rule equivalent to the de facto ability to do so” (Sleat, 2014, p. 315). It is well to be noted that most of the realists oppose this stance showing that even realists are following – although not similar type as the so-called moralists – some kind of ethics.

Researchers and journalists put serious efforts into finding a role for Christian realism in the 21st century (Lovin, 2009). One of the current debates on Christian realism was published in the columns of *First Things*. In May 2019, Matthew Schmitz wrote an article entitled *Immigration Idealism – A case for Christian realism*, in which he criticized immigration idealist Christian leaders (e.g. Merkel or Tony Blair) for misreading the gospel and for misjudging human affairs in the case of migration. His criticism was based on Niebuhrian ideas explicitly referring to Christian realism, also following the Niebuhrian trait by harshly blaming sentimental liberalism for its misunderstandings. Based on Christian views (e.g. Biblical references, Thomas Aquinas, Pope Pius XII), Schmitz urges Christians to build a just immigration policy which – besides ethical considerations – takes into account the political, cultural, and social factors before decision-making, resulting in a more realistic migration policy. Among other aspects, Schmitz highlights the essentiality of maintaining political order and argues that states should consider cultural differences before welcoming a stranger. He prompts Christians to follow Thomas Aquinas, who distinguished between spiritual and political communities. In political realities, it might happen that spiritual communities are open, but political communities are not (Schmitz, 2019). Altogether, Schmitz’s reasoning is a decent instrument for underpinning a realistic position regarding immigration policy. However, the core of Schmitz’s conclusion is also perfect for defending the actions of anti-immigrational forces.

Obviously, Schmitz’s suggestions were not left unanswered. Three months later, Justin Hawkins and Grant R. Martsolf delivered their own short but substantial comments on Schmitz’s article at the “*Letters*” section of *First Things*. First, Hawkins criticized Schmitz’s realism for the mistake – which is also present in the Niebuhrian arguments frequently, says Hawkins –, “that the commands of Scripture can be ignored for the sake of political exigency.” In other words, if there are any political or social issues in which the ethics of Jesus could not be followed since it “would turn the world upside down,” what would determine whether a situation belongs to that category or not? Typically, political exigency (Hawkins, 2019).

Another commentator, Martsolf also had problems with Schmitz’s arguments, or, more specifically, with the Christian conservatives for whom America comes first. He agrees with Schmitz that immigration idealists fail to take human sin seriously. However, he disagrees with the usage of Christian realism in politics since “Christian realism, simply put, cannot systematically produce uniquely Christian positions on social policy” (Martsolf, 2019). His

main problem with Christian realism is that its starting point is always America, never God. Christian realism became a conservatory force as it accepts America as it is; it tries to maintain the status quo, national sovereignty, and strong borders by the implementation of restrictive immigration policy. The end product is irresponsible American Christians fueled by Christian realism, who want to uphold America and not faithfully testify against America.

Even by skipping the critical evaluation of these arguments, it can be easily seen that Christian realism is still a target of interest as a useful resource in current practical and theoretical political debates. Christian realism, however, has its historical roots, and its central arguments are present throughout the history of Christian political thought. As Tsoncho Tsonchev claims, “Christian realism is a twentieth-century interpretation of political realities, international and domestic, based largely on the fifth-century insights of Saint Augustine. It is a theological and philosophical perspective with deep intellectual roots” (Tsonchev, 2018, p. 4).

In the following, we try to demonstrate how the central arguments of Christian realism were present in the history of Christian political thought, most prominently in the arguments of Saint Augustine. After a short overview of the place of Augustine’s realism in the history of political thought, we shall focus on those Augustinian arguments that – with some modifications – are present in Christian realism. By immersing in the past are we able to understand the present and the future of Christian realism.

Augustine’s realism in the history of political thought

The Christian scholar who has been most closely connected to the political realist³ and Christian realist thought, is unequivocally the early Christian bishop and theologian, Augustine (354-430). The Church Father has not just been labeled a political realist but was “canonized as a theological grandfather of a tradition that includes Machiavelli and Hobbes” (Elshtain, 2003, p. 284). However, treating Augustine as a political realist is a relatively modern feature in the history of political thought; his “political realism received little attention and no further development in the centuries that followed his death” (Deane, 1963, p. 229). Herbert Deane

3 There are several contesting and conflicting ideas about the status and definition of political realism. Here it is treated broadly, as tradition in the history of political thought, “a tradition that is focused on power and interest, suspicious of moralizing, and attentive to the limits of political action” (McQueen, 2018, pp. 6-7). In the political realist tradition Thucydides, St. Augustine, Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas Hobbes, Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Carl Schmitt are treated as significant figures (McQueen, 2018).

accurately summarizes the reception of Augustine's realistic ideas throughout history. In the medieval age, where cruelties were so evident and where the political order was far less stable than in the earlier Western Roman Empire or in the later nation-states, Augustine's realistic views were not echoed by the Christian scholars. It can be well suggested that Augustine's idea found in *The City of God* that true justice only dwells in the city in which the ruler is Christ, were used to justify the doctrine of papal supremacy. However, it was not predominant reasoning, and it did not develop into a compelling justification of a doctrine. Augustine's realistic interpretations of political life revived much later, in a revolutionary age, which was full of conflict and war; it was the age of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Luther, and Calvin. Besides the similarities between Augustine's and Hobbes's ideas, the protestant scholars' views were clearly marked by Augustinian realistic ideas regarding human nature and political authority (Deane, 1963, pp. 229-237).

Herbert Deane also highlights the increased interest of theologians and secular thinkers towards Augustine's realism in the middle of the 20th-century; this era was again the time of brutalities and the time of struggles for political and military domination. This revival of Augustinian realism of the 20th century was mainly due to Reinhold Niebuhr. Charles Jones (2003) argues that renewed interest in the Augustinian tradition in international relations can be connected to him, while Michael Loriaux claimed that Niebuhr "is the bridge that spans the centuries separating Augustine from the modern realist" (Loriaux, 1992, p. 406).

Niebuhr's attitude towards Augustine and his political thought is controversial. Despite the several overlaps in their scholarly interest and their Christian background, until almost the age of fifty, Niebuhr did not treat Augustine as a unique or a particularly useful author. Later, after expanding his knowledge in Augustine's theology, the Patristic Christian Father became more and more valuable for Niebuhr. Niebuhr called Augustine the first great realist in the Western world (Niebuhr, 1953, p. 121). Then, he also mentioned that Christian realism is grounded on the Augustinian interpretation of the Bible (Niebuhr, 1953).

Nevertheless, what did these realists, including the Christian realists, take away from Augustine? In the following section, those characteristics of the Augustinian arguments will be displayed, which – with some modifications– are present in Christian realism. Augustine was neither a systematic theologian nor a political theorist; his arguments are scattered in his writings, which makes it burdensome to have a complex overview of his thought (Weithman,

2001). To overcome this challenge, besides the authoritative Augustinian interpretations (e.g. Deane, 1963; Elshtain, 1995; 2003), some pieces of the relevant Hungarian literature (e.g. Molnár, 2015), will also be utilized. Nonetheless, one supplementary comment must be made before the analysis. Although influenced by several authors (e.g. Plato and Origen), the prime source of Augustine's thought was the Bible. As Deane (1963) writes, Augustine's meditations were first and foremost commentaries of the Bible, which might create the illusion that the same holds in the case of Christian realism. It is, however, just partly true, because, although the core arguments of Christian realism stem indirectly from the Bible, they more often use its Augustinian interpretation, so it is the latter that had a more direct influence on Christian realist thought.

Human nature⁴

For Augustine, the story of human beings began with the act of God creating the world and placing Adam and Eve into the Garden of Eden. Human beings, by their nature, were good, though they had an inclination to become corrupted when being away from God. Their free will provided them with an opportunity to turn away from God, and because of their pride, their will to become the center of the world (or, in other words, their will to be like God) they committed sin, turning away from God. It was this original sin that brought mortality, misery, and suffering into the world as a punishment from God.

It is crucial to understand that for Augustine sin was not just an act that was wrong, unjust, or immoral; sin was an omnipresent feature of human beings. Each individual remained under the effect of the original sin from Adam and Eve until the end of the world. From prideful self-centeredness stemmed all the violations of God's will. All of humanity was a mass of sins. Still, it was not only pride that affected the human condition. Those who fell away from God would seek temporal goods to provide temporal satisfaction. These earthly desires for temporal happiness had several varieties: lust for revenge (anger), lust for money (avarice), and lust for power. A passion for domination over the other (*libido dominandi*), coming from this lust of power, caused everlasting conflicts and wars. These were the consequences of the Fall, and

⁴This summary is a primarily based on two chapters of Deane's book, entitled the *Theology of the Fallen Man* and the *Psychology of the Fallen Man* (Deane, 1963, pp. 13-78).

although the Fall had affected human freedom (for people were/are in the bondage of sins), they still had free will to choose between good and evil.

This portrait of human nature might seem biased at first glance, since – among other aspects – it avoids the elaborations of Augustine on the love between the pilgrims on earth and does not take into account the mercy, the unmerited grace, and the gifts of God. However, this pessimistic Augustinian picture of the fallen person driven by avarice, lust for power, and sexual desire was not just the basis of Augustine’s realism but was also shared by his so-called “followers” like Luther, Calvin, Machiavelli, and Hobbes (Deane, 1966, p. 56). This portrait of the human being was shared by Christian realists as well but in a historical time when sin was forgotten. Although Christian realism recalls the dual nature of people (holy and evil at the same time) which stems from his freedom, as a reaction to the optimistic liberal view on human nature, Christian realism echoed the sinfulness of human nature similarly to Augustine. This reinvention of sin by Niebuhr resulted in being treated as part of Neo-Orthodox circles (McGrath, 2002). This theological realism was and is the ground of Christian realism as well; moreover, this theological realism is the basis of political realism in the case of Christian realism.

The nature of human relations

Human is a social being for Augustine as well. Human being – just like God – through his nature, tries to build relationships with his fellows. First was Adam, for whom it was not good to be alone, so Eve was created as his wife and companion. After the Fall, they formed a family with their children, which is a natural bond of human societies. Humans live side by side with each other; they cannot avoid society, and for a functioning society, norms that create order and prevent chaos are necessary. There is a hierarchy of these norms or laws for Augustine: first comes God’s law, then natural law, and finally, human laws. The last, the only which is under human authority, should be made in the light that people are sinful; from family to empire, all human institutions (including private property, legal and political order) must serve as a checkpoint to control human greed, violence and to prevent anarchy and chaos. Although it will never result in permanent peace, in a just society or in a society in which people will be free from contest, suspicion, conflict, and war, it will “provide an element of order, stability, and peace in social life” maintained by coercion (Deane, 1963, pp. 78-79, 96). For Augustine, society is a form of human relations, or to put it more specifically, “Augustine’s central

categories, including the categories of war and peace, are in the form of a relation of one sort or another” (Elshtain, 2003, p. 291). Therefore, the nature of human relations should be in focus in order to understand the social and political world around us, argues Augustine.

The essence that was grasped by the Christian realists in Augustine regarding human affairs was the fact that rivalry and conflict can never be eliminated, peace is only temporal, and a just society cannot be established. Just like other realists, Niebuhr was also captured by Augustine’s sinful earthy concept that was “governed purely by self-love, by an uneasy armistice between contending interests and by the provisional peace caused by the momentary victory of a dominant political force” (Niebuhr, 1965, p. 44). Moreover, Niebuhr called Augustine the first great realist in the Western world because he “gave an adequate account of the social factions, tensions and competitions which we know to be well-nigh universal on every level of community” (Niebuhr, 1953, p. 122).

Political ethics

After shedding light on Augustine’s views on the nature of human beings and human relations, it is apparent that he was skeptical about the moral capacity of man and the possibility of a progression that would end in a perfectly just social order. Still, the sources of the relevant scientific literature greatly differ in the way they approach Augustine’s political ethics. On the one hand, some scholars view Augustine as a hopeless skeptic, while on the other, some researchers focus on the limited – but existing – moral expectations that Augustine formulated towards citizens. Molnár highlights the skepticism of Augustine about the possibility of reaching or approaching eternal peace and his uncertainty in the possibility of founding prudence. It is indifferent how much good or bad is present in the *civitas terrena*; it is irrevocably violent in a way (Molnár, 2016). This statement might not equal Nietzschean nihilism but would certainly devalue the significance of performing moral actions in politics or the relevance of establishing robust political ethics.

The violent nature of the earthly city is also acknowledged in Elshtain’s Augustine interpretation, but she is keen on presenting the “brighter side” of Augustine (Elshtain, 2003). For Augustine, temporal earthly peace was in itself good, both in the sense of peace between cities and as a peace of the body and the soul. Elshtain – who criticizes realists for their overly pessimistic view on Augustine – argues that the following two norms should be taken as a guide to handle human relations based on Augustine: “first, to do no harm to anyone, and, [second],

to help everyone whenever possible” (Elshtain, 2003, p. 295). These two norms serve as a guide to foster earthly peace; moreover, those civic arrangements that are made based on these two norms are the most just. Augustine thought that men must keep balance in human relations, one should not be so comforted to ignore the problems of his surrounding fellows, while one should not be so active to feel that God or turning towards God is unnecessary. Finally, Elshtain (2003) mentions that Augustine left a tremendous historical legacy by condemning pride at every level of society where it is present. Without analyzing its contents, it is also worth mentioning that Augustine had heavily touched on other crucial topics of political ethics as well (e.g. he is treated as a forefather of just war tradition, and he set serious ethical standards towards just rulers). To sum it up, even by accepting Molnár’s viewpoint, Augustine cannot be suspected of being indifferent towards morality in politics.

Some of the main conclusions of Augustine’s political ethics occurred in Christian realism. Just like Augustine, the representatives of Christian realism were ready to set moral expectations towards citizens, especially towards Christians. Even though Christian realism – just like Augustine – is pessimistic concerning the moral capacity of human beings, it has always formulated moral goals to be reached in politics that are present in Christian ethics (e.g. proximate justice). Moreover, Niebuhr tended to write more about Christian realists and less about Christian realism as an independent phenomenon, automatically placing responsibilities for those who were called to fight against the extreme form of naïve idealism (sentimentalism) and/or the extreme form of realism (cynicism) in politics. Although Christian realism did not follow the steps of Augustinian political ethics entirely⁵, it was also skeptical about historical progression. The proponents of the Social Gospel movement thought that the gap between the biblical vision of God’s rule and the realities of industrial societies could and should be closed. However, the “*new generation*”⁶ from which Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian realism evolved, believed that Christian conscience supported by science would not be able to narrow this gap (Lovin, 1995). Furthermore, they – just like Augustine – were confident in their belief that a just society could never be attained in historical reality.

⁵ Niebuhr was more optimistic in individual moral capacities and he argued that Augustine gave a too realistic and pessimistic overview of human life (Niebuhr, 1965).

⁶ Reinhold, and his younger brother, H. Richard Niebuhr were part of a group already around the First World War including their professors at Yale (e.g. Daniel Clyde Macintosh and Walter Marshall Horton) that called their own viewpoints as “religious realist” or called themselves as the representatives of “religious theology”. (Bogárdi Szabó, 1998) However, even in the 1930s, as presented in the book entitled *Religious Realism* edited by Macintosh (1931), it was more a theological and philosophical than a political approach.

Conclusion

By reviewing the main arguments of Augustine on three specific topics (human nature, nature of human relations, political ethics) and revealing the similarities that are also present in Christian realism, it was demonstrated that the central arguments of this modern political phenomenon are rooted in the history of Christian political thought. Nonetheless, how could so many similarities occur if around one and a half thousand years separate Augustine and modern Christian realism? Kroner emphasizes the resemblance of the cultural situations when he writes about Augustine's era as follows: "Like him, we live at the edge of tremendous upheavals – social, political, cultural, and spiritual. Like him, we face a degeneration of a splendid epoch which has enriched mankind by an enormous progress in scientific knowledge" (Kroner, 2001, p. 263).

It is also worth mentioning that there were similar roles and positions that Augustine and the leading Christian realist, Niebuhr had taken; they were both Christian pastors and were acknowledged as remarkably influential apologists.⁷ While Augustine was defending the Christian faith against such as Arians, Pelagians, Manichaeans, it was Niebuhr who fought against the secular idealists, the secular realists, and the religious idealists. Niebuhr, just like Augustine, fought continuously against the internal and external enemies of Christianity. If Bogárdi Szabó is right, the resemblance was not accidental; he – probably based on Richard Fox (1985, p. 257) – argues that in Karl Barth, Niebuhr has seen the 20th century Tertullian; in Tillich ontologism, he thought he had found Origen; and he wanted to be Augustine (Bogárdi Szabó, 1998, p. 97).

As we indicated in our earlier papers: today, when renewed ideological debates in the West are less about the conflict between classic liberals' "secular" idea of an empty public square and its "religious" opponents, but about how to refill the square with (quasi- or genuinely religious) ideas from either side, Christian realism offers a sober view on all such attempts in a multi-front struggle. It is surely not the only view possible, but it can at least remind us of the inescapable fact that human imperfection, sin, and selfishness are here to stay, which makes all political, social, or religious utopias suspicious.

⁷ In addition, neither of them is treated as a systematic theologian, both favored to use dialectic narratives and argumentative force instead of scientifically disciplined writing style.

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