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# Review: The Way That Leads There: Augustinian Reflections on the Christian Life

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Christ at its center. Hart's "postmodern" deconstruction of the postmodern rejection of the Christian faith, as just another form of the will to power through false weakness and a claim to peace as necessarily false (in favor of Dionysian life), is both quite complete and extraordinarily effective. Such hatred of the Christian evangel is itself an ontology of violence. Hart's amplification of the Christian narrative of God's offer of peace, reconciliation in Christ as answer and as rhetorical "showing" of the cogency of that Christian claim, is likewise mighty, often almost staggering in depth and scope. Amazing.

Yet, in a work of this magnitude one cannot help but have concerns. Despite regular reference to the biblical basis of Christian theological authority, the book gives to Scripture only very occasional explicit roles, for example, the narrative of the divine Trinity from the Gospel account of Jesus' baptism. In fact, much of the argument simply baptizes certain philosophical streams, which are set over against opposing positions, and these are said to affirm the logic of the scriptural revelation (e.g. Anselm's *id quo maius cogitari nequit*). Though this reviewer undoubtedly still reflects here certain effects of modernity, it often appears that Hart's rhetorical articulation of the Christian narrative is as emptily rhetorical as, say, Nietzsche's; indeed, some portions even sound almost Spinozean (though Hart would emphatically deny this). It also seemed at times that theological positions were criticized only because they did not fit the patristic or medieval Christian vision of God as the infinite source of all being, as though such philosophico-theological expression were to be equated with the biblical portrayal of God. I worried at times about a serious case of historical romanticism. Finally, Hart has little time for, nor anything positive to say about, Luther, Calvin, or Protestantism, since these reflect, he says, a "low ebb" in Christian theology (pp. 133-34). Still, this is a truly amazing, demanding, but highly rewarding theological treatise. Most highly recommended.

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*The Way That Leads There: Augustinian Reflections on the Christian Life*. By Gilbert Meilaender. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006, xi + 172 pp., $16.00 paper.

In his recent work, Gilbert Meilaender interacts with key aspects of Augustine's moral theology, appropriating his thought toward a variety of contemporary ethical issues in a masterful economy of words. A specialist in ethics, Meilaender capably tries his hand at Augustine, with his stated purpose being "to probe . . . some aspects of the moral life" (p. ix). While making no claim to being an Augustinian specialist, he carefully interacts with those who are (Robert Markus, Donald Burt, John Burnaby, Edmund Hill, Peter Brown, and Lewis Ayres, among others) while also responsibly incorporating some choice works from Augustine (*Confessions*, *City of God*, *Against Lying*, *The Trinity*, and some of Augustine's letters). Furthermore, the author is not attempting to do the work of an historian—some of which would strengthen his argument, as this review will show. Rather, he regards Augustine as a "conversation partner" with whom he can "worry aloud" over certain moral issues.

Meilaender begins with a discussion of the tension between desire (chap. 1) and duty (chap. 2) before carrying those thoughts into more practical conversations on politics (chap. 3), sex (chap. 4), and grief (chap. 5). Interestingly, he waits to discuss his methodology until the close of the book (chap. 6). In large measure, Meilaender's goals are not unlike those of Donald X. Burt in *Friendship & Society: An Introduction to Augustine's Practical Philosophy* (Eerdmans, 1999); he does in fact interact with Burt in chapter four. While Burt is an accomplished Augustinian scholar in the area of

philosophy, Meilaender's effort is nevertheless distinct because he works from his strengths as an ethicist. Hence, the two works, while overlapping on a number of issues, are complementary. Having given this general overview of *The Way That Leads There*, I will now briefly interact with the main themes of each chapter and offer some critique.

In a rather C. S. Lewis-like fashion, Meilaender's opening chapter presents a lively discussion on desire. Through interaction with Augustine, Luther, Lewis as well as his contemporaries in ethics, Meilaender wrestles with the tension of desire for happiness and disinterested love. Appropriating Augustine's famous prayer, "because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you" (*Conf.* 1.1; cf. *Conf.* 10.22), Meilander asserts that all humans are created in need and truly desire God. Indeed, Augustine unapologetically longed for the "happy life" (*vita beata*) and claimed it in God's presence. Hence, it was a fair, reasonable, and inherently selfish goal.

Meilaender correctly adds that the sixth chapter of *Confessions* shows Augustine pursuing the happy life in the presence of God as well as in the company of others. Thus, Augustine's "selfish" pursuit of God charitably benefited others while also exposing the deficiencies of humans to love. This, in turn, led him back to the presence of God for genuine satisfaction. Meilaender's argument is only supported by what we know about Augustine's journey in community. Prior to his conversion in 386, he and several friends attempted a "happy life" community in Milan pursuing philosophical understanding (*Conf.* 6.14.24). While that plan failed, Augustine succeeded in initiating a philosophical and spiritual community at Cassiciacum (near Milan) in the months leading up to his baptism in 387 (*Conf.* 9.4.7). This conviction for community ultimately resulted in the proto-monastery in Tagaste (388–391; *Possidius*, 3), the garden monastery in Hippo (391–395; *Possidius*, 5.1), and the clerical monastery in the bishop's house in Hippo (395–430; *Possidius*, 11.1). In this communal context of pursuing God in the company of others, Augustine broke with Cicero's classical idea of friendship (*amicitia*) toward a uniquely Christian understanding that he eventually termed *caritas*.

In the second chapter, Meilaender rather seamlessly moves from desire to a discussion of duty—that which we ought to do even if it is inconvenient. He deliberately focuses on the duty of truth-telling by surveying Augustine's work *On Lying*, interpreting Augustine's definition of lying as a "'mismatch' between what is in one's heart and what one speaks" (p. 69). Arguing the hierarchical position, Meilaender seems to charge Augustine with an overly simplistic position on lying that does not fully consider the cases of the midwives (Ex. 1:17–20), Rahab, and the hypothetical case of withholding bad news from a dying man. Rather, he sides with Bonhoeffer (*Ethics*, 372) that lying might at times be necessary.

Resuming the desire-duty debate, Meilaender asserts that *Confessions* is a tale of desire while *On Lying* promotes duty. He further avers that martyrdom represents the pinnacle of duty: "The existence of the church's martyrs teaches Augustine that we are sometimes obligated to relinquish certain goods, even that of life, rather than violate our duty. It suggests the possibility of an obligation that does not seem to lead to any fulfillment" (p. 74). I would argue, however, that a further investigation into the narratives and subsequent theology of martyrdom in the North African church in the first five centuries suggests otherwise: that desire for the presence of God was certainly in the minds of those embracing martyrdom. As William Frend asserts (*Martyrdom and Persecution*, 314), the phrase "today we are martyrs in heaven" (*hodi martyres in caelis sumus*) became a rallying cry among North African believers between AD 180 and 305. As martyrdom was embraced by believers like Scillium (180), Perpetua and Felicitas (203), and Cyprian (258), the selfish motivation of entering the presence of God was quite apparent. This is even more reflected in the Montanist writings of Tertullian (*On Fleeing Persecution*; *Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas*) in which martyrdom was rigorously embraced almost to the point of being a sort of temporal spiritual pleasure

that resulted in an eternal one. Augustine, while condemning the Donatist excesses toward voluntary martyrdom in his day (he called it suicide), nevertheless preached about a hundred sermons on the anniversaries of the martyrs. In these he appealed to his congregation to imitate the example of those who had suffered for their faith. Hence, it seems that Augustine would regard martyrdom as an opportunity that led to happiness in the presence of God more than a duty that leads to no fulfillment.

That quibble aside, Meilaender nicely concludes the chapter on duty by summarizing the tension "between the God who calls us to himself (desire) and the God who calls us to obey." He adds that "only the God who gives what he commands, in whom we are to hope, can overcome it" (p. 76).

Working from the philosophical discussion of desire and duty, Meilaender converses with Augustine in the third chapter on the nature and extent of politics. He argues rather clearly that politics cannot meet the desires of restless hearts and thus people are often guilty of asking more of politics that it can provide. Hence, Meilaender seems especially committed to upholding eternal matters—that which is spiritual and heavenly—over the temporal. Drawing upon the work of Markus and Burt, he capably interacts with Augustine's two cities, avowing that it is a messy paradigm to apply to contemporary politics. In this discussion, Meilaender helpfully distinguishes Eusebius's triumphal regard for Constantine from Augustine's view that the Christian emperor's emergence was not necessarily the answer to biblical prophecy or a show of God's providence in an eternal Roman Empire. Also, he makes the interesting point that Augustine's ammillenial stance was not only informed by his thoughts on the "city of God" but also by the limited hope he placed in politics.

Meilaender does seem to err in his assertion that Augustine contradicted his view on the limits of politics in his approval of the Donatist suppression in North Africa. Again, a bit of historical work might cause him to reconsider that claim. Meilaender fails to take into consideration that by Augustine's day, the Donatist controversy was nearly a century old. In the latter half of the fourth century, the violent Circumcellion element had arisen and advanced their factional aims through violence and terror. From 392 to 405, Augustine's posture toward the Donatists was quite evangelical as he wrote letters, produced books and tracts, and initiated debates toward winning his errant brothers back to the unity of the church. In councils with the North African bishops as late as 404, Augustine repeatedly urged his fellow bishops to approach the Donatists in a charitable and persuasive manner. Yet, when Honorius issued the edict of unity in 405 and Marcellinus ruled against the Donatists at Carthage in 411, Augustine did comply. Even so, it cannot be responsibly argued that his goal was religious suppression; rather, Augustine accepted state intervention as a last resort to quell violence in a turbulent society. Similarly, he accepted the state's suppression of pagan violence in nearby Calama in 408, after his friend and fellow bishop Possidius was beaten in his church by a pagan mob (*Possidius*, 12). Hence, Augustine's view that the state could rightfully restrain evil was not contradictory to his political philosophy.

In chapter four, Meilaender expands the discussion of desire and duty by interacting with Augustine on sex. He summarizes Augustine's belief that the purpose of sex was procreation and to some extent pleasure, adding that it would be wrong to separate the two purposes and merely have sex for the purpose of pleasure. Working from Lewis's analogy, Meilaender likens sex to food. While eating ought to bring pleasure to the senses, it is also nourishing and maintains the health of the one eating.

Meilaender expands upon Lewis's thought and offers an added benefit to eating: a meal brings friends together for community and fellowship. This reasoning would have surely struck a chord with Augustine who, as noted, initiated monastic communities at Tagaste and Hippo. According to Possidius, one of the key points of the monastic day in Hippo was table fellowship. Referring to Augustine, Possidius noted: "He practiced

hospitality at all times. Even at table he found more delight in reading and conversation than in eating and drinking" (*Possidius*, 22.6). While the meal was not extravagant and consisted usually of vegetables and wine, the better nourishment included theological discussion and fraternal communion. In fact, gossip was strictly forbidden at Augustine's table! Thus, at this stage of the conversation with Augustine, Meilaender would probably have a good hearing from Augustine on this added benefited of sex: bringing a couple together into deeper intimacy and friendship.

In short, Meilaender convincingly shows the insufficiency of Augustine's view of sex as being primarily for procreation. One might surmise that Augustine's personal experience of sexual promiscuity in his younger years led him to this more functional perspective. Furthermore, his prescriptions on sex and marriage were given while he was personally practicing chastity in a monastery. Interestingly, before concluding this chapter, Meilander carries the conversation into a consideration of some contemporary problems of contraception and assisted reproductive strategies. Though revealing his strengths as a bio-medical ethicist, Meilander nonetheless abandons his conversation partner back in the fifth century!

Meilaender next takes up the subject of grief in chapter five by putting on display the longing soul left unsatisfied by selfish sex and an unrealistic expectation of politics. Surprisingly, he seems to converse more with Lewis and the *Problem of Pain* in this chapter than with Augustine. Simply put, Meilaender argues that to be alive is to be passionate, and longing and to be alive in the fallen world means facing inevitable grief. He adds that the humiliated Christ, the "man of sorrows," suffered appropriate grief. Meilaender also show that Augustine rejected the Stoic alternative of *apatheia*, a "liberation from passion," as a dishonest and diluted look at the world. Finally, he returns to the original question of desire, suggesting that grief is a solace that reveals both the need and desire to be satisfied in God.

As this review has shown, Meilaender has overall rendered a great service in *The Way That Leads There*. So who should read it? First, ethicists contemplating moral issues will find a relevant conversation partner in Augustine. Secondly, students of history and Augustine may celebrate and wrestle with some relevant moral ideas from the bishop of Hippo. Finally, Christians in general will discover its devotional content nourishing. Though "devotional" in the twenty-first century might be construed as "light," Meilaender's work is anything but that. Rather, it is a feast of thought to be read (like Lewis or Augustine) in a slow and contemplative manner.

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