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November 5, 2024

St. Augustine and Thomas Muentzer's Ideas of Justice and their Goals of Politics

## **Introduction**

St. Augustine and Thomas Muentzer both deal with justice in their writings, but they have very different understandings of the concept, and different forms of justice they advocate for. They share in their underlying belief as Christian thinkers that the Christian community is uniquely entitled to justice handed down by God, and view of Christians as an outlier within the context of politics. However, for Muentzer, the structure of power that shapes political life on earth are very important, while Augustine disregards these earthly matters as fleeting and of lesser importance than spiritual ones. Muentzer endorses a kind of social justice that Augustine does not.

Both authors lived through times of immense crisis, and their conceptions of justice can be directly connected back to the historical circumstances in which they developed their thought. Additionally, they both used powerful rhetoric to persuade their audiences, using various devices to craft arguments that appeal both to logic and emotion. While Muentzer's idea of justice is more similar to a modern one, Augustine's idea of justice is still relevant, especially his understanding of unjust regimes. This paper will argue that Muentzer's idea of justice is preferable because it emphasizes individual action in the context of structures, empowering people to fight for change, while Augustine has a more pessimistic perspective, making justice and progress seem unattainable and irrelevant.

## Augustine's Definition of Justice

Augustine's conception of justice is certainly unlike modern justice. For Augustine, the governing principle of human existence is original sin. The world is full of sin, injustice, and depravity because of the sin of Adam, from which all people inherit their sinful nature<sup>1</sup>. This one action marked all of humanity as imperfect. He therefore cannot endorse social justice, because progress cannot occur in a world in which suffering is the baseline condition. Justice does not mean that no one endures harm, as this would be impossible. In his conception of Christianity, suffering befalls both the good and the evil because original sin has left a permanent mark of depravity and evil on the world, yet God's mercy is applied to all. God's mercy is inherently just because it is applied equally. The trials people must endure in their lives are implemented by God to invite the wicked to repent for their sin, while the faithful are trained to endure difficult times<sup>2</sup>. The chastisement of believers and the punishment of non-believers is just because they are still vulnerable to earthly desires and vices, so trials and tests are not an act of punishment, but of correction and guidance<sup>3</sup>. These tests are a hallmark of internal life and spiritual development.

Since external life on earth is characterized by original sin, the development of one's internal spiritual life is the only way that they can achieve happiness, and the only way justice may be realized. Political structures are also inherently flawed, and Augustine's view of politics is not progressive due to this pessimistic view of the forces that shape society. All regimes are flawed because humans possess only a limited capability for rational understanding<sup>4</sup>. It is easier

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<sup>1</sup> Navid Hassanzadeh, "St. Augustine". (Lecture, Towson University, October 1, 2024).

<sup>2</sup> St. Augustine. *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*. Translated by Henry Bettenson. 1467. Reprint, London: Penguin Books, 1972. p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> Navid Hassanzadeh, "St. Augustine". (Lecture, Towson University, September 26, 2024).

to understand what Augustine understands as unjust, as only regimes based on Christianity can be just. His conception of justice can be inaccessible for those unfamiliar with the theological ideas that shape his thinking.

One of the biggest topics of discussion in Augustine's work is his discussion of Rome. He is highly critical of its leaders for their overly ambitious *libido dominandi*, or lust for domination. Desiring domination for the sake of power is dangerous, leading to the downfall of kingdoms. While many saw the fall of Rome as an indicator that the end times were approaching, Augustine argues that God's justice is always perfectly timed and executed. He encourages people to weigh the suffering of the people in Rome against the suffering of Christ, and see that God will not make the faithful endure hardship beyond what they are capable of handling<sup>5</sup>. God perfectly corrected those who engaged in frivolous, immoral, and greedy behavior in Rome in the name of security, but he really did so because they were depraved and incapable of learning through trials<sup>6</sup>.

### **Muentzer's Definition of Justice**

Muentzer endorses justice in a way that is much more comparable to modern understandings of social justice than Augustine does. His political outlook revolves around equality and justice for the oppressed. Muentzer believes that justice for the oppressed must come from them, as they are more aware of the struggles they face, and the leaders should listen and support their fight for justice<sup>7</sup>. The poor and destitute have the right and responsibility to

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<sup>5</sup> St. Augustine. *On the Sack of the City of Rome: A Critical Text and Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. Translated by Marie V. O'Reilly. 413AD. Reprint, The Catholic University of America Press, 1955. p. 73.

<sup>6</sup> St. Augustine. *City of God*. p. 44.

<sup>7</sup> Muentzer, Thomas. "Interpretation of the Second Chapter of Daniel." In *The Collected Works of Thomas Muentzer*, translated by Peter Matheson. T&T Clark, LTD, 1988. p. 245.

forcibly oppose authorities that wish to prevent progress or fail to protect God's people<sup>8</sup>.

Muentzer is like Augustine in the way he understands internal life. For him, the gaining of true faith or a real understanding of God comes through undergoing trials and hardship. To come to faith any other way would be to have counterfeit or false faith<sup>9</sup>.

However, though Muentzer emphasizes internal life as a key to a healthy life and society, he does not do away with earthly matters like Augustine does. He argues external life is marked by suffering not necessarily because of original sin, but because unjust systems have been allowed to persist. He analyzes these structures and comes to understand how the systems that are in place on earth are corrupt or harmful and advocates for changing them. Further, he advocates for militant action, not just passivity. While Augustine ignores the temporal or worldly end of justice, Muentzer is very concerned with it, and knows that the sword, which represents physical force, is necessary<sup>10</sup>.

A difference between the two thinkers is that Muentzer argues that happiness and true faith are a process, or something to be worked for. Because progress must come from both internal reflection and external struggle, Muentzer encourages introspection, but also encourages people to be militant. Unlike Muentzer, Augustine argues that happiness is something to be filled with, not to be struggled for<sup>11</sup>. Happiness is a consequence of faith, not something that can be handed out by secular authority<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 250.

<sup>9</sup> Muentzer, Thomas. "On Counterfeit Faith." In *The Collected Works of Thomas Muentzer*, translated by Peter Matheson. T&T Clark, LTD, 1988. p. 223.

<sup>10</sup> Muentzer. *Second Chapter of Daniel*. p. 250.

<sup>11</sup> Hassanzadeh, "St. Augustine". (Lecture, September 26, 2024).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

At some points, Augustine does encourage people to be aware of the world they live in, though any goals of politics beyond preservation are to be realized in the next world. Life on earth is like a pilgrimage during which people are not ultimately bound to this realm, and in turn are not bound to any goals<sup>13</sup>. People cannot achieve goals through connections to physical goods, while for Muentzer, people should work so that their worldly lives reflect principles of justice and godliness. This crucial difference in the view of the purpose of life sets these thinkers apart. This explains why Muentzer advocates for social justice while Augustine asserts that politics is not a person's sole goal on earth.

### **To Whom is Justice Applied and Who Applies It?**

For Augustine, because justice cannot be gained through temporal ends, it belongs to the Christian community. It exists outside of the worldly, and true justice is only determined by God. While God tries to bring justice to all people, some are incapable of receiving it and though they undergo the same suffering, do not develop spiritually or receive God's mercy. Christian believers are the only people with access to the final justice that is realized in the afterlife. Muentzer believes differently, that justice is something to be fought for by the oppressed. It is something withheld by unequal systems. This is evident in his encouragement not only of Christians to take up the sword against non-Christians, but of peasants to act militantly in their best interest against the elite classes.

Christians in a way must also be responsible for bringing justice to their communities. Muentzer cites scripture that calls Christians to eradicate enemies. He refers to a passage from Luke which calls for Christians to strangle their enemies, and that to do so would be to follow

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<sup>13</sup> Navid Hassanzadeh, "St. Augustine". (Lecture, Towson University, October 8, 2024).

the example of Christ<sup>14</sup>. He goes as far as to say that attacking the roots of the government is also just, as long as it is done for the reasons mentioned here. The godly must take up the sword as the mechanism by which God's will ought to be enacted<sup>15</sup>. In this passage, Muentzer concedes that princes should be the ones who use the sword and average people should only take it from them if they fail to use it adequately<sup>16</sup>. This means that Muentzer thinks that political leaders do have the right to enact justice so long as it is in accordance with God's law, but the people reserve the right to revoke this power if leaders fail to enact justice. Muentzer also makes it explicit that the godless do not deserve to exist because they do so in a way that is fundamentally opposed to God's law and word. In no uncertain terms, he calls the godly to kill and eradicate the godless. God will take the government into his own hands and godly people should not fear<sup>17</sup>.

### **City of God & City of Man and External & Internal Life: Where Is Justice Executed?**

Augustine argues that there are two 'cities': the city of man and the city of God. He does not explicitly define what the city of God is, assuming it would be intuitive to a Christian audience, as it is bound up in the Christian identity<sup>18</sup>. The City of Man has to do with earthly activities, both vices and virtues, and the time one's corporeal form spends living before moving to the afterlife. Because justice can only exist as God wills, the City of Man is not the setting in which this will occur. Augustine argues that communities that are led by God are the only communities that can truly be just. He argues that because Rome was unjust in nature, it could not have been a commonwealth in the sense that the word was used by Cicero<sup>19</sup>. Again, this is

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<sup>14</sup> Muentzer. *Second Chapter of Daniel*. p. 247.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 250.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 251.

<sup>18</sup> Navid Hassanzadeh, "St. Augustine". (Lecture, Towson University, October 3, 2024).

<sup>19</sup> Augustine. *City of God*. p. 75.

because all earthly institutions are flawed, and only through God can justice be realized. This means that because justice never existed in Rome since it was not based in God, it could never have been a true community. Augustine concedes that there should be some power structure, and the good and godly should seek dominion<sup>20</sup>. These people being in power would benefit all people because their regime would look after people not just in this life, but eternally. Here, justice is confined to the Christian afterlife again. The only way that a just regime can be established on Earth is with an eye to the spiritual life of its constituents.

He compares rulers to pirates and political leaders to robber bands. Their difference is mostly in name, as political leaders arguably perform many of the same indefensible actions but instead of being punished for it, they do so with impunity<sup>21</sup>. Again, justice is what gives kingdoms their foundation, but this can only be achieved through godliness, not merely through proclaiming a title. Even in cities that are full of good, virtuous people, if they are not truly pious and worship God, then despite being good by earthly standards, they are not morally or spiritually superior to criminal gangs.

There is some merit in thinking about the idea that justice as a concept that comes from on high, as judging what is just by earthly standards can mean that different people will judge it differently. In Augustine's conception, he soothes the anxiety of his audience by arguing that justice is not defined by humans, therefore people do not have to understand why things that seem unjust happen, they have to trust that God's will is playing out and that belief in God will provide the ultimate justice for the faithful. That said, Muentzer also advocates for spiritual development and faithfulness.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 138.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, p. 139.

Muentzer believes that justice is executed both internally and externally. He also sees internal and external life existing in a sort of existential feedback loop where one's experience is more important to the development of faith than scholarly learning<sup>22</sup>. The refining of the soul and the improvement of public life are not exclusive concepts, but can happen at the same time, improving the counter-process at the same time<sup>23</sup>. While he does believe that the oppressed should be the ones fighting for justice, this raises the question of why victims of oppressive structures are to be responsible for their own justice. Muentzer argues that the power to take action against injustice rests in the community, to which political leaders are servants.

### **Agustine's Historical Context**

The major event that shaped Augustine's political thought and the political climate of the region he lived in was the sacking of Rome by the Visigoths in 410 AD. Under the leadership of Alaric, the city of Rome fell victim to the control of the Visigoths and their cruel practices. This was traumatic and shocking for the world at large, as Rome was viewed as permanent and strong enough to resist an attack like this one. Even for Augustine who was in his home near Tunis in North Africa at the time, this was upsetting. This event had apocalyptic significance and was the culmination of the crises that characterized this era. Many people sought Augustine's opinion and guidance as a public figure, so in many ways he wrote to help people understand these events and recover from this trauma<sup>24</sup>.

Earlier in history, Constantine had made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, marking a transition away from its Pagan roots. Many blamed Christianity for the fall of

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<sup>22</sup> Navid Hassanzadeh, "Thomas Muentzer". (Lecture, Towson University, October 15, 2024).

<sup>23</sup> Navid Hassanzadeh, "Thomas Muentzer". (Lecture, Towson University, October 10, 2024).

<sup>24</sup> Hassanzadeh, "St. Augustine". (Lecture, October 1, 2024).



Rome, which Augustine wholeheartedly rejects. However, instead of offering another explanation of cause and effect, Augustine relies on the idea of divine will to explain this crisis. Because human existence is marked by suffering, this event should not have been viewed as catastrophic according to him, but another episode in God's larger plan<sup>25</sup>.

### **Muentzer's Historical Context**

Muentzer wrote during the Reformation in Germany, characterized by the movement of Protestant groups to separate from the Catholic Church. He was actively persecuted for his writings, so he lived an itinerant life, constantly moving to avoid persecution. Wherever he went, he was controversial, and his legacy continued to be decisive even among 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarship who debated whether Muentzer was a hero or a misguided idealist<sup>26</sup>. While he was alive, he began as a contemporary of Martin Luther, reflecting the radical tradition of the Reformation and thinkers who opposed the Roman Catholic Church and abuses by the clergy. Many of his critiques of the church had public support until he became more radical and began to question authority. Luther believed that worldly authority was legitimate as long as it met people's needs, though they were entitled to challenge it to a degree. Muentzer on the other hand was a much more militant radical, viewing worldly authority as gatekeepers of faith and perpetrators of oppression<sup>27</sup>. They would engage in an extremely toxic relationship, hurling vitriol and potent insults at each other throughout their lives.

Muentzer's involvement in the German Peasants' Rebellion was fundamental to his political thought. In May of 1525, work stoppages such as one in Waldshut led to widespread

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Hassanzadeh, "Thomas Muentzer". (Lecture, October 10, 2024).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

Peasant Revolts. Peasants presented a list of demands known as the Memmingen Articles to the German nobility and princes. The Diet of Speyer was held to address the demands, which included access to natural resources, communally owned lands, and other reforms. The Diet concluded that these demands were valid, but unattainable. Luther and more vocal critics called the peasants evil and immoral, claiming that they did the Devil's work. This conflict would culminate in the Battle of Frankenhausen, in which Muentzer would be captured by mercenary soldiers. His death was particularly gruesome, as he was tortured extensively before he was killed<sup>28</sup>. Muentzer was fundamentally opposed to these structures of power that oppressed peasants and ultimately killed him.

An interesting note is that while both thinkers lived through times of crisis, for Augustine the crisis was itself a change, an alteration to a longstanding institution. The fall of Rome was representative of the need for preservation. For Muentzer, the various crises he saw were precisely the reason why things needed to change. His opponents generally stood against change, as they often benefited from the systems in place and wished to preserve them.

## **Use of Rhetoric**

Augustine was trained in the use of rhetoric and was a teacher of it<sup>29</sup>, so his writings are full of it. One tool he uses is metaphors, which serve to simplify concepts to the audience and make them comparable to everyday life. In *City of God*, Augustine invokes the imagery of a cesspool and a perfume being stirred<sup>30</sup>. He does so to highlight that when God puts the wicked under the same conditions as the just, they experience it differently not because God treats them

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<sup>28</sup> Navid Hassanzadeh, "Thomas Muentzer". (Lecture, Towson University, October 17, 2024).

<sup>29</sup> Hassanzadeh, "St. Augustine". (Lecture, September 26, 2024)

<sup>30</sup> Augustine. *City of God*. p. 14.

differently, but because they are inherently different. The same action, stirring a cesspool and stirring a pool of perfume, would yield vastly different results. He also uses similes such as comparing the lustful, glory-seeking Roman empire to glass to illustrate the fragility of this outlook on rule. To lust only for domination, to subjugate and enslave others shows that while displaying power in this way may create the appearance of strength, one blow could shatter the regime.

Muentzer's main rhetorical device is his diction. He carefully selects his words to have the most impact on his audience, and his serious tone emphasizes the urgency with which people must act. One example of his use of pointed language is in his insults towards Martin Luther. He calls him many derogatory names, often repeating the moniker 'Doctor Liar'<sup>31</sup> to highlight how Luther uses his position and education to bolster his legitimacy when really he gatekept the Christian faith and colluded with princes. He also does not hesitate to use these kinds of words about the princes themselves, calling back to a biblical passage referring to secular leaders as eels and snakes<sup>32</sup>. The connotations of these phrases underscore the conniving and scheming nature of elites. Leaders and people who are not oppressed have to act in unsavory ways to preserve the distribution of power which enables them to live comfortably at the expense of others. Like Augustine, Muentzer also employs scripture to illustrate his points. Throughout his writing he calls back to the Bible as his sermons expand beyond whatever passage they initially sought to analyze.

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<sup>31</sup> Muentzer, Thomas. "Vindication and Refutation." In *The Collected Works of Thomas Muentzer*, translated by Peter Matheson. T&T Clark, LTD, 1988. p. 328.

<sup>32</sup> Muentzer. *Second Chapter of Daniel*. p. 245.

## Evaluation

While Augustine does conceive of justice, justice is not a goal of politics for him. In fact, politics lacks a clearly defined goal<sup>33</sup>. Augustine could be considered ‘conservative’ because of his belief that the only goal of politics is to maintain peace. Again, because all earthly things are tainted by original sin and inherently imperfect, there is a bleak, pessimistic angle to his writings that make politics seem inconsequential and uplift the spiritual realm as the sole purpose of one’s life. His conception of justice is also predicated on the idea of an all-powerful God who is incapable of being unjust, which can be a difficult idea for a modern reader to digest.

However, taking the idea that all modern political thoughts are secularized religious thoughts from earlier periods, the idea of justice being predetermined or out of human control and an acceptance of the imperfection of politics can be appealing. Especially in times of crisis, it can be soothing to consider that justice is something divine, something that comes from a realm that is entirely separate from the one we live in day-to-day. This justice is inaccessible except by faith, making this type of justice exclusive. That said, this is only comforting to people who believe, while to others this is exclusionary, making conservative attitudes like this generally counterproductive.

Even moving beyond the theological implications of Augustine’s writings and translating them into a more secular context, his arguments still fall short of being completely persuasive. In the most general sense, conservatism is not a helpful tool for understanding politics. Preservation may maintain peace (the absence of war) and stability, but by not viewing politics as a tool to improve the lives of one’s self and others, one fails to see why humans organize themselves this

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<sup>33</sup> Hassanzadeh, “St. Augustine”. (Lecture, October 8, 2024).

way. Surely people go through trials, and it is not incorrect to say that life on earth is marked by imperfection. However, survival is not the only goal of a person, which Augustine acknowledges by encouraging people to have goals that lie beyond earthly security or gains. The pessimistic perspective that people should be content with ‘minimizing suffering’ and should focus on things beyond this earthly life produces an individualistic attitude that normalizes suffering and oppression, stripping humans not only of their agency to make positive change but of their empathy for others.

Some could argue that Muentzer’s bombastic and aggressive tone is not productive or conducive to a persuasive argument. However, for Muentzer and others who are repeatedly disparaged and persecuted by systems that seek to maintain hierarchies and necessarily require some people to occupy a subordinate position in society, this type of language is understandable and necessary. If anything, it bolsters his argument, highlights his passion and emphasizes the need for urgency. Modern thinkers may read Muentzer and apply his thoughts to discussions on violence. There are many debates to be had regarding when violence is justified and who gets to execute it. For example, militant movements during the Civil Rights era were demonized as being violent, when they would argue that being the victim of unceasing systemic violence necessitates and justifies the use of force in retaliation. Muentzer argues that those who are subjugated by unfair systems are not only entitled to resistance but are required to do so.

To offer a criticism of Muentzer, his idea of an ‘elect’ being a vanguard or guiding force towards justice is problematic in some ways. This implies that there are people suffering under the same conditions who are less capable of understanding social change or leading the charge, but this undermines the aspect of progressive or social justice thought that emphasizes agency. Muentzer’s understanding of justice resonates today not just because of its parallels to modern

understandings of social justice, but because it holds room for human agency. Faith and justice are not bestowed upon people arbitrarily, and even in the spiritual sense people must work to obtain true faith by suffering and contending with it. This emphasis placed on the relationship between the inner and outer world is motivating. It gives the poor and otherwise marginalized the political power and self-efficacy to let their discontent with the status quo mobilize them. This is fundamentally the opposite of conservatism in political thought, what we would label progressivism, though these terms carry modern connotations that are not necessarily fair to apply to these two thinkers.

## **Conclusion**

Thomas Muentzer and St. Augustine both address justice from a Christian perspective. They both agree that ultimate justice will be had on the final judgment day or in the afterlife, and is something reserved for believers. However, St. Augustine does away with concerns for earthly struggles and advocated for a complete embrace of one's spiritual life. Muentzer on the other hand recognizes the importance of structures on earth, while still encouraging Christians to be introspective and faithful. Muentzer encourages militant action, advising Christians to eradicate unbelievers but also calling to poor to use whatever means are necessary to fight for social change. While Augustine makes no room for progress or change, Muentzer empowers the oppressed to take matters into their own hands. Augustine's devaluation of temporal authority and worldly problems leads to inaction, and to apply it today would be misguided.

There are material ways in which the distribution of power shapes people's lives. Whether one believes in an afterlife or not, it is almost irresponsible to think of politics as something fleeting. While the comfort provided by externalizing suffering to a force out of one's control may provide temporary anxiety relief, to endorse the preservation of regimes that are

admittedly unjust is dangerous. Muentzer's radical approach to politics is extremely relevant today as we see people reclaim power that has been historically denied to them. It is important to acknowledge the power people have in this earthly life to improve it for all people. Some may take issue with Muentzer's selective idea of who can usher in progress, but the premise remains. Even those who do not belong to the 'elect' by Muentzer's standards can be empowered to improve their internal life, gain power in their external life, and bring positive changes.

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