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### 10. Church and State at the End of Nature

#### An Augustinian Reflection on a Climate Change and Late Modernity

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##### Abstract

This essay places in dialogue St. Augustine and the French philosopher Bruno Latour. Specifically, it makes a typological connection between the failure of the late Roman state in the fourth century and the current realities stressing the state in late modernity. It argues that the eschatological political theology of St. Augustine remains a useful dialogue partner for us as we face a season of rapid and confusing political change.

Keywords: climate change, Augustine, Bruno Latour, eschatology, modernity

##### Introduction

One of the most surprising intellectual developments arising from contemporary environmental consciousness is surely the problematization of the word “nature.” “Nature,” for most of us, has a simple meaning: it refers to the non-human world. Its meaning

encompasses the environment, romantic landscapes, and the places inhabited by both bunnies and bobcats. However, generally, in our culture, “nature” does not include human civilization, human communities, or even human beings. Human projects, according to our common cultural inheritance, stand outside of nature as a separate category. In my view, it is precisely this category distinction between “nature” and “human” that is in the process of collapsing and, in the process of its collapse, is ushering in, against our will, a radically new politics. In a way, we are coming to the end of nature, or at least to the end of an idea of nature that our culture has taken for granted for centuries.

Embedded in this phrase “the end of nature,” are ideas gleaned from the work of the French philosopher Bruno Latour. According to Latour, since the rise of modernity the word “nature” has come to mean something like “the non-human world out there,” or “the background stage upon which is enacted the drama of human history.” Nature is something passive, inert, and largely unchanging. Latour also suggests that the environmental crisis we are currently experiencing is rendering this old view of nature obsolete. Nature is now awake, he explains, an actor herself who pushes back on human projects and who will, for good or for ill, impact our future. For Latour, “nature,” as we have understood it for the last 500 years, has come to an end (2013: lecture 3).

The question driving this essay is simple: if Latour is right and the environmental crisis is disrupting both our self-understanding (as not-nature) and our relationship with the earth (as distinct from it), how will it impact religion and politics or the Church and the state? To answer this question, however, is less simple; a full consideration would require an extended meditation on the history of modernity (engaging the works of Milbank; Blumenberg; Dupré; and Taylor), a task clearly beyond the scope of this essay and the conference that occasioned its composition. Nevertheless, in the pages that follow I would like to make some tentative observations about the theological and religious implications of this change.

My thinking on this matter began as an intuition, which I expressed to a friend one day while walking around the track at the campus athletic center. The gist of what I wanted to claim, I explained, was that, given its theological resources, Christianity was in a better position than the secular state to respond to a radical reorientation toward nature of the sort that Latour describes. As I reflected on this more, eschatology emerged as a core part of the problem. Once that happened, I ended up inescapably with Augustine. This is not all that surprising both because my theological imagination gravitates naturally toward eschatology and because my eschatological perspective has been deeply influenced by Augustine’s thought.

In the context of this essay, however, I can say that before sitting down to write, it had never occurred to me that Augustine’s political theology would have anything to say about our environmental moment, about our shifting views of nature, or about our current political imagination. But I think it does. While not exactly parallel, I would like to suggest that Augustine’s response to the failure of the late Roman state can serve as a model for the Christian community as it struggles to adjust to the impact of our changing relationship to nature. Augustine challenges our temptation to cling to a political narrative that is passing away. Reading Augustine with these concerns in mind can help us to rethink the meaning of human life in the new world emerging here at nature’s end.

## A Tale of Two Cities

More than twenty-five years ago I was a student in a graduate seminar offered by the late, great patristics scholar Robert Markus. During that semester, I read Markus's most famous and influential book *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (1970). It is one of the few works of scholarship that has ever made me cry, and is the only specific scholarly book that I remember making that happen. *Saeculum* is a great book, full of interpretative power and of lasting impact. In it Markus explains how Augustine developed his political ideas about the "two cities" as a response to his collapsing world. These ideas are enshrined in his classic work *The City of God*.

I will summarize Markus's argument in a moment, but first I want to reflect briefly on Augustine's context. For years I have taught students about the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410. I tell them that this was the first time Rome had been invaded in more than 800 years. I report that the voice of herald bringing the news to St. Jerome "failed and sobs interrupted his utterances. The city which had taken the whole world," Jerome wrote, "was itself taken" (463). I also explain how the empire did not fall that day, but it was only a matter of time. By 430, as Augustine lay dying in Hippo, the Vandals had crossed the Straits of Gibraltar and would soon destroy forever Roman North Africa and the Christian civilization established there.

I have known these things for a long time, but for some reason in preparing this paper, the deep pathos of Augustine's situation struck me in a way that it had not before. In realizing this, I stopped typing and did the math; Augustine was 56 years old when Rome fell. People our age, I thought to myself, adjust badly to change of this magnitude. I point this out not to overdraw the comparison between that world and ours. I hope that our civilization is not on the verge of a collapse similar to that experienced by the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century. But, it is nonetheless true that we live in a time of real anxiety about the future, and many among us harbor not-so-secret fears that the kinds of shifts that Latour and others describe are likely to have world-changing consequences similar to those experienced by Augustine sixteen hundred years ago. So, recovering imaginatively for a moment the human context in which Augustine constructed his political theology and juxtaposing it with our own can help make the case for the ongoing relevance of his ideas that I am trying to build in this paper.

Now, back to Markus. The central claim of *Saeculum* is that as Augustine grew older and the stability of the Western empire became increasingly shaky, he became suspicious of the dominant ways of thinking about the relationship between the Church and the Roman imperium. Markus calls this dominant way of thinking "the Theodosian establishment" (32). Theodosius I, who reigned from 347-395 and Theodosius II, who reigned from 408-450 together can be credited with completing the project of christianizing the empire that Constantine I had begun at the beginning of the fourth century. Members of the political establishment created by these emperors tended to think of the age in which they were living as "Christian times." This Theodosian thinking was supported by the political theology embedded in the *Ecclesiastical History* written by Eusebius of Caesarea during the early decades of the fourth century, while Constantine was still in power.

These ideas surface even more forcefully in Eusebius's cloying biography of his emperor called, unremarkably, *The Life of Constantine*. At the core of Eusebius's political thinking is the assumption that the conversion of the emperor, and the subsequent establishment of a new Christian civilization, prove that God is blessing both the Church and the state and showing his approval of Christendom. In other words, the ongoing success of the now Christian empire was interpreted as an indication of divine approval. The Christian empire was, in this view, God's project (22-44).

Markus explains that when Rome was invaded in 410, many wealthy and educated people fled to North Africa where they wondered out loud how such a tragedy could happen in these "Christian times" (37-38). Some considered this to be a sign of God's displeasure. Others thought the calamity was the result of Rome's abandonment of the old gods and urged a revival of paganism. Augustine rejected both positions. As Markus narrates it, Augustine interpreted the sack of Rome as an indication that God, in fact, blesses no government or political establishment. The current alliance between the Church and Rome provides no clue at all about God's intentions or plans for the future. The Christian empire is a human construct, not a divine one, and, like all things human, it will pass away.

In order to make his case for decoupling Church and empire, Augustine wrote the *City of God*. At the core of his argument is an eschatological reading of all human history as the tale of two cities, which he called the "City of God" and the "Earthly City." These cities are not places on the earth or local to any institution. They are, instead, for Augustine eschatological communities that are defined by their loves and by their ends. Thus, the Earthly City is defined by love for the things of this world, by the lust for power, by pride, and by violence. In contrast, the City of God is defined by love for God, by humility, and by peace.

Augustine believed that the scriptures told us the story of these two cities in the past. So, Cain could be identified as a resident of the Earthly City, while Abel was a citizen of the City of God. However, because the historical record of the scriptures ended with the death and resurrection of Jesus, we now live in a time of great ambiguity, an ambiguity that will remain until the time of the last judgment. For Augustine, we live now in the *saeculum* – the secular – that space between the first and second coming of Christ. In the *saeculum*, the two cities are mixed together inextricably and no human observer can know for certain to which city individual members of the human community belong. Membership in the Church does not guarantee membership in the City of God, Augustine would argue. Indeed, he thought many prelates would be exposed at the end of time as members of the diabolical city and many currently labeled sinners would find their way to the city of peace. Both cities, he thought would only be revealed fully at the end of time, at the consummation of history (Markus: 154-86).

In such a framework, the Christian empire emerges not as a theological triumph proving divine favor, but as a modest good, serving a purpose for a time in the *saeculum*. For Augustine, that primary purpose of the state was to keep the peace and allow for human flourishing in a world that must continue in brokenness until the final revelation. According to Markus, Augustine believed all human society had essentially fallen away from the "primordial harmony" that existed in the early days of creation. This "peace," Markus goes on to explain,

“cannot be recovered in any actual, existing, society of fallen men, any more than the original wholeness of the personality could be recovered by an individual” (xv).

### **Bruno Latour and the End of Nature**

In order to explore further the parallel I am attempting to draw between Augustinian political eschatology and the current moment, I turn now to the work of Bruno Latour. Latour’s fascination with the shifting meaning of the idea of nature began with his pioneering work *We Have Never Been Modern* (1993), and continues in his recent study of the philosophical and religious implications of a new emergent earth consciousness, which he explores in his book *Face à Gaïa* (2015). For Latour, the shift in the meaning of “nature” represents one particular outcome of a rift that has opened in the cultural assumptions of modernity. Indeed, the emergence of this rift is the major theme of *We Have Never Been Modern*. Here, Latour observes that when modern culture was fully functional, the tendency was to think that we humans had arrived at a cultural apotheosis, reaching at last the full realization of human potential in this world. Moderns came to see themselves as inhabiting the one true culture as opposed to inhabiting one or another more primitive cultures, which they thought of themselves as transcending. Moderns simply assumed that they lived in a world that had migrated from delusion to illumination and that modern culture could not be superseded because it was true and, by definition, unsurpassable (1993: 13-46).

Consider the example of an anthropological study that might have been carried out in the 1930s by, for example, Margaret Mead. Here we have the classical image of a “modern” social scientist, standing as an objective observer of a “primitive” culture and making judgments about it. Following Latour’s insight, such an anthropologist could not have imagined doing an anthropology of modernity because “the modern” was conceived to be the one, true, enlightened point of view. Said another way, a truly modern person could not imagine writing critically about the culture that produced Margaret Mead. Latour, however, thinks confidence in the modern project began to break down in the later part of the twentieth century, and its decline is ongoing. This decline exposes Modernity as just another human culture; modern culture is no longer the true enlightened culture, but a culture that could, in theory at least, be the subject of an anthropological study and that could be replaced by something else. When we became aware of our modernity we are, paradoxically, no longer modern.

Latour traces the root of this rupture in confidence to the increasing untenability of the distinction that modernity habitually makes between the human and the non-human. He thinks the modern worldview depends upon distinguishing sharply between the human world of culture, language, and politics and the natural world governed by forces as old as the earth itself. This distinction, however, is constantly threatened by what Latour calls the existence of “hybrids,” or realities that expose the overlapping of, and constant interaction between, nature and culture (1993: 1-12).

For example, following Latour’s logic, we might note how the virtual world made possible by the Internet is completely dependent upon mining earth materials and burning fossil fuels. This makes it a hybrid of human cultural things and natural things. However, the modern worldview depends upon suppressing awareness of hybrids like these. Latour calls this impulse to suppress awareness of hybrids “purification.” That is, if one is truly modern, one feels

compelled to purge the world of hybridity and separate nature and culture, human and non-human (1993: 10-12).

To return to the example of the virtual world, a person fully ensconced in the culture of modernity would be inclined to claim the Internet as a human cultural achievement, failing to notice its complete embeddedness in, and dependence upon, nature and failing to notice that disruptions in the natural sources supporting the Internet could destroy our civilization.

In addition, Latour observes the modern practice of purification paradoxically increases the number of hybrids that must in turn be purified. In contrast, premodern culture was preoccupied with the suppression of hybrids, resulting in deeper fusion of nature and culture and little proliferation. For Latour, the dilemma of late modernity is that purification is increasingly impossible. We are becoming aware of the hybridity of nature and culture, and with that awareness comes knowledge of our inescapable intertwining with what we used to call “nature” – the border between the two has become porous, the dams of separation have ruptured, and now we are coming to realize that we have never been modern at all.

Recently Latour’s work has taken a notable environmental turn. In both his Gifford Lectures (2013) and in his book *Face à Gaïa* (2015), he argues that the failure of purification and the proliferation of hybrids has created “hybrid monsters” like climate change. We can no longer pretend that human activities take place on the stable stage of nature. The earth, he explains, is now awake and has revealed herself to be the actor in the human drama that she has always been and that we have only recently attempted to deny. To capture the dramatic nature of this new culture moment, Latour suggests we refer to the earth henceforth as “Gaia.” For Latour, however, Gaia is no pagan god, but our own planet, now become responsive, active, and even dangerous. When we push millions of tons of carbon into the atmosphere, Gaia responds by getting warmer and threatening our coastal cities and way of life; she is not passive.

### **Hybridity, Politics and the Failure of Hope**

Latour’s ideas about hybridity and purification help to illuminate the sources of the forces currently stressing our political and economic life. Consider briefly how dependent the American project is upon purification and hybridity. American political discourse has deep roots in the assumption that the lives of the next generation will always be better than the lives of the previous generation because, it assumes, human are in the process of mastering nature and bringing it under human control. We will also soon destroy all ignorance and bigotry, we are told. As children, members of my generation were told we were in the process of mastering nature. We spoke of “conquering space” and of colonizing new worlds. We were assured that economic growth will be endless, even though it is taking place within a closed system. We were promised jet packs!

If we look at this narrative from the vantage point of the end of nature, it seems clear that the most appropriate word to describe it is “delusional.” Although there is no time to develop this theme fully in this context, many commentators have pointed out that these things will not happen; they cannot happen (Latour 2015: 239-83, LeCain; Sideris). Humans are not powerful enough to conquer space, and the idea that one could “master” the reality that produced and sustains us – as if we somehow exist apart from it – is utterly and completely

incoherent. However – and here is the problem – the eschatology of modernity depends upon the hope that someday these dreams might come. But, what happens to this implied eschatology when we begin to realize that the promised land will never appear? How does the state, which exists, at least in part, on the promise of delivering us to our hope, cope with a failure at this level? In my view, it probably cannot and we are likely facing a time of dramatic, rapid and uncomfortable political change.

Although he makes no comparison to Augustine and his situation, Latour is clearly worried that changes we are currently experiencing could overwhelm us. In a worst-case scenario, they could overwhelm us in a way that is similar to the way in which Germanic migrations overwhelmed the late Western Roman Empire in the fifth century. That is, these changes have the potential to alter the path of our civilization. In one of his Gifford lectures, Latour reflects upon our situation by invoking an image drawn from ancient cosmology. It seems to him, he explains to the assembled audience, that once again humans have been “banished to the sub-lunar world” (2013: lecture 3). For readers unschooled in the universe of the ancient world, the statement will seem odd, since we have no contemporary reference. Briefly, in antiquity the realm below the moon was the place in the universe inhabited by humans and other densely material beings. It was the domain of physicality, change, decay, disorder, violence, and death. In contrast the domain above the moon was intellectual, spiritual, and stable. Many ancient people located human suffering in the fact that we are intellectual beings stuck in the world below the moon.

In calling forth the image of the sub-lunar, Latour is deliberately drawing a parallel between the situation facing the ancients and the situation facing humans entering into this new post-modern relationship with the earth and the universe. For Latour the failure of purification and the out-of-control proliferation of hybrids reveals the hubris of modernity, a time during which humans foolishly believed they could escape their metaphorical status as sub-lunar beings. Latour reminds us, we are not going anywhere. We are stuck down here, below the moon. We are, at the end of the day, earthlings through and through. Jet packs were never our destiny.

### **Augustine Redivivus**

If I am right that the crisis in front of us is, at least in part, an eschatological one brought on by the fracturing of the union between our human hope and the promises of modernity, then we might find in this space a point of typological connection between our world and the world of Augustine. Like Augustine’s contemporaries, Christians today have been comfortably inhabiting the “Theodosian Establishment” of modernity for some time. We tend to share the modern presumptions that the future will always be better than the past, that we will soon conquer bigotry and ignorance, that are going to master space and colonize Mars, indeed that humans are meant to be masters of this world. Our hope is in our achievements here and now.

But what if, as we increasingly suspect, the future is not great? Where then do we find meaning and hope? The reality of nature’s end threatens the implicit eschatology of modernity by exposing utopian delusion. The prospect that our hopes for earthly paradise are unlikely to be realized or – even worse, that they might be thwarted by things like climate change and good old fashioned human failure is already producing and will continue to produce a crisis of meaning not unlike that faced by the ancient Romans fleeing to North Africa and wondering

to Augustine how such things could be happening in the “Christian times.” How are these things happening to us, we wonder, in these “modern times”?

Because the end of nature is stressing the core principles of our civilization, our situation is formally similar to that facing citizens of the Western Empire in the fourth century. Events were cascading out of control, events which, over time, would completely alter their world. Although we tend to narrate that story as one of collapse, the experience on the ground was often less dramatic. There were catastrophes, of course, as in Augustine’s own North Africa, but the general morphing of the late antique world into medieval civilization was a slow and gradual process. However, from the vantage point of the historian, we can see that events in the fourth century destabilized a world that had been relatively stable for at least five hundred years. So it is also true to say that ancient Roman civilization did, in fact, collapse. I do not know what kind of transition is in our future, but it seems certain that the establishment that has held the modern western world together for five hundred years has, in fact, become destabilized, perhaps irreversibly.

Political institutions do not easily adapt to change on this scale. As I stated above, our political narrative is so tied up with the cultural vision of modernity, it will not easily survive that vision’s end. There is no real counter narrative, only variations on the same narrative that find expression in the increasingly incoherent bickering between the left and the right. Even now, before we have experienced the worst impacts of climate change, both sides fight over the best way to protect our way of life. Neither is capable of suggesting that we need a radically new narrative to guide us as we rethink how we live in this world. We will continue, they promise, our culture of consumption and economic growth by powering it with wind and solar, oblivious to the limits of a finite world and the newly assertive forces of an awakened planet storming across the long-neglected borders at the edges of the empire. In other words, our politics, like the imperial politics of the western empire in the fourth century, are not in a position to respond well to the reality confronting us.

Christians, however, do have access to another narrative, one preached to us anew by our brother in faith, Augustine. His ideas about the two cities and the limits of human politics directly challenge the notion that somehow our civilization will go on forever because it is blest by God, by enlightenment, or by our own amazingness. Defenders of the Theodosian political narrative believed that a state allied with the Church could never fail. It did. While our situation is different, the possibility that our civilization will fail no longer seems remote. It may be tempting to blame the arrival of this moment in time on the loss of Christian culture or the loss of patriotic commitment, as many on the right tend to do. Or, we may rush to pin the failure on human unwillingness to evolve and embrace the core principles of the liberal state.

These explanations, however, are beside the point. What is happening is that borders of the empire have been breached and change is surging into our world with relentless force. Were Augustine preaching to us, he would likely remind us that God’s ultimate purposes remain mysterious and we cannot know them fully in this life. He would also likely remind us of the fragility of human projects. The more we have placed our hope a world of our own making, the deeper will our bitterness and disappointment be should that world fall apart. As the book of Hebrews reminds us, “we have here no lasting city” (13:14). For Augustine, the

ultimate human city was the eschatological community, the City of God, which invades our present from God's future and infuses the world with ultimate rather than contingent meaning.

While many find the Augustinian worldview I am presenting here to be excessively dark, I have always experienced it to be, in a paradoxical way, a consoling one precisely because it relieves us of the burden of our own failure. Our projects are limited because we are limited. Our civilizations come and go because we are unstable. We are unstable because we are made of matter that changes and morphs and because we house within us energies and forces that produce both rage and compassion, love and hate, joy and sorrow. These are forces we can barely control, even those long-practiced in spiritual discipline. We are, to paraphrase Augustine, "problems to ourselves" (*Confessions* 10.33.50) and these problems constantly erupt from the borders of our own bodies and spill over into our collective lives, sometimes in ways that change forever the course of our politics and our ways of life. Because he knew these things about himself, Augustine could look directly at the failures of his own world without looking away in despair. Because he had confidence that God was working toward some yet-to-be-fully revealed eschatological purpose, Augustine could look at the real without being crushed by it. Following Augustine, we too can look at the reality of nature's end without succumbing to debilitating anxiety, eruptive rage, or evasive denial. God is in charge of the present and the future, just as God has been in charge of all things always unto the ages of ages.

Augustine's vision, however, does not end abruptly in the tragic. At one point in his discussion of *City of God's* political synthesis, Markus reminds his readers that there was "one kind of society which Augustine excepted" from the eschatological ambiguity that marks the earthly pilgrimages of the Earthly City and the City of God. That society was "the monastic community." In monasticism, "Augustine saw a kind of prefiguring of the heavenly City" (xv). Monasteries functioned in his thinking as eschatological islands, where the City of God disrupted the ordinary spaces of the *saeculum* by revealing the radical inadequacy of all human projects, promising something more, but without promising everything. Monastic communities were not themselves the kingdom of God, but they could open up, in an iconic way, a window into that kingdom. So, to finish out this Augustinian meditation on our own historical moment, it seems appropriate to ask, where now are these iconic openings? Do they exist at all or are we left only with the icy hardness of Augustinian realism?

I think we are not and such openings do exist. In fact, I am frequently consoled to see so many people awakening to the gravity of this moment, trying to make sense of it, and to respond with courage and grace. I am struck by how often their intuition urges them to embody in some way an eschatological hope that parallels exactly that expressed by Augustine. The desire of so many people for community, the urgent longing to reconnect with the land, the struggle for mindfulness, and a surging interest in spiritual practice strike me as that concrete and organic expressions of people trying to find a way back to (or toward) a narrative that is more lasting than the one that has long dominated our modern imagination. In these new "monastic" projects, I think, we can glimpse the ongoing pilgrimage of the City of God.

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