

THE IMPOSSIBLE STATE AND THE CITY OF GOD: AN EVALUATION

ALAA ABDELAH OSMAN*

ABSTRACT

This research paper sets out to use St. Augustine's philosophies outlined in the City of God, as a resource in evaluating Hallaq's thesis from the Impossible State. In order to legitimize a comparison between the two books, I analyze state properties the modern state shares with ancient Rome, including certain techniques it employs for shaping the subjectivities of its citizens. This posed a problem to the formation of the Christian subjectivity, as argued by St. Augustine. The formation of a Muslim subjectivity faces a similar threat. I evaluate the way St. Augustine attempts to solve these proposed problems and compare them to the solutions offered by Hallaq, highlight the fundamental differences in the way Augustine and Hallaq conceive of the ideal state, and propose a third opinion in how to reconcile the moral and political.

Keywords: Subjectivities, paradigm, state, politics, morality, metaphysics

* Qatar University, Doha, Qatar alaa-abdelelah@hotmail.com

St. Augustine, one of the greatest Christian philosophers, wrote at a vital time for the history of the Western canon and civilization. His relevance to the overall scheme of political philosophy is profound in his criticisms of Rome and overall conceptualization of state and church. Because St. Augustine's ideas gave rise to fundamental philosophical and political discourse, he can be regarded as a resource in discussions of religion and politics. He is the bridge between antiquity and medieval political thought. However, many of his ideas about the subjectivities of the Christian individual within pre-modern civilization are relevant to the contemporary challenges Muslim individuals face within the context of the state. In *The Impossible State*, the right-wing post-modernist, Wael Hallaq arrives at a thesis that can be understood within the framework of St. Augustine's *City of God*. In this essay, I set out to highlight the similarities and differences between the two books. I will also briefly evaluate both Hallaq's and Augustine's ideal solutions to the incompatibility between the moral and political.

Hallaq and Augustine are perhaps worlds apart in terms of history, social circumstance, and importance, and it may seem futile to compare the two. The extent of its relevance to the latter's contemporary dilemma depends on the degree to which Rome and the modern state are paradigmatically similar enough for legitimate comparison. Ancient Rome was technologically advanced for its time, and practiced a premature form of legal positivism. The Roman Empire, is perhaps the closest pre modern civilization to the United States in sharing its form property of sovereignty and its metaphysics.

Augustine argued that the prime reason for Rome being morally corrupt and inferior to the Christian faith was because they lived within a problematic metaphysics, based on a false conception of divinity. Romans could therefore never truly experience salvation, as they were misled by their pagan faith. This metaphysics of paganism and their dependence on the gods for the sustenance of the Empire undermined the Christian efforts to expand within the region because they believed that in order to gain the respect and protection from the gods once again, they would have to revive the pagan spirit of worship. Murphey highlights the various parallels between the two civilizations in his book, *Are we Rome? The Fall of an Empire and the Fate of America*, to predict the possible consequences of America's amoral characterization of the political.

Rome believed that their political leaders were essentially the chosen people. They were accepted as sovereign because of the grace given to them by the pagan gods. The consciousness of the self can be compared to that of paradigmatic America, as Murphey argues that both citizens exaggerate their sense of presence in the world and their ability to act alone. Augustine,

therefore, criticized the Romans for worshipping the state before God. In terms of legislation, law and violence, Rome held law in high esteem and although they did not have a legislative power, per se, they were inching towards legal positivism. Both Rome and the modern state were able to legitimize violence through military coercion because of their sovereign will and ability to justify it through the legitimacy of the legal order. Moreover, Rome experienced a strong sense of nationalism and patriotism, which is why in 9 A.D, when three Roman legions were ambushed and annihilated by a less significant German force, they were devastated and suffered repercussions that had a lasting effect on national identity.

Although Rome existed in Antiquity, and the modern state in the present, both 'states' were criticized for being incompatible with religious ideals and moral values. Augustine retaliated against the Romans who believed that the Christian faith was the prime cause for the deterioration of the Roman Empire. They believed that Christians had provoked a false worship of monotheism, which angered the gods, revoking their blessings and protection over the Empire. Augustine argued however, that throughout history, misfortunes had fallen upon Rome, proving the illegitimacy of their claims. He also condemns ancient Rome for being morally bankrupt, essentially leading to its own demise. Augustine dissected and criticized two widely held Roman conceptions.

Firstly, Romans believed in the autonomy of the self, and the ability to perfect the human form. Hallaq argued that modern man and the consciousness of self has molded a new epistemological trajectory, however there are signs of this reformed conception of the self in the metaphysics of Ancient Rome. They believed that man had the power to dominate over nature through the autonomy of reason and their own judgement. Augustine mainly criticized their efforts to perfect man and to create happiness on earth through their own agency. Augustine argues that man is the progeny of the original sinners, Adam and Eve, so all of human existence is predetermined to unhappiness because of the consequence of man's fall from grace. Man can never perfect himself because he is flawed by nature.

The second argument of Augustine's is to disprove that Rome had the potential to be just. Man by nature, desires to dominate, and is incapable of loving because of egoism, pride and fragile rationality so by extension, man cannot act justly. Justice can only be achieved in the Hereafter. The Romans became too dependent on their own capacity for reason and agency, and so contributed to the detrimental worldview of the domination and abuse of nature. Seyyed Hossein Nasr acknowledges this fact of the alienation of man from nature when he writes, "the earth is bleeding from wounds inflicted upon it by a humanity no longer in harmony with

Heaven and therefore in constant strife with the terrestrial environment. The world of nature is being desecrated and destroyed in an unprecedented manner” (Nasr, 1996, 3).

Neither ancient Rome nor the modern state followed monotheism in the way that Hallaq and Augustine describe which entails that they do not acknowledge the earth as a creation and by extension, blessing from God with a moral composition, but rather “inert” and “brute”. Because of all these factors, mainly the decline in family, the spiritual and moral values, and the lost connection between man and the natural order, Augustine maintained that there was a discrepancy between the moral and the political, or in other words, the city of God and the city of man.

Christian’s love for each other, *caritas*, created a doctrine for the love of others, which in Christian scriptures is the concept of ‘love thy neighbor’ in contrast with the self-aggrandizing love of others and things we want to possess, *cupidity*. In this sense, Augustine illustrates the distinction between the individualistic and narcissistic paradigm adopted in the city of man against the community-oriented city of God where Christians love each other for the sake of God. Hallaq similarly argues that the domination of man over nature was primarily because of the disenchantment of the order of things and the narcissistic individual created by the state. According to this allegory, one city has been formed by the love of God and the other by the love of self.

The city of God is not a material place, but rather a psychological and spiritual state that is eternal, divine and filled with everlasting peace, completely opposite to the city of man. Here, Augustine creates a dialectic between spirit and matter and alludes to the possibility of harboring two subjectivities within one person. The two cities are deeply intertwined and essentially indistinguishable until the Day of Judgment, only from an eternal perspective; however, what distinguishes the citizens of the two cities are their different aims or teleological purposes.

Hallaq maintains a similar argument that because of the Islamic belief in an eternal judgement, there is a metaphysics embedded in the cosmology that shapes the Muslim subjectivity in a way that creates the practical question of how to be moral, rather than the philosophical question of why we ought to be moral. Hallaq might disagree, however, with the concept of harboring two subjectivities within one person because he believed that the external environment was much more profound in shaping our identities. Augustine and al-Ghazali held the belief that subjectivities can be formed independently through certain acts, rituals and the love of God. According to Hallaq, the rise of the political has shaped individuals’ ideologies through techniques of discipline and an overarching ordering apparatus. Therefore, in order for Muslims to create their own subjectivity, the external environment should reflect

the internal reality of the Muslim.

Augustine departs from the classic understanding of the cosmos in which gods were seen as political deities, and called for a dichotomy between religion and politics. It was evident, from the history of Rome, once deeply intertwined with pagan faith, that there was a politicization of religion. Augustine does not create a straight distinction between the profane and the holy but rather creates a space for secularism because he holds the Christian faith too sacred to be corrupted by human culture and politics. The city of God, the holy, is eternal and perfect while the city of Babylon is corrupted because of the imperfection of man after the original sin. Therefore, true civic virtue is acquired through the assistance of a higher justice, which can only be achieved by being a citizen of the city of God. Augustine also responded to the political pressures and tensions about identity that burdened the church since 313 AD, when it accepted political power as an instrument for advancing its own agenda, thus losing its distinct religious identity.

Augustine maintains that any earthly regime is acceptable as long as it does not impede on a Christians ability to practice their faith. It is imperative then to question whether the shaping of a Muslim subjectivity is a solely private or public matter. Before Muslims can follow an Islamic legal or political order, they must create a subjectivity dependent on particular religious precepts. Every religious act must be justified by intention (*niyya*) and if coerced, loses its moral value. If Hallaq’s argument that the Islamic world and Muslims are by nature moral because of their profound embeddedness in the moral imperative, then it may undermine the necessity for reinforcement of religious law through the state. Misdeeds, sins and our moral accountabilities are to a large extent private until they inflict harm upon another. The Qur’an aims at shaping our inner selves, as Ghazali’s book, *Ihya ‘Ulûm al-Din*, showcases. He defines human nature as being pliable and shaped by each individual’s ability to silence the negative potentialities and nurture the divine. Through scripture and guidance, man is able to realize this potentiality, actualize it, and reach perfection. Thus, if Muslims internalize and practice the five pillars of Islam to shape subjectivities with the genuine love of God, *niyya* and purification, they would have successfully cared for the self and shaped the soul.

Perhaps the main form property that Hallaq argues would make this shaping impossible is the sovereignty and metaphysics of the state. He argues that the state wants to take the role of God and become the omnipotent. Similarly, Nietzsche, writes of the death of God, which is the removal of God, the religious and the moral from the central political domain. However, even if the state did believe it was omnipotent, this does not necessarily entail that we must ‘worship the state’. How the state perceives itself versus how individuals perceive the state are

entirely different. St. Augustine maintains that we can live under a common 'political law' and still hold God above all. The city of God exists within a spiritual or psychological state while the city of man is worldly and of less significance. Islam as a moral code does not push so heavily for the adoption or implementation of a single political system but rather sets guidelines based on an epistemic or holistic Islamic worldview. Islam does not spell out socialism, democracy or communism but rather has an overarching theme of justice. If justice is exercised in the sense that freedom is granted to establish a Muslim subjectivity, then it seems quite plausible to attain Augustine's proposed form of justice and peace within a state.

Although, both Augustine and Hallaq's central theses are quite similar, having their own merit, their conclusions do slightly differ. Augustine's conclusion is one that may be understood as a minimalist liberal state, by authentic definition, while Hallaq suggests for a shift in paradigm from the political central domain to the moral one. Augustine's conclusion may be criticized for essentially alienating the individual from the state and prohibiting them from participating in political life. Within Christian scripture, Jesus preaches; "render to Caesar the things that are Caesars and to God the things that are God's". Augustine adopts this method of thinking; that Christians can pay tax to the state without being considered immoral. However, he maintains that the political man is the fallen man.

Hallaq's conclusion, however, is perhaps too optimistic to follow his main thesis, and overall conviction of the modern state. If the state solely exists to monopolize power and violence, willing to sacrifice its subjects to perpetuate this monopoly of power, then how is Hallaq's conclusion plausible? Another Islamic thinker by the name of Seyyed Hossein Nasr gives a conclusion on how to cross religious frontiers to get back in touch with nature without undermining the fundamental features of each religious tradition. In this sense, he extends further than Hallaq by not only reaching for a moral resource within Islamic tradition but rather various religious traditions that fall under schools of thought displaying interest in the order of nature. "Any discussion of religion and the other of nature, which is interested in healing the wounds of the Earth and ameliorating the existing crisis now threatening man's terrestrial existence, cannot but take place on a global scale. (Nasr, 1996, 4)"

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