



**Peter Iver Kaufman.** *On Agamben, Arendt, Christianity, and the Dark Arts of Civilization.* London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019. pp paper, ISBN 978-0-567-68275-8.

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At the end of his book, Peter Iver Kaufman “thanks” the three authors to whom he chose to dedicate the previous hundred and fifty pages for “having alerted us to the need for radical innovations” and, at the same time, for having highlighted how “spectacles, selfishness, prejudices, powers, and lusts” make “meaningful renovation impractical” (p. 147). This endpoint is the core objective Kaufman wanted to focus on in *On Agamben, Arendt, Christianity, and the Dark Arts of Civilization*: placing Augustine of Hippo, Giorgio Agamben, and Hannah Arendt “in conversation” (p. x), and specifically—as he stated in the preface—engaging the last two with the former’s political theology, in order to better serve “the legacies of these three critics and visionaries” (p. 147).

Throughout his career, Kaufman has been interested in the relation between the realm of religion and that of politics, working especially on the cultures of late antiquity and medieval and early modern Europe. Augustine, in particular, is one of Kaufman’s main interests in this book and elsewhere—and he himself seems to express his concern over this “entry into the history of political theory in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries” by analyzing his thought in relation to two contemporary thinkers (p. x). Nevertheless, Kaufman tries, at the heart of his argument, to effectively suggest not only a fruitful exchange but also a

somewhat theoretical link between the three authors.

The book consists of three chapters whose titles are quite self-explanatory: while the first and third recall the two contemporary authors in their dialogue with the Hipponian bishop (“Augustine and Agamben” and “Arendt’s Augustine”), the second chapter, entitled “Glory, Glory,” uses the reflection on Agamben, and of Agamben on Augustine, contained in the first chapter, to articulate the central concern of the book—that is, an examination of Augustine’s view of the Roman Empire and of all imperialistic powers as violent and unjust, due to their ambition and search for worldly glory.

The central theme of the book—as well as Kaufman’s main theoretical point—is in fact the parallel he makes between Augustine’s “pilgrim,” Agamben’s “refugee,” and Arendt’s “pariah” and, building on these concepts, the reflections of the three thinkers on the nature and conditions of possibility of radical, alternative communities as antidotes to the perverse results of “the pursuit of personal glory in public service” and as a path toward the variously identified “heavenly city” (p. 73). The different reconstructions and contextualization of the concepts of pilgrim, refugee, and pariah as related to their authors’ works represent the *fil rouge* developed in the book.

The idea of “alternative communities” entails forms of radical opposition to the institutional political realm. But Augustine is obviously the model and main reference here: Augustine’s monastic experiences and his criticisms of the political and imperial power of Rome. The point of convergence that Kaufman identifies between the three authors and on which he builds his entire argument is, in fact, a radical pessimism regarding politics. The interpretation of Augustine’s thought as pessimistic is a central element in Kaufman’s works, and he links it with a shared pessimism he discovers in Agamben’s “biopolitics” and Arendt’s critique of totalitarian powers.

In this sense, despite Kaufman’s premises, both Agamben and Arendt emerge in the developing of the argumentation not so much as conversationalists as the litmus test for Kaufman’s reading of Augustine. This very specialist book is thus better understandable as a dialogue, not so much between the considered authors as much as with Kaufman’s previous works. The aforementioned search for meaningful conversations between more or less distant thinkers is one of his favorite topics, in this book as well as in previous—and subsequent—ones. This was the case with *Incorrectly Political*, a comparison between Augustine and Thomas More as pessimistic thinkers; on a similar path were books such as *Church, Book, and Bishop: Conflict and Authority in Early Latin Christendom* or *Religion around Shakespeare*; in the same way, Kaufman’s latest work, a follow-up to the book discussed here, in the same Reading Augustine series, *On Agamben, Donatism, Pelagianism, and the Missing Links*, further develops the reflection on the role of Augustinian thought in the work of the Italian philosopher.[1]

But it is his 1990 *Redeeming Politics* that really functions as a spiritual antecedent to this book, “a study of how versions of Christianity and political cultures made claims upon each other at a number of junctures in western history.”[2] In that book, Kaufman focused for the first time on—

among other issues related to the ambivalent relationship between politics and redemption—his interpretation of Augustine’s thought as pessimistic, and in so doing implicitly raised the question of what to do with such an interpretation. In his words: “does a politically pessimistic Augustine offer alternatives worth discussing today, alternatives to the public sphere and to citizenship, as presently defined?” (p. ix).

In this sense, the most relevant aspect of *On Agamben, Arendt, Christianity, and the Dark Arts of Civilization* being the reflection on the categories of pilgrim on the one hand and of alternative communities on the other and the relationships with politics and public life, the book emerges mainly as an alternative reading of a canonical thinker through some highly intellectual insights. All things considered, this book is therefore especially suited for scholars specialized and interested in the contemporary reception and interpretation of Augustine’s thought, as well as for those with an interest in specific matters of political theology and alternative points of view on the authors considered by Kaufman. It nevertheless requires a specialized knowledge of authors and issues at stake as well as of Kaufman’s work itself, and also a very attentive and careful reading even for academic standards.

#### Notes

[1]. Peter Iver Kaufman, *Incorrectly Political: Augustine and Thomas More* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007); *Church, Book, and Bishop: Conflict and Authority In Early Latin Christianity* (New York: Routledge, 1996); *Religion around Shakespeare* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013); *On Agamben, Donatism, Pelagianism, and the Missing Links* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021).

[2]. Peter Iver Kaufman, *Redeeming Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), x.

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