What Does Religion Mean for Augustine?

In his landmark 1993 book *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*, the anthropologist Talal Asad makes a crucial turn to Augustine of Hippo. Framing a lengthy quotation from Peter Brown's authoritative 1967 biography, Asad writes: "The relation between power and truth is an ancient theme, and no one has dealt with it more impressively in Christian thought than St Augustine."[1] For Asad, Augustine provides a prime example of the function of religion in relation to power and truth that shows the inadequacy of Clifford Geertz's anthropological "formula" for defining "religion," which Asad thinks is "too simple to accommodate the force of this [viz. Augustine's] religious symbolism."[2] In Asad's interpretation, "Augustine was quite clear that power, the effect of an entire network of motivated practices, assumes a religious form because of the end to which it is directed, for human events are the instruments of God."[3] Thus, "here it is not mere symbols" (as with Geertz) "that implant true Christian dispositions, but power" (which takes the form of laws, disciplinary activities, practices of the self, etc.). In short: Talal Asad, a most eminent contemporary anthropologist of religion, finds in Augustine food for thought today in reconceptualizing what "religion" even means. Why so?

Just what *does* religion mean for Augustine? This paper attempts to provide a fresh answer to this well-trodden question by focusing on the first five books of the *City of God*. First, I consider the pre-Christian Roman context of *religio*, focusing especially on Cicero and on Varro. I then consider the Christian Romans who had developed *religio* before Augustine's own work, including Tertullian and Lactantius. Through these interpretive contexts, I show that *religio* had in the first place a concern with power (especially the proper relation of *cultus* [worship, honoring, reverence] with the Roman state) and secondly with truth (such that *vera religio* is only possible through worship of the *unum veram deum*, the one true god). I then show that these concerns with power, truth, and the divine continue to structure Augustine's discussion of *religio* in the *City of God*. Finally, in a sort of coda, I return to contemporary critical thought like Asad's to briefly consider how this discussion of *religio* in *City of God* might indeed contribute to our understanding of religion at the crux of philosophy (truth), politics and history (power), and the human relationship with the divine.

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[1] Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 34.

[2] Ibid., 35.

[3] Ibid.

Before diving into the developments of *religio* in *City of God*, we ought to consider what "religion" would have meant in the elite Roman world in which Augustine was raised. In the *Augustinus-Lexikon*, Christian Tornau gives us an overview of the background of the Latin word *religio*, which he says was "neither in its pre-Christian nor in its Christian use identical with the modern concept 'religion,'" but nonetheless "has overlaps with it, insofar as it can refer to both the affective relationship of a person to the divine as well as to the cultic rules of a community or even a theological system with a claim to truth."[4] As Tornau recognizes, these are three components of what "religion" usually means today, too: a personal disposition towards God (or the gods); a theology, i.e. a philosophical, literary, and legal system built out of these personal relations; and a community-oriented definition, which situates both the personal and the systematic dimensions with a historical and social context. All three of these elements were present in the Roman concept of *religio*. (Although there is no exact Greek equivalent of the Latin *religio*, the developments within Roman religion itself and its relationship to Greek antecedents are beyond the scope of this paper.)

For Cicero and for Varro, for instance, *religio* means first a general sense of being in awe of the divine, which inspires a sort of scrupulousness, both with respect to morals (rules) and rites (practices). This sense of being "religious" in some cases has less to do with the divine *per se* than with a general sense of performing a task conscientiously, assiduously, as in "I eat clementines religiously every afternoon." This more general sense of scrupulousness is then transferred to matters divine. As Tornau puts it: "first of all, *religio* means the feeling of inhibition or shyness caused by religious, moral, or other scruples and then generally the fear or shyness of the divine, which is expressed in the scrupulous observance of religious rules and rites."[5] Perhaps a closer modern translation would be when one describes somebody as a *pious* or *god-fearing* man, which carries generally positive connotations of moral uprightness and good character — as long as one does not veer into being *superstitious*, which generally refers to an excess of care for the wrong sort of rules and practices that may even be deemed threatening or oppositional to "true religion." Tornau aptly calls *superstitio* a "negative counter-concept [*negativer Gegenbegriff*] which is understood to mean an excess

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[4] "Das lateinische Wort religio ist weder in seinem vorchristlichen noch in seinem christlichen Gebrauch ganz deckungsgleich mit dem modernen Begriff ‹Religion›. Es weist aber Überschneidungen mit ihm auf, insofern es sowohl das affektive Verhältnis eines Menschen zum Göttlichen als auch das kultische Regelwerk eines Gemeinwesens oder auch ein theologisches System mit Wahrheitsanspruch bezeichnen kann." Christian Tornau, "Religio," in *Augustinus-Lexikon*, ed. Robert Dodaro, Cornelius Mayer, and Christof Müller (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2018), https://doi.org/10.24894/AL.Religio. All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

[5] "Zunächst meint religio das durch religiöse, moralische oder sonstige Skrupel bedingte Gefühl der Hemmung oder Scheu und dann allgemein die Furcht oder Scheu vor dem Göttlichen, die sich etwa in der skrupulösen Befolgung religiöser Vorschriften und Riten äußert." Ibid., sec. 1. Nichtchristlich.

of religious attentiveness and a cultic practice that deviates from the norm and is potentially dangerous to the state."[6] To sum up: for the Romans, *religio* is that which supports the Empire through scrupulous and faithful adherence to rules and rites of the state cult, while *superstitio* refers to that excess of religious scruples that can become a threat to the state.

> This whole range of meanings is exemplified in Cicero. In *De Officiis*, Cicero writes:
> Again, the following rule of duty is to be diligently observed: never prefer a capital charge against any person who may be innocent. For that cannot possibly be done without making oneself a criminal. For what is so inhumane as to turn the eloquence given by nature for the safety and protection of our fellow men to the ruin and destruction of good men? And yet, while we should never prosecute the innocent, we need not have scruples against undertaking on occasion the defense of a guilty person, provided he be not infamously depraved and wicked. For people expect it; custom sanctions it; humanity also accepts it. (Cic. *Off.* 2.51)[7]

Here, *religio* seems to carry a purely "secular" meaning of scrupulousness: that is to say, to be religious is to follow a precept with diligence (*hoc praeceptum … diligenter tenendume est*). *Religio* expresses what people expect, custom sanctions, and humanity accepts (*vult hoc multitude*, *patitur consuetudo*, *fert etiam humanitas*): to defend in a court of law someone who is in fact guilty, as long as they are not guilty in such a way as to offend religion itself. We can thus see that *religio* has its basis in a sense of the general morals and customs of a community, but there is a natural evolution to consider it something more substantial. In *De Natura Deorum*, Cicero develops this line of reasoning more explicitly. He gives first a narrow definition of religion as "the cult of the gods" (*religione id est cultu deorum*, Cic. *Nat. Deor.* 2.8). Of course, this begs the question: what is "cult"? The Loeb translates *cultu deorum* as "reverence for the gods."[8] Similarly, Lewis and Short define *cultus* as "an honoring, reverence, adoration, veneration," whence also "care directed to the refinement of life (opp. to a state of nature), i.e. arrangements for living, style, manner of life, culture, cultivation, elegance, polish, civilization, refinement." Religion, then, is in the first place simply *honoring* the gods, but this naturally shades into a whole range of practices of life

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[6] "Seit Cicero fungiert ‹superstitio› als negativer Gegenbegriff, worunter ein Zuviel an religiöser Achtsamkeit und eine von der Norm abweichende, potentiell staatsgefährdende kultische Praxis verstanden wird." Ibid.

[7] "Atque etiam hoc praeceptum officii diligenter tenendum est, ne quem umquam innocentem iudicio capitis arcessas; id enim sine scelere fieri nullo pacto potest. Nam quid est tam inhumanum quam eloquentiam a natura ad salutem hominum et ad conservationem datam ad bonorum pestem perniciemque convertere? Nec tamen, ut hoc fugiendum est, item est habendum religioni nocentem aliquando, modo ne nefarium impiumque, defendere; vult hoc multitudo, patitur consuetudo, fert etiam humanitas." For this and following Latin texts (unless otherwise indicated), I have consulted the *Loeb Classical Library* edition for both the original and the translation, which I have slightly modified.

[8] Duncan MacRae, for his part, amends the translation to "worship of the gods." Duncan MacRae, *Legible Religion: Books, Gods, and Rituals in Roman Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2016), 35.

directed towards the divine. (Perhaps Foucault was not so far off the mark when he drew attention to what he called the ancients' *care for the self*, *souci de soi-meme*.)

But Cicero has not had the last word. *On The Nature of The Gods* has a much more robust discussion of the relationship between the gods and the Republican institutions, controlled by the senatorial class, which is considered to buttress the state. Cicero writes:

> The religion of the Roman people comprises ritual [*sacra*], auspices, and the third additional division consisting of all such prophetic warnings [*praedictionis*] as the interpreters of the Sybil or the soothsayers have derived from portents and prodigies. Well, I have always thought that none of these departments of religion was to be despised, and I have held the conviction that Romulus by his auspices and Numa by his establishment of our ritual laid the foundations of our state, which assuredly could never have been as great as it is had not the fullest measure of divine favour been obtained for it. (Cic. *Nat. Deor.* 3.5)[9]

Interpreted most cynically, we might understand from this passage that Roman *religio* is simply a cult that supports the state. This aligns with an earlier historiography that turns *religio* into something quite foreign to modern religion, precisely because the question of belief and the real existence of the gods can be sidelined in favor of a focus on "empty ritual."[10] This is not what Cicero or other Romans thought of with *religio*. Even though *religio* is above all a *cultu deorum*, as we have already seen, this *cultus* has a range of meanings, from simple "reverence" through a range of "practices" (like the prophesying and soothsaying to which Cicero refers) that direct and channel that honor for the gods so as to obtain divine favour (*placatione deorum inmortalium*) for our state (*nostrae civitatis*). With texts like *De Natura Deorum*, elite Romans like Cicero and Varro were building what Duncan MacRae has termed a "civil theology," which "was not simply an otiose and disinterested scholarly activity: in the late Republic, the books created, for the first time, a Roman religion from the huge variety of polytheistic practices in Rome and its empire."[11] In short: with Cicero, we see the evolution of *religio* from a more general meaning of

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[9] "Cumque omnis populi Romani religio in sacra et in auspicia diuisa sit, tertium adiunctum sit si quid praedictionis causa ex portentis et monstris Sibyllae interpretes haruspicesue monuerunt, harum ego religionum nullam umquam contemnendam putaui, mihique ita persuasi, Romulum auspiciis Numam sacris constitutis fundamenta iecisse nostrae ciuitatis, quae numquam profecto sine summa placatione deorum inmortalium tanta esse potuisset."

[10] As Duncan MacRae puts it: "For a long time, historians downplayed the intellectual and textual components of Roman religion in favor of an emphasis on supposed ritualism and the implication of religion and politics at Rome. Christian polemic — including Augustine's — and early modern political thought encouraged this tendency, which was also catalyzed by Hegel's idea that Roman religion was a 'religion of utility' that lacked doctrine." MacRae, *Legible Religion*, 4.

[11] Ibid., 5.

conscientiousness to a more substantial meaning of a state cult which can be theorized in something like "civil theology."

This excursus into Cicero has given us a sense of the Roman background to *religio* as Augustine came to use the word. Augustine, of course, in no way sharply breaks with the prechristian Roman antecedents of *religio*. For instance, he is deeply concerned with what it means to be god-fearing and scrupulous, moral and pious, as part of a complexly interweaving relationship of a personal relation to God (after all, this is the man who addresses his most beautiful work, the *Confessions*, to God in the second person) with a social context in which religion continues to be part of the infrastructure of the state. The *City of God* has many sections devoted to precisely the task Cicero expresses in *De Natura Deorum*: to account for Rome's relationship to God's favour. (The pesky little detail that God already had a chosen people, whom the Romans themselves relentlessly persecuted, is no great obstacle for this great Roman gentile-turned-Christian.) But before proceeding to analyze the *City of God*, we should also consider how other Christian writers in Latin used the word. After all, Augustine was not the first to adapt Roman language and society to accommodate the new centrality of a strange Jewish sect; his efforts come after at least three centuries of this great synthesis.

To begin, it is important to note that *religio* appears only three times in the Old Latin Bible used by Augustine, reflecting the absence of θρησκεία from the Greek source material.[12] However, the Latin Christian writers do use *religio*, borrowing from the Roman sense, to designate Christianity: Lactantius uses *religionis christianorum* (Lact. *Mort. Pers.* 48.4) and Tertullian uses *christianae religionis* (Tert. *Adv. Marc.* 4.4.2). What is really new with the Christians is the idea of "true religion," *vera religio* — to be contrasted with "false religion," *falsa religio*. Instead of opposing *religio* to *superstitio*, as Cicero did, the Christians oppose the true *religio* to the false one. Now, how can a *practice* or set of *morals* be true or false? In philosophy, the predicate "true" or "false" is usually assigned to a *statement*, not a *practice*. The sentence "dogs have two legs" (or even "I care about my dog") can be true or false. It is harder to think of *true* walking of my dog as opposed to *false* walking of my dog (perhaps one would rather say that I walk my dog with love, or with care, or by contrast with neglect, or with resentment; but none of these are truth-statements). Tertullian is the first to use *vera religio* in his *Apology* of 197 CE. He writes, in a very polemical passage:

> All this confession of theirs, their avowal that they are not gods, their response that there is no

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[12] Tornau, "Religio," sec. 2. Christlich.

> God but the One whose servants we are, is amply enough to repel the charge brought against us of treason above all to the religion of Rome. If they definitely are not gods, then definitely it is not a religion; if it is not a religion because they definitely are not gods, then we are definitely not guilty of injuring religion. On the contrary the taunt has recoiled upon you, who, by your worship of a lie, by your neglect of the true religion of the true God [*sic*] — and more than that — by your assault upon it, commit against the true God [*sic*] the crime of real irreligion. (Tert. *Apol.* 24.2)[13]

The only true religion is the worship of the one true god (note the capitalization here; the original Latin, of course, does not distinguish *deo* from *Deo*). What we see in Tertullian is the attempt to yoke together the civic sense of *religio* (cult, ritual, practice) with the theoretical sense that had formerly been rather the province of Greek philosophers than of Roman priests. In particular, what is *philosophical* here is the sense of "truth." We begin to see a shift from the idea that many gods exist to the idea that "in reality," that is "in truth," there is only one gods. To neglect the "true religion of the true god" (*veram religionem veri dei … neglegendo*) is to worship a lie (*mendacium colentes*). We can see here echoes of Cicero's use of *religio* in a legal context, as quoted above. Not only does the worship of a lie result in real irreligion (*verae inreligiositatis*), but this worship is in truth the same as committing a crime (*in verum committitis crimen*). For Tertullian, pagans are *irreligious* in the quite Ciceronian sense that their *cultus* is literally perverted, that is to say, turned the wrong way. As Tornau puts it, "What is new and specifically Christian is the claim to sole representation of the truth, with which Christianity raises the accusation of theological falsehood and cultic (and moral) perversity against the religious systems excluded by the self-designation *religio christiana*. In this sense, the traditional opposition between *religio* and *superstitio* is turned by the apologists against the Roman *religio*."[14] Thus, in Tertullian we see exemplified a development of a distinctly Christian sense of *religio* that nonetheless does not abandon its Roman antecedents but rather exploits these very connotations against the non-Christians in its creation of the new *religio christiana*.

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[13] "Omnis ista confessio illorum qua se deos negant esse quaque non alium deum respondent praeter unum, cui nos mancipamur, satis idonea est ad depellendum crimen laesae maxime Romanae religionis. Si enim non sunt dei pro certo, nec religio pro certo est: si religio non est, quia nec dei pro certo, nec nos pro certo rei sumus laesae religionis. At e contrario in vos exprobratio resultavit, qui mendacium colentes veram religionem veri dei non modo neglegendo, quin insuper expugnando, in verum committitis crimen verae inreligiositatis."

[14] "Neu und spezifisch christlich ist der Alleinvertretungsanspruch auf die Wahrheit, mit dem das Christentum gegenüber den durch die Selbstbezeichnung ‹religio christiana› ausgegrenzten religiösen Systemen den Vorwurf der theologischen Falschheit und der kultischen (und moralischen) Verkehrtheit erhebt. Der traditionelle Gegensatz von religio und ‹superstitio› wird von den Apologeten in diesem Sinne gegen die römische religio gewendet." Tornau, "Religio," sec. 2. Christlich.

These, then, are the two intertwined contexts in which Augustine uses *religio* in *City of God*: on the one hand, the Roman state cult referred to by Cicero, along with its associated mores and norms, and on the other hand, a developing sense of *vera religio* as properly designating Christianity, *religio christiana*. Across his work, Augustine uses *religio* within this spectrum of meanings, moving between a sense of piety, assiduity, and a more substantial meaning of a specific set of cult practices and doctrines. To pin down some of this conceptual ambiguity, Augustine further employs words like *cultus*, *devotio*, *fides*, *pietas*, and *doctrina*. Above all, what is notable with Augustine is his development of *vera religio*. Through all this conceptual ambiguity and many-layered background to the concept, Augustine insists that there is only one true religion, Christianity: *vera religio* is synonymous with *christiana religio*. *Vera religio*, in turn, is the only path to real happiness and truth, which consist in blessedness, *beatitudo*, that is to say dwelling in the city of God.

Consider first a famous passage from Book Five:

It was not God's purpose to grant these men eternal life with the angels in his heavenly city. Only true piety leads to membership in that society, piety which offers only to the one true God the religious service which the Greeks call *latreia*. If he were not to grant them even this earthly glory of pre-eminent rule, he would not be granting a proper reward for their good arts, that is, the virtues by which they pursued the hard road that brought them at last to such glory. For it is such men, men who give the appearance of doing something good in order to gain human glory, of whom the Lord himself says: "Truly I say unto you, they have received their reward." It was the same with the great Romans. They disregarded private wealth for the sake of the commonwealth, that is, for the republic and for its treasury. They stood firm against avarice, gave advice to their country with an unshackled mind and were not guilty of any crime against its laws, nor of any unlawful desire. By all these arts, as by a proper path, they strove to reach honour, power and glory. They were honoured among almost all nations; they imposed the laws of their empire upon many nations, and today they enjoy the glory conferred by literature and historical writing among almost all nations. They have no ground of complaint against the justice of the supreme and true God. "They have received their reward." (Aug. *Civ. Dei* 5.15)[15]

What is *λατρεία*? At first, we might think it equivalent to the Latin *cultus*, that is, worship or reverence. But then why would Augustine use the Greek word? The LSJ tells us that *λατρεία*

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[15] "Quibus ergo non erat daturus Deus vitam aeternam cum sanctis angelis suis in sua civitate caelesti, ad cuius societatem pietas vera perducit, quae non exhibet servitutem religionis, quam *λατρείαν* Graeci vocant, nisi uni vero Deo, si neque hanc eis terrenam gloriam excellentissimi imperii concederet, non redderetur merces bonis artibus eorum, id est virtutibus, quibus ad tantam gloriam pervenire nitebantur. De talibus enim, qui propter hoc boni aliquid facere videntur ut glorificentur ab hominibus, etiam Dominus ait: *Amen dico vobis, perceperunt mercedem suam*. Sic et isti privatas res suas pro re communi, hoc est re publica, et pro eius aerario contempserunt, avaritiae restiterunt, consuluerunt patriae consilio libero, neque delicto secundum suas leges neque libidini obnoxii; his omnibus artibus tamquam vera via nisi sunt ad honores imperium gloriam; honorati sunt in omnibus fere gentibus, imperii sui leges inposuerunt multis gentibus, hodieque litteris et historia gloriosi sunt paene in omnibus gentibus. Non est quod de summi et veri Dei iustitia conquerantur; *perceperunt mercedem suam*."

means "the state of a hired labourer, service"; the word is used in Plato's *Phaedrus* and *Apology* with *του θεού* to mean "service to the gods, divine worship." Thus, *λατρεία* is first of all the service, say of a labourer, which is *rewarded* with, for instance, a daily wage or a loaf of bread. This is confirmed by Kittel, who writes that "The noun *λατρεία* is rather more common [than the verb *λατρεύω*]. It first means service for reward."[16] Augustine begins from this meaning to say that it is only those who offer *λατρεία* to the one true god (*servitutem religionis, quam λατρείαν Graeci vocant, nisi uni vero Deo*) who can be considered to be exhibiting "true piety" (*pietas vera*). It is only they who will receive membership in that society of the heavenly city with the angels (*cum sanctis angelis suis in sua civitate caelesti*). This is how Augustine comes to interpret Matthew 6:2: "Amen dico vobis, perceperunt mercedem suam" ("Truly I tell you, they have received their reward," NRSV).[17] Just like the master gives the labourer his rewards (*mercedem suam*) for his service (*λατρεία*), the one true God gives *his* servants their own just rewards for their *λατρεία*.

So, what is a "true God"? Consider now Book Four. Two crucial moves made in this text are to whittle down an excess of Gods to one true God, and to bring together the "one true God" with "true happiness" and with truth itself. In the former register, Augustine addresses the Roman writers on *religio*, while in the latter, Augustine addresses mostly the Greek philosophers who offer "theosophy." Consider the famous example of Augustine's attack on Varro. Book Four begins with Augustine's explanation that he feels it is his duty to expose "false gods" (*deos falsos*) in order to defend "the Christian religion, which is the one sound and true religion" (*religioni increpitant Christianae, quae una est salubris et vera religio*). "Take Varro, for example, who in the eyes of the pagans is a most learned man and a most weighty authority," Augustine says.[18] Augustine satirizes the list of gods Varro had given in his *Antiquities*. He begins with *Cluacina*, the goddess of sewers (*cloacae*), goes on to describes *Vaticanus*, who presides over the wailing (*vagitus*) of infantas, and ends with *Cunina*, "who administers the department of cradles" (*quae cunas eorum administrat*). How ridiculous is the Roman religion, Augustine thinks, which worships this "mighty throng" of gods, among which none can be found that actually "extends and preserves" the empire.[19] His

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[16] Hermann Strathmann, "Λατρεύω, Λατρεία," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1967), 59.

[17] Interestingly, the Greek here reads "ἀμὴν λέγω ὑμῖν, ἀπέχουσιν τὸν μισθὸν αὐτῶν" (Nestle-Aland 28). Μισθόν is literally a wage or a salary; the Iliad speaks of soldiers hired *μισθώ επι ρητω*, "for fixed wages" (*Il.* 21.445, cited in LSJ s.v. μισθός).

[18] "ita ut vir doctissimus apud eos Varro et gravissimae auctoritatis ita ut vir doctissimus apud eos Varro et gravissimae auctoritatis" (Aug. *Civ. Dei* 4.1).

[19] "Deinde quaeramus, si placet, ex tanta deorum turba quam Romani colebant quem potissimum vel quos deos credant illud imperium dilatasse atque servasse" (Aug. *Civ. Dei* 4.8).

mockery culminates in an acerbic metaphor: "It was not enough for men who loved a multitude of gods that each wretched soul was prostituted to a throng of demons because it scorned the chaste embrace of the one true god."[20] What began as a mockery of Varro culminates in a passage that echoes Tertullian: the only true religion is that which involves love of the one true God.

This theme about truth and falsehood was already raised in Book Three of the *City of God*, also in relation to Varro. That book also begins with a discussion of the "false gods" (*deos falsos*) who "did nothing to assist the people that worshipped them to diminish their oppression by the weight of those evils but instead took action to increase such oppression to the utmost."[21] What follows is a complex discussion of just what this "falsehood" means. Augustine, for instance, considers Varro's view that it is useful to believe in the fiction that men are descended from gods. Augustine says of this:

> Someone will say, "Do you really believe this?" I certainly do not believe it. Why, even Varro, their most learned man, though he does not boldly and assuredly confess that it is false, yet comes near to doing so. He does say that it is expedient in a commonwealth for brave men to believe, though it be a fiction, that they are descended from gods. It is a means whereby the minds of men, inspired by regarding their lineage as founded by a god, may more boldly embark on tasks of high emprise, carry them through with greater energy, and so fulfil them with better success just because of that faith. You see what a wide area is opened for falsehood by this statement of Varro's which I have expressed, as best I could, in my own words. We see in this case that very many beliefs that are now consecrated and included in religion of a sort may have been fabricated, when lies even about the very gods have been thought to make citizens better. (Aug. *Civ. Dei* 3.4)[22]

This statement complicates the simple picture we painted above about Augustine's arguments on the matter of "truth" in relation to religion. For one thing, consider the word *mendax*. Lewis and Short define the word as "lying, false, deceptive; feigned, fictitious, counterfeit, not real." How is a lie related to a falsehood? What is invoked here is the Platonic trope of the

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[20] "Non tamen satis fuit hominibus deorum multitudinem amantibus, ut anima misera daemoniorum turbae prostitueretur, unius dei veri castum dedignata complexum" (Aug. *Civ. Dei* 4.8).

[21] "nihil deos falsos populo cultori suo quo minus eorum malorum aggere premeretur subvenire curasse, sed potius ut maxime premeretur egisse" (Aug. *Civ. Dei* 3.1).

[22] "Dixerit aliquis: Itane tu ista credis? Ego vero ista non credo. Nam et vir doctissimus eorum Varro falsa haec esse, quamvis non audacter neque fidenter, paene tamen fatetur. Sed utile esse civitatibus dicit, ut se viri fortes, etiamsi falsum sit, diis genitos esse credant, ut eo modo animus humanus velut divinae stirpis fiduciam gerens res magnas adgrediendas praesumat audacius, agat vehementius et ob hoc impleat ipsa securitate felicius. Quae Varronis sententia expressa, ut potui, meis verbis cernis quam latum locum aperiat falsitati, ut ibi intellegamus plura iam sacra et quase religiosa potuisse confingi, ubi putata sunt civibus etiam de ipsis diis prodesse mendacia."

"noble lie," whereby deception might in some cases be justified for the sake of a greater good. In this case, Augustine tells us, "many beliefs that are now consecrated and included in religion of a sort may have been fabricated" (*plura iam sacra et quase religiosa potuisse confingi*). Why? For the sake of the betterment of citizens (*ubi putata sunt civibus etiam de ipsis diis prodesse mendacia*): "it is expedient in a commonwealth for brave men to believe, though it be a fiction, that they are descended from gods" (*sed utile esse civitatibus dicit, ut se viri fortes, etiamsi falsum sit, diis genitos esse credant*). Is it really that bad to worship false gods, then? Augustine in some ways here is being very charitable to his opponent. It is as if he imagines a conversation with Varro, where Varro might concede that Cluacina and Cunina are not just ridiculous but also patently false, but would maintain that belief in them is useful for the city (*utile esse civitatibus*), even if they are false (*etiamsi falsum sit*).

All of this returns us to Book Two of the *City of God*, whose main contention is precisely the falsity of the Roman gods. Augustine develops a robust account of just what "falsehood" means and how it is related to religion. Now, one of the critical questions that arises here is: are the gods nonexistent, and therefore false? That would seem to be what is demanded by Christian orthodoxy. But at times, Augustine seems to be articulating an argument more like saying that the Roman gods were false not because they do not exist, but rather because they are unreliable and immoral. In fact, his argument even seems to attribute causal power *to* the Roman gods, because he wants to show that they — rather than the Christians — are the cause of all the ills the city has suffered, most recently its sacking. Augustine writes:

> For granted that, instead of teaching the qualities of character and the honesty of a life whose rewards must be hopefully sought after death, they [i.e. the gods] rather saw to it that just the opposite lessons were inculcated in the people, granted too that even in the sphere of these temporary and transitory blessings they neither injure any whom they hate nor advance the cause of any whom they love, to what end are they worshipped, to what end do those who are so eager to worship them demand the privilege? Why is there murmuring in periods of hardship and sorrow that they must have withdrawn because they were offended, so that for their sakes the Christian religion becomes the undeserving target of abuse? (Aug. *Civ. Dei* 2.23)[23]

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[23] "Nam si virtutibus animi et probitati vitae, cuius praemia post mortem speranda sunt, magis contraria ut populus disceret institerunt; si nihil etiam in his transeuntibus et temporalibus bonis vel eis quos oderunt nocent, vel eis quos diligunt prosunt, ut quid coluntur, ut quid tanto studio colendi requiruntur? Cur laboriosis tristibusque temporibus, tamquam offensi abscesserint, murmuratur et propter eos Christiana religio conviciis indignissimis laeditur?"

If the gods do not lead to the development of virtue in community, but rather bring about wickedness, why ought they to be worshiped? Well, some might say (like Varro) that it is all a grand wager (like Pascal's?), where the favor of the gods has to be solicited in order that they may aid the Roman state. Augustine does not argue against this position by denying the existence of the Roman gods (at this point). Consider, here, the concluding section of Book One:

> There are still, however, some things that I must say in answer to those who blame our religion for the disasters of the Roman republic, because it forbids sacrificing to their gods. I must list in detail, for instance, as many misfortunes and as great as may suggest themselves, or as shall seem sufficient, that the commonwealth of Rome or the provinces under its rule had to bear before their sacrifices were prohibited. Without doubt they would attribute all these disasters to us, if our religion had already shed its light upon them and had forbidden them the sacrilegious sacrifices. (Aug. *Civ. Dei* 1.36)[24]

Augustine again demonstrates remarkable argumentative charity. His argument proceeds by accepting the hypothesis that the Roman gods *do* exist and in fact have great power; and then proceeds to show — by rewriting the history of Rome, *ab urbe condita* — that the city suffered plenty of misfortunes. Even the sack of Rome that many of his interlocutors in Carthage had just fled from themselves could be situated within the history of Rome itself.

This can help us now make better sense of the climax of Book Two, in which Augustine exhorts his audience to abandon false worship in favor of true religion.

> Desire rather these things, O admirable Roman character, O offspring of men like Regulus, Scaevola, the Scipios and Fabricius. Desire rather these things, segregate them from that utterly vile inanity and utterly deceptive malignity of the demons. If there is in you naturally any special merit, true religion alone can refine and bring it to a perfect state; but irreligion drowns it out and consigns it to punishment. Choose without delay which way you will take, that you may win praise, not in yourself, but in serving the true God with no deviation. You had, of course, in those days popular renown, but by the hidden dispensation of God's providence you had no opportunity to choose the true faith. Awake, it is now day, as you have already awakened in the case of some in whose perfect virtue and even martyrdoms for the true faith we glory, for they, contending everywhere against most hostile powers and by their brave death winning the victory, "have created by their blood this fatherland for us." (Aug. *Civ. Dei* 2.23)[25]

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[24] "Sed adhuc mihi quaedam dicenda sunt adversus eos, qui Romanae rei publicae clades in religionem nostram referunt, qua diis suis sacrificare prohibentur. Commemoranda sunt enim quae et quanta occurrere poterunt vel satis esse videbuntur mala, quae illa civitas pertulit vel ad eius imperium provinciae pertinentes, antequam eorum sacrificia prohibita fuissent; quae omnia procul dubio nobis tribuerent, si iam vel illis clareret nostra religio, vel ita eos a sacris sacrilegis prohiberet."

[25] "Haec potius concupisce, o indoles Romana laudabilis, o progenies Regulorum, Scaevolarum, Scipionum, Fabriciorum; haec potius concupisce, haec ab illa turpissima vanitate et fallacissima daemonum malignitate discerne. Si quid in te laudabile naturaliter eminet, non nisi vera pietate purgatur atque perficitur, impietate

Again, Augustine performs a grand synthesis of the non-Christian Roman rhetorical tropes, historical references, and conceptual shorthands in order to exhort his audience to abandon the "false gods" and "choose the true faith." Augustine continues:

> Do not pursue false and fallacious gods. Abandon them, rather, and despise them, break away into true liberty. They are not gods, they are malignant spirits, for whom your eternal happiness is their punishment. Juno would appear to have begrudged the Trojans, from whom you trace your descent after the flesh, their Roman citadels less than those demons, whom you still hold to be gods, begrudge the whole race of mankind their everlasting home. And you yourself have given a judgement of no small weight against them when you appeased them with games, yet decreed the men who performed the games to be infamous. Permit your liberty to be vindicated against those unclean spirits who upon your necks placed the yoke of dedicating to them and celebrating their own disgrace. You excluded from your honourable offices the performers of the divine crimes. Pray to the true God that he may exclude from your company those gods who delight in the sins they are charged with — their utter shame is exposed if the charges are true; their utter malignity, if they are false. (Aug. *Civ. Dei* 2.23)[26]

Here, he employs a variety of terms to relate to "religion": *pietas*, *cultus*, and *religio*. So far, much of his appeal is couched in a very Ciceronian, Roman vocabulary. But ultimately, Augustine *is* a Christian: in fact, the crucial development of *religio* he undertakes is to make it refer most of all to the *religio christianae*. Like Tertullian, he identifies this turn as the consequence of worshiping for once the one true god. If his audience decides for once to offer reverence (*cultus*, λατρεία) to the one true god, they will receive their just rewards in the heavenly city. Although *religio* emerges from a Roman context, for Augustine, the ultimate reference lies in the Gospels, where Jesus says: *amen dico vobis, perceperunt mercedem suam*; right service will receive right rewards.

In closing, I want to return to the conjuncture in contemporary anthropology and philosophy introduced at the beginning of this paper. As I indicated there, Augustine has proven strikingly central to contemporary debates, not least about the very notion of "religion." I find it remarkable that one of the most eminent voices in this interdisciplinary debate, Talal Asad, turns back to Augustine to resuscitate the notion of religion (in contrast

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autem disperditur et punitur. Nunc iam elige quid sequaris, ut non in te, sed in Deo vero sine ullo errore lauderis. Tunc enim tibi gloria popularis adfuit, sed occulto iudicio divinae providentiae vera religio quam eligeres defuit. Expergiscere, dies est, sicut experrecta es in quibusdam, de quorum virtute perfecta et pro fide vera etiam passionibus gloriamur, qui usquequaque adversus potestates inimicissimas confligentes easque fortiter moriendo vincentes "sanguine nobis hanc patriam peperere suo."

[26] "Noli deos falsos fallacesque requirere; abice potius atque contemne in veram emicans libertatem. Non sunt dii, maligni sunt spiritus, quibus aeterna tua felicitas poena est. Non tam Iuno Troianis, a quibus carnalem originem ducis, arces videtur invidisse Romanas, quam isti daemones, quos adhuc deos putas, omni generi hominum sedes invident sempiternas. Et tu ipsa non parva ex parte de talibus spiritibus iudicasti, quando ludis eos placasti, et per quos homines eosdem ludos fecisti, infames esse voluisti. Patere asseri libertatem tuam adversus inmundos spiritus, qui tuis cervicibus inposuerant sacrandam sibi et celebrandam ignominiam suam. Actores criminum divinorum removisti ab honoribus tuis; supplica Deo vero ut a te removeat illos deos qui delectantur criminibus suis, seu veris, quod ignominiosissimum est, seu falsis, quod malitiosissimum est."

with the previous Geertzian consensus in anthropology that viewed religion most of all in terms of symbolic systems). Yet it is not only Asad for whom Augustine plays a strikingly central role. Asad may have been thinking about Ludwig Wittgenstein, who has played an immensely influential role elsewhere in his oeuvre, who famously begins the *Philosophical Investigations* with a passage from Augustine's *Confessions*.[27] Or he may have been thinking about Hannah Arendt, who also began her career with a PhD thesis (under the supervision of Karl Jaspers) on the concept of love in Augustine; passages from his work continued to influence her thought right to the end of her life (she was very fond, for instance, of [mis]quoting a passage from *City of God* along the lines of "initium ergo ut esset, creatus est homo").[28] Or Asad may have been thinking about Michel Foucault, whose influence is most directly apparent in many of these contemporary debates about religion, power, and truth, and who also turns to Augustine in some of the most intriguing parts of his oeuvre.

It would take a whole article, if not a dissertation, to consider the many relationships of Augustine with contemporary critical thought. This paper has not attempted to address this problem head-on. Instead, I have tried to consider it from the side, as it were, illuminating the questions of contemporary relevance — what is religion? what is its relationship with power, particularly in the form of the state? what, too, is its relationship with truth, as embodied in the complicated history of religion's relationship with philosophy? — by working through the primary source material with as much care and patience as I could muster. But to end, I want to illuminate these relationships in a slightly more direct manner, for once. Consider the (recently published) fourth and final volume of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, entitled

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[27] See Talal Asad, "Thinking about Religion through Wittgenstein," *Critical Times* 3, no. 3 (December 1, 2020): 403–42, https://doi.org/10.1215/26410478-8662304.

[28] The quote can be found in, for example, Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Second edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 177., where it serves as a site for Arendt to develop her concept of natality. The original passage is from Aug. *Civ. Dei* 12.21, which ends with the following: "… there can be new events that neither occurred previously nor yet are unrelated to the pattern of history. And if the soul could through its own improvidence create new misery for itself that was not unforeseen by divine providence, which could thus include it too in the order of things and set the soul free from it not without foresight, what rash human vanity prompts us that we dare deny that God can create things which are new not to him but to the world, things which were neither created previously nor yet at any time unforeseen by him? … Accordingly, in order that there might be this beginning, a man, before whom none existed, was created." ("Si autem et haec novitas ab ordinatione providentiae non excluditur, sive data sit anima sive lapsa sit, possunt fieri nova quae neque antea facta sint nec tamen a rerum ordine aliena sint., Et si potuit anima per inprudentiam facere sibi novam miseriam quae non esset inprovisa divinae providentiae ut hanc quoque in rerum ordine includeret et ab hac eam non inprovide liberaret, qua tandem temeritate humanae vanitatis audemus negare divinitatem facere posse res, non sibi, sed mundo novas, quas neque antea fecereit nec umquam habuerit inprovisas? … Hoc ergo ut esset, creatus est homo, ante quem nullus fuit.") For Arendt's PhD thesis see Hannah Arendt, *Love and Saint Augustine*, ed. Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott and Judith Chelius Stark (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Roy T. Tsao, "Arendt's Augustine," in *Politics in Dark Times: Encounters with Hannah Arendt*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 39–57.

Confessions of the Flesh (*Les aveux de la chair*), which ends with an entire chapter devoted to Augustine. Foucault (as is his wont) is most concerned with the nature of sexual desire, as expressed through Augustine's "theory of concupiscence," which Foucault argues "will serve as a guiding principle for controlling the unfolding of sexual acts between spouses and for defining what is permitted and forbidden."[29] As he had announced in Volume 2 of the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault turns to the ancients and particularly to the Church Fathers in the first place to give a sort of prehistory of the modern, confessing subject. But Foucault is too much of an archivist and historian too fall victim to facile presentism. Thus, he tarries with the ancients for the last six years of his life, dramatically improving his Greek, moving his usual study spot from the Bibliothèque nationale de France to a Dominican monastery in Paris, and engaging in a sustained, bidirectional dialogue with Peter Brown.[30] In the end, Foucault acknowledges that it is only in the Middle Ages that the "morality of the juridical subject" will assume its full form, but "the fact remains that in the Augustinian analysis one finds the theoretical matrix that will make such developments possible."[31] We may dispute the specifics of Foucault's interpretation of Augustine (as indeed we ought), but it is striking to me that the intertwined development of thinking that we find in Augustine himself — always in conversation with Roman letters, Greek philosophy, and the history of the world around him — continues today among people like Foucault, Brown, and Asad, all of whom are basically concerned with the relationship of human beings to power, truth, and the divine.

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[29] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 4: Confessions of the Flesh*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 2021), 283.
[30] Niki Kasumi Clements, "Foucault's Christianities," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 89, no. 1 (March 1, 2021): 12–13, 24, https://doi.org/10.1093/jaarel/lfab024.
[31] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 4*, 283.

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