Honors Thesis Proposal

for

Pax Christi et Pax Americana: Christianity and Politics in America

Ryan G. Tindall

Harry Coverston, PhD
Thesis Committee Chair
Department of Philosophy

Bruce Janz, PhD
Department Chair
Department of Philosophy

Todd Brenneman, PhD
Committee Member from Major
Department of Philosophy

Kelly Astro, M.S. Ed.
Director of Research and Civic
The Burnett Honors College

Nathan Ilderton, PhD
Committee member from outside Major
Department of Political Science
American exceptionalism, perhaps now more than ever, is a political hot button issue. As treated here, it is the idea that America is an exceptional country, possessing unique virtues and strengths which, due to its vocation (divinely given or not), it has a responsibility to spread to the rest of the world, and gives the United States authority to act as it does throughout the world. This has provided the motivation for many expansionist wars throughout the country’s history and various other dispositions and actions, and has, according to some, become unhinged in the years after the constant threat of Soviet communism was removed as its global counterbalance (Bacevich *New American* 5).

In this vision, American ideology and self-conception provide the basis for American dealings with the rest of the world. This ideology and self-conception are inherently religious concepts introduced into the realm of politics and history, whether God is explicitly or implicitly providing the justification for various actions. American civil theology then provides the justification for its politics. This American ideology, with the strange combination of the remnants of Christian doctrine and Enlightenment political philosophy, becomes the civil religion. Secular America becomes the sacred object of veneration for every American.

Empires throughout the history of the west are rather common, and points of comparison between the far reach of American power and previous great world powers are easily made. Rome looms large though, as perhaps the greatest of all empires, and if not that then certainly the ideal at which subsequent ones aim. The reasons for this are manifest: it combined an incredible geographic and political reach with astounding longevity, lasting in an immediately recognizable iteration for a millennium, having its
immediate ancestor fall to the Ottomans only as late as the 1400’s, and even still maintaining some semblance of authority in the Vatican to this day. Rome is the eternal city. America seems an obvious modern heir of this tradition, in its great reach and influence throughout the world (though yet untested as to its duration), and perhaps has a point of continuity that few other empires throughout history can claim: that of a religiously grounded political exceptionalism.

Rome too saw itself as an exceptional country with a divinely provided raison d’être. The gods had provided the basis of Roman imperialism, as its pious people spread their way of life throughout the world, civilizing the barbarians and bringing Romanness to the Greeks. Such is the advice that Anchises provides his quintessentially Roman son Aeneas in the underworld: “But Romans, don’t forget that world dominion / Is your great craft: peace, and then peaceful customs; sparing the conquered, striking down the haughty” (Ruden VI.850-53). This is the wisdom of Rome; this is her calling that was supported by Cicero and Virgil. Thus under the divine Augustus was pax Romana established.

The pax Romana also saw another figure spring into the historical narrative besides Augustus, and that man was Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus preached his message of the kingdom of heaven in opposition to the kingdom that Caesar had established, one based on love and forgiveness, contrary to the envious and expansionistic gospel of Rome. This message was carried throughout the Mediterranean world by the most influential of the apostles who were to follow him: Paul. Through Paul’s efforts, Jesus’ confined efforts in Palestine were spread and built upon, as Paul’s gospel of a new way to be human – politically, morally, and religiously – was brought everywhere from Syrian
Antioch to Rome itself. This gospel, literally the *evangelion* or good news, was presented in ways that paralleled the gospels of the Roman world. Paul traveled setting up new assemblies – *ekklesias* – in cities throughout the Empire that would have as their core message the lordship of a God who loved, suffered, and died to conquer the powers of the world: the powers of Rome itself. This gospel was a great paradox, that the true savior of the world was not Caesar; that though Jesus was defeated by the world and its allies, he triumphed over them in his suffering and triumphal resurrection. In being defeated, he defeated.

For all this, it must be alleged that the Christian faith presented by Paul and eventually recognized by the Fathers and the catholic Church is not anarchistic, and though Pauline politics present a radical critique of empire – of the Roman Empire in its particular temporal form – they do not point to the end of all state power. Perhaps the greatest summation of the political thought to emerge from this tradition is in Augustine’s *City of God*, which acknowledges the legitimacy of state power while maintaining Paul’s critique. With Augustine emerge explicitly the ideas of the city of God, the sacred city that organizes itself on the concepts of love and forgiveness, and the city of man that is buttressed upon rivalry, envy, and vain ambition.

This, it will be shown, is the original sacred/secular divide. The two cities represent two separate ways of organizing and conducting human affairs. The flaw then that Paul critiqued in Rome, if one is to read his epistles as critiques of Rome without delving into anarchism, was the confusing of these two ideas. This can be seen in the Roman idea of their own exceptionalism: that they had a unique, divine calling; that they had a mission to spread their version of civilization to the world; that they were more
moral than other peoples; and eventually that their state and their emperor himself, as
sovereign, were divine.

If then a reasonable connection between Roman and American conceptions of
their nations, roles in the world, callings, etc. can be established, then it is very
reasonable to apply the same critiques of Paul and Augustine to the United States today.
Even more, the question must then be begged how a great deal of American religious
practice and experience, especially considering that a great deal of American religion
self-describes as Christian, prop up this American self conception, from the very
founding of the country to its modern existence.

To then sum: the project of this thesis is to relate together the notions of American
and Roman exceptionalism by comparison and contrast, to seek out a political reading of
the Pauline epistles and an understanding their philosophic of canonization in Augustine,
and then to understand how this element of Christian tradition should critique the *modus
operandi* of the United States but, due to the political convictions of a significant number
of American Christians, does not.

In order to do this, the thesis will be split into two broad sections with multiple
subsections. The first will set the groundwork for the second, as it seeks to establish a
conception of the Roman Empire that fits within this framework. This will rely to some
extent on historical narrative and political theory and to some on the latest research into
the religious practice of Romans, especially as relates to the emperor and the imperial
cult. This will correlate with a good number of the current political readings of the
Pauline epistles, as the two areas here share a good deal of scholars and scholarship. In
the readings of Paul, this will rely on scholars like Richard Horsley, John Dominic
Crossan, and N. T. Wright, all of whom recognize the importance of reading Paul in his political context and attempt to form readings of him within that context. To sum up this Christian politics of antiquity, Augustine’s *City of God* will be consulted as an original source, along with various scholars on Augustine’s political thought. It is intended that this section should be, in comparison to the second, more brief. Because the research of those seeking anti-imperial readings of Paul and those providing historical, political, and religious insight on the time is so tightly connected, it is thought that this is a distinct possibility and will provide some short cut to supporting the broader argument, with the addition of political Augustinianism.

The second of these broad sections will focus on the modern American context. In order to accomplish this, again a brief historical overview will be done, with pertinent comments from respected commentators like Alexis de Tocqueville. Much of this discussion will, however, focus on identifying various American ideologies that may compare directly with those of Rome. Perhaps the greatest motivation to this idea is the famous quip of G. K. Chesterton that America is a nation with the soul of a Church (11). This will include a discussion of the concept of Manifest Destiny and the Monroe Doctrine, inspired by William Pfaff, and the connections to modern politics and foreign affairs, from writers like Thomas Chalmers and Andrew Bacevich. In order to connect the two strands of thought, scholars from various disciplines will be consulted. From the political side of the question, the work of Paul Kahn and Stephen Smith will be used, and the theological influence of writers like John Milbank will be felt. Especially important to this will be Kahn’s works *Political Theology* and *Putting Liberalism in its Place*, both of which point to the connection between theology and politics within the modern nation
state, and the United States in particular. Some items of evangelicalism's and
fundamentalist political outlooks will be dealt with here, though to explicitly connect the
two, the thought of authors like Robert Bellah, John Fea, Stanley Hauerwas, and Robert
Jewett will be sought out.

In order to not simply critique but also to seek to offer some insight into possible
remedies from whatever modern malaise may be identified, the work of Oliver
O'Donovan on the connections between politics and theology will be consulted.
O'Donovan's *The Desire of the Nations* espouses many of the Pauline/Augustinian
political ideals that will be identified in a distinctly post-modern context, and one that I
believe offers a great deal of insight and clarity on the problem that this thesis identifies.
This then is the goal and the hope of this project: that, even given the meager erudition
and skills of its author, it may make some contribution to understanding the way that the
United States operates in the world today and to how it should be properly responded to,
using the political ideals of the Christian religion, by all those concerned with the
overreach of imperial hubris into other lands and into matters of the sacred.
Works Cited


Bibliography


