

Augustine with a
twist: the similarities
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Martin Luther, one of the foremost leaders of the Protestant Reformation, sought to reject much of the doctrine and authority of the Catholic Church, yet many of his theological and political ideas are extremely reflective of the Catholic luminary St. Augustine. While major differences do exist between Augustine and Luther in some areas, especially the areas of the authority of kings and nobles over peasants and slaves, most of Luther's arguments can be linked to Augustine's in some way or another. Some areas in which the two men greatly agree include their thoughts on the existence of false Christians (i. e. sinners who masquerade under the title of Christians), and their assertions that wars bring unnecessary misery to life. Even though each author discusses these themes in different ways and for different reasons, including different aspects and examples of the idea, the premises for each author's arguments on these ideas are similar. Some topics written upon by Luther that are somewhat, though not entirely, similar to Augustine's ideas include Luther's assertions that true Christians do not necessitate temporal law yet thrive in it, and Luther's insistence that man must abide by both temporal and heavenly authority in order to survive the human life and reach salvation in the eternal life. One of the greatest parallels between Augustine's beliefs and Luther's writings is Luther's echo of Augustine's assertion that "there are false Christians within the Church" (I: 35). Luther agrees on this point and further embellishes this theme by adding "The world and its masses will always be Un-Christian, even if they are all baptized and Christian in name. Christians are few and far between" (Hillerbrand, 48). The two author's differ, however, in their methods of settling the problem of Christian imposters. Augustine acknowledges the incapability of man to always discriminate the true from the imposters and <https://assignbuster.com/augustine-with-a-twist-the-similarities-and-differences-of-the-political-and-theological-ideas-of-augustine-and-luther/>

believes that those sinners who craftily label themselves Christian will only be separated from the true Christians on judgement day (I: 35). Luther sees the difficulty in determining the true Christians as one reason for the necessity for both human and divine law. It is interesting to note that neither author quotes Scripture supporting their assertions that fake Christians exist; this suggests that both Augustine and Luther came to these conclusions through their life experiences rather than by their interpretations of Scripture. Another topic upon which Augustine and Luther decidedly agree upon is the necessity to avoid war, however, both authors handle this subject in different ways. Augustine asserts that “Peace is the instinctive aim of all creatures, and is even the ultimate purpose of war” and that “there is no man who does not wish for peace” (XIX: 12). Augustine makes the distinction, however, between seemly peace and real peace when he states “the peace of the unjust, compared with the peace of the just, is not worthy even of the name of peace”. Augustine Christianizes his statements on temporal peace when he concludes that “God created all things in supreme wisdom and ordered them in perfect justice” (XIX: 13) and that man can achieve peace by following God’s orders such as “love thy neighbor” (XIX: 14). Augustine’s statements on peace are congruent with both the actions and writings of Luther, most specifically in his Friendly Admonition to Peace Concerning the Twelve Articles of the Swabian Peasants. Firstly, as stated in Mackenson’s introduction, this writing is Luther’s “appeal to peace” (Hillerbrand 67) in order that “if any misfortune or disaster come out of the matter, it may not be blamed on me because of my silence” (Hillerbrand, 68). In his plea for peace To the Princes and Lords Luther uses both the tactics of impending hell and gentle persuasion to persuade the nobles to

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gain peace with the peasants. He reminds the nobility of the passage from Psalms “ He poureth contempt upon princes” (Hillerbrand 69) and advises them “ You will lose nothing in kindness; and even though you were to lose something, it can afterwards come back to you ten times over in peace, while in conflict you may, perhaps, lose both life and goods” (Hillerbrand, 71). In To the Peasants Luther greatly narrows Augustine’s idea that peace is the natural goal of man by claiming that peace is a uniquely Christian goal. This is demonstrated by Luther’s claim that if neither the peasants nor the nobility allow themselves to be instructed and live at peace, neither side is Christian (Hillerbrand, 78). Augustine and Luther’s interpretations on temporal law vary slightly from one another, with Augustine’s beliefs reflected by the passage from Corinthians “ The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin is the law” (XIII: 5) and Luther’s resonating in the passage from the first book of Timothy “ The law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless” (Hillerbrand, 46). Augustine argues that the law itself is a temptation, that the very restriction of a deed is a reason that some perform it. In this way, some who might not ordinarily commit sins may be swayed to commit them because of the stronger temptation, or as Augustine writes “ when the love of righteousness is not strong enough to overcome the sinful desire by the delight it affords” (XIII: 5). Luther bypasses the question of whether the law can be taken to bad account by the wicked in his writings; there is little need for Luther to consider whether laws enhance the temptation of the wicked to violate them, because Luther believes that laws are not made for true Christians anyway. He writes “ If all the world were composed of real Christians, that is, true believers, there would be no need or benefits from prince, king, sword, or law” (Hillerbrand 46). There is a <https://assignbuster.com/augustine-with-a-twist-the-similarities-and-differences-of-the-political-and-theological-ideas-of-augustine-and-luther/>

similar contrast between Augustine and Luther's interpretations of man's obedience to temporal law. Augustine states plainly "when man lives by the standard of man' and not by the standard of God', he is like the Devil" (XIV: 4). Augustine clarifies that even though man comes from God, who is all good, he can live falsely, as in not living in a godlike manner, for "Falsehood consists in not living in the way for which he was created" (XIV: 4). Luther however, in distinguishing the two options of lifestyles (to live by a heavenly government or by a temporal one) grants that the heavenly one is best, but he also adds that the temporal government is necessary: "Both must be permitted to remain; the one to produce righteousness, the other to bring about external peace and prevent evil deeds. Neither one is sufficient in the world without the other" (Hillerbrand, 48). In this way, Luther takes Augustine's condemnation of temporal lifestyle to another level; while Luther admits that it would be best if the Christians of the world could live in peace without laws, like sheep, he admits that given the wolves or Non-Christians of the world would quickly devour them (Hillerbrand, 48). Augustine does not make this distinction, possibly because of his beliefs such as "When starvation killed...it snatched [the Christians] away from the evils of this life, as disease rescues men from the sufferings of the body" (I: 11). One substantial difference between the theological and political thoughts of Augustine and Luther is each author's unique interpretation of the authority between kings and nobles and their respective peasants and slaves. Augustine takes a rather surprising turn on this subject when he uses a passage in Genesis to back his claim that "[God] did not wish the rational being, made in his own image, to have dominion over any but irrational creatures, not man over man...That is why we do not hear of a slave

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anywhere in the Scriptures until Noah...punished his son...that son deserved this name because of his misdeed, not because of his nature..." (XIX: 15).

Augustine goes on to clarify, however, that slavery can only happen "by the judgement of God". Therefore Augustine is stating that man is not meant to be enslaved, but God is just when He gives man a life of slavery.

Furthermore, Augustine states, "Everyone who commits sin is sin's slave", and thereby somewhat justifies slavery as a sin which will cause the master to be a slave because the master practices slavery. Luther, on the other

hand, spares no time in his tract On Governmental Authority in quoting Paul's letter to the Romans: "Let every soul be subject to the governing authority, for there is no authority except from God; the authority which everywhere exists has been ordained by God. He then who resists the governing authority resists the ordinance of God, and he who resists God's ordinance will incur judgment" (Hillerbrand, 44). As mentioned in

Hillerbrand's introduction to Twelve Articles "The Protestant Reformation... seemed to be tailor made for the peasants" (Hillerbrand 63). As Mackenson states in his introduction to Admonition to Peace, however, "Luther left little doubt that he disapproved of the peasant's marshaling of scriptural arguments in support of their economic and social goals...Luther rejected the use of the gospel to sustain secular demands, and insisted that the laws of society must provide the answer for social amelioration (Hillerbrand, 67). In conclusion, the similarities and differences in the theological and political thought of Augustine and Luther are caused by the correspondences and variances in the ways that each author interprets Scripture. Both authors never question the truth of the Scripture, yet it is obvious that the passages

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views. The differences in these views reflect the differences of political motivation of each author. It is ironic that Luther, who was trying to sever himself from the Catholic Church should echo so many of Augustine's teachings, yet it makes sense, for each author is defending an interpretation of Christianity from an outside existing force (the Romans for Augustine, the Catholics for Luther). Furthermore, when Augustine wrote *City of God*, the Catholic Church had not yet become the elaborate and corrupt political system, full of the "blind bishops and mad priests and monks whose hearts are hardened" (Hillerbrand, 68) of which Luther writes. It follows that in many cases the basic premises for Luther's writings are the same as Augustine's; it could be said that Luther is Augustine with a twist.