

‘The truth shall make you free’: Augustine on the Power of Religion

Gillian Clark
University of Bristol

‘A fine religion! The weak take refuge there in hope of liberation, and when they seek the truth that shall make them free, it is thought expedient for them to be deceived’ (*De Civ. Dei* 4.27). In *City of God* Augustine developed his argument that false religion enslaves and true religion liberates. Demonic power, he claimed, controlled and deceived the Roman statesmen who used Roman religion to control and deceive the Roman people. Varro, the recognised authority, betrayed in his *Antiquities* the awful truth that he was too afraid to speak, and that some of Augustine’s contemporaries still would not acknowledge: this religion was a human construct, serving powers who kept their worshippers by corrupting them.

True religion, in contrast, liberates people from deception and compulsion, and empowers them to serve the true God. For Augustine, that is the overwhelming power of religion. True religion is not a human construct, but a divine revelation. It may, but need not, work through the power of religious leaders to muster support and influence politics, to exclude others from religious community, and to persuade people to change their lives. Power exercised by humans takes many forms: force (*vis*), official power (*potestas*), influence (*potentia*), authority (*auctoritas*). All can be used for good or bad purposes, and all are affected by human failings. In households and political communities, the desire for domination, *libido dominandi*, displaces recognition of the gifts and needs of other people. Individuals risk spiritual damage from ‘pride of life’, *superbia vitae* (1 *Jn* 2: 16): Augustine interpreted this as desire for recognition of one’s power and status, whether as office-holder or as expert speaker, and found it very difficult to distinguish from wanting to do one’s job well (*Conf.* 10.36.59). Experience taught him that the power of a Roman official to inflict or remit punishment is not enough to discover truth, and the power of a gifted speaker is not enough to convey truth. In a fallen world, people must use power to maintain or restore peace, but cannot assume that their war is just. The power of the true God is at work in everything, and we can do nothing without it, but we cannot know where and how it works.

Augustine did not write history, because he thought it was a full-time task, but his reflections on power challenge the theme of this conference. Are historians bound to interpret religion as a category of human power? How else could they write history?