

Michael Weinman: The Political Theology of Hannah Arendt

Michael Weinman: *The Political Theology of Hannah Arendt: Augustine and the Invention of Modernity*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025), 184 pp., £ 99 (hardback) / £ 19.99 (paperback) / £ 19.99 (ebook).

This review essays Michael Weinman's *The Political Theology of Hannah Arendt* (2025), which challenges the "secular republican canon" by identifying a persistent Augustinian political theology throughout Arendt's oeuvre. While Weinman convincingly demonstrates how religious language and Augustinian concepts—such as *initium* and *interiority*—inform Arendt's mature phenomenology, this review questions whether such a reading risks imposing a metaphysical coherence that Arendt herself sought to avoid. By balancing Weinman's post-secular insights against Arendt's commitment to worldly, non-sovereign politics, the text highlights the generative tension between theological genealogy and secular political action.

Michael Weinman's *The Political Theology of Hannah Arendt: Augustine and the Invention of Modernity* (Weinman 2025) challenges the conventional opposition between secularism and theology in Hannah Arendt's theory.

Weinman affirms that Arendt is a thinker engaged in a particular form of political theology. He reveals how religious language permeates even her most phenomenological texts, such as the dialectic of *interiority* and *appearance* in *The Life of the Mind*. According to him, Arendt's theory is grounded in her early and constant dialogue with Augustine. Augustine is not just Arendt's early philosophical framework but also a continuous reference of her reflections on *natality*, *freedom*, *forgiveness*, and the conditions of political life.

Following this perspective, we can draw a *fil rouge* between *Love and Saint Augustine* (Arendt 1996; originally 1929) and later major works such as *The Human Condition* (Arendt 1958) and *The Life of the Mind* (Arendt 1978). Weinman's analysis thus uncovers a continuity between Arendt's early theological considerations and her later political theory.

On the reverse, the so-called "secular republican canon", advanced by scholars such as Seyla Benhabib (2003), Margaret Canovan (1992), and Dana Villa (1996), generally places Arendt as a theorist of worldly politics, public action, and civic republican institutions—one who explicitly rejects metaphysical or theological underpinnings in political life. On this reading, Arendt's suspicion of sovereignty, her critique of transcendence and her claim on plurality as a worldly, relational condition marks her distance from any form of political

theology especially the ones associated with Carl Schmitt's sovereign decisionism (Schmitt 2005).

Weinman challenges this approach because he argues that Arendt's break from Schmitt does not mean a rejection of theological categories; rather, she develops a non-sovereign, anti-metaphysical, and pluralistic political theology focused on the human capacity for beginning—what Augustine describes as *initium* (Augustine, *City of God*). In this perspective, Arendt's thought is part of a broader post-secular reassessment of the role of theology in modern thought, as it is seen in Charles Taylor's analysis of secularization (Taylor 2007) and Robert Austin Markus's (1970). The later considers Augustine as a theorist of historical contingency rather than ecclesiastical triumph (Markus 1970).

Weinman's analysis is particularly valuable for highlighting how Arendt appropriates Augustine's reflections on love, will, and temporality. She develops a political ontology of action that challenges both modern disenchantment and theological authoritarianism. For example, by drawing on Augustine's account of the irreversibility of time and the fragility of human promises (*Confessions*), Arendt frames her own concepts of forgiveness and promising as political faculties necessary for sustaining a shared world (Arendt 1958).

Moreover, the book's structure — from Weberian disenchantment through the antinomies of liberalism, to the “eschaton” of liberal political theology — provides a vibrant pathway to understanding how Arendt sought to preserve meaningful political pluralism in a world de-sacralized by modernity.

Weinman's claim raises challenging questions. By reframing Arendt as essentially a political-theological thinker, the volume may risk underplaying her commitment to secular political institutions. Undoubtedly, one of Arendt's greatest contributions is precisely her defence of a public political sphere based on pluralism, rational debate, and active citizenship — arguments laid out in works such as *The Human Condition* or *On Revolution*. Then, Weinman's assumption seems to re-establish metaphysical foundations that Arendt herself carefully avoided. Indeed, a reading that involves theology could downplay her scepticism toward religious or metaphysical certainties in political life.

Weinman's book is provocative and valuable. He unwraps new paths for understanding her as a thinker crossing the paradoxes of modernity: a world disenchanted yet still haunted by theological residues, a world where political action requires meaning but fears transcendence. It also suggests new lines of inquiry into Arendt's enduring relevance. For scholars and students of Arendt, political theory, or modernity, *The Political Theology of Hannah Arendt* is likely to become a foundational reference, compelling readers to reconsider assumptions about secularism, liberalism, and the theological traces of modern political thought. The book shows that Augustine influences Arendt's mature work far more than the “secular republican canon” view typically admits. He shows that Arendt's existential categories have Augustinian genealogies — e.g., the inward-outward tension in *The Life of the Mind* echoes Augustine's interrogations of interiority. He also shows how religious language permeates even her most

phenomenological texts. However, his theological perspective forces Arendt's thoughts in a coherence that does not exist in her *œuvre*. He does not always respect Arendt's own refusal of metaphysical grounding in politics. Briefly: his thesis is immensely generative — but not definitive. It opens a field rather than settling it.

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