After Augustine, after Markus: 
the problem of the secular at the 
end of antiquity

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This article revisits Robert Markus’s account of the de-secularization of the Latin West between Augustine and Gregory the Great. It uses letters of advice for rulers written by early sixth-century clerics to contest his narrative of a ‘grand simplification’ of Christian thought. Multiple overlapping conceptions of the secular were still in play after the fall of Rome, articulated, not in the absence of, but in dialogue with robust political institutions. By uncoupling Christian ideas of secularity from the actual degree of religious pluralism or tolerance in a given society, historians can better capture the continued complexity of early medieval secularities.

The secular after Robert Markus

To revisit the secular, early medieval historians must reckon with Robert Markus. His work has been a critical point of departure for the last generation of scholarship, not only on the Christianization of the Roman world, but also the forms of religious pluralism evident in early

* This article was a right pain to write. Audiences at the Late Roman Seminar in Oxford in March 2015, the Leeds International Medieval Congress in 2015 and 2018, and ‘The Sacral and the Secular’ conference in Cambridge in June 2018 heard various versions of it. I received helpful feedback on draft versions from the special issue editor, Conor O’Brien, as well as Conrad Leyser, Ingrid Rembold, and Graeme Ward. Remaining errors and infelicities are of course my fault.

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medieval Europe. Across a string of key publications – and in particular his magnum opus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* – Markus challenged modern attempts to tidy up awkward aspects of a Christianizing society as ‘pagan survivals’: he instead concerned himself with ‘the manner in which Late Roman Christians, lay and clerical, drew the line which distinguished what they would have seen as their “religion” from the rest of their activity and experience, their “secular lives” and its setting’. His central insight was the need to prioritize evolving contemporary definitions of what was ‘religious’ (and, in particular, what was ‘Christian’ or ‘pagan’) as against what was ‘secular’. The result was a rich and persuasive account of the formation of mainstream Latin Christian thought in the fifth and sixth centuries and its implications for societies in the late and post-Roman west. And yet, as William Klingshirn has shrewdly noted, this account cannot straightforwardly be extended into the early Middle Ages. In fact, the central narrative which Robert Markus retraced again and again in his work – and which I will rehearse again here – closes down the possibility of an early medieval secular to which it would be worthwhile to devote the special issue of a journal.

This trajectory of Latin Christian thought led from Augustine to Gregory the Great and encapsulated a period which saw the ‘drainage’ of the secular. For Markus, Augustine articulated a notion of the *saeculum*, this age or world, as a neutral space. Because the individual members of the city of God and the worldly city would only be revealed at the Last Judgement, the current age saw a *corpus permixtum*: a ‘mixed body’. Humanity was made up of both those who would be saved and those who would be damned, with no (human) means of determining who was who until the Last Judgement. For Markus, this radical indeterminacy led Augustine to characterize the *saeculum* as a neutral space open both to Christians and non-Christians (including,

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1 For Markus’s influence, see the following biographical sketches: P. Brown, ‘Introducing Robert Markus’, *Augustinian Studies* 32.2 (2001), pp. 181–7; W. Liebeschuetz, *The Independent* (25 February 2011); J. Nelson, *The Guardian* (9 January 2011); W. Klingshirn, ‘Theology and History in the Thought of Robert Markus’, *Studia Patristica* 53 (2013), pp. 73–83 (esp. on early medieval reception); K. Cooper, ‘Robert Austin Markus’, in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2014).

2 R.A. Markus, *The End of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 9, pp. 14–15.

3 See esp. Markus, *The End*, pp. 1–17.

4 Klingshirn, ‘Theology’, pp. 80–1.

5 E.g. R.A. Markus, ‘The Sacred and the Secular: From Augustine to Gregory the Great’, *Journal of Theological Studies* 36 (1985), pp. 85–96, at p. 96; *idem*, *The End*, pp. 15, 16, 131, 228. For particularly clear formulations of the narrative: *idem*, *Christianity and the Secular* (Notre Dame, 2006), pp. 71–91; *idem*, ‘The Secular in Late Antiquity’, in É. Rebillard and C. Sotinel (eds), *Les frontières du profane dans l’Antiquité tardive*, Collection de l’École Française de Rome 428 (Rome, 2010), pp. 353–61, at pp. 358–60.

6 R.A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine* (Cambridge, 1970).
most notably, the pagans to whom he responded in *City of God* and elsewhere). Various critics have rightly pointed out that Augustine was rather less consistently neutral in his use of the ‘secular’ than Markus made out. *City of God* also uses the adjective in more pejorative ways, and, in its narrative chapters on the history of the two cities, repeatedly associates the worldly city with the city and empire of Rome and its history of idolatry. Nevertheless, even if not the whole picture, this neutral secular is one important strand of Augustine’s thought. It was of central importance for Markus who, as a Catholic social activist, sought to reclaim Augustine’s *saeculum* to demonstrate the possibility for the church (after Vatican II) to inhabit peacefully a society no longer directed towards a Christian god.

By Gregory the Great’s time, though, this neutral space had been closed down. In Gregory’s thought, Markus saw the impact both of the culmination of profound societal change and of a failure to understand Augustine’s subtleties. The progressive Christianization of the Roman world meant that Gregory, in an almost exclusively Christian society, no longer had to account for religious plurality and traditional civic culture; the end of the Roman imperial state in the west allowed him to elevate the church to the most significant earthly institution. Above all, Gregory’s writings encapsulated a ‘grand simplification’, seen most clearly in his presentation of the workings of the sacred in contemporary society. The secular had moved from Augustine’s ambivalent, morally neutral space, inhabited by Christians and (in particular) adherents of traditional Greco-Roman religion, to Gregory’s ambivalent, morally neutral space inhabited by better and worse Christians. It should be stressed that this shift was, in Markus’s terms, both the end of the secular (in his modern sense), and the beginnings of the cultural hegemony of a new ‘secular’ (the sense in which Gregory used it). But that latter secular is one in which Markus simply was not interested, for understandable political reasons: he wanted to recover the process of de-secularization at the end of antiquity, not the contours of the ‘secular’ from then on, which was part of a self-explanatory medieval future. There is a signal paradox here, which Markus almost, but never quite addressed. The moment when the

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7 See esp. J.J. Van Oort, *Jerusalem and Babylon: A Study into Augustine’s City of God and the Sources of His Doctrine of the Two Cities*, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* 14 (Leiden, 1991), pp. 93–163.

8 For this key motivation, see Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, as well as the biographical sketches in n. 1.

9 R.A. Markus, ‘The Latin Fathers’, in J.H. Burns (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Medieval Political Thought*, c. 350–c.1450 (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 92–122, at p. 122; cf. *idem*, ‘Sacred and Secular’, p. 95; *idem*, *Christianity and the Secular*, p. 10.

10 He came close in Markus, ‘The Secular in Late Antiquity’, esp. at pp. 354–7.
secular drains out of the ancient world is precisely when the ‘secular’ gains purchase as a way contemporaries understood their societies and thus becomes key to our understanding of them. There is a need to revisit the end point of Markus’s influential narrative of Christian thought so as to reopen interpretive possibilities for the early Middle Ages.

Recent work on the fourth and earlier fifth centuries provides ways to move beyond a narrative of closure. Even as Markus’s pathfinding insights remain fundamental, historians of the Christianization of the Roman world have begun to develop, qualify, and (quietly) query aspects of his account. Richard Lim, Hartmut Leppin, Éric Rebillard, and Maijastina Kahlos have each pointed out the problems of applying a modern (or putatively Augustinian) ‘secular’ to the study of fourth- and fifth-century Roman culture and society. In effect, it requires adopting and privileging the precise Christian mindset it seeks to compartmentalize. To be sure, a wide array of late ancient people (of various religious affiliations) found ways to designate spaces and phenomena in their societies as religiously neutral. But to categorize this tertium quid as ‘secular’ and align it too closely with the particular conceptual frameworks of contemporary authors can make it appear that all these late ancient people thought like Christian bishops. Moreover, it can work to flatten responses to these cultural phenomena and social spaces, by closing off the possibility of their continued interpretation as somehow linked to the divine. Such criticisms align in interesting ways with critiques of the late twentieth-century secularization thesis which inspired Markus’s work. These post-secular approaches suggest that modern understandings of the secularity, though evacuated of theological content, still depend on a distinctly

11 See esp. R. Lim, ‘Christianization, Secularization, and the Transformation of Public Life’, in P. Rousseau (ed.), *A Companion to Late Antiquity* (Chichester, 2009), pp. 497–511, at p. 505, on the secular as ‘an unintended product of Christianization’.
12 For all the following: M. Kahlos, *Debate and Dialogue: Christian and Pagan Cultures* (Aldershot, 2007); and see now *idem*, *Religious Dissent in Late Antiquity, 350–450* (Oxford, 2020), pp. 177–8; Lim, ‘Christianization’; *idem*, ‘Inventing Secular Space in the Late Antique City: Reading the Circus Maximus’, in R. Behrwald and C. Witschel (eds), *Rom in der Spätantike: historische Erinnerung im städtischen Raum* (Stuttgart, 2012), pp. 66–7, 77–8; É. Rebillard, *Christians and their Many Identities in Late Antiquity, North Africa, 200–450 CE* (Ithaca, 2012), pp. 62, pp. 95–6, noting p. 107 n. 8; H. Leppin, ‘Christianisierungen im Römischen Reich: Überlegungen zum Begriff und zur Phasenbildung’, *Zeitschrift für Antikes Christentum* 16 (2012), pp. 247–78.
Christian (western, European) opposition of religious and secular.\textsuperscript{13} That opposition was not (yet) mainstream when Augustine wrote \textit{City of God}.

Recent histories of late ancient religious change have thus sought to go even further in pursuing the contingency of contemporary interpretations of (potentially) religiously neutral social activities, concerns, and environments. They have argued that many people may not have been worrying about these categories when they engaged with aspects of everyday life in the late ancient Mediterranean. By removing the ‘secular’ as a commonsensical means to conceptualize aspects of late ancient society, they have, at the same time, reframed how we might understand its use by those Christian authors who did deploy it. Richard Lim has persuasively argued that we should see ‘christianization and secularization . . . as historically meaningful discursive strategies that ancient persons employed in order to help shape the nature of the christianizing Roman society’.\textsuperscript{14} ‘Christian’, ‘secular’, and ‘pagan’ were ‘negotiated categories’, and decisions as to their application were ‘situational’; authors used them to persuade others, both to interpret aspects of late ancient society as such, and to consider the categories themselves as meaningful in their everyday lives.\textsuperscript{15} The strategic nature of these textual representations both reveals the plurality of contemporary viewpoints and makes them less susceptible to interpretation as indices of the progress of religious change.\textsuperscript{16} When authors across multiple centuries felt able to deploy these same strategies in almost identical ways, greater distance needs to be placed between late ancient discussions of secularity and a meta-narrative of de-secularization.\textsuperscript{17} In that sense, recent work implies that Christian ideas of the ‘secular’ retained a vital significance even in contexts of

\textsuperscript{13} T. Asad, \textit{Genealogies of Religion} (Baltimore, 1993), pp. 27–55 is classic. On post-secular perspectives and their critiques, I have found the following recent surveys useful: G. McLennan, ‘The Postsecular Turn’, \textit{Theory, Culture \& Society} 27.4 (2010), pp. 3–20; A.I. Dosdall, ‘From the Secular to the Habermasian Post-Secular and the Forgotten Dimension of Time in Rethinking Religion and Politics’, \textit{Contexto Internacional} 38 (2016), pp. 887–908; see too S. Mahmood, ‘Can Secularism be Other-Wise?’, in M. Warner, J. VanAntwerpen and C. Calhoun (eds), \textit{Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age} (Cambridge, MA, 2010), pp. 282–99 on not reproducing western exceptionalism in stressing this heritage for ideas with a global contemporary reach. Useful late ancient discussions: K. Cooper, ‘Religion, Conflict, and the Secular: The View from Early Christianity’, in J. Wolffe and G. Moorhead (eds), \textit{Religion, Security, and Global Uncertainties} (Milton Keynes, 2014), pp. 14–15; Lim, ‘Christianization’, pp. 502–4; \textit{idem}, ‘Inventing Secular Space’, pp. 66–7; H. Leppin, ‘Religiöse Vielfalt und öffentlicher Raum in der Spätantike’, in M. Lutz-Bachmann (ed.), \textit{Postsäkularismus: zur Diskussion eines umstrittenen Begriffs} (Frankfurt, 2017), pp. 335–60.

\textsuperscript{14} Lim, ‘Christianization’, p. 510.

\textsuperscript{15} Lim, ‘Inventing Secular Space’, p. 78; Rebillard, \textit{Christians}, pp. 61–2, 95–7; Kahlos, \textit{Religious Dissent}, p. 178.

\textsuperscript{16} Lim, ‘Inventing Secular Space’, pp. 66–7.

\textsuperscript{17} Rebillard, \textit{Christians}, pp. 96–7.
lesser religious pluralism. The four historians I have cited do not go beyond the first decades of the fifth century in the west: partly, perhaps, out of an underlying sense that traditional spaces for religious neutrality did disappear by the end of the sixth.18 Yet the approach which they suggest to the ‘secular’ – as a fundamental rhetorical strategy and moralizing conceptual framework – has obvious possibilities past 430, 500, or 600.

This article thus seeks to reframe the problem of the secular at the end of antiquity. It will sketch the contours of the particular form of Christian ‘secular’ which Markus displaced to a medieval future: that is, the use of the concept as a means of categorizing certain phenomena within a society imagined to be Christian. This is far too big a topic for one article, so I will focus on the period which Markus vaulted to get from the world of Augustine to the world of Gregory the Great. I will consider a series of Latin Christian texts which drew on Augustine’s ideas of the secular to talk about rulers and political institutions in the late fifth- and early sixth-century West: the works of the African bishop Fulgentius of Ruspe (c.508–33), his protégé, the deacon Ferrandus of Carthage (fl. 510s–40s), and the Gallic bishop Aurelianus (fl. mid-530s?). Of course, these are not the only (nor necessarily the most significant) reflections on the secular from a period which saw increasing efforts to distinguish the clergy as a group in society,19 and numerous flash-points over the competing jurisdictions of churchmen and imperial or royal judges.20 Nevertheless, it is my contention that texts about rulers are particularly helpful when reconstructing assumptions about secularity. Writing to political actors forced clerics to confront central ambiguities regarding the nature of the ‘sacred’ and the ‘secular’, and to juggle multiple ways of evaluating what constituted the worldly and the divine. Moreover, missives to and about rulers were the place where late ancient Latin Christian authors were most likely to make use of the ecclesiological concepts and strategies which Augustine had developed (partly in dialogue with late Roman imperial officials).21

This article will analyse how these authors writing after (and often in dialogue with) Augustine characterized the ‘secular’ in their political

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18 Cf. Lim, ‘Christianization’, p. 510; Leppin, ‘Religiöse Vielfalt’, pp. 354–6.
19 See the excellent discussion by L.K. Bailey, The Religious Worlds of the Laity in Late Antique Gaul (London, 2016), pp. 24–33 (with earlier literature).
20 On the latter, see Charles West in this issue.
21 See esp. N. McLynn, ‘Augustine’s Roman Empire’, Augustinian Studies 30 (1999), pp. 29–44; B.D. Shaw, ‘Augustine and Men of Imperial Power’, Journal of Late Antiquity 8 (2015), pp. 32–61. See also T. Geelhaar, Christianitas: eine Wortgeschichte von der Spätantike bis zum Mittelalter (Göttingen, 2015), pp. 187–217 on the use of christianitas as a personal form of address in letters to rulers.

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thought. It will tease out the various conceptions of secularity present in these works. This will not be a strictly lexical study of the Latin terms *saeculum* and *saecularis*, although there is certainly scope for such work. Rather, it will explore the use of a bundle of related concepts which Latin Christian writers used in contrast to those things they defined as Christian, religious, sacred, ecclesiastical, heavenly, divine, or holy (not a comprehensive list). The various qualifiers highlighted here (*saecularis, saeculi, in [hoc] saeculo, temporalis, huius temporis, [huius] mundi, orbis*) of course had subtly different meanings and resonances. Nevertheless, I would contend that they are united by their use within such binaries to demarcate people, activities, concerns, and environments which harboured a lesser degree of Christian religious commitment. I will continue to use secular as a term to translate this central idea (ditching the scare quotes) since I am considering how this particular Christian discursive framework was used, rather than the (possible) religious neutrality which it overlaid. This is not intended to imply a necessary alignment with modern ideas of the secular: that is, to indicate neutral spaces free from (or, in less tolerant formulations, inimical to) forms of religious allegiance, expression, or practice. Rather, the point of the article is precisely to identify where to place specific usages by sixth-century authors on a spectrum from a more neutral to a more polemical sense of the ‘less or non-religious’.

Given my intent to revisit this narrative of closure, it may seem surprising that I locate my study in the first half of the sixth century. I have chosen these particular authors because they all built their ideas of the secular from the assumption (however accurate) that polity and society were coterminous with the church, and thus that the Christian community was the most significant field for political agency (above other institutional contexts). These represented central features of Gregory’s thought as Robert Markus delineated it. As Mayke de Jong has argued, the theme of the ‘polity as *ecclesia*’ and the ruler as member of the church would be of critical significance later in the early Middle Ages. Its presence in these texts suggests the Christian secular Markus identified in the age of Gregory had already begun to attain political significance in the immediately post-imperial west. This chronological shift implies that this secular was formulated, not in the absence, but rather the presence, of political institutions which could

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22. Cf. Geelhaar, *Christianitas* on the changing semantic and cultural resonances of that term.
23. M. de Jong, ‘The State of the Church: *Ecclesia* and Early Medieval State Formation’, in W. Pohl and V. Wieser (eds), *Der frühmittelalterliche Staat: Europäische Perspektiven*, Forschungen zur Geschichte des Mittelalters 16 (Vienna, 2009), pp. 241–54.
make similar claims to overarching authority. In fact, far from developing in the space left by the late Roman state, this notion of the polity-as-church was articulated most clearly in letters addressed to late fifth- and early sixth-century rulers. The Christian seculars articulated by Fulgentius, Ferrandus and Aurelianus are thus best understood, not as naive or unrealistic descriptions of contemporary society, but carefully calibrated attempts to make it amenable to the demands of Christian interpretation. Even if their assumption of a wholly Christianized context provides it with a different colouring, all of these authors retain (in differing ways) the ambivalence and complexity of Augustine’s ecclesiology.

After Augustine, before Gregory

I am not the first historian to try to tackle the period bypassed by Robert Markus’s accounts of the development of Christian ideas of the secular in the Latin west. In an important recent essay, Mischa Meier has modified Markus’s narrative to single out the late fifth and early sixth centuries as a crucial transitional phase. For Meier, the fall of Rome produced an almost immediate paradigm shift in Latin Christian political thought. Meier argues that, for late fifth- and early sixth-century bishops of Rome – as for Markus’s Gregory – the retreat of the imperial state in the west lent weight to a particular misreading of Augustine, whereby the eschatologically revealed ‘city of God’ is simply identified with the church in this age and political institutions are concomitantly devalued. The ‘simplification’ of Augustine which Markus identified in Gregory’s writings (and postponed to medieval history) is already present in the letters of earlier bishops of Rome.

This Christian secular appears in particularly stark terms in Gelasius’ famous non-apology apology to the eastern Roman emperor Anastasius,

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24 Indeed, Augustine already used this approach: Markus, *Saeculum*, pp. 146–9.

25 Recent work on Gregory’s Rome has also nuanced this picture of fading secular institutions: M. Humphries, ‘From Emperor to Pope? Ceremonial, Space and Authority at Rome from Constantine to Gregory the Great’, in K. Cooper and J. Hillner (eds), *Religion, Dynasty and Patronage in Early Christian Rome, 300–900* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 21–58; P. Booth, ‘Gregory and the Greek East’, in B. Neil and M. Dal Santo (eds), *A Companion to Gregory the Great* (Leiden, 2013), pp. 109–31; cf. R.A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and his World* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 83–96.

26 M. Meier, ‘Nachdenken über “Herrschaft”: Die Bedeutung des Jahres 476’, in M. Meier and S. Patzold (eds), *Chlodwigs Welt: Organisation von Herrschaft um 500, Roma Aeterna 3* (Stuttgart, 2014), pp. 143–215.

27 Meier, ‘Nachdenken’, pp. 149–73, 198–211. This misreading was encouraged by tensions in Augustine’s ecclesiology: above, n. 7; G. Dagron, *Emperor and Priest: The Imperial Office in Byzantium*, trans. J. Birrell (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 300–3.
the letter on the ‘two powers’ of 494. Since the Investiture Controversy of the eleventh century (if not earlier), readers of the letter have focused most attention on its portrayal of the relationship between imperial or royal power and the church. Meier rightly suggests that Gelasius set out an ideal reciprocity between royal and priestly authority figures and institutions. Rulers were to have authority over ‘human’ or ‘mundane’ things, supported by priests; the latter had authority over ‘divine’ or ‘heavenly’ things, with the backing and obedience of the former. Since divine things were more important than human ones, priests in general (and the bishop of Rome in particular) held a putative moral superiority over kings. Equally significant (as Meier notes) is the conception of the church and human society this vision implies. This was far from Augustine’s indeterminate saeculum, in which priests, too, were ‘earthly’ authority figures whose moral standing was uncertain. In Gelasius’ framework, the earthly and the divine were clearly separable, and Anastasius was to condition his political actions so as to maintain his good standing as a Christian. This collapsing of imperial policy into a question of individual piety was partly a matter of conventional rhetorical positioning, with the bishop presenting the emperor as an ordinary Christian in need of his pastoral guidance so as to chastise his political and social superior. Gelasius’ presentation of the church as the ultimate context for political agency nevertheless remains telling, and representative of wider ecclesiological developments in the fifth-century Roman church.

Meier’s essay is important in tracing the origins of this particular Latin Christian secular. It is less convincing in characterizing its contemporary significance. Meier revives two traditional meta-narratives of the

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28 Gelasius, Epistola XII, ed. A. Thiel, Epistulæ Romanorum pontificum genuinae et quae ad eos scriptae sunt a s. Hilaro usque ad Pelagium II (Braunsberg, 1867), pp. 349–58. The literature is massive; important recent accounts include A. Cottrell, ‘Auctoritas and Potestas: A Reevaluation of the Correspondence of Gelasius I on Papal-Imperial Relations’, Medieval Studies 55 (1993), pp. 95–109; G. Demacopoulos, The Invention of Peter: Apostolic Discourse and Papal Authority in Late Antiquity (Philadelphia, 2013), pp. 89–95. There are two recent English translations: Demacopoulos, Peter, pp. 173–80; B. Neil and P. Allen, The Letters of Gelasius I (492–496): Pastor and Micro-Manager of the Church of Rome (Turnhout, 2014), pp. 73–80.

29 Gelasius, Epistola XII.2, ed. Thiel, pp. 350–2. Early medieval reception: P. Toubert, ‘La doctrine gélasienne des deux pouvoirs: propositions en vue d’une révision’, in C.D. Fonseca and V. Sivo (eds), Studi in onore di Gioué Musca (Bari, 2000), pp. 519–40.

30 Esp. Meier, ‘Nachdenkung’, pp. 201–4; Gelasius, Epistola XII.4, ed. Thiel, p. 352.

31 On this strategy: see Shaw, ‘Augustine’, pp. 49–50.
fifth-century west: the fall of Rome and the rise of the papacy. Like Markus, Meier suggests that the power vacuum caused by the deposition of the last western emperor led to this equation of polity and church. For Meier, this also led to a challenge to the authority of rulers, because as members of the church they were subject to priests and, above all, the bishop of Rome. The absence of a western emperor gave the bishop of Rome space to articulate an overarching (and quasi-imperial) authority. This transition of power from emperor to pope jars with recent work both on the bishop of Rome in late antiquity and on the successor kingdoms. In the first place, these bishops’ letters lacked the influence on their contemporaries (or even later early medieval readers) to effect such a rethinking. As Hanns Christof Brennecke has recently put it, in the sixth century this vision of papal moral supremacy over the emperor ‘actually had no grounding in reality’ (‘hatte . . . eigentlich keinen Bezug zur Realität’). Likewise, any reader of the past generation of scholarship on sixth-century Rome or Ostrogothic Italy will be surprised by the political vacuum evoked to explain Gelasius’ papal manspreading. Numerous studies have stressed the continuing presence of rulers with imperial pretensions in Ostrogothic Ravenna and robust civic institutions in Rome, while relocating real clout in the city from the episcopal chancery to the households of the senatorial elite. The posturing in these letters is not a good guide to the actual social and political location of late fifth- and early sixth-century bishops of Rome. Gelasius’ letter to Anastasius is a useful limit case. Gelasius may not have been subject to the emperor’s authority, but he nevertheless acknowledged the continuing

32 For this meta-narrative, see esp. W. Ullmann, *Gelasius I. (492–496): das Papsttum an der Wende der Spätantike zum Mittelalter*, Papste und Papsttum 18 (Stuttgart, 1981), echoed by e.g. Cottrell, ‘Gelasius’, p. 107; S. Wessel, *Leo the Great and the Spiritual Rebuilding of a Universal Rome*, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* 93 (Leiden, 2004), pp. 345–76; H.A. Drake, ‘The Church, Society, and Political Power’, in A. Casiday and F.W. Norris (eds), *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, Vol. 2: Constantine to c. 600 (Cambridge, 2008), p. 416. Compare Dagon, *Emperor*, esp. pp. 282–312.

33 Meier, ‘Nachdenken’, pp. 162–73. Here Meier tightens a causal link also drawn by Markus for Gregory the Great, e.g. ‘The Sacred and the Secular’, p. 87: ‘In a significant sense “secular” authority and institutions had vanished from Gregory’s world.’ Cf. also the account of medieval ‘Christendom’ and the papacy in Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, pp. 88–90.

34 Meier, ‘Nachdenken’, pp. 184–211.

35 See esp. Toubert, ‘La doctrine gelasienne’.

36 H.C. Brennecke, ‘Zwischen Byzanz und Ravenna: das Papsttum an der Wende zum 6. Jahrhundert’, in Meier and Patzold (eds), *Chlodwig und Welt*, pp. 217–38, at p. 237.

37 G. Heydemann, ‘The Ostrogothic Kingdom: Ideologies and Transitions’, in J. Arnold, K. Sessa and S. Bjornlie (eds), *A Companion to Ostrogothic Italy* (Leiden, 2016), pp. 17–46; Humphries, ‘Emperor to Pope’; K. Sessa, *The Formation of Papal Authority in Late Antiquity: Roman Bishops and the Domestic Sphere* (Cambridge, 2012); Cooper and Hillner (eds), *Religion, Dynasty, and Patronage*.

38 See esp. Demacopoulos, *Invention of Peter*, pp. 72–101.
presence, claims and alternative thinking of the eastern imperial state; he simply pushed them to the background to invoke Anastasius’ membership of the church. Gelasius formulated his post-Augustinian secular in a context where the claims of civic, royal, and even imperial institutions continued to resound. Most fundamentally, this ecclesiological model was not limited to the peculiar episcopal and political environment of Rome.

The theme of the polity as the church had a significance beyond contributing to a still inchoate narrative of papal supremacy. A number of authors across the early sixth-century west presented similar visions of rulers and political institutions as secular components of a Christian society. The Christian ideas of secularity formulated by late fifth- and early sixth-century bishops of Rome have a clear parallel in the works of three early sixth-century authors: Fulgentius, Ferrandus and Aurelianus. Like Gelasius, these North African and Gallic clerics show clear debts to Augustine and articulate parallel claims to the superiority of the priesthood with imperial and post-imperial political institutions in view. And like the letter to Anastasius, these texts were partly about the authority of priests and the protection of their jurisdiction against royal or imperial claims. But unlike Gelasius, they also found space for wider discussions of how the secular people who ruled Christian post-imperial societies were supposed to act. Through consideration of these authors, Latin Christian conceptions of the secular after Augustine can be better understood.

**Fulgentius, Ferrandus, Aurelianus**

Fulgentius’ writings show a substantial ongoing engagement with the works of Augustine (and the *Life* written after his death implies that he saw the bishop of Hippo as a role model). The bishop of Ruspe’s career was punctuated by involvement in a series of doctrinal debates. In the course of one of these – the controversy surrounding the Scythian Monks – Fulgentius wrote a work *On the Truth of**

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39 On a similar marginalization of ‘secular’ political actors in documents from the sixth-century Roman chancery: D.I. Viezure, *Collectio Avellana* and the Unspoken Ostrogoths: Historical Reconstruction in the Sixth Century*, in G. Greatrex and H. Elton (eds), *Shifting Genres in Late Antiquity* (Aldershot, 2015), pp. 93–103.

40 On Fulgentius: see R. Whelan, *Being Christian in Vandal Africa: The Politics of Orthodoxy in the Post-Imperial West*, Transformation of the Classical Heritage 59 (Oakland, 2018), pp. 49, 160–3; on the influence of Augustine and the *Vita Fulgentii*: C. Leyser, “A wall protecting the city”: Conflict and Authority in the *Life of Fulgentius of Ruspe*, in A. Camplani and G. Filoramo, *Foundations of Power and Conflicts of Authority in Late-Antique Monasticism*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 157 (Leuven, 2007), pp. 175–92.
Predestination and Grace in 523.⁴¹ Within that tractate, Fulgentius sought to rebut a rather curious exegetical argument from unnamed ‘brothers’: that high officials (both secular and ecclesiastical) were the ‘vessels of mercy’ from Paul’s Letter to the Romans, and ordinary people, clerics, and monks were the ‘vessels of shame’.

The view of certain brothers on these vessels of mercy and vessels of shame clashes greatly with the truth. For it appears to them that the vessels of mercy are those who have a position of honour of ecclesiastical or secular service in this world and that the vessels of shame are clerics and monks or whichever laymen.⁴²

In setting out an account of grace and predestination in response to this unusual interpretation, Fulgentius made a revealing series of claims. As is already apparent in the quoted passage, he characterized both bishops and rulers as individuals holding secular offices, in the sense that both have authority in this age. Unlike Gelasius, Fulgentius preserved Augustine’s anxieties about authority and the ambiguities of the present age (before the clarity brought by the End Times).

Therefore, as much as it pertains to life in this time, it is certain that in the church no one is more powerful than the bishop and in the world no one is more elevated than the Christian emperor. But that does not mean that just any bishop should be judged a vessel of mercy prepared for glory because he performs pontifical service.⁴³

Bishops, too, were secular figures who were not all predestined to be ‘vessels of mercy’. All earthly institutions – imperial and ecclesiastical – were placed on the secular side of an eschatological boundary. ‘Both vessels of mercy and vessels of shame can, to be sure, acquire ecclesiastical and secular positions for themselves, because those

⁴¹ Fulgentius, De Veritate Praedestinationis et Gratiae Libri III, ed. J. Fraipont, CCSL 91A (Turnhout, 1968), pp. 458–548. Translations are my own, although I have consulted R.R. McGregor and D. Fairbairn (trans.), Fulgentius of Ruspe and the Scythian Monks: Correspondence on Christology and Grace, The Fathers of the Church 126 (Washington, DC, 2013), pp. 121–231.

⁴² Fulgentius, De Veritate II.36, ed. Fraipont, p. 514: ‘In quibus uasis misericordiae atque contumeliae multum sensus istorum fratrum discordat, quibus uidetur ipsos esse uas misericordiae, qui ecclesiasticae siue saecularis militiae habent in hoc saeculo dignitatem, clericos uero et monachos, uel quoslibet laicos, uasa esse contumeliae.’

⁴³ Fulgentius, De Veritate II.39, ed. Fraipont, p. 516: ‘Quantum ergo pertinet ad huius temporis uitam, constat quia in ecclesia nemo pontifice potior, et in saeculo nemo Christiano imperatore celsior inuenitur. Sed non ideo quilibet episcopus uas misericordiae putetur in gloriam praeparatum quia pontificali militia fungitur.’
positions are open to the good and the evil alike.'

It was divine grace (perhaps visible in earthly conduct) and not possession of a position of dignity, which made an individual a ‘vessel for honour’. Fulgentius here reproduced the *corpus permixtum* of *City of God*. Like Gregory the Great, Fulgentius translated this from a question of moral plurality within a society made up of Christians and non-Christians, to one of moral plurality within a society presumed Christian.

Later in the text, Fulgentius defaulted to a simpler distinction between secular and religious jurisdictions (already trailed in the description of secular and ecclesiastical ‘service’ above). Ideal princes (characterized as *laici*) were those who had ‘subjected themselves truly and in a manner worthy of praise to those who despise the world’: that is, bishops and monks. This was a direct lift from Augustine’s account of the ideal emperor in *City of God*, as is clear from the examples which follow: Constantine and Theodosius I. Fulgentius distinguished between political and ecclesiastical institutions and personnel as secular and religious, perpetuating the separate jurisdictions of state and church. Fulgentius implied that rulers might have alternative interests, but argued that the ideal *princeps* would place the interests of the church above these, so as to uphold his personal (and eschatological) standing within the Christian community.

For the Christian empire is ordered and increased rather when it consults the institutional church throughout the world, than when it resists it in one place for the sake of temporal security.

In thinking about predestination, Fulgentius left no space for alternative secular or temporal interests to have value. They were simply a jumping off point for a ruler’s true interests, which were conceived as a package of characteristics and behaviours a truly

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44 Fulgentius, *De Veritate* II.40, ed. Fraipont, p. 518: ‘Saecularem quippe sibi ecclesiasticam dignitatem possunt et uasa misericordiae et uasa contumeliae temporaliter adipisci, quia ista bonis sunt malis que communia.’

45 Fulgentius, *De Veritate* II.41, ed. Fraipont, p. 518: ‘Quisquis hoc diuina illuminatus miseratione considerat, nullatenus audebit quoslibet quoslibet laicos, quantacumque saeculari praeditos dignitate, mundi contemptoribus id est clericis atque monachis sancte uiuentibus etiam temporaliter adipisci, ut illos uasa contumeliae appellet, a quibus diuinae gratiae dono mundum ipsum contemplum uidet atque calcatum, et illos pro temporali potestate putet esse uasa misericordiae, quos manifestum est in culmine saeculi constitutos, id est mundi huius religiosos principes, mundi contemptoribus non solum episcopos, sed etiam monachos, christianae religionis obtentu, seipsos ueraciter atque laudabiliter subsidisse.’ Quotation in text from last four sentence clauses.

46 Cf. Augustine, *De Civitate Dei* V.24–6, ed. B. Dombart and A. Kalb, CCSL 48 (Turnhout, 1955), pp. 160–3.

47 Fulgentius, *De Veritate* II.39, ed. Fraipont, p. 517: ‘magis enim christianum regitur ac propagatur imperium, dum ecclesiastico statui per omnem terram consultetur, quam cum in parte quacumque terrarum pro temporali securitate pugnatur’.
religious emperor would possess and perform: orthodoxy, humility, generosity, mercy (in contrast to the use of anger, fear, and judicial strictness). Here the secular received more polemical definition than simply the alternative jurisdiction of the state: it was an incorrect way of thinking, in sharp contrast to true Christian ways of governing.

These secular interests were given rather more traction on an earlier occasion when Fulgentius articulated this ideal in a text addressed to an actual ruler: the Vandal king Thrasamund. In the mid-510s, Fulgentius had been recalled from exile to debate Trinitarian doctrine in Carthage; these activities included responding to two treatises sent him by the king.48 His three-book response to the latter, entitled To Thrasamund, opened with praise of the king for a correct ordering of his priorities.

While you have ruled Africa thus, you have been ruled by self-control, so that you have desired rather to broaden the extent of your spirit than your kingdom. You know, venerable king, and (as I do not doubt) you hold confirmed by a firm opinion how much he adheres to better and more fitting things who desires to know the truth, than he who, having conquered peoples, desires to extend more broadly the boundaries of a temporal kingdom.49

Fulgentius returned to Theodosius in City of God to describe Thrasamund’s cast of mind.50 He provided a running contrast between individual development as a Christian and the standard approach to ruling a kingdom. As in On the Truth of Predestination, the latter was a jumping off point for the former. But here it was more of a legitimate presence as part of a captatio benevolentiae for what followed: a three-book account of the Nicene Trinitarian doctrine to which Fulgentius hoped Thrasamund would adhere. It capped a section of praise for Thrasamund’s other qualities and accomplishments as a ruler.51 Both On the Truth of Predestination

48 On this episode: A. Merrills and R. Miles, The Vandals (Chichester, 2010), pp. 197–8; Whelan, Being Christian, pp. 160–3.

49 Fulgentius, Ad Trasamundum 1.2, ed. J. Fraipont, CCSL 91 (Turnhout, 1968), p. 99: ‘inuentus es qui te ipso potior exitiisse, dum sic africano praesides moderando regimini, ut magis desideres animae spatia dilatare quam regni. nosti, uenerabilis rex, et (ut non ambigo) firma tenes sententia comprobatum quanto melioribus inhaereat commodis qui ueritatem desiderat nosse, quam qui, subactis gentibus, temporalis fines regni cupit latius propagare’.

50 On this passage of City of God: Y.-M. Duval, ‘L’éloge de Théodose dans la Cité de Dieu (V, 26, 1): sa place, son sense, et ses sources’, Recherches Augustiniennes 4 (1966), pp. 135–79. It could be seen as outside the scope of Markus’s version of Augustine: cf. Markus, Saeculum, p. 57 n. 1, citing Peter Brown: ‘some of the most shoddy passages of the City of God’. Nevertheless, it illustrates a key part of Augustine’s thought on the two cities isolated by Markus: that heavenly citizens will use the things of the world for higher purposes: ibid. pp. 67–8.

51 Fulgentius, Ad Trasamundum 1.2, ed. Fraipont, p. 99. The secularity or otherwise of clerics does not feature here.
and To Thrasamund presented the duties of government as both Christian and secular (with the precise character of some activities depending on the individual formation of the ruler). The difference is that, when writing to Thrasamund, those distinctly secular concerns were presented more neutrally as the ‘cares of rule’; when writing more theoretically, those same secular affairs became problematic. That difference must stem from the different audiences of these texts. In both cases, Fulgentius assumed an alternative conception of government within contemporary political institutions. The bishop of Ruspe could flatten this institutional logic when writing to the Scythian Monks about predestination, but not when addressing a contemporary king.

If Fulgentius had lived longer, he might have had another opportunity to apply his ideas to a living ruler. Soon after the Byzantine reconquest of Africa in 533–4, a military commander (dux) named Reginus wrote to Fulgentius seeking ‘a spiritual rule (regula) for one occupied by military affairs’; since the bishop died before he could respond, his mentee Ferrandus, a deacon in Carthage, wrote back instead, providing seven rules for Reginus to live by. Augustine’s ecclesiology in City of God fundamentally informed these rules. Yet this was not simply an abstract exercise; the deacon’s advice applied this framework to the practical business of government in Byzantine Africa, including frank discussions of topics including corruption, false tax assessments, heretics in the army, judicial behaviour, and oath-breaking. Like Fulgentius, Ferrandus offered alternative versions of the distinction between the Christian and the secular built out of issues of morality and jurisdiction.

Ferrandus made his reliance on City of God obvious from the beginning. The deacon divided the world into two sorts of people serving Babylon and Jerusalem: milites saeculi and milites Christi. The former served earthly kings; the latter, a heavenly emperor. A series of rhetorical contrasts sharpened this dichotomy between secular and Christian soldiers (e.g. enriching yourself as against serving the common good). It is clear that the secular represented the customary,

52 Fulgentius, Ad Trasamundum I.2, ed. Fraipont, p. 99: ‘barbari regis animum numerosis regni curis . . . occupatam’.
53 Ferrandus, Ad Reginum (= Ep. 7), PL 67, pp. 928–50; quotation at 2, col. 929C: ‘Et ideo laudabili sollicitudine uenerabilis memoriae Fulgentium pontificem Ruspensis Ecclesiae interrogasti quals tibi militiae in terram occupata regula sit spiritualis propitiato retinenda.’ On Ferrandus’ text, see K. Cooper, The Fall of the Roman Household (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 31–7; R. Whelan, ‘An Ascetic State? Fashioning Christian Political Service Across the Early Sixth-Century Mediterranean’, Studies in Late Antiquity 2.3 (2018), pp. 385–418, at pp. 407–16.
54 Ferrandus, Ad Reginum 5–6, 7–8, 9, 11–14, 15, 15–16, PL 67, cols 932C–933A, cols 933A–936D, cols 936D–938A, cols 939A–942D, cols 942D–943B, cols 943B–944C.
55 Ferrandus, Ad Reginum 1, PL 67, col. 928D.
56 Ferrandus, Ad Reginum 1, PL 67, cols 928B–929B.
corrupt way of doing things in the context of the late ancient state. This was a polemical rather than a neutral secular, of the sort to encourage individuals towards the correct form of militia: spiritual service in various forms of ideal Christian lifestyle (ascetic, monk, bishop, confessor, martyr).

Unlike Augustine and Fulgentius, the deacon did not see clerics as ‘earthly’ authority figures. His own rhetorical positioning emphasized the absence of anxiety about ecclesiastical authority in his account: ‘bound by the chains of ecclesiastical service, I am separated from secular cares’. Ferrandus laid separate institutional contexts over this distinction between the secular and Christian. Later, in the Rule ‘place divine things before human ones’ (humanis divina praepone), Ferrandus argued that the dux must maintain a respectful and subordinate relationship with respect to bishops, especially in questions of doctrine and local ecclesiastical practice: like Anastasius in Gelasius’ letter, Reginus was to approach churchmen with ‘neck bent’ (inclinata cervice). A significant starting point for Ferrandus’ thinking was a stark contrast between a corrupt secular state and a morally upstanding church.

The need to provide a ‘spiritual rule’ for a miles saeculi necessarily complicated this binary picture. At the end of the introduction, Ferrandus blurred this sharp contrast; the imperial state was not simply made up of secular soldiers.

Whenever the hidden dispensation of the most pious creator has given the power of judging and administering the earthly commonwealth to those hearing and obeying this salubrious admonition [i.e. I John II.15–17: ‘Do not love the world, nor those things which are in the world’ etc], because of them the collectivity of those serving the state [lit. army of the world] is not filled with graver sins.

The litany of criticisms of secular officials is finally shown up as a way of positioning the role of a Christian in government, avoiding corruption and oppression and checking it on the part of others. The rules which follow blend the activities of the militia saeculi and the militia Christi.

57 Ferrandus, Ad Reginum 3, PL 67, col. 930A: ‘Ecce ego militiae ecclesiasticae uinculis alligatus, curis secularibus dissipor.’
58 Ferrandus, Ad Reginum 17, PL 67, col. 945B.
59 Ferrandus, Ad Reginum 1, PL 67, col. 929B: ‘Quibus audientibus atque obedientibus huic saluberrimae admonitioni, quoties occulta dispensatio piissimi Creatoris potestatem iudicandi ac disponendi terrenam rempublicam tribuit, tunc ex parte militia saeculi non est grauioribus referita peccatis.’
60 In this sense, they run in parallel with many of Augustine’s own discussions: see Markus, Saeculum, p. 58.
Like Gregory the Great, Ferrandus presented earthly political institutions as morally mixed bodies, in which (exceptional) Christians were capable of translating spiritual service to the context of the imperial state. The deacon presented a set of overlapping distinctions between secular and Christian: differing life courses and institutions; the mixture of secular and Christian soldiers within the state; and rulers as members of the church. Through drawing and redrawing all of these circles Ferrandus could plot a course through competing expectations of a Christian official.

Those competing expectations are front and centre in an intriguing letter sent by a Bishop Aurelianus to the Merovingian king Theudebert. The date and context of this letter—preserved in the *Epistulae Austrasicae*—has been contested. Originally attributed to Aurelianus of Arles (writing c.546), Roger Collins has plausibly reassigned it to a southern Gallic bishop of the same name who was an episcopal correspondent of Ennodius of Pavia in the mid-530s.\(^{61}\) This reattribution would place the letter closer to Theudebert’s accession. In either case, Aurelianus established a clear rhetorical context from the beginning: his fear in sending the letter and speaking before his ruler given his own rhetorical inadequacy. This fear was (naturally) assuaged by his knowledge of Theudebert’s personal character: his humility and care for the poor. The bishop clarified what kind of panegyric he would offer, celebrating things for eternity, not these times: the king’s ‘pious behaviour’ (*religiosa actio*). With a heavy-handed *praeteritio*, Aurelianus signalled he would leave the king’s secular accomplishments to the ‘eloquence of the world’ (*loquacitas orbis*).

I neglect your starry lineage; I am silent also about [all] this: that you alone hold the scepter, [rule] many peoples and diverse *gentes*, [are] united in lordship, firm in rule, of widespread power.\(^{62}\)

While Aurelianus suggested that distinctly pious forms of agency were more valid than worldly ones, and went on to reflect on the sort of Christian mindset which befitted an ideal ruler, he nevertheless left

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\(^{61}\) R. Collins, ‘Theodebert I, “Rex Magnus Francorum”’, in P. Wormald (ed.), *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies Presented to J.-M. Wallace-Hadrill* (Oxford, 1983), pp. 7–33; P.D. King, ‘The Barbarian Kingdoms’, in Burns (ed.), *Medieval Political Thought*, pp. 127–53, at p. 135; Y. Hen, ‘The Uses of the Bible and the Perception of Kingship in Merovingian Gaul’, *EME* 7 (1998), pp. 277–90, at p. 283.

\(^{62}\) *Epistulae Austrasicae* X.1–5, quotations at 4 and 5, ed. H. Rochais *et al.*, CCSL 117 (Turnhout, 1957), p. 426, p. 427: ‘Praetereo generis tui stimma sidereum; taceo et illud, quod unicus sceptris, multiplex populis, gente uarius, dominatione unitus, solidus regno, diffusus imperio.’

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considerable space for the secular as valid on its own terms, and especially significant in the context of court and kingdom. Perhaps more than any other author considered in this article, Aurelianus gave credence to an alternative (and indeed dominant) secular mindset present in the ruling elites: something akin to the ‘massive secularity’ of the late Roman state and empire which Markus repeatedly emphasized. The secular activities of rule are here portrayed positively, even if contrasted to the more significant religiosa actio of the king.

Aurelianus divided up the ruler’s activities into the secular or temporal, as against the pious or eternal. The secularity of government was defined (in the quotation above) in terms of lineage, military success, the size of a kingdom, and the musculature of power. Meanwhile, Aurelianus categorized the correct behaviour of Theudebert towards his subjects as part of his pious behaviour.

What, I say, should we talk about first and foremost, his mercy among the poor, his moderation among his subjects, his generosity in gifts, his counsel in uncertainty, his constancy in adversity?

... You are greatest in your dominion, because you are great in your dedication [or prayer?]; you are happy in your conscience, because you are pious in your life; bravo, restorer of antiquity, inventor of the new, sometimes serious, sometimes playful, you provide benefits to the absent, and favour to the nobles in your presence; you are encircled by the love of all, and enlarged by the opinion of all.

The favour of a ruler towards their elite subjects was a central theme of late ancient panegyric. As Ennodius did in his letters, Aurelianus took the traditional notion that elites held a pious duty to maintain normative forms of appropriate sociability, and subtly recast it to reflect a more specifically Christian sense of what constituted ‘religiosity’.

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63 Markus, ‘The Sacred and the Secular’, pp. 90, 96; Markus, The End, pp. 131, 228.
64 See esp. S. Kennell, Magnus Felix Ennodius: A Gentleman of the Church (Ann Arbor, 2000), pp. 43–84, pp. 168–9; S. Gioanni, Ennode de Pavie: Lettres (Paris, 2006–10), pp. lii–lxxii, lxxiii–lxxvii, cxxi–cxxii; cf. Alan Cameron, The Last Pagans of Rome (Oxford, 2011), p. 189 on religio as ‘Symmachus’s favorite word . . . for the duties of friendship’.

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the fifth- and sixth-century authors discussed in this article, the Gallic bishop advised a form of distinctly Christian agency within the secular political institutions of government. Still, his portrayal of this ‘religious’ form of behaviour encompassed rather more than those of his near-contemporaries. This expansive perspective could be connected to the lesser significance of issues of jurisdiction in the text as compared to Fulgentius, Ferrandus, and Gelasius. In the (apparent) absence of a specific inciting incident requiring the defence of ecclesiastical jurisdiction, Aurelianus could be much less guarded in articulating a wider ‘religious’ remit for the king.66

Once again, this vision of Christian rulership stemmed from the specific demands of church membership. In maintaining peace, Theudebert conquered himself rather than extending his kingdom; in governing, he was to look towards the Last Judgement, where he would render account to God.67 Aurelianus envisaged a Christian ruling with the heavenly kingdom in mind. His conception of Christian rulership could be viewed as a mindset to bring to government in general. Yet it also seems limited to a subset of Theudebert’s activities, with other (necessary) tasks filed under a secular portfolio. Aurelianus imagined a court where secular forms of praise not only ran in parallel, but were the dominant form of cultural expression, requiring him to itemize and implicitly valorize a whole list of virtuous activities (which he was, naturally, not going to talk about). There was no polemical secular in his text, only a neutral one which underlay Theudebert’s capacity to develop a ‘pious’ form of Christian sociability with his subjects.

The secular in early sixth-century Latin Christian political thought

These authors set out four overlapping, but not entirely compatible Christian notions of the secular. All of these versions of the concept were already present in Augustine’s writings. The first is an

66 Aurelianus’ lack of concern for separate jurisdictions may reflect differing ecclesiastical climates in Merovingian Gaul and Vandal/Byzantine North Africa. Compare B. Dumézil, ‘La royauté mérovingienne et les élections épiscopales au VIe siècle’, in J. Leemans, P. Van Nuffelen, S.J. Keogh, and C. Nicolaye (eds), Episcopal Elections in Late Antiquity, Arbeiten zur Kirchengeschichte 119 (Berlin, 2011), pp. 127–44, esp. pp. 132–3, with Y. Modéran, ‘L’Afrique reconquise et les trois chapitres’, in C. Chazelle and C. Cubitt (eds), The Crisis of the Oikoumene: The Three Chapters and the Failed Quest for Unity in the Sixth-Century Mediterranean, Studies in the Early Middle Ages 14 (Turnhout, 2007), pp. 60–1, and cf. King, ‘Kingdoms’, p. 135 and Hen, ‘Uses’, p. 283 on Aurelianus as foreshadowing an even more developed Christian and distinctly biblical representation of Frankish kingship.

67 Epistulae Austrasicae X.8, ed. Rochais et al., p. 428.
eschatological notion of the secular as belonging to this age (as opposed to the time after the Last Judgement). Such a notion (potentially) carved out all facets of contemporary experience as secular, however much they had to do with the church. For Markus, this was the key to Augustine. All three authors had an implicit eschatological framework behind their conception of the secular. They adopted the pastoral strategy of summoning divine providence and of relating behaviour in this age to rewards in the next. Fulgentius was the only one explicitly to reproduce Augustine's sense of the uncertainty of the current age in his discussion of both emperors and priests as 'earthly' authority figures in On the Truth of Predestination and Grace. Even he transgressed this indeterminacy by dividing up things happening in sāeculo into transparent moral categories. Eschatological ideas are important in all of these conceptions of the secular, but they are less consistent than Augustine in their emphases, and permit of much greater certainty.

More common is a clear-cut association of secular and sacred with the activities and representatives of, respectively, state and church. Such a perspective was buttressed by the mutually reinforced separation of jurisdiction between the two sets of institutions. This division could be neutrally formulated as a simple matter of separate legal fields and competences, as, for example, Gallic church councils spoke of both secular and ecclesiastical laws and courts. Aurelianus and Fulgentius (when writing to Thrasamund) built on this neutral division in their acceptance of secular activities as necessary 'cares of rule' to which kings needed to attend. Yet this splitting of jurisdictions also shaded off into more moral judgements about the corrupt worldliness of the agents of late and post-Roman regimes. Such critiques ran in parallel with wider apologetic and ascetic critique of traditional modes of life and the encouragement of more distinctly Christian attitudes and behaviours. This more polemical account of the secular is evident in both Fulgentius and Ferrandus, who contrasted 'Christian' approaches to government with secular ones rooted in corruption, anger, unconcern, and intimidation. This simpler division of contemporaries into secular and sacred cut sharply against a more eschatological framework, but, as Fulgentius' text on predestination shows, the two frames of reference could nonetheless coexist.

68 Bailey, Religious Worlds, pp. 24–6.
69 Cf. Markus, Saeculum, p. 55 on early Christian apologetic confrontation of the church and the world; the influence of ascetic/monastic traditions in the fifth and sixth-century west runs throughout The End, but see esp. pp. 199–211 on the 'ascetic invasion'.

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This binary division into the problematically worldly and the laudably Christian was a tempting recourse, especially in contexts of polemic against specific political actors or advice to ascetically minded aristocrats. Yet the fact that most fifth- and sixth-century political actors were Christians disrupted such neat frameworks. The status of rulers and their subordinates as members of the church required more subtle applications of conceptual divisions between the secular and the sacred. It led to notions that the personnel, attitudes, and activities of late and post-Roman regimes were themselves more or less worldly or Christian. In all of these texts what rulers did belonged to both spheres. This could be (as in Fulgentius and Ferrandus) a question of the mindset which an individual brought to the affairs of rule. It could also be a matter of separate secular and Christian portfolios. Such a view was articulated most clearly in Aurelianus’ letter to Theudebert, although both Fulgentius and Ferrandus singled out some activities as particularly Christian. The ambiguous position of the Christian ruler required multiple competing visions of the secular.

Such differentiated perspectives on that most worldly of earthly institutions led to similar forms of ambivalence as those articulated by Augustine. Moreover, they often led authors to use Augustine’s own language and concepts. Ferrandus drew on the notion of the two cities to portray the state as a corpus permixtum, in which the citizens of Jerusalem had to check the excesses of those of Babylon. Both Fulgentius and Ferrandus drew extensively on City of God’s ideal Christian emperor. But these three authors were not simply continuing and modifying a specific Latin ecclesiastical discourse about the secular. They also implicitly engaged with a fourth conception of the secular: the alternative perspectives of those very political actors. All of these authors assumed that their addressees or those around them would have a contrasting take on morally appropriate behaviour, rooted in the different cultural milieu of their social and institutional environment. For Ferrandus, this meant the corrupt (but also pragmatic) secular mindsets of Reginus’ colleagues. For Fulgentius, it was (echoing Augustine) the possibility that the security of the state would count more than the interests of the church. For Aurelianus, it was the hegemony of ‘secular’ praise – loquacitas orbis – for masculine military authority at the court of a Merovingian dynast. These authors gave such alternative perspectives differing degrees of validity, but when writing to a ruler or official, they had to take them into account. The significance of these interests of state is, of course, partly a projection of the authors’ own rhetorical positioning, and it is generally filtered through the more or
less polemical categories already laid out. The accuracy or disingenuity of this characterization of a non-ecclesiastical (and insuffi-
ciently Christian) political environment can only be judged with respect to particular settings and individuals. This projection of secular people, attitudes, and environments ‘out there’ is nevertheless central in these texts.

Conclusion

To read Robert as he passes from Augustine to Gregory I is to detect with a thrill (and with a certain dread at the sheer, silent force with which it flowed) one of the formative currents of European history. For good or ill, this current would sweep Christianity itself, in its own self-definition, from an open world, aware of the challenge posed by outsiders to the faith and of the baffling diversity of well-tried technologies of living inherited from the non-Christian past, into the stiller waters of the early middle ages – deeper waters, perhaps, and less muddy, but flowing now between far narrower banks . . . Heaven and earth are in place, and the rustling density of the saeculum outside . . . is long forgotten.\footnote{Brown, ‘Introducing Robert Markus’, p. 185.}

In his short introduction to Robert Markus’s lecture at Villanova University in November 2000, Peter Brown vividly evoked the ‘itinerary’ on which his works lead us.\footnote{Brown, ‘Introducing Robert Markus’, p. 185.} Markus’s works present a compelling narrative of ‘de-secularization’ in western Mediterranean societies from c.400–600 CE. In this article, I have not sought to challenge the contours of this narrative of cultural change at the end of antiquity, which can perhaps be shifted or qualified, but (like the Last Judgement) cannot be postponed forever. Instead, I have suggested that we need to revisit Markus’s account of changes in Christian thought from Augustine to Gregory the Great. This narrative of an inexorable slide into medieval Christendom starts early medieval historians off on the wrong foot.\footnote{Klingshirn, ‘Theology’, pp. 80–1.} Associating the complexity and ambivalence of Christian thought about the church and society with the extent of contemporary religious pluralism cannot but lead to an intellectually impoverished early Middle Ages in which a banal secular plays a greatly
diminished role. To understand the secular in the early Middle Ages, we need to reset our coordinates.\footnote{In making this argument, I seek to respond to C. O’Brien, ‘Kings and Kingship in the Writings of Bede’, \textit{EHR} 132 (2017), pp. 1473–98. O’Brien sees in Bede’s works traces of an Augustinian neutral ‘secular’, and suggests that we might profitably extend Markus’s late ancient secularity into the early Middle Ages. I argue instead that we need to detach Christian ideas of the ‘secular’ from narratives of de-secularization. See also Robert Evans in this issue, for the seemingly independent emergence of an ambivalent secular in Carolingian history writing.}

The notion that the church represented the basic field for human society was not new with Gregory the Great. It is already present in Christian writings to and about rulers from a century earlier (and even further back).\footnote{See Ullmann, \textit{Gelasius}, pp. 10–20; Meier, ‘Nachdenkung’, pp. 159–60.} The writings of Gelasius, Fulgentius, Ferrandus, and Aurelianus show a corresponding conception of the secular as a way of classifying (more or less neutrally) the activities, mindsets, offices and institutional settings of Christians. As a result, this way of thinking about secularity – as an issue within the church – cannot be put off to a medieval future. It also cannot be taken as a correlate of the end of the Roman state or the decline of traditional civic institutions. All of the authors considered in this article articulated this secular when writing to rulers and when engaging with the alternative perspectives of contemporary political institutions. These Christian conceptions of the secular are thus not simply a commonsensical (even complacent) interpretation of a society at the end of a period of profound religious change. Rather, they were formulated in dialogue with competing ideas of overarching authority in late fifth- and early sixth-century society. Of course, the views of kingship or \textit{militia saeculi} in these writings do not map straightforwardly onto the perspectives of contemporary kings and emperors or those who served them. But they were nevertheless formulated with these alternative ways of thinking in mind. This secular appears from these works, not as a banal commonplace, but rather a rhetorically sophisticated strategy to capture aspects of contemporary society and make them susceptible to Christian interpretation.

What these writings suggest above all is a need to acknowledge the continuing plurality and complexity of late ancient and early medieval secularities. Individual authors could deploy multiple (sometimes contradictory) conceptions of the secular within the same work: the secular as this world as against the next; the secular as royal or imperial jurisdiction as opposed to that of the church; the secular as morally neutral or flawed cast of mind, activity, or phenomenon in contrast to that of the true Christian. The authors I have discussed here were deeply indebted to the works of Augustine for their ecclesiology. But
the bishop of Hippo was not the only late ancient author with a complex perspective on the relationship between church and society. Nor was his notion of the *saeculum* the sole recourse for a fifth- or sixth-century Christian author. Even in the case of these deeply Augustinian authors, a wider set of Christian cultural traditions shaped their ideas, including legal discussions of secular and ecclesiastical jurisdiction and the long history of first apologetic, then ascetic notions of true Christianity as a break from the world. These alternative modes of thinking about the secular may provide different trajectories to that suggested by the reception of Augustine. At the very least, this multiplicity of forms of secularity – when combined with the ongoing complexity of early medieval societies – led to similar forms of ambivalence to those which Markus patiently drew out of the works of the bishop of Hippo.⁷⁵ Those many forms of early medieval Christian secularity still await a study as sophisticated and sympathetic as *The End of Ancient Christianity*.⁷⁵

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⁷⁵ For parallel arguments, see O’Brien, ‘Bede’, pp. 1473–4, 1497–8.