

PLATO'S MYTH OF THE "NOBLE LIE" VIS-À-VIS SAINT AUGUSTINE'S IDEAL  
OF A STATESMAN

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**Abstract**

*In this study, we show how, in the bid of fostering harmony and cohesion in the ideal city presented in his Republic, the ancient Greek philosopher Plato invented the so-called myth of the Noble Lie. It aims at convincing people of their common origin in order to ignite in them the desire to love and defend their common city but also to make them accept the division of society into classes. We then compare Plato's vision of the political community to Augustine's ideal of a Statesman to expose what the Bishop of Hippo consider as the criteria for ruling the earthly city with the heart fixed on the eternal promises. In a last step, we took a critical look at the situation of the politics in Nigeria after 60 years of independence, to indicate that most politicians do not even use the Noble Lie, but rather go for the "Ignoble" one to satisfy their greed, to the detriment of the people they are meant to serve.*

**Keywords:** Plato, Noble Lie, Augustine, Statesman, earthly city, virtues.

**Introduction**

This paper investigates how Augustine of Hippo envisioned Christian leadership compared to the myth of the Noble Lie invented by Plato in his *Republic* to foster the acceptance of life together in the ideal city. First of all, we shall expose the origin and content of the "Noble lie" before briefly evaluating it. Then we shall present Augustine's thought as a proposition of who should lead society, and how the Gospel values can transform the relations between those who lead and the people they rule for the common good and most importantly for the desire of the eternal goods God promised for the life to come. The itinerary will eventually lead us to critically examine the problem of leadership in the Nigerian political sphere after many years of independence. Our approach will be expository and analytic on the bases of concrete texts from the authors we set out to study.

## The myth of the Noble Lie

Towards the end of Book III of the *Republic*, in the course of a long discussion about the best way of educating the rulers of the imaginary city,<sup>1</sup> Socrates claims that in order for a just city to exist, it will have to be founded on a *gennaion pseudos*, a “noble” lie or falsehood. This lie will be used “to persuade, in the best case, even the rulers, but if not them, the rest of the city” that the citizens are earthborn siblings, and that a paternalistic god chose the political role of each before their birth (*Rep.* 3. 413c).<sup>2</sup>

## Cadmus and emergence of the earthborn

The myth has two components of which the first is Plato’s rewriting of the story of how Cadmus<sup>3</sup> sowed a field with dragon’s teeth, and how from the earth there then sprang up a race of armed men, the so-called ‘earthborn’ or ‘Spartoi’ (the sown ones). Cadmus set these earthborn fighting among each other by throwing a stone into their midst. As a result of the fight, they exterminated themselves, but five of them survived and helped him build Cadmea, the eponymous citadel of what was to become Thebes. This Phoenician foundation myth inspired Plato in the first part of his myth, especially concerning the idea that all the citizens sprang from the earth, which is their common mother. So, for the first part, Plato had Socrates, in conversation with Glaucon, to narrate a tale that would persuade the citizens of Kallipolis to believe the foundation myth that makes them love the city and seek its good:

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<sup>1</sup> In the Books II and III of his *Republic*, Plato discusses hypothetical cities in comparison, culminating in Kallipolis (Καλλίπολις), a utopian city-state ruled by a philosopher-king. A utopia is an imagined community or society with highly desirable or nearly perfect qualities for its citizens. Plato holds that a philosopher-king is a ruler who possesses both a love of wisdom, intelligence, reliability, and a willingness to live a simple life. Such are the rulers of his utopian city Kallipolis. For such a community to ever come into being, “philosophers [must] become kings...or those now called kings [must]...genuinely and adequately philosophise”. (*Rep.*, 5.473d).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. K. Carmola, *Noble Lying. Justice and Intergenerational Tension in Plato’s Republic*, in *Political Theory* 31/1 (February 2003), 39.

<sup>3</sup> For modern authorities on the t of Cadmus, see F. Vian, *Les origines de Thèbes: Cadmos et les Spartes*, Paris 1963; R. B. Edwards. *Kadmos, the Phoenician: A Study in Greek Legends and the Mycenaean Age*, Amsterdam 1979; W.J. Verdenius, *Cadmus, Tiresias, Pentheus Notes on Euripides’ Bacchae 170-369*, in *Mnemosyne* 41/3 (1988), 241-268; Matia Rocchi, *Kadmos e Harmonia: un matrimonio problematico*, Rome 1989; S. Murnaghan, *The Daughters of Cadmus: Chorus and Characters in Euripides’ Bacchae and Ion*, in *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 49/87 (2006), 99-112; M. Detienne, *Being Born Impure in the City of Cadmus and Oedipus*, in *Arion: A Journal of Humanities and the Classics* 10/3 (2003), 35-47.

I have to try and persuade first of all the rulers themselves and the soldiers, and then the rest of the city, that the entire upbringing and education we gave them, their whole experience of it happening to them, was after all merely a dream, something they imagined, and that in reality, they spent that time being formed and raised deep within the earth – themselves, their weapons and the rest of the equipment which was made for them. When the process of making them was complete, the earth their mother released them, and now it is their duty to be responsible for defending the country in which they live against any attack – just as they would defend their mother or nurse – and to regard the rest of the citizens as their brothers, born from the earth. (*Rep.* 3. 414D–E)

As we can see, this lie is one of the most powerful tools used by Socrates in his attempt to move his interlocutors, especially Glaucon, away from their simplistic ambitions and resentments, and toward a more complex and realistic form of political justice.<sup>4</sup> So the first part of the myth of noble lie will generate an ideal just state by falsifying the origin, or generation, of the citizens. The idea is to get the citizens ‘to care more for the city and for each other’ (*Rep.* 3. 415D) by showing them that they have the same origin and that they are brothers.

### **The myth of the metals**

The second part describes how the distinct social and political classes of the city are created.<sup>5</sup> The second part of the myth, also called ‘the parable of the metals’, speaks of society’s origins based on the three distinct categories or classes of men. Socrates affirms:

All of you in the city are certainly brothers, we shall say to them in telling the tale, but the god, in fashioning those of you who are competent to rule [the guardians], mixed gold in at their birth; this is why they are most honoured; in auxiliaries [soldiers], silver; and iron and bronze in the farmers and the other craftsmen (*Rep.* 3. 415A).

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<sup>4</sup> It is the discussion about justice that opened the Book I of *Rep.* the continues into Book II.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. K. Carmola, *Noble Lying*, 52.

These metals (gold, silver, and iron and bronze) sprinkled in the souls of different people classify them into society's three ranks. Through this myth, Plato tries to bring people to accept the situation in which they find themselves.

Moreover, 'the Noble Lie' helps Plato resolve another issue that he has been wrestling with throughout many of his earlier dialogues, namely, how to convince the populace, who are unable to grasp the truth without resorting to rhetoric, of the benefit of this form of society: "this myth... [it] would have a good effect, making them more inclined to care for the state and one another. For I think I apprehend your meaning". (*Rep.* 3. 415D).

The thought that the Noble Lie, precisely its Cadmeian element, consists of telling people something false about their origins, does not appear to be anything Plato finds disconcerting. To some extent, it is easy enough to see why Plato might think it noble. Devotion to one's city was a widely accepted and frequently hymned Greek ideal, familiar from Homer (particularly in the figure of Hector in the *Iliad*) to the Athenian funeral oration. So, a myth designed to promote such devotion to what Socrates will describe as the good city (e.g. *Rep.* 4. 427E) might well be regarded as noble.<sup>6</sup>

From what precedes, it appears that the two halves of the Noble Lie theory are linked: the first part aims to provide a mythical basis for fraternity among citizens, and the second part aims to prevent the significant threat of fratricide. Thus, the Noble Lie rests on a wishful image of mythical parents and children, ascribing godlike perception to parental figures, transparent natures to children, and easy relations between siblings.

However, at the second level of analysis, it is hard to reconcile the common birth from the same earth (first part of the myth) with the stratification of society in various groups (the parable of the metals). There seems to be nothing remotely egalitarian or democratic about the myth of metals. This myth is irreconcilable with any suggestion of natural equality of birth and endorsement of the hallmark democratic slogan 'equality under the law', conveying it did something like our 'equal rights'.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. M. Schofield, *Plato. Political Philosophy*, Oxford 2006, 287.

The Noble Lie, therefore, affirms fraternity without equality. And liberty? The other key component of the Noble Lie's conceptual fabric is not liberty but god: divine declaration, injunction and prophecy. The ideology of the Republic's ideal city is explicitly authoritarian and theistic... Noble Lie: the beginning and the middle and the end of the city are presented in a divine perspective. Plato's rationale for writing god into the popular ideology of Republic and Laws alike is not hard to understand. He wants to appeal to a source of authority that is unchallengeable, which will underpin society's traditions, and whose pronouncements can be immediately persuasive to the population at large.

Such deception is entirely incompatible with the assumption of modern liberal political philosophy since Locke. The latter posits that the only proper way of legitimating the political order is by appeal to reason: to rational considerations which have the power to motivate acceptance of a political authority by those who are to be subject to it. It is similarly and connectedly in conflict with the fundamental moral requirement, often associated above all with Kantian ethics, that people be treated as ends, not means. The Noble Lie seems an affront to human dignity, significantly undermining the human capacity for self-determination.

Lying and falsehood are considered as pervasive necessities in the ideal city's politics and culture, and in this regard, there is an asymmetry between rulers and ruled. One particularly chilling remark on the subject occurs in Socrates' discussion in Book 5 of the mechanisms needed to sustain belief in the eugenic system for controlling breeding. 'It will be a necessity', he says (459C), 'for the rulers to use many drugs.' He then explains what he has in mind (459C-D): 'It looks as though the rulers are going to have to use a great deal of falsehood and deception for the benefit of those they are ruling.' In this instance, the ruled (here not the economic class, but the young soldiers who are to support the rulers) will be told that the mating arrangements are simply the outcome of a lottery. The ruled, by contrast, should have nothing to do with lying. An ordinary citizen cannot lie to the rulers. Such an action is worse than that of a patient or someone in training lying to his doctor or trainer about his physical condition, or a sailor not telling the navigator the truth about the ship's state and those sailing it. If a ruler catches any of the artisans lying like this, 'he will punish him for introducing a practice which is as subversive and destructive in a city as it is in a ship' (3.389 B-D).

Plato suggested the Noble Lie for the sake of peace and cohesion in the city. The myth seeks to unite and differentiate, explain what is common and distinct, and foster civic patriotism amid significant difference. The first part encourages civic commitment, shared sacrifice, and belief in a common good. The second justifies the existence of inequality as a permanent feature of -human society.<sup>7</sup> Despite the shortcomings and criticism we could raise against the myth in modern and contemporary contexts, Plato intends to promote and favour social harmony.

What type of lie do our politicians put forth today in our countries' socio-political context, especially in Nigeria? We could say that theirs is an "Ignoble Lie". As A. Aughey puts it, "An Ignoble Lie is not a venal lie, one that promotes corruption or that hides personal malpractice and wrongdoing. It is not such a petty thing. The Noble Lie has the virtue of conviction, and even of intention, an Ignoble Lie has the virtue of neither. It is the grand nakedness of political self-interest clothed in the garb of nobility."<sup>8</sup> The lies of a large spectre of our politicians prove more than Ignoble in the sense that they do more than hiding personal malpractice and wrongdoing. We shall return to this discussion in the last session of the paper. In the meantime, let us examine Augustine's ideal of a Statesman.

## Augustine's ideal of a Statesman:

### The two Cities

To understand Augustine's political thought, we need to understand his doctrine of the two cities. This doctrine developed progressively in his works. Its origin is in various works and dates back to some of Augustine's early writings. Its development is diffused in many literary productions before the *City of God*, which most notably exposes the doctrine.<sup>9</sup> In a nutshell, the two cities are the *Civitas Dei*

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Patrick J. Deneen, *The Ignoble Lie*, in *First Things* 04 (April 2018). The idea is expressed on the journal's site: <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2018/04/the-ignoble-lie> consulted on January 04th, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> A. Aughey, *The 'noble lie' of politics*, in *Forthnight* 397 (Jul.-Aug. 2001), 14.

<sup>9</sup> For a deeper understanding of this doctrine, we recommend the following readings: Markus, *Saeculum: history and society in the theology of St. Augustine*, Cambridge 1970; K. Chabi, *Eternal Peace or everlasting Frustration: The Doctrine of the "Two Cities" in the Thought of Saint Augustine*, in B. Chidili, K. I. Anthony (eds), *Augustine*

(the city of God) the *Civitas Diaboli* (the devil's city, the earthly city). According to the bishop of Hippo, the two cities are founded by two opposite loves. In his *City of God*, he wrote: "Two loves, then, have made two cities. Love of self, even to the point of contempt for God, made the earthly city, and love of God, even to the point of contempt for self, made the heavenly city. Thus, the former glories in itself, and the latter glories in the Lord."<sup>10</sup>

Getting into the heart of the matter, we can say that by the devil's city, Augustine means those who, from Cain until the end of history, will be damned on Judgment Day to eternal hellfire along with the bad angels because of their sins. The earthly city is, therefore, the city of the damned. He puts it thus: "All those who have no taste but for the things of this earth, all who prize earthly happiness above God, and all who seek their own ends, not those of Jesus Christ, belong to that city whose mystical name is Babylon, the city that has the devil as its king."<sup>11</sup>

Nonetheless, he uses the expression at times to refer to political entities (empires, kingdoms, etc.), whether in a generic or specific sense.<sup>12</sup> The Roman Empire falls within the scope of the earthly city. As R. Dodaro observes, Augustine certainly believes that all political regimes are depraved. However, he admits that some are less depraved than others and that some are less depraved at certain times in their history than at other times.<sup>13</sup> In contrast to the city of God, the earthly city is guided by self-love and lives according to what Scripture calls the flesh.<sup>14</sup> In its broadest sense, the earthly city is characterised by its affectation of total independence and self-sufficiency. It presents itself as the very antithesis of the life of pious obedience ("the mother and guardian of all the virtue," *civ. Dei* 14, 12) or humble submission to the word of God. Its ancestor is the unrepentant Cain, and its rebellion re-enacts the sin committed by Adam and Eve when they transgressed the divine command.<sup>15</sup>

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through the ages: passionate reflections of his African spiritual Sons at their 75, Augustinian Publications, Jos – Nigeria 2014, 362-382; R. Dodaro, *Augustine on the Statesman and the Two Cities*, in *A Companion to Augustine*, ed. M. Vessey, Chichester 2012, 386-397.

<sup>10</sup> Aug., *civ. Dei* 14, 28.

<sup>11</sup> Id., *en. Ps.* 61, 6.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. R. Dodaro, *Augustine of the Statesman*, 387.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Aug., *civ. Dei* 12, 2 and 4.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. E. L. Fortin, *De Civitate Dei*, 199.

The City of God is that city whose life is one of total acquiescence in divine revelation. For this reason, it is the only place where true justice can be found.<sup>16</sup> Because its pattern is laid in heaven and its perfect state is achieved only in the afterlife, the City of God is sometimes called the heavenly city. However, insofar as, by adhering to Christ, human beings now have the possibility of leading virtuous lives, it already exists here on earth. On that account, it is not to be confused with Plato's ideal city, which has no existence other than in thought and speech.<sup>17</sup> By contrast to the devil's city, Augustine says about the City of God: "All whose taste is schooled to the things above, who ponder the realities of heaven, who live with circumspection in this world, taking care not to offend God, who are wary of committing sin, but if they do sin are not ashamed to confess it, all who are humble, gentle, holy, just, devout and good – all these belong to the one city whose king is Christ."<sup>18</sup>

Although Augustine occasionally equates the City of God with the Church,<sup>19</sup> it is clear from other statements that not everyone who is officially a member of the Church belongs to it, and that many who do not profess the Christian faith are, without their being aware of it, members of the same holy city. In that line of thought, Augustine exclaims in his commentary to the Gospel of John: "*How many sheep are outside, how many wolves within! And how many sheep are inside, how many wolves without!*"<sup>20</sup> According to him, anybody who is wholly dedicated to the pursuit of truth and moral virtue is implicitly a citizen of the city of God, and anybody who abandons virtue for vice is ipso facto excluded from it. What is more, any attempt to discriminate, save in a purely formal way, between the two cities is doomed to failure by the fact that it is impossible to know with certitude whether a particular human being is genuinely virtuous or not. One can observe another person's actions but not the inner dispositions from which they proceed. Even the doer of the good deed is never absolutely sure that he or she is acting out of virtue, for one can easily be deluded about the purity of one's motives. These motives belong not just to the secrets of the heart, which one can reveal if one chooses to do so, but to the heart's secret intention, which remains obscure to everyone, including the agent himself. In this life, the two cities are inextricably mixed, like

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. E. L. Fortin, *De Civitate Dei*, in *Augustine through the Ages. An Encyclopedia*, ed. A. D. Fitzgerald, 199.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Aug., *en. Ps.* 61, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Aug., *civ. Dei* 8, 24, 2; 13, 16, 1; 16, 2, 3.

<sup>20</sup> Aug., *In Ioan. Eu. tr.* 54, 12.



the wheat and tares of the parable which must await the time of harvest before they can be separated (1.35; 11.1; 18.49; 20.9.1). This idea comes clearly expressed in Augustine's commentary on the Gospel of Saint John when speaking about the Church he said: "

At the present time, you see, the body of Christ is all mixed up, as on a threshing floor; but the Lord knows who are his own (2 Tm 2:19). If you, when you are threshing, know that there is a mass of grain hidden there, and that the threshing does not destroy what the winnowing is going to sort out and clean, then we can be sure, brothers and sisters, that all of us, who are in the body of the Lord and are abiding in him so that he too may abide in us, must live among bad people in this world until the end of time.<sup>21</sup>

The idea here is about the Church, the body of Christ that is a mixed body for the time being. Nevertheless, the same idea applies to the city of God. Augustine's expresses in the commentary to Ps. 61: "

During the present age, these two cities are mingled together, but they will be separated at the end. They are in conflict with each other, one fighting on behalf of iniquity, the other for justice; one for what is worthless, the other for truth. This mixing together in the present age sometimes brings it about that certain persons who belong to the city of Babylon are in charge of affairs that concern Jerusalem, or, again, that some who belong to Jerusalem administer the business of Babylon.<sup>22</sup>

From the foregoing, we understand that Augustine is not opposed to the implication of faithful in directing the affairs of the earthly city since they live for the time being in this city. Let us now consider Augustine's submission on the qualities and virtues a Christian politician should have.

### **The virtues and guiding principles of a Christian statesman**

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* 27, 11.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*, en. Ps. 61, 8.

In Plato's myth of Noble Lie, we encounter an elitism alien to the Christian doctrine. For him, only a small section of society, formed by those whose souls were sprinkled with gold, has the potential to become a guardian. The message of 'the Noble Lie' is that most of the populace is, from the beginning, made from the wrong kind of substance which keeps them at the lower layer of the society. Augustine's view of the statesman challenges this understanding and questions this mode of thinking. Birth or predestination does not necessarily qualify a person to be a ruler in the society. The bishop of Hippo recommend that the statesman must be holy, and holiness is open to all. Augustine is aware of what the society of his time considers the essential elements and principles that must guide those who aspire or do rule others.

In classical philosophy and beyond, thinkers emphasise the importance of what we call the cardinal virtues in moral philosophy and in social life. These virtues are Prudence, Courage, Temperance, and Justice. From Plato and Aristotle through Cicero, Augustine and Aquinas down to those present-day moral philosophers who have also considered them, these four virtues have been accorded a certain pivotal status in moral life.<sup>23</sup>

When applied to the political sphere, most especially to the statesman's person, each of these virtues has its specific function to help him achieve good leadership. In this context, the four virtues can be defined thus: Prudence is the virtue that guides the statesman in his reflecting on human affairs, for instance on the question whether to go to war; Courage enables him to overcome the fear of his adversaries and the enemies of his Nation; Temperance leads him to avoid corruption; Justice directs him to render to each his or her due, as when he addresses inequalities in the distribution of wealth.

As Dodaro indicates, when taken together, these four virtues are considered by philosophers as the essential virtues for achieving the common good within political society. Augustine knows this tradition, but he regards the four virtues as morally lacking and doomed to produce only injustice, as long as they are understood by statesmen in terms of the earthly city, without regard for the heavenly city.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, this takes us back to our statement at the beginning of this session. Only if we get the deep meaning the two cities and their mode of operation, can we understand Augustine's political theory. As we have seen, the

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<sup>23</sup> Cf. D. Carr, *The Cardinal Virtues and Plato's moral Psychology*, in *The Philosophical Quarterly* 38/151, (April 1988), 186.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. R. Dodaro, *Augustine of the Statesman*, 389.

earthly city only seeks the things of this world and is not oriented towards God. For that reason, no virtue applied in an earth-bound society can prove just. What then, can help a statesman achieve the good of those under his care and lead them to seek the goods that are beyond the earthly realities if the political virtues are doomed to fail?

From his early works, Augustine tends to reorient the four cardinal virtues in the light of Christ's new commandment of love. Moreover, we shall see how he complements the political virtues with what the New Testament teaches for the faithful's growth. In his work on the *Morals of the Catholic Church* and those of the Manichaeans, Augustine wrote:

For these four virtues (would that all felt the influence in their minds as they have their names in their mouths!), I should have no hesitation in defining them: that temperance is love giving itself entirely to that which is loved; courage is love readily bearing all things for the sake of the loved object; justice is love serving only the loved object, and therefore ruling rightly; prudence is love distinguishing with sagacity between what hinders it and what helps it.<sup>25</sup>

This understanding of the four political virtues clearly shows Augustine's orientation towards the commandment of love. Each of the four virtues expresses an operation of love. This is an interesting aspect of the Augustinian reading of these virtues. For him, they do not exist, nor do they have any meaning outside the law of love. No virtue has any value whatsoever outside the bond of charity. However, Augustine progressed in his reflections on these virtues, especially as they pertain to the political arena. They need to be checked and enlightened by other virtues. So, for Augustine, Faith, Hope, and Charity (later referred to in the Christian tradition as the "theological virtues") are alone capable of drawing the Christian statesman beyond the limited, temporal perspectives of the earthly city into a deeper love of God, and therefore into the eternal reality of the heavenly city. Augustine believes that the theological virtues accomplish this because they alter the way the statesman understands and practices the political virtues in the performance of his public duties.<sup>26</sup> In his *Letter 138* addressed to the Roman imperial tribune and notary Marcellinus, Augustine points out that Faith, Hope and love admit Christians as citizens the heavenly city. These three virtues either

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<sup>25</sup> Aug., *De moribus eccl.*, 1, 25.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. R. Dodaro, *Augustine of the Statesman*, 389.

reform the morals of those would allow vices to destroy the goods there are in the earthly city, or failing to reform such individuals, they help Christians at least to tolerate them.<sup>27</sup>

We shall base the remainder of this session on Augustine's *Letter 155* addressed to Macedonius,<sup>28</sup> the imperial vicar in Africa during part of his episcopate. This letter is fundamental for understanding how Augustine envisions the transformation of the political virtues in light of the Christian doctrine's teaching. In other words, Augustine exposes, in this letter, the dynamics of the transformation of the Christian statesman's practice of the political virtues through his Faith, Hope, and charity.

He sets forth his argument by showing that Hope's theological virtue helps the faithful understand that they cannot get the happiness they long for in this life. It teaches them that they must desire happiness in life to come according to God's promises. Quoting *Rom. 12:12* he wrote:

The apostle Paul exhorted us to this; he said, "*Rejoice in hope; be patient in tribulation (Rom 12:12)*". For he shows why we should be *patient in tribulation* by prefacing it with the words, "*Rejoice in hope*". I exhort you to this Hope through Jesus Christ our Lord. For, when the majesty of his godhead was hidden and the weakness of the flesh was seen, God himself, the teacher, not only taught this by the words he spoke but also confirmed it by the example of his passion and resurrection. For in his passion, he showed us the sort of

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<sup>27</sup> Cf. Aug., *ep.* 138, 17.

<sup>28</sup> On the topic of the relationship between the Political and theological virtues in Augustine, R. Dodaro's studies on which we base our approach remain authoritative and unsurpassed. I indicate the following, R. Dodaro, *Political and theological virtues in Augustine, Letter 155 to Macedonius*, in *Lateranum* 70/3 (2004), 431-474; also published in *Augustiniana* 54/1-4 (2004), 431-474; Id., *Augustine and the possibility of political conscience*, in *Augustinus- Ethik und Politik: zwei Würzburger Augustinus-Studientage "Aspekte der Ethik bei Augustinus" (11. Juni 2005) "Augustinus und die Politik" (24. Juni 2006)*, ed. C. Mayer, Würzburg 2009, 223-241; Id. *Ecclesia and Res publica. How Augustinian are Neo-Augustinian politics?*, in *Augustine and postmodern thought: a new alliance against modernity?*, eds. M. Lamberigts, M. Wisse, L. Boeve, Leuven 2009, 237-271 (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium 219); There are also other interesting studies on the interactions between Augustine and Macedonius. Cf B. D. Shaw, *Augustine and Men of Imperial Power*, in *Journal of late Antiquity* 8 (2015), 32-61; P. I. Kaufmann, *Augustine, Macedonius, and the Courts*, in *Augustinian Studies* 34/1 (2003), 67-82; K. K Raikas, *The State juridical dimension in the office of a bishop and the Letter 153 of St. Augustine to Vicarius Africae Macedonius*, in *Vescovi e pastori in epoca teodosiana II: in occasione del XVI centenario della consacrazione episcopale di S. Agostino, 396-1996: XXV Incontro di studiosi dell'antichità cristiana, Roma, 8-11 maggio 1996*, Institutum Patristicum Augustinianum, Roma 1997, 683-694 (SEA 58).

things we would have to endure; in his resurrection he showed us the sort of things we ought to hope for.<sup>29</sup>

Hope helps us understand the place where happiness can be attained and thus directs the heart towards the heavenly city. When the statesman possesses this virtue, his struggle at the people's service will be oriented from in the right direction, viz. teaching them to seek eternal happiness. Augustine believes that the political lesson of Hope can be simply put thus: The primary aim of government must be to assist people in living a virtuous life, so that they may achieve happiness in the life to come. Dodaro summarises Augustine's submission on Hope saying that it "redirects the political virtues away from an exclusive concern with assuring temporal benefits for the earthly city and toward the pursuit of the happiness that belongs to the heavenly city. In this way, Hope alters the statesman's conception of political virtues."<sup>30</sup>

The Bishop of Hippo also indicates that Hope works together with Faith. According to him, Faith tells Christians what they should believe about God and his promises. It is Faith that establishes the grounds for Hope. God's promise of eternal goods is faithful, and it is by his gift of Faith that we abide in faithful expectation of those eternal goods. So, Faith and Hope work together as preparations for Charity.

After discussing Faith and Hope, Augustine examines the political aspects of charity. He insists that, by loving God, the statesman fulfils the divine commandment to love his neighbour as himself.<sup>31</sup> By loving God, the statesman also loves himself, because he can choose no greater good for himself than God. Moreover, the statesman's love of God obliges him to assist his subjects in loving God. Thus, by loving God properly, the statesman also loves his neighbour, because he can seek no greater good for his neighbour than God. Therefore, the statesman's proper love of God extends both to the love of self and to the love of neighbour: the three loves are united in the love of God. Finally, Augustine emphasises that the commandment to love one's neighbour obliges the statesman to love all human beings, without discrimination.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Aug., *ep.* 155, 4.

<sup>30</sup> R. Dodaro, *Augustine of the Statesman*, 390.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. *Mt.* 22: 37–40, *Mk.* 12: 30–31, *Lk.* 10: 27; *Deut.* 6: 5; *Lev.* 19: 18.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. R. Dodaro, *Political and theological virtues in Augustine*, 443.

We have seen the political virtues as they apply from the earthly city's point of view, within the limited, temporal horizon of the present life, without reference to eternal life. When they are transformed by Faith, Hope, and Charity's theological virtues, they orient human affairs toward the eternal good to be attained in the life to come. Therefore, the Christian statesman must apply the theological virtues to the political ones such that his actions will direct the people towards the worship of God and the desire of eternal life. Augustine plainly tells Macedonius that if his political actions do not achieve this goal, his labour and efforts are useless even though he might secure every comfort and earthly happiness to his citizens. He expresses his opinion to the imperial vicar of Africa as follows:

And so, if all your prudence, by which you try to provide for human affairs, if all your courage, because of which you are not frightened by the iniquity of any opponent, if all your temperance, by which you hold back from corruption amid the great disgrace of the bad habits of human beings, if all your justice, by which in judging correctly you give each his due, if all these labour for and strive after this goal – I mean that these people whose well-being you desire may be sound in body and safe and secure from the wrongdoing of anyone, that they may have sons like strong saplings and daughters adorned like the temple, that their cellars may be full and overflowing from here and to there, that their sheep may be fertile and their cows fat, that a collapse of a wall may not disfigure their property, and that the outcry of litigation may not be heard in their streets – then your virtues will not be genuine, just as their happiness will not be. Here, after all, that modesty of mine, which you praised with kind words in your letter, ought not to keep me from speaking the truth. If any act of administration on your part, guided by those virtues I mentioned, is determined by the intention of this goal that human beings suffer no unjust troubles in terms of the flesh, and if you do not think it is your concern how they use this peace that you strive to give them, that is, to speak plainly, how they should worship the true God where there is found the whole benefit of a peaceful life, that great labour does you no good for the truly happy life.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Aug., *ep.* 155, 10.

In this dense passage of *Letter 155*, Augustine is pointing out that one cannot apply the political virtues only for the purpose of material, temporals wellbeing. He further posits that in the heavenly city, the four political virtues are not conceived of in terms of struggles against any evils, as they are in the present life. Thus, in the world to come, Prudence will no longer be obliged to judge between good and bad, because evil will not exist; Courage will no longer need to endure troubles courageously, because worldly difficulties will not exist; Temperance will not ward off the passions, because passions will not exist; and Justice will not require that wealth be used to assist the poor, because poverty and material need will not exist. Consequently, he concludes that only one virtue exists in the heavenly city, namely the love of God, which he also calls wisdom – a virtue that he says is identical in nature with its reward, which is happiness. In the paragraph 12 of his letter to Macedonius referring to the heavenly city wrote:

There this will be complete and everlasting wisdom, and this same wisdom will also be the truly happy life. It is, of course, the attainment of the eternal and highest good, and to cling to it for eternity is the goal that holds all our good. This might be called prudence because it will with perfect foresight cling to the good that will not be lost. It might be called courage because it will most firmly cling to the good that will not be torn away. It might be called temperance because it will most chastely cling to the good by which it will not be corrupted. And it might be called justice because it will with full righteousness cling to the good to which it is rightly subject.<sup>34</sup>

Augustine's concrete suggestion to Macedonius and to every Christian statesman is that he should govern the earthly city through the political virtues as they exist in the heavenly city, i.e. entirely transformed by the love of God. He should be prudent by leading his subjects to love God in preference to everything else; he should be courageous in allowing no hardship to deter them from that love; he should be temperate in allowing no temptation to distract them from loving God; and he should be just by preventing pride from keeping them from loving God.<sup>35</sup>

In this way, Augustine redefines the political virtues as they should be practised on earth consistently with his presentation of their perfections in the heavenly city.

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<sup>34</sup> Aug., *ep.* 155, 12.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *Ibid.* 13.

Augustine is saying that, to rule in the earthly city with their minds fixed on the heavenly city, Christian politicians must measure their judgments and actions by the standard of an absolute love of God. In his view, the Christian statesman's primary objective in governing should be to assist his subjects in loving God as completely as is possible in this life. This fundamental aim should guide all his endeavours to advance even his subjects' temporal welfare, whether he seeks to assist the poor who suffer material need or to discipline criminals and enemies who undermine public security.<sup>36</sup>

From the foregoing, we can see that Augustine thoroughly revised the content of political virtues as they are conventionally understood and applied. However, the Bishop of Hippo does not imply that Christian public office-bearers should neglect the pursuit of temporal benefits for their subjects. Instead, he proposes that their expectations about the benefits they should promote in the earthly city must change. Justice provides an example is classically defined as "rendering to each his or her due". This understanding is close in Roman jurisprudence to establishing and maintaining equity between parties.<sup>37</sup> However, suppose Faith, Hope, and charity transform justice into an aspect of the love of God. In that case, the statesman who seeks to punish justly will do so, taking into consideration the commandment of love.

1. Some considerations on the Nigerian statesman in the light of Augustine's teaching

As we have seen at the end of the first section of this paper, while Plato advocates the Noble Lie to bring a certain level of harmony in the political community, most politicians in our countries impose the "Ignoble Lie" as their *modus operandi* to rule the society. Lies in politics seem to be as old as the politics itself. In effect, from the sophists of ancient Greece, chastised by Plato for their specious rhetoric and Aristotle's analysis of the operation of persuasive rhetoric, through to the 16th-century realpolitik of Machiavelli and the 20th-century advocacy of the necessity of deception in politics by thinkers such as Leo Strauss,

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<sup>36</sup> R. Dodaro, *Augustine of the Statesman*, 391.

<sup>37</sup> Plato, *Republic* 4, 427E–434D; Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1129A, 1130A; Cicero, *De inventione* 2.160.



the issues of lying and deception more widely are perennials of politics.<sup>38</sup> Not satisfied with their personal lying, men and women holding public offices would even have people sing their praises through lies. Augustine of Hippo told us he was once selling his tongue at the fair of lies. While working as the official orator at the imperial court at Milan, praising the emperor through lies was one of his duties before his conversion. We read in the *Confessions*: “How unhappy I was, and how conscious you made me of my misery, on that day when I was preparing to deliver a panegyric on the emperor! In the course of it I would tell numerous lies and for my mendacity would win the good opinion of people who knew it to be untrue.”<sup>39</sup>

The use of dishonourable lie in conducting the affairs of the nations is a planetary phenomenon. In an article on the lies of Politicians published on the Nigerian *Vanguard* newspaper on October 24th, 2018, Afe Babalola rightly observes that the phenomenon of lie telling by Politicians deeply pervades all political systems in the whole planet so much so that academic studies have been dedicated to investigating just why Politicians lie.<sup>40</sup> In that light, he quoted Jim Taylor, who presents a graphic depiction of the situation:

I’m constantly amazed by how often politicians lie and then, of course, their unwillingness to admit that they lied. The euphemisms that politicians use for what is, in many cases, bold-faced lies are legend. Politicians misspoke. The biased media misinterpreted what they meant. Politicians’ words were distorted, misrepresented, twisted, exaggerated, or taken out of context. They were overstated, understated, or misstated. But, of course, politicians never lie, at least that’s what they say. Yet, the unvarnished truth is that politicians do lie about things substantive...<sup>41</sup>

After 60 years of Independence in Nigeria, there is a lot to worry about regarding the magnitude of lies that politicians use. In all quarters, recourse to lies seems to be the usual way of life. From electoral promises to the management of national budgets, falsehood continuously holds sway. Saint Augustine suggests that the political virtues should be transformed by the theological virtues for a better

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<sup>38</sup> Cf. V. Bakir, E. Herring, D. Miller, & P. Robinson, *Lying and deception in politics*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Lying*, (ed.) J. Meibauer, Oxford 2018, 529.

<sup>39</sup> Aug., *Conf.* 6, 6, 9.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. A. Babalola, *Lie telling by Politicians*, in *Vanguard* of October 24th, 2018, retrieved from <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2018/10/lie-telling-by-politicians-3/> on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2021.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

orientation of human desire of the eternal goods. Sometimes in our context, one wonders whether our politicians even consider the ordinary cardinal virtues the way they should be normally applied in the earthly city. Their Prudence does not seem to guide them to take the right action in the face of glaring abnormalities rampant in the society. A prudent leader would carefully evaluate the right course of action when it comes to reacting against criminality, for instance, and demonstrate Courage to bravely face that which disturbs society's peace under his care. One may say that there is still a long way to go in terms of measures against terrorism in Nigeria. Without denying that efforts are being made to control the situation, it is right to say that there is still a lot to do on the part of the Federal Government. Temperance is that virtue that helps a leader to curtail the inclination to greed, selfishness and corruption. The situation in Nigeria after 60 years of independence is woeful when we think of politicians' appetite for embezzlement and looting of public resources. Where is Temperance in a Nation that ranks first among the most corrupt Nations of the planet? It cannot be denied that there are upright people in the country, but the bad ones outnumber men and women of goodwill who have the common good at heart. Finally, what can we say about Justice? What has Nigeria to offer as an example of the application of Justice? A country where criminals are freed even though they committed grave crimes is no land of Justice. In Nigeria, people are denied their rights and are violently repressed at any attempt to claim them. The cardinal virtues, judiciously used, are meant to guarantee, at least, earthly peace and harmonious living in the society. Those temporal goods are ostensibly far from what citizens are experiencing in Nigeria at this particular point in time.

We can say that most of our statesmen fall short of those cardinal virtues. There is no need to mention the theological virtues of Faith, Hope and charity advocated by Augustine. Those of our leaders who profess Faith in Christ<sup>42</sup> need to heed the call so ancient and yet still new and valid to use the political virtues transformed by the theological ones. First of all, they should reform their mind to come closer to the ordinary political virtues required to govern the earthly city and then apply that which their Faith teaches them as Augustine suggests. Their mind should not be fixed merely on earthly prosperity which greed pushes them to secure for themselves alone. By following the Bishop of Hippo's teacher and the social doctrine of the Christian faith, maybe some glimpse of Hope will begin to shine for a better future.

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<sup>42</sup> These virtues are also present and valued in Islamic theology. So, it applies also to the leaders who are Muslims.

## **Conclusion**

We have attempted to establish a close reading of Plato's theory of Noble Lie vis-à-vis the Augustinian conception of the Statesman. The former sought to establish social harmony and coherence based on two myths we have exposed in the first part of this study. All the citizens of Plato's ideal city are born from the same mother (the earth), and that is enough reason for them to love each other, to care for their city and work for its prosperity and security. Secondly, while the creator formed them, he sprinkled different kinds of metals in their souls. The type of metal in a citizen's soul determines the class to which he belongs. Those with gold in their soul are born to be the guardians or rulers of others. Those whose souls bear silver are auxiliaries (soldiers) while the rest of the people with iron and bronze in their soul are the workers at the lowest stratum of the society. These two myths (big lies) aimed at getting people to accept their condition and allow the society to prosper in harmony. Whether someone ever succeeded in getting people to submit to the myth is a question good to be posed to Plato and Socrates, the brain behind the theory or a shred of evidence to be checked in history. However, the Noble lie as presented by the ancient philosopher has, at least, the good intention of securing peace and harmony among the citizens.

Augustine's approach to the question of political government is based on love which is the fundamental law of Christ. Augustine does not teach predestination that makes some particular people fit for ruling as the theory of Plato suggests. Holiness is the criterion and distinctive feature of the good leader and it is open to all. While acknowledging the existence and the possibility of the political virtues traditionally known, thought and encouraged in the classical philosophy, Augustine teaches that those virtues are doomed to fail if Hope, Faith and Charity do not transform them. These three (theological) virtues orient the heart of those who have them to the heavenly realities. Thus, any statesman who has them will use the political virtues better as he will be able to work not only for the citizens' temporal prosperity but also to move them to desire God's eternal promises in the life to come. And leading the people to love of eternity is precisely the vocation of the Christian statesman.

In light of the previous considerations, we examined the state of affairs in Nigeria. Can one think of anything like a noble lie among the Nigerian politicians? It is a

rhetorical question! They do not seem to value the political virtues not to talk of the theological ones. Our call is that our politicians should remember that they must guarantee at least the relative peace that can be attained in the earthly city if they cannot lead people to love the goods of eternal life. That aspect would be left for religious leaders whose role is equally vital in the life the Nation even though many questions arise as to how they are playing their role in the formation of consciences in the Nation.