excerpt from
***Faith in Dark Times: An Augustinian Guide for Life in the 21st Century* (provisional title)**
by Charles Mathewes

As morning warmed towards noon on September 11, 2001, a teacher slowly wrenched part of his mind away from the catastrophe visible on his television, and began to come to terms with his own, local problem. He was supposed to teach a class that afternoon, a class on modern theology. The reading for that day seemed now to have been selected by an evil genie: it was the Swiss-German theologian Karl Barth's essay "Theological Existence Today," proclaiming that we should "do theology as if nothing else mattered." It's a powerful essay; written in 1932-33, as the Nazis were coming to power in Germany, it argues that the world is full of terrible challenges and dangers, that it will ever unsettle our confidences and expectations, and yet that that peril should not deter us from doing theology—asking the perennial questions of the meaning of human life, the proper shape of divine love, and the purpose of history. Such questions as these, the essay proclaims, remain central human questions of every day, no matter what the experiences of the present moment seem to demand.

His thoughts twisted back and forth in his mind as he struggled with the question of what he should do. Could he teach this essay? Was it right even to hold class today? But could it be right to leave his students alone? If they did have class, should they spend the time talking about what had happened that morning, and what was happening now and what it all meant for the days and years ahead? (What did it mean?) Or should they go ahead and try to go forward normally, trying to recover, if only for ninety minutes, the rationale for their presence together in study, in college itself? And if they went forward, how could he introduce the reading for the day? The Barth essay is challenging enough on normal days; it takes some imaginative stretching to get students to appreciate the vehemence and outrageousness of what he is saying. But today of all days the piece's vehemence and outrageousness would be no problem; today the problem would be getting the students to feel the seductive power of Barth's conviction in the face of the massive manifest evidence against it. How would they react to being confronted with such a strident, demanding claim? Come to think of it, how should he--the teacher--react? Can Barth's words be the words for a day like this? That question, once spoken, answered itself. He taught the Barth.[1]

I was not that teacher. But I wish I had been, for what he did seemed to me profoundly wise. It still does. This book is an attempt to extend his lesson further. It is the book of a teacher, not the book of a cultural analyst or a geopolitical (or ecclesiological) strategist. My aim is fundamentally pedagogical: to offer a primer in the Augustinian-Christian vernacular, a language of religious, moral, and political deliberation. This vernacular was once common currency among educated Christians in Western cultures--and indeed formed the lingua franca of those cultures themselves--but which has become more or less completely lost. Those who learn it learn a way of thinking about the political machinations of states, the moral and religious struggles of individuals and communities, and how all the manifold features of human existence relate to one another and to the central driving force behind all history, God’s living pursuit of an errant humanity, wounded in its attempt to escape the inescapable desire for God at humanity’s core. Were this language recovered, Christians--and non-Christians--would find in it many crucial insights they would not otherwise possess.

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[1] For a nice discussion of this essay, and its original context, see Timothy Gorringe, Karl Barth: Against Hegemony (REF), pp. 20-23.

My friend's class was not all Christian, of course; it was not a class in a seminary or divinity school. While he was teaching about a Christian theologian that day, on other days he would teach a secular philosopher or intellectuals of other traditions. This book pretends to no such wide-ranging scope. It discusses one strand of one religious tradition--Christianity--in the hope that extended attention to it will illuminate the challenges we face in a new and vivid way.

"In the hope "--there's the rub. For cultivating hope is the central political task of today--of every day, in fact. But hope is harder to cultivate than we think, and since 9/11 its absence seems to me increasingly palpable.

Part of the problem is simply a matter of the challenge that living in this new age puts to us. Many of us, myself included, have not managed fully to move past the events of 9/11. It has been more than five years since that day; and yet for many of us we have yet to see 9/12. My memory of that morning is still fresh. I remember it all--the phone calls, the first images, the way the day turned from a bright and fair late summer day, to rain by nightfall. Don't you?

And those not stuck on September 11th are still caught, it seems, on September 10th. There are many books flooding the market, talking about life after 9/11; but most of them are simply variations on "this just demonstrates what I've been saying all along". This is not just manifestly false, it is actually destructive of the possibility of knowledge: such attitudes are not responses but mere reactions--consolation devices for those who can't bear the reality of our situation. For it is hard to bear. Hope helps us bear it, and so come better to understand what is going on in our world.

Understanding, the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein said, is knowing how to go on. Such a "knowing how to go on" is a kind of "understanding" that presumes no total comprehension of reality, or even of any single event, in all its fullness and detail; such comprehension is not ours in history. Henry Kissinger once asked Chinese leader Chou en-Lai what he thought of the French Revolution; to which the premier replied, "it's too soon to tell." As with all events, the meaning of 9/11 will be determined by its full effects; but what those effects are, is still being determined by the actions of people all over the world, and will be for some time to come. An apocalyptically final understanding is beyond us at present. But we can at least attempt to acknowledge the event, and go on from it, into the future.

Hope has had a hard time since September 11. But things were not so good before then, either. In fact, true hope is rarer than we realize. After the end of the Cold War, a curious kind of vapid smugness took over public life, infecting everyone with its vacuous giddiness: a complacency with no fears about the future because it refused to admit that there would be a real future--that anything genuinely new would ever happen again. The general attitude seemed to be, "now we can all have more of the same forever and ever!" Such bovine placidity pleasantly complemented the hysterical optimism at the core of American civil religion. But it was not hope.

We can do better than this. We must: after all, ours is a political world, with many of our most pressing problems are political--caused by decisions we have made and hence to some degree amenable to our correction. After all, we need not be victims of the rulers anymore. We are not subjects of kings, we are citizens of republics, sharing in our common sovereignty; genuine participation in the governance of our world is possible. Because of this, there is reason for civic hope. Indeed I think that the hope for today is more profound, and more profoundly insightful into the metaphysical truth of our condition, than are the anxieties that occupy so much of the surface of our lives. Despite our despair, there is much to be hopeful for today.

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But our prospects for inhabiting this hope are today challenged by the fact that we are living in a way that increasingly makes hope unintelligible to us. For us, history is increasingly just one damn thing after another, nothing more than a perennial series of temporary delays between the sparking of an appetite and its desultory, momentary, satiation. Our understanding of history increasingly lacks any sense of an ultimate horizon against which we can measure our lives' significance or determine an event's meaning. We think our past is fully past, and any longing for a recovery of full historical existence can only be expressed as a kind of abashed nostalgia. For us, eschatology has been replaced by next-day air.

So how can we seek to become hopeful people, and hopeful citizens, in this setting? That is the fundamental question this book seeks to help us answer. Many thinkers seem to believe that "the struggle of the age" is the battle between faith and disbelief, or between blinkered dogmatism and enlightened skepticism (and we can tell which side you're on by which description you choose). And yet it is the struggle to possess and acknowledge this hope, against the despair and cynicism so common today, that is the deepest political and religious struggle of our age. This is the fundamental contention of this book, a book written by one who wishes to be on the side of hope.