Supremacist thinking, epistemological despair, and Christian hope

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Abstract:

This article looks at the connection between white supremacist cults and an epistemology of despair—a view that knowledge cannot be shared and communicated between diverse people. The theology of Augustine, the 4th century African bishop an evangelical message that undermines the power of this epistemology by inspiring hope for dialogue as an avenue towards ending supremacist thinking.

5 or so key words for online search engines:
White Nationalism; Anti-Semitism; Augustine; Christian Hope, Dialogue

Supremacist Thinking, Epistemological Despair, and Christian Hope

The current predicament.

In 2020, there is a global crisis rooted in a despair that truth cannot be known. In particular, there is a national crisis in the United States that is exhibited in partisan divides, social unrest, and growing political fracture. On one hand, this crisis is sometimes labeled as a result of a two party system. On the other hand, the crisis has clearly moved beyond simple political disagreements to a crisis of hope that there are knowable communicable truths that all people can discuss and use in order to live together well. The rise of white nationalism and white supremacy in the United States and in several European countries is one dangerous part of this crisis. While some white nationalists insist that they are not supremacists because they do not claim to be superior to other races, they assert the same main epistemological claim: whites cannot communicate with, learn from, or live well beside people of other races.
This view that different people cannot understand each other is dangerously widespread today among groups that suggest that knowledge is private and who on those grounds decry the main stream media, science, and public education. Ironically, the fear that knowledge is not commonly recognizable or communicable has become *commonly held* and pervades groups on all sides who suggest that they have special knowledge or that they are special people who cannot communicate meaningfully with other groups which cannot be trusted. The fear and distrust of each other leads to quietism and apathy on the part of some groups and violence on the part of others. Clearly there is a need to counter this fear and give constructive paths for dialogue and truth-seeking that can help all people work together.

This article focuses, therefore, on the epistemology of white supremacist cults and white nationalism and those that stand by idly in order to expose it as dangerous in its despair and to confront it with an epistemology of hope. Such an epistemology of hope can be found in the theology and philosophy of Augustine, a 4th century African bishop whose views on faith, reason, and dialogue have remained of central importance to Christian thinkers for over 1500 years. In this current time, Augustine’s central hope and the theology on which is is built can inspire readers to trust dialogue and rational conversation. This trust is the necessary antidote to the skepticism that allows white supremacist thinking to flourish.

**The Role of Augustine’s Thought**

Augustine, was no stranger to our current predicament. Indeed, as a young man, he himself joined an elitist cult, the Manicheans. Later as a philosopher and then as a priest, he argued publically against the group and similar cults that had secret teachings only shared by group members. He found from his own experiences that these groups attracted members by
appealing to their passion for knowledge and their desire to avoid error perfectly. They kept members by promoting a despair that knowledge could be shared or communicated to diverse groups. This way of thinking is dangerous because it stokes fear of the cure to error: conversation and dialogue with diverse groups of people. Throughout his adult life, Augustine advocated for hope that dialogue, debate, and conversation would prevail based on a Judeo-Christian foundation that God is a God of Truth who has a friendly heart.

The source of his hope was in Christian Scriptures starting with the Old Testament, which he saw as proclaiming that Wisdom wishes to be known, can be communicated in human words, and exists in the words and spaces of human dialogue. Augustine noted the Anti-Judaism of many elitist cults in his era and insisted this was not coincidental. The Hebrew Scriptures are a testament to the idea that Wisdom is active in the world, is friendly hearted towards people, and dwells in the words and conversations between diverse speakers. Augustine argued that the Old Testament proclaimed what human experience demonstrates, that the human desire to know alongside God’s friendly-hearted will to give Wisdom provide a powerful antidote to all supremacist ways of thinking. His explanations of his life experiences and his theology can lead contemporary readers to consider how hope in a God of grace who is Wisdom might inspire continued dialogue that can help break the barriers that trap those caught in dangerous supremacist groups and inspire all people to talk and learn together.

**The Lure of Supremacist Cults**

“Then I fell among people who were deliriously proud, so carnal and so loquacious. In their mouths were diabolical traps.”
In the 4th century, a teenage Augustine who was studying rhetoric in Carthage, found himself attracted to an elitist cult, the Manicheans. This group claimed to be Christian but denied the veracity of Genesis’s claim that God created heaven and earth and all creatures, proclaiming them good. Instead the Manicheans taught that the world had been created during a cosmic battle between divine and evil forces with the result that there were two races of human beings. There were those human beings who had souls that were divine but which had been ripped from God during the cosmic battle with evil that had resulted in the creation of the world. But also they believed that there were other human beings who were creations of the evil one whom God had battled. Manicheans were expected to help those with divine souls but to ignore the needs of those who were not members of the group. This meant denying bread to beggars outside the cult, even if it meant them dying of hunger. Group members considered themselves morally and ontologically superior to others outside the group. Augustine was flattered to be included, and while he struggled to uphold their restrictions against alcohol, meat eating, and sexual activity, his pride was enflamed by their promise that his crimes were beyond his control and that his divine nature was untouched by his misdeeds.

Generally, Augustine was attracted to the Manicheans because they promised him that he was special and that they had knowledge about the origins of the world that others did not yet understand. But as Augustine continued his schooling, he found that there were natural events explained by the mainstream science of his day that contradicted some of the teachings of the cult. Suddenly, instead of being flattered for his intelligence, Augustine was introduced to their epistemology of despair. In his words, he found he was “commanded to believe many most absurd and fabulous things because they could not be demonstrated.”

The sect’s adherents proclaimed that the nature of the divine soul of the elect was of a radically different substance
than the bodies of scientists outside the sect and even radically different than the Manichean believer’s own corporal body. This meant that scientific studies could be discounted if they contradicted the foundational teachings of Mani, the Persian prophet whose “Book of Mani” was the basis for the cult. Augustine found the teachings of the Manicheans were, thus, impervious to questioning and debate as any evidence against them was considered, by virtue of being against them, diabolical in nature.

That Augustine was attracted to such a group that forbid questioning puzzled him later. But he came to realize that his desire for truth, his relative ignorance, and his own pride made him a perfect candidate. Moreover, he realized there were many perfect candidates in the world. Evangelists for the cult sought and attracted hearers precisely by promising a secret teaching that common people could not understand. They flattered the intelligence of their listeners by mocking the teachings of more main stream religions by taking tenets out of context and exaggerating them. When the previous trust the listeners had in another group was broken, the Manicheans then introduced their teachings. Augustine, later as a philosopher, and much later as a priest and bishop warned his students and parishioners that this was the standard operating procedure for all such cults.

Today, readers can find that this technique is still frequently used on websites for white nationalists and, also, for various groups that promote other conspiracy theories. First, the listener is flattered; second, the knowledge of main stream religion and science is mocked; and only last are the teachings of the cult given. As the listener gets more and more involved in the cult, the less and less tolerance is given for questioning and for interaction with others outside the cult.
Importantly, this method works so well not because people prefer ignorance, but because the human being is naturally a wisdom seeker, a *homo sapiens*. From Plato to Solomon, ancient texts have noted that human beings crave new knowledge which makes them natural investigators but also creatures susceptible to bizarre conspiracy theories and esoteric cults. Contemporary studies corroborate this view. Contrary to some common opinions about people who join cults or supremacist groups, it is not apathy towards truth that is the cause of false belief. Rather, it is excitement about the possibility of learning something new, something that most other people do not know, that attracts the seeker to a secret. When the member of the cult tries to continue to grow in learning, the cult insists that no other knowledge can be known.

It is interesting to compare Augustine’s account of his time with the Manicheans with a contemporary account of a former white supremacist. Frank Meeink wrote his *Autobiography of a Recovering Skinhead* in order to expose the techniques used to recruit and sustain white supremacist cults in the 21st century. Frank Meeink recounts, “They knew what to do and say to a half Irish, half Italian kid who was abused.” While, as a teenager from the streets of Philadelphia, he was a skeptic and a “hard sell,” the white supremacists used this to their advantage. They followed up his “millions of questions” with what appeared to Meeink at the time to be evidence and logic, treating him, as no one else had, like someone intelligent and worthy of teaching. He became excited feeling that he was being let into a group who had the real truth.

In Meeink’s case, as in Augustine’s, ignorance did play a part. Augustine admits that he would not have fallen into the trap of the Manicheans if he had learned a better understanding of the Old Testament scriptures that they mocked and had studied Christian theology generally. Meeink suggests that if he had had a deeper understanding of politics and race relationships he
would not have been so easily persuaded. In general, most cults rely on materialist accounts that are simple to understand and ignore greater complexities. They sound smart to a new recruit. But they do not hold up to serious debate and thinking, and that is why they inoculate themselves from questions and debate by fostering an elitist pride that is coupled with epistemological despair. They insist that only members of the group can understand their teachings. The despair is medicated by the pride that members alone have perfect knowledge.

**The Desire to Be Perfect.**

Anyone who has read Augustine knows that Augustine’s most pressing desire was to be good. His central philosophical problem was not why God permitted evil in the world, but why God permitted him to do evil when he so badly wanted to be good, to be perfect, to be blameless. Thus the Manichean explanation of the problem of evil was especially appealing to the young Augustine. The Manicheans taught that evil was a material substance that pervaded the created world, a substance that was part of his carnal body and polluted his ability to think, will, and act rightly. Manichean psychology explained sin as the result of the uncontrollable force of evil in material bodies that acted contrary to the goodness of the will of the elect. This psychology allowed Augustine to believe that his soul was divine and good but that at times he chose evil because of the overwhelming influence of the evil force of his material flesh. This ability to accuse something outside of himself appealed to Augustine. Such teachings flattered his pride and did not demand that he inquire further into the nature of himself and his urge to do evil.

A common view in supremacist cults is that some evil force or evil power is the source of a specific problem. Such a position protects the members and teachings of the group. It
removes the blame and the guilt for a difficult problem from the members of the group and creates an alternate explanation. For example, white supremacists in the 21st century proclaim their own blamelessness in a world of suffering. By blaming people of color and Jews, they claim themselves to be victims in a system that has led to their unemployment, poverty, and conditions of drug addiction and violence. Often white supremacists claim this as a religious understanding; they see themselves as children of a different god than that of people of color. They paradoxically proclaim that they are victims of those outside their group while claiming that they are the true masters who will soon take power. This allows them to feel blameless for their suffering and the suffering of others, while being assured that they will be victors.

Additionally, this view protects the believers against any counter arguments. Because cult members are told they are victims of a dangerous power, they must be constantly wary of how this dangerous power might try to deceive them. Dangerously, this viewpoint ensures that the more counter evidence that is presented, the stronger is their claim that an evil power has tampered with the evidence. The view that evil has as much power as good and that deceit can thoroughly disguise the truth is at odds with Judaic teachings. As such, Augustine found that Anti-Semitism was at the core of Manicheanism; and many researchers find it at the core of white supremacy and other conspiracy theories. An important weapon against these groups is an epistemology of hope-- a reclaiming of Jewish philosophical views.

**The role of Anti-Semitism**

Augustine reports that the Manichean recruiters who approached believers in catholic Christianity always began with an attack on Judaism. Chief among the elements of Judaic teaching opposed by Manicheanism was the Jewish understanding of creation as an act of God in
accordance with God’s wisdom. Historically, many Jewish theologians have considered human beings to be creatures of this world, created from earth to dwell on the earth. From this worldview comes a faith in a personal God who regularly meets humans in the earthly realm: in burning bushes, in clouds and whirlwinds, and in the promise of an embodied messiah. There is, throughout the Hebrew Torah, a theological hope in a God who is a friendly hearted non-deceiver. Moreover, an epistemology arises from the creation narrative, an epistemology that expects humans can find God’s wisdom in examining creation. Therefore, much Jewish theology, like much of Christian and Muslim theology that is grounded in Genesis, encourages the study of science and the examination of lived experience. In contrast, in attacking Jewish thought, the Manicheans and 21st century anti-Semites both contend that arguments based on empiricism and reason are dependent on a Jewish type of intellectualism, which they reject. The anti-Semitic attack on Jewish philosophical method makes itself immune to all arguments from empiricism, reason, and authority figures outside their own group.

In this way, anti-Semitic groups are “immune to fact, logic, and reason,” according to Talia Lavin in her 2019 article on the subject in the Nation.8 White supremacist anti-Semites insist that Jews control government agencies, scientific organizations, and the media. As a result, the more evidence an interlocutor gives about a given issue, the more evidence the conspiracy theorist believes he has that Jews have used their wealth, influence, and cleverness to pollute the mainstream sources of information. The accusation concerning Jewish cleverness is an especially protective defense used by anti-Semites. To explain, Talia Levin cites the 1920 publication, The International Jew, which proclaimed that the Jew does not simply rule by wealth and influence but by the “masterful genius of his race.”9
Thus, anti-Semites in the ancient and contemporary world rail against intellectual activity. In doing so they protect their errors by suggesting that only their elite can know their teachings which cannot be explained to those lower than them. Manichean doctrine proclaimed that Jews were children of the dark and evil creator of the natural world, thus inferior in every way to the Manichean elect. Jews simply could not be trusted in discussion. Contemporary anti-Semites are equally vitriolic in their rhetoric and often more violent in their actions as they maintain that Jews are racially inferior, their bodies substantially different from “white” bodies. This elitism simultaneously gives anti-Semites a reason to ignore Jewish voices and promotes a dangerous pride in themselves and their own views. Importantly, many white supremacist groups go far beyond disdain for Jews and actively encourage hatred and violence. Meeink, in his confessional autobiography, admits to feeling pleasure when he committed mandated acts of violence. For some personalities, guilt-free opportunities to commit sadistic acts of torture and murder are relished.

Psychological experiments, like the Stanford experiments, as well as historical events like the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide, suggest that a majority of human beings may be easily lured into participating in sadistic acts if the activity is considered blameless and praiseworthy by leaders. Furthermore, those who have participated in such violence may be unwilling later to question their groups’ core beliefs as doing so would require admitting painful guilt for their actions. Ironically, the very desire to be good, to be blameless, can lead a believer to do violent acts and to refuse to examine her own motive or the motive of the group that led her to these acts. Thus, what comes across as pride in one’s own group is actually a despair due to one’s guilt, a despair that is painted over with a veneer of supremacist thinking that is held all the more proudly.
The Particular Danger of Inauthentic Pride

Augustine frequently suggested that the swollen cheeks of pride block the eyes of the proud person so she cannot see clearly. This was certainly his experience of himself as a Manichean hearer, but he later found this same pride, which was actually a symptom of despair, to be a stumbling block for other groups.

As an African Christian in the 4th and early 5th century, Augustine had a great deal of authentic pride in his ethnic heritage. While some Italians denounced his accent and his ethnicity accusing him of Punic speech and Numidian stubbornness, he told Africans to be proud of their ethnicity, language, and accents. Indeed, it is important to note the special nature of the name of Augustine’s son, Adeodatus, which in Latin means gift of God. The Punic version of this name is Hannibal, the name of the African warrior who almost brought down Rome in the Punic Wars. It was one of the most popular names for Carthaginian boys the year Adeodatus was born—perhaps due to an uprising of Punic pride against the Roman Empire occupying Africa.

Yet, as a bishop, Augustine was supremely concerned with the Donatists, whose pride he found to be inauthentic. The Donatists were a denomination of African Christians who claimed to be the only pure Christians because they had refused to renounce their faith even when threatened with persecution. These African Christians claimed that other Christians, especially Italian Christians, who had hidden and even recanted their Christianity out of fear of persecution during the reign of polytheist Roman emperors were false Christians. The Donatists further claimed that baptisms were not efficacious if they were done by priests who had earlier been apostates during times of persecution. The Donatists insisted on rebaptism for catholic Christians who wished to join the “true” church. The Donatists’ belief in their own superiority despaired of
God’s promise of grace. As a result, they resisted debate with non-Donatists, not trusting dialogue as an avenue to conversion. Further, many Donatist leaders encouraged violence against non-Donatists.\textsuperscript{xii} Augustine understood that much of the Donatists’ popularity came from its resistance to Roman rule. He was sympathetic to their desire for autonomy and equality but not to their claim of superiority. The Donatists did not accept those baptized by Roman priests as brothers and sisters in Christ. Their view of their superiority was based on a fear that God could not be trusted to be gracious. This fear made them unwilling to examine their own faith in order to seek understanding. Their fear also gave them an excuse to be violent. Later in his life, as a bishop in North Africa, Augustine found the Donatists’ refusal to accept equality with other Christians to be almost as dangerous as Manicheanism. And yet, Augustine was surprised to find that even as he was working to quell the Donatists’ claim of superiority, the Roman See was starting to claim itself as the authority and source of knowledge from which all other churches might draw.\textsuperscript{xiii} To both Italians and Africans he insisted on the equality of all people before a friendly hearted God who encouraged dialogue and debate between diverse perspectives.

In general, Augustine came to see inauthentic pride that was based in fear as the most common obstruction in the path of true wisdom seeking. To remedy this, he found it necessary to give the credit to Wisdom, rather than to the wisdom seeker. This allows the wisdom seeker to put her trust in Wisdom rather than in her own purity, quelling the dangerous pride that too often keeps a believer clinging to ignorance and refusing to talk to others outside her circle. Augustine insisted that people talk to other people without fear of being drawn into error, to trust that God will lead them if not immediately, eventually to a more coherent path.

\textit{Trust in Wisdom’s Friendly Heart}
Augustine continued to dialogue in public with both Roman Catholics and African Donatists throughout his life, as well as with various heretics such as Pelagius. Augustine was a formidable debater, skilled in rhetoric and naturally charismatic. But Augustine insisted that everyone should engage in public discussion. This included women and men, those trained in the liberal arts and those who had not had the benefit of higher education. He told his own mother that he was pleased with her attempts to do philosophy and wrote letters encouraging women who wished to enter public debate in their towns to do so. After his death, many African Christians, such as Fulgentius and Facundus of Hermiane, honored his legacy by continuing the practice of public debate on matters in the church. And throughout the middle ages into contemporary times, Augustinian hope has often grounded Christian commitment to dialogue in the church and in society against the fearful use of secular force. For example, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and contemporaries such as John Paul II and Cornel West have advocated for conversation, public debate, and dialogue using phrases from Augustine. Their trust in these endeavors stems from the hope in Wisdom’s friendly heart to seek out those who love wisdom and to dwell in the conversation between human beings.

It is of course hard to have this trust at all times. Sometimes conversation does not bring conversion or unity but only fracture and pain. In these times it is important to remember that according to Christians, Christ who is Wisdom is present even in brokenness and suffering. This trust in the presence of Wisdom even when it is veiled in darkness can be a powerful antidote to despair that leads to apathetic agreement to disagree or the simple refusal to converse at all.

Perhaps more helpful in the face of despair are accounts of remarkable moments when conversation does lead to new knowledge and unity. For Augustine, his conversations and
debates with Manichean leaders and Donatist bishops were just such moments. For Meeink, his conversations with prisoners of color and those who had left his supremacist group were also such moments. In the news, there have been three remarkable stories that speak to the Augustinian hope for such friendly hearted relationships. These accounts do not prove the point nor do they suggest that there is minimal risk in such attempts. But they do speak to the possibility that in coming together in conversation, Wisdom’s friendly heart is sometimes evident. All three accounts involve people who were committed to white supremacy but who were opened to see more broadly through the friendly conversation of others outside the group.

The first story begins with Pardeep Kaleka, whose father, along with five other people, was massacred by a white supremacist during a service at the Sikh Temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin in 2012. Kaleka, whose Sikhism teaches optimism rooted in compassion, wanted to understand how and why someone would do this murderous act. In order that he might grow in his understanding, he contacted a former white supremacist named Arno Michaelis who had written a book about his experiences called My Life After Hate. Michaelis had been a listener to a leader in the movement, a reverend in what he saw as a holy religious war. He had, in his past, encouraged and trained the kind of killer who had murdered Kaleka’s father. These two men met in a café and talked, and their conversation led to others. Together they wrote The Gift of Our Wounds and founded an organization called Serve2Unite. Today, they continue to lead discussions across the United States about the power of friendly conversation in increasing understanding and the power of forgiveness in healing traumatic wounds.

The second story is about a Jewish student, Matthew Stevenson, who sought friendship in college with, Derek Black, a prominent white nationalist whose father started Stormfront. Stevenson invited Black to come to Shabbat dinner in his dorm room every Friday night for over
two years. For two years, Black continued to write and speak for white supremacy at the same time that he was attending weekly Shabbat dinners with Matthew Stevenson and others. In the long run, Black found that he could not reconcile his friendship with a Jew with the tenets of white supremacy. Black insisted that it was not just friendship that made him renounce white supremacy, it was recognizing the untruth in the movement. Yet, the logical arguments would not have moved him without the friendship, although the friendship could not have endured without the rational understanding. Today, Black is pursuing a doctorate in history at the University of Chicago.xviii

The third story is from Daryl Davis, an African American jazz pianist who began conversations with members of the Ku Klux Klan after a white member of the Klan asked if he could buy him a drink at a bar after a set. Over the next thirty years Davis met with this Klansman, his friends, and even a Grand Dragon. Every time he met with a new Klansman Davis knew he could be in grave danger. But over the course of thirty years, he converted over 200 Klansmen, including the Grand Dragon. As a symbol of this, he has kept a closet full of Klan robes that have been given to him by people leaving the movement.xix His book, *Klan-destine Relationships: A Black Man’s Odyssey in the Ku Klux Klan* details his experiences in order to encourage others to have the confidence to try to engage in friendly conversation with their most dangerous enemies.

**Conclusion**

There are many roots to the problems of white supremacy and white nationalism in the United States. The systemic racism that has led to unequal power structures has made white supremacy hegemonic. In order to uproot white supremacy, much work needs to be done. This
article has only examined one issue involved, that of the desperate epistemology of white supremacist cults that despairs of the ability of people to understand each other and of truth to be communicated universally. Unfortunately, this epistemology of despair exists broadly in contemporary culture and thus is used easily by supremacist cults to discourage conversation, dialogue, and public debate with others. Of course, there are many skeptics and even conspiracy theorists who are not white supremacists. But without an epistemology of hope and a trust in conversation, many skeptics find themselves unsure how or whether to enter public debate with such groups.

This is not a twenty-first century problem, but one that has dominated other eras of human history. In the fourth and fifth centuries, Augustine found the need to combat this epistemology as central to encouraging conversation and dialogue amongst people of rival sects. He was not a naïve thinker. He did not think that humans easily understood their world or each other or even themselves. And he knew that conversation was not always easy. In his lifetime, he saw theological controversies tear apart the church, and he saw war tear apart society. At the end of his life, he saw barbarous warriors destroy whole cities including Carthage. He certainly understood the feeling of apocalyptic anxiety, the skeptical loss of hope, and the despair of nihilism. And yet, Augustine remained a hopeful advocate for the pursuit of truth through reading, writing, and discussion until his death. As he watched the Vandals sacking Carthage, he wept, but also he went through each of his writings and explained better what he meant, making corrections where he realized he had erred. He knew his writings might be saved for later generations, and he wanted to be the best possible friend to later thinkers. Today, in the midst of our current crisis, Augustine’s writings can inspire us to dare to talk to each other and trust that Wisdom can be communicated in order to build understanding and friendship between those who
converse. With such hope, we can break down barriers that allow supremacist thinking to flourish.


\[\text{ii Augustine, Conf. VI.v.7.} \]

\[\text{iii See Plato, Protagoras, 313ab.} \]

\[\text{iv See Proverbs 9.} \]


\[\text{vi Frank Meeink, Autobiography of a Recovering Skinhead. The Frank Meeink Story as told to Jody M Roy. (Portland, OR Hawthorne Books & Literary Arts 2009) 52.} \]

\[\text{vii Meeink, 55} \]

\[\text{viii The Maddening, Baffling, Exhausting Endurance of Anti-Semitism: In an age of conspiracy theories, what chance do we have against the oldest conspiracy theory of all? Talia Lavin in The Nation February 13, 2019 HTTPS://WWW.THENATION.COM/ARTICLE/ANTISEMITISM-CONSPIRACY-ILHAN-OMAR/} \]

\[\text{ix ibid.} \]


xiv See Augustine, *De Ordine*, I.xi.31.

xv For example, see Augustine, *Epistle 264 “To Maxima (395)”*


