



BOOK REVIEW

Gary Chartier, *Christianity and the Nation State: A Study in Political Theology*

(Cambridge: CUP, 2023), p. xviii + 324. \$110.00

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We all know that we should not judge a book by its cover, but we do not normally anticipate the need for a reminder of this aphorism in a scholarly book review. The title of this volume (*Christianity and the Nation State: A Study in Political Theology*) and the nature of the volume (an academic monograph from a prestigious university press) give every indication that the reader will encounter either a thorough, scholarly treatment of various Christian approaches to questions of the state; or a careful, scholarly argument for a particular interpretation of how Christians should view and relate to the state, or some combination thereof. What the reader actually finds is a series of assertions arising from an undeclared theopolitical position. Chartier takes some time in the introduction to situate himself in relation to voluntarism, social trinitarianism and pacifism. And through the course of the book he takes a position against nationalism and for cosmopolitanism and radical consociationalism. But the main schools of thought being promoted and activated in this book are never mentioned, engaged with explicitly or advanced through careful argument.

Chartier believes that the state is dangerous and unnecessary, and his critiques focus in various ways on consent and violence, though he is not a pacifist. He decries the injustices of the state, but he is not a liberationist, and his critiques of the state are never turned on the market. He promotes a global society and non-territorial networks of consensual, self-governing associations. Any alert reader sees a clear pattern emerging: a form of libertarian anarchism. And this is the perspective Chartier explicitly embraces elsewhere. Yet he never once in this book uses any form of the words 'libertarian' or 'anarchy'. His often-cited interlocutors are O'Donnovan, Yoder, Finnis and Bretherton. Where are anarchist and libertarian sources, and why does he not interact with them or situate himself in relation to them?

Why does Chartier not make an explicit argument for his version of Christian anarchy? Well-reasoned arguments for Christian anarchy, even for those of us who reject them in the end, bring critically important questions to the table. I am very much in favour of conversations which exercise the muscles of imagination needed to wonder whether the state as it exists is either inevitable or desirable, and to envision alternative forms of politics and theopolitics. However, particularly in a moment such as this one in global geopolitics, these conversations must be very careful and very explicit, or they are patently dangerous.

If people are convinced by Christian anarchism to give up on the state in the absence of well-argued and well-planned, viable alternatives, even the most cursory knowledge

of history and human behaviour tells us that it is not an entirely novel network of non-violent, consensual associations that will fill that vacuum; it will be something more totalising and more dangerous than the, albeit problematic, states with which we currently grapple. And as far-right totalitarianisms grow in strength around the globe day on day, that is not an irrational dismissal of an alternative viewpoint; it is a reckoning with a terrifyingly possible near future.

When Chartier unpacks the reasons for his assertion of the illegitimacy and undesirability of the state, which he calls 'a product, facilitator, and enactor of sin' (p. 85), he describes all the frailties of human nature which make state actors so violent and sinful – ambition, hubris, greed, misguided moralism, corruption, etc. – and the terrible things states do as a result – hoarding resources and power, waging wars, exclusion and oppression, injustice, enshrining elitism, promoting inequality and poverty, enslavement, undermining care and stifling creativity. Of course, all this is true; identification of, resistance against and alternatives to all these realities should be central in political theology. But Chartier's account entirely ignores the limited but significant goods of the state rather than addressing these goods head-on in a careful argument. The Catholic Social Teaching themes of subsidiarity, flourishing and the common good are positively employed regularly by Chartier, after a swift and cursory dismissal of that tradition's critical but steadfast embrace of the state as having the limited ability to safeguard the conditions required for these themes to be realities in society. Chartier's account also entirely ignores the entrenchment of the late modern nation state in late-stage capitalism. The market is somehow untouched by these critiques.

When Chartier turns to asserting his alternative of cosmopolitan consociationalism, suddenly human nature becomes much more salutary. In the absence of the state, legal networks would allow people to resolve disputes peacefully and individuals would want to avoid violent networks. Somehow (it is not carefully argued how or why), the 'opportunity of exit' from these consensual networks would prevent sinful people from seeking power as they do in states, and even if some corrupt people acquired some power, they would not be able to do as much harm (p. 198). 'Exit' would also 'naturally serve to winnow out many unappealing rules' (p. 198), preventing these networks from being oppressive, violent or conformist. Chartier drops a passing mention that these legal networks may use military force, but he does not explain how, or why this would not be dangerous and oppressive as he has established state military force to be. (Does the libertarian commitment to consent trump its resistance to violence?) Chartier promises to show that there are historical and contemporary examples that prove the possibility of such networks, yet in 297 pages, he spends just one paragraph (on p. 180) listing his examples of successful non-state consensual legal associations. In the end it is unclear why readers should take Chartier's critiques of the state seriously without those same principles of critique being allowed to interrogate the market and the proposed consensual associational networks.

I am in no way suggesting that anarchy is out of bounds in Christian political theology. Careful conversations about the traditions of Christian anarchy are important, and careful, thorough arguments for such positions should be openly pursued and engaged. Perhaps elsewhere Chartier makes such contributions. But promotion of anarchy should not be smuggled in under the radar as it is in this volume, in either popular or scholarly discourses.

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