
Five years ago the O’Donovans did a great service to both teachers and students of Christian political thought with the publication of their massive anthology, From Irenaeus to Grotius (Eerdmans, 1999). Bonds of Imperfection is intended as a companion volume to that earlier collection of texts, providing an opportunity for “more sustained analysis of individual thinkers and more developed arguments about specific issues” than would have been suitable for
inclusion in a classroom collection of primary sources. This new book consists of a dozen essays, half by each author, written over a span of about fifteen years. The essays are divided into two groups. The first seven probe moments in the history of Christian political thought, ranging from an interpretation of the book of Revelation to an extremely interesting discussion of Grotius’s modification of the Aristotelian and scholastic theories of justice. The last five essays, by contrast, apply insights from the tradition of Christian political thought to contemporary dilemmas: judicial overreach, European integration, just war and pacifism, nationalism, and the disintegration of local and national identities in a globalizing world.

Given the wide range of topics discussed in the essays, the book as a whole retains an impressively coherent focus, one that is partly methodological and partly thematic. The authors’ persistent efforts to mine the resources of the Christian tradition provide the book with its methodological consistency. These efforts at historical retrieval are part and parcel of the book’s overarching purpose: to recover a distinctively Christian understanding of political action. Because early modern thinkers divorced political theory (and philosophy more generally) from theology—because, one might say, their aim was precisely to enunciate an understanding of politics that was not distinctively Christian (and thus not dependent upon theological consensus—we can recover an understanding that is distinctively Christian only by stepping outside the limited political vocabulary and conceptual framework that we have inherited and engaging anew the concerns and perspectives of premodern thinkers. The authors successfully bring alive these earlier insights both through focused treatments of particular thinkers—the essays on Augustine and Grotius are especially noteworthy—and also through broader thematic discussions, such as the treatment of contrasting premodern and early modern ideas of individual and corporate freedom in “The Challenge and the Promise of Proto-modern Christian Political Thought.”

As the O’Donovans seek to sketch out their vision of a Christian politics, two themes in particular recur with sufficient frequency to tie together many of the book’s essays. Both take aim at the conceptual basis of modern liberal democracy. The first of these themes is the idea of “Government as Judgment”—and the reader looking for a single essay that best encapsulates the book’s overall perspective would do well to begin with the one by that title. Here, Oliver O’Donovan argues that whereas the Christian tradition historically understood government as primarily judicial in nature, modern thinkers conceived of it instead as fundamentally legislative. Under the first concept, governmental actors (both judges and others) thought of themselves as clarifying and applying a law that they discovered but did not make; under the second, they became the authors of their own laws, thus making law the product of human will and cutting positive law loose from a broader moral order. O’Donovan suggests that this shift helps explain contemporary disputes over the propriety of judicial review. Disturbed by the obvious tyrannical possibilities of (merely) human-
made law, we attempt to check legislators with judges and then discover that in so doing we have only instituted a conflict between rival groups of (merely) human lawmakers. Escaping this dilemma would require that we rethink the nature of legislation itself, returning to a more modest concept of governance as judgment.

The second theme is a critique of the legitimating role played by natural (or human) rights in modern theories of liberal democracy. In adopting the “economic anthropology” of natural rights, liberal democracy derives all government from a self that is envisioned primarily as insisting upon its property to which it has a prior and fundamental claim. This, however, reverses the church’s traditional concept of government (and property) as instituted to punish wrongdoing and restrain the self’s sinful desires. This problem is closely connected to the idea of government as judgment: To found government on and derive its legitimacy from natural rights is to suggest that the self possesses some prior claim that could be insulated from the judgment of God within human history. It is to suggest that humans are ultimately the founders or legislators of the order that judges them, rather than its subjects. Natural rights are thus a crucial factor in the move to separate the political from the moral order. The deleterious effects of this conceptual framework become clear through its dominance of our political discourse, as associations not readily defended in terms of individual rights—most especially the family—find themselves increasingly under attack, unable to justify themselves adequately on such terms. This predatory and disintegrative effect of natural rights is nicely illuminated, in different ways, by the essays on subsidiarity and on “The Loss of a Sense of Place.”

Perhaps the chief shortcoming of this volume is that it is unlikely to serve well, at least in the classroom, as a companion to the From Irenaeus to Grotius sourcebook (which is a marvelous classroom resource). The essays here are, almost without exception, simply too difficult for most undergraduates, and even more advanced students will often find them difficult going. In a number of cases, substantial prior knowledge of the material is assumed. Certainly, it is difficult to imagine successfully combining the two books in a single course. Readers who are already reasonably familiar with the tradition of Christian political thought—readers, perhaps, who have already mastered the texts in the sourcebook—will find here much to challenge them, particularly as they reflect upon the forms of political understanding that dominate our own age.

—Peter C. Meilaender