

Renaissance and Reformation
Renaissance et Réforme



God and Government: Martin Luther's Political Thought

C. Mark Steinacher

Volume 42, Number 3, Summer 2019

Situating Conciliarism in Early Modern Spanish Thought
Situier conciliarisme dans la pensée espagnole de la première
modernité

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1066377ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1066377ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0034-429X (print)

2293-7374 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Steinacher, C. (2019). Review of [God and Government: Martin Luther's Political Thought]. *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme*, 42(3), 210–212. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1066377ar>

© All Rights Reserved Canadian Society for Renaissance Studies / Société canadienne d'études de la Renaissance; Pacific Northwest Renaissance Society; Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium; Victoria University Centre for Renaissance and Reformation Studies, 2019

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

Carty, Jarrett A.

God and Government: Martin Luther's Political Thought.

Montreal: McGill–Queen's University press, 2017. Pp. xv, 191. ISBN 9078-0-7735-5151-0 (paperback) CDN\$34.95.

Jarrett Carty's goal is "to follow from [...] scholarly reconsiderations of Luther's political thought, while [...] holding a critical stance toward what is problematic, unresolved, or unanswered in them" (8). This volume not only contributed to semi-millennial celebrations of Luther's posting of his ninety-five theses but is a fresh source of insight for Christians in turbulent political times. Carty's prose is athletic, concisely conveying weighty conceptions. Sceptical of received interpretations, he deconstructs limited and/or erroneous constructions of Luther's political thought and erects a well-researched, cogently argued model encompassing "a coherent system of positive civil law based on legal norms [...] from the Western legal tradition (including natural law, Roman law, and canon law)" (146) and the Bible. Carty's goal includes avoiding the pitfalls of earlier interpretations of Luther, whether insights were skewed by confessional restraints or by fully secular commitments, while maintaining a rigorous and scholarly stance for resolving remaining critical issues.

The core "two kingdoms" concept (a term coined by Karl Barth) emerged in *Temporal Authority* (1523). One kingdom, inner and spiritual, exists alongside a second, outer and temporal. The first is the realm of the Word and Gospel; the second is governed by law, morality, and coercion. Both are essential to God's governance of humanity but possess distinct spheres. Luther believed his work restored an ancient approach lost by the medieval church. Ironically, Heiko Oberman argued, the concept is profoundly medieval, despite affinities with northern humanism.

A corollary of *sola fides*, Carty contends, the "two kingdoms" ideal was grounded in Luther's "law and gospel" biblical hermeneutic, addressing questions of conscience regarding the balance of good discipleship and good citizenship. Luther taught that since even pagans evinced elements of divinely given political wisdom, the universal nature of God's gift of such wisdom obviated the church's role in politics' implementation. Thus, politicians could honour God as readily as clerics. Luther treated many issues, from education (essential to a well-functioning society), through poverty relief (a matter for government tax revenues), to marriage (a temporal matter).

Facing a potential Turkish invasion and riotous internal European divisions, Luther elaborated his theory over time. Its core formulation remained constant, despite current charges to the contrary. The fundamental methodological error of many historians, Carty contends, is failing to consider Luther's political thought as entangled even in works not explicitly political. That Luther wrote no systematic political text facilitates this faux pas.

Luther's political theology was unique among reformers. His successors, despite acknowledging Luther's influence, enunciated political theory predicated on the two kingdoms' co-operation rather than separation. They particularly emphasized governments' limitation by and through law, undermining recent claims that Luther favoured absolutism. Huldrych Zwingli's political program initially appeared parallel to Luther's, both anointing civil authority as virtuous, but Zwingli's lacked a clear-cut ontological distinction between inner and outer allegiances. Gospel demands aligned with moral law, in the Züricher's thought, as a single covenant. The result was a baptized version of Old Testament Israel: life regulated by a unified moral, civil, and ecclesiastic code. John Calvin, who did not employ a law-gospel dialectic, shared neither Luther nor Zwingli's radical shift but touted separate civil and ecclesiastical courts. As for the Radical Reformation, to the limited degree that consensus existed, radicals focused on a quietistic, simple, and individual Christian life embodied in the *Gemeinde*, viewing the larger community as essentially demonic and unworthy of obedience. The English Reformation's unusual circumstances make it unlikely that Lutheran political theology exercised significant influence.

Carty explores the impact of Luther's political thought on the modern secular state, a task complicated by lack of consensus in defining "modern" political thought and practice. Themes considered include Luther's alleged necessity to absolutism's rise, his supposed encouragement and legitimization of unified and absolutist monarchies, his apparent role as harbinger of national particularism, and his putative neutralization of Christian institutions as political restraints. Carty argues: "one major problem with this general view of Luther's political influence is that it fails to withstand the charge of anachronisms that distort his own foundational political ideas" (173). The emergence of secularist politics has also been linked to Luther, portrayed as an early advocate of church-state separation. Yet Luther's thought lacks any sense of "state" as understood in twentieth- and twenty-first-century political science. Similarly, a stark contrast of "religion" and "politics" reflects neither reality in

Luther's era nor Luther's insistence that spiritual duties existed in both realms. Carty thus concludes: "Luther's influence on the development of the modern secular state [...] can perhaps be best argued as an indirect and unintentional consequence of this political thought" (175).

A few minor technical issues flaw an otherwise masterful tome. There is no index of Scripture citations, bizarre in light of chapter 3's focus on Luther's biblical interpretation. "Tyrannicide" and "holy orders," key concepts analyzed, are not in the index. More surprising, given allegations that Luther's theology was foundational to fascism, "National Socialist" is not indexed. This reviewer noted only three typos.

C. MARK STEINACHER

Tyndale Seminary

Castellion, Sébastien.

***Conseil à la France désolée.* Ed. Florence Alazard, Stéphan Geonget, Laurent Gerbier, Paul-Alexis Mellet, and Romain Menini.**

Geneva: Droz, 2017. Pp. clxxxii, 110. ISBN 978-2-600-05835-3 (paperback) 19.80 CFH.

This book is a critical edition of Sébastien Castellion's *Conseil à la France désolée*. It seeks to give a detailed analysis of the text and its different contexts as well as to provide the edition that is now available in Gallica. The text itself is complemented by a thorough analysis, many footnotes, a chronology of notable events in Castellion's life, and a bibliography and index. The editors are four researchers from the University of Tours—Florence Alazard, Stéphan Geonget, Laurent Gerbier, and Paul-Alexis Mellet—and Romain Menini, a researcher at Université Paris-Est Marne-La Vallée.

Florence Alazard specializes in the cultural and political history of the Renaissance. Stéphan Geonget analyzes relationships between both literature and law and literature and fiction in the period. Laurent Gerbier researches the moral and political philosophy of the sixteenth century. Paul Alexis-Mellet studies the history of the state and the wars of religion in Europe, while Romain Menini focuses on Rabelais and how classical Antiquity was received in the Renaissance. This book is addressed to Renaissance specialists.