

**Episode 2,375: Christianity and the State: Time to Abandon Tired Ideas**

**Guest: Gary Chartier**

**WOODS:**  I'd like to take a couple of minutes to have you kind of give us an overview of what your primary goals are. What do you hope to achieve with this book? And then I have plenty of follow up questions.

**CHARTIER:** Well, that's awesome. So, what I want to do in this book is to, I guess, begin by offering a theological case, a philosophical case, something that probably combines a bit of both against nationalism.

Moving on from there to offering a case against state authority, before going on to look at what might be an attractive alternative to the state. And then considering, finally, what we do, given that we currently live under the thumb of states all over the world.

So, I begin by thinking about the rich variety of human life and talking about the way in which a kind of politics that makes space for the expression of that human variety is important. And the way in which that probably undermines various sorts of nationalism and probably various sorts of identity politics beyond nationalism.

And then moving on from there, I'm looking at a set of arguments, mainly theological arguments offered for state authority, and showing why I think they're unsuccessful. Turning from there, looking at what I think could be a set of attractive non-state institutions.

Which, I'm framing with reference to an early Protestant thinker, Johannes Althusius, who talked about – at least people who quote him today talk about consociationalism. And he had the idea of a set of sort of nested institutions, like matryoshka dolls.

I talk about radical consociationalism with the idea that these institutions can overlap each other geographically and in terms of jurisdiction and so forth, in a way that, of course, those of us who have thought about market anarchy will find familiar.

And then, as I say, I look at some things in that final chapter that include dealing with war and empire and how the kind of model I have in mind responds to things like global poverty. So, that's an overview of Christianity and the Nation State.

**WOODS:** We could have multiple conversations about this. I want to hit on at least some important issues here.

Thinking about chapter one, I was put in mind of neo-Aristotelians, like, for example, Roderick Long, who might say something like this. That if we – and in fact, I think you said that you're borrowing from new natural law theory that comes from the Catholic world.

But I think the old natural law theory also more or less proceeded from the idea that we need to understand who man is and what contributes to his flourishing in order to evaluate institutions.

And so, somebody like Roderick might say: *If we're going to agree with Aristotle, that man is a rational being fundamentally, first and foremost, then that does say something about the state in his life. Because if the state is behaving according to coercion rather than reason, then there's a contradiction right there in terms of human flourishing.*

And so, there are a number of people who have taken that kind of Aristotelian insight and given it this kind of liberal interpretation. Now, in your description of human flourishing, you describe quite a few features of man's life that are encompassed by that.

But is it the same kind of analysis where we see what human beings require for their flourishing, and then we evaluate this against the state, and we come up with a conclusion about whether or not the state contributes to human flourishing?

**CHARTIER:** So, I think that's a really nice way of putting it. And I certainly am not at all uncomfortable with that. I start out, absolutely, with a picture of human beings in their great variety.

Certainly, I think about human beings as ones who exercise practical reason. I think about a range of features of human life that in various ways sit ill with state power.

So, I try to begin that case against the state in particular by showing why it's important that authority that involves the use of force be understood as legitimate only when it's grounded in consent. At least that there is, at any rate, a very strong presumption in favor of consent.

And so, I try to establish that in light of a number of features that I'd want to identify of human life. We, of course know then that states don't pay much attention to their subjects' consent. Some of them try to use talk about consent as legitimating, but we know that that doesn't really happen.

And so, then once we've established that there is this sort of presumption of illegitimacy, then we might think about whether states can somehow overcome that. Well, they don't do a good job insofar as they seem to engage in lots of counter-flourishing behaviours.

They do things that undermine human well-being, that attack various goods. So, that doesn't make their situation look any more promising.

And then of course, if we can think of credible alternatives to state power, then all the more reason why we shouldn't try to give them a pass with regard to their non-consensual and dangerous character.

**WOODS:** I want to just ask you for your frank assessment of – I think it's astonishing how long it took for the Christian tradition to really begin seriously looking at the state with a skeptical eye. I mean, in a way, I would argue that it really still hasn't with a handful of exceptions.

I mean, I know that there are modern people – I know who David Lipscomb was and so on. But honestly, these people are few and far between.

For example, if I look at the early centuries of Christianity, when Christians are sporadically being persecuted by the Roman Empire, there is no tradition of thought developing that questions the legitimacy of this: *Well, this is what we have to deal with living in a fallen world, and it's about what we deserve.*

So, there isn't that. Now you do later, in the second millennium a.d. you do get some theorizing about the possibility of deposing an unjust ruler. But even that is not really a full-throated attack, or, let's say, analysis of what the state is capable of. And in your book, you lay it out very clearly.

You have a monopoly institution that can tax, that can create money, that trains the population to think of it as being legitimate. I mean, as bad as some corporations can be, there's no child in school who's looking at the classroom wall and seeing that corporation CEOs historically all over the wall.

So, are you not – I mean, maybe you're going to tell me – I don't know what you're going to tell me. Maybe you're going to tell me that there has always been such a tradition. But even if there has been, it's not been nearly as robust as you would think the evidence of the case would demand.

**CHARTIER:** Yeah. So, I think that's a really, really spot-on question, Tom. And I don't know the history well enough to be confident about what's going on in the earliest period of Christianity. And it does, on its face, seem as if there is a lot more acquiescence than we'd like to see.

I mean, you might say, for instance, that early monasticism, which is, among other things, pretty clearly a reflection of deep-seated discontent with what is seen as kind of the accommodation to the status quo that people like Saint Anthony aren't happy with, maybe in some ways embodies a critical look there.

But it certainly isn't developed systematically. And there are, at different stages in Christian history, pacifist groups such that if they took their ideas to the logical conclusions of those ideas, they would have to recognize serious problems with state authority.

But it often seems as if that's not the direction they choose to go. Yeah, so how do we account for that? I really am just thinking about this on the fly and trying to buy myself time by talking.

**WOODS:**  And that's okay. That's kind of what I expected because I don't have an answer. I think the answer could be some of the biblical verses that you take a crack at in chapter two, some of which on their face don't immediately seem to lend themselves to a liberal interpretation.

Now you can give them one, but then I wonder, does it then seem to the general public to be a form of special pleading. That if for 2,000 years I can count on two hands how many people interpreted these verses the way you do, then maybe there's a chance that you're wrong and Christianity is illiberal.

**WOODS:** Yeah. So, that's a really, really sharp-edged point. And I know that you and I are coming at this ultimately from the same place. But if you were a critic, you could be twisting the knife between my ribs very effectively.

**WOODS:** Right. And I'm not trying to. I'm just trying to understand it, too, honestly.

**CHARTIER:** Yeah. I understand, Tom. Absolutely. As we think out loud about this, I mean, look, what we see is a history during which Jewish and Christian religion develop a history in which everybody is taking for granted something like monarchical rule.

And it's not that you don't ever find criticisms of that. I mean, there's that, I think, kind of amazing passage that we get in first Samuel that I reproduce at the beginning of the book, in which we find the elders of Israel coming to the prophet and saying: *We'd really like a king*.

And the response is pretty devastating, right? You know, the king is really going to exploit you and treat you unjustly and so forth. But we still find it's very much part of the mentality that people are operating with.

That kingship is treated as a kind of fact of life and provides some of the most familiar metaphors that people use to think about God and God's relation to the world and relationship to them.

And so, I guess my view as a general matter about these things is that if we're to seriously try to reflect on the nature of God's relationship to the world, we begin with a recognition that many things in the world are profoundly contrary to God's intentions.

We can't possibly imagine (as I think some people have tried to) that everything that happens is as God wills it. And once we recognize that that entails, I think, then, a view of divine providence that is – let's say that the simplest version, we're not having a conversation in philosophical theology here.

But I would say, roughly, we want to talk about mediation in and through the events of the creaturely world. And that means that creatures get it wrong and resist the divine influence and so forth.

And I think that just suggests that while providence is always at work seeking to enhance our understanding of God and then of human life, it doesn't follow from that that we get it right on anything like a consistent basis.

And of course that means we're not getting it right now in one way or another. So, I just think there's constant providential pressure being exerted on people.

And sometimes they're responding in ways that yield insights that can be used later, let's say in this context, to undermine illusions about state legitimacy, but that don't take root immediately and certainly don't get expressed immediately.

Yeah. So, I just think the reality is, Christians, among others, are finite, fallible, sinful people, and we don't always get it. And over time, maybe we get it better because of past learning that's happened. Sometimes, of course, we just forget past insights.

Yeah, we're human and therefore complicated.

**WOODS:** Well, would you say that of all the various verses that are sometimes cited, that Romans 13 is the one most frequently used to point to the legitimacy of the state?

**CHARTIER:** That seems right. I mean, it's not like I've done a survey.

**WOODS:** Right. But I mean, just your sense of it would be that. And the thing is there, that I remember at the time of the war in Iraq 20 years ago – maybe it was Lawrence Vance saying this. That all those people you're fighting against in Iraq are also following Romans 13, right?

They're just doing what – they're respecting the powers that are over them for their own good. I mean, so now how does this help us resolve anything, if everybody's basically being obedient to Romans 13 in that situation?

What do you make of Romans 13? How can you look at this with fresh eyes?

**CHARTIER:** Well, whether the eyes are fresh is, of course, another matter. We need to consider several things that at least provide some contextual understanding of what's going on there.

It's certainly not the case, I think, that Saint Paul is sitting back and reflecting at a high level of abstraction on anything and everything that might be going on with respect to state power.

One thing you have to remember is that in the world in which he's writing to the Christians at Rome, Rome is the source of order in the world. And it is certainly not in any sense the case that there's a kind of alternative that's available to Rome that might be a source of justice and of order.

And no matter how flawed Roman law and Roman institutions undoubtedly were, if your thought is, *"In this immediate environment our alternatives are Rome or Hobbes's war of all against all."* pretty clearly you're going to take Rome.

You can certainly think, if you had really gotten to the bottom of the matter and said: *Look, there could be a more consensual and more just alternative.* I think Saint Paul might well have said: *We could certainly welcome that. Right now, this is what we've got, and we can see God's providence at work here.*

Not because this is perfect, these people are sinful, obviously. But because providence is at work using this to improve things as against the alternatives that might, in the immediate circumstances, have been available.

Would he have said, is it a good thing that Rome conquered Israel, incorporating it into the empire 150 years earlier? And the answer presumably would have been: *No, that's not ideal, but here's where we are.*

So, I think in addition, there obviously would have been no outcome but suicide had the church tried to oppose Rome at that point. And so, to take the most positive look at Rome at that point is, I think, a reflection of what would have been needed given the church's own need for survival.

So, obviously, you turn to Revelation 13 and you find a picture of Rome that seems much more beastly, right? It's much more suffused with a sense of the injustice of Rome.

But in Romans 13, I think Paul is largely just kind of pragmatically looking at the environment he's confronting, considering the goods that it brings to bear, and appreciating those goods.

And trying to discourage people from engaging in a kind of foolish insurrection that he thinks would probably just get them killed. So, those are some of the things that occur to me. I'm sure there's more to say.

**WOODS:** The very first sentence you have in Chapter three is, *"States are illegitimate because they lack consensual foundations."* So, where do you come up with that as a Christian principle? At least maybe as developed through a natural law approach, why are consensual foundations so important?

**CHARTIER:** Yeah, so, roughly speaking – I mean, there are several different things going on. But I think the consensual foundations are important in light of what I would see as a really central Christian principle, certainly one that is there in the natural law world, but certainly one that is there throughout the Christian tradition framed in a variety of ways.

And that's the Golden Rule. And we can think about how we ourselves don't want to be ruled non-consensually. We can think about the way in which if we're understanding the golden rule as a kind of principle of generalization or universalization, there's the sense that centralized power undermines the use of dispersed information.

So, I would say several things like that, all largely drawn from the Golden Rule, tend to give us a kind of cumulative case for the importance of consent. I don't think, probably, that I can show that there is never a time (per the Golden Rule) when consent might be bypassed.

But I think there's got to be a very strong case for it. You might also note that what happens when force is used, so often, that's counter to the people's capacity for practical reason. It attacks that capacity. That's certainly something that's a basic natural law principle as well.

So, I just think that looking at who we are as persons, looking at our relationships with each other in light of, especially, the Golden Rule, we come to see that respect for each other's capacities for consent is something in favor of which there seems to be a strong presumption.

**WOODS:**  All right. Well, I think one of the reasons people are inclined to support the state is that they believe that it fosters the common good. Now, "the common good" is an expression that, as you know, is often very murky and imprecise and is used to cover a multitude of sins. We'll put it that way.

I think in your book you have a much more precise definition of what constitutes the common good. So, can you explain what that is and then how it can be carried out in a stateless fashion?

**CHARTIER:** Thanks, Tom. Yeah. So, my sense is that the best way to think about the common good is in light of the question, what is it? What kind of good in any sort of social environment really could be thoroughly, unqualifiedly, common?

So, there are lots of goods that many people value, that show up in lots of individual lives and so forth. But when we talk about the common good, I think we do best when we think about the institutional framework that safeguards flourishing. I would put it something like that.

So, the idea here is, then, the network of norms, and rules, and adjudicatory institutions, and rights-protecting institutions, that enable people to flourish. So, we're not talking about institutions that take the place of people's exercise of their own judgment and try to, as it were, flourish on their behalf.

But certainly, the common good can be seen as the set of institutions that give people the space in order to flourish by engaging in peaceful, voluntary cooperation with each other. And so, that's what I think we ought to mean when we use the term.

Obviously, people can use terms however they want to. And there are people who have, as you note, a very sort of murky sense of what they mean by the common good. And they really often seem to mean just "anything we'd like to see some state institution promote".

But if we really want to ask, what can be common to everybody? Then a framework of rights and of institutions that protect those rights is a good candidate.

And so, proponents of state power assume that what we need in order to protect those rights, to safeguard the common good, to safeguard peaceful, voluntary cooperation, is something like a centralized authority, something like Hobbes's Leviathan.

And what I want to suggest is that we don't need that. That a set of overlapping networks of institutions can do this. Consensual networks that people can enter and leave that are not territorial monopolists can do that.

And I think we can take that seriously as an alternative because because of some factors that include the degree to which states survive and function not entirely or exclusively because they're looking over people's shoulders, prepared to use force against them (though, of course, fear of their intervention is always part of what's going on) but very often because people do regard them as legitimate and support them.

And I think once people come to see that alternate non-state institutions can merit that same kind of support, then I think you can see social norms and social practices that sustain non-state institutions. Similarly, there's the practical desire to avoid violence.

And participants in various networks, I think, have every reason to not want to join or support institutions that unnecessarily get them involved in violence. Violence is costly and it tends most of the time to be more efficient for people to achieve peaceful, cooperative solutions to problems than to try to fight it out.

It doesn't mean there aren't bullies. It doesn't mean there aren't would-be dictators who might show up in those contexts and have to be resisted.

But I think the perception that non-state institutions are legitimate, and the desire of those institutions to avoid the costs that come with violence seem likely to make possible their peaceful cooperation with each other in ways that can maintain order without its being the case that any one of them has a monopoly on violence or lawmaking.

**WOODS:** So, you're describing something you term "radical consociationalism". And I have to be fair to you, chapter three is really describing this and what it looks like. And I don't want you to even try to reproduce it.

I think that's more or less what you've been describing up to now. But maybe this helps us come up with a charitable interpretation for why there isn't more of an anti-state tradition. It's maybe that it's hard to conceive of a plausible alternative.

And I'll tell you, until I came across Rothbard and people in his tradition – I'll tell you, I wouldn't have thought of it. I wouldn't have originated it myself. It would have seemed obvious that, of course, you have to have a monopolistic institution providing law and order and some of these basic services.

Because who else could do it? And if you didn't have the state, then it would be roving bands of gangs. And we all know the arguments. And I think 99.9% of us just assume that without giving it any thought.

**WOODS:** Yeah, I think that's exactly right, Tom. And undoubtedly people do think that. It's worth asking – and you're the historian here and I'm not. But it is worth asking whether that's always been the mentality. Because the idea of the territorial monopolist doesn't really seem to have been uniformly embraced in earlier centuries.

**WOODS:** No, that's true.

**CHARTIER:** And we know that, yeah, in medieval Europe you have definitely overlapping jurisdictions and a variety of institutions in play there. It's not perfectly capturing what we're talking about here, but it's much closer than a kind of Hobbesian monopolist.

**WOODS:** Right. I guess I was just thinking, more or less, the average person today certainly, I think, is inclined. Yeah, but you're right. They did have before their eyes a more decentralized order in which the church didn't have all the power.

The monarchs certainly did not have all the power. There were all different institutions. There's a very good study of this (or, I would consider it, at least, to be an interesting theoretical study of this type of society) in the form of Robert Nisbet's book, *The Quest for Community*.

Because his argument is that what's happening with totalitarian states is that they're taking the desire that people have to be part of something – which they did have in these earlier arrangements. They could be part of this, that, or the other institution.

They want to strip those institutions away, because of course they're totalitarians. But they have to substitute something for it. And so, that means they have to create a "Soviet man". They have to give you some kind of alternative identity to substitute for the ones they stripped from you.

And in this regard, I want to cite – you have this quotation that I've heard before about the unification of Italy in the 19th century. *"We have made Italy. Now we must make Italians."*

That is very telling, because I think there are a lot of conservatives out there who think nationalism is this great conservative force, and only a wimpy liberal doesn't want to be a robust nationalist.

But in the 19th century and into the 20th, as that quotation makes clear, they were creating something that did not exist. There was no "Italian identity". There were Piedmontese, there were Sicilians, there were – I mean, you could go on and on and on.

And they were all quite different from one another. And so, in order to bring about that nationalist outcome, you have to engineer uniformity. That is a revolution. That's not conservative.

Conservative would have been, you keep the old patchwork of little ways of living and flourishing. I'm not sure how I got on this, Gary.

**CHARTIER:** No, but I think it's super important. Because there is this kind of irony, the way in which nationalism has been taken on board, really by both liberal and conservative thinkers in the 20th century.

And we hear talk about "liberal nationalism" and "conservative nationalism". And for different reasons, I think classical liberalism and traditional conservatism both ought to have found nationalism a really troubling idea.

And I think you're absolutely right to highlight that. It's a recent arrival on the stage. It's not a kind of long-standing sort of position. And it reflects very much the desire to consolidate state power. And I think it's pretty much incomprehensible, except as a kind of accompaniment to the growth of centralized states.

**WOODS:** Well, in the few minutes we have left, I want to be completely unfair and ask you a question we could devote an entire episode to, but you do talk about it a bit in chapter four of your book.

Given that we do live in a world of states, and now we've spent the first few chapters (chapters two and three in particular) at the moral problems with states, but yet here we are living among them. And so, how do we interact with them?

And you go into the question of, well, should we pay taxes or not? And is it prudent not to? And you analyze all this, but then you get into the general question of, should we participate in politics?

And I guess I want to ask you, how do you respond to the old saying, *"You may not be interested in politics, but politics is interested in you."* And so, if you don't participate, then things are going to be done to you that you might have been able to prevent from happening.

**CHARTIER:** Sure, That's a perfectly reasonable, pragmatic point. And I don't think I ever suggest here – well, I'm generally quite suspicious in this sort of context of what we might call "clean hands arguments".

I don't think that getting involved in any aspect of political life is automatically a source of a kind of moral stain. I'm not making that kind of argument. I think it's just a matter of making sure that we don't become purposeful participants in the state's evil.

It's, I think, entirely possible for people to seek to influence state action from the outside (but perhaps in some cases from the inside) in ways that don't involve purposeful participation in the state's evil.

I just think it's important to recognize that the evil is real, and that if we are to be morally responsible, then we can't simply brush that aside in some sort of utilitarian way.

We have to recognize there are some things it really is going to be wrong for us to purposefully facilitate or promote, even as we recognize that we may be able sometimes to, yes, influence political actors (perhaps even be political actors) in ways that can prevent some state evils from happening.

So, I try to be nuanced. Your question makes me wonder if I needed to be more nuanced.

**WOODS:** No, no, no, no. You were. I was being a bit tongue-in-cheek throwing that at you, but I just wanted you to wrestle with it for a bit. And then as we close, I would just want to throw one more thing in.

I personally, back in the old Ron Paul days, found myself up against people who I felt kind of understood some important things. But they really, really missed the boat on other very important ones, particularly on foreign policy.

And the number one reason I had difficulty getting through to them was that nationalism had clouded their ability to think things through clearly. Because if I were to say: *Well, this is morally wrong*. Well, they think of themselves as belonging to the nation, and the state is the enforcement arm of the nation.

And so, by my criticizing George W Bush, I'm kind of criticizing them. And so, now they have to become defensive, and they have to go around the Internet trying to find arguments that exonerate their state against the claims I'm making.

Whereas if I were making this argument against the Soviet Union or Nigeria or any other place at random, they would be perfectly willing to accept the criticisms that they're hearing from me. But if it's their state: *Now, hold on a minute! I can't listen to you!*

**CHARTIER:** Yes, I think that's absolutely right. And it seems to me that probably unsurprisingly, war brings out the worst in people. And I don't just mean, obviously, that violence on the ground involves the worst human behavior.

But also that war efforts tend to mobilize people in ways that involve this kind of profoundly intoxicating (in the worst sense of that word) team spirit, that I think can prompt an entire loss of judgment.

**WOODS:** Well, Gary, this is the amount of time I said I would keep you. I'm going to keep my word. The book is *Christianity and the Nation State: A Study in Political Theology.* I have it linked on our show notes page, TomWoods.com/2375.

And even when it challenges you, the reader, with positions you might not hold, it gives you serious food for thought. And that's, I think, what we look for in a book. So, Gary, best of luck with it and thanks so much.

**CHARTIER:** Thank you, Tom. It's always a pleasure to talk with you.