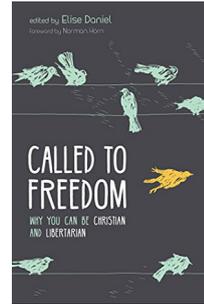


Book Review

Elise Daniels (ed.).
Called to Freedom:

Why You Can Be Christian And Libertarian
Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017.

Reviewed by, Jonathan Ashbach
Lecturer in Politics at Baylor University, in Waco TX



Every so often it is worth going back and dealing with something that was not adequately addressed at the proper time. A review of Elise Daniel's *Called To Freedom*, published in 2017, is just such an exercise. It is no secret that American politics has become increasingly partisan in recent years, and Daniel's book gives a voice to the faction within Evangelicalism that is becoming increasingly drawn into the libertarian camp.

Libertarianism comes in two broad varieties, perhaps best denominated principled and non-principled libertarianism. Non-principled libertarians like Nikolai Wenzel¹ and F.A. Hayek² are not deficient in political-moral theory. Rather, their theory may be relatively uncontroversial, and their libertarianism consists more of an empirical perception that smaller government works better at achieving common goals. Principled libertarians like Murray Rothbard³ and Ayn Rand,⁴ by contrast,

embrace a libertarian or even anarchistic ethic that is fundamentally distinct from other political perspectives and is rooted in individual autonomy rigorously worked out across the political board.

Christianity has little to say about non-principled libertarianism, per se. Prudential questions about the best means to political ends should be decided by experience. Traditional Christian political thought is radically opposed, however, to principled libertarianism. From Augustine's meditations on the use of punishment to drive the wicked to moral reflection⁵ to Aquinas' argument that law habituates individuals to goodness,⁶ Christians have typically believed that government possesses authority to seek human spiritual and material wellbeing, not merely to protect a minimalist conceptualization of negative bodily and property rights. This judgment has endured among American evangelicals, somewhat unreflectingly, to the present day.

Daniel and her co-authors are aware of the popular presumption that Christianity and principled libertarianism are incompatible, but they seek to convince readers that this judgment is unfounded. They also believe this may be the

- 1 Nikolai G. Wenzel, "What is Libertarianism," in Wenzel and Nathan W. Schlueter, *Selfish Libertarians and Socialist Conservatives: The Foundations of the Libertarian-Conservative Debate* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), 45-80.
- 2 F.A. Hayek, *The Fatal Conceit: The Errors of Socialism*, ed. W.W. Bartley III (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).
- 3 Murray N. Rothbard, *The Ethics of Liberty* (New York: New York University Press, 2002).
- 4 Ayn Rand, *Atlas Shrugged*, 50th anniversary edition (New York: Signet, 1985).

- 5 Augustine, "Letter 93" and "Letter 153," in Oliver O'Donovan and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, eds., *From Irenaeus to Grotius: A Sourcebook in Christian Political Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 119-33.
- 6 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Question 95, Article 1.

ideal moment to make that case. Introducing the book, Daniel and Norman Horn cite a recent groundswell of popular interest in libertarian ideas driven by the expansion of the state over the past century, a groundswell that Daniel chronicles from personal experience.

The ensuing chapters make the case for libertarianism (generally defined, when articulated, as the principled variety) from a number of angles. In chapter 1, Jacqueline Isaacs argues that an understanding of salvation history cultivates appreciation for free will, which she conflates with political liberty. In chapter 3, Taylor Barkley distinguishes libertarianism from libertinism. One can adhere to traditional moral standards without seeking to coerce others to adhere to them. In chapter 4, Leah Hughey explains how Christian theology and empirical data both encourage an optimism that should lead people to value productive labor and trust information provided by the price system over the organizational capacity of any individual mind. In concluding the book, Philip Luca recalls the destructiveness of communism and Daniel calls on libertarians to embrace the responsibilities as well as the opportunities that freedom bestows.

The moral heart of the book, however, is chapter 2, which deserves separate treatment. Jason Hughey notes the intrinsically violent nature of governance and lays out the principled libertarian position that this is justified only in defense of person or property from physical aggression. Hughey notes several biblical themes, including the human depravity of rulers and the supremacy of divine authority, that he argues provide support for libertarianism. These themes are generally uncontroversial and worth heeding, though “My kingdom is not of this world” is proof-texted as libertarian-sounding with little regard for the statement’s contextual

significance. Next, Hughey tries to make the Bible safe for libertarianism by reinterpreting several passages that fit poorly with libertarian ideals. For example, “Render unto Caesar” is glossed as an esoteric indication that nothing belongs to Caesar, and “There is no authority except from God” is presented as prudential advice relevant only to the letter’s original recipients. Hughey’s fundamental argument, however, seeks to derive libertarianism from an orthodox affirmation of human corruption.

Unfortunately, the book fails to come to grips with many of the most fundamental difficulties with principled libertarianism noted by more traditional Christian thinkers. The authors speak in reverent tones about “liberty,” but they tend to work that out in economic terms with which Christians across the political spectrum can easily sympathize. None significantly addresses the critique that the liberty principled libertarianism uniquely defends is specifically the liberty to do what is wrong, which is indefensible from a moral perspective if not necessarily from a prudential one. Further, none addresses the critique that libertarianism is predicated on a false concept of harm as merely material. As Nathan Schlueter notes, principled libertarianism permits the infliction of harm to reputation, social order, and others’ and one’s own moral wellbeing. “Libertarianism essentially denies that both self-regarding harms and moral harms exist...Accordingly, it promotes a legal regime in which some individuals are legally entitled to harm others in noncoercive ways,” which is unjust.⁷ Nor do any of the authors display awareness of the educative function that law plays, and the implications this has for

7 Nathan Schlueter, “What’s Wrong With Libertarianism,” in Schlueter and Wenzel, *Selfish Libertarians*, 114-17.

its capacity to promote human flourishing by inculcating virtue.

Nevertheless, the book highlights some opportunities for productive engagement between libertarian Christians and those of more traditional political persuasion. First, the authors emphasize the underappreciated power of the free market. Horn is probably right that theologically aware Christians are frequently drawn toward increased governmental intervention in part by economic ignorance. The economic literacy that the authors demonstrate is a wakeup call that should not be ignored.

Second, the manner in which various authors describe the attractiveness of libertarianism indicates a misconception that one must impose all morality if one imposes any, and thus an opportunity for productive clarification. Barkley speaks of the ideal of “[t]otal eradication” of prostitution as demanding universal government surveillance (94). Daniels and other authors join Hughey in presuming that emphasis on human imperfection implies libertarianism. This suggests that the underlying motivation driving many Christians towards radicalization into principled libertarianism is actually a praiseworthy caution about the abuse of authority and a lack of awareness of the heavily prudential assumptions of traditional Christian political thought. More traditional Christian political thinkers need to do a better job at explaining that emphasis, perhaps most enduringly expressed by Aquinas:⁸ Any virtue may be legislated. Not every virtue should be legislated. Political decisions must always be determined prudentially—taking human weakness into account—to promote the real flourishing of the community.

8 *Summa Theologica*, Questions 96 and 97.

