

Book Review

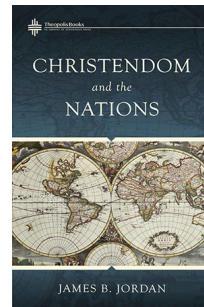
James B. Jordan.

Christendom and the Nations

Theopolis Books, Athanasius Press,

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What guidance might scripture contain for foreign policy? It is an interesting question. Very little of the literature on Christianity and Politics addresses this issue systematically, but James B. Jordan's *Christendom and the Nations*¹ (hereafter CATN) seeks to defend a body of specifically Christian principles for international relations. While one can be grateful for Jordan's initiative in seeking to draw greater attention to this part of the discipline, however, the work's flaws also leave one hoping that this will not be the last word on the subject by scholars of the Christian tradition.

Chapter 1 defines some central terms and themes. A nation is described as "a body of people, usually living in the same place, sharing a common faith and culture, and desiring a common and separate government" (7). States—which Jordan believes should ideally map to nations—are areas governed by force. The ideal for international relations is spiritual unity within a variety of Christian nations, Jordan argues.

The next five chapters elaborate on this theme of unity and diversity. Chapter 2 argues that biblical government must be local, with larger governmental units depending upon alliances of smaller ones. Chapters 3 and 4 argue that God desires nations to be united in the word and

worship of the Church and through free trade, but that he will thwart "pagan" international unity based on force and convenience. Chapter 5 defends plurality within that unity, holding that national borders and their defense are legitimate and that each nation should "mind its own business" (61). It also articulates a series of principles for warfare: War must be defensive, it should target enemy leadership, the enemy must be offered a negotiated peace, civilians are not legitimate targets, and armies should consist of local militia. Chapter 6 argues that alliances with "pagan" nations are forbidden unless they settle border disputes or are alliances of mutual defense initiated by the non-Christian nation.

The second half of the book mixes theoretical argument with commentary on contemporary foreign policy issues. Chapter 7 criticizes past US imperialism and contemporary foreign aid both as failures to "mind our own business" (96). Chapter 8 argues that church relations and spies are more central to international communication than are ambassadors. Chapter 9 denounces the UN as inherently anti-Christian. "The United Nations was founded as an international secular church with salvation as its explicit goal," Jordan claims, a thesis justified by reference to the UN charter's aspiration to "save" future generations from war (123). Jordan psychologizes UN advocates with the claim that "people committed to playing God...are the only kind of people attracted to the U.N." (126). The next two chapters (9 and

1 James B. Jordan, *Christendom and the Nations* (West Monroe, LA: Theopolis Books, 2019).

10) focus on the concept of sanctuary. CATN praises the medieval version of this idea for recognizing separate spheres of authority within a nation—thus instigating further divisions of governmental power. It then argues that Israel was, and the United States should be, a sanctuary for the nations, accepting all those fleeing oppression who are willing to convert to Christianity. It is not entirely clear what is to become of these immigrants. Jordan suggest that they should be made citizens once they have acculturated but then suggests segregating them into “certain areas...ghettoes in the older sense of the term – in which refugees might live and continue their own customs” (145). The final chapter reiterates the ideal of free trade and church unity.

One should be grateful for Jordan’s desire to provoke thought about the implications of Christianity for foreign policy. As a serious attempt to grapple with this area of study, however, CATN suffers from a number of major flaws. The least serious involve factual assertions that are false or problematic. For example, the book repeats the myth that the Civil War was fought over tariffs rather than slavery—“the Southern States seceded from the Union because of Lincoln’s tariffs” (52).² It claims that localities rather than states are the traditional “basic unit” of American government (21).³ And it rather blithely labels opposing viewpoints with undefined pejorative constructs like “secular

humanism” and “paganism” (17-18).

More serious are the book’s methodological problems. In defining the biblical “nation” (Greek: *ἔθνος*), for example, CATN inexplicably turns to dictionaries of the English language (3-4). The book also heavily employs the fallacy of over-extension of an analogy, apparently assuming that because humans bear the image of God, anything that can be said about God finds a parallel in humanity—to the point of claiming a precedent for national boundaries in the integrity of the persons of the godhead (57, cf. 17, 71). Most troubling, methodologically, the book apparently adheres to a naïve presumption that anything done by biblical Israel is normative for all time. Thus, Gideon’s identification with his tribe and household in Judges 6 and Jethro’s advice to Moses in Exodus 18 are held forth as transcendent normative statements of “the intensely local character of biblical government” (19). Similarly, a spattering of historical examples transform assassination and reliance upon militia from tactical tools appropriate in particular circumstances into moral principles of warfare.

This last critique bears on CATN’s deepest flaw. Like theonomy before it,⁴ the book fails to grasp the single most important truth about politics—the need for prudential flexibility. Thus, we are told that “the Christian faith” is “committed to localism” and stands firmly against centralization, in principle (24). Entirely absent is any consideration that forms of political organization might be instrumental structures appropriately adapted to changing

2 See, by contrast, the South Carolina Declaration of Secession in, e.g., Brooks D. Simpson, Stephen W. Sears, and Aaron Sheehan-Dean, eds., *The Civil War: The First Year Told By Those Who Lived It* (New York: Library of America, 2011), 149-55.

3 See, by contrast, e.g., Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison, *The Federalist: The Gideon Edition*, ed. George W. Carey, and James McClellan (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), 42:219-20, summarizing positions at the time of the Founding.

4 See Greg L. Bahnsen, “The Theonomic Position,” in Gary Scott Smith, ed., *God and Politics: Four Views on the Reformation of Civil Government* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1989).

technological⁵ and economic realities.⁶ Once CATN has declared that “[m]assive centralized government makes God angry” in principle, such prudential questions apparently seem unnecessary (75). Similarly, the policy of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) is dismissed as un-Christian on the ground that “[c]ivilians are not to be attacked” with no apparent reflection on the possibility that MAD may have been the best way to prevent such an attack. And once the “principle” that “trade [should] be free of civil laws that restrict voluntary trade, except in wartime” has been anointed with sacred significance, the door has been closed to questions whether some trade restrictions might reasonably, e.g., safeguard essential industries, or alleviate the distress of displaced domestic workers (49).

These criticisms highlight the caution with which a foreign policy must proceed in claiming the title “Christian” for set and unvarying “principles.” But CATN does provide an ever-timely reminder: Christianity offers guidance for all of life, including a nation’s relationship to its neighbors. Unfortunately, the book provides little insight into the details of that guidance.

5 Cf. *Helvering v. Davis*, 301 U.S. 619 (1937).

6 Cf. *US v. Lopez*, 514 U.S. 549 (1995).

