

A deeper order? A roundtable on William Bain, *Political Theology of International Order*

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Abstract

A brief introduction to the roundtable on William Bain, *Political Theology of International Order*.

Keywords

International Political Theory, political order, political theology, William Bain

Some topics define global politics in a fundamental way: war, sovereignty, wealth, nature, rights, responsibilities, and order are just a few. In this journal, we give space to articles that grapple with these fundamental questions, by revealing assumptions, evaluating concepts, or exploring traditional ideas in new and innovative ways. While the journal publishes articles which seek to do this, we also provide space for review essays and roundtables on key books we believe accomplish some or all of these objectives.

William Bain's 2020 book, *Political Theology of International Order*, is just the kind of work that accomplishes these objectives. It takes on one of those central themes—order—and reveals how order finds its origins in debates among medieval and early modern theorists. His account of immanent versus imposed order is drawn from debates about the nature of God in medieval Christian debates, which he argues is inflected in contemporary ideas about international and global order. Briefly, an imposed order derives from the nominalist tradition, in which God creates the world *ex nihilo* and is not bound by any rationalist assumptions of good or right. The key medieval figure here is William of Ockham. Opposed to this is the idea of an immanent order, which derives from the natural law tradition in which God's actions are reflective and constitutive of a rational and ordered universe. The key figure here is Thomas Aquinas.

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Bain does not explore Ockham or Aquinas directly in his book, however. Instead, creatively, he takes the basic contours of this debate and finds its echoes in three key thinkers of the early modern period: Martin Luther, Hugo Grotius, and Thomas Hobbes. Out of his careful reading of these three, he then moves back to the international and explores themes such as the balance of power and international law.

This provocative and insightful work opens up many debates and questions. We invited some thinkers who we believed could appreciate and critically assess his claims. Friedrich Kratochwil provides a wide ranging and insightful overview of the book, putting it into conversation with a range of thinkers and ideas that cross various disciplinary boundaries. Patrick Thaddeus Jackson links the nominalism of imposed order to contemporary philosophy of science, especially the idea of scientific ontology. Daniel Philpott critically engages Bain's account and ends by asking why we need to choose imposed order as our only option—could we not find resources in the natural law logic that may also inform contemporary claims about international affairs (particularly in legal and constitutional accounts)? Cornelia Navari draws out some of the connections between Bain and the wider scholarship on the English School, a tradition with which Bain is intimately familiar and which informs some of his framing around order. Finally, Murad Idris sympathetically reads Bain's invocation of political theology, but asks how Islamic political thought might provide a counter or parallel with Bain's medieval Christian story. And, we have given Bain an opportunity to respond to these critical responses, resulting in what believe to be one of our best roundtables on a book in many years.

I thank our contributors and, especially, William Bain for opening space for political theology and enabling us to think critically and carefully about the past and its heritage for us today in international affairs.

Author biography

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