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A book review

Jørgen Møller and Jonathan Stavnskær Doucette
The Catholic Church and European State Formation, AD 1000–1500
Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2022. 223 pp.

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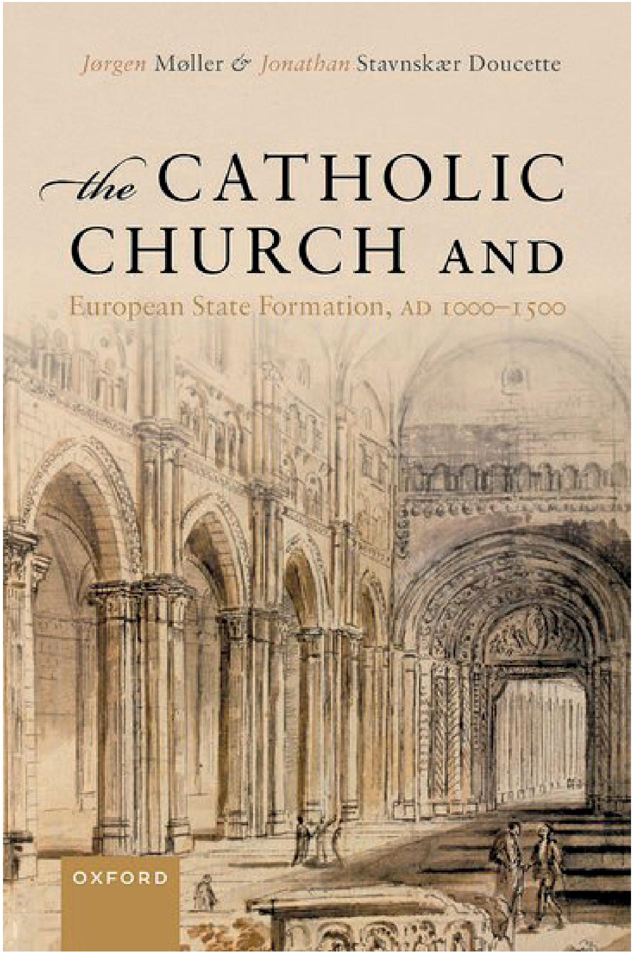

The book *The Catholic Church and European State Formation* moves between two worlds. Its authors, Jørgen Møller and Jonathan Stavnskær Doucette, are two political scientists from Aarhus University addressing a big historical question: how did the European multistate system emerge at the cost of an empire and universal power, and what was the role of the Catholic Church in the process. On the one hand, Møller and Doucette address political scientists with the goal of bringing the Church and medieval politics into the debate about European state formation, a discussion that has emphasised the early modern period and its endemic warfare, exemplified by the work of Charles Tilly. On the other hand, the authors aim to demonstrate and test quantitatively the phenomena and processes studied qualitatively by historians.

Many historians are, by instinct and for good reasons, suspicious of social and political scientists who promise to solve historical research questions with ‘big data’ and statistics. However, I have to say that I found the book’s premises promising. Firstly, the authors do not claim to reinvent the wheel but repeatedly emphasise that generations of historians have studied how, for example, Cluniac and Gregorian reforms spread and how rulers emulated the Church’s administration. The goal of bringing together the separate spheres of discussion in political science and premodern history is, by all accounts, extremely commendable, and it seems that the authors have genuinely attempted to do that. There seems to be momentum for integrating the Middle Ages into political science, for as the authors themselves point out, Anna M. Grzymała-Busse (Stanford University) has had a parallel project and has recently published her book on almost the same topic.[1] Because historians have not, to my

[1] Anna M. Grzymała-Busse, *Sacred Foundations: The Religious and Medieval Roots of the European State,* Princeton University Press: Princeton 2023.

knowledge, reviewed these books, one of the goals of my review is to make medieval historians aware of such discussions in political science.

Secondly, the processes of medieval state formation and the emergence of representation, democratic institutions and self-government are worth studying quantitatively, and political scientists have a much stronger tradition of quantification of political phenomena than historians. While explicit hypotheses and a focus on a few quantifiable variables have the disadvantage of reducing the complexity of historical sources and phenomena, this approach has its merits. Undeniably, we historians are sometimes too fascinated by complexity and fail to explicate what we mean when we speak about dependencies and explain the emergence of the phenomena we study. However, while almost all historical sources can be quantified, there are critical conditions for doing so, most notably that the researchers embarking on quantification have a deep understanding of the sources and their context.[2] Here are some of Møller's and Doucette's most significant shortcomings, to which I will return after presenting the contents and arguments of the book.

The key argument of the book is that the roots of the European multistate system and political self-government are in the high Middle Ages and that the early advent of this system 'is to be bound in ideational and institutional developments within the medieval Catholic Church, which were themselves enabled by the tenth-century state collapse' (pp. 6–7). Consequently, the Church brought about the internal balancing act of the practices of self-government and the external balancing act of backing up the multistate system instead of the emperor. The theoretical framework for analysing how these processes took place is a theory of the diffusion of organisational practises, assuming 1) the demand for change among the adopters and 2) the supply of institutions working as the model for change.

Following the introduction, Chapter 1, based on earlier research, recounts the tenth-century state collapse and investiture controversy. It is likely the chapter of slightest interest to historians as it moves along well-trodden paths. Chapter 2 presents the research data, partly based on earlier datasets, partly collected and coded by the authors. As expected for the research question at hand, the data is of a very general level. The dataset records the urban centres in 1000 CE, the dates for the founding of the dioceses and the location of bishops' seats, the Cluniac monasteries and mendicant houses with their founding dates, the urban institutions with recorded self-government, and finally realm-level political assemblies in the Crown of Aragon and England. The description of the dataset provides some eyebrow-raising moments for a historian. While the authors acknowledge that there is much uncertainty involved in defining when self-governing institutions were introduced in an urban community, they declare with confidence that 'there is little subjectivity involved as we have simply registered the founding of bishoprics and Cluniac, Dominican, and Franciscan monasteries [*sic*], which are probably among the best-documented institutions in medieval Europe' (p. 48). A medieval historian quickly points out that it is an entirely different matter that some of these institutions have extant founding charters, and others have their founding date recorded in histories written decades or even centuries afterwards. Moreover, while it is a trivial matter analyt-

[2] There is an excellent introduction to quantification and history; see Claire Lemercier and Claire Zalc, *Quantitative Methods in the Humanities: An Introduction*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, University of Virginia Press: Charlottesville 2019.

ically, consistently using the term ‘monasteries’ of the mendicant male convents and speaking of them as ‘monastic’ orders leaves an amateurish impression – and does not speak well of Oxford University Press’s copy-editors.

The concrete cases studied by the authors are the emergence of urban self-government and its dependency on episcopal sees and Cluniac monasteries (Chapter 3); the spread of representation and consent in medieval institutions, with particular focus on the Dominican order’s influence (Chapter 4); how the Church supported rulers in the periphery but fought the Holy Roman Emperor; (Chapter 5) and finally the consequences of the Hohenstaufen collapse after Frederick II for the urban self-government and political fragmentation in the Empire as well as its corollaries in the Crown of Aragon (Chapter 6).

The main impression from Møller’s and Doucette’s analysis is two-fold: firstly, from a historian’s perspective, most of the book is a quantitative corroboration of what is already known. The authors genuinely strive to avoid naïve conclusions and use a range of control variables (for example, wealth and population size of the urban centres) to demonstrate that there is a true dependency between the variables they study, for example, the proximity of Cluniac houses to the emergence of urban self-government. Some of the tables and graphs are illustrative and insightful. However, for example, the analysis of representation and consent (the principle *quod omnes tangit ab omnibus approbetur*) in Chapter 3 remains descriptive and fails to explain the transmission of these notions from ecclesiastic to secular government any more than the previous scholarship already has. Some of the hypotheses the authors test with much work and an exhaustive number of control variables are simply not relevant or interesting, such as the autocratization of the Dominican order in the late fourteenth century, after which the order supposedly had little impact on the diffusion of democratic institutions. It certainly did not, but it seems beside the point to model such a hypothesis when it is common knowledge that the mendicant orders had by that point become part of the establishment in the medieval urban landscape, themselves targets of criticism and protest from new generations of reformers. On the contrary, it is intriguing that there is a statistically significant relationship between the presence of the Dominican order and representative town government before 1300, but no such dependency with regards to Franciscan houses (pp. 110–111). The observation would have merited more attention than simply using the Franciscans as a control to demonstrate the effect of the Dominicans.

The second main impression of the statistical analysis is that the authors, being political scientists, have a somewhat limited understanding of medieval society, current research and, consequently, research questions worth pursuing. To give an example: while exploring the raw geographical proximity of urban centres with self-government to episcopal sees, Cluniac monasteries and Dominican convents seems to reveal some statistical relationships, a little more nuanced dataset would have produced genuinely new insights. The geographical distance from an urban centre to a religious house is a somewhat naïve variable. Estimations of actual travel times, which current projects studying historical geoinformation and travel routes produce, would be much more enlightening. In addition, bishops and monasteries were also landowners and secular rulers, and their influence reached well beyond the immediate geographical proximity: the city of Erfurt was ruled by the archbishops of Mainz, over 250 km away. Therefore, to explore the influence of bishops and abbots on the emergence of urban self-government, comparing cities and towns under secular lords against those with ecclesiastic overlords would have been sensible. For many medieval champions of urban self-government, the Church was not primarily a source of inspiration as Møller and Doucette view it, but an adversary and the enemy of the citizen's freedoms.

The book's severe shortcoming is the dismissial of the role of revolts and rebellions in the birth of urban self-government – with few exceptions. Surprisingly, Samuel K. Cohn Jr.'s seminal work on medieval urban revolts and their political nature is absent from the bibliography.[3] Likewise, the authors dismiss much of the relevant literature on the Church and medieval state formation – despite themselves studying precisely it. In the past two decades, several important volumes have been published on Christianization and state formation, particularly in Central Eastern Europe and Scandinavia,[4] and the authors do not engage with this literature. The book's copious references to historical studies create a simulacrum of engagement with the latest research, but the authors' view on history relies heavily on a few overview books, especially Chris Wickham's *Medieval Europe* (2016); R.I. Moore's *The First European Revolution* (2000); Brian Tierney's *The Crisis of Church and State, 1050–1300* (1988) and Richard Southern's *Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages* (1970). They all have undeniable merits but, at best, serve as a starting point for exploring medieval society and politics.

It is clear that from a medieval historian's viewpoint, *The Catholic Church and European State Formation* does not fulfil its promises and contains very few novel insights. However, I would not dismiss it completely, as tempted as one would be. Medieval historians should applaud Møller's and Doucette's aim to bring the Middle Ages into political science. Their book and Grzymała-Busse's almost simultaneous study demonstrate a demand for quantitative study of medieval politics, religion and society, and historians should answer to this call. For political scientists working on the Middle Ages, my advice is: involve medieval historians in your work; with our help, it will become much better.

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[3] Cf. above all Samuel K. Cohn, *Popular Protest in Late Medieval English Towns,* Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2013; *Lust for Liberty: The Politics of Social Revolt in Medieval Europe, 1200–1425: Italy, France, and Flanders,* Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass. 2006.

[4] See esp. Nora Berend ed., *Christianization and the Rise of Christian Monarchy: Scandinavia, Central Europe and Rus', c. 900–1200*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 2007; Ildar H. Garipzanov, Patrick J. Geary, and Przemysław Urbańczyk eds., *Franks, Northmen, and Slavs: Identities and State Formation in Early Medieval Europe* (Cursor Mundi 5), Brepols: Turnhout 2008; Sverre Bagge, *From Viking Stronghold to Christian Kingdom: State Formation in Norway, C. 900–1350*. Museum Tusculanum Press: Copenhagen 2010.