

Orthodox Political Theology

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Dzalto, Davor. *Anarchy and the Kingdom of God: From Eschatology to Orthodox Political Theology and Back*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2021, 328 p.

Davor Dzalto has written a refreshing book about Orthodox Political Theology. Typically, for an Orthodox scholar, the book engages Patristic sources. However, Dzalto goes on to engage contemporary Orthodox political theologians, including Pantelis Kaliadzitis and Aristotle Papanikolaou, not to mention broader influences on modern Orthodox scholarship and theology like Sergius Bulgakov and John Zizioulas. He also alights on anarchist influences in Michael Bakunin, Leo Tolstoy and Peter Kropotkin.

Dzalto divides his book into two parts. Part I addresses Orthodox political theologies. Particularly prominent is an exposition and exploration of the ‘symphony’. The ‘symphony’ is perhaps the dominant Orthodox political theology running from Patristics to the modern era. Dzalto brings his scholarly insight to this 2000-year history alighting on major figures and contexts, which shape this approach to Orthodox political theology. The wealth of sources will be welcome to those unfamiliar with Orthodox theology, and a comfort to those who know how to navigate the field.

In Part II, Dzalto turns to a counter-narrative. He begins by exploring the ‘proto-anarchism’ of Patristic sources. Amongst the (un)usual suspects are Justin, the Martyr, Tertullian, Irenaeus of Lyon, Athanasius of Alexandria Ambrose of Milan, and Augustine of Hipona. The clear exposition of the political and theological positions of these Patristic sources neatly problematizes the ‘symphony’ settlement of Part I.

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The remainder of Part II reads something like a manifesto, albeit a scholarly one. Dzalto digs deep into the insights of Nicholas Berdyaev, Sergius Bulgakov and John Zizioulas to bring forth a wonderful Christian Anarchism rooted in freedom, creativity and love. From my point of view, the chapter dedicated to ‘Being as Freedom and Necessity’ is the most lucid and forthright. It is where scholarship and manifesto coincide with an accessible discussion of the perspectives set out by Zizioulas, and navigating the discussions with Bulgakov and Berdyaev in other chapters.

The book contains four charcoal sketches and four Excurses, which provide excellent background material for classroom teaching or seminar settings. The sketches are of Zeus Enthroned, Ambrose of Milan with Emperor Theodosius, Basil the Holy Fool, and the Last Temptation of Christ. The Excurses focus on discussions of ‘Roman, Eastern, Byzantine or Greek Empire?’, ‘Symphonia e Synalleia’, ‘Left, Right and Christian’, and ‘Christian Anarchism and the Institutional Church’.

Dzalto’s scholarship is a rich contribution to the burgeoning literature on political theology, and a particularly welcome perspective in the field of Orthodox political theology. In terms of Christianity and Anarchism it is certainly the most comprehensive engagement since the work of the Reformed thinker, Jacques Ellul, although Dzalto does not fully engage the anarchist political manifesto in the manner of Ellul. To this end, scholars of Anarchism as a political movement may well have some questions about Dzalto’s approach. Instead, he prefers to place an emphasis on Berdyaev and existentialism, viewed through the prism of suspicion of power and power structures. For theologians, East and West, Christian and non-Christian, it is a challenging text about the nature of God and the nature of the Church set in and against ‘this world’.