
**Reviewed by** Amanda Power (University of Oxford)

**Published on** H-Diplo (September, 2023)

**Commissioned by** Seth Offenbach (Bronx Community College, The City University of New York)

*Sacred Foundations: The Religious and Medieval Roots of the European State* is about the role of medieval institutions in the formation of modern European states. The central thesis of the book is that the medieval formation of the modern European state was driven by the Roman Catholic Church. Beginning around 1000 CE, an extraordinarily wealthy early medieval church first “freed itself” from secular authorities, innovated in law and administration, and created a conceptual structure that transformed the nature of political legitimacy. When these practices and ideas were subsequently adopted by kings, states emerged in recognizable forms and eventually drew power and national resources away from the church. When rulers were prevented by papal intervention from effective consolidation of their power, the result was long-term weakness and fragmentation.

The introduction explores some of the large body of existing work around the question of European state formation. It looks at the wealth, moral authority, and trained personnel of the Roman church, which secular rulers of the central medieval period could for the most part only envy and emulate. As time went on, secular mimicry became secular dominance. From this perspective, Grzymała-Busse suggests, the Protestant Reformation was more an inevitable outcome of longer-term processes than a revolution. She goes on to review studies in history and political science that tend to locate the state’s emergence in the post-1500 era, explaining it variously through the pressure of war, competition, and internal negotiation for resources. *Sacred Foundations* argues that its analysis accounts for the ongoing fragmentation of some states and the centralizing success of others.

The first chapter sets out the relationship of church and state—that is, kingdoms and empire—in the medieval period. It reflects a twentieth-century consensus in which the two are treated as discrete types of institution and essentially the only players on the scene. The course of their struggle is laid out in keeping with that older historiography. The second chapter elaborates Walter
Ullmann’s thesis that the papacy concentrated on working against the Holy Roman Empire, resulting in the highly fragmented Germany of the early modern period, while enabling kingdoms like England and France to develop strong centralizing governments.[1] The argument here is that the fragmentation was deliberately induced by papal deployment of a variety of spiritual, legal, and military tools. This is supported by a series of data analyses that allegedly confirm the tenor of the synthesis of the historical literature. These look for correlations between papal conflict and fragmentation at a regional level, correcting for alternative explanations for political fragmentations such as the rise of communes or different inheritance practices. Opinions may vary about the value of such an exercise, but it is fair to say that this section is not particularly accessible to a reader not versed in the methodology or terminology, nor are all of its figures easy to interpret. They do demonstrate some interesting illustrations of trends. The final sections of the chapter offer a strikingly under-nuanced summary of the fourteenth-century loss of papal authority and rise of secular sovereignty. Sentences like “The Great Schism showed popes to be petty politicians vying for power rather than men of God” and the oversimplification of “The church’s considerable achievements—differentiation of secular and religious authority, the fragmentation of Europe, and new notions of sovereignty—backfired” are particularly egregious examples of this (both p. 74). It hardly took the Great Schism to give either historians or medieval critics the idea that popes were power-hungry political players: it was an old allegation.[2]

The development of governing institutions in the church and their adoption by secular rulers is the subject of the third chapter. Figures 3.1 and 3.2 set out a comparative timeline. The chapter traces details of each element as they were pioneered by the church and taken on in European kingdoms. The account here fits with the overarching argument: necessary papal allies were enabled by the church in this process; kingdoms that converted to Christianity in this later period adopted the institutional package along with the doctrines; the fragmented empire failed to centralize. The fourth chapter looks at the development of canon and civil law and academic training in the law. In this chapter, “skilled, knowledgeable, educated citizens” (these are elite males receiving a legal education in the universities) are described as “human capital” (p. 114). It is unclear why this rather unpleasant term is preferred to others that would make more sense in the context—especially as the argument is that the church helped to create, “but could not control how this human capital would be used” (p. 133). The more heavily regulated areas of theology and philosophy, which were—and remained—important for teaching and disciplining the wider population, are not discussed.

The role of representation, especially in the form of parliament, in “promoting economic growth” and state building, is explored in the final chapter. The premise is that these representative bodies are crucial in guaranteeing property rights, consent to taxation, “predictable investment environments,” and peaceful conflict resolution (p. 144). The notions of representation and consent are said to have passed from church to state during this period and underpinned increasingly robust practices of governance and assent-based taxation. Conciliarism, which failed in the church, shaped medieval secular practice and ultimately facilitated the Protestant Reformation. Church absolutism (and indeed, the Reformation) also played their parts in the post-1500 intensification of monarchical power.

A conclusion reiterates the main points, finding “sacred foundations” for what are claimed as distinctive features of European states—sovereignty, rule of law, autonomous universities, and representative national assemblies. The book disagrees with the arguments made by other scholars (which it sets out in the introduction) that modern states grew out of early modern wars, because
these had to be paid for by taxes, which meant that monarchs had to bargain. Instead, *Sacred Foundations* argues, the wars were consequences of the shapes previously given to states by the church. Parliaments, universities, and the diffusion of the expertise of trained “human capital” were medieval innovations; the separation of church and state was begun in the eleventh century; and church independence enabled the conceptualization of sovereignty. Underlying all this is the argument that state formation is historically deeper (that is, it goes back to the eleventh century), and more institutionally complex and regionally specific, than some of the literature cited in the study generally recognizes. This means—and this is certainly a point worth making—that European state development cannot be exported to other regions as a model to follow. As well as its complicated evolution, it is rooted in a religious culture that carried a particular kind of authority because it offered eternal life and salvation. However, the book’s rather worrying concluding observation is that while some of the literature suggests that “local, endogenous solutions are often more efficient and effective,” this study shows how the institutional models from a top-down institution like the church can be critical to future economic and political development if they seem “familiar and legitimate” (p. 182). Ironically, therefore, it was the medieval church, authoritarian and religious as it was, that engendered all the elements that are commonly valued in the modern secular state.

Not all readers will find irony here.

The conclusion is followed by an appendix that clarifies the way data was used to generate the analyses offered in the text. This is important because the data analyses are the main original element in the book. It looks as if Grzymała-Busse has been thoughtful about how she gathered and deployed her data. But it is very doubtful whether enough of the factors that would need to be included for robust results are quantifiable. The case is never really made for why this sort of modeling—with its inevitable simplifications and omissions—is valuable for our understanding of the relationships and processes discussed in the book. It is mostly offered as confirmation of the book’s prior argument, rather than as the basis of novel analysis. There are other difficulties. The measures of fragmentation of political authority are done in grid cells, without reference to types of terrain. If one were to overlay figures 2.5A-C (maps of Europe in 1000, 1300, and 1648 respectively) on a physical map showing mountains and rivers, other explanations for the patterns of governance might emerge.[3] Similarly, where are the data of climatic changes, weather patterns, and pandemic and epizootic disease, all of which strongly affect availability of labor and resource production in agrarian societies? Historians are rightly cautioned against an excess of environmental determinism, but as we know more about past climate and environment, historians ought to be equally cautious of an excess of institutional determinism.

What are the strengths of the approach in this study? In the first place, if political scientists or modern historians really are excluding periods before ca. 1500 in their analyses of the emergence of the European state, it is certainly high time that they were encouraged to take a longer view. Judging by the recent literature in this field cited by Grzymała-Busse, her study contributes to a trend toward looking deeper in time. Similarly, the formative quality of much thinking and practice generated by the medieval Roman church needs to be recognized in any discussion of the origins of European governing institutions. In a time of anthropogenic climatic breakdown, there is self-evident value in a greater recognition among Western political theorists of the roots of the globalizing monotheism that underwrites their economic, political, and scientific programs. The data analyses may well render the book’s argument more compelling to this kind of audience. If medieval historians are not writing books communicating such ideas accessibly to historians and others
who specialize in later periods and contemporary concerns, then there does exist a gap that needs filling. Grzymała-Busse has produced a useful synthesis of one strand in medieval history writing that speaks clearly to her sense of the gap, and the effect that it has had on the quality of work in her own field. Hopefully her colleagues will pay attention.

There are, nonetheless, some limitations and problems. The book offers a remarkably moncausal argument that is supported by its periodization, the rather outdated sharpness of its distinction between church and state, and a lack of interest in the substantive differences between kingdoms and empires as forms of governance. Taking periodization first, the book’s aim is to show that the European state is better understood if the story of governance in Europe is picked up with the series of ecclesiastical innovations known as the “Gregorian” reform. This is not wrong, but take an earlier starting point, and the “sacred foundations” become residues of the practices of a retreating empire, cross-pollinated with those of the partially converted ruling elites of post-Roman states—stories that have also been much told but are not acknowledged here.

Secondly, the book could have been about entangled practices of ecclesiastical and lay governing elites—since much of its evidence would bear this interpretation and its overall aim would still have been achieved—but it is determinedly one about church innovation driving that of state and state emulating and eventually overtaking church. This requires distinguishing and essentializing enormously complicated, locally specific, and ambiguously interrelated networks of elite power into two kinds of thing. Again, Grzymała-Busse is not wrong if one is looking for a chronology of the introduction of administrative techniques in these centuries. She is also often attentive to the workings of mutual influence. But her approach overlooks research that complicates our sense of what constituted power and community across the diverse regions and communities of the Latin West, [4] or explores the oppressive effects and resistance to technologies of governance that she treats as “advances” (e.g., p. 76).[5]

Finally, the argument that the centralization of kingdoms like England and France and the fragmentation of the vast, transalpine Holy Roman Empire owed much to papal choices is proposed without reflection on other differences between these forms of rule. Empires in this period always collaborated with effective regional authorities. This was also true to varying degrees within kingdoms. Grzymała-Busse’s maps show the Holy Roman Empire divided into smaller administrative areas, but do not always show what could be considered the equivalent demarcations of relatively independent smaller-scale lordship in other regions (e.g., the duchies of Aquitaine and Normandy in 1000 CE France). All this begs the question of what “fragmentation” really is, and when—and why and to whom—it matters.

Grzymała-Busse should be congratulated for identifying and speaking to an important misunderstanding in political science approaches to questions around the development of European states and institutions. It is an impressive feat to move so far from her earlier areas of research (postcommunist states), and into an academic landscape that does not always embrace badly needed ambition and breadth of enquiry. The study’s weaknesses are related to the body of historical literature on which she has depended, rather than misunderstandings of it. The book could therefore be a useful starting point for students interested in institutional and administrative engagements across lay and ecclesiastical regimes. For everyone else, it should stimulate reflection on some of our more important and dangerous illusions about the hegemonic discourses of Western history and political practice.

Notes

[1]. For example, Walter Ullmann, The Growth of Papal Government in the Middle Ages: A Study


If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo


URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=59172

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.