

CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

Natural Law and Religious Freedom: The Role of Moral First Things in Grounding and Protecting the First Freedom

J. Daryl Charles

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J. Daryl Charles is the author or coauthor of a remarkable number of books and articles characterized both by their depth and erudition as well as the breadth of their author's interests and expertise. A nonexhaustive list of these interests include criminal justice, the American political tradition, natural law, just-war thinking, biblical hermeneutics, bioethics, and Christian social thought. Over his career Charles has taught primarily at Christian colleges and universities, with affiliations with several think tanks and a fellowship at Princeton University. Raised in the Anabaptist tradition, deeply conversant with Roman Catholic social teaching as well as the legacy of the Magisterial Reformers, Charles brings all of this experience and scholarly prowess to bear on several important topics in this latest book. His aim in the book is to make painfully clear to his audience how precarious our culture's commitment to religious freedom is, why this is important, and how the good of religious freedom depends on its grounding on natural law principles.

Charles accomplishes this over several substantive chapters—supplemented by a whopping 1,045 endnotes—that lead the reader through an embarrassment of topical riches. While Charles provides some commentary linking the threads of the overall argument, some of the chapters are better taken as stand-alone contributions. Charles expertly describes the current threats facing religious liberty, discussing legal challenges to various Christian groups, while also explaining the philosophical underpinnings of religious liberty as a fundamental good the exercise of which accords with and contributes to the flourishing of human nature. The book can be taken as something of a survey of these themes, in which

Charles acts as tour guide and an intermediary between the reader and several conversation partners. He draws on giants of Western thought such as Augustine, Aquinas, John Locke, Alexis de Tocqueville, and several others, as well as more contemporary voices such as Popes Benedict XVI and John Paul II, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Paul Ramsey, and American Founding scholars Daniel Dreisbach, Jeffry Morrison, and Mark David Hall. To his credit, Charles gives voice to a number of scholars with whom he disagrees. Indeed, some of the richest sections of the book are found when Charles describes an important argument, lays out thinkers who represent opposing sides, and charitably re-presents their views and then critically but fairly interacts with them.

Given the many different topics tackled by the book, readers will resonate with some sections more than others. This reviewer found Charles's treatment of the relationship between justice and love to be the highlight of the entire volume. In chapter 6, Charles provides the reader with a comprehensive description of a debate about the putative priority of love over and against justice. He describes what may be the conventional wisdom about the supposed tension between the requirements of love and how they temper the "cold demands" of justice, riffing on thinkers supporting this view such as Kierkegaard, Anders Nygren, and Timothy Jackson. He then draws from the rich contributions of Augustine and Aquinas as well as his own expertise in biblical hermeneutics to show, conclusively in my view, that love and justice work hand in hand rather than in competition with each other.

Of course, a book of this scope naturally elicits quibbles and good-faith disagreements. One can agree with much of Charles's arguments while still finding an important component missing, as much as one is reluctant to call for more content in an already overflowing work. Nevertheless, the book would have been greatly strengthened by an account not only of how our culture has lost its faith in natural law and religious liberty, but how we can recover it. Charles lays out the architecture of the relationship between natural law principles and religious liberty (and love and justice), but peoples and cultures do not live by worldviews alone. At moments in the book the reader may be forgiven for concluding that what went wrong is merely that people began to *believe* the wrong propositions and that thus the solution is just to patch up the faulty thinking. There is no doubt that faulty thinking has and continues to play a role, and Charles's book should be part of any salutary remedy to a deficient understanding of natural law and religious liberty. But it would be fantastic to learn more about what a scholar like Charles thinks about how *practices* and *habits* can be reformed in addition to addressing the argumentative structures upheld by propositional philosophical truths. There are, to be sure, some promising hints at this in his final chapter in which he discusses how cultural change is preceded by small and subtle changes in language and policy. This quibble aside, Charles's work is a worthy contribution to any serious person's efforts to understand some of the most fundamental challenges facing Western culture.

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