

*Essays in Economic & Business History*

2024, 42 (1): 152-155

Published May 4, 2024



**Book Review:** Grzymala-Busse, Anna. *Sacred Foundations. The Religious and Medieval Roots of the European State*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2023. 235 Pp.

The key concept and messages of this book are that the role of the Catholic Church (later on in the text named as church) in the development of the state has been important, but neglected in the existing research, which has emphasized the role of state and war (Philip Hoffman 2015), economic development (Mark Dincecco 2017) or global trade and small and medium powers (Jari Eloranta, Eric Golson, Peter Hedberg, and Maria Cristina Moreira 2018). Although previous research has dealt with the Church, its role has been somewhat marginalized and put in the ecclesiastical corner of history.

The role of the Church has, through extensive usage of sources, been brought into the open in Grzymala-Busse's book. It is also a call for more research into the role of the Church and religion in creating state capacity or, before that, the capabilities of religion to enhance state formation and vital institutions. Many of the most secular institutions' roots are ecclesiastical. The Church was not used solely for developing state capacity through fragmentation but could also have its hold on developing states, thus making it a brake and accelerator at the same time.

The development of European states must be looked at carefully to understand the ambiguous role of the Church in creating state capacity. In this respect, Grzymala-Busse's book is in good company. There has been, in recent years, new research on the role of church/religion in developing state capacity, such as Bruce Bueno de Mesquita (2022), who examined the 1122 Worms Concord between the Catholic Church and the sovereigns, showing the division of power, and its significant role in creating capacity for the Church and sovereigns. Both agreed to concentrate on their core activities, thus making their institutional focus more successful. With these institutions being the main actors in medieval times, a mutual agreement was needed.

As one of the most important agreements in medieval times, it led to consequences for the present, with the formation of, at the very least, a clear separation between Church and state at the functional level. Noel Johnson and Mark Koyama (2019) identify this as a key factor for the societal success of Europe, which includes political and economic/trade capabilities. The state and Church cooperated closely and the result was more welfare results or human capital in institutional form, hence the need for cooperation and common goals for both institutions: make the society great again.

Joel Mokyr (2016) includes a chapter on the role of religion and economic development, where he examines the role of religious toleration, concluding that business is done because rent-seeking takes precedence over the religious prejudice of the actors involved.

In this seminal book, Grzymala-Busse has brought out three intriguing propositions. First, the significant role of the Church and religion in the creation of state capacity in Europe. Church and religion were omnipresent in society from the medieval times into the early modern era. The Church can be seen as an institution just like other institutions (sovereign status, the military, taxation, or schools). The author attributes to the Church, and more broadly religion,

a profound role in the creation of statehood (i.e., state capacity) beyond the purely ecclesiastical—they created institutional knowledge, which has remained over time. It is institutional tenacity at work. Second, the author has pointed out the significance of medieval times as a main root cause for the state capacity discussion in more modern times. This is explained through the medieval state formation by religion and church. The Church had, as an institution, more knowledge of how to be active and successful as an institution. This institutional capacity and knowledge were made through education, administrative skills, and the role of the Church in consecrating trade and marketplaces. Third, this book shows that events and developments in medieval times are active even in the present day, namely in the form of functioning institutions.

The legacy of medieval times in the form of institutional capacity, memory, or tradition is a focal point of this very lucidly written book. It sheds new light on the development of European states through intensive research. The focus of this book is to show how the European state, and its institutional basis, were ecclesiastical and medieval.

The author constructed the book in a manner that is easy to follow. We are first introduced to the key concepts: the Church and the long legacy of medieval times, together with their influential role in promoting state formation in Europe. The following chapters explain and widen the concept of the medieval setting, the rivalry between the Church and state (i.e. the fragmentation of states which enables the influence and power of the Church to grow) together with often neglected topics such as governing, education, and legal institutions, together with their role in society. The role of the Church in developing education facilities (schools) and structures (bureaucracy), as well as governing (administrative knowledge) capabilities paired with knowledge of the law (courts), made the Church a formidable actor in society. Then the author explains parliament and representation, which were immensely important for the development of European statehood and the Church. The democratic organizations (national parliaments) had their roots in the ecclesiastical foundations of the Church, namely cooperation and competition with sovereigns over power and creation of state formation (i.e., state capacity in its beginnings). In this book, the whole gamut of Church influence on society is shown and explained through these above-mentioned examples.

Grzymala-Busse's book is a compelling argument about the role of the Church in creating state capacity from medieval times. It also shows the basis for future state capacity developments. Firstly, the Church was a competitor, but also an ally in creating state capacity. The argument is intriguing and has been demonstrated clearly in this book through education (Church schools), institutional innovations (monasteries or episcopal institutions; the chair of the bishop, taxation, education, cooperation with politics and trade; monasteries and parishes in the frontier areas) or administrative services. Secondly, the European-specific attribute of the Church means that this European model cannot be transferred to other areas. While correct from a narrow perspective, every geographical area has specific attributes that cannot be transferred to other areas. Nonetheless, this is not to suggest that it is not feasible to research a more holistic view of state capacity creation in other non-European areas. Thirdly, culture and ideology also build states. Their presence, together with their heritage and legacy, makes them a vehicle for institutional memory with their specific set of capabilities. Fourthly, territorial fragmentation was not an accident, but was formulated by the Church. This shows the ambiguity of the Church in its relations to the state, and also begs the question whether the Church was always successful in determining the direction of these relations. Did the Church have the capacity to decide the direction of society? Furthermore, the Church also provided a model for (and facilitated) institutions, the passage of laws, and the realization of conceptual innovations. Such conceptual innovations added value to society, sovereigns, and to the Church itself, and the book has a core narrative about how and why Europe developed its state capacity. The Church had clear separation from and roles in society, and undertook tasks that would enable societal development in Europe.

While this book is very well-researched, there are some areas for potential further inquiry not covered which could provide avenues for future research. I suggest six. Firstly, the direct role and especially the impacts on trade and economics in society, illustrated in the recent book by Benjamin Friedman (2021). The Church had its influence on the economic gospel, education, and trade. The Church and religion were active players in this “game” and had their institutional voice heard in society. Grzymala-Busse alludes to the effects on society from an economic perspective, but there is also an opportunity to explore the economics of the Church since currently this analysis is implicit.

Secondly, the role in political lobbying (politics) and political proto-parties could have been addressed more clearly. This could have been done by looking at the Church as a key player in politics, economics, and wider society. Monasteries, bishops, cathedrals, and papal innovations were mentioned as tools of government and negotiations towards the society (i.e., the sovereigns). It would have helped to elaborate their role in advocating the Church’s intention and role in society and especially in the advocacy work (i.e., formulating clear and tangible political aims and goals).

Thirdly, the role of the Church in creating a welfare state through the social services it provided could be explored further. The ethos of the Church and how it created state capacity through social services, was an example of early welfare state development. Robert Nelson (2017), for example, explores the Church’s role and function in the society.

Fourthly, the role of cults of saints could have been mentioned, and their role both supranationally and nationally in creating state capacity at the behest of the Church as discussed in Robert Bartlett (1993), and the development of Europe in the form of cultural change (Jyrki Knuutila 2010). The cults of saints had more weight in society than just ecclesiastical affairs. They were a powerful vehicle to widen both the Church’s and sovereigns’ influence and power beyond their borders. (The Church did not have borders in the same way as sovereigns had, but the Church had later competition in the ecclesiastical realm with Orthodox Churches and the Protestant Church in Europe.)

Fifthly, the view of the Orthodox world, especially the role of the Church and religion in creating state capacity and before that an engine for state formation through church art, would also be an interesting angle to explore. J.J.M. Bastubacka (2018), for example, explains how the West rose, in much the same way as Mokyr (2016) emphasized the role of enlightenment and rational science.

Sixthly, the role of the Church in developing fiscal capacity was missing. What was the relation of the Church towards fiscal issues and how did it relate to state formation and creating state capacity later? It would have been beneficial to have a few words concerning this issue, which Antonis Adam and Sofia Tsarsitalidou (2023), for example, examine.

Otherwise, this book is a lucid and ardent call for more research on the role of the Church in state capacity creation. The role of the Church as an institution, and its long institutional legacy, was to use its expertise to manage bureaucracy and administration. This bureaucratic knowledge has made the Church a major player in the realm of state formation, which is the basis for later state capacity and European integration. Through Church and religion, state capacity could spill over to new areas and states, thus making it (State Capacity) a *supranational* and *not solely national* process. This is one of the most interesting findings when one is reading this splendid book and looking for future research avenues and bridging with the international relations research corpus. The future question is: is this institutional capacity a form of institutionalized human capital(ism)?

Henri Aaltonen, University of Helsinki, Finland

## Works Cited

- Adam, Antonis, and Sofia Tsarsitalidou. 2023. "Serving Two Masters: The Effect of State Religion on Fiscal Capacity." *Public Choice* 194 (1-2): 181-203.
- Bartlett, Robert. 1993. *The Making of Europe. Conquest, Colonization, and Cultural Change 950-1350*. London: Penguin.
- Bastubacka, J.J.M. 2018. "Use of Images in Eastern and Western Church Art." In *Imaging the Spiritual Quest: Explorations in Art, Religion, and Spirituality* (Writings from the Academy of Fine Arts; No. 6), edited by F. Brummel. Helsinki: The Academy of Fine Arts at the University of the Arts Helsinki.
- Bueno de Mesquita, Bruce. 2022. *The Invention of Power. Popes, Kings, and the Birth of the West*. New York: Public Affairs.
- Dincecco, Mark. 2017. *State Capacity and Economic Development*. Cambridge Elements. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eloranta, Jari, Eric Golson, Peter Hedberg, and Maria Cristina Moreira (eds.). 2018. *Small and Medium Powers in Global History. Trade, Conflicts, And Neutrality from the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*. London: Routledge.
- Friedman, Benjamin. 2021. *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*. Alfred A. Knopf: New York
- Grzymala-Busse, Anna. 2023. *Sacred Foundations. The Religious and Medieval Roots of the European State*. Princeton University Press: Princeton
- Hoffman, Philip. 2015. *Why did Europe Conquer the World?* Princeton University Press, NJ: Princeton
- Johnson, Noel and Mark Koyama. 2019. *Persecution and Toleration. The Long Road to Religious Freedom*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge
- Knuutila, Jyrki. 2010. *Soturi, kuningas, pyhimys. Pyhän Olavin kultti osana kristillistymistä Suomessa 1200-luvun alkupuolelta 1500-luvun puoliväliin [Warrior, King, and Saint. The Cult of Saint Olaf as part of the Christianization of Finland from the Beginning of the 1200s to Mid-1500s]*. Helsinki: Suomen kirkkohistoriallinen seura [Finnish Church Historical Society].
- Mokyr, Joel. 2016. *Culture of Growth. The Origins of the Modern Economy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Nelson, Robert. 2017. *Lutheranism and the Nordic Spirit of Social Democracy. A Different Protestant Ethic*. Aarhus: Aarhus University Press.