The Ciceronian Middle Ages

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Review: *The Bonds of Humanity: Cicero's Legacies in European Social and Political Thought, ca. 1100 – ca. 1550,* by Cary J. Nederman (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020), 240 pp. Paperback, $34.95 / hardcover $85.95.

The re-emergence of Aristotelian thought into Western Europe in the Thirteenth Century provoked what one political philosophy textbook called a "crisis in theological and political thought."[1] The authority of the Church and the "Holy Roman Empire" was challenged, provoking theologians and philosophers to respond to the resurgence of a pagan, Greek tradition. St. Thomas Aquinas is justifiably considered the greatest of those thinkers addressing the intellectual crisis, but the result was not necessarily a triumph of either Greek philosophy or theology. It was a precarious synthesis between the Christian tradition and the work of Aristotle, who was often referred to reverently as "The Philosopher."

Is the story of the High Middle Ages, then, primarily a struggle between "Athens" and "Jerusalem"? Is the history of political thought from the early thirteenth century to the middle of the sixteenth best understood as a conversation between Christianity and "The Philosopher"? Political philosopher Cary Nederman finds this description wanting because it overlooks important ancient sources and traditions that call into question whether Aristotle's reemergence was really a crisis at all.

In *The Bonds of Humanity,* Nederman seeks to "generate a counternarrative that dislodges Aristotle from the pride of place accorded to him in the study of European social and political thought during its initial centuries. More specifically, concentration on Aristotelianism seems to [Nederman] to mask the importance of a figure whose impact was far more pervasive yet remains profoundly underappreciated: the Roman orator, statesman, and philosopher Marcus Tullius Cicero" (2). By the end, it is unclear whether Aristotle has been genuinely "dislodged," but Cicero's role in the story has been elevated considerably.

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[1] John Hamilton Hallowell and Jene M. Porter, *Political Philosophy: The Search for Humanity and Order* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1997), 176.

Cicero, as Nederman and others show, was a "household name" in the Middle Ages and he was well-read by the major thinkers of late antiquity and throughout the period from the Church Fathers to the Renaissance (and beyond). Cicero's impact – that is, the ubiquity of distinctively Ciceronian themes – was allegedly "wider and deeper" than that of Aristotle in the post-1000 A.D. intellectual development of Europe. To be sure, Nederman is not suggesting that scholars ignore Aristotle's importance for the period, but Cicero's hold on the Medieval mind was rooted more deeply than that of other classical sources.

More controversially, perhaps, and drawing on A.J. Carlyle, Nederman claims that *the* dividing line between ancient and modern thought can be described as the dethroning of Aristotle and the crowning of Cicero.

Persuading others of this is no easy task for the intellectual historian. Quentin Skinner famously dismissed such attempts to assign direct influence as "arbitrary…nearly always false" and "trivial" (6). Nederman adopts, then, a strategy more in line with scholars like Francis Oakley and especially that of Charles Martindale. He refers to his method as "classical reception studies," which assume that modern Western thought "ineluctably bear[s] some marks of the classical past" (6) and that the intellectual historian's task is to elucidate how this inheritance was appropriated and transformed in that historical context.

This does not mean that merely quoting Cicero qualifies a thinker as "Ciceronian." Instead, Nederman outlines a distinctive Ciceronian "framework" that will endure over the time period in question. "Cicero's framework," he explains, "in its manifold expressions, revolves around the notion that human beings are drawn together by a set of fundamental communal bonds that impose duties upon them – a notion of *societas* or fellowship that renders them responsible toward one another" (7). How that framework emerges in particular writings can range widely, and Nederman recognizes he must "distinguish a Ciceronian thinker from one who merely refers to Cicero as an authority" (7).

Beginning in the first chapter, Nederman carefully outlines this this framework. Cicero's account of human nature here seems quasi-Lockean (my words), in that human beings are born free, rational, and capable of reflection. Individuals have an "associative urge" which is given coherence and life by means of the "divine gift" of reason, and the blessings of oratory and collaboration. The role of language is especially important for Cicero; he seems to treat "language" and "reason" as one in the same. While Nederman does not use this phrase, his summary of Cicero's political thought brings to mind an orator taking the place of Plato's "philosopher king," in a sense. This would also comport with Cicero's preference for action over contemplation. Furthermore, the Ciceronian foundation of language and reason are common to all human beings equally, and it is in that shared foundation, reinforced by religious observance, in which the unity of human beings can be achieved.

Reason's full potential – that is, virtue – cannot be realized in isolation, but must develop in the context of a range of relationships and associations, especially that of friendships and the republic. Humans then are not the warring beasts of Hobbes' state of nature in *Leviathan*, but more like the reasonable persons found in Locke's *Second Treatise*. Cicero arguably differs from these later modern thinkers though, not only because he does not utilize social contract theory, but also because the use of reason in a community evokes a recognition of duties rather than a constellation of fears and rights. In other words, for Cicero, human beings speaking and reasoning together will recognize individual responsibilities to humanity universally and to *particular* families, friends, and countries. When we reason with others, we can better ascertain natural laws generally and in accordance with our specific context and community. Civil laws and governmental institutions remain subordinate to natural law, to be sure, but they are also necessary supplements to achieve a just order.

The rest of the book identifies key manifestations of this framework in widely read and distributed texts of the time. This review cannot evaluate all of the texts and thinkers Nederman uses, but his selections are a mix of well-trodden scholarly ground as well as a consideration of now obscure thinkers forgotten by many historians of political thought. He examines, for example, Thierry of Cartres's commentary on Cicero's *De invention*, Rufinus's commentaries on Gratian's *Decretum,* Otto of Freising's *Chronica sive Historia de duabus civitatibus,* Aelred of Rievaulx's *De spirituali amicitia*, and the widely read *Moralium* (author unknown).

The somewhat-more-well-known John of Salisbury receives his own chapter, and is, arguably, Nederman's most straightforward example of a genuine "Ciceronian." John's work goes beyond mere quotation and exemplifies someone whose vey intuition seems formed by its encounter with Cicero, especially (depending on how one reads Cicero) in his emphasis on the practical side of philosophy over the contemplative. Nederman argues further that Cicero is a regular source for John, even when the debt is not made explicit, such as in the latter's theories of friendship and in his attack on tyrannical governments. The wealth of evidence that Nederman can draw on to ground his Ciceronian reading of John, however, unintentionally exposes some of the weaker readings elsewhere. His earlier account of Otto of Freising, for example, merely suggests a Ciceronian debt, but it could just as easily be argued that Otto was Augustinian.

Moving to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Aristotle's dominance is often assumed to be at its highest. This is when the scholastics of the early universities had translated The Philosopher's work into Latin, resulting in its wide dissemination and use. Nederman's goal is not to dismiss this development but to show that it did not result in Cicero's displacement or neglect. "Rather," he argues, the recovery of Aristotle "reinforced" Ciceronian ideas. He goes so far as to say that Aristotle's works were often "read through a Ciceronian lens" (9). Some scholars have tried to apply this reasoning to Aquinas, though Nederman finds such readings to be misleading.

Other beneficiaries of scholastic training, though, may owe much to Cicero. Henry of Ghent apparently "conflated Cicero with Aristotle, using their texts interchangeably" (87) in his *quodlibets*. Ptolemy of Lucca is another fascinating example, where Ciceronian principles are read as being "absolutely fundamental" (93) to *De regimine principium* (which may have been initiated by St. Thomas). This reading, again, is in spite of extensive Aristotelian quotations. Ptolemy may even be said to favor Cicero's understanding of justice and the nature of a *res publica* over the more explicitly Christian account by Augustine. In a way James Viterbo's *De regimine Christiano* is later described as achieving something similar. John of Paris's *De regia potestate et papali* is also read as grounding his understanding of the "origins of human association" (100) in Ciceronian principles.

Arguably the most formidable challenge that Nederman sets for himself is to show the Ciceronian debt of Marsilius of Padua in his infamous, *Defensor pacis*. He was, after all, once describe as "a man more Aristotelian than Christian." For Nederman, Marsilius is an example of someone who may be quoting Aristotle, but who is nevertheless retaining Cicero's framework at a most fundamental level. Indeed, Nederman claims that the Ciceronian influence helps explain the "alleged gap between Marsiglio's political theory and his polemical cause" noted by other scholars.

What about those thinkers who were writing in languages other than Latin? The French writings of Brunetto Latini, Nicole Oresme, and Christine de Pizan are taken up in chapter six as examples, and all these thinkers deserve more attention among historians of political thought, separate from Nederman's use of them here.

Finally, toward the end of the book, Nederman recalls how Cicero's works were used both in defense of imperial ambitions and as grounds for resisting them. Nederman recounts something of the Cicero v. Caesar debate that occupied some writers from the early fourteenth century through to the Renaissance (144). He looks specifically at the works of Engelbert of Admont, Silvius Piccolomini, and Nicholas of Cusa as examples of those using Cicero in dense of "world empire" (145). Bishop Bartolome de Las Casas, on the other hand, rebuked European imperialism and its treatment of indigenous peoples by appealing to Cicero's belief in the equality of human beings and their shared capacity for reason.

Nederman's attempt to recover Cicero from Aristotle's shadow in the study of Medieval political thought is a welcome correction. And it would be difficult to dispute the great orator's influence since he was so much a part of the Medieval intuition and language. It is also to Nederman's credit that he deliberately chooses cases in which his argument seems unlikely to succeed given their Aristotelian context and references. One could imagine many dissertations and scholarly articles being inspired by this book as Aristotle's dominance is increasingly questioned and nuanced.

Whether or not they were inspired by Nederman, some have already taken up a similar task, reading more modern ideas back into the Middle Ages to show that the time from Rome's fall to the Renaissance was not as intellectually, socially, and politically "Dark" as some suggest. Indeed, it would be interesting to compare Nederman's argument with that of Michael Hawley's more recent work, *Natural Law Republicanism: Cicero's Liberal Legacy* (2022).

Another topic that needs to be considered though is why the reception of Classical Greek and Roman thought is so crucial for "lightening up" the not-so-dark ages. What about the dominance of Scripture and the Christian tradition? What about Augustine? Were Cicero and Aristotle more important than the Bible and the Church Fathers in the development of Medieval political thought?

When reading scholars like Nederman one wonders if the assumed goal of these works is a kind of "De-Christianization" of the Middle Ages to make them more palatable to a modern audience. To be sure, Nederman is not openly hostile or disparaging of Medieval Christianity; he just seems indifferent. He obviously could not trace or account for all the influences on these thinkers, but by the end it's not clear that Cicero's fingerprint is distinguishable from that of Christian thinkers. In other words, where Nederman sees Cicero, one might easily see the New Testament, or the writings of St. Ambrose or St. Augustine.

Nederman's work need to be supplemented with the writings of scholars like Brian Tierney, Francis Oakley, and Eric Voegelin to acquire a fuller understanding of how that which is considered best in modern political thought does not need to shed its Christian "residue" to survive. Contemporary historians of political thought seem to prefer as secularized of a story as possible. They want to show that we can have concepts of individual rights, the rule of law, and limited representative government apart from the Christian tradition. But the more we uproot these principles from their theological and sacred foundations, the more precarious their survival becomes.

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