

5-26-2016

## Review: Political Agape Christian Love and Liberal Democracy

Bharat Ranganathan

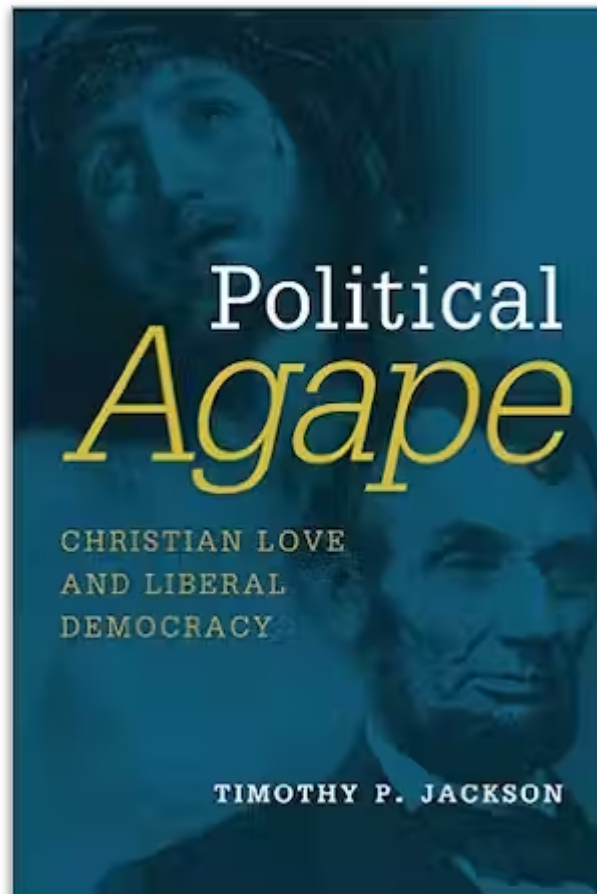
Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/relfacpub>

 Part of the Religion Commons

Please take our feedback survey at: [https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE](https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE)



[Home](#) / [Emory University Studies In Law And Religion](#) / [Religion](#) / [Political Science](#) / [Political Agape](#)



# Political Agape

## Christian Love and Liberal Democracy

By: **Timothy P. Jackson**

Series:

441 Pages

---

**PAPERBACK**

**ISBN: 9780802872463**

**Published By: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing  
Co.**

**\$40.00**

**Published: April 2015**

FROM PUBLISHER

REVIEW

HIDE -

Timothy Jackson's *Political Agape: Christian Love and Liberal Democracy* is expansive. Across the book's twelve chapters, which are themselves bookended by a substantive introduction and conclusion, he covers an impressive range of moral, political, and religious thinkers, including Ronald Dworkin, Martin Luther King Jr., Abraham Lincoln, John Rawls, Richard Rorty, Peter Singer, and Jeffrey Stout. He also discusses an array of disparate topics, including adoption, euthanasia, capital punishment, gay marriage, and human rights. His book is also ambitious: he examines these thinkers and topics while aiming to think together commitments to both neighbor-love and liberal democracy, simultaneously navigating between sectarianism ("a certain school in Durham") and the accommodationism of modernity and secularism ("a certain school in Boston") (xi). While canvassing this terrain, Jackson's motivating thesis is "that if we rightly understand Christianity as prophetic, then

justice-as-respecting-status-or-rights will have its place, but love-as-addressing-needs-and-potentials will be politically foundational” (4).

Does Jackson succeed? To my mind, the results are rather mixed. Jackson is at his strongest when he’s articulating his positive account of neighbor-love, which he calls “prophetic liberalism.” For prophetic liberals, “*agape* is *the political virtue*, rather than merely a *private excellence*, and that *agape* must correct as well as uphold liberty, equality, and justice, and other social desiderata” (8). In explicating this ethics, he emphasizes that while both the church and the state have distinctive roles, they are not discontinuous with one another. In other words, one can, without necessarily compromising one’s values, be committed to both the church and to the liberal democratic state: “Christians can be friends to liberal democracy precisely because they are first loved by God and subsequently love their neighbors” (52). In staking out this view, Jackson positions himself against Stanley Hauerwas and other Christian anti-liberals, who seek (rightly or wrongly) to undermine Christian identification with liberal democracy.

Jackson’s views are more problematic, however, when considered in relation to the various thinkers he labels “liberal.” How does he understand “liberalism”? Treating liberalism as shorthand for “liberal democracy,” Jackson holds that liberalism is “standardly committed to two central goods: (1) liberty and (2) equality” (42). For Jackson, *agape* must govern standard accounts of liberal democracy, since *agape* “has a deeper root than liberty and equality and is the necessary condition for their full and proper realization” (42). Whereas liberalism is concerned with dignity and interest-based rights (“a.k.a. duties of justice”), prophetic liberalism thinks about equality and liberty “in terms of sanctity and need-based rights (a.k.a. duties of love)” (42). But this definition of liberalism is too capacious and consequently can’t do the analytic work that Jackson wants: liberal theorists are deeply divided over what justice entails, whether it’s comparative fairness, moral permissibility, or personal or impersonal duties, to name only a few positions. Moreover, a feminist thinker like Eva Feder Kittay, who is not only concerned with the relationship among dependency, equality, and liberalism

but also with many of the same issues as Jackson, is relegated to two footnotes.

I have further issues regarding Jackson's engagement with individual theorists and their relation to liberal thought. For example, consider his chapter on Christian ethics and John Rawls: "To Bedlam and Partway Back: John Rawls and Christian Justice." When discussing Rawls, Jackson doesn't seem to fully appreciate that Rawls's theory is (a) an idealized theory of justice; and (b) delimited to the special case of politics and, more particularly, how citizens construct, revise, and uphold the principles governing a society's basic structure—that is, a society's economic, political, and social institutions that are responsible for guaranteeing that citizens enjoy the substance of their rights to constitutional essentials and primary goods. Given the distance between how Jackson describes Rawls's project and how Rawls himself viewed it, the reader must labor to see the sorts of challenges that Jackson's prophetic liberalism may pose to Rawls. (There's a further scholarly issue: Rawls viewed his articles and lectures as works-in-progress and not definitive statements. While Jackson engages with Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* and, in a postscript to the chapter, *Political Liberalism*, he holds Rawls accountable for views in development rather than definitive ones.)

In another chapter, "A House Divided, Again: Dworkin and Singer on Sanctity and Dignity," Jackson discusses Ronald Dworkin and Peter Singer and their respective views on dignity and sanctity. Here, Jackson's argument seems to suffer from reading these two thinkers together, highlighting putative overlaps between them rather than explicating the subtle (and not so subtle) distinctions between them, especially with regard to what's morally obligatory versus morally permissible, what's the realm of ethics versus the realm of politics. In explicating his own views about dignity and sanctity, I think Jackson's argument would have been strengthened from attending to other theorists—for example, Stephen Darwall on appraisal respect and recognition respect; Christine Korsgaard on moral status at the margins of agency; or David Velleman on Kantian arguments against the right-to-die—whose respective views would have served as nuanced foils to his own.

I have been critical about Jackson's views regarding liberalism, and the ways in which he handles certain thinkers and topics. In focusing on what I found problematic, however, I have not attended to the challenging and insightful parts of his argument. To be sure, I have learned a great deal from reading and thinking about the position Jackson stakes out and endeavors to defend. I think anyone interested in the relationship between Christianity and liberal democracy, and the ways in which Christian thought might contribute to our thinking about common moral and political problems, will benefit from engaging Jackson's argument.

**Bharat Ranganathan** is Visiting Assistant Professor of Religion at University of Evansville.

**Date Of Review:**

May 26, 2016

AUTHOR(S)

SHOW +

---

## RELATED BOOKS