

The Immortal Commonwealth: Covenant, Community, and Political Resistance in Early Reformed Thought.

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David P. Henreckson begins *The Immortal Commonwealth: Covenant, Community, and Political Resistance in Early Reformed Thought* with an important setting of the stage: “The God of early modern Reformed theology has sometimes been described as a leviathan: all-powerful, unaccountable, and utterly free in his dealings with humanity. His chief end is the increase of his own glory. His covenants are made apart from any prior recognition of goodness or merit, depending solely on his sovereign whim. Theologians, political theorists, and historians of early modernity have all contributed to this construal of the tradition... . To put it in simple terms, the divine Leviathan of the Calvinists begat the human Leviathan of the early modern nation-state” (16–17).

In his addition to the excellent Cambridge Studies in Law and Christianity series, Henreckson does well to help remedy this (mis)construal of the tradition. The title places the volume right in the midst of two disciplines—history of political thought and historical theology—and he states that he “aims ... to reintegrate the two fields of study” (4). In doing so, Henreckson is able to gain a richer historical perspective on political resistance in the post-Calvin era of the Reformed movement. He does this by focusing on the concept of covenant and what it means for the political realm.

Henreckson focuses on Reformed thinkers on the European continent active between 1574 and 1614, a period bookended by the wake of the Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre and the publication of Theodore Beza’s *De jure magistruum* on the one end and the final edition of Johannes Althusius’s *Politica methodice digesta* on the other. This period of forty years, however, includes a rich (and often overlooked) trove of writers reflecting theologically on political matters. In addition to Beza and Althusius, Henreckson makes good use of Girolamo Zanchi, Philippe de Mornay, and others.

He opens the volume with a pair of chapters examining covenantal thought, theologically, legally, and politically. He begins with a challenge to the commonly held idea that the Reformers were strictly theological voluntarists. In his challenge, he asserts that the early Reformed understanding of God rests, ultimately, not on absolute sovereign freedom, but rather on the Divine goodness and kindness as the predicate on which the Divine calls



humanity into covenantal relationship that humans might participate in that divine goodness and kindness. Rather than the voluntarist view, the early Reformed doctrine of God tended to emphasize that God was, by God's own nature, unable to do anything wicked or unjust. This challenge is central to the concept of the covenant as Henreckson uses it through the rest of his study. He then tracks the inclusion and development of covenantal thought in early Reformed theology from earlier sources, including covenantal language such as *pactum*, *testamentum*, and *foedus*—terms describing concepts that, by then, already had meanings and traditions.

Turning to the legal and political aspects of covenantal thought, Henreckson examines how the understanding of the relationship of the people to the Divine sovereign mirrors the relationship between the people and their ruler and the ramification of covenantal thought on the legal and political sphere. The covenant between God and humanity is not one based solely upon the absolute and arbitrary whim of an absolute sovereign; rather it is directed toward a rightly ordered relationship. Engaging significantly with Zanchi and many other theologians of the period, Henreckson argues that Reformed theology saw a similar covenantal relationship in the political sphere.

Questions of political resistance from this period did not arise in a vacuum but revolve around the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre and the Dutch Revolt. Two important treatises of the period, Beza's *De jure magistruum* and Mornay's *Vindiciae contra tyrannos* are substantially engaged with these events. In particular, Mornay identifies a covenant between God and humanity and a political covenant between God, the ruler, and the people. The political covenant is subject to the divine covenant and reflects it in terms of the divine standards of justice. While these treatises were certainly not liberally democratic in their argument, this idea of the secondary political covenant introduced a degree of agency for a population, for it is a party to the covenant.

Henreckson then turns to rival theories of political agency, regal voluntarism and paternalistic conceptions, using Alberico Gentili and William Barclay as conversation partners to present these theories. Gentili argues that a king stands in God's stead on earth. Although God's absolute power cannot be communicated to kings, because kings must obey God's law, rulers indeed have a plentitude of power and public piety requires obedience. Barclay voices a paternalistic theory of political reality, understanding the king to be the paterfamilias of the people with broad latitude to rule regardless of the desire of the populous. Certainly, kings may commit offenses against a population just as a father can be abusive to his family, but just as the family cannot hold the father to account, the people cannot hold the king to account. The king is accountable and answerable solely to God. Therefore, for people to rebel against the king, even if the king has committed a grave injustice, is an offense against God—the one who establishes the royal office and the ordering of society.

Henreckson uses these rival accounts to set up the discussion of Johannes Althusius, the subject of the penultimate chapter and central figure in his analysis, a careful reading of Althusius's *Politica*. Althusius clearly drew from the previous generation of Reformed theological-political thinkers, but he introduces a unique turn: *consociation*, which is "also used to signify the sacred fellowship that arises between God and God's people. Union with God involves a consociation of members who are bound together in recognition of the great love that is intrinsic to God's own nature, and which God extends to his human creatures" (136). As such, the political world is not one of *potestas* but one of *koinonia* (fellowship). The concept of consociation helps Althusius to make a unique argument for covenantal political relationships, something that was already widely utilized by Reformed thinkers of the time.

In Althusius's thought, the relationship is essential to the nature of the ruler/population dynamics. Rulers are to be obeyed *because* of the relationship; the relationship is not established *because* rulers are to be obeyed. Similarly, positive law is not the primary framework that governs the relationship; rather, to his mind the framework is the virtues

that have been written into the created order. Positive law is contextual; the virtues of natural law are eternal and transcontextual. Even rulers are bound to this eternal law. Therefore, even if a ruler was, for instance, given consent by the population to personally enrich himself from the state's treasury, such consent would not legitimize that behavior. The emphasis on relationship rather than power and on consociation rather than hierarchy and paternalism opens the way to theological justification for resistance to rulers in certain instances.

Finally, Henreckson concludes with a chapter drawing together the essential learnings from the threads that he examined earlier. Resistance is not only possible, but in some instances it is preferred, even required. Yet at the same time, how do societies avoid falling into anarchy or into a popular tyranny? Henreckson asserts that the moral and ethical formation of a population is an essential part of a consociation. Virtues—especially those of prudence, tolerance, piety, and courage—help in identifying tyranny and aid in formulating how, exactly, the population is to respond and resist. Henreckson helps the reader to see that the early modern Reformed thinkers neither thought that people must endure tyranny nor supported the idea of revolt whenever the people desired it—a difficult balance to understand.

Henreckson accomplishes what he sets out to do—give voice to the theological underpinnings of early modern legal thought. He draws on both well-known thinkers and some lesser-known ones (and some lesser-known works by prominent thinkers, such as a little-known dramatic work by Heinrich Bullinger). However, one must question whether the limits of his study might be too narrow and if he could have expanded the scope, even slightly. While understanding that the dynamics on the European continent were different from those in the British Isles, one does wonder how consideration of Reformed theology in England and Scotland would have given greater nuance to his research. Indeed, Henreckson notes that the political ramifications of covenantal thought were different in the British Isles. It might have been interesting to see how Reformed theologians in that context dealt with such questions.

In his final chapter, Henreckson moves from the intellectual and theological work of covenant in political thought directly to the bridge from early modern to late modern application. While this final chapter is helpful, the reader could have benefited from one more historical chapter examining the tangible implications of this thinking on societies of the time. Even if Henreckson remained focused solely on the European continent, a discussion of how this thinking was applied (or attempted) or not, and what forms that took would have been helpful. For example, how did the populations receive such ideas? A penultimate chapter with this focus would have helped to tie the intellectual history that forms the bulk of the book to the more practical considerations that Henreckson addresses in the final chapter. Henreckson notes, “[u]p to this point, my historical analysis has focused on the possible rationale and justification for lawful resistance... . How might resistance be carried out rightly? By whom? And to what end?” (161). The question of “how might” could helpfully be preceded by “how has.” Rooting the ideas to something tangible in history could have provided Henreckson with a better foundation from which to spring to application. We might hope that Henreckson will follow this volume with one that addresses some of these possible additional avenues.

In the final analysis, however, *The Immortal Commonwealth: Covenant, Community, and Political Resistance in Early Reformed Thought* is a valuable addition to this series and helps to provide a better insight into the theological-political thought among Reformed thinkers on the European continent in the early modern period. It also complements John Witte, Jr.'s *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Henreckson's volume, while perhaps too advanced for the novice, will serve many others very well, especially theologians, historians, and political theorists.