

## **CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT**

### **Covenant, Causality, and Law: A Study in the Theology of Wolfgang Musculus**

**Jordan J. Ballor**

Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012 (270 pages)

The scholarly interpretation of Reformation and post-Reformation theology has undergone a significant change over the past several decades. For much of the twentieth century, writers focused on a handful of important Reformation figures such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, viewed them as the chief movers of theological opinion, and tended to emphasize the distinctive and innovative character of their theology in a way that highlighted discontinuity between them and both their medieval predecessors and their post-Reformation successors. More recently, a number of scholars have broadened the focus and examined dozens of other significant theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This has opened a far more nuanced and rich view of early Protestant thought. Scholars now recognize more clearly that a great many learned theologians (and not just a few giants) contributed significantly to the development of Reformation theology and that all sorts of previously undetected lines of continuity exist between the early Reformers and the medieval schools of theology, on the one hand, and between the early Reformers and their Protestant scholastic successors, on the other.

Jordan Ballor's new volume self-consciously adds another piece to this portrayal of Reformation and post-Reformation theology through a study of the thought of Reformed theologian Wolfgang Musculus (1497–1563). Readers of this journal may be especially interested in its treatment of various social-political issues in Musculus' writings, including usury, natural law, and the role of the civil magistrate.

The opening chapter provides helpful background to Musculus and his work and to the relatively limited scholarship on his contributions to Reformed theology. Ballor notes that Musculus produced significant scholarly output in three areas of theological study: (1) as an editor of patristic writings, (2) as a prolific biblical commentator, and (3) as a systematic theologian (the latter primarily through his *Loci Communes* of 1560). The older Reformation scholarship often contrasted the early Reformers as biblically focused theologians with the later Protestant scholastic theologians as rationalist systematizers. Musculus was in many respects a link between the early Reformers and the later scholastics, and Ballor's portrayal of his overlapping interests provides further evidence against the overly simplistic caricatures common in twentieth-century historiography.

The bulk of this book—chapters 2 through 4—describes Musculus' thought on three distinct but related issues: covenant, causality, and law. Recognizing Musculus' identity as both a biblical exegete and a systematic theologian, Ballor draws material from his commentaries on Scripture and his *Loci Communes*. Along the way, he reflects on Musculus' relation to and appropriation of earlier theologians and his contribution to the development of Reformed thought. Because this must be a short review, I will comment only on a few issues that arise in these chapters that are likely to be of particular interest to readers of this journal.

Chapter 2 explores Musculus' view of the biblical covenants. Ballor suggests that Musculus may have been the first Reformed theologian to have given the topic of covenant its own *locus* in a theological system, and he therefore pays considerable attention to Musculus' relationship not only to earlier medieval thought (especially in the Franciscan tradition) but also to his contemporaries Heinrich Bullinger and Calvin as well as to later Reformed theologians. One aspect of Musculus' covenant theology that Ballor emphasizes and that may be of special interest to readers of this journal is his distinction between God's *general* covenant with all of creation (exemplified by the Noahic covenant after the flood) and his *special* covenant with a chosen people (first initiated with Abraham). Ballor argues that this distinction was quite important to Musculus and that it differentiates his thought from Calvin and Bullinger. In the general covenant, God shows a general grace and kindness to his creation in order to sustain earthly goods on a temporary basis. One might think that holding this view of a general covenant would have important social-political implications. Ballor does not dig into this question, and it is not clear whether Musculus pursued it.

The third chapter, on causality, investigates numerous aspects of Musculus' thought: on the one hand, matters related to the divine will—omnipotence, causality, and justice—and, on the other hand, matters of human freedom—contingency, obligation, and righteousness. Ballor devotes considerable space to a topic that may initially seem somewhat tangential to the primary concerns of the book but was widely debated in Musculus's day, namely, usury. According to Ballor, Musculus was a strong critic of usurious practice, though his critiques were directed more to the internal motivations behind usury than to larger questions of its legal regulation. Ballor helpfully identifies two strands of Christian teaching

on usury that extended from the later Middle Ages through the age of Reformation and notes that there were Protestant and Roman Catholic proponents of both positions.

It is chapter 4, concerning Musculus' view of law, that deals most extensively with his social-political views. Like his fellow Reformers, Musculus held a strong view of natural law. Ballor identifies his approach to natural law as basically a Thomistic view, though Musculus clarified, refined, and complemented conventional Thomism. Another important part of this chapter is Ballor's discussion of Musculus on civil magistrates, particularly with respect to questions of religion and church-state relations (a discussion Ballor augments in chapter 5). Musculus not only advocated that civil magistrates should have a general care for protecting and promoting true religion but also that they are the ones entrusted with imposing discipline and instituting laws in the church itself. With respect to the latter issue, Ballor argues that Musculus belonged to a line of the Reformed tradition (which may be termed "Erastian") distinct from Calvin's two-kingdoms or "Genevan" model. Musculus also believed that the church's ministers were obligated to give instructions to magistrates about how to govern; he admitted that Paul had not given such instructions in Romans 13 but argued that he would have had there been Christian magistrates, as in Musculus' own day. Given earlier discussions in the book, it would be interesting to know whether Musculus' strong advocacy of a universal general covenant, distinct from the special covenant, had any bearing on his political thought. In light of his political views, one suspects that the answer is negative, though Ballor does not indicate how these lines of his thought may or may not be connected.

This book is well researched, helpfully organized, and broadly conversant with contemporary scholarship. Ballor is to be commended for shedding much new light on an important but underappreciated Reformed theologian. Even where certain lines of exploration leave off (as with the social-political implications of his views on the general covenant), Ballor opens up new avenues for profitable research and reflection.

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## The Economy of Desire: Christianity and Capitalism in a Postmodern World

**Daniel M. Bell Jr.**

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2012 (224 pages)

In *The Economy of Desire*, Bell presents a thorough critique of the neoliberal capitalist system. Whereas Karl Marx assessed capitalism from a materialistic standpoint, Bell uses a spiritual one, namely, desire, adapted from the work of postmodern French philosophers Foucault and Deleuze. Bell contends that capitalism is more than simply an economic system involving the exchange of goods and services. Rather, capitalism is about accumulation, efficiency, and satisfaction of individual desires. In other words, capitalism