

## CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

### Natural Law and Evangelical Political Thought **Jesse Covington, Bryan McGraw, and Micah Watson (Editors)** Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013 (287 pages)

Professors Covington, McGraw, and Watson have assembled a fine collection of essays that analyzes the ways in which evangelical theologians can and should engage natural law's intellectual pedigree and contemporary relevance. Three strengths of the book are (1) its insightful critiques of *voluntarism*; (2) its articulation of natural law's amenability to a *common language* for public reasoning and discourse; and (3) its helpful appraisal of natural law's Achilles tendon, that is, its susceptibility to being *co-opted* by the status quo.

*Voluntarism* is a justificatory theory: Law is justifiable (legitimately authoritative) because it is the command of the sovereign. Natural law, its rival, insists that law is justifiable if it is just. The salient point in voluntarism (positivism) is the legitimacy of the sovereign. The salient point in natural law is that justice and law stand above the sovereign. Protestant theology was not hospitable soil for voluntarism until fundamentalism reacted against liberalism's secularization of natural theology in the late nineteenth century. The ways voluntarism corrodes contemporary evangelical thought is a story that needs to be developed beyond C. FitzSimmon Allison's masterful book, *The Rise of Moralism*.

The ironic, unintended consequence of embracing moral voluntarism was strengthening rather than countering the concurrent rise of secular legal positivism. The Scopes trial illustrates who will prevail in the collision between secular and religious voluntarism. (Divine command theory is, after all, positivism with a different author.) Post-World War II evangelicals, seeking to emerge from fundamentalism's public irrelevance, struggled with voluntarism. Theologian Carl Henry, with whom several essays engage, rejected natural law. However, he was apparently leery of voluntarism's loss of public reasoning,

and he had to account for the many scriptural passages where *God* gives reasons for his commands and judgments. The mythical quest for a theory that cannot be secularized unrealistically discounts the human need to devise counterfeit goods and bogus idols. Nevertheless, Dr. Henry proposed a “creation ethic” that looks suspiciously like natural law (61), thus falling victim to the notorious observation that when natural law is swept out the front door, even by its most able critics, it creeps back in through the back door.

The indispensability of a *common language* for political discourse is frustrated by voluntarism and also by an increasing unfamiliarity and hostility to biblical language, narratives, and moral reasoning in contemporary society. Natural law offers both a way to reason and a language with which to discuss political issues without relying on secular or religious moral language. Without such reasoning and language, Evangelicals struggle to engage meaningfully in political thought and advocacy. Liberal Protestants and Catholics adopt secular reasoning and language, enabling them to engage the public directly, but eviscerating the gospel’s challenges to secular thought. Fundamentalists who separate themselves from worldly concerns continue to frame their discourse in biblical language and are handily marginalized. Evangelicals—still “recovering fundamentalists”—have begun to discern how natural law offers a reasoning process and language for proper engagement with the society. “Without the natural law, there is no common ground, no point of connection, no meaningful engagement between Christians and nonbelievers” (14).

Natural law compels people to give *reasons* for political judgments and to make those reasons convincing in arguments. Because natural-law reasoning has collapsed, is it any wonder that political dialogue has been reduced to monologue, propaganda, blame, and scapegoating? Amidst the handwringing about the collapse of political discourse in Congress, one could argue that we should expect nothing else. Positivism is corrosive to reason—it is the solvent that in an advanced state of social decomposition withers dialogue. Without natural law, there may be no other way to *justify* and to *argue* about political and legal commitments in a common language. The antidote, as Matthew D. Wright so elegantly argues, is the synergy between friendship and natural law to cultivate *civility*.

Natural law’s great weakness is its susceptibility to *co-optation* by the status quo. In the hands of the powerful, natural law has offered a ready means by which to justify racism, slavery, wars of imperial expansion, and the exploitation of the poor, thus buttressing heretical ideas about race, ethnicity, sex, chattel property, and poverty. The Church has repeatedly forsaken its duty to speak against injustices, especially when pursuing political power. McGraw’s essay analyzes this problem with clarity. He notes that when thinkers manipulate nature to suit their purposes, they conflate culture and history. “When history comes to rule nature, what goes by the name natural theology becomes little more than cultural apologetics and makes natural law not just irrelevant, but quite impossible” (71).

The three areas I wish had been addressed are (1) the *hubris* of the so-called epistemological problem, (2) a serious engagement with contemporary evangelical political thinkers, and (3) a deeper probing of natural law’s dependence on the *moral psychology* of the virtues.

The *epistemological problem* arises from believing that revelation gives Christians superior insight in moral reasoning. They should have such insight, but the notion is not descriptively demonstrable, and it is given more credibility in these essays than it merits. Natural-law reasoning *does* require the corrective lens of scripture. However, we recall with shame that even with revelation Christians have been complicit in enslaving native peoples, race hatred, segregation, apartheid—all rooted in a patently heretical anthropology. Christians have not demonstrated an exceptional capacity for justice. The capacity to understand the things of the Spirit has not guaranteed sound moral and political reasoning. Indeed, the persistence of racism in fundamentalism is sufficiently humiliating that claims to epistemological superiority are embarrassing. Scripture actually reveals the central tenet of natural law: God made the world according to wisdom, and he gave us reason to discern the truth of real things in order to be just. In humility, Christians should thank nonbelievers who help us renounce complicity in evil.

The essays address evangelical reflection on the history of natural-law thinkers and their opponents but do not address evangelical *political* thought. It would have been helpful to treat contemporary evangelical political thinkers who discuss how natural law does or does not help them *to justify* their theorizing about actual political questions such as state legitimacy, sources of political authority and obligation, consent, the rule of law, national sovereignty, human rights, citizenship and membership, violence and national defense, privacy, and economic policy. If contemporary evangelical political thinkers have engaged these issues, their work is absent in this volume.

Discussions of *virtue* in the essays are too impressionistic, even though virtue is indispensable to natural law. Virtues are stable dispositions trained to nourish mature character. Mature people do good, and immature people do evil. Mature people are prudent—they know what things are and what is owed in justice. Prudent people are just, and they do justice. Just people are courageous and are undeterred by recklessness or cowardice to restore justice. Courageous people are temperate—their loves are ordinate or properly ordered to the intrinsic worth of each thing. If love is disordered by hate or indifference, if hope is disordered by despondency or complacency, or if faith is disordered by unbelief or gullibility, then one cannot know what things are and what is owed to them in justice. This *moral psychology* animates natural law. God created things according to wisdom, people *can* become wise, and the wise *can* know what is owed to each created thing in justice.

Positivists do not believe that such knowledge is possible. In modernity, justice is not what one *is* but is, rather, the consequence of a negotiation (social contract theory) or a calculation (utilitarianism). Natural law is utterly implausible to positivists who believe that people cannot know the good or what we owe in justice. Natural law, the only rival opposing positivism, insists that people have the capacity to know and to be virtuous. Natural law does not deny the need for revelation or that law must correspond to God's commands. Instead, it is the means by which we reason about developments unanticipated in scripture in order to formulate just laws. Natural law actually opposes voluntarist autonomy by grounding justice in the nature of things *as* created things. Natural law imposes the humility of knowing that each thing's value is designed by God.

Politics is primarily concerned with making laws, which is why most legislators are lawyers. One can no more get politics out of law than one can get sin out of the gospel. Law protects people from those who would oppress, persecute, and otherwise prey on them. Law is the *syntax* of life in a fallen world. The problem is not that politicians make laws but that we do not elect competent, thoughtful politicians who create sensible laws they can explain. As J. Daryl Charles observes, “Since law is part of creation, the very order of things as they are, it is a biblical, anthropological and eminently theological question” (24). Natural law guides just lawmakers to formulate just laws. Natural law is far older than evangelicalism, and it exists independently of its advocates and critics! Those striving to reason as Christians about politics and justice will find authentic wisdom in this volume to deepen their thought.

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## Flourishing Faith: A Baptist Primer on Work, Economics, and Civic Stewardship

**Chad Brand**

**Foreword by Daniel L. Akin**

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Christian’s Library Press, 2012 (152 pages)

Professor Brand’s book is a Christian’s endeavor to make sense of the connection between the Christian religion and the issues of work and political economy. Brand approaches the subject matter as a former pastor and professor of Christian theology. I should say at the outset that I read the book as a professor of economics whose special emphasis is political economy. With that said, my overall impression of Professor Brand’s work is that it is generally correct, and it is an important work at a time when Christians must understand the substance of his central message: People ought to be free to work according to their unique gifts and talents and government should not impose great hindrances on them.

Of the seven chapters that make up the book, in my view two, in particular, stand out as excellent and are well worth the price of admission. They are chapter 3, “Wealth,” and chapter 4 “The City of Man.” In chapter 3, Brand does a good job of distinguishing between money and wealth, noting that the accumulation of wealth is important. He explores many of the scriptural passages that warn us about the pitfalls of loving money and our possessions more than God and what the results of that behavior are likely to lead to. He goes on to explain that wealth is not, in and of itself, a bad thing. His main focus is to develop a theology of wealth in the Christian era beginning with Saint Augustine. He then moves through the ages and concludes with Thomas Aquinas and the rise of natural law. While I thought some additional features of the story would be helpful to the reader, what the author does offer is essentially correct. The only misstatement I found is Brand’s