

David H. Hopper. *Divine Transcendence and the Culture of Change*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011. xiii + 262 pp. \$35. ISBN: 978-0-8028-6505-2.

This work argues that the magisterial Protestant Reformation arose in large part as a response to the newfound recognition of divine transcendence, which transformed Christian piety from a medieval emphasis on otherworldly salvation to an eschatologically grounded, this-worldly oriented engagement. Hopper examines Martin Luther, Martin Bucer, John Calvin, and Francis Bacon in turn, and argues for “the likely contentious thesis that their recovery of a sense for God’s transcendence helped break open formerly closed systems of thought and life” (xii).

If God’s transcendence is the first major theme of Hopper’s argument, then temporal progress is the second. Contrary to many accounts, Hopper claims, “it is false to conclude that divine transcendence and ‘otherworldliness’ are essentially synonymous” (61). In fact, as Hopper explores in his analyses of Luther, Bucer, Calvin, and Bacon, the vigorous sense of God’s distinction from the created order leads in each case to a more directly progressive program of cultural transformation. Luther reacts to an inherited tradition of divine domestication, or at least the commodification of divine grace as expressed in the medieval sacramental system, which was predominantly oriented toward heavenly salvation. On Hopper’s account, “the break with obsessive otherworldliness in Luther lies in his (re) discovery of the unnatural grace of a transcendent God revealed in the cross of Christ as testified in the Christian Scriptures” (69–70).

Where Luther’s rediscovery does not carry over into a fully fledged reevaluation of all existing social structures, Martin Bucer develops Luther’s ethical insights, particularly the doctrine of vocation, in a new direction, subjecting the responsibility of believers to serve their neighbors in Christian love to a more rigorous analysis. Bucer’s view of vocation “meant assessment of how best to expend one’s gift of grace in earthly tasks . . . as a means to the greatest good for the greatest number” (135–36). Calvin’s contribution was to develop this kind of a perspective in the context of “the breakdown of the unity of Christendom, both theologically and politically” (159). This opens up the possibility of actively envisioning new forms of social order, a focus not merely on individual destinies but corporate realities. In Calvin, “corporate-historical existence was given meaning in fresh awareness of God’s reigning sovereignty in history” (162).

Bacon appears as an intellectual heir to these Reformers, then, as he is described as having, to at least some significant extent, “in his philosophical work assimilated

and transformed fundamental affirmations of Reformation theology, Lutheran and Reformed, in the development of his special project: the ‘Novum Organum,’ a new ordering of knowledge” (190). Bacon essentially develops and rationalizes the general trend toward “activating the ethical will of the believer” found in Luther, Bucer, and Calvin, but does so “by enlisting human curiosity and engaging it in discovering the potential for good which God had vested in nature” (203).

There is a payoff for all this critically positive assessment of the relationship between the Protestant Reformation and modernity, at least as represented by the figures under examination. Hopper is to be applauded for his close and careful engagement with the sources, both primary and secondary, even if his engagement with such a wide variety of secondary sources sometimes derails the cogency of his argument. Hopper’s articulation of the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith and the corresponding liberation for believers to act truly lovingly toward their neighbors *coram Deo* is one of the book’s more noteworthy accomplishments. He is also to be praised for his contextualization of a figure like Bacon within a religious, and indeed explicitly theological, background.

At the conclusion of the work, however, at least part of Hopper’s “contentious thesis” remains unproved. This is perhaps in part due to the clear inspiration of Karl Barth, which results in a curious derogation of natural theology throughout the work, despite the significance of natural law for the magisterial Reformers and Bacon’s definite emphasis on meaning embedded in the natural order. In addition, even granting the validity of a great degree of intellectual continuity between these figures, we might also wonder at what really drove Bacon’s views of transcendence and progress. It does seem that Bacon’s vision of progress, and indeed his perspective on the capacities of the human intellect and will, are of a fundamentally different nature than that of Luther, Bucer, or Calvin. But in any case Hopper has made a significant scholarly contribution toward unraveling the complex threads of the transition from the early modern to the modern world, showing the significance of divine transcendence for cultural engagement, simultaneously raising interesting possibilities for exploring varied conceptions of human progress.

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