

American literary culture. *There Before Us* should convince both historians and literary scholars of the need to look beyond the notion of secularization to recognize the continued relevance of the religious even after the abandonment of explicitly Christian belief.

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Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics. By **Stephen J. Grabill**. Emory University Studies in Law and Religion. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2006. x + 275 pp. \$38.00 paper.

Ignored, derided, or simply missing from many works in Reformed theological ethics during the twentieth century, the theme of natural law is currently enjoying a revival. Whether one is thinking of more conservative writers like Richard J. Mouw, or of liberals like David Little, the idea that there are some moral values that human beings simply cannot fail to acknowledge plays a critical, if controversial, role among authors who self-identify as Calvinists. Stephen J. Grabill proposes to contribute to this revival. In particular, the point of this very ambitious work involves a demonstration of the central place of natural law in historic Reformed theology. Not only Calvin, but Peter Martyr, Althusius, and Francis Turretin make good use of this theme. Further, as Grabill has it, these and other authors developed a specifically Reformed alternative to Thomistic natural law theory. In making these points, Grabill hopes to show, first, that Barth and other twentieth-century writers who rejected the notion of natural law were less than faithful to Reformed tradition; and second, that the association of natural law with Roman Catholicism cited by Barth and those following him involved a failure of understanding; and finally, that advocates of a revival of natural-law thinking in Reformed theological ethics may draw from a number of writers other than Calvin in developing their positions.

Grabill develops each of these points in great detail. The bibliographic work exhibited in the endnotes is impressive, particularly with respect to Dutch material. And it is the Dutch strand of Reformed tradition with which Grabill seems most comfortable, and about which he is best informed. In keeping with this emphasis, Grabill's focus on the importance of scholastic thinkers like Turretin makes sense. As he has it, the Barthian rejection of Reformed scholasticism in favor of a return to Luther and Calvin provides a partial explanation for the eclipse of natural law in the twentieth century.

To this, the proper response is: perhaps; but Grabill's claim can only be substantiated if we ignore a great deal of what Barth actually wrote. Indeed, if one counts passages in which Turretin and others are actually discussed, one would have to say that Barth's *Church Dogmatics* demonstrates a more extensive engagement with scholasticism than the nineteenth-century compendia Grabill favors. As well, Barth's comments suggest a rather favorable evaluation of the scholastic project, not least because it testified to an "objective" rendering of Christian faith, much to be preferred to pietism and Schleiermacher's "religion of feeling." When Barth rejected natural law, he certainly did not do so because of a failure to engage Francis Turretin.

Nor did other twentieth-century critics of natural law reject the notion simply as a function of admiration for Barth. Reinhold Niebuhr's worries about natural-law thinking did not precisely track those of Barth; neither did those of his brother. Insofar as these and other critics share a rationale for rejecting or delimiting natural law, it would appear to be their concern to maintain a dynamic factor in theological ethics. To put it another way, they thought it important to stress that "doing right" involves a response to the *living* God. In this, it is instructive to read the first sections of *Church Dogmatics* III.4, in which Barth rejects biblical versions of a "rule-based" ethics, along with notions of natural law. Christian theology, he writes, is bound to construe "the right" in terms of conformity to the command of a living God. The deliberations of Christian communities through the ages regarding rightness in action should be described as an attempt to discern this command, typically in light of precedents recorded in scripture. The remainder of the volume is Barth's attempt to illustrate this, with respect to particular issues.

More recent rejections of natural law unite this concern for dynamism with an attack on foundationalist epistemologies. Those who would revive natural law in Reformed theology must respond to both of these concerns. Interestingly, Grabill's account of Calvin's natural-law thinking points to some resources for this task, not least by stressing continuities between Calvin's rhetorical approach to theology and the discourse of late medieval accounts of the natural law. In this, Grabill claims that Calvin and his contemporaries distinguish themselves from the static ontology of Thomas and other Aristotelians. Unfortunately, Grabill does not see that the development of Protestant scholasticism involves a return to that ontology. Contemporary advocates of natural law need less in the way of instruction from Turretin and more in the way of Calvin and his immediate interlocutors. In that connection, they will find a mode of natural-law thinking that responds to Barth and others' concerns. My recommendation to those who would recover the natural-law theme in Reformed theological ethics? Read chapters 2 and 3 of Grabill with great care. The other chapters

are certainly of interest but point to a mode of argument that is less than promising in terms of the attempt to revive the tradition of natural-law thinking.

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Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture. By **Vincent J. Miller.** New York: Continuum, 2003.
vii + 256 pp. \$17.95 paper.

We are awash in talk about the ethics of consumption. From the “eat local” movement to student activists decrying sweatshop sneakers to organizations such as the Center for a New American Dream and Climate Counts advocating smarter—and generally less—consumption, we are witnessing a profound reexamination of what had been, at least since World War II, a nearly uncontested American truism: buying more stuff is good. Americans have been told, again and again—from Vice President Richard Nixon’s “kitchen debate” with Nikita Khrushchev at the height of the Cold War to President Bush, in the wake of 9/11, encouraging Americans to return to the mall—that consuming not only satisfies private desires (a debatable proposition itself) but also serves a public good. While advertisers continue to find ever more clever ways to insinuate their propaganda into every nook and cranny of our minds, the chorus of voices questioning what historian Lizabeth Cohen calls the “Consumers’ Republic” continues to grow louder. Though far from an equal in this struggle, the anti-consumerist forces are at least now being heard.

And yet, the most disturbing message of Vincent J. Miller’s *Consuming Religion* is the imperviousness of consumerism to dissent. In a society such as ours, Miller tells us, all forms of culture, including ideologies of resistance, become commodified and repackaged as innocuous objects of desire; products embellished with the patina of dissent, in fact, appear all the more desirable for the aura of “cool” this faux resistance provides. (A poster of Che Guevara on a dorm room wall comes to mind.) This observation forms the basis of Miller’s important work. Religion, according to Miller, offers perhaps the most comprehensive alternative to our totalizing ethic of consumerism, and yet religion, too, like all ideological rivals to consumerism, is also easily disarmed through commodification. Indeed, the greatest threat of consumerism for Miller, even more than straightforward material excess and its myriad costs, is the way a consumerist orientation