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BOOK REVIEW

Amy Nelson Burnett, ed. *John Calvin, Myth and Reality: Images and Impact of Geneva's Reformer. Papers of the 2009 Calvin Studies Society Colloquium*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books of Wipf & Stock, 2011. xvi + 255 pp. Pbk. ISBN: 9781608996933.

Robert N. Bellah *et al.*, in their influential book *Habits of the Heart* (1984, revised 2007), interpret facets of American culture and often find the figure of John Calvin dominant in the background. They are not concluding that Americans are predominantly Calvinists. Rather, Calvinism as defined by historians and sociologists can refer to moral viewpoints and societal habits that are virtually unconnected to Calvin's theology. Calvinism, viewed through these lenses, refers to the *effects* of his ideas, and often the linkage to the theological root is rather tenuous. Interest does not center on Calvin's religious beliefs themselves but on how his ideas have shaped culture, the mythological "Calvinist work ethic" being one example.

To show how a religious label can be used with purely sociological meaning, this illustration is sometimes used: an Englishman, confronted by a group of youths on the streets of Northern Ireland during the "troubles" between Roman Catholics and Protestants, was asked a question menacingly: "Are you a Protestant or a Catholic?" He hesitated before replying, "I'm an atheist." The youths were quick to respond, "Yes, but are you a Protestant atheist or a Catholic atheist?" The heart of reformed theology might be forgotten by the majority of North Americans as a relic of a forgotten heritage but there is a residue of social, political, moral, and economic attitudes that continue notwithstanding. What annoys many admirers of John Calvin's doctrinal contributions today is that his legacy labors under the burden of a mythology that his ideas are about certain social effects.

The recent upsurge of interest in Calvin blossomed in 2009 around the five-hundredth-year anniversary of his birth. The 2009 Colloquium of the Calvin Studies Society attracted a number of scholars from various disciplines to discuss the disparities between legend and reality.

The present collection of essays deals with controversies surrounding the historic Calvin and Calvinism. For those entrenched in the dubious comfort of dogmatic certitude, these papers can play some havoc with the sensibilities, especially for those who were raised in a Calvinist setting but have never read Calvin. It is helpful to be familiar at first hand with some of Calvin's own work to understand what the essays refer to. One also needs to be somewhat acquainted with the scholasticizing of his views by seventeenth-century dogmaticians, and how movements, attitudes, and practices are ascribed to Calvin for which he is not responsible.

Amy Nelson Burnett of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln has collected the essays into the present volume. Generally, the book is a plea for level-headed realism in assessing the Genevan reformer, and the essays seek to dispel misconceptions that surround the man and the tradition he engendered. How, asks Burnett, does one begin to separate myth from reality?

The essays are divided into three sections: "Calvin: The Man and His Work," "Appeal of and Responses to Calvinism," and "The Impact of Calvin's Ideas."

Richard Muller begins Part One with what is likely the most important contribution of the collection. Muller is critical of modern theologians who credit Calvin with a theology that rises above time and resists development or modification. He offers instead a historically situated, contextualized Calvin, wherein his accomplishments are measured within his own time and in relation to the multitude of colleagues who shared many of his convictions. Calvin, argues Muller, was not the only "calvinist" by far. He emerged as a great leader but was one of many. Then Elsie McKee studies progression in Calvin's theological development in his use of 1 Tim 2:1–10 through consecutive editions of the *Institutes*. In John Thompson's paper, the distortions about Calvin's view of women are made clear by studying his own

writings. Diane Margolf's work on the Genevan Consistory remedies the invention that they were a repressive bunch, instead highlighting their main goal of spiritual restoration and reconciliation.

Part Two focuses on the proliferation of reformed ideas during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries from Geneva to as far away as the Dutch East Indies. While two of the papers highlight consistencies in ideas and practice as the movement spread, the other three provide a look at reaction. In the Netherlands, Calvinism collided with Arminianism, Catholicism, and the Anabaptists. In the Germanic lands it bumped into the followers of Luther. Finally, Part Three directs our attention to the twentieth century and Calvin's influence on philosophy, politics, and how to view the Bible.

Many of the essays are pleasingly judicious and undeniably convincing. The authors give scrupulous attention to primary sources. To say that Muller's fine article on Calvin's theological contribution outshines the rest is saying too much. But his is not one to miss. Many of the others provide correctives in their respective areas. The book links apparently random pieces of Calvin studies into a thematic whole and sometimes elicits delight at the discovery of new insight. If there is a weakness in this publication it lies in how widely scattered the offerings are. One might have hoped for a more closely-knit grouping with a stronger focus on Calvin's own writings, especially his commentaries.

All the same, this is a significant contribution to Calvin studies and deserves a place in any serious library. But one effort cannot do so very much. Implicit therefore is the invitation to expand to more areas and to fill some of the gaps left by this book, which, we hope, others might attempt. To rescue Calvin from the rigors of scholastic dogma on the one hand and creative mythologizing on the other would be an honorable enterprise.

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