

BOOK REVIEW

Kenneth G. Appold & Nelson H. Minnich (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Reformation Era Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024), pp. xiii + 792. ISBN 9781107044043.

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Theology aims towards heaven but does not descend from it. Rather, it is the product of human beings working in particular social, political and cultural contexts. This insight is the fundamental frame for the new *Cambridge History of Reformation Era Theology*, which stands out from the many essay collections on this theme by organizing its contributions not by theologian, confession or theological topic, but rather by the context and conditions which gave rise to the theology described. As the editors explain, organizing the content by theologian overlooks ‘the role of dialogue and collaboration, mutual influences and academic exchange in the generation of ideas’, while organizing it by topic runs the risk of ‘imposing an artificial coherence on widely divergent strains of thought’ and of viewing ‘ideas all too ahistorically, reducing theology to a series of timeless apodictic statements decoupled from their place and function in the conversation of their day, and from the social and political environments’, and separating subject can lead to ‘ignoring the degree to which all these groups were in communication with each other and influenced each other’s thoughts’ (p. 1). Instead, this collection is divided into three sections, each of which aims to approach theology as a cultural and social product in a different way.

The first, ‘Theology in an Age of Cultural Transformation’, describes the broader technological and social changes that led to changes in theology during this period and can therefore be viewed as a treatment of the non-theological pre-conditions of the theological change which characterized the Reformation era. The section opens with an admirably efficient and comprehensive survey of the impact of the printing press by Andrew Pettegree, which summarizes much of his extensive work on that subject and moves on to considerations of the impact of humanism, the evolving politics of the period, changing educational structures and universities, gender and the social position of theologians. This collection therefore begins not with the content of theology but with the training, material circumstances and social condition of those writing it.

The collection then moves on to the second section, ‘Schools and Emerging Cultures of Theology’ to focus more specifically on the educational and confessional

contexts from which theology in this period emerged. The first four essays of this section deal explicitly with the history of universities, and it is good to see the centrality of universities to theological history recognized in this way. The subsequent essays in this section consider the confessional contexts from which theology emerged in this period, and here the collection moves closest to traditional overviews of confessional theology, with an exceptionally detailed overview of early Lutheranism from Markus Matthias, and further considerations of Reformed theology and the theology of radical and dissenting groups, followed by an essay by Irene Dingel on ecumenism in this period. Importantly, this section also includes considerations of theology produced in Latin America (by Josep-Ignasi Saranyana) and the response of eastern Christianity to western confessionalization (by Yury Avakumov). Readers of this journal may be especially interested in the excellent essay in this section by David Sytsma, which follows the approach of the collection, as a whole, in describing four competing 'Cultures of Theology in the British Isles', rather than a unified theology of the 'English Reformation'.

The final section is titled 'Topics and Disciplines of Theology', and it is in this portion that the content, rather than the methods of production, of theology, are centered. The grouping of essays is here somewhat idiosyncratic. The section begins with an essay on the 'Method and Ethos of Theological Instruction and Discourse' which might have fitted more naturally with the earlier contributions on education, before moving on to an excellent essay by Euan Cameron on biblical theology in this period. Then, further contributions to systematic, controversial, sacramental, pastoral, and moral theology will follow. The conclusion of this section is effectively a grab-bag of generally excellent essays covering ecclesiastical law, spirituality, Catholicism and American indigenous religion, Catholic missions in Japan, India and China, and the interactions between theology and science, history, politics and warfare and art.

In all, this is an exceptional collection of essays which rightly situates the production of theology in its social, cultural, technological and political context and covers an astonishing array of topics with nuance and insight. It successfully eschews a narrow European focus in favour of understanding the Reformation in truly global terms, and its distinctive organizational approach allows this collection to add something genuinely new to an already crowded field. Inevitably, this frame has its limits. In attempting to situate theology within almost every possible context, this collection covers an astonishing amount of ground in a relatively limited space, meaning that these essays consistently assume a high degree of existing knowledge on the part of the reader. Likewise, focusing on the context within which theology was produced rather than its content, and abandoning traditional organizational structures by which theology is treated by topic or theologian makes this collection less accessible to a reader who is not already familiar with the theology of this period. At no point are core concepts in Reformation theology (such as justification by grace through faith) explained for someone who has not already studied them. This is not a flaw; as it is nearly 800 pages already, the addition of detailed explanations of each theological concept discussed would have rendered this collection physically impractical. It will therefore form an invaluable resource for scholars seeking to refresh their knowledge of essential topics or regions outside their specialism, and particularly for graduate students or advanced undergraduates.

Most undergraduate students or readers wishing for an initial introduction to Reformation era theology may wish to begin elsewhere before moving on to this collection. This is nonetheless an ambitious and admirable collection, and it is to be hoped that its context-based approach to the subject will be emulated in further studies of this kind.

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