

Did the Reformation Break with a Commonly Shared Concept of “the Good Life?”

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Author’s comment: The Reformation unintentionally ended a common conception of “the good life” that had been held for centuries, along with the morality that had made that life possible. That, at least, is the thesis of Brad Gregory in his much discussed book *The Unintended Reformation*² as well as in an earlier book by Alasdair MacIntyre.³ In this article I trace whether the Reformation—and especially the Calvinist version—was indeed such a break with the teleological vision on life.

The central thesis of Brad Gregory is that the Reformation led unintentionally to the secularization of knowledge, politics and society. According to Gregory, the Reformation constitutes a turning point in a series of developments that have led to a “hyper pluralism” of religious and secular convictions, the secularizing of universities and scholarship and the triumph of capitalism and consumerism. The source of this misery is the disappearance of the conviction of a common good that has served as basis of Western culture for centuries.

According to MacIntyre also the Reformation played an important role in what he calls the breakdown of a “teleological vision of mankind.” This vision consisted of three related elements. (1) The undeveloped human nature, (2) with the help of moral prescriptions derived from practical reason, (3) is to be shaped into what mankind can be when it realizes its *telos*, goal or destiny. This scheme, originally from Aristotle, stayed intact within Christendom, except that the moral prescriptions were seen not only as teleological concepts but also as corresponding with God’s laws. With later medieval thinkers like Thomas Aquinas there was no chasm between the law of God and what humans could ascertain as morally worthy aims on basis of reason. According to MacIntyre, this changed fundamentally at the time of the Reformation with the result

¹Trans. Jan H. Boer. Original: “*Brak de reformatie met een gedeelde opvatting van ‘het goede leven’?*” *Sophie*, 2/ 2014, pp. 8-11.

² Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*, Cambridge, 2012.

³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics: A History of Moral Philosophy from the Homeric Age to the Twentieth Century*. London 1974. *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*. Notre Dame, 1984.

being the deletion of the third element from the above scheme, namely the teleological concept of humans. Now it was considered politically correct to speak of morality only in terms of unordered human nature such as passions and moral sensitivities or of general moral obligations. In what follows I will summarize the most important arguments of MacIntyre and Gregory.

The Unintended Reformation

In the first place, there runs a thread from the Reformational emphasis on the sovereignty of God's laws to the modern concept that moral rules are unconditionally valid, but they can no longer be justified rationally. True, the Enlightenment tried to arrive at a universal foundation of justification for morality, but that project stranded. Conflicting ethical theories pretend to offer such justification, but the fact that their adherents could not convince each other demonstrates their failure painfully. The result is that the subject of morality, looked at *an sich*, was thrown back upon itself and could now consider the good only as "what feels good" (emotivism⁴). This is supposed to be the provisional endpoint of a development in which the Reformation played a key role.

Luther and Calvin considered God's laws as the only basis for moral rules,. The commandments have no rational justification other than that they are willed by God. They are thus arbitrary. They were no longer seen as prescriptions that were intended to bring us to our destiny, as something to which we are inclined by nature. Because human reason and will are enslaved to sin, only God's commandments can show us the true meaning of life. The classic teleological moral ethic was replaced by an ethic of rules based on the Bible. It was no longer a matter of *caritas* but of obedience. However, increasing disunity arose about the interpretation of what God did or did not command in the Bible. Gregory emphasizes the social disintegration that the Reformation set in motion by its unceasing doctrinal controversies, both with Rome as well as internally, and the many fractures that resulted.

In the second place, the modern concept of autonomy and freedom of choice of the moral subject stems from the Reformation. While in the medieval concept, human beings were seen primarily as members of a moral community, the Reformers laid all emphasis on the individual believer, who stood "naked before God" divorced from her role in church and society. With this individualistic concept of the self, the way was

⁴Translator-- "Emotive: as distinguished from the cognitive, meaning of a statement is its ability to communicate an attitude or emotion, to inspire an act of will without conveying truth." Dagobert D. Runes ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy*. Ames, Iowa: Littlefield, Adams & Co., 1959, p. 89.

prepared for the modern idea of the autonomous self, that is not defined by her social role or his place in a community or tradition, but decides strictly autonomously how she will fulfill her life.

Finally, the Reformation encouraged the secularization of the political and economic domains by liberating them from every form of ecclesiastical control. Luther left the “secular” world to itself, while Calvin indeed held a theocratic idea but still sanctioned the relative autonomy of the various cultural sectors as long as these did not conflict with religious practices and concepts. The history of Calvinism is thus the history of the development of the economy as an independent domain, as Max Weber already posited long ago. Something similar holds for the state, in which people no longer see themselves as members of social communities, but purely as individuals. Social life can now only be ordered in terms of individual rights and obligations. Tolerance has become the fulcrum that makes it possible to work in a “hyper pluralistic” framework. In such a fragmented world there is no longer any room for a common good.

Break with Teleology?

While Gregory restricts himself especially to a historical analysis, MacIntyre pleads for a restoration to honour of the teleological vision and a moral ethic in a contemporary form. He regards the human being as a socially embedded being who functions in social segments such as the arts, the sciences, play, political and social communities, along with appropriate associated roles. In each of these segments there is a central “good” or *telos* that is realized in and through the specific segment. Morals are the qualities that enable the participants to bring to realization the good of such a segment. Above all, MacIntyre pleads for a concept of life as a unified narrative with an eventual good or *telos* as the destiny of life as a whole. In his vision, this “good” is associated with a concept of the good life in general, as that is expressed in a tradition and is maintained in a community. With the help of these central concepts—segmental practice, unity of life narrative, tradition and community—he develops a contemporary teleology and moral ethics.⁵

I, Pieter Vos, believe that this is a specially fruitful direction of thought that has led to a promising renewal in ethics. The question, however, is whether this requires that we go back behind the Reformation and modernity. I restrict myself in the rest of this article to

⁵*After Virtue*, pp. 180-225.

Calvin and Calvinism. I will show that Calvin's concept of the law is more nuanced than Gregory and MacIntyre think and has in addition a certain benefit or good.

The Law of God and Reason

It may be true that obedience to God's commandments are pivotal with Calvin. However, it is not a mere matter of blind obedience for him, but of a responding ear to God's liberating deed and His Word of acquittal. The believer does not obey a divine despot, but a God who enters into a relationship with people, as the prologue to the Decalogue shows: "I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). The commandments aim at a life in freedom, at human flourishing. In the human response to God, the reason and the human will are fully involved. In the sanctified life the will is transformed. The mind also plays an important role in understanding the purpose and cohesion of God's commandments. Calvin teaches that for every commandment one must look for its "ratio" and purpose. He utilizes the principle of synecdochy, meaning that the whole is encompassed in its part. When a commandment either orders or forbids a certain act, that then represents the whole of an all-encompassing practice with its implications.⁶ For example, "You shall not steal" means to deal with your possessions in a good, positive and responsible manner. In order to determine what that means, we need our mind and its reasoning facility, though that is a mind renewed by God (Romans 12:2)⁷

In addition, Calvin starts off with the notion that God has revealed His will not only in the Decalogue, but also in the law of nature that is written on the hearts of *all* people (Romans 1:18-20 and 2:15).⁸ There are various opinions about the place and meaning of natural law in Calvin. I think that the meaning of natural law as "general revelation" is part of his understanding of the "three-fold use of the law." Natural law functions relatively independently in the "first use" of the law, namely the resistance to evil in the world. Even though God has revealed His will much more clearly in the Bible and though mankind cannot be justified before God on basis of acting in conformity with

⁶Translator: A classic use of the synecdochy principle is found in the explanation of the Decalogue in the Heidelberg Catechism. During the decades (or centuries?), reading the Decalogue was a regular part of the liturgy in some Reformed churches and still is in some. Theologians wrote endless volumes on the Heidelberg, including its explanation of the Decalogue. In that genre synecdochy was refined into a "science," with every command being expanded to cover an entire aspect of culture. For example, the principle of honouring parents gets expanded to practicing honour throughout all of life, especially the government. See my own *The Prophet Moses for Today*, Meditations 157-159. (This book is available on the Boeriana page of this website.)

⁷John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.8.8 and 3.7.1.

⁸John Calvin, 2.2.17 and 22, 2.8.1. Trans: If the reference is not clear, feel free to consult the author.

natural law, Calvin acknowledges that every person has knowledge of what constitutes a good and just life.

In addition, natural law also has a function in the “second use” of the law: There is no defence for the evil humans perpetrate, for everyone has a natural knowledge of good and evil. In the third function of the law, i.e. as a guide for the Christian life, natural law has no special meaning.

In short, in contrast to what MacIntyre and Gregory suggest, Calvin simply continues along the line of thought about natural law, including the teleological concept of human destiny, as that found its apex in medieval thought with Thomas Aquinas. The difference is that with Calvin grace does not fulfill nature but produces a total renewal of the human will to a life in communion with Christ. With Thomas the relationship between nature and grace is much more harmonious.⁹

Calvin and Morals

Beyond all this, it appears that Calvin simply assumes the morality ethic. Completely in line with his appreciation of natural law, he acknowledges that excellent examples of morals are also found among Pagans. This does not contradict the idea of “total depravity” of human nature, for this corruption does not mean that people are evil through and through, but, rather, that their nature is affected by sin *in all aspects*. When it comes to the sanctified life as unity with Christ, Calvin is remarkably positive about the morals. They must then be directed towards their proper goal: the love for God. Calvin then provides an explanation of the Christian life on basis of the Decalogue. This decision, however, is not principial as much as pragmatic. He refers with approval to the church fathers who were constantly developing each virtue separately in many of their writings. He wants to keep his depiction short of how the believer arrives at the goal of ordering a good life, which is the reason he chooses for the ordering as expressed in the Decalogue.¹⁰ The unintended consequence of this pragmatic choice is that the Protestant ethic gradually lost sight of these virtues and increasingly moved over to the development of an ethic of rules and commandments, of rights and obligations. In this respect MacIntyre and Gregory are right. But it is incorrect to claim that this was a *necessary* consequence of the Reformation. Calvin gives various positive expositions

⁹⁹ Translator: For a more complete discussion of the relationship between nature and grace see Jan Veenhof, transl. A. M. Wolters, [“Nature and Grace in Bavinck,”](#) on the < Reformational 15/15 > page of this website.

¹⁰*Institutes*, 3. 6. 1.

about the virtues.¹¹ Protestant theologians, such as Melancton, Danaeus, Amesius, Edwards, Schleiermacher, Brillenburg-Wurth and others, developed their own forms of moral ethics during different periods.

According to me, a Calvinistic ethic has an added advantage, because in principle it is able to relate commandments and virtues, prescriptions and moral qualities to each other. This is of importance because the strength of moral ethics, which consists of internally formed attitudes that motivate the good from within, is sometimes also its weakness. This has to do with the human will that can be an evil will. That is why a person must be ordered what he *must* do. Commandments form a necessary supplement to the virtues, as MacIntyre himself also posits, but which in the development of his own moral ethics he cannot actually bring to realization. The Calvinistic idea of law has contributed fruitfully in an additional way on moral ethics, namely in the “normative practice model” in which a MacIntyrian concept of practice is enriched with Dooyeweerd’s theory of law-spheres, a contemporary proof that a strained relationship with a teleological vision is not inherent in Calvinistic theory; It can be at ease with it.

Social Roles and Autonomy

Finally, I will briefly consider the two other central points of the Reformation that MacIntyre and Gregory have criticized: the individual who has been stripped of all his social characteristics and the secularization of various aspects of life. Here also there is room for criticism on basis of Calvin’s perspective. When it comes to the individual in his social role, Calvin’s theory of calling is of interest. On the one hand, calling has to do with participation in the Kingdom of God; That is the true calling of the Christian. On the other hand, there is no strained relationship between this calling and the social roles we fulfill in our professions and in social contexts. In fact, the precise point is to be present in the midst of these roles as an outlook post. In addition, Calvin has a sharp eye for the socio-political changes of his day. He pleads both for a more open, less rigid approach to interpersonal relationships as well as for attention to the place everyone occupies in their social role. Along with this we must strive for harmony and connections between the various part of life as aiming at the goal of the Kingdom, a thought that conforms to a MacIntyrianic concept of a holistic life narrative. Calvin has strong feeling for the order of human practices and associated laws that are rooted in the creation order.¹²

¹¹E.g., *Institutes*, 3.6.3 and 3/7/3.

¹² *Institutes*, 2.2.3 and 3.10.6.

In connection with the third point of criticism we observe that the Reformers did not mean that with the independence of the civil government the ruler was not accountable to God. In both Luther's and Calvin's two-Kingdom theories governments were obligated to exercise their authority before the face of God. In addition, Calvin's covenantal framework is also relevant for the social and political domains. With a later Calvinist such as Johannes Althusius a rich concept develops of various associated cultural segments, each of which strives after a specific goal that came with God's good creation, such as life in the family context, cooperation in guilds and associations, and the development of knowledge in universities. Over against the further segmentation of social roles, Calvinists prefer consociation of the various units in the religious as well as the political domain. This manner of thinking is advanced in Dooyeweerd's philosophy of modal law-spheres. I regard this kind of thinking as a unique Protestant development of what is essentially a teleological vision, whereby the conditions of modernity are not only criticized but also fully realized.