

A Protestant Christendom?

The World the Reformation Made

Edited by
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INTRODUCTION

Onsi A. Kamel

PROTESTANTISM made the modern world—or so say the polemicists. Over the last several centuries, debates between and about Catholics and Protestants have shifted: we no longer argue for the veracity or superiority of this or that position so much as we seek to defend our respective traditions based on their societal and political fruits. Are Protestant societies dynamic, progressive, and free or godless, Erastian, and libertine? Are Catholic societies enchanted, traditional, and morally serious or superstitious, stultifying, and backwards?

Older generations of theologians and historians argued that Protestantism created societies grounded on reason, freedom, and the individual.¹ The nineteenth-century Reformed theologian and patristic scholar Philip Schaff argued that, although Protestantism produced “false and hateful” Rationalism, it also produced those elements of Rationalism which “served to overthrow many false prejudices and...made many contributions of permanent worth to history and criticism.”² Furthermore, Schaff argued, the “Roman Church” does not “sufficiently respect the world in its own divine rights, and seeks to subject it to herself in a violent, unnatural and premature way”; by contrast, “the world since the sixteenth century has reached a measure of cultivation such as it never possessed before. The Protestant States are incomparably superior to [Catholic states]; showing altogether more order,

¹ As Brad Gregory puts it, this is “part of standard narratives about how the Reformation era ushered in Western modernity.” Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*, Reprint edition (Cambridge, MA; London: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2015), 6.

² Philip Schaff, Theodore Louis Trost, and Leigh Eric Schmidt, *The Development of the Church: “The Principle of Protestantism” and Other Historical Writings of Philip Schaff*, ed. David R. Bains, trans. John Williamson Nevin (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2017), 151.

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obedience, and contentment.”³ Protestantism’s distinctive achievement, culturally and politically speaking, was the escape from bondage to papal subjugation. Protestantism cast off papal superstition, a precondition for the genesis of the modern world. Thus, Schaff draws clear, causal connections from Protestantism to reason, freedom, prosperity, and advance.

A more recent crop of genealogists, including Alasdair MacIntyre, Brad Gregory, and Charles Taylor, also look upon Protestantism as the begetter of these distinctive characteristics of “modernity,” although they associate modernity with a different regime having ambivalent connotations: secularity.⁴ For them, Protestantism still stands in a causal relationship to modernity, but modernity is no longer considered an unambiguous good. Brad Gregory argues that “scientific naturalism is deeply beholden to metaphysical univocity,” and metaphysical univocity spread in part because the Reformation rejected the notion that “the transcendent God manifests in and through the material world.”⁵ Protestantism begets metaphysical revolution.

MacIntyre, for his part, contrasts the “moral scheme” of the European Middle Ages—Aristotelian and teleological natural law—with Protestantism’s “new conception of reason,” holding fallen reason “can supply...no genuine comprehension of man’s end.”⁶ On this telling, Protestant theology upholds a noetic fall, and a noetic fall destroys teleological ethics. Protestantism begets ethical revolution.

The account provided by Charles Taylor of the relationship between Protestantism and modernity is the most sophisticated of the three, and worth discussing at length. Taylor focuses upon the “move to disenchantment.”⁷ In short, the fulfillment of human life, and of all life, was once believed to exist outside the scope of purely human possibilities, whereas now it is possible to place it “within’ human life.”⁸ In the enchanted world of pre-modernity, meaning was outside of us and operated on us; the world was

³ Schaff, Trost, and Schmidt, *The Development of the Church*, 158–59.

⁴ As Brad Gregory puts it, these older polemics are “part of standard narratives about how the Reformation era ushered in Western modernity.” Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*, 6.

⁵ Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation*, 66, 41.

⁶ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd edition (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 62, 64.

⁷ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 30–31.

⁸ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 15.

filled with “forces” and objects that had powers: demons, saints, relics, the Host, and blessed or cursed objects.⁹ Powers and forces possessed objective meaning, and they imposed this meaning upon humans.¹⁰ The fact that power and meaning resided both inside and outside of people, and the fact that both internal and external meanings and powers could condition people, rendered humans “porous.” There was no hard boundary between my mind and the external world (including my body).

By contrast, with modernity arises the “buffered” self, which allows us to “disengag[e] everything outside the mind,” to consign it to an external world which has no fixed meaning or existential significance.¹¹ What does this have to do with secular modernity? Taylor makes a number of arguments, but one is critical for this book. When the self is porous and subject to powers “out there,” the community has a vested interest in guarding against such powers, so public religious observance becomes a matter of survival. The buffered self, however, makes this inessential—there are no spiritually charged realities to guard against.¹² When the world is enchanted and humans are vulnerable, they develop a “good magic” (historically, the Church’s magic, consisting of the sacraments, sacramentals, relics, and the like) to counteract the “bad”; the various reform movements, culminating in the Protestant Reformation, produced the buffered self and attempted to overthrow this magical system.¹³ The community no longer needed to guard against bad enchantment, which means it no longer needed to orient itself around God and the Church. Protestantism begets cultural and political revolution.

The claim that Protestantism begets political revolution has been developed a number of ways: perhaps Protestantism, particularly in the American Revolution, secularized and thus paradoxically sacralized the state; perhaps Protestantism subjected the Church to the state, forfeiting the Church’s independence; perhaps Protestantism fused Church and state by idealizing a

⁹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 32–33.

¹⁰ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 35.

¹¹ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38.

¹² Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 42.

¹³ Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 73–74.

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Christian commonwealth; and so on.¹⁴ The particulars are of little importance. But one line runs through all of these accounts: the association of Protestantism with *revolution*, with the severing of religious and metaphysical bonds which united diverse European nations, bound individuals to the religion of their community, joined past and present, connected heaven and earth.

But what if these accounts fundamentally misunderstand not only the Reformation, but the character of modernity itself? Joseph A. Josephson-Storm has contested the very notion of a coherent “modernity” or “disenchantment” altogether. According to Josephson-Storm, modernity does not describe an event or era. Modernity is a dual sign. First, as evidenced by historians’ inability to settle on a relative dating for the modern period, it does not describe a set of intellectual tendencies or material developments but merely signifies rupture with the past.¹⁵ Modernity is not-pre-modernity. Second, it is a spatial signifier: “to call a culture modern is to ally it with newness and to consign its opposite to colonization or the scrap heap of history.”¹⁶ In short, modernity is not a descriptor but a sign in service of a project—the project of realizing modernity.

Josephson-Storm argues that, not only is modernity a suspect category, but it has not even “experienced disenchantment [or] a loss of myth.”¹⁷ Although secularism is often presented as a kind of Protestantism, and Protestantism is construed as anti-magic, magic was never eclipsed.¹⁸ To see this, we need only to ask what “magic” means. As Josephson-Storm argues, the categories “religion” and “science” were constructed as opponents, and this opposition generated a third category—superstition (negatively construed) or

¹⁴ Miles Smith IV, “The Promise and Peril of Disestablishment: Baptist and Miles Smith IV, “The Promise and Peril of Disestablishment: Baptist and Reformed Political Theology in the New Republic,” *Ad Fontes*, March 27, 2020, <https://adfontesjournal.com/church-history/the-promise-and-peril-of-disestablishment-baptist-and-reformed-political-theology-in-the-new-republic/>; Gillis J. Harp, *Protestants and American Conservatism: A Short History*, 1st edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 10, 40–41.

¹⁵ Jason Ananda Josephson Storm, *The Myth of Disenchantment: Magic, Modernity, and the Birth of the Human Sciences*, Illustrated edition (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 7.

¹⁶ Josephson-Storm, *Myth of Disenchantment*, 7.

¹⁷ Josephson-Storm, *Myth of Disenchantment*, 8.

¹⁸ Josephson-Storm, *Myth of Disenchantment*, 4.

magic (positively construed).¹⁹ Protestantism, as a modernizing phenomenon, becomes the mechanism of science's triumph over religion and superstition.

The simple problem with this picture is that magic was never defeated: neither science nor religion managed to vanquish it, even as scholars theorized that Protestantism generated the science that killed it. The very theorists of disenchantment were in many cases enamored with the occult, patronizing mediums, hearing spirits, doing magic, and substantial majorities of people today continue to be so enamored.²⁰

In light of this, we must ask: if it is the case that accounts of Protestantism's relationship to modernity are fundamentally wrongheaded, how should we understand Protestantism? Put another way: if Protestantism's cultural and social import must be described in terms that do not simply attribute to it whatever our society has become, in what terms should we seek to understand it? Can we move beyond narratives of Protestant disjuncture and Church-state dysfunction, investigating Protestantism's political, cultural, and social vision on its own terms?

The burden of this book is to illuminate this vision, and always with an eye toward applying it to our own day. The book is divided into three main parts: Church and state, politics and culture, and economics and justice. Together, the authors in each section have written essays giving an overview of the classical Protestant position as well as drawing out contemporary implications of that position. We begin at the Reformation, but we do not end there.

What becomes immediately apparent in the first section of the book, concerning Church and state, is this: classical Protestantism rejects the secular nation. As Calvin observed, not even pagans denied their civic obligations to the gods, and almost all Protestant confessions assert, in the words of the Westminster Confession of Faith, the principle that the magistrate "hath authority, and it is his duty, to take order, that unity and peace be preserved in the Church...that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed; all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed."²¹

¹⁹ Josephson-Storm, *Myth of Disenchantment*, 15.

²⁰ Josephson-Storm, *Myth of Disenchantment*, 6.

²¹ The Westminster Confession of Faith, XXIII.3.

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The Reformers did not reject the claim that society should be ordered to God, and, like their “superstitious” or “magical” Roman Catholic counterparts, they believed that this ordering was of the utmost importance. Crucially, however, Protestants did not claim that this ordering entails the subordination of earthly magistrates to the Church militant. Luther and his heirs foregrounded the fact that the Church is of the world. Word and sacrament are spiritual realities; the church’s exercise of jurisdiction is not. Thus, when the Church passes judgment on temporal affairs, she acts as just one more *temporal* power.

What follows from this? If the Church’s action in the world is worldly, then the demand that magistrates submit their judgment to her is an attempted usurpation of the authority given them by God. Thus, Brad Littlejohn’s opening essay (“The Freedom of the Christian Nation”) details the late medieval and Protestant political tradition which asserted the supremacy of the nation in the ordering of its ecclesial and political affairs. In the second chapter (“Inhabiting the Places of Promise”), Michael Laffin expounds Luther’s doctrine of the three estates. Each of the three estates—the civil magistrate, the Church, and the family—possesses its own integrity and *independence* because each is created by God for human flourishing. The Reformers’ chief political aim was not secularizing the nation but rather thwarting the papacy’s attempt to usurp the magistrate’s authority and become a pseudo-spiritual, imperial superpower. In short, Protestants sought to re-establish the Constantinian ecclesial order.

Relatedly, for the Reformers, the magistrate’s authority was not limited to executing justice in a narrow sense, as when early modern Roman Catholic ecclesiastical courts convicted men of heresy only to deliver them to the king for burning. Rather, the magistrate’s authority extends to all matters of justice as set forth in the natural law and Ten Commandments: it includes the sword but extends beyond it to the regulation of the Church’s temporal life, as seen in both the Old Testament and the Constantinian imperial order.²² E. J. Hutchinson’s chapter (“Nursing Fathers”) goes into greater detail about how the Reformers envisioned the magistrate upholding right religion, and in the process, he is careful to point out the all-important distinctions between classical Protestant political theology and Roman Catholic integralism on this

²² See, e.g., 2 Kings 23 and Is. 49:23; St. Augustine’s Letter 155 to the Roman vicar Macedonius is likewise instructive, entrusting Macedonius with the souls of those he rules.

score. Protestant doctrine would, however, eventually develop its understanding of the magistrate's authority with regard to the Church—creating space for a Protestantism without state churches. Thus, with Miles Smith IV's and Ethan Foster's contributions (respectively, "The Promise and Peril of Disestablishment" and "James Wilson"), we move squarely to North America, particularly the colonial and early post-Revolutionary periods. Each essay charts distinctive American contributions to and departures from this classical Protestant inheritance, Smith by detailing how Baptists allied with Deists to overturn religious establishment, and Foster by outlining the contours of founding father James Wilson's synthesis of democratic liberalism and the natural law tradition.

The second section investigates Protestant politics and culture, demonstrating how deeply it was indebted to Renaissance ideals of learnedness and skill in humane letters. Adam Carrington ("The Neglected Craft") shows how highly the Reformers prized wisdom, and in particular, prudence in applying laws. This may be one of the book's most important contributions for us today: in an era when the right and the left are motivated by ideologies and theories (of progress, of free markets, of bodily autonomy), Carrington draws out the indispensability of a wise ruler's non-ideological application of laws in the messiness of human life. But how is such wisdom produced? Roberta Bayer ("The Art of Protestant Learning") illuminates the kind of education and formation the Reformers hoped children would receive, that they might grow into virtuous adults, while Rhys Lavery ("Retrieving John Donne") reflects on the fruits of such an education in the peerless poet John Donne, detailing Donne's conversion from Roman Catholicism into the Church of England.

Finally, after unpacking Protestant conceptions of the relationship between Church and state, and elements of the Protestant ideals of politics and culture, we turn squarely to topics with, perhaps surprisingly, as much relevance then as now: economics and justice. Today as during the Reformation, seismic shifts in the structure of the economy meant that new problems were arising at a rapid clip, and it was imperative to offer new solutions. The Reformation saw the rise of the merchant class; we have seen the hollowing-out of the middle class. The Reformation saw the enclosure of the commons; we have seen public goods and institutions, such as public universities, get further out of reach. The Reformation saw the creation of new kinds of poverty; we have seen poverty's ability to remain stubbornly present in the midst of

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unimaginable bounty. Even where the Reformers' solutions were wrong, they are invaluable aids as we seek to take seriously our own problems.

Brad Littlejohn ("Against the Infinite Stimulus of Greed") opens this section with an essay on Bucer's proposals for poor relief (welfare), illuminating various principles for us to keep in mind as we seek to ameliorate poverty in our own day. Connected to poverty, of course, is the question of labor, and Joseph Minich ("What is Work For?") looks to Scripture to seek to discern labor's purpose, and thus, by implication, to answer the question, "How, then, should we work?" Alan Calhoun ("Martin Luther on Tax") applies his expertise in tax law and Luther's theology to propose a distinctively Protestant theory of taxation, in dialogue with Catholic Social Teaching and prominent secular theories of taxation. Rounding out this volume are two discussions thoroughly rooted in the present: Brian Dijkema's reflections on social justice ("Who's Afraid of Social Justice?") and Jake Meador's full-throated defense of the necessity of a shared common good ("Why We Need the Common Good").

Each of these essays brings out the distinctive and yet simultaneously catholic character of Protestant political, social, and cultural thought. To understand Protestantism as it was and as it can be, we must put out of our minds many popular arguments tying Protestantism to "modernity" or "secularity," whether adulatory or condemnatory; those in vogue have been tried and found wanting. This is not to say that Protestantism bears no relationship to modernity, but its influences are rather more subtle and certainly less straightforward than cheerleaders or detractors would like to believe. This is all to the good: once we forget what we thought we knew about Protestantism, we can learn to let it speak to us anew. Perhaps the voices of our forefathers can still challenge and surprise us. Perhaps Protestant Christendom has not yet run its course.