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British Delegation to the Synod of Dort (Book Review)

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the creation-fall-redemption-consummation story, they propose the “glorious scientific task in the kingdom [as] a science that has an integrally transforming character as aspects of creation are brought into explicit relation to the Christian scientist himself and thus are connected through him to the transformation of all things that has come and will come in Christ” (186). This is portrayed not simply as an unattainable platitude but with many concrete suggestions and examples that are both challenging and enriching. They show, for example, that Adam’s naming of the animals entails both “the receiving of order as divinely given and the constructing of order as a divinely appointed task” (214); in fact, this way of explaining “order” occurs as a theme in the book, so much so that I had to add pages 216, 224, 241 to the index entry for “order as given”/ “order as task.”

The term “grace” is also well and widely used in this book, as in the following contexts. It is God’s grace that the reality of creation constrains and allows for scientific theories to agree across worldviews. By God’s grace, we can confidently strike out into an exploration of our Father’s world without fear. God graciously reveals to us both Himself and the wonders and workings of the world. Even though the authors affirm “Common grace” as a theme early in the book (in connection with Kuyper), they distance themselves from that terminology near the end because of controversies in Dutch Reformed circles.

This dichotomy in the use of the term “common grace” may be attributed to the book’s dual authorship, which occasionally left me wondering whether this or that chapter was written by Morris or Petcher. In fact, while mostly speaking in the first person plural, the authors speak in the singular in a number of instances. While the preface warns the reader that there will be different styles and some redundancy because of co-authorship, some more careful editing would have avoided such

awkwardness. I do acknowledge the value of their style(s) in that a good number of chapters can be quite fruitfully read independently of the others.

As a physicist concerned with the study of the physical aspect of creation (defined in terms of its kernel, interaction), I was disappointed with their use of the word “physical” as denoting something that is “material” or “natural,” as opposed to “spiritual.” While the unpacking of Dooyeweerd’s modal aspects is not in the scope of this book, the insights gained from the philosophy of the cosmonomic idea highlight the reductionism of referring to biotic life and processes as physical, as they do in at least two cases: “the Spirit is not only the giver of spiritual life but also of physical life” (107) and “a physical process, like a plant developing from seed” (198). Furthermore, my interest as a physicist was piqued at several points to see how they might discuss issues such as randomness and uncertainty in quantum mechanics, but only the surface was scratched; perhaps a subsequent book will unpack the implications of their approach, which rightly remained generally applicable rather than discipline-specific.

Science and Grace is highly recommended for anyone teaching or learning science in a Christian context, for Christians working in science, and for those interested in a thoughtful and balanced alternative to perennial controversies. The book is based upon a theologically and philosophically Reformed foundation, thoroughly informed by Scripture, with suitably lengthy quotations and discussion, and well researched. Their treatment of scholarship and vocation will be valuable to those in other fields as well. In fact, in many respects I think the book could have been aptly titled *Scholarship and Grace*, for even outside of the so-called natural sciences, many of its themes apply as the multi-faceted creation is explored to the glory of its Triune Creator.

Milton, Anthony, ed. *The British Delegation to the Synod of Dort*. Woodbridge, Suffolk, England / Rochester, NY, USA: The Boydell Press and Church of England Record Society, 2005. 411 pp. ISBN: 1-84383-157-0. Reviewed by Keith C. Sewell, Professor of History at Dordt College.

“There I bid John Calvin good-night.” This, we are told, by his editor Anthony Farindon (1598-1658), was the response of “the ever memorable” John Hales (1584-1656) to the Synod of Dort (1618-1619). Although Hales was not a delegate to the Synod (he was chaplain to the English ambassador in The Hague), the oft-misunderstood quip is in many books partly because generations of historians have found it too good to resist. The wide currency of the quotation can also be attributed to Hales’ *Golden Remains* (1659, enlarged 1673) being, for many years, one of the few accessible sources on the English and Scottish presence at the Synod.

As the writings of A. W. Harrison (*The Beginnings of*

Arminianism 1926; *Arminianism*, 1937) exemplify, the Synod did not come to enjoy a high reputation in England. The fact that it did not is partly explained by the massive impact of Wesleyan Methodism in the eighteenth century and the later tendency of Evangelicalism towards a careless, unexamined Arminianism. Even at the time, the Synod was not free from its association with the highly questionable execution of Johan van Oldenbarnevelt (1547-1619), leader of the United Netherlands following the assassination of William of Orange.

Moreover, there was already a tendency within the Church of England to extrapolate the counter-reformational implications of the writings of the “judicious” Richard

Hooker (1554-1600) in the direction of a more ornate and ritualistic form of worship. As a result, the Synod, driven as it was by the internal doctrinal convulsions of the *Hervormde Kerk* (Reformed Church) and the political insecurities of the United Provinces of the Netherlands, came at a particularly crucial stage in the history of English Protestant Christianity.

This volume is ably edited by Anthony Milton of the University of Sheffield, England. He may be known to some readers for his fascinating study *Catholic and Reformed: The Roman and Protestant Churches in English Protestant Thought, 1600-1640* (1995). This new work contains a fascinating range of hard-to-locate or otherwise unavailable documents, mainly correspondence to and from, or relating to, the English and Scottish representatives at the Synod.

The material is ordered and presented in ten parts: (1) the political background to the Synod; (2) the theological background; (3) the preliminaries of the Synod; (4) the prosecution of the Remonstrants, who were opposing the official teachings of the Reformed Church on subjects such as election and grace; (5) divisions among the delegates; (6) the collegiate suffrage [opinion expressed by vote] of the “divines of Great Britaine”; (7) the Canons of Dort; (8) after the Canons; (9) aftermath; and (10) later defense of the British delegation. Each of these ten parts receives its “Introduction” by the editor, who guides the reader with finesse through the mass of interacting issues that were the origins, course, and consequences of the Synod.

The monarch of the day was James I of England, dubbed by one wit as “the wisest fool in Christendom,” who was also James VI of Scotland—the formal unification of England and Scotland as “Great Britain” only came in 1707. James appointed the English delegates to the Synod: George Carleton (1559-1628, Bishop of Llandaff), Joseph Hall (1574-1657), John Davenant (1576-1641), and Samuel Ward (1577-1643). Part way through the proceedings, Joseph Hall, suffering from ill health, was replaced by Thomas Goad (1576-1638). James also eventually sent his chaplain, the Scotsman Walter Balcanquhall (1586-1645). After Balcanquhall’s arrival, it becomes more appropriate to refer to a “British” delegation to the Synod (184).

Many noteworthy points emerge from the documents. Oldenbarnevelt was more sympathetic to the counter-Remonstrants than is generally appreciated (6). The English Archbishop Abbot (1562-1633), a man of reformed doctrinal opinions, thought that the Dutch church needed an Episcopal polity (8-10). We learn of the English scruples towards the Belgic Confession (337) and are reminded of Pierre du Moulin’s (1568-1658) ambitious project of a single transnational protestant confession based on the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England and the Heidelberg Catechism (197-8). (Pierre du Moulin had his irenic side. His reputation for combativeness should not be assessed apart from the circumstances of his life). For many, the centerpiece among the documents will be the original 1619 translation into English of “The Canons of the Synod of

Dort” (297 f.).

As I considered these documents, a number of matters came to mind that simply cannot be dismissed when one reflects on the predicament of reformed Christianity in the early seventeenth century. Firstly, the Reformed churches of Europe were for the most part dependent on, and subject to, their respective “godly princes” (xxii ff.). As it turned out, James was satisfied with the outcome of the Synod (364). Also, it is worth remembering that scholasticism, with its orientation towards logical symmetry, had become the habitual mode of technical doctrinal statement amongst the reformed by this time. Those of us who acquired our philosophy from neo-Calvinists have learned to critically probe the epistemological and ontological assumptions of this style of discourse. In truth, however, the Synod was rightly saying that our deliverance comes to us entirely by the grace of God, freely provided in Jesus Christ. We should not forget this as we critically assess the scholasticism of the Synod itself. It is important not to throw out the doctrinal baby with the scholastic bathwater.

Furthermore, there was some “wobble room” amongst those who rejected the Remonstrant position. For example, John Davenant had his own thoughts on the extent of the atonement. “There is no Confession of any Reformed Church,” he declared, “that doth restrain Christ’s death only to the Elect...” (220). There has been a long-standing English tendency to resist the logical angularity of the Canons of Dort—a tendency expressed also in the soteriology of Richard Baxter (1615-91) and J.C. Ryle (1816-1900).

If the Remonstrants had expected a conference, what they got was a trial and condemnation. They soon triumphed, however, at the expense of Reformed Christianity. “Calvinism” in the minds of many became reduced to, and equated with, the contested “five points.” With that notion firmly lodged in the minds of many today, it is hardly surprising that it is an up-hill battle to convince folk that authentic Calvinism exhibits an all-encompassing world-view.

After 1619, the British delegates suffered a multi-phased eclipse in reputation. Their theological position soon became *passé* in the Church of England (382 ff.). When parliament and Puritans challenged the crown and episcopacy in 1640, they suffered by their association with Anglicanism. Thirdly, their “Calvinism” was unacceptable because it was associated with Puritanism and rebellion at the restoration of the English monarchy in 1660. So it was that Hales’ earlier criticisms, mentioned above, found ready ears in a changed context (xix).

This work provides documents and commentary for academic specialists. It is not a popular introduction, but it is a valuable contribution to the literature, and it is essential reading for those investigating the composition of the canons and their reception in subsequent generations. It is pleasing to record that this volume, dedicated to “the people of the Netherlands, [is] still kind and hospitable to visiting British scholars four hundred years later.”