

12-2003

Review of A. James Reimer, Mennonites and Classical Theology

Richard Crane

Follow this and additional works at: https://mosaic.messiah.edu/brps_ed



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Permanent URL: https://mosaic.messiah.edu/brps_ed/11

Sharpening Intellect | Deepening Christian Faith | Inspiring Action

Messiah University is a Christian university of the liberal and applied arts and sciences. Our mission is to educate men and women toward maturity of intellect, character and Christian faith in preparation for lives of service, leadership and reconciliation in church and society.

on United States Amish and Mennonite women, with only a few exceptions. Only outsider historian Pederson raises the issue of pacifism—a most distinctive Anabaptist belief and challenge to the state—in any substantive way. (Pedersen's reflections on pacifism are useful and innovative.) On the other hand, she sometimes falls into the inaccuracies of oversimplification in the largely unfamiliar complexity of Anabaptism.

Despite these weaknesses, readers of all stripes will come away surprised, with new questions, and perhaps with a chastened sense of the difficulties of building religious communities.

JAMES REIMER. *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics*. Telford, Pa./Kitchener, Ont.: Pandora Press, and Scottsdale, Pa./Waterloo, Ont.: Herald Press, 2001. Pp. 564. \$65.00

*Reviewed by Richard D. Crane**

Mennonites and Classical Theology is a collection of thirty-seven essays written between 1978 and 2000 and presented, with the exception of minor revisions, as they were originally published. A short introduction is provided for each essay, written in retrospect and identifying the original occasion of the article or presentation. The book is divided into three major sections. Part one is an analysis and critique of modernity. Reimer's critical engagement with Mennonite theologians in light of the crisis of modernity is the subject of the second section. Part three includes nineteen essays, addressing the central doctrinal themes of the Christian theological tradition and presenting Reimer's constructive proposals about the reappropriation of classical orthodoxy in contemporary theology.

* Richard D. Crane is Lecturer in Theology at Messiah College.

The articles in *Mennonites and Classical Theology* address an incredible range of topics, including the relationship between biblical and systematic theology, Ernst Bloch's interpretation of Thomas Muntzer, homosexuality, conflicting views of Anabaptist origins, the distinction between policing and war, and the debate between Paul Tillich and Emanuel Hirsch in pre-war Germany. Amid the diversity of subjects addressed, the motif that integrates the book is the conviction that the Christian doctrine of God as triune is foundational to Christian theology. Reimer calls for a rehabilitation of doctrinal thinking among Mennonite theologians and contends that the Mennonite ethical agenda should be grounded in the trinitarian and christological doctrine of historic Christianity.

Reimer's theological project is indebted to Canadian philosopher Charles Grant's analysis of modernity. According to Grant, environmental devastation, military and nuclear proliferation, and the industrial and technological dominance of life are, in part, products of the fundamental assumption that humanity's essence is its freedom to shape and control human and non-human nature and history in an unlimited fashion. Accompanying the emergence of the autonomous self is a loss of accountability to a transcendent reality and belief in an objective realm of absolute moral norms.

Reimer contends that an effective critique of modernity requires the recovery of "a more traditional belief in a transcendent God who stands above history and judges, restricts, and limits human *hubris*" (p. 35). He highlights the continuities between the biblical and classical Hellenistic world views, both of which presuppose the existence of an absolutely transcendent spiritual reality. Reimer suggests that the doctrine of the Trinity is the distinctively Christian understanding of God, developed as the product of a creative synthesis between the Jewish and Greco-Roman views of reality. As an expression of the conviction that the one God has three modes of being, the "trinitarian imagination" is one in which God's radical transcendence, historicity, and immanence are dynamically held together. This allows a recovery of the ontological-eternal

dimension of reality without denying the importance of human action and history.

Readers interested in recent debates and contested issues within Mennonite theological circles will appreciate the inclusion of Reimer's critical engagements with John Howard Yoder, Gordon Kaufman, J. Denny Weaver, and others. In opposition to some of his fellow Mennonites, Reimer argues that "Constantinianism" and theological orthodoxy are not intrinsically linked. He also charges that contemporary Mennonite theology is often unwittingly complicit with the worst aspects of modernity. Unless the Mennonite ethical agenda is metaphysically and ontologically grounded in classical orthodoxy, he argues, the result will be an autonomous, self-grounded ethic. Within the theology of Yoder and other Mennonites, Reimer claims to detect an anti-metaphysical and anti-ontological world view in which human freedom is emphasized at the expense of the eternal divine truths of classical orthodoxy. He encourages Mennonite thinkers to supplement the commendable emphasis upon the social, political, and historical aspects of the Christian message (prophetic-eschatological dimension) with a renewed appreciation for that part of human experience that one might call the vertical, mystical, ontological, or sacramental dimension of reality (priestly-sacramental dimension).

Mennonites and Classical Theology brings together in one volume the work of a theologian who deserves serious attention in Mennonite and ecumenical theological discussions. Reimer's attempt to counter the *hubris* of modernity and the relativism of much postmodern thought through a recovery of transcendence and his strong affirmation of the ontological truth of classical Christian doctrine display his willingness to address some of the most difficult and most urgent issues in contemporary theology.

However, an objection can be registered at the point at which Reimer suggests that classical orthodoxy can provide a universalistic ethic sufficient to address the global moral challenges we face at the beginning of the twenty-first century. He calls for an ethic that is "grounded beyond itself in the very structure of reality" (p. 15). However, a Christian ethic

"grounded in the very structure of reality" must either privilege the internal norms of a particular tradition (God's revelation as attested in Scripture) or claim some kind of more general rational or experiential access to God's reality. Reimer seeks to hold these two together. He maintains that God's revelation in nature, human consciousness, and reason is not alien to, but consistent with, God's revelation in Jesus Christ. He characterizes his position as a "trinitarian foundationalism" or a "dogmatic foundationalism," which assumes the truth of Christian claims and a commonality of human experience and understanding (pp. 16, 290).

In spite of his admirable attempt to synthesize general and special revelation in order to set forth a "non-relativistic metaphysics and ontology," his project faces two formidable obstacles. To the extent that the classical Christian doctrine of God as triune provides the supra-historical norm for these universalistic ethical claims, it remains the ethic of a particular historical community. Reimer's attempt to provide a metaphysical and ontological underpinning to his ethic that is rooted in "general revelation" fails to evade another problem. As Alasdair MacIntyre, Jeffrey Stout, and others have pointed out, our current postmodern situation is, at least in part, the result of the inability of ethical frameworks claiming indubitable epistemological foundations to achieve universal acceptance. It is one thing to set forth a proposal that makes universal truth claims. It is quite another matter to expect universal consent or consensus sufficient to address the global moral challenges within that particular moral framework.

Nevertheless, Reimer is to be commended for his willingness to wrestle with the most intransigent issues in relation to the Christian community's public responsibility in our troubled and fragmented social, political, and intellectual context.