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ST8.101 Medieval to Puritan Thought  
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## A Motley Millennium: Christianity's Medieval to Puritan (Dis)engagement

### **A Christian Social Imaginary as Methodology**

Before I begin this analysis of medieval to Puritan thought I want to be candid about my understanding of thinking as such, and thereby just what thinking about thinking (i.e., metacognition) might entail.

First, the kind of thinking I have in mind in this context—theoretical, analytical—is distinctly human. Although I believe that many creatures with complex nervous systems (e.g., apes, elephants, cetaceans, dogs, crows, et al.) employ higher cognitive abilities (e.g., problem-solving, sense of self, long-term memory, social sensitivity, simple cultural development, etc.), none that we know of are able to combine imagination and language to the degree necessary to artificially separate and simplify (reduce) reality for the purpose of (virtual) manipulation. This type of thinking does not seem to come “naturally” but is a learned, i.e., cultural, phenomenon. We must teach our young to think in a disciplined and focused manner (e.g., the scientific method), lest they remain at a “lower” (brain) level of thinking, unduly influenced by their potentially harmful prejudices and other “unthinking” predilections.

Second, thinking on all levels—“higher” (human) and “lower” (human and nonhuman)—is never neutral, i.e., disembodied or objective in the sense of being lifted out of context. It is

always organically dependent upon the dynamic interactions between the creature's external (environmental) and internal (perceptual, emotional, habitual, and, for humans, religious) realities. All actions, including thinking, are intentional or directional, i.e., being motivated by a basic desire. We may not be aware of that motivating desire—in fact, most often we don't think about it at all (hence, the subconscious)—yet it is there all the same.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that logical thinking is the pinnacle of humanness, nor am I saying that human morality is merely an outgrowth of our (collective) subconscious. Careful, focused, analytical (logical, theoretical) thinking is a skill to be honed in the academic setting, and it is a directional skill. When we act metacognitively (thinking about our thinking), we are not to analyze thoughts by “dispassionately/objectively” laying a “neutral” template of logic over them; rather, we are to bring all of our humanness (bodily intuitions, emotions, basic desires/motivations) to bear on the subject in all of its wholeness *via* our analytical thinking. Analysis (Greek: *ana* (throughout) + *luo* (to loosen)) is a dissection of something into its components, a purposeful reduction of the complex to artificially simplified pieces that we (hope we) can get our minds around. This kind of thinking—a cultural tool—is a boon for the further development of culture (science, technology). None of which—it is worth repeating—is neutral. What we choose to analyze, how we choose to analyze it, and what we choose to do with that knowledge are all determined by our fundamental desires (ground-level motivations, religious commitments).

One useful example of analysis is Herman Dooyeweerd's dissection of reality into fifteen aspects (modalities, dimensions).<sup>1</sup> For the sake of simplicity, I will divide them into two groups:

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<sup>1</sup> For a good summary of Dooyeweerd's aspects, see Andrew Basden's *The Dooyeweerd Pages* at <http://www.dooy.salford.ac.uk/aspects.html>. Accessed 7 Jan 2015.

nature (energy, life, etc.) and culture (community, language, justice, etc.). Animals are comprised solely of natural aspects, humans of natural *and* cultural aspects. For Dooyeweerd, moving from animal/nature to human/culture requires the analytical aspect, our ability to distinguish and conceptualize teachings—the very topic we are considering (analyzing!). Of course, no aspect occurs in a vacuum (so to speak); analytical thinking, for instance, always includes a sense of language (words), community (sharing ideas), ethics (proper usage), etc. The lingering problem of rationalism (modernism, scientism) still so prevalent in the academy (both Christian and non-) today stems from the supposed autonomy (neutrality, objectivity) of theoretical (analytical) thought, i.e., from its purported separability from the other aspects of human reality. If only the *ratio*, the *logos*, could float above our fleshy bodies in a sterile, pristine manner and engage the world without having to touch it; then we would really understand things. Or so Plato dreamt—a nightmare that still haunts us.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, even Dooyeweerd's holistic, interconnected scheme can fall prey to a platonic mishandling. In fact, the animal/nature vs. human/culture divide I presented above was a ruse (did you fall for it?). There is a latent dualism in any conception of culture that divorces itself from "nature." Even if Dooyeweerd is correct that the human analytical ability separates us from the animals and opens the door for the development of culture, and that such analytical thinking is further opened (deepened, widened, effectuated) by a normative realization of its correlative aspects (clear analysis, fair analysis, etc.), this in no way lessens its rootedness in human instincts, feelings, (mis)perceptions and other so-called natural/animal/pre-human dimensions.

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<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis's *That Hideous Strength* is a powerfully imaginative critique of the disembodied mind.

Whereas Plato would eradicate (root out) the bodiliness of human cognition, James K. A. Smith takes the bold (gutsy) step of calling us animals, albeit “affective, desiring, liturgical animals”<sup>3</sup>—something virtually unheard of among his evangelical Christian colleagues. I believe it is an important step, using language to embed our imagination (and, thereby, our thinking about thinking) in the creational wholeness of being human. Descartes (echoing Plato) expressed a certain anthropology with his *cogito ergo sum*; so did Anselm (echoing Augustine) with his *credo ut intelligam*. The former puts our thoughts (mind/soul) at our core, the latter our beliefs (heart); however, both assume/propagate an intellectualist anthropology, i.e., both idea-centric and belief-centric approaches “reduce us to thinking machines,” to a “cognitive picture of the human person.”<sup>4</sup> This is the problem, Smith says, with worldview-thinking. It does not go deep enough, neither acknowledging the major influence of precognitive elements in our thoughts and beliefs, nor effecting radical (deeply rooted) lifestyle change in too many worldview-educated Christians.

Smith will settle for nothing less than a “holistic, . . . embodied anthropology”<sup>5</sup>—nor should we. In a tradition where Abraham meets God in nature (a burning bush) and God becomes enfleshed, we should pull our heads out of the clouds (cf. Acts 1:11) and sink our toes into the mud. With nods to Aristotle and contemporary neuroscience and cognitive science, Smith asserts that “our primary orientation to the world is visceral, not cerebral,”<sup>6</sup> that instead of being mainly theory-driven at the cognitive level, we are more fundamentally desire-driven at the precognitive, (pretheoretical, prereflective) level of the imagination. As he summarizes,

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<sup>3</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*, Cultural Liturgies, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 24.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 60.

The most basic way that we intend the world is on the affective order of love. This love constitutes our fundamental and governing orientation to the world. As such, our love is always ultimately aimed at a *telos*, a picture of the good life that pulls us toward it, thus shaping our actions and behavior. This orientation is something that comes before thinking; thus we've described it as precognitive. It is more at work at the level of the adaptive unconscious or the "social imaginary." Our love is aimed from the fulcrum of our desire—the habits that constitute our character, or core identity. And the way our love or desire gets aimed in specific directions is through practices that shape, mold, and direct our love.<sup>7</sup>

This deserves a careful explication. Let us look at the key phrases.

*Intend the world.* We are intentional creatures, i.e., "our being-in-the-world is always characterized by a dynamic, 'ek-static' orientation that 'intends' the world or 'aims at' the world as an object of consciousness."<sup>8</sup> Smith credits Heidegger for shifting "the center of gravity of the human person from the cognitive to the noncognitive....[so] we might say that I don't *think* my way through the world, I *feel* my way around it."<sup>9</sup>

*Affective order of love.* Smith then turns to Augustine to "argue that the most fundamental way we intend the world is *love*."<sup>10</sup> We feel our way around the world by a "kind of primal, ultimate love"; "it is what we love that defines who we are."<sup>11</sup> This is why Smith calls us "desiring animals" (again, "animals" because it emphasizes our embodied, visceral, prereflective selves).  
*Amo ut intelligam.*

*Aimed at a telos.* We intend the world by aiming our love (desire) at a "picture of what we think human flourishing looks like,"<sup>12</sup> a picture that captures our imaginations and draws us

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 49-50; emphasis in original.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 50; emphasis in original.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 52.

toward it, a vision or quest for what the Scriptures call the kingdom of God, hence the title of Smith's book, *Desiring the Kingdom*.

*Social imaginary.* “A social imaginary is not how we think about the world, but how we *imagine* the world before we ever think about it; hence the social imaginary is made up of the stuff that funds the imagination—stories, myths, pictures, narratives.”<sup>13</sup> Smith suggests we (temporarily) set aside worldview-talk with its theoretical (propositional, paradigmatic) terms and, instead, focus on the communal and traditioned stories that shape our imaginations. *Imaginary* precedes *theory*.

*Fulcrum...habits.* Our habits (dispositions, precognitive tendencies) are like a fulcrum because it is here, shaped by our social imaginary, that our actions (including the act of analytical thinking) of desire (love) erupt toward a *telos* (the good life). We are desiring animals, but our desires are aimed by our habits. Of course, our habits often aim us in different (even antithetical) directions. An important part of spiritual growth and healing is moving from hypocrisy to shalom.

*Practices that shape, mold, and direct.* Some of our habits are default, i.e., we come “preprogrammed” with different personalities, tolerances, etc., but both ancient wisdom and modern science tell us that even those defaults are slightly mutable with enough effort. Of greater interest to Smith are the “bodily practices, routines, or rituals that grab hold of our hearts through our imagination, which is closely linked to our bodily senses.”<sup>14</sup> We forget our animal bodiliness to our ruin. As Smith is zealous to point out, Christian worldview education is largely ineffective against, and losing ground to, the body/heart/imagination/habit-shaping social

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 66. Smith borrows this curious term from Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> Smith, *Desiring*, 63.

imaginaries of capitalism/consumerism/materialism, rationalism/cognitivism, scientism/technicism, hedonism (entertainment addiction), nationalism/militarism, etc. Perhaps saddest of all is when our Christian schools mimic the nonchristian social imaginaries of American culture.

To be blunt, our Christian colleges and universities generate an army of alumni who look pretty much like all the rest of their suburban neighbors, except that our graduates drive their SUVs, inhabit their executive homes, and pursue the frenetic life of the middle class and the corporate ladder “from a Christian perspective.”<sup>15</sup>

We need practices (rituals, liturgies)<sup>16</sup> that cut deeper than idea-centric (worldview) or belief-centric (confessional) approaches to understanding our world, and simultaneously, challenge the nonchristian elements of American culture on their own turf.

To sum, Smith’s anthropology is holistic, bodily, and precognitively rooted in the social imaginary of the heart (*kardia*, guts) which aims our desires—via our actions (including thinking)—toward our vision of human flourishing (the good life, the kingdom). The habits of the heart are formed by the practices (rituals, liturgies) in which we allow ourselves to be immersed. If the social imaginary and heart-habits are interior, and the practices and *teloi* are exterior, then the exterior elements, as indicative of the interior elements, are the things we can observe, analyze and evaluate (according to our own social imaginary and heart-habits which, in turn form our articulated beliefs, worldview, and methods of analysis and evaluation). That being said, I propose a method of analysis and evaluation based on Smith’s cultural exegesis (substituting a medieval to Puritan “thinker” for his “university”):

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>16</sup> Smith broadens the use of the term “liturgy” to include all rituals, routines, or practices of ultimate concern (ibid., 87). This has the problem of conflating the pistic, ethical, and psychic aspects of reality under the umbrella of love (desire). Indeed, his solution to our compromised Christian colleges is to make them “ecclesial” colleges, i.e., an “extension of the mission of the church” (ibid., 220). Is this not playing dangerously close to a breach of sphere sovereignty? Nonetheless, I find his critique of and alternative to worldview-thinking worthy of application in this paper.

there are two sets of questions that we can bring to the [thinker]: (1) what *telos* does [s/he] “glorify”? What way of life or vision of the good life does [s/he] foster? What does the [thinker] want us to love? (2) What are the rituals and practices that constitute the... liturgy of the [thinker]? The first set of questions concerns just what it is that the [thinker] loves; the second set concerns just how the [thinker] tries to make us the kind of people who love the same thing. The way to the first question is through the second: by reading the ritual practices that animate the [thinker], we’ll begin to discern what it is that the [thinker] worships, to what [s/he] ascribes worth.<sup>17</sup>

The topic herein is medieval to Puritan thought in theology and life. There is no thought or theology without theologian-thinkers, no thinker without his or her social imaginary, and no social imaginary without a multidimensional social milieu. And so we turn to medieval times with an eye toward the *teloi* and practices of the Christians of that era.

## Medieval Theology and Life

Dooyeweerd characterizes the central dynamic force of cultural development in medieval society with the dialectical “ground-motive” of nature and grace.<sup>18</sup> For him, all of western history can be captured in the tension between higher and lower realms of reality: for the ancient Greeks, form v. matter; for medieval Scholasticism, grace v. nature; for modern Humanism, freedom v. nature.<sup>19</sup> The only exception is the Augustinian-Reformed interpretation of Scripture as a creation, fall, and redemption metanarrative. I have two concerns regarding this cultural exegesis. First, it may be helpful as a quick sketch of western culture, but it is ultimately a presocratic reduction, reducing all of reality to mutability (matter/nature) and immutability (form/grace/freedom). Second, comparing the Christian metanarrative creation-fall-redemption to the three

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>18</sup> Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options*, trans. John Kraay, ed. Mark Vander Vennen and Bernard Zylstra, newly ed. D. F. M. Strauss (1979; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Paideia Press, 2012), 77.

<sup>19</sup> Herman Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought* (Nutley, NJ: The Craig Press, 1968), ch. 2.



ontological dichotomies (form/matter, grace/nature, and freedom/nature) can end up being a categorical error. In truth, regardless of creation's history (fall) or destiny (redemption), Christian theology has historically and predominately viewed the ontology of creation itself in the same terms as the surrounding ("secular") culture. For instance, the earliest creeds are more about higher, supernatural reality (an ontotheology) than the lower, natural world; Luther's humanism interprets God's grace as transformative of our fallen nature to a freedom of the will (i.e., from grace/nature to freedom/nature); and contemporary Evangelicalism is, for the most part, as heaven-seeking and nature-denigrating as the early neo-Platonic Christians (cf. the aforementioned quote about SUV-driving graduates from Christian colleges). Of course, another way to make use of the creation-fall-redemption model is to express it in terms of an ontological change, i.e., from fallen creation to redeemed creation, but this is still a lower/higher designation. These are some of the philosophical tensions over Christianity's two-thousand year history that provide the backdrop for our more limited study.

Dirk Vollenhoven offers another perspective. As summarized by Michael H. Goheen and Craig G. Bartholomew, "The medieval period...was characterized by a compromise, fusion or amalgamation of the two comprehensive worldviews,"<sup>20</sup> i.e. Christianity and Greco-Roman paganism. The man who, more than any other, set the trajectory for medieval thought in theology and life was Augustine of Hippo. Vollenhoven names this period "synthesis" and Augustine embodied it: "prior to [Augustine's] conversion he had been a neo-Platonic philosopher, and he was converted under the influence of the neo-Platonic bishop Ambrose."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Michael W. Goheen and Craig G. Bartholomew, *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 71.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

The “vertical and world-denying element”<sup>22</sup> of this synthesis was later modified by Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century. Bringing the recently rediscovered Aristotle into his broader synthesis, Aquinas “affirmed the goodness of our present world, of the body, of social and cultural life, and of empirical reason as they had rarely been affirmed in preceding centuries. Nevertheless, he subordinated them to the soul, the church, faith,...and theology.”<sup>23</sup> Goheen and Bartholomew call this a “finely tuned synthesis,” but it was also fragile. As they point out, following immediately on Aquinas’s heels John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham were witness to the first cracks in Aquinas’s edifice.

Before we get ahead of ourselves, let us visit a couple of earlier medieval luminaries beginning with Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1197). In 2012, Pope Benedict XVI named her a Doctor of the Church, a distinction shared with Thomas Aquinas. Preceding Aquinas by more than a century, she provides a glimpse at a much different teaching. Whereas he was a well-educated man, she was barely literate; his writings reflect the philosophical currents of his day; she developed her theology from visions. Hildegard reflects a time when people lived closer to the earth. Her voluminous writings include books on “the scientific and medicinal properties of various plants, stones, fish, reptiles, and animals.”<sup>24</sup> One of her books is noted for its “constant interplay of the human person as microcosm both physically and spiritually with the macrocosm of the universe”; in other words, all of creation is interrelated (presaging Aquinas’s use of Aristotle?). Of course, as a woman of her time, she also used the “sciences” of a lunar horoscope and the four elements (air, fire, water, and earth), which merely places her in the long line

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>24</sup> “Hildegard of Bingen,” *Wikipedia*, last modified August 12, 2014, accessed August 14, 2014, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hildegard\\_of\\_Bingen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hildegard_of_Bingen). All quotes in this paragraph are from this source.

(preceding Christianity) of earth-based healers (shamans, witches, etc.). Even this briefest introductions to this remarkable woman is enough to see an earthy Christianity and a respect for intuitional knowing. Her life and writings embody a desire for a simple and virtuous life *coram Deo*. Her many musical compositions include “soaring melodies, often well outside of the normal range of chant at the time,” which I would interpret to be more emotive, more celebrative of creatureliness. Finally, one scholar refers to Hildegard’s frequent use of *viriditas* (“greenness”) —“an earthly expression of the heavenly in an integrity that overcomes dualisms”<sup>25</sup>—in her works. Considering that the medieval world was, according to both Dooyeweerd and Vollenhoven, bathed in dualism, this is a stunning divergence, one worthy of further exploration in another setting.

Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) is known for his love of nature but I doubt he was considering the nonduality of Hildegard’s *viriditas*. For him, Brother Sun and Sister Moon were, like the birds he preached to, fellow creatures that praised God through their splendor. As biographer Donald Spoto writes, “Francis is no nature mystic, no philosophical transcendentalist, no romantic, pantheistic poet. Everything reminds him of Beauty itself.”<sup>26</sup> Francis may have had a soft spot for the natural world but that is only because he had utterly forsaken the cultural world of medieval Italy. A former carousing dandy enamored by the picture of (Arthurian?) chivalry, he found himself at the end of his rope, in a deep depression, when a series of mystical experiences “lifted [him] out of the prison of self.”<sup>27</sup> From then on, the term *imitatio Christi* really belongs to him. Wealth, fame, and power meant nothing to him. His *raison d’être* seemed to be to minister to

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid. Referencing Shawn Madigan, *Mystics, Visionaries and Prophets: A Historical Anthropology of Women’s Spiritual Writings* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1998), 95.

<sup>26</sup> Donald Spoto, *Reluctant Saint: The Life of Francis of Assisi* (New York: Penguin Compass, 2002), 203.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 46.

outcasts (poor, mentally and physically ill, criminals, et al.)—a chivalrous cause—providing them their basic needs, including a caring community. He was more interested in living a Christlike life than studying about it or writing theology, and more comfortable with an egalitarian sharing of responsibilities than being an authoritative leader. Unfortunately, without returning to hunting and gathering, this meant his growing community was both dependent on the gifts (of land, food, and patience) of the surrounding community, and, to prevent utter disarray, the oversight of the pope. Francis's *telos*, his vision of the good life, was beautiful but naive, and it did not—could not—last. Ultimately, as the community grew, it marginalized him and evolved into yet another medieval monastic movement—for both good and ill. Francis was no philosophical dualist, but his life belies the fact that as much as he loved creation, he had no time for culture, especially its decadence, and felt that life should be a compassionate (suffering-with) embrace of all of God's creatures until we meet again in paradise. Spoto concludes, "Like Jesus, Francis had been a seeker in the world. He had not fled to the desert or a monastery but rather believed that God could be found in the crowd."<sup>28</sup>

Meister Eckhart (AKA Johannes Eckhart von Hochheim, OP; c. 1260-c. 1327) followed Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) by a generation or so, and, though both are linked to medieval scholasticism, they make for an interesting comparison. Eckhart is usually remembered for his mystical and heretical ideas, but unlike most unlettered mystics, he was a trained theologian, philosopher, and held supervisory positions over regions of monasteries and convents. He also followed Aquinas's footsteps in a prestigious lectureship in Paris. Whereas both Aquinas and Eckhart embodied the dualist outlook of the day, Aquinas pictured a distinctly two-tiered reality (supernature over nature) and Eckhart felt we could dissolve the duality into a mystical union

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 210.

with God.<sup>29</sup> Aquinas's onto(theo)logy is dichotomous, Eckhart's is ultimately monist, and Hildegard's might be called nondual. Aquinas is considered orthodox (if neoplatonic), Eckhart heretical (yet recanted under duress), and Hildegard borderline (yet gaining in acceptance).

As we draw close to the Reformation, it is important to stay focused on the rituals and *teloi* that are being passed forward in the name of Jesus, lest we become so bedazzled by the theoretics of theology that we lose sight of the radical possibilities of (earthly and earthy) kingdom living. To my mind, Hildegard is nearly unrivaled in her inspirational poetics of a Christian life. She offers a full-bodied and imaginative engagement with nature, neighbor, and God. Francis's original vision of an egalitarian community was Jesus-like in its boldness; it is a terrible shame that his dream did not last as long as his short lifetime. Eckhart's unorthodox musings were a valuable antidote to the close-minded control of scholastic theology; his liberating ideas could have had far-reaching (ecumenical) effects, but he eventually gave in to the pressures of the establishment. And Aquinas represents—even defines—the establishment. Jesus' life was about open arms; the church has too often been about closed minds.

The open arms are exemplified by the Lollards, a loose collection of differently-living and -thinking Christians with “no central belief system and no official doctrine.”<sup>30</sup> Feeling the centralized (Roman Catholic) church was corrupt in a number of ways (e.g., spending money on church decor instead of helping the poor), they nailed their Twelve Conclusions to the doors of Westminster Hall in 1395. Thanks in part to the work of John Wycliffe (1328?-1384), they had a vernacular (English) Bible and developed their life practices (rituals) and kingdom vision (*telos*)

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<sup>29</sup> “Meister Eckhart,” *Wikipedia*, last modified May 5, 2014, accessed May 6, 2014, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johannes\\_Eckhart](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johannes_Eckhart).

<sup>30</sup> “Lollardy,” *Wikipedia*, last modified October 20, 2014, accessed November 1, 2014, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lollardy>.

straight from Scripture rather than mediated by church doctrine. One of their Conclusions was that “the Sacrament of the Eucharist is a contradictory topic that is not clearly defined in the Bible”<sup>31</sup>—I could not agree more, and yet much blood was still to be shed over this contentious subject. They also questioned clerical celibacy, confessions to a priest, and capital punishment (for good practical reason since they were considered heretics). They proposed the priesthood of all believers and an early version of the separation of church and state. Of course, as is often the case with such free-thinking and radical Jesus-like/Francis-like communities, the establishment labeled them a heresy and sought to stamp them out.

## **Reformation Theology and Life**

It was difficult growing up in a Reformed community and going to a Reformed college not to feel that our studies of John Calvin were a kind of theological paparazzi event. Who was this towering intellect who single-handedly turned Martin Luther’s little rebellion into a theological battering ram that brought Rome to its knees and yet remains woefully under appreciated to this day? I fear that Calvin himself would blush at the things done in his name these past five hundred years. Nevertheless, due to circumstances far beyond his control, he, like Luther shortly before him, became the point man when the tempest of humanism and its political and economic progeny shattered the dreams of a unified (catholic) power center of Christianity. God won't have it. Had the church learned nothing from the Tower of Babel? Jesus wouldn't stand for it either. He left the whole unifying thing to his father in heaven. Jesus had far more pressing issues to attend to—such as looking into the eyes of the next marginalized person and assuring her that she was loved, that she was valuable. Jerusalem was all about unifying the people of God

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

(and keeping God in a a box). Jesus had other ideas, like chatting openly with a Samaritan woman in full daylight. With these down-to-earth practices and this *telos* of Jesus (and Hildegard and Francis) in mind, let us turn to the reformers.

Martin Luther (1483-1546) was obviously a brilliant and troubled man. He was verbose, prolific, and left plenty of stories in his wake. We know that he was “constantly beset by internal struggles, doubts, and depressions.”<sup>32</sup> We also know that he had the courage to look the most powerful man in the western world—Charles V—in the face and tell him what he did not want to hear; namely, that Christendom was about to shatter into innumerable pieces. Of course, neither man could have anticipated that, but, if Charles was learned, he should have seen the portents and guessed at the outcome. Either way, the “wild boar” (Pope Leo X’s epithet for Luther) was not the man to relinquish his conscience under pressure. What did he care about a possible death sentence? He had already died to self long ago. I emphasize Luther’s personality—depression, courage, etc.—because it was this flesh-and-blood person, probably smelling of sweat, who stood in that glittering, fragrant hall in Worms, who, by force of circumstances, became the figure to embody the sweeping changes of western history. Yes, God’s Holy Wind swept through that hall, too, and we can only imagine the strength it gave to Luther’s resolve. But Luther was no puppet. He was free—freer than he had ever been before—to speak truth to power.

We don’t need to look far for Luther’s rituals and guess at his *telos*. His entire life was a drama of release, of an inadequateness (sinfulness) that—no matter how hard he tried, he could not (literally) beat it out of himself—was suddenly taken from him and borne by Jesus on the

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<sup>32</sup> Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 156.

cross. Luther's theology of the cross is a theology of release, and the exhilaration of that sudden weightlessness drove his furious preaching of the best news he had ever heard/read/understood. This was proof positive that words have power (cf. Hebrew *dabar*). This is, in my mind, Luther's finest legacy: polishing the lens of Scripture (to borrow Calvin's metaphor), a lens that had become terribly opaque over the centuries, so that the powerful words of truth could be read/heard, penetrate our false selves and release/free our true, child-of-God selves. Francis intuited this without much Bible study. The Lollards—thanks to new vernacular translations—encountered the Word for the first time in generations. Luther had the gall to confront the emperor and his guilded advisors and say, "If I'm wrong, show me in the Scriptures and I'll recant." Mark A. Noll writes, "Luther...intimated a whole new sense of the self against what Charles and his allies regarded as the settled wisdom of the ages. The authority of the individual conscience had been proclaimed over against the authority of the church councils, in contradiction to the weight of tradition, and in the very face of the emperor himself."<sup>33</sup>

None of this is to suggest that Luther was a saint, a label he would have rejected outright. His harsh denunciations of the Jews were, regardless of his reasoning, despicable. "In extreme language Luther called upon the rulers of Germany to drive the Jews out of their lands, take most of their wealth, and forbid their rabbis to teach." Noll continues, "the sinfully violent way in which he published his arguments cast one of the seeds into the ground that has been bearing much bitter fruit ever since."<sup>34</sup> The "wild boar" crossed words with many an opponent, including the older Erasmus of Rotterdam (c. 1469-1536). Erasmus, known for his work with the Greek New Testament, had decided to stay in the Mother Church, but this did not stop him from being

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 157.



critical of corruption. Whereas Luther used barbed polemics to communicate his concerns, Erasmus used satire. Upon the death of Pope Julius II in 1513, Erasmus wrote a dialogue called “Julius Exclusus” in which Julius approaches the gates of heaven but cannot get in; he’s got the wrong key.

Julius: Can’t you see this key, the triple crown, and the pallium sparkling with gems?

Peter: It doesn’t look like the key Christ gave me.<sup>35</sup>

Erasmus’s most popular work was his *The Praise of Folly*. “It was above all [its]...humor and guileless satire...that endeared him to all Europe of his day.”<sup>36</sup> According to John P. Dolan, many people, including scholars, have made the mistake of judging Erasmus solely by his humor, concluding he was a theological lightweight. Next to the “incendiary character of Luther’s convictions,”<sup>37</sup> Erasmus might appear weak, but Erasmus was cut from a different cloth. “[I]n view of the violent and abusive character of contemporary polemics, both Catholic and Protestant, one must admit that Erasmus was one of the few men of his time to guard the purity of the Christian ideal of charity.”<sup>38</sup> He felt that dialectic had “subverted theology to a ludicrous and profitless concatenation of quarrels...[as well as] lead[ing] men to an obstinate pertinacity in their own opinions [which was] dangerous to the peace and unity of the Church.”<sup>39</sup> According to Dolan, Erasmus’s *telos* was to attempt “to unite nature and grace” by leading his readers “to the true notion of Wisdom, to God Himself”; “[f]or Erasmus as for many of the Renaissance philosophers theology is not a *scientia* but rather a *sapientia*, not a systematic body of certain

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 179.

<sup>36</sup> Erasmus, *The Essential Erasmus*, trans. John P. Dolan (New York: Mentor-Omega Books, 1964), 96.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 13.

knowledge but a holy rhetoric in humble service of the sacred text of God’s revelation.”<sup>40</sup> Dolan makes the curious remark, “wisdom is itself a kind of madness.”<sup>41</sup> I interpret this to mean that those who truly follow Jesus’ radical path (cf. Francis) will find themselves very out of step with the world around them—a world that may very well judge them as insane and/or criminal and punish them accordingly. At first blush, and without taking the time for a more complete study, I find Erasmus’s sapiential practices and unifying *telos* to be easier on the heart than either Luther’s or Calvin’s “incendiary” writings.<sup>42</sup>

## **Puritan (and Early Evangelical) Theology and Life**

Post-Reformation church history is a mess. Any attempt to categorize it cleanly will inevitably fall short due to changing terms and theological cross-fertilization. Take Puritanism, Methodism, and evangelicalism, for instance. The Puritans were sixteenth- and seventeenth-century reformers of the Church of England, the Methodists grew out of the Wesley brothers’ reforms of the Church of England in the eighteenth century, and evangelicals are, well, any number of Christians from at least the time of the Protestant Reformation to the present who emphasize personal conversion and holy living.<sup>43</sup> All three draw élan from the Protestant Reformation, from Luther’s verve and Calvin’s perspicacity. For many people in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, wresting power from Rome was not enough. The Protestant (Puritan, evangelical)<sup>44</sup> legacy has been one of

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 95, 97.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>42</sup> I addressed my concerns with John Calvin’s barbed rhetoric in my paper, “A Reading Journal: 23 Days with John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*,” Edinburg Theological Seminary, Spring 2014.

<sup>43</sup> Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 15.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 17.

comparing all ecclesial elements to Scripture to see how they stand. The proliferation of Protestant denominations (sects) is a testament to different communities and generations feeling free enough from a central authority or tradition to go their own way. It is the blessing (freedom of conscience) and curse (lack of unity) of humanism. In this section we will draw on Mark A. Noll's *The Rise of Evangelicalism* to trace that movement through the eighteenth century and Dane C. Ortlund's *Edwards on the Christian Life* to become better acquainted with this giant of Reformed thinking.

“Evangelicalism in its origins,” Noll writes, “was overwhelmingly a movement of spiritual renewal.... [I]t was a pietistic movement in which the relationship of the self to God eclipsed all other concerns.”<sup>45</sup> This is not to say that it encouraged a kind of holy narcissism. On the contrary, “Ministry to convicts, care for orphans, the provision of schooling for the unattended poor, sharp-eyed commentary about the exercise of political or economic power, and even protests against slavery were thus all a natural and early part of evangelical attention to the world.”<sup>46</sup> Of course, these constructive elements were not universally present in every individual or community. For example, for all of his popularity and success, the itinerant preacher George Whitefield, “who preached so willingly to slaves, hardly gave a thought when he became a slaveowner himself.... [W]hile his character and purpose possessed great integrity, there was no consistency to his broader actions, no depth to his thinking about culture.”<sup>47</sup> William Wilberforce represents the other end of the spectrum with a life of patient work toward “eradicating first the slave trade and then slavery itself.”<sup>48</sup> Nonetheless, “the vision that drove Wilberforce and his

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 250.

associates to heroic lengths on behalf of the enslaved failed to grasp the degradation that was descending on Britain's own laboring poor"; "in other words, evangelicalism transformed people within their inherited social setting, but worked only partial and selective transformation on the social settings themselves."<sup>49</sup>

The more important transformation for Puritanism, Pietism, and evangelicalism was "that God could actually, actively and almost tangibly transform repentant sinners who put their trust in him."<sup>50</sup> Calvinists and Arminians would argue about whether the initiative lies with God or man, Puritans became known for their strict moral code, but most all of these Bible-based (as opposed to tradition-based) movements found their *telos*—and accompanying rituals/practices (such as tent revivals)—in the preaching of the Word leading to personal conversions or "saving souls." They were more interested in being a movement of preachers/missionaries—everyone "preaching" to neighbors and coworkers—than sitting under the (Anglican or Catholic) mediation of a priest who was, in their minds, simply going through the motions. Services and sacraments were greatly simplified in order to put the emphasis on the preaching of the Word and the response of the individual listeners. Hymns (thanks to Charles Wesley et al.) smoothed over theological differences and "featured the need of sinners for Christ the Savior, the love of God in Christ, the redeeming power of Christ, the refuge and healing found in Christ, the joy of redemption in Christ and the hope of eternal life in Christ."<sup>51</sup> The simplifying and assuaging forces within parts of evangelicalism, as well as the exterior battles with the secularizing force of the Enlightenment, led most evangelical leaders to eschew academic pursuits and even avoid an analytical engagement with historical theology altogether. This led to an anti-intellectual

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 274.

reputation: “evangelicalism did not fashion worldviews, push toward fundamental intellectual insight or show great understanding of the structures of British or North American life.”<sup>52</sup> The great exception to this was the “late Puritan”<sup>53</sup> Jonathan Edwards.

As Noll points out, “It remains an oddity that the greatest intellectual in the whole history of evangelicalism was also its first great intellectual.”<sup>54</sup> In other words, even though it took nearly two centuries (after Luther and Calvin) for these reform movements to produce a mind like Edwards, they also produced none like him for almost another two centuries (until, perhaps, J. Gresham Machen). It seems the Enlightenment proved to be an ample competitor for public discourse, scattering evangelicals in two directions. The vast majority went toward pietism, “in which the relationship of the self to God eclipsed all other concerns.”<sup>55</sup> A tiny minority, represented well by Edwards, coopted the burgeoning rationalistic zeitgeist for the purposes of “construct[ing] his era’s most thorough reformulation of Calvinist theology.”<sup>56</sup> As Noll describes, Edwards read thinkers like John Locke (epistemology), Isaac Newton (science), and Francis Hutcheson (ethics) with appreciation for their erudition.<sup>57</sup>

Ortlund presents an Edwards whose definition of the Christian life “is to enjoy and reflect the beauty of God.”<sup>58</sup> Beauty, says Ortlund, is the organizing theme of Edwards’s theology, but not natural beauty, for “all beauty perceived in the creation is simply the reflection of God

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>53</sup> Dane C. Ortlund, *Edwards on the Christian Life: Alive to the Beauty of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 107, 193. Ortlund calls Edwards a late Puritan “even though his birth in 1703 came two generations after the age of the Puritans (1560-1660)” (193).

<sup>54</sup> Noll, *Rise*, 256.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ortlund, *Edwards*, 16.

himself.”<sup>59</sup> Beauty is found in holiness, which is, in turn, the umbrella term for all virtues (love, joy, peace, etc.). A Christian life full of virtue is a holy life, a sanctified life, a beautiful life inasmuch as we reflect God’s beauty. That reflection is the very reason for our being.<sup>60</sup> Ortlund describes Edwards’s idea of sin as “false beauty. It is ugliness masquerading as loveliness.” Like the siren’s song in Homer’s *Odyssey*, “It is an enchanting song that kills.”<sup>61</sup> Jesus Christ, on the other hand, is the manifestation of the loveliness of God,<sup>62</sup> and we behold that loveliness now only through the brokenness of creation. We experience love, but not without heartbreak; joy, but not without tears; peace, but not without bloodshed. Ortlund draws on C. S. Lewis to explain Edwards’s belief “that joy in this world is experienced largely as yearnings,” and punctuates it with J. R. R. Tolkien’s neologism, *eucatastrophe* (good catastrophe), i.e., the joy of a happy ending, when disaster turns to good fortune (blessing!) and brings tears to the eyes.<sup>63</sup> Of course, as Tolkien says, the greatest Story “does not deny the existence of...sorrow and failure; the possibility of these is necessary to the joy of deliverance; it denies...universal final defeat.”<sup>64</sup> This, he says, is the *Evangelium*. For Edwards, the evangelium, Scripture, is “pure and perfect,”<sup>65</sup> and faithful preaching is the “voice of God to his people.”<sup>66</sup> Ortlund concludes his book with several criticisms of Edwards, one of which questions Edwards’s emphasis on “the spiritual world to the

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>64</sup> J. R. R. Tolkien, “On Fairy-Stories” in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays*, ed., Christopher Tolkien (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 153. He continues, “The Birth of Christ is the eucatastrophe of Man’s history. The Resurrection is the eucatastrophe of the story of the Incarnation” (156).

<sup>65</sup> Ortlund, *Edwards*, 105. Quoting Edwards.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 108.

neglect of the material world.”<sup>67</sup> This might lead to a false asceticism. Better, says Ortlund, is the Dutch Reformed tradition’s stress on the restoration of creation. He concludes, “Final redemption will not eradicate our need for a body; final redemption will restore our bodies right along with our souls, all in a restored planet earth.”<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusion

Ortlund’s critique is poignant to the entire discussion of medieval to Puritan thought in theology and life, a topic that emphasizes the cognitive (thought and theology) over the holistic (life). It is asceticism, that draw to the other-worldly, the platonic, the solely cognitive, that we must resist if we are to be any earthly good. James K. A. Smith joins Ortlund in affirming that “it is one of the hallmarks of the Reformed tradition that it has a long history of encouraging curiosity about creation.”<sup>69</sup> And yet I must ask in light of the history covered in this essay: “long history”? As a product of Dutch Reformed churches, grade schools, college, and graduate studies, my impression is that Calvin did much to bring Christianity back down to earth (celebrating creation), but then, upon his death, Theodore Beza et al. merely turned Calvinism into an abstruse exercise (Edwards notwithstanding) until Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper more than three centuries later. It is the black hole of Christianity’s biblical engagement with culture and creation. “Biblical” is key here because the Reformed hermeneutic is based on the creation-fall-redemption covenantal metanarrative and not the “Christian” assimilation of humanism’s individualism (pietism) or rationalism (scientism, e.g., higher-critical hermeneutics).

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>69</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Letters to a Young Calvinist: An Invitation to the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2010), 3.

As Smith describes, “Calvinism is world-affirming in the sense that it is world-formative—or better, world *re*formative—laboring to undo the curse and foster *shalom*, which is not a matter of getting to heaven, but seeing heaven on earth.”<sup>70</sup>

So is the medieval to Puritan period of church history merely a black hole? Of course not. Hildegard gave us a Christian life full of music and poetry and theology; Francis modeled Christ’s ministry to the marginalized like few others and created a community of hope; Luther, the “wild boar,” gave us a theology of release—springing free from the unbearable weight of sin; Erasmus’s wit and humor reminds us to strive for unity; the Puritans offer a simple life of simple worship to keep us from being distracted from our true purpose; Wilberforce exemplifies a force for social change; and Edwards reminds us to reflect the beauty of God. The Enlightenment cast a shadow over it all—and continues to do so. As we discuss history, we bow to Progress when we trust that we can always make things better. As we discuss theology, we bow to rationalism when systematics usurps our practices and *telos*. As we turn to Christ, we bow to individualism when we reduce him to the one who “died for my sins.” What about expanding his influence to include “died because of our sociocultural sins,” i.e., the systemic injustices that destroy lives? Instead of just “my personal lord and savior,” how about the “lord” (leader, hero) against and “savior” (rescuer, healer) from our military- or entertainment- or consumer-industrial complexes? To substitute “Jesus” for “Caesar” in phrases like “Caesar is Lord” or “Caesar, Son of God” is counter-cultural in a way most Christians throughout history cannot imagine. To substitute Jesus’ simple life for our modern-day Caesar-equivalents—adulation toward the rich and famous (athletes, rock stars, CEOs), allegiance to name brands (clothing, cars, electronics), striving for immortality (youth culture, pharmaceuticals), etc.—seems insane, and indeed it is if we allow the

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 103-4.



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worst of human nature (greed, revenge) to define sanity. This is not a medieval to Puritan issue; this is an eternal issue of inspiring each generation to write songs like Hildegard, minister to the poor like Francis, speak truth to power like Luther, and use our minds to analyze like Edwards—all *solī Deo gloria*.

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