

CHRISTIAN SOCIAL THOUGHT

The Theological Origins of Liberalism

Ismail Kurun

Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2016 (254 pages)

Ismail Kurun’s recent work, *The Theological Origins of Liberalism*, is largely an investigation of the role Christian theology played in the development of political liberalism. His fundamental contention, contrary to notions that still linger in academic circles, is that liberalism, as well as the Enlightenment and modernity, are not sharp breaks from medieval scholastic thinking. He convincingly argues for these claims throughout the work. He also wishes to explain some of the long-standing philosophical critiques leveled at some of the key components of the Christianized liberalism that developed in the early Enlightenment. In response, he offers a broad-brushstroke suggestion of how we might better navigate—than we do today—our increasingly religiously pluralistic societies and respect the different religious positions and lifestyles while upholding equity, justice, and order. He calls this “legal pluralism.”

The outline and progression of the argument are straightforward. In the first chapter, Kurun briefly touches on the relationship between philosophy and theology, a leitmotif of the book. In so doing, he starts his case for the inseparability of politics and morality. He then shows, in the second chapter, how important elements in liberalism, such as individuality and equality, are readily found in the thought of Reformation-era Protestants. Continuing chronologically, he showcases, in the next chapter, how covenant theology in the post-Reformation era either introduced or paved the way for notions like federalism and social contract. Locke is then finally brought to the fore. Kurun attempts to demonstrate the influence that Christianity had in the development of Locke’s liberal political theory in the fourth and fifth chapters. These chapters are the most focused and detailed

of the book. In the final one he wrestles with what he thinks is a contradictory relationship between so-called natural-law and natural-rights traditions. He goes on to offer a potential solution to what he considers to be problems with modern versions of political liberalism: Kurun's legal-pluralistic version of the classical liberal political theory. (This, as he indicated in his introduction, is neither outlined in great detail nor applied in scenarios.) In Kurun's mind, while religion seems to have lost much of its influence in various disciplinary realms, it perhaps is still the primary basis for concernment with morality and, relatedly, politics.

Overall, the book is a very intriguing and worthwhile read for those who are interested in history, theology, ethics, and political science. Though never express, it does show the discontinuity between the desires of some to engage in merely secular discourses regarding their respective visions of a liberal political landscape and the markedly religious roots of liberal political theory. On a related note, his contention that an interconnection exists between politics and morality is well presented. And, although the book is technical, it is easy to follow. The flow of the book is largely chronological and clearly presents the intended narrative of the Christian roots of liberalism. The author has included summaries, reminders, and previews at strategic points in the work that guide the reader along.

The author's use of sources is noteworthy. On the one hand, he evidently does his best to interact with some of the important works from the various fields. This is especially commendable given the multidisciplinary nature of the book. On the other hand, the author too frequently quotes from or references these many sources, often in quick succession. Instead of substantially adding to the defense of his many key positions, the references often appear as arguments from authority that distract from the points he is making. Also due to the frequent referencing, some of the chapters can seem a bit like extended surveys of the literature. Moreover, it is not until the chapters focusing on Locke that there is serious and sustained commentary on primary sources. The author seems most at home in Locke, which is unsurprising based on his educational background.

The multidisciplinary dimension of this work is the most exciting aspect of it. Overall it is fairly well executed. There is a distinct difficulty in attempting a project like this. Each reader will likely have notable critiques in their respective areas of expertise. For instance, I thought his understanding of the Trinitarian debates of the early Enlightenment period were inaccurate in certain respects. But, in some such cases, his theological misunderstandings, like the aforementioned, were not essential to his overall argument. There were other issues that were more problematic. Perhaps the most substantial is his interpretation of Locke. Kurun attempts to build the case that Locke was concerned with citizens being theists as that should compel people to be concerned with morality. If there is a relational God, there is most likely an accessible, objective morality. This is an inadequate reading of Locke. In *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, Locke was mainly concerned with people's adherence to the Christian Bible. Scripture was, for Locke, the most expedient source of morality and one superior to those promoted by other religions and cultures. Locke was not a pluralist, though he does have a broader definition of what a Christian is than many traditional Protestant thinkers in his era might have liked. Kurun even has

some of the primary extended quotations from Locke's works to prove this in his book. In the end, he seems to make Locke's works into a wax nose, perhaps feeling somewhat justified by the abundance of scholars who find Locke's thoughts on reason and religion to be contradictory. This interpretation of Locke that runs counter to Kurun's does not, however, overturn his points that liberalism finds roots in Christianity and that we might consider legal pluralism as a way forward. In fact, I hope that we will see more from Kurun, especially works that fill out the skeletal structure of the legal pluralism with which he concludes his book. He seems to have a fine handle on the dangers of approaching religion, politics, and morality in a compartmentalized fashion. His book is refreshing.

—Jonathan S. Marko

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Engaging Globalization: The Poor, Christian Mission, and Our Hyperconnected World

Bryant L. Myers

Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017 (304 pages)

Bryant Myers has written, as the title suggests, an engaging book about globalization. Many titles have appeared promising a critical or constructive encounter between globalization and Christian theology or ethics. Unfortunately, few have delivered on the promise, tending to either concentrate on economics with a bit of broad theological rhetoric attached as an afterthought, or propounding a theological or moral critique that often displays little working knowledge of the markets undergirding contemporary globalization. In contrast *Engaging Globalization* weaves together a sophisticated and informed understanding of economics and missiology in a nearly seamless manner.

The primary thesis of the book is that the global markets, integrated economies, and migration patterns characterizing globalization have created a series of challenges and benefits. The challenges include economic disruption, political unrest, and environmental degradation. Yet globalization has also prompted great strides in poverty alleviation, technological innovation, education, and economic opportunity. From a macro perspective, the benefits of globalization outweigh its liabilities, and the problems it has created are not necessarily unsolvable. More importantly, globalization has helped create a world that in many respects is potentially more receptive to the gospel and offers new and welcomed opportunities for the church's mission.

Myers makes his arguments through a series of historical and thematic expositions. He traces the historical development of modern market-based economies, focusing particularly on previous eras of globalization. Unlike many other forms of economic exchange that are zero-sum based, markets emphasizing free trade tend to do a better job of alleviating poverty and creating wealth since all parties presumably benefit when engaging in production and consumption of goods and services through international trade. This is exemplified in the current phase of globalization in which nearly a billion people have