

Shaping a more honest Anabaptist political theology

A consideration of the work of A. James Reimer

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The political theology of Mennonite A. James Reimer is significant for those in the Anabaptist tradition and in the broader Christian community who give thought to how Anabaptists today can relate in an authentic and theologically informed way to the political-social contexts in which we find ourselves.

Jim Reimer's career spanned forty-five years. He served as a member of the faculty at Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo,

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Ontario, from 1978 until his retirement in 2008. He had many theological and academic interests, but political theology was a dominant area of research in the latter years of his career. Essential pieces of Reimer's scholarship have recently been published posthumously in *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology: Law, Order, and Civil Society*.¹

Reimer's contribution to political-theological discussion in the contemporary Anabaptist church is important and necessary: he had a clear commitment to Anabaptism while addressing what he perceived to be the tradition's lack of theological rationale for engagement in politics and providing an

account of the positive, purposeful place of the civic order and its institutions. He contended that Anabaptist thought about the political realm must move from a posture of suspicion to one of affirmation.

A quest for a more honest political theology

Of course, Reimer is not alone among Anabaptists in his view of the importance of the civic order. Ronald J. Sider writes, "Human experience proves that politics profoundly impacts billions of

people. Bad political choices lead to dictatorship, starvation, and death for hundreds of millions. Good political decisions nurture freedom, life, justice and peace. Politics matters.”² Reimer would certainly agree with Sider and other Anabaptists affirming the value of politics. For Reimer, political involvement is not only an important aspect of living out a faithful Christian witness; it is unavoidable. Reimer’s desire is to challenge the notion that a faithful church can somehow stand apart from engaging the civic order. “Those who deny the legitimacy of such engagement are being dishonest; they engage with every facet of their lives, whether consciously or not. In our daily lives, whether we like it or not, we are all deeply enmeshed in multiple layers of civil (cultural, economic, and political) society.”³

While there is little doubt that North American Anabaptists have become significantly involved directly and indirectly in the sociopolitical arena, Reimer contends that Anabaptists have not done the kind of theological work that would ground such activity. In particular, he calls for work that affirms the positive place

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of civic authority and encourages engagement in the legal-political-governmental apparatus. What is needed is “a more honest theology of law and civil institutions and their function in helping shape and preserve human and nonhuman life in a fallen world, as mandated by the Christian doctrines of creation, redemption, and reconciliation.”⁴ Since institutions within a civic order are ordained of God and necessary for the proper functioning of our common life, we should affirm them and approach them in a supportive manner.

But this contention may seem to be at variance with traditional Anabaptist theology, which largely ignores the civic order, its institutions, and their functioning, and does

not adequately address our necessary interaction with these institutions. For a large portion of the Anabaptist community, “the church is understood not in a universal, comprehensive sense, but as a small group of believers visibly gathered from out of the larger culture and society. In this view, how God governs

the world ‘outside the perfection’ of Christ remains largely unaddressed.”⁵ This gap in Anabaptist thought has created an ambivalence among many Anabaptists who believe that a primary focus of discipleship is being a faithful member of the church yet are aware that we function mostly within the context of broader society on a regular basis. Reimer argues:

*When social ethics are positioned exclusively within or derived from a discussion of the doctrine of the church, as found in most Mennonite confessions of faith and virtually all Mennonite theologizing, there is a problem: the true theological significance of “God-ordained” institutions throughout human history, by which God preserves the world from total chaos and disintegration, is not adequately understood or acknowledged.*⁶

Reimer points out the obvious: the church is not the sole context for faithful Christian service. In fact, Anabaptist Christians undertake many positive and God-honoring activities outside our life in the church. Reimer questions the stark duality expressed in what is known as the Schleithem confession, an articulation of Anabaptist principles endorsed by a group of early Anabaptist leaders meeting in 1527 in Schleithem, Switzerland. Reimer writes: “The distinction between those ‘inside the perfection of Christ’ and those ‘outside the perfection of Christ’ may be a helpful theological way of signaling where our ultimate allegiances lie, but when used to draw bold and rigid lines between church and world this duality obfuscates the concrete world in which our lives actually take place.”⁷

Embracing a common space

To resolve this gap in our theologizing and dispel the ambivalence resulting from it, Reimer seeks to shape a political theology that is more honest. Rather than view life within and beyond the church using the traditional lens of Schleithem, he introduces an alternative framework, distinguishing between our primary, particular, and communal home and our universal, global, and cosmic one.⁸ In offering this framework, he gives us a stance that embraces “common space”—the space within which we all live. This space can still be described as “the world,” but it can now be seen as a

setting where we pursue the common good—as part of the created order, where life is to flourish and good is to be preserved. As Anabaptists, we are able to accept this common—universal or global—home not as essentially evil and to be shunned but as a God-affirmed setting for our common life.

A comprehensive examination of Reimer’s political theology is beyond the scope of this article. Drawing primarily from his work published in *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology*, I will give attention to four main approaches Reimer employs, to four themes that surface in his development of Anabaptist political theology: an application of Trinitarian theology, a consideration of law, a broader use of scripture, and an openness to a more objective view of church history and its lessons.

A Trinitarian framework

A dominant theme in Reimer’s scholarship in general, including his work in political theology, is an application of a Trinitarian framework or hermeneutic. His commitment to the biblical text and classic Christian orthodoxy leads to a conviction that the doctrine of the Trinity is central for Christian faith and foundational for a Christian social ethic. This commitment to a robust Trinitarian theology leads Reimer to a key criticism of Schleitheim’s political-theological perspective: its simplistic duality, if taken to an extreme, is not consistent with nor does it adequately reflect Trinitarian belief. A closer examination of the three persons (Reimer uses the phrase “ways of being”) of the Trinity helps us develop a more nuanced understanding of how God relates to humankind and thus shape a more adequate comprehensive political theology.

The strong Christocentrism of Anabaptist tradition puts a heavy weight on the person and teaching of Jesus and can tend towards a “Jesu-monism.”⁹ If focus on Jesus is not placed within a robust Trinitarianism, our ability to understand all the ways God is at work in the world may be impaired, and with it our sense of how we might relate to our world. Reimer explains: “Good theology must have its own prior grounding in a certain view and experience of God—in Trinitarian monotheism. In short, behind a good social ethic is a good theology.”¹⁰ We cannot understand one person of the Trinity apart from the other persons and must

resist isolating one way of God's being in the world. Reimer's examination of patrology, Christology, and pneumatology provides important insights that affect the shaping of our political theology.

We encounter God as Father as the first person of the Trinity. In this way of being, God relates to the world as creator and sustainer or preserver of all that he has made. To speak of God as Father is to point to his providential relationship to humankind and broader creation. God as creator and sustainer transcends human understandings of good and evil—and every particular ethical system. The first person of the Trinity expresses divine judgment in our fallen world, and the biblical narrative reveals God using individuals and groups of people in various capacities to mediate both his punishment and his reward. A consideration of God as Father includes both the pursuit of the good and the need to address the existence of evil within civil society. Reimer contends that God cannot be confined to the human category of pacifism (or any other human-generated category, for that matter), as God *freely* acts to preserve and govern his creation. In this first way of being, God “tolerates no idolatry, sits in judgment on

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all human presumption . . . , is both lamb and lion, and remains mysteriously hidden (*Deus absconditus*) to us even in its revealedness in Christ.”¹¹

In his consideration of the second person of the Trinity, Reimer identifies the need to see in Christ both *Logos* and *Nomos*. In the Son, God is revealed as “the formative or structuring principle of creation”¹² who expresses *Logos*—wisdom, love, grace, reconciliation—and *Nomos*—law, form, and boundaries. Reimer's Christology engages the

role of structure, ordering, and law in society as reflected in the teaching that Jesus Christ came to bring fulfillment to the law.

The third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, “is immanent, personal, transformative, *life-giving power*.”¹³ It is through the power of the Spirit that we are able to live our lives in a world of ambiguity, brokenness, and sin. Reimer emphasizes that “God has created the world good, God has redeemed the world in Christ,

and God is reconciling the world to himself through the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴ This statement acknowledges that God’s work of reconciliation occurs in the world and not just in the church. Therefore, what is happening on the stage of cosmic and human history has meaning: God is at work in and through concrete societal and cultural realities. What are the sociopolitical implications of acknowledging that God works by his Spirit not only in the church (in the perfection of Christ) but also beyond it? We can’t simply dismiss the social order and focus exclusively on the church or on its history. If we do so, we miss seeing God at work in a broader realm.

The role of law

A second theme that Reimer develops in his political theology is an understanding of law. “The question of law, and particularly natural law, is critical for any full-fledged social-critical theory. If one is intent on exploring the possibility of developing a systematic social-political theory from an Anabaptist Free Church perspective, some consideration of how law is to be understood is indispensable.”¹⁵ Law is an essential component of the preservation and enjoyment of life in society. Reimer incorporates at least two main building blocks in this consideration of law: the existence of a form of natural law as an ordering of creation, and Jesus as the fulfillment of the law.

Reimer contends that a positive role for civic authority and institutions, including the legal framework, can be embedded in a sense of the ordering of creation or natural law. “Law is an essential part of this divine ‘yes’ to the world in both its prelapsarian (before the fall) and postlapsarian (after the fall) state.”¹⁶ Reimer builds his case by drawing heavily on Karl Barth’s discussion of creation. “The creation sequence is but an account of how God progressively separates, divides, and creates boundaries (what I call here Law) against the threat of the chaotic realm so as to make life possible and to provide the stage on which the theatre of the covenant of grace can take place.”¹⁷ Laws can be viewed as provisional forms by which God’s grace is structured, enabling our common life to be preserved and to flourish. This consideration of creation and its continuous, dynamic ordering is key to a Trinitarian natural theology.

Natural theology also points to universal principles or laws that can be known and applied to the pursuit of the common good. But Reimer makes a critical distinction in his discussion of universal principles: “They are always mediated through particular communities, frequently religious ones. While there is no neutral vantage point through which universal moral and ethical principles can be mediated—the universal is always mediated through the particular—nevertheless, there are universals that can be translated into public law and civil institutions.”¹⁸ Close study of Jewish-Christian tradition (as well as other faith traditions) gives us insight into moral principles or themes that have shaped the broader legal framework in a positive way.

Reimer’s consideration of law also includes a Christological component: Jesus came not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. The Jewish view of law did not contain a false dichotomy between the religious and the civil. Hence the fulfillment that Jesus provides must somehow reckon with both, whereas the usual focus within Anabaptist circles has been almost exclusively on the religious or spiritual aspect of the law. Reimer’s work identifies these questions that must be examined: What does it mean to consider Jesus as

Nomos? What role does civil law play? What role has Christianity played in the development of Western legal tradition?

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A broader engagement with scripture

A third theme in Reimer’s project is exegetical: he insists that a broader engagement with scripture—both Old Testament and New Testament—is required in shaping an Anabaptist political theology. This emphasis not only underscores his commitment to the classic Christian theological tradition; it gives

broader shape to an Anabaptist political theology. A critique that Reimer levels at traditional Anabaptist social ethics is the nearly singular focus on the Sermon on the Mount. “The Sermon on the Mount in itself can simply not bear the freight that it is asked to bear. It does not give sufficient advice for family, vocational, and social life. We need the whole Bible as a guide for Christian life—a theology of the whole Bible.”¹⁹ To focus so exclusively on the

Sermon on the Mount, at the expense of the whole of scripture, is to “make it into a hermeneutical key with which to understand everything—the whole Bible, the whole of God’s relation to the world—[and] is to make ethics the starting point for theology.”²⁰ The starting point, of course, is a good theology, drawing on the whole of scripture, which in turn shapes ethics.

Drawing on the work of Mennonite biblical scholar Waldemar Janzen, Reimer examines the Old Testament as a resource for the development of political theology. The tendency in Anabaptism to look almost exclusively to the New Testament has meant that

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many theological themes that inform a sociopolitical view in the Old Testament have not been sufficiently considered. Its themes of land, family, stewardship of creation, and justice not only yield fruitful insights for our lives today but underscore the principle that theological reflection on matters related to the sociopolitical has a long history among God’s people.

The work of John W. Miller is another source for Reimer’s political theology. Miller calls for a broader examination of the way God used rulers of the other nations to

advance God’s plans and purposes, not only for Israel but for humankind. Further, Miller’s challenge to comprehend the narrative unity and comprehensive nature of the whole of scripture helps us avoid supersessionism in our political theology.

Turning to the New Testament, Reimer looks to Acts and the Pauline Epistles, identifying relevant accounts for consideration: encounters with civil authorities, reliance on law and courts, appeal to the benefits of citizenship, and consideration of the rightful place of civic authority in God’s ordering of the world. This broader exegetical engagement raises questions, such as: What role does policing have in society? What role do secular courts of law play in the Christian scheme of things? In theologizing around these and other questions arising from a broad engagement with scripture, our political-theological framework embraces necessary truth.

A more objective view of church history and its lessons

A final theme that Reimer employs is a more nuanced review of church history—Anabaptist history and that of the broader church—in order to apply lessons and identify examples that can enhance our understanding and our practice in the sociopolitical realm. Understanding ourselves as but the most current generation of Christians attempting to navigate the challenges surrounding the relationship between church and civil society opens us to the wisdom we can glean from earlier generations and elicits our acknowledgment that the historical record is usually more complex than it is simple.

The lessons Anabaptists have typically taken from church history, starting with and following the time of Constantine, are almost exclusively negative in terms of political theology. Mennonite theologians have tended to see all the ways the church went wrong, all the theological distortions that flowed from the church-

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state relationship in Christendom. While Reimer affirms that the Constantinian shift in the early fourth century introduced many theological distortions, he also calls “for a more differentiated analysis of the Constantinian problem.”²¹ Drawing on an array of recent studies on the Constantinian era, he examines both negative effects on as well as positive contributions to the development of political theology. One Christian leader Reimer points to in this era is Lactantius (ca. 250–ca. 325). Lactantius developed a theological view of forbearance—as distinct from tolerance—which allowed different religious groups to coexist even as Christians assumed their religious perspective was superior and true. Given the later prevalence of oppression of opposing religious views and

minority groups, the contribution of Lactantius was a helpful one in the early years of the Constantinian era and continues to have resonance today. This is but one example of a positive contribution to political theology that stems from this period in church history.

Turning to the history of his own church tradition, citing the work of C. Arnold Snyder and Werner Packull, Reimer again challenges an oversimplified view of history that has tended to inadequately address a diversity of experience and views that existed in early Anabaptism. From some more neglected parts of this diverse expression of early Anabaptism, Reimer gleans insights to enhance our view of and interaction with civil society. As illustrative of what can be gained by an objective consideration of Anabaptist history, Reimer brings into focus Pilgram Marpeck (1495–1556). Marpeck’s life and thought provide evidence of a less starkly dualistic view of the relationship between church and world, one that can help shape the political theology of Anabaptists today. Reimer contends that the “Marpeck model” has much to teach us:

A non-separatist Anabaptism with a clear sense of Christian and moral identity; a collaborative-communal approach to biblical interpretation, theological reflection, and witness; energetic engagement in apologetics and ecumenical debate; and active participation as a full-fledged citizen in civic affairs and public life but always with a personal proviso . . . is what Mennonites and all Christians should strive after.²²

Whether in his examination of the life of Pilgram Marpeck as part of a broader review of Anabaptist history or in his identification of positive and negative lessons of Christendom, Reimer is more open to a careful discernment of those places where the spirit of Antichrist and the Spirit of God have been at work. This more nuanced examination is a necessary, exemplary stance for us in seeking to draw insights from church history that can shed light on our path today.

Conclusion

For Anabaptists and the wider Christian community, Jim Reimer has made important contributions to the growing body of work on political theology. He took major strides towards the goal of providing a more honest Anabaptist political theology. One only regrets that his untimely death in 2010 prevented the continuation of his work; in it these themes, and other aspects of his

project, could have been more fully developed and more thoroughly integrated. Even so, the contribution he has made to Anabaptist political theology will continue to provoke and challenge us as we pursue the vital mission of the church in our time.

Notes

¹ A. James Reimer, *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology: Law, Order, and Civil Society*, ed. Paul G. Doerksen (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014).

² Ron Sider, *Just Politics: A Guide for Christian Engagement* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012), xi.

³ Reimer, *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology*, 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁹ Reimer uses this term in *Mennonites and Classical Theology: Dogmatic Foundations for Christian Ethics* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2001), 334.

¹⁰ Reimer, *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology*, 174.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁹ A. James Reimer, "Towards a Theocentric Christology: Christ for the Word," in *The Limits of Perfection: A Conversation with J. Lawrence Burkholder*, ed. Rodney J. Sawatsky and Scott Holland, 2nd ed. (Waterloo, ON: Institute of Anabaptist and Mennonite Studies, 1996), 102.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

²¹ Reimer, *Toward an Anabaptist Political Theology*, 63.

²² *Ibid.*, 124.

About the author

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