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Snyder's "Faith and toleration: A reformation debate revised" (book review)

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Book Review



Snyder, C.A. (2018). *Faith and toleration: A reformation debate revisited*. Winnipeg: CMU Press. 106 pp. \$16.99. ISBN 9781987986051

C. Arnold Snyder examines theological calls for religious tolerance and intolerance in the sixteenth century, focusing on the changing views of Lutheran theologians as well as emerging Anabaptist engagement with the theological debate as the century progressed. As he considers the Reformation era discussion Snyder draws lessons for current Christians living in a world with recent experience of religion-inspired terrorism and other forms of religious intolerance, calling for Christians to follow sixteenth-century Anabaptists and reclaim religious toleration as a Christian virtue. Snyder is Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Waterloo, and has published several important works in the field of Anabaptist studies. This particular volume was originally delivered as a series of three lectures at Canadian Mennonite University on the occasion of the quincentennial celebration of the Protestant Reformation. For the published volume Snyder has supplemented these lectures with an introduction and extensive footnotes containing supporting materials.

Snyder begins his study with an examination of Martin Luther's early calls for toleration that flowed from his understanding of salvation by grace through faith, and his defense of that position by appealing to scripture and conscience before Roman Catholic authorities. From that context Luther developed his initial two-kingdoms view of the relationship between church and state that included the proposition that secular rulers in the kingdom of the world should not coerce individuals in matters of personal faith, since faith is a free gift from God in the inner spiritual person. However, when Luther's message was radicalized and used as support for political and social movements like the Peasants' Revolts of the mid-1520s, Luther amended his earlier calls for religious tolerance by saying that people are free only when their consciences are controlled by the proper interpretation of scripture. Protestant secular authorities then began to enforce confessional uniformity on their subjects, and later Lutheran theologians developed theologies of intolerance based on (what Snyder calls) a misinterpretation of Romans 13, as well as appeals to Augustine's ancient argument that heretics should be compelled to hear the true Gospel. Further, these theologians argued that governments should punish heretics because heresy necessarily leads to political revolt. In the context of experiencing persecution as a result of these theological conclusions, Anabaptist thinkers responded by calling on those in authority to practice religious tolerance, ironically echoing Luther's early argument that scripture limits state power to the temporal realm and excludes

magistrates from exercising authority over matters of faith and conscience. Snyder concludes his lecture series by examining the *de facto* tolerance that Anabaptists sometimes experienced in the sixteenth-century Swiss countryside, where their neighbors often protected them from persecution by the state.

Snyder's treatment of the Anabaptist side of the Reformation era debate is thorough, balanced and sympathetic, and it includes detailed analysis of Anabaptist sixteenth-century primary source materials. His discussion of Lutheran arguments is less objective, tending toward generalization, perhaps the result of time constraints placed on his lectures. For example he implies that Lutheran and Reformed theological arguments for salvation by faith apart from works inherently produced followers excused from living lives of obedience and Christlikeness. Many of the lessons that Snyder draws for the present assume an epistemology characterized by relativism, where tolerance sometimes means valuing all truth claims equally because human knowledge is limited and therefore such claims can never be certain. Snyder's work will prove helpful primarily for readers studying the history of sixteenth-century Swiss Anabaptists.

Reviewer

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