

THE NATURE AND DESTINY OF MAN, by Reinhold Niebuhr.
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Volume II: "Human Destiny"

Calvin's conception of "divine law" has the advantage of consistency over Luther's sketchy directives in the field of social and political life. But it nevertheless combines the errors of both obscurantism and pretension. It is obscurantist in that it does not sufficiently engage man's rational capacities in determining what is just and unjust in his relation to his fellows. It appeals prematurely to Biblical authority for answers to every conceivable moral and social problem. Catholic social ethics, though informed by an unjustified ~~con-~~ fidence in the ability of a universal reason to define the norms of justice, are sometimes more discriminating than the Calvinistic appeal to "divine law". Calvin's ethical system is pretentious as well as obscurantist; for it gives the Christian an unjustified confidence in the transcendent perfection of the moral standards which he has derived from Scripture and obscures not only the endless relativities of judgment, in applying a Scriptural standard to a particular situation, but also to the historical relativities which are imbedded in these Scriptural standards themselves. PAGES 202 and 203.

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Undoubtedly one cause of the failure of the Reformation in the field of culture was that its Bibliolatry implied "sanctificationist" principles in the realm of culture and truth, despite its generally more paradoxical conception of grace. Thomas Hobbes was one, among many, critics of the church, who observed this effect of the Reformation: "After the Bible was translated into English," he wrote, "every man, nay, every boy and wench that could read English, thought they spoke with God Almighty . . . and every man became a judge of religion, and an interpreter of the Scriptures to himself." (FOOTNOTE: Thomas Hobbes, Behemoth, Works, VI, 190.) The certain conviction of the faithful that the Bible gave them the final truth, transcending all finite perspectives and all sinful corruptions, thus contributed to individual spiritual arrogance, no less intolerable than the collective arrogance of the older church. This pride expressed itself despite