



Chapter from Book

COVENANT AND COMMONWEAL: THE LANGUAGE OF POLITICS IN REFORMATION SCOTLAND

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Abstract

The Scottish Reformation – like many other aspects of Scottish history – is currently the subject of a good deal of revisionist discussion and interpretation. In recent years, a number of historians have made major contributions to our understanding of the nature of the complex and critical events of the two decades following 1550. In the light of this research, facile assumptions regarding the irretrievable decay of the Catholic Church and the irresistible rise of Protestantism have at long last been consigned to oblivion. Instead, a more realistic picture has emerged in which the events of the 1550s and 1560s are set against and interpreted in terms of a variegated pattern of socio-political as well as religious pressures and aspirations. As other essays in this collection make clear, however, the revised picture is as yet far from complete, and there are many areas which still await detailed research. One such area – and by no means the least important of them – is the ideological context of the Reformation and in particular the role of political ideas in motivating and legitimating the conflicts of the period. Of course, if frequently misconstrued, the ideas of the prominent political theorists of these years – John Knox and George Buchanan – have nevertheless often received detailed commentary. But little effort has been made to recover the beliefs and values of the political community at large and to consider the ways in which ideological assumptions and preconceptions may have affected the behaviour of those who participated – or chose not to participate – in the crucial events unfolding in their midst. Quite obviously, a short essay cannot do full justice to a topic which is not only potentially enormous in scope but which also confronts the daunting complexities of the relationship between political thought and action. Nevertheless, taking a limited empirical base and making some cautious methodological assumptions, the nature and importance of the ideological background to the Scottish Reformation may be tentatively explored.

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