



Abstract from Article

KNOX, RESISTANCE AND THE MORAL IMPERATIVE

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Abstract

This article seeks to reassess the political thought of John Knox against the background of his prophetic vocation and ultimate commitment to the establishment of a godly commonwealth. A prophet, rather than a political theorist, his political pronouncements – especially his theory of resistance – took the form of moral imperatives stemming from and made binding by a covenant with God. But, as a Calvinist wedded to obedience as an essential corollary of the discipline believed necessary for the subsistence of a Christian commonwealth, Knox found it hard to develop any resistance theory without undermining his ultimate objective. In theory, he succeeded by employing two ideological devices deriving initially from early Protestant thought: the idea of an inferior magistracy and the distinction between the office and the person of a prince. In practice, however, the inferior magistrates to whom he looked for the fulfillment of his ideals in Scotland – the nobility and barons – proved less sensitive to the imperatives of the divine will than he was himself. While, therefore, he succeeded in setting a revolutionary movement in motion, he failed to establish the godly commonwealth which he envisaged as its end and object.

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