Calvinist Thomism Revisited: William Ames (1576–1633) and the Divine Ideas

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Calvinist Scholasticism and Thomism: Then and Now

In a series of pioneering works on “Calvinist Scholasticism” and “Calvinist Thomism” John Patrick Donnelly established the point that not only were the medieval backgrounds of early modern Reformed thought of considerable importance to the study of the theologies of the Reformers and their scholastic or orthodox successors, but that in the cases of several major Reformed writers, notably Peter Martyr Vermigli and Girolamo Zanchi, there were significant elements of Thomistic theology and philosophy present in major works of Reformed thinkers.¹ Donnelly’s work provided a major impetus to further study inasmuch as it did not partake of the substantial theological negatives that had often plagued earlier scholarship, whether the anti-scholastic and anti-Thomistic understandings of various writers who had engaged the writings of Protestant scholastics² or the critiques of Protestantism from the vantage point of expertise in medieval scholastic thought. Early on in the study of developing sixteenth-century Reformed thought, it also served to point out that a group of Calvin contemporaries, notably Farel, Bullinger, and Vermigli, were not to be regarded as disciples of Calvin but as partners in the early modern theological conversation, whose individual backgrounds and training needed to be examined for the sake of a proper picture of early modern Reformed thought.³

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³ Donnelly, Calvinism and Scholasticism in Vermigli’s Doctrine of Man and Grace, 2.
In addition, Donnelly was able, by showing the Thomistic underpinnings of Vermigli’s thought, as well as suggesting a somewhat eclectic appropriation of medieval backgrounds on Vermigli’s part, to set aside the then-widely-held view of the nearly overpowering impact of aspects of late medieval nominalism on the development of Protestant theology and to question the broad and somewhat pejorative definitions of Protestant scholasticism found in the older literature.4

Recent scholarship on an increasing number of Reformed scholastic thinkers of the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries has built on and debated the points raised by Donnelly, by identifying other medieval backgrounds to Protestant scholasticism5 arguing further cases of influence of Thomist thought6 indicating the positive impact of contemporary Roman Catholic, notably Dominican and Jesuit, scholasticism on Protestant theology7 raising the possibility of a broadly Scotist line of influence on the Reformed, above and beyond the Thomist8 and disputing the extent of Scotist

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4 Calvinism and Scholasticism in Vermigli’s Doctrine of Man and Grace, 196–207.