

JOHN KNOX, TYRANNY, AND RADICAL RESISTANCE THEORY

by
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John Knox (1514–1572) was always a colorful figure, presenting himself not only as a pastor, but also as a prophet of God.² The drama of his personality was also there in his early years when he served as the bodyguard of the preacher George Wishart, bearing a two-handed sword, ready and willing to use it in defense of God's servant. He wielded the sword even though he had been ordained as a Catholic priest before he came under the influence of Wishart.³ Such a determination took place against the backdrop of the medieval prohibition laid down by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*. The great Dominican theologian had maintained that for "bishops and clerics" it was "not lawful for them to fight."⁴ In fact, according to Aquinas, it was not only "unbecoming for them to slay or shed blood," but "they should be ready to shed their own blood for Christ, so as to imitate in deed what they portray in their ministry."⁵

The Protestant community as a whole likewise frowned upon this kind of conduct for a minister. Luther, for example, affirmed that the popes would be "deserting their calling and office to fight with the sword." They were in fact "forbidden" to do this.⁶ Philip Melancthon similarly asserted that the civil magistrate "bears the sword and watches over the civil peace," while ecclesiastical magistrates have one

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²Richard G. Kyle, "Prophet of God: John Knox's Self-Awareness," *Reformed Theological Review* 61 (August 2002): 85–101; Dale W. Johnson and James E. McGoldrick, "Prophet in Scotland: The Self-Image of John Knox," *Calvin Theological Journal* 33 (April 1998): 76–86.

³David B. Calhoun, "John Knox (1514–1572) After Five Hundred Years," *Presbyterian* 40 (Fall 2014): 10.

⁴Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1355. All quotations from Thomas Aquinas's essay *Of War*, Q. 40, are from the five-volume English translation, *Summa Theologica* (Alen, TX: Christian Classics, 1948).

⁵Ibid., 1355, 1356.

⁶Martin Luther, "On War against the Turk," in vol. 46 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1967), 165.

fundamental duty, being “enjoined only to preach the Word of God.”⁷

We find the same perspective within the Reformed community. Johannes Wollebius in Early Orthodoxy affirmed the classic position that the defense of the true religion was a task that was committed to the *state*. “Religion,” he said, “may be defended by arms, but not propagated by arms.” In defense of his thesis, he appealed to “examples of pious kings, the Maccabees, emperors, as Constantine and Theodosius.”⁸ He articulated the mainstream position in these words: “Although the church is built by the Word, not by the sword; yet being built, is justly defended by the sword against unjust violence.”⁹ The sword in this scenario was to be wielded exclusively by the civil authority.

The same perspective among the Reformed is reflected in the thinking of the first-generation theologian Huldrych Zwingli. He distinguished between the minister and magistrate in his work *An Exposition of the Articles*. The office of the minister is to teach the Word of God (art. 36). Rulers, on the other hand, look after the office of the sword (art. 41). Zwingli even addressed the pope and exhorted him to take no other sword into his hand than the sword of the Spirit, namely the Word of God (art. 36).¹⁰

There is a discrepancy, however, between what Zwingli taught and what he practiced on this issue. We need only to call attention to Kappel and the year 1531. Five Roman Catholic cantons had declared war on Zurich. A small Zurich army of two thousand men confronted a larger Catholic force of eight thousand on October 11. Zwingli joined the Zurich forces as a chaplain. He had taught that ministers ought not to wield the sword, but he decided in the emergency of the moment to take up the sword and to fight alongside his soldiers. He died in the ensuing engagement that lasted less than an hour.

Knox in contrast survived his experience as a minister *and* an armed bodyguard. His conduct in these early years anticipates some of his later views that are not in the theological mainstream of Reformed doctrine particularly when it comes to political theology. There is no question that aspects of his doctrine stand in continuity with elements of medieval teaching and with perspectives articulated by Lutheran and Reformed theologians of his time.¹¹ He embraced radical views,

⁷Philip Melancthon, “Loci Communes,” in *Melancthon and Bucer*, ed. Wilhelm Pauck (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), 148–49.

⁸*The Abridgment of Christian Divinity* (London: T. Mabb, 1660), 2.4.9.

⁹*Ibid.*, 8.2.4.

¹⁰All citations from Zwingli’s “An Exposition of the Articles” appear in Huldrych Zwingli, *The Defense of the Reformed Faith*, trans. E. J. Furcha (Allison Park, PA: Pickwick, 1984).

¹¹Richard L. Greaves, “John Knox, the Reformed Tradition, and the Development of Resistance Theory,” *Journal of Modern History* 48 (September 1976): 1–36. John Knox’s *On Rebellion*, provides a good selection of Knox’s writings on church and state issues (Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, ed. Roger A. Mason [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994]). The quotations from his

however, in his commitment to private war and tyrannicide on the part of the common man. "Knox insisted that there are some political situations that cannot and should not be endured."¹²

His private resistance doctrine continues to be reflected in the thinking of contemporary theorists who discuss appropriate responses to government tyranny. It may well be the case that the struggle for civil rights in America perhaps unwittingly "drew strength from John Knox's principles."¹³ There is no question though that the American political tradition as reflected in the Declaration of Independence stands in continuity with the thinking of Knox. The Declaration famously insists on the right of the people to rise up against their government if it should descend into tyranny. The seeds of this position go back to the sixteenth century and the teaching of Knox on political revolution. We should not think that John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* is the first articulation of the idea of political revolution that finds a permanent home in the Declaration of Independence.¹⁴

We shall first consider his reform program for the church and his position on resistance to tyranny on the part of the inferior magistrates. On both of these issues, he stood in solidarity with other theologians within the Reformed community.

REFORMING THE CHURCH

Knox presented his reforming agenda for the Scottish church in his *Letter to the Commonalty* (1558), written to the common people of Scotland from Geneva. Knox drew attention to the problems that existed in Scotland, namely false religion and the tyranny of the political and church leaders. He captured both of these concerns in one sentence: "Your princes and rulers are criminal with your bishops of all idolatry committed, and of all the innocent blood that is shed for the testimony of Christ's truth."¹⁵

The letter went on to assert that both magistrate and commonalty had the responsibility to seek the reformation of the church. The king along with "lords, rulers and powers" were to provide "true preachers" and "expel such as under the names of pastors devour and destroy the flock." If the magistrates refused to do this, the people were to take action. "You may provide true teachers for yourselves," Knox wrote, "be it in your cities, towns, or villages." He then added, "Them you may maintain and defend against all that shall persecute them."¹⁶

treatise "Letter to the Commonality" in this essay come from this volume.

¹²Calhoun, "John Knox (1514–1572) After Five Hundred Years," 12.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Garrett Ward Sheldon, *The History of Political Theory* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 95–96.

¹⁵Knox, "Letter to the Commonalty," 124–25.

¹⁶Ibid., 123.

This is a remarkable assertion, maintaining that the common people could not only support the clergy that they had selected for themselves, but could also take up arms and defend them against government persecution.¹⁷ In a sense, Knox was advocating the role that he had once had as the sword-wielding bodyguard of the minister George Wishart. From another perspective, it was counsel that many would find problematic in light of Jesus's statement regarding the sword-swinging activity of Peter who as a private individual was seeking to defend Jesus from his enemies in the Garden of Gethsemane:

¹⁷The general drift of the argument that Knox presented is seen in this extended quotation from his "Letter to the Commonalty," 124–26: "It will not excuse you (dear Brethren) in the presence of God, neither yet will it avail you in the day of His visitation, to say: 'We were but simple subjects; we could not redress the faults and crimes of our rulers, bishops and clergy. We called for reformation, and wished for the same, but lords' brethren were bishops, their sons were abbots, and the friends of great men had the possession of the church, and so were we compelled to give obedience to all that they demanded.' These vain excuses, I say, will nothing avail you in the presence of God who requireth no less of the subjects than of the rulers, that they decline from evil and that they do good, that they abstain from idolatry, superstition, blasphemy, murder and other such horrible crimes which His law forbiddeth and yet nonetheless are openly committed and maliciously defended in that miserable realm."

"And if ye think that ye are innocent because ye are not the chief authors of such iniquity, ye are utterly deceived. For God doth not only punish the chief offenders, but with them doth He damn the consenters to iniquity; and all are judged to consent that knowing impiety committed give no testimony that the same displeaseth them. To speak this matter more plain, as your princes and rulers are criminal with your bishops of all idolatry committed, and of all the innocent blood that is shed for the testimony of Christ's truth, and that because they maintain them in their tyranny, so are you (I mean so many of you as give no plain confession to the contrary) criminal and guilty with your princes and rulers of the same crimes, because ye assist and maintain your princes in their blind rage and give no declaration that their tyranny displeaseth you."

"This doctrine I know is strange to the blind world, but the verity of it hath been declared in all notable punishments from the beginning. When the original world perished by water, when Sodom and Gomorrah were consumed by fire, and finally when Jerusalem was horribly destroyed, doth any man think that all were alike wicked before the world? Evident it is that they were not if they shall be judged according to their external facts. For some were young and could not be oppressors, neither yet could defile themselves with unnatural and beastly lusts; some were pitiful and gentle of nature and did not thirst for the blood of Christ nor of His Apostles. But did any escape the plagues and vengeance which did apprehend the multitude?"

"The cause is evident if we can be subject without grudging to God's judgments which in themselves are most holy and just. For in the original world none was found that either did resist tyranny and oppression that universally was used either yet that earnestly reprehended the same. In Sodom was none found that did again stand that furious and beastly multitude that did compass about and besiege the house of Lot. None would believe Lot that the city should be destroyed. And finally in Jerusalem was none found that studied to repress the tyranny of the priests who were conjured against Christ and His Evangel, but all fainted (I except ever such as gave witness with their blood or their flying that such impiety displeased them), all kept silence, by the which all approved iniquity and joined hands with the tyrants, and so were all arrayed and set as it had been in one battle against the Omnipotent and against His Son Christ Jesus. For whosoever gathereth not with Christ in the day of His harvest is judged to scatter. And therefore of one vengeance temporal were they all partakers."

"Put your sword back into its place; for all those who take up the sword shall perish by the sword" (Matthew 26:52).

Knox nevertheless pressed his case upon the consciences of the common man in Scotland. He reminded them of the condition of the ministry in Scotland: "The iniquity of your bishops is more than manifest; their filthy lives infect the air; the innocent blood which they shed crieth vengeance in the ears of God; the idolatry and abomination which openly they commit and without punishment maintain doth corrupt and defile the whole land; and none amongst you doth unfeignedly study for any redress of such enormities."¹⁸ Knox then warned his readers about the danger of refusing to defend biblical preachers against those who would destroy them. "Be not deceived, dear Brethren," he said. "God hath punished not only proud tyrants, filthy persons and cruel murderers, but also such as with them did draw the yoke of iniquity, was it by flattering their offenses, obeying their unjust commandments or in winking at their manifest iniquity."¹⁹

With respect to the issue of idolatry, Knox stood in continuity with medieval perspectives on the crime of heresy.²⁰ The sword, he believed, is committed to the magistrate to execute judicial punishment upon those who are guilty of religious criminality.²¹ Scotland in his view was in a covenant relationship with God, just as ancient Israel had been. Idolaters were to be put to death in Israel, and the same thing was to be done in sixteenth-century Scotland. In *An Admonition or Warning* (1554) Knox called on the civil magistrates to slay idolaters.²² His reform program for Scotland clearly gave a crucial role to the political leadership of the country and to the common man as well. He believed though that the reformation of the church would only succeed if tyranny were put down. The responsibility to do this was laid upon the shoulders of the inferior magistrates.

¹⁸Ibid., 126.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 2a2ae, q. 11, art. 3. Richard Kyle states concerning Knox, "His greatest anxiety was idolatry, which he equated with Catholicism, to be a Catholic was to be an idolater. The fight against the 'idolatrous' Mass so dominated his thinking that virtually no major area of his thought was free from it. Increasingly, Knox developed his anti-idolatry theme in a political context and as a springboard to resistance against political authority" (*Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, s.v. "Knox, John [c.1514–1571]", by Richard G. Kyle, 209).

²¹W. Owen Chadwick refers to Knox's view that "idolaters should be liable to... execution." Knox affirmed that this "was a commandment of God, whatever his feelings" ("John Knox and Revolution," *Andover Newton Quarterly* 15 [March 1975]: 258).

²²Knox was very much a man of his time. The doctrine that the crime of heresy merited capital punishment was imbedded in the Justinian Code, which had been a part of the civil law of Europe for one thousand years.

RESISTING THE TYRANT

Knox, in harmony with the Lutheran Magdeburg Confession (1550) and Reformed thinking as well, affirmed that inferior magistrates had the right to engage in a defensive war against monarchical tyranny.²³ They were authorized to take up arms against the armies of the prince who would seek to exterminate them. Knox considered the Scottish nobility to be the magistrates who were responsible for resisting a tyrannical monarch. The Scottish nobles had private armies and within their own areas they had rights of jurisdiction. In his letter to the nobility of Scotland in 1557, Knox wrote, "Your subjects" are "oppressed." He continued, "You ought to hazard your own lives, be it against kings or emperors for their deliverance." He added, "Your office and duty" is "to deliver your subjects...from all violence and oppression."²⁴

This was precisely the position of Theodore Beza. Knox went beyond Beza, however, in his position that inferior magistrates had the responsibility of removing a tyrannical sovereign.²⁵ In *The First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558), Knox maintained that inferior magistrates were to depose and execute a tyrannical monarch.²⁶ In Beza's thinking, inferior magistrates could only

²³Lutherans and Calvinists agreed on the right of inferior magistrates to resist tyranny. In the Augsburg Interim (1648), Charles V attempted to suppress Lutheranism within the German Empire. Lutheran pastors in the city of Magdeburg defied imperial law and produced the Magdeburg Confession (1550) by way of response. It made this declaration in the Preamble: "If the high authority does not refrain from persecuting with force and injustice not only the persons of their subjects, but even more their rights under Divine and Natural Law, and if the high authority does not desist from suspending or eradicating true doctrine and true worship of God, then the lesser magistracy is required by God's divine injunction to attempt, together with their subjects, to stand up, as far as possible, to such superiors" (quoted in David Whitford, *Tyranny and Resistance: The Magdeburg Confession and the Lutheran Tradition* [Saint Louis: Concordia, 2001], 69). Reformed thinkers such as Amandus Polanus á Polansdorf asserted that Scripture allows for wars to be waged by inferior magistrates to defend their people against tyranny. Theodore Beza and Martin Bucer made similar arguments. Luther himself came down on the side of the legitimacy of a defensive war on the part of the inferior magistrates in his *Warning to His Dear German People*.

²⁴In *The Works of John Knox*, ed. David Laing (Edinburgh: Wodrow Society, 1864), 1:272.

²⁵Theodore Beza did believe, however, that the Estates-General had the authority to "oppose the tyrant and even, if need be, inflict just and deserved punishment upon him." He asserted this position in *Concerning the Rights of Rulers over Their Subjects and the Duty of Subjects toward Their Rulers* (Capetown and Pretoria: H.A.U.M., 1957), 63.

²⁶As an aside, Maria Zina Gonçalves de Abreu draws attention to the fact that "Knox's fundamental premise" in the treatise *The First Blast of the Trumpet*—"that women were unfit and ineligible to bear rule over kingdoms—was commonplace among his contemporaries" ("John Knox: Gynaecocracy, 'The Monstrous Empire of Women,'" *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 5 [2003]: 169).

wage a defensive war, endeavoring to protect their people from harm at the hands of the tyrant. At this point, Knox stood more in line with the Strasbourg theologian Martin Bucer who argued in his *Exposition of the Four Gospels* that inferior magistrates (in his thinking, self-governing city authorities and territorial princes) held the power of the sword not only to defend their people against a godless tyrant who might fall upon them, but also had the right to remove him by force of arms.²⁷

TAKING UP ARMS

Thus far we have noted that Knox stood in continuity with both medieval and Reformed thinking on political power as it would be used in response to heresy and tyranny. Knox though went beyond the theological mainstream in his private resistance theory.²⁸ The private person according to Calvin is not allowed to initiate active resistance by taking up arms against the tyrant.²⁹ Calvin issued this warning to private individuals: "If the correction of unbridled despotism is the Lord's to avenge, let us not at once think that it is entrusted to us, to whom no command has been given except to obey and suffer."³⁰ With respect to the specific issue of tyrannicide, Calvin stated, "No deed is considered

²⁷Mark J. Larson, *Calvin's Doctrine of the State* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 56–57.

²⁸Chadwick accurately summarizes the mainstream resistance theory of the Reformed community: "The accepted theory of revolution...followed along the lines to which Calvin pointed" was that tyrants are to be obeyed. He who rebels against a tyrant rebels against God as well as man. But this rule applies to private men. In most states exist organs of government which check the power of the ruler and may be said to represent the people. When these organs of government be they Parliament, or Estates, or responsible magistrates—summon the people to resist or overthrow a tyrant, then they are to be obeyed by the people. No man may take it upon himself to murder King Charles. But if the representatives of the People, be they in Parliament or (if Parliament has become unrepresentative and a Rump) be they the leaders of the nation then in office, order the killing of the king because by tyranny he sacrificed his kingship, resistance and revolution is just, and the cause of God" ("John Knox and Revolution," 252, cf. Richard C. Gamble, "The Christian and the Tyrant: Beza and Knox on Political Resistance," *Westminster Theological Journal* 46 [Spring 1984]: 131–32).

²⁹Calvin did believe, however, that there is an institutional remedy for the problem of tyranny. He appealed to the existence of *populares magistratus*, designating them the "magistrates of the people, appointed to restrain the willfulness of kings." Parliamentary bodies, such as the French Estates-General, had the responsibility to take up arms, if necessary, in behalf of the people for whom they had been "appointed protectors by God's ordinance" (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.20.31, trans. Ford Lewis Battles [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960]). In contrast to the Calvinist perspective, Luther rejected the doctrine of parliamentary resistance to tyranny. While Peter Martyr Vermigli approved of the deposition of King Christian II by the parliamentary body in Denmark, Luther firmly repudiated the deposition. He exclaimed in his treatise "Whether Soldiers, Too, Can Be Saved," "A rebellious noble, count, or prince should have his head cut off" (in vol. 46 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan [St. Louis: Concordia, 1967], 116).

³⁰John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.20.31.

more noble, even among philosophers, than to free one's country from tyranny. Yet a private individual who lays his hand upon a tyrant is openly condemned by the heavenly judge."³¹

Knox dissented from Calvin's teaching and accepted the idea that any private individual may use violence and take up arms against a tyrannical government.³² He believed that the punishment of tyranny is a duty that is required of the whole people—of even the common man, the private individual.³³ This position fits in with the events of 1546 in which a group of Protestants assassinated Cardinal David Beaton of St. Andrews in retaliation for his execution of George Wishart on the charge of heresy. Knox did not participate in the assassination, but he joined the conspirators in the castle of St. Andrews, the previous residence of the Cardinal. Knox, in other words, had no problem in associating himself with individuals who had eliminated an ecclesiastical tyrant.

Knox's teaching at this point was radical not only in relationship to what Calvin taught, but also in terms of the doctrine of the medieval church, which limited the right of war to sovereign princes. Knox's view was also extreme in comparison to the ancient feudal right of private war. In that arrangement, any person of military status had the right to levy war upon his enemies for a just cause.

The medieval church opposed this principle with some success. Over time, the right of private war ceased to operate. Continual opposition and censure by the church had had an effect. It should be noted that Knox was not merely reverting back to the old feudal principle of legitimate private war. For Knox, the right of private war became the duty of private war for all men against the tyrant—not only the nobility, but the common man as well.

UNDERSTANDING THE REFORMER

Medieval political thought, along with Lutheran and Reformed ideas, informed Knox's thinking on war. The most influential source for his ideas, however, was the Old Testament.³⁴ He saw little distinction between Old and New Testaments. For him, the Old Testament history of Israel was being played out once again in Scotland.³⁵ He was

³¹Ibid., 3.10.16.

³²William Klempa notes that Knox "condoned the cardinal's murder as God's vengeance." It appears that "Knox justified the action of the conspirators, viewing it as similar to tyrannicide" ("Patrick Hamilton and John Knox on 'The Pith of All Divinity,'" *Touchstone* 24 [January 2006]: 41).

³³Douglas F. Kelly, *The Emergence of Liberty in the Modern World: The Influence of Calvin on Five Governments from the 16th through the 18th Centuries* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), 56.

³⁴Richard G. Kyle, "John Knox: A Man of the Old Testament," *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (Spring 1992): 65–78.

³⁵John R. Gray, "The Political Theory of John Knox," *Church History* 8 (June

a prophet of God, and Scotland was Israel. This principle of interpretation helps to explain the points in his political theory that move in a radical direction.³⁶

It should be noted that the long reach of his private resistance ideas is reflected to some extent in the American Declaration of Independence. After the Declaration makes the statement that governments are established to secure such fundamental human rights as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, our founding political document asserts, "That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the *Right of the People to alter or abolish it*, and to institute new Government."³⁷ Knox would have been fundamentally pleased with this perspective even as he believed that it would be the *duty of the people* to resist a government that had descended into tyranny.³⁸

In a real sense, modern oppressive governments have something to fear in Knox's teaching regarding the right of the people to rebel. Powerful, centralized states that push people around would prefer that his ideas be forgotten. Some have suggested that we see something of this in the fact that in Edinburgh, "his grave lies unmarked in a car-park."³⁹ It is quite clear that many would prefer to bury his teaching into oblivion, but Knox cannot be forgotten. His revolutionary ideas continue to be remembered to this very day. The trajectory of his thought is imbedded in the Declaration of Independence, the foundational constituting law of the United States.⁴⁰

1939): 134.

³⁶Knox set forth "resistance theory at its most radical, for it looked beyond the nobility...to the commonalty." "Only Christopher Goodman, in his *Superior Powers Ought to Be Obeyed*, came anywhere close to Knox in advancing such theory" (*The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, s.v. "Knox, John," by Jenny Worwald, 2:380).

³⁷The Declaration of Independence with its original spelling is found in *The American Republic: Primary Sources*, ed. Bruce Frohen (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2002), 189, emphasis added.

³⁸Calhoun makes this important point: "John Knox contributed to the formation of modern democracy by his championing of the rights and dignity of ordinary people" ("John Knox [1514–1572] After Five Hundred Years," 12).

³⁹Crawford Gribben, "John Knox, Reformation History and National Self-Fashioning," *Reformation and Renaissance Review* 8 (2006): 55.

⁴⁰Mark J. Larson, *Abraham Kuyper, Conservatism, and Church and State* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 67.

