

**Providence, Freedom, and the Will in
Early Modern Reformed Theology**

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Reformation Heritage Books
Grand Rapids, Michigan

*Providence, Freedom, and the Will in
Early Modern Reformed Theology*
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Reformation Heritage Books

3070 29th St. SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49512
616-977-0889
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www.heritagebooks.org

Printed in the United States of America
22 23 24 25 26 27/10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Muller, Richard A. (Richard Alfred), 1948- author.
Title: Providence, freedom, and the will in early modern reformed theology / Richard A. Muller.
Description: Grand Rapids : Reformation Heritage Books, 2022. | Series: Reformed historical-theological studies | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2021055698 (print) | LCCN 2021055699 (ebook) | ISBN 9781601789129 (paperback) | ISBN 9781601789136 (epub)
Subjects: LCSH: Reformed Church--Doctrines. | Providence and government of God—Christianity. | Liberty—Religious aspects—Reformed Church. | Free will and determinism—Religious aspects—Reformed Church. | BISAC: RELIGION / Christian Theology / History
Classification: LCC BX9422.3 .M855 2022 (print) | LCC BX9422.3 (ebook) | DDC 230/.42—dc23/eng/20220114
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021055698>
LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021055699>

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Acknowledgments

The essays in this volume span a period of twenty-five years and, although the arguments and conclusions found in the earliest of the essays stand in agreement with the more recent studies, there has been considerable development in my thought and approach to early modern materials (and, hopefully, a modicum of learning) that has taken place in the intervening years. The study of early modern Reformed thought has altered massively whether in the detail, sophistication, or sheer quantity of scholarship. That alteration is due in no small part to the vast increase in our knowledge of the sources, made possible by numerous digitization projects.

Accordingly, my primary acknowledgments and thanks go to the many colleagues and students and students-become-colleagues with whom I have dialogued over the years, as well as to the libraries and librarians that have made this line of scholarship possible in increasing detail. It would be impossible to name all and indefensible to single out a few. Rather than attempt either the impossible or the indefensible, I note my thanks to my partners in dialogue during my tenure at Fuller Theological Seminary (1980–1992) and Calvin Theological Seminary (1992–2015) and to my colleagues on the theological faculty of Utrecht University, who honored me with a guest professorship in 1999 and who continued in dialogue in the following years. Special thanks go to the students who participated in my seminars at Calvin Seminary and whose discussions and presentations stimulated my thoughts and research in a multitude of directions.

A special word of thanks is also due to the many librarians and libraries whose efforts and collections have facilitated my work. The resources of the H. Henry Meeter Center and the Hekman Library at Calvin Seminary and University have been an invaluable support to my work, but thanks must also be given to the many libraries, both European and North American, that have opened their rare book rooms to digitization, making available hundreds of volumes that otherwise would have been very difficult of access. Here, too, thanks go to my colleagues in PRDL, the Post-Reformation Digital Library project, where so many volumes of these digitization projects have been identified for direct access.

I am also grateful to several journals and publishers for their willingness to allow me to include the four essays in this volume that have been published previously and are included here by permission, with minor editorial modification. “Grace, Election, and Contingent Choice: Arminius’ Gambit and the Reformed Response” was previously published in *The Grace of God and the Bondage of the Will*, edited by Thomas Schreiner and Bruce Ware, 2 volumes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), volume 2, and is used by permission of Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group. “Goading the Determinists: Thomas Goad (1576–1638) on Necessity, Contingency and God’s Eternal Decree” originally appeared in *Mid-America Journal of Theology*, 26 (2015), pages 59–75. “Jonathan Edwards and the Absence of Free Choice: A Parting of Ways in the Reformed Tradition” originally appeared in *Jonathan Edwards Studies*, 1/1 (2011), pages 3–22; and “Jonathan Edwards and Francis Turretin on Necessity, Contingency, and Freedom of Will. In Response to Paul Helm,” in *Jonathan Edwards Studies*, 4/3 (2014), pages 266–85.

—Richard A. Muller
Lowell, Michigan

Introduction

The essays in this volume deal with aspects of Reformed thought on the interrelated subjects of divine providence, grace, free choice, necessity, contingency, and freedom. These topics have been and remain subjects of significant discussion and debate. The approach here, as in my other studies of early modern Reformed thought, is to read and interpret the early modern documents in their early modern context with attention to the meaning of their theological and philosophical terminology—and only secondarily to raise questions concerning the applicability of contemporary philosophical language as an explanatory framework for understanding the documents. The secondary concern arises only because of the dogged insistence of various modern theologians and philosophers to impose their terms and theories on the past. The early modern Reformed approach to providential causality and governance was framed by the specific issue of the nature of the divine concurrence with creaturely or temporal causes, given the ontological dependence of all things on God and the assumption of three kinds of causes, necessary, contingent, and free. The early modern Reformed issue of grace and freedom was concerned specifically with the capabilities of the will as a free cause, operating of its own accord. The issue of free choice was expounded in the light of traditionary assumptions concerning faculty psychology, namely, the intellect, will, and affections, and the way in which external objects, whether physical or ideational, are selected or rejected—but also in the context of debates over providence and predestination.

The essays are arranged in chronological order. The first essay, on the thought of Peter Martyr Vermigli, deals with the work of a major second-generation codifier of Reformed thought. The essay is followed by a study of Theodore Beza that marks the transition from Reformation to early orthodoxy. The next three essays—one on Arminius and Perkins, one on Robert Rollock, and one on Lucas Trelcatius Jr.—mark out several early orthodox developments. The essays on Thomas Goad and Stephen Charnock underline the international character of an English Reformed theology entering the era of high orthodoxy. The last three essays, all on Jonathan Edwards, identify changes in Protestant thought that took place in the eighteenth century as the traditional scholastic vocabulary and philosophical models were replaced with perspectives on necessity, contingency, and the will that could no longer account for the balance of divine willing and human freedom evidenced in seventeenth-century Reformed orthodoxy.

Taken together the essays trace out a trajectory of argument on the rather complicated issue of interrelated causalities, divine and human, and the Reformed attempt to do justice to the overarching sovereign providence of God while at the same time arguing the freedom of human beings and the necessity of divine grace in matters of salvation. “*Tum vero voluntas est libera: Vermigli on the Human Will, Free Choice, and Providential Concurrence*” takes on the issue of divine determination and free choice that I examined more broadly in my *Divine Will and Human Choice* and the issue of grace and human freedom that I analyzed in my study of the theology of William Perkins, *Grace and Freedom*. Both of these studies noted the work of Peter Martyr Vermigli as one of the major antecedents of later Reformed orthodox formulations, but neither dealt with his work in the detail it deserves. In this essay Vermigli is examined as offering a clearer view of human freedom and divine concurrence than found in the writings of a contemporary like Calvin.

The study of Theodore Beza’s approach to divine and human causality underlines the contextual issue of the early modern Reformed reception and application of traditional cosmology to the doctrine of God’s operation in the world order in general and human life in particular. Given the ontological dependence of all creatures on God, not only for their existence but also for their ability to act—inasmuch as all things live, move, and have their being in God—the issue of dual

causality, divine and human, primary and secondary, frames questions concerning the freedom of human acts and the authorship of sin. In various of his works, Beza addressed these questions, both positively and polemically, technically and pastorally. His understanding of divine concurrence and dual causality marks a step beyond Calvin's formulations and probably evidences the influence of Vermigli. Without altering the basic doctrine, Beza clarified issues and adumbrated later "scholastic" or technical developments. Beza's movement toward a more technical, scholastic formulation needs to be recognized as a refinement of argument in which the dual operation of divine and human causality was given a more balanced and nuanced treatment than found in Calvin's work. Beza's argumentation also approaches the Thomist theory of premotion.

The third essay, "Grace, Election, and Contingent Choice," presents my initial foray into the subject of grace and human freedom, with some attention to the thought of William Perkins, against which Arminius posed some of his most cogent arguments. I have edited the text in places and have significantly updated its bibliography. At the time of the original publication of the essay, the editors of the volume in which it appeared requested that I include reference to Perkins as a compatibilist thinker. I declined, primarily because I viewed application of the term as anachronistic. It has since been pointed out that my interpretation of Perkins' views did not quite square with a modern compatibilist reading of human freedom. I can quite happily respond that the situation is in fact the reverse: the modern compatibilist reading of human freedom does not square with Perkins' understanding of the issue. More in relation to the actual context of Perkins' and Arminius' thought, the essay outlines Arminius' indebtedness to the Molinist notion of a divine middle knowledge (*scientia media*) as a point of opposition to early modern Reformed thought. Rather than interpret the Arminian-Calvinist debate in terms of anachronistic, modern, libertarian-versus-compatibilist categories of causation and willing, the debate should be understood as grounded in different understandings of divine concurrence in relation to predestination and grace—arguably between advocates of a theory of simultaneous concurrence and advocates of a theory of premotion.

The essays on Robert Rollock and Lucas Trelcatius Jr. mark a technical development in the Reformed understanding beyond the

argumentation found in the works of Vermigli and Beza. Rollock's work on the issue of human free choice, with particular reference to the difference between antelapsarian and postlapsarian humanity, adds a layer of complexity not found in either Vermigli's or Beza's arguments—but, with that layer of complexity, Rollock also clarifies the issue of how a human being, created with the capacity to elect or reject objects and for making choices both good and bad, without any material alteration of being, can become incapable of what is truly good and be in need of grace to activate a latent capacity. The argument rests on a clear distinction between the inalienable freedom of the will itself and the alterable capacity for free choice. Trelcatius, writing contemporaneously with Rollock, offers evidence of a fairly unified development of Reformed thought on freedom in several generations of the theological faculty in Leiden, both in presenting a positive doctrine of free choice and in juxtaposing it with Roman Catholic adversaries, Robert Bellarmine in particular. Trelcatius' exposition is notable for three issues: it distinguishes between the will's natural inclination toward the good and its incidental turning from the genuine good; it includes an exposition of willing according to the fourfold causality, namely, efficient, formal, material, and final causes; and it includes a closely argued pattern of relationship between human subject and the willed object. His comments on the efficient causality of the will, moreover, reflect the dual causality, primary and secondary, divine and human, by which all effects in the created order are brought about.

A sixth essay, "Goading the Determinists: Thomas Goad on Necessity, Contingency, and God's Eternal Decree," carries the issue of divine and creaturely causality into the era following the Synod of Dort. The essay examines a document of curious pedigree. Written by one of the British delegates to the Synod of Dort, but left unpublished at his death, it was prepared for publication by the English "Arminian" John Goodwin, who found it a significant work, perhaps even supportive of his own thoughts on contingency. After its publication by Goodwin, Goad's essay migrated into several Arminian publications, even rubbing shoulders with tracts by John Plaifere and John Wesley, lending credence to the claims that various members of the British delegation lost sympathy for the rigors of "Calvinism" during their stay in Dordrecht. Although my study does not support the hypothesis of a shift toward Arminianism on Goad's part, it does underline some of the

commonalities between Reformed and Arminian thought in the first half of the seventeenth century. In accord with his colleague Bishop John Davenant, and looking toward the brief but telling statement in the Westminster Confession of Faith that “the Libertie or contingencie of second Causes” is “established” by the divine decree and that divine providence causes all things “to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently,”¹ Goad argues that God can and does decree that some things occur contingently and freely, namely, that they could be otherwise inasmuch as their causes are not determined to one effect.

Stephen Charnock’s *Discourses* provides one of the more detailed and extensive points of entrance into the English Reformed and Puritan understanding of the doctrines of God and divine providence. His doctrine of providence stands in close relation to several of the expositions of divine attributes, notably divine foreknowledge and holiness. Taken together, these expositions show Charnock as a thinker well versed in the theological developments of the early modern era, standing in the tradition of the Westminster Standards, whose work also reflected developments in Continental Reformed theology. His doctrine of providence, specifically of divine concurrence understood as premotion, reflects a line of Reformed thought extending back to the work of writers like Vermigli and Beza and identifiable in such later Reformed theologians as Turretin and Maastricht.

One conclusion that can be drawn from all seven of these essays is that the determinist or compatibilist reading of the Reformed on free will and free choice is fundamentally wrong. It simply cannot account for all aspects of the argumentation found in the early modern documents. Specifically, it cannot account for the basic mechanics of free choosing—electing, rejecting, and suspending—with regard to choices between such things as a Belgian abbey ale and Czech pilsner, namely, between things of an indifferent moral character, in the context of a divine willing, ordering, and providing an ultimate determination of all things. Nor can the modern compatibilist and libertarian theories of human freedom account for the common ground among the early

1. Westminster Confession of Faith, iii.1; v.2, in *The Confession of Faith: A Critical Text and Introduction*, ed. John R. Bower (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2020).

modern Reformed, Arminians, the Dominicans, and the Molinists: all regard the will as a free cause, which is to say, a cause that is not determined either extrinsically or intrinsically to one effect. Their debate, unlike modern libertarian and compatibilist argumentation, was focused not on civil or household choices or on moral choices abstractly considered, but on moral choices made in the sinful state of human nature, specifically those choices concerning the good in relation to salvation. The differences arise in two places, first in terms of differing readings of the divine concurrence with secondary causality in the specific case of the human will as, in itself, a free cause; and second in terms of the relationship of the limited fallen will to the power of grace. In other words, the debate was not over determinism in general, and it was not a theory of overarching determinism, such as that deployed by modern compatibilists, that governed the Reformed analysis of the inability of the fallen will to choose salvation. Rather, the foundational point at issue in the debates over free choice was the necessity that a rational being must will according to its nature, and that the nature of unregenerate human beings is sinful and, accordingly, wills sinfully until grace restores the nature.

The actual debate between the Reformed and the Arminians, then, was much more narrowly defined than it is typically portrayed. In the first place, it was not a debate between libertarians and a bevy of compatibilists. At very least, that would be an anachronistic application of modern philosophical arguments to viewpoints on the other side of Lessing's ugly ditch. In the second place, and more importantly, it was not a debate between proponents and opponents of free choice. All parties in the debate affirmed free choice and, moreover, they defined it in terms of the ability of the human subject to accept or reject objects presented for choice. It was a debate over the extent of the limitation placed by the sinfulness of human nature on the human capacity to choose the good as good, over the efficacy of prevenient grace, and, arguably, over the question of whether grace might be thought of as partially an object of choice.

Underlying these issues in the debate, moreover, were different construals of the doctrine of divine providential concurrence. Not to burden the discussion with yet another generalizing term ending in "ism," "ian," or "ist," but the understandings of divine providence held by the opposing parties were neither compatibilist nor libertarian, rather

they were concurrentist. This issue has been noted in some recent scholarship.² The traditional concurrentist account of divine providence and human freedom assumed that, however one constructed a solution to the problem, both terms, namely, the divine determination of all things and the alternativity of human choice, must be respected. Arguably, the larger part of the historical path of conversation and debate over divine will and human freedom was devoted to finding a solution to the problem that did justice to both. The modern compatibilist and libertarian formulations short-circuit the debate. Both the libertarian and compatibilist accounts, for all of their detail and seeming nuance, are quite reductionistic in their sacrifice of one term of the problem in order to salvage the other. The libertarian account removes any determination of choice other than the willing of the human agent in order to secure freedom, while the compatibilist account sacrifices half of the definition of free choice (retaining spontaneity but discarding alternativity) for the sake of arguing prior necessary causation, whether divine or temporal, extrinsic or intrinsic.

The majority of Reformed writers examined, moreover, held a view of concurrence that drew on the Thomist concept of a necessary divine premotion, *praemotio physica*, as the basic explanation of the interrelationship of primary and secondary causality in the acts or motions of creatures: there is a single act that has two causes. From the Thomist perspective,

The premotion does not anticipate the will's act; it makes possible the act's exercise. Nor does it deprive the will of its own causality; rather, in bringing about the transition [from potency] to act, it makes this causality effective.... [T]he will, when choosing to act, is not acting under necessity but is exercising its freedom. Since, then, physical premotion does bring about the will's exercise of

2. E.g., Alfred J. Freddoso, introduction to *On Divine Foreknowledge: Part IV of the Concordia*, by Luis de Molina, trans. Alfred J. Freddoso (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 24, 26, 42–43; idem, “God’s General Concurrence with Secondary Causes: Why Conservation Is Not Enough,” in *Philosophical Perspectives*, 5 (1991), pp. 553–85; Brian J. Shanley, “Beyond Libertarianism and Compatibilism: Thomas Aquinas on Created Freedom,” in *Freedom and the Human Person*, ed. Richard Velkley (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), pp. 70–89; and Timothy Shanahan, “God and Nature in the Thought of Robert Boyle,” in *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 26/4 (1988), pp. 547–69.

its own act, such premotion is not opposed to freedom. On the contrary, premotion brings this freedom to fruition in the act of choice that it causes the will to cause.³

Unlike occasionalism, this premotion on the part of the first cause “does not rule out the action of [the second] cause or render it superfluous.”⁴ Arguably, this understanding of dual causality cannot be assimilated either to libertarianism or compatibilism—although in its own way, it assumes that free choice and divine willing are compatible. Premotion cannot be libertarian because it assumes that the will, as a second cause, must be moved determinately from potency to act by the divine first cause. It cannot be compatibilist because the will, under premotion, is held to be self-determining in its own order of secondary causation, having the power “not to act, or to act in another way.”⁵

The volume concludes with three essays on Jonathan Edwards’ approach to necessity, contingency, and freedom, the first two of which appeared previously. I have edited both essays slightly, primarily in the footnote apparatus, where citation of Edwards’ *Freedom of Will* now adds page references to the Yale edition. The third is entirely new and appears here for the first time. Taken together the three essays mark the result of the philosophical transition from an early modern, broadly Aristotelian perspective to the rationalist philosophies of the eighteenth century, with specific attention to the issue of divine willing and contingency in the world order and in human acts. In Edwards’ account of freedom all that remains to the will is spontaneity. Contingency is an illusion; the will is determined to one effect either by external causes or by its own predispositions.

The first two essays, “Jonathan Edwards and the Absence of Free Choice” and “Jonathan Edwards and Francis Turretin on Necessity, Contingency, and Freedom of Will,” both address the issue of Jonathan Edwards’ understanding of human freedom and argue that it represents

3. Thomas C. O’Brien, “Promotion, Physical,” in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Thomson/Gale; Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003), vol. 11, pp. 669–72, here p. 671; cf. R. P. Phillips, *Modern Thomistic Philosophy: An Explanation for Students*, 2 vols. (New York: Newman, 1934–1935), vol. 2, pp. 342–51; and Henri Grenier, *Thomistic Philosophy*, trans. J. P. E. O’Hanley, 3 vols. (Charlottetown, P.E.: St. Dunstan’s University, 1948), vol. 3, pp. 345–49.

4. Phillips, *Modern Thomistic Philosophy*, vol. 2, p. 344.

5. Phillips, *Modern Thomistic Philosophy*, vol. 2, p. 349.

a deterministic turn in Reformed thought that does not comport with the understanding found in the writings of the Reformed orthodox of the early modern era, but replaces the older definitions of free will and free choice with definitions drawn from the rationalist philosophy of the eighteenth century, with roots in the thought of John Locke and, ultimately, in the thought of Thomas Hobbes. Edwards replaces the older concurrentist reading of divine and human willing with a thoroughly deterministic compatibilist account. I must note that I had no idea how controversial this interpretation might become or how desperately modern self-identified Calvinists might defend Edwards' compatibilism as a faithful development of Reformed confessional orthodoxy. I remain unconvinced by their arguments. I am also somewhat surprised that compatibilist responses to my reading of Edwards' determinism have avoided encounter with the scholarship (consistently cited by me) that has argued a case for Edwards' departure from the Reformed tradition—just as they have avoided dealing with the scholarship (also cited by me) that has agreed with my basic point that theories of “compatibilism” and “libertarianism” have been anachronistically applied to premodern theories of divine willing and human choice.

As these two essays on Edwards point out, his understanding of mind and will differed considerably from the approach of the traditional faculty psychology that assigned different roles or functions to the intellect and the will in their interrelated operation of identifying objects, deliberating and adjudicating the objects, and reaching a final determination to select or reject a particular object. Edwards' approach lacks the subtle interrelation of intellect and will characteristic of the several formulations available to the older tradition and lacks a functional conception of contingency. Edwards also loses sight of the traditional distinction between free will and free choice, the former having to do with the spontaneity and the absence of coercion characteristic of the faculty of will, the latter having to do with deliberation and the unfettered choice of one object rather than another.

The third essay shows in more detail than the two previous essays that Edwards allows only for necessary effects, rules out effects that could be otherwise (the traditional understanding of contingencies), and defines contingencies as effects the causes of which are unknown and which therefore appear as utterly fortuitous. Edwards also is shown to

base his deterministic conclusion by assimilating propositional certainty to causal necessity, an argumentative tactic that is dubious at best.

Edwards' work offers an understanding of freedom that would be viewed as self-contradictory by the older tradition; specifically it identifies the will as determined to one effect. In the older tradition, determination to one effect is characteristic of natural causes that are not contingent in their manner of operation. The will has been traditionally identified as a free cause—and a free cause, by definition, is not determined to one effect. In short, what Edwards presents as freedom would not be understood as freedom by the older tradition, Reformed or otherwise. From an early modern perspective, Edwards' view of freedom sounds all too much like the following:

Conceive, if you please, that while continuing in motion [a falling] stone thinks, and knows that it is endeavoring, as far as in it lies, to continue in motion. Now this stone, since it is conscious only of its endeavor and is not at all indifferent, will surely think it is completely free, and that it continues in motion for no other reason than that it so wishes. This, then, is that human freedom which all men boast of possessing, and which consists solely in this, that men are conscious of their desire and unaware of the causes by which they are determined.⁶

Such a formulation is not amenable to the traditional Reformed view of human freedom.

Taken as a whole, the volume traces out developments in Protestant thought on providence, freedom, and the will from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth century. The patterns of doctrinal statement that extend from the earlier work of Vermigli, through the argumentation of Beza, to the later formulations of various thinkers of the orthodox era, illustrate the rise of a more technical or scholastic vocabulary and, with that vocabulary, a more carefully nuanced approach to divine and human causality. The soteriology of the Reformed writers began and remained distinctly Augustinian, while their construction of a causal framework within which to understand divine and human action took on detail from the Christian Aristotelian understandings of faculty

6. Benedict de Spinoza to G. H. Schuller, October 1674, in *Spinoza. Complete Works*, trans. Samuel Shirley, ed. Michael J. Morgan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), Letter 58, p. 909.