

# JOHN CALVIN: THE MYSTERY OF HIS IMPACT

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## I.

### THE MYSTERY

The title of this essay is at the same time a program. Over the years the vast and rich tradition of Calvin scholarship has concentrated on interpreting and understanding the course of his life and the texture of his thought. In view of the fact that theologians are predominant among the students of Calvin, it is quite understandable that the bulk of the secondary literature deals with the systematic cohesion of his thought and with the relevancy to modern times of issues, ranging from the inspiration of the Scriptures to the doctrine of eternal election. The recent work of William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin, A Sixteenth Century Portrait*,<sup>1</sup> is a significant new departure in the search for the person behind the system, recovering the man of flesh and blood, exposed to a complex bundle of contradictory psychological impulses. Though we will want to include both the theological and psychological approach our quest is oriented towards a different goal, namely to the question why Calvin stood out in his time, why his message was heard, received, remembered, and acted upon. In short, what elements in Calvin's thought and in the mood of the times lent his voice resonance beyond his family table, his circle of intimate friends, beyond Geneva and indeed beyond his own day?

Though this line of inquiry presupposes a close reading of Calvin's writings, it cannot be satisfied with a report on their content. It must explore the further question why a given audience in the Pew, in the Lecture Hall or in the Court House, be it in or outside Geneva, was prepared to lend him its ear rather than ignore or silence him, as happened to most contemporary voices competing for attention, authority, and loyalty. Since this procedure requires the high risk of generalization—as the very term 'the mood of the times' already indicates—I will proceed cautiously to six aspects of Calvin's message which shed light on what I regard as the mystery of his impact. This sequence of aspects requires six incongruous steps, but they must all be taken in good order to explain why a bookworm and a typical scholar without much social grace, in a marginal city at the edge of the Swiss confederacy was heard throughout Europe.

## II.

### THE IMPACT

1. The first answer we must give to the question of impact can be brief since it is now commonly recognized in secondary literature<sup>2</sup>: Calvin was a trained jurist. Trained by the progressive faculties in Orléans (1528-1529) and Bourges (1529-1531), he was well prepared to deal with what he called the '*humanitatis et civilitatis officia*.'<sup>3</sup> This very formulation alerts us to the fact that Calvin was concerned with that form of humanism which used the sources of antiquity to clarify the issues of power and justice in a Christian society. Though both Luther and Calvin were ordered by their fathers to study law while they themselves had preferred theology, with Calvin we find none of the inner reaction against this form of parental control. Luther revolted, sold his legal textbooks and entered the monastery. Calvin avoided such confrontation, rolled with the punch, acquired a firm grasp of the classics and pursued issues of legal theory and ethics. His first scholarly—and, as I believe, pre-conversion<sup>4</sup>—publication of Seneca (1532) dealt with the central problem of clemency, that thin demarcation line between tyranny and libertinism which forms the frontier between order and chaos.

Both training and vision prepared him for the task of writing the *Ordonnances Ecclésiastiques* (1541; revised in 1547 and 1561), which became the widely-imitated charter for the Reformation in Geneva. The same respect for order led to the innovative institutions of the *Consistoire* and the Academy of Geneva. Without these structural underpinnings of Calvin's heritage his *Institutio*—which grew from a short catechism to a formidable tome—might still have reached the desk of some learned rare-book collectors of the seventeenth century, but would not have become the textbook of so many Reformed theologians of his day—let alone of later days!

2. If Calvin the lawyer and organizational genius of lasting structures represents the first veil to be lifted from the mystery of his impact, a close second is formed by the fascination he held for an inner circle of close friends. Rarely has anyone gained historical stature, whose influence was not lifted beyond his grave by a coterie of dedicated first disciples. Against the traditional profile of Calvin, as propagated by generations of scholars, which presented Calvin as a 'lone ranger,' aloof, shy, and an introvert, Andrée Hugo has already pointed to the deep bonds of friendship which enriched the life of the young Calvin.<sup>5</sup> This applies also to Calvin in his later career; throughout his life he continues to be a man of deep attachments. His letters amply document that foremost among his friends are his spiritual father, Martin Bucer, his close colleagues Farel and Viret, his brother Claude, later in life, Bullinger, and increasingly Beza. The waves of grief after the death of his wife Idelette belie the seemingly passionless courtship.

The stoic caricature of Calvin may well explain why one seeks in vain in the secondary literature for Calvin's intimate report to Farel in a confidential letter from Strasbourg about the events during one late night in October 1539.<sup>6</sup> His pen is still shaky while he owns up to having committed a grave sin (*graviter peccavi*) in an immoderate seizure of fury, which found release only in a true flood of tears. The reason is that Martin Bucer had seemed to him to be disloyal in his confrontation with the duplicitous backslider Caroli.<sup>7</sup> As is quite understandable for the refugee situation, lacking the benefit of natural, social roots, the newly-found, spiritual 'brother' and 'sister' had to take on a new, intensified significance beyond the traditional attachment to blood relations.<sup>8</sup> Calvin's tears betray the pain of the adopted child, hungry for the warmth of the new found family circle.

If these explicit and amply documented bonds of deep attachment have been so little discussed,<sup>9</sup> it cannot be surprising that even less is known about a second circle of dedicated students and friends who played a unique role in preserving Calvin's heritage. In this second rank of friends we encounter the team of transcribers of Calvin's lectures, foremost among them Jean Budé (Budaeus), the second son of France's most learned humanist.<sup>10</sup> Calvin regarded Jean Budé, who lived just around the corner, as a special friend: '*optimus amicus noster*.'<sup>11</sup> Impressed by the example (since 1549) of the expert sermon transcriber Denis Raguénier (†1560), Budé took the initiative to gather some eager volunteers to record Calvin's lectures on the Psalms. But as Budé admits, in the case of the Psalms commentary of 1552, his team could not yet keep pace and still had to gain experience. Their procedure and proficiency improved increasingly, to the point that when Calvin's lectures on the Minor Prophets were published in 1559, Calvin had to acknowledge that the original had been preserved word for word.<sup>12</sup> Hence Budé could proudly claim that if it had not been for the effort of his team none of the original words of Calvin would have reached posterity.<sup>13</sup> Admittedly there was a financial dimension to the transcription of the sermons and lectures. Under the auspices of the mutual aid society of the refugees, "La Compagnie des Étrangers," the copyright was carefully protected and used for support of the impoverished newcomers. The dire need of the refugees made them inventive and inspired that kind of free-enterprise which later would be mistaken for the beginnings of capitalism. Those were employed who had already started this taxing job without financial incentive; they believed in the lasting significance of Calvin's work: these formed the first phalanx of transmitters.<sup>14</sup> The invention of 'rent-a-sermon' brought money into the coffers and provided the distribution system which put Calvin, the lecturer, on the market—first in Geneva by manuscript, later in all Reformed cities by the printing shops.

Even more important than the actual decision to record Calvin's oral presentations is the underlying question as to the source of such fascination for Calvin. As always in real life a number of answers are to be given.<sup>15</sup> At least one is found on that elementary level on which we evaluate any scholar, often without realizing it, namely whether she or he serves the field or makes the field serve the scholar. The test for Budé is that Calvin does not seek to impress with his eloquence but reflects in his own lecture—and writing—style the simplicity,<sup>16</sup> which the Reformer found so characteristic of scriptural language. A further explanation is Calvin's immense erudition and total recall which allowed him to prepare his lectures amidst many other pressing duties. One admirer put it in words that would be faint praise today: Calvin manages to prepare in less than half-an-hour, "*vix plerumque semihorae spatio.*"<sup>17</sup>

However, there is a third characteristic which is of particular interest to us, namely the impressive command of the biblical languages which lent Calvin's voice an authority which his listeners seldom failed to report. Calvin was indeed a good Latinist, though more concerned with simplicity than with elegance.<sup>18</sup> As far as Greek is concerned, to place him in the same league as Erasmus does perhaps not do sufficient justice to his expertise, since he had plenty of reasons to be quite critical of the many hasty errors in the New Testament-edition of the exegete from Rotterdam. Truly amazing, however, is Calvin's command of Hebrew which became after his French mother tongue and his concise Latin, his third language. The excitement of his readers and listeners to hear for the first time the Scriptures 'authentically,' usually arises from his interpretation of the Jewish Scriptures.

3. Here we encounter the third veil to be lifted from the mystery of Calvin's impact. For the first time in the history of the West the Jewish Scriptures are no longer presented as the 'Old' Testament. The Jewish Scriptures are now seen as the ancient, i.e. original Testament in which the eternal and lasting covenant is proclaimed to the people of Israel for all times. Hitherto, in the whole history of interpretation from Augustine through Luther, the Jewish Scriptures had been domesticated as the "Old Testament" by finding the key to its message in its prophecy of the coming of Christ. To Calvin this seemed a stark reduction; after all, the Books of Moses were the bible of Jesus.

Calvin's proficiency in Hebrew made him into the most outstanding among the Christian Hebraists of his day and indeed the only sixteenth-century Christian interpreter of the Hebrew Scriptures who is still relevant as a resource for modern textual studies. There is more at stake here, however, than his contribution to the history of learning. Calvin transformed the 'Old' Testament into the first and lasting Word of God. No longer is the New Testament presented as superseding the Old Testament according to the paradigm of 'shadow and light' or of 'promise and fulfillment,' as we find it with such church fathers as Crysostom and Augustine, or among Calvin's own contemporaries Erasmus and Luther.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, God is more manifest in the New Testament in so far as he has revealed himself more clearly in Jesus Christ. But the first among the elect are the Jews; they are the 'first born in the Church,' the *primogeniti in ecclesia*.<sup>20</sup> This is not just a pious or rhetorical call for the conversion of the Jews; Calvin insists on a radical reorientation of the Gentiles.

How deep this shift cuts becomes visible in the dramatic reinterpretation of the central text in Jeremiah 31 (verse 31). The whole Christian tradition had invoked these words as a proof text—the Lord says: "I will make a new covenant...not like the covenant I made with their fathers..." Here was the evidence that the covenant of God with the Jews had been preempted by a new covenant with the Christian church. For centuries this text had been used to expose the Jews as the 'Old Israel' of disobedience and the Christians as the 'New Israel' elected by God. For Calvin—as for modern scholarship—the text of Jeremiah expresses not the revocation but the renewal of the covenant with Abraham.<sup>21</sup>

This shift has far reaching consequences also for Calvin's reading of the New Testament. The mission of Christ is primarily to the Jews (Matthew 15, 24); only after the resurrection is the range of the Gospel extended to the gentiles.<sup>22</sup> Hence Christians are added to the People of God

and inserted in the Tribe of Moses, and not the other way around as had been the traditional wisdom. The 'Old' or rather the 'Primary' Testament is not only Holy Scripture because of its prophetic witness to the future Messiah, but because it tells the story of God's care for his people, as relevant today as it was in the time of Moses and the prophets. For the first time the Jewish Scriptures are presented as equally relevant to Christians and Jews, no longer allowing for that old loaded contrast of the People of the Law versus the People of Grace. Hitherto the crucial expression in Romans 10:4, Christ is the End of the Law, "*finis legis*," had been, as Calvin insisted, misinterpreted to mean that Christ is the "end" of the law. Rather it means that Christ is the 'scopus' and goal ('but') of the law.<sup>23</sup>

Quite different from Luther and the whole medieval tradition the Law of Moses is not presented as externally 'forcing the hand' in contrast with the Gospel as the 'inner guide of the heart.' Such had been the argument of Thomas, Scotus, and all commentators on Lombard. For Calvin the law is 'The Way,' the '*l'intention de Dieu*,' the infallible and therefore reliable directive toward the right relation with God and the neighbor. But—as most Calvinists will be surprised to hear—the law as a set of precepts is only a side-show: an '*assessoire*';<sup>24</sup> its main point is faith and salvation.<sup>25</sup> The core of the law teaches that God is the Father and Saviour of his people with whom he has made an '*alliance gratuite*,' a covenant of grace.<sup>26</sup> The Law of Moses is therefore not just a way of living but the Way of Life.<sup>27</sup>

4. The radical reinterpretation of the relation between Christians and Jews causes a steep reduction in the traditional Christian arsenal for anti-semitism. Though Calvin finds in the Scriptures both promises and threats of God they are no longer divided in terms of the promises for Christians and threats to the Jews. The harsh critique directed by the Old Testament prophets against the People of Israel had long served the Christian exegetical tradition from Augustine through Luther to prove the unreliability of the Jews and to explain why God gave up on the old Israel. For Calvin, Christians and Jews are so clearly the one People of God that the prophetic critique is a call for reform of the whole Church throughout history and particularly in this own time. The formidable and indeed decisive demarcation line is drawn by the election of God which dwarfs the distinction between Christians and Jews: The father of all the elect, is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

This vision implies a triple shift which helps us to grasp the extent to which Calvin taught his disciples to read the Scriptures anew. In the first place, and in keeping with the rejection of the traditional view of the Old Testament as superseded by the New, for Calvin the key to the Hebrew Scriptures is not its 'prophecy towards Christ.' Admittedly, there are such '*vaticinia ad Christum*.' But the real significance of the Old Testament is its witness to the threatened experience of the People of God and the concrete description of the persecution and perils to which this People is and will be exposed till the end of time. When Calvin repeats over and over that the message of the prophets Isaiah or Daniel is 'written for us,' he does not point to a christological key or a messianic prophecy, but he actualizes by retelling their story about God as Lord and Protector of his people living in an antagonistic world.

The second shift is Calvin's startling assertion that the mission of Christ was directed only to the Jews.<sup>28</sup> After Pentecost it is the work of the Spirit to extend the People of God and include the Gentiles. When Christ says: "I have still other sheep, which are not of this fold, them also I must bring in"<sup>29</sup> those other 'sheep' are for Calvin no longer the Jews but the Gentiles, who may henceforth call the patriarchs and the prophets their own.<sup>30</sup>

The third shift is related to this perspective of Jesus as a Jew serving the Jews. For Calvin this is important for understanding not only the Gospels, which describe the events in the life of Christ but also for the epistles of Saint Paul, which articulate their significance. Calvin wants it to be taken seriously that Paul was a Jew and trained as a rabbi. The Apostle writes Greek but, as Calvin never tires of saying, he thinks 'more *hebraico*'; his writing is Greek in grammar, but Hebrew in structure and thought. The indicated triple shift may seem to be quite technical, but it is part and parcel of a wholly different way of reading the undivided Scriptures by telling the one

story of the People Of God, of the *'ecclesia'* as the *'piorum omnium mater,'* the mother of all the children of God.<sup>31</sup>

Modern students of the history of anti-semitism will still find with Calvin ample comments about the Jews, which they have come to recognize as part of the Christian anti-semitic arsenal. In this vein Calvin can make asides about the 'stubborn' reduction of the promises of God to the temporal benefits of the land of Israel or references to the 'arrogant' reliance on being of the same flesh as Abraham. Yet the racist dimension is missing, when all points of critique are directed against the Church in both eras, in the dispensations of Moses and of Christ.

The designation of Jesus and Paul as Jews and the view of the Jews as the first born (*primogeniti*) in the Church<sup>32</sup> is indeed a remarkable innovation, but it does not help to explain the impact of Calvin. On the contrary, such close association of Jews and Christians in a Europe which, especially since 1492, had grown increasingly intolerant and suspicious of Jews could not have been a drawback. At the same time, as in the case of the Jewish tribes gathered by Moses, the insistence on the relevancy of both tables of the law lent the early Reformed communities the social cohesion they needed so badly. With the Ten Commandments as the infallible kernel of Scripture and as the undoubtable 'intention' of God goes a common new lifestyle—reaching all the way from the avoidance of images and crucifixes to the strict observance of the Sabbath.

Later generations have found with Calvin the assertion of the literal infallibility of Holy Scripture. Yet Calvin is also in this respect a second-generation reformer: he realized that *'sola scriptura'* does not provide an unassailable standard: biblical interpretation can be turned too easily into a game of words, especially by the learned *'Docteurs.'* The Ten Commandments, however, cannot be bent or misunderstood: therefore they form the unassailable cradle of Law and Gospel: *"Tout cela...est contenu en la loy."*<sup>33</sup> This is high theology, but with far-reaching consequences for daily life. The steep rise of Old Testament baptismal names in Calvinistic cities and territories documents that Calvin's insistence on the one People of God was widely heard and understood.

Another characteristic of Calvin's doctrinal profile is directly related to this new Reformed lifestyle. There is today a growing consensus that Martin Luther was an apocalyptic prophet of the end-time, acutely aware of living 'in these last days.' Luther saw himself existentially involved in the eschatological battle between God and the Devil, or, more precisely, between Christ and the Anti-Christ. For Calvin this end has not yet drawn near; the Master of Evil is not the Anti-Christ but Satan. This Satan is not so much the opponent of God as his agent, operating in the domain conceded to him, yet in his every evil move subservient to the sovereign God. For Calvin Satan or the Devil is not the Anti-Christ but the Anti-Spirit, who from the beginning of time has been persecuting the faithful 'East of Eden,' in Egypt, during the Babylonian captivity, in the days of the minor prophets, before and after the coming of Christ, and throughout the history of the church.

This vision of the continuity between the religious and political history of Jews and Christians portrays the Reformation not as the climactic battle preceding the final coming of the Kingdom, but rather as the wake-up call and mobilization of the elect who should expect to be exposed to the same persecution which the Jews experienced ever since the time of Abraham and Moses. To employ the famous words of Winston Churchill, the Reformation is for Calvin not the 'beginning of the end' but only 'the end of the beginning.' Accordingly, Calvin insists on the 'perseverance of the saints,' who are to keep their eyes on the prize of the future life, armed not for revolutionary apocalyptic change but for survival and amelioration. Having come to his own conversion out of the experience of underground existence and fear of persecution in Paris, he lent his voice to all the displaced persons who, following Abraham out of their country, were exposed to Satanic xenophobia.

In a revealing letter dated October 18, 1548, and written under the pseudonym Charles d'Espeville—a name which, after his first, secret mission to the Court of Ferrara, he would continue to use when communicating with the underground churches in France Calvin formulates

his vision so succinctly that he deserves to be quoted in full: God said to 'our Father' Abraham 'get thee out of thy country...unto a land that I will show thee.'<sup>34</sup> If it pleases God to do the same to us today so that we too must leave our homeland and resettle in an unknown country without knowing what is awaiting us, let us place ourselves in his hands and have him direct our steps. Grant him the honor to trust Him that He will guide us to a good haven (*a bon port*). Yet we should realize that we will not be brought into a paradise on earth (*en ung paradis terrestre...sans aulcune molest*)...'<sup>35</sup> Even in 1561, when the situation of the reformed church in France started to look so much more promising, Calvin continued to warn that what was coming would require all the consolation and strength of the doctrine of election: "I announce to you that tough battles are ahead, tougher than you think."<sup>36</sup> Exile is the work of Satan, and yet part of God's design. It could have aborted Calvin's reformation. *De facto*, it fostered cohesion and made survival a saintly goal.

5. Our quest for the mystery of Calvin's impact would be incomplete if it were not to include a separate point about Geneva's discipline, the '*censura morum*,' and the social control that goes with it. We are still in the process of sorting out the differences between fact and fiction. A massive phalanx of influential Calvin scholars have long held that Calvin made discipline into the third mark of the true Church, next to the two characteristics described in the *Confessio Augustana* (1530), the true preaching of the Word and the proper administration of the Sacraments. As if he had foreseen such a distortion, Calvin explicitly denies that church discipline is an additional and third mark of the true Church.<sup>37</sup>

On the other hand the social historians among Calvin scholars have assumed that the proposed discipline necessarily limited Calvin's impact and is chiefly responsible for the decline of Calvinist rule in Lyons, Nimes, and those territories outside of France where Calvinism was victorious for only a limited period of time. To a remarkable extent this can be verified through the opening up of the registers of the *Compagnie des Pasteurs* as Robert Kingdon has done so effectively.<sup>38</sup> Here we see Calvin, well into the 1550s in bitter conflict with those he called the Epicureans and Libertines, but who were in reality defending civic liberties against ministerial hegemony.

It is important to realize, however, that there is also another side to this discipline, where 'social control' is a misleading designation for the moral cohesion which every refugee community needs for survival in an alien culture. The Ten Commandments which Moses gave the Israelites for exactly the same purpose were, for Calvin, not arbitrary divine directives but remedies for social evil and the best protection of true humanism.<sup>39</sup> Strict discipline actually corresponded to the needs of the refugee community, as is amply documented by the records of the Reformed refugee congregation in London<sup>40</sup> and Emden,<sup>41</sup> which abound with examples of protection of children, women and generally of the socially underprivileged.

There is still another aspect to this same story. A recent study of sixteenth-century Antwerp establishes the continuity between the five years of Reformed rule and the succeeding counter-reformation rule by the Jesuits. Before and after the reconquest of 1585, we encounter in Antwerp the same public campaign against taverns, gambling, prostitution, and nudity.<sup>42</sup> In general it can be said that—what must be seen today—the most offensive tenets in Calvinistic discipline were completely in keeping with late medieval city legislation, they were fully in step with the growth of that moral self-control which, according to the model of Norbert Elias<sup>43</sup> and the findings of Heinz Schilling,<sup>44</sup> coincided with the emergence of the modern state. It should not surprise us that of the three major reform movements centered in Wittenberg, Zurich, and Geneva, Calvin's Reformation was relatively more successful in answering the challenge of the high moral demands as articulated by the radical reformers. In short, Calvin's emphasis on discipline can only be designated as 'social control,' when it is realized that this control was in keeping with an impatient, broadly-based longing for moral reform and one of the very reasons for the success of the Calvinistic Reformation.

6. The final and perhaps, historically, primary factor which can help us to explain Calvin's impact is his effective response to the generally acknowledged late medieval crisis in the realm of penance and conscience. It has been argued that Luther's impact is to be explained in terms of his response to the burden of guilt heaped on the layman in the confessional; and indeed there can be no doubt that the message of justification by faith brought relief to many guilt-ridden consciences.<sup>45</sup> It is to be remembered, however, that Luther left the sacrament of penance intact, even though reinterpreting true contrition as the return to the baptismal covenant of grace. Calvin, on the other hand, rejected the sacrament of penance altogether, designating it already in the first edition of his *Institutio*, Basel 1536, as 'a false sacrament.'<sup>46</sup>

An important dimension of his own conversion had been the struggle with unremitting guilt.<sup>47</sup> In keeping with his characteristic emphasis on the importance of experiencing the work of the Holy Spirit, Calvin provided a spiritual guide for all those who no longer lived under the shield and cover of the confessional. Now they were directly confronted with the Holy judgment of God, without the solace of the priestly absolution '*ego te absolvo.*'

It is not easy to overestimate the extent of the shock and indeed trauma of the first generation of European Christians who had to live henceforth without the comfort of priestly protection. Calvin knew it and described it in vivid terms. In searching for the reasons of the impact of Calvin it is therefore important to note that no religious thinker of the sixteenth century dealt so squarely and head-on with this new situation as John Calvin, who exposes in every sermon and prayer the direct confrontation with the holiness of God.<sup>48</sup> Whereas the Middle Ages had trained the faithful to experience a troubled conscience<sup>49</sup> and *Anfechtungen*,<sup>50</sup> Calvin was the first to break through this monastic tradition and proclaim 'the pure conscience' as the characteristic of true faith<sup>51</sup> and even the condition for true prayer.

This bold emancipation from the confessional<sup>52</sup>—hitherto overlooked—is part and parcel of the striking radical demythologization of which the much-discussed anti-ritualism and iconoclasm are only the negative components. Calvinistic anti-ritualism as such can be best understood in terms of the new social 'setting' of the refugee community. Cut off from the local shrines and regional fertility rites which are organically in tune with the natural rhythm of the native environment, the rejection of formerly sacred rituals goes with the new experience of dislocation and the move to new frontiers.<sup>53</sup> The refugee experience both sharpened Calvin's reading of the Scriptures and allowed him to speak to the conditions of his time.

Yet for someone who has gone down in history as a fundamentalist and biblicist, it is remarkable how innovative Calvin dares to be in demythologizing the Holy Scriptures, in demiraculizing the miracles and internalizing the significance of prayer,<sup>54</sup> and even in his treatment of central events in the life of Christ. Calvin ventures to present the descent into hell and the ascent to heaven no longer as 'actual,' in the traditional sense of space and time, but now reinterpreted as Jesus' internal experience of extreme anguish.<sup>54a</sup> In Calvin's hands the descent into hell becomes the radical alienation from God, and the Ascension the radical proximity to God.

All these instances have in common the discovery of the psychology of religion—called by Calvin the 'secret operation of the Spirit.' It is this spiritual psychology, which allowed the involuntary nomads to leave the sacred world of shrines and circumscribed sacrality and to survive 'in the desert' by reliance on the 'boundless' (i.e., without boundaries) care of the covenanting God—trekking with his people "as a fugitive Himself."<sup>55</sup> With this epithet for the Almighty Calvin coined a new phrase. The bonds of the spirit extended beyond the boundaries of the native soil: they formed the lifelines in the arid desert of exile.

## III.

## LIMITING FACTORS

We may conclude that Calvin was able to speak to the conditions of his time which made exile a reality and a realistic threat well beyond the ranks of those actually forced to leave their country—for the Nicodemites in 'hiding' and for the activist underground network in France, Italy and the Low Countries. Calvin's institutional inventions and initiatives—the academy, the consistory and the synod—allowed for forms of organization which were sufficiently loose to be adaptable to national exigencies and, yet, at the same time, were sufficiently firm to prepare for a flexible response in times of extreme duress.

It is one of the ironies of Sixteenth Century history that this promising profile of a total vision for religious reform and political survival, which lent Calvinism its surprising impetus, contained already in the cradle its own statute of limitations. Calvin's true followers are movers, not stayers; and the call to follow Abraham intends to transform settlers into trekkers. It is a measure of his impact and success that the Reformed movement spread to the Palatinate, the United Provinces, England and Scotland—as it did later to America and South Africa, ideologically prepared to stay in step with the moving frontier. But wherever this wave crested, wherever the frontier was reached this meant the integration of refugees into the emerging modern states, which by necessity transformed the religious nomads into social city-dwellers. Once removed from its social matrix, without the daunting experience of the former reality of displacement and persecution, the original vision of election into the Company of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob became the doctrine of private predestination. And the common discipline needed to preserve group identity in an antagonistic world, gave way to the pursuit of personal purity, ultimately to develop into the pursuit of private prowess.

At the same time, some severely limiting factors are due to Calvin's own program, implementation and fundamental decisions. Three of these stand out and should be mentioned explicitly.

1) As the exiled spiritus rector of the French reformed underground, he held the movement on course, *i.e.*, on his course, from afar but never far behind the facts. He did so by trying to control its two 'extreme' wings. He assailed the 'Nicodemites' as quislings and collaborators, and called for all French adherents to come out of the closet and risk open confrontation. By overhearing their rebuttal that it takes more courage to persevere under cover, than to flee to Genevan safety—as Antoine Fumée put it in 1543<sup>56</sup>—he drove this group into despair, isolation and finally alienation. In the process Calvin lost precious potential for support far beyond the borders of France.

2) Against the other flank, the extremists who called for the use of force, he insisted on the path of resistance via legal means. He is clearly dismayed by the Amboise plot of 1560—the conspiracy to kidnap the young king and assassinate his Guise regents.<sup>57</sup> If Denis Crouzet had admitted Calvin's correspondence into the court of evidence, he would not have been so surprised about the 'passive response' of the Huguenots to the 1572 massacres<sup>58</sup>: they did Calvin proud! However, they themselves were done in. The Edict of Nantes (1598) should not allow us to underestimate the devastating impact of the slaughter: St. Bartholomew's Massacre was anything but a myth.

3) The treatment of Servet (1553)—about which Calvinistic historiography is still evasive—is but one instance of the hard line Calvin drove through the reformed camp. Bolsec would have become an even more abhorrent symbol of intransigence if Bern had not offered asylum.<sup>58a</sup> His alienation of such earlier friends as Gérard Roussel<sup>59</sup> (Ruffus), Pierre Toussaint<sup>60</sup> and Sébastien Castellio<sup>61</sup> are but personalizations of the price paid for the uncompromising stance required in leading a decentralized resistance movement.



All of these setbacks and drawbacks, however, are dwarfed by the indicated transformation of the exiled nomads into established citizens. This spelled at once the disintegration of the original social matrix and the transition from Calvin's movement to "neo"-Calvinism.

Looking back over the ground we covered in seeking to understand Calvin's impact, we found six answers—quite certainly not exhaustive and by no means all of them new. Yet, by not 'celebrating' or even 'assuming' impact in the way hagiography does, our analysis of the interplay between Calvin and early Calvinism allows for a critical distance to traditional biography or timeless doctrinal reconstruction.

In six 'steps' we noted:

- (1) the structural significance of Calvin's innovative institutions;
- (2) we listened to the excitement and fascination of Calvin's first communicators;
- (3) we called attention to the new identification of Jews and Christians as the spectacles through which the situation of exile is interpreted;
- (4) we observed Calvin, rereading the Scriptures in the light of the experience of persecution and displacement. Understandably, the high evaluation of the Ten Commandments as the Way of Life provided the key to group-identity in an antagonistic environment;
- (5) directly related is the emphasis on discipline as a form of moral self-control and as a survival mechanism. And finally,
- (6) we discovered Calvin's attraction for those who not only were uprooted from the nurturing motherland but who were also deprived of the most 'fatherly' of all Sacraments, priestly absolution.

While these six aspects help us to understand why Calvin's message could be attractive and how early Calvinism came 'off the ground,' they alert us simultaneously to the deep chasm between the short-term impact in the Sixteenth Century and the long-term reception from the Seventeenth Century onwards. As always in history, there is both discontinuity and continuity. Yet, it is the later state-protected religion of the settled 'bourgeois' Calvinist, which redirected the movement, and—for the modern observer—raises a formidable smoke screen. This screen obstructs our insight into the original magnetism with which Calvin drew the first refugees to Geneva, and it blocks our access to the original matrix of fear, and faith, of persecution and perseverance.

In a fascinating recent novel about Nigeria in post-colonial times, Paul Theroux introduces as the narrator a sophisticated white American who is the acting director of a local Nigerian high-school. The following account of his non-encounter with the native bursar of the school not only reveals how difficult it is to translate biblical categories into modern parlance, but also what a distance the modern historian has to bridge to start to understand the sixteenth-century reality of Calvin's vision: "He [the bursar] was a member of one of those churches who believe you are either saved or damned. He was saved; I was damned—he had made that plain enough to me the first time we had met, so I felt no need to be polite to him. He had already consigned my soul to Hell."<sup>62</sup>

Reformation scholarship has not felt the need to be polite to Calvin—to a large extent, I am convinced, because Calvin admirers and neo-Calvinists have allowed him to be reduced to the man who believed that you are either saved or damned. The price to be paid is not only the caricature of a man and his message, but the fundamental misunderstanding of his age and our day: the fast food of the neo-Calvinist Geneva-burger could not have met the needs of the times or provide for the survival-power until our own day.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>New York, Oxford University Press, 1988.

<sup>2</sup>Joseph Bohatec, *Budé und Calvin, Studien zur Gedankenwelt des französischen Frühhumanismus* (Graz, 1950), p. 440. Robert Kingdon has repeatedly called attention to Calvin's activity as an expert lawyer in Geneva. See "Calvin and the Government in Geneva," in *Calvinus ecclesiae Genevensis Custos*, ed. W.H. Neuser (Frankfurt a.M., 1984), pp. 49-67; esp. 59f. Cf. the seminar report "Calvinus 'Registrator [sic!]: The 1543 'Constitution' of the City-State of Geneva," in *Calvinus Servus Christi*, ed. W.H. Neuser (Budapest, 1958), pp. 225-32; esp. 226. Cf. Kingdon's forthcoming contribution to *Anticlericalism in the later Middle Ages and Reformation*, ed. H.A. Oberman and P. Kykema, Brill, Leiden, 1992.

<sup>3</sup>*Institutio* (1536), Cap. VI; QS 1. 232, 34.

<sup>4</sup>See my article in FS for G.W. Locher: "Subita Conversio: The 'Conversion' of John Calvin."

<sup>5</sup>A.M. Hugo, *Calvijn en Seneca. Een inleidende studie van Calvijns Commentaar op Seneca, De Clementia, anno 1532* (Groningen, 1957), 8-12.

<sup>6</sup>Of course, the exceptional—and exceptionally profound!—Emil Doumergue has noticed this incident, even though he gives a different interpretation to the occasion. *Jean Calvin. Les hommes et les choses de son temps. II. Les premiers essais*, George Bridel, Lausanne, 1902, 397-400.

<sup>7</sup>"*Ubi domum redii, correptus sum mirabili paroxysmo, nec aliud solatii occurrebat quam in gemitu et lachrymis.*" Letter of Oct. 8, 1539. *CO* 10.398 C - 399 A. For the conflict with Caroli see Richard C. Gamble, "Calvin's Theological Method: The Cause of Caroli," in *Calvin: Erbe und Auftrag* (Festschrift for W. Neuser), ed. Willem van 't Spijker, Kok, Kampen 1991, 130-137.

<sup>8</sup>Related to this is that throughout his life Calvin readily identifies with orphans. In his commentary on Ps. 27, 10 he notes that God will act '*in loco parentis*' when parental care has vanished: "*patris simul et matris officio functurum*," acting as Father and Mother at once. *CO* 59.277 C.

<sup>9</sup>Though the theological indebtedness of Calvin to Butzer has long been recognized the personal relationship deserves separate treatment. Calvin articulates both in his letter of June 26, 1548 to Bullinger. *CO* 12.729 A/B. In the same letter we encounter—as far as I can see, for the first time—the expression 'Calvinism' (in one breath with 'Buceranism'). Calvin reports how badly his representatives fared in Bern, where they were told to leave '*cum sui Calvinismo et Buceranism.*' *Ibid.* 730 C.

<sup>10</sup>See the precious booklet by William Monter—required reading for an introduction to the 'smell' of life in sixteenth-century Geneva: *Calvin's Geneva*, John Wiley, New York 1967, 170.

<sup>11</sup>*CO* 42.193 B.

<sup>12</sup>In the subtitle of the French translation of the lectures on Hosea only Budé is mentioned by name—"Recuellies fidellement de mot a mot par Iehan Budé..." (Geneva 1557). In the French translation of the Daniel lectures, Geneva 1562, the claim '*mot à mot*' is no longer necessary but now the name of Charles de Ionviller is added as second '*auditeur.*'

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<sup>13</sup>CO 42.194 C. For the form of cooperation in this team see T.H.L. Parker, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1986, 27f.

<sup>14</sup>See the testimony of Jean de la Haize, written in La Rochelle, a year after Calvin's death: God has granted "*à ce saint personnage des dons et graces admirables...*" Preface to the Sermons on Daniel, CO 41.319 A.

<sup>15</sup>Effectively using the '*Registres de la Compagnie des Pasteurs*' Robert Kingdon concludes his analysis of the reaction of 'ordinary people' in Geneva to the Bolsec case: "While Calvin was technically only but one of a company of pastors and teachers, he was the one who commanded by far the greatest degree of public attention. This is a striking contemporary witness to his personal charisma and the degree of respect—or fear—with which he was regarded by the general population in Geneva. It shows us something significant about the sheer force of his personality." "Popular Reactions to the Debate between Bolsec and Calvin," in *Calvin: Erbe und Auftrag* (as in note 6), 138-145; 144.

<sup>16</sup>Characterized by de la Haize as '*populairement et facilement.*' *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup>CO 42.194 C.

<sup>18</sup>See François Wendel, *Calvin et l'Humanisme*, Paris, 1976.

<sup>19</sup>For the developments within this 'western' tradition and its increasing emphasis on the literal sense of Scripture, see particularly the first part of James Samuel Preus, *From Shadow to Promise. Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1969, 9-165.

<sup>20</sup>CO 51.152 A; Eph. 1,12.

<sup>21</sup>CO 42.250 A; Hosea 2,19. See the commentary of Calvin on Jeremiah: God is reliable and does not contradict himself; hence the first covenant stands and cannot be violated: "*Sequitur ergo primum foedus esse inviolabile.*" CO 38,688 A; Jer. 31, 31. Unfortunately, the surviving sermons on Jeremiah break off with the exposition of chapter 18, 23 (Aug. 16, 1549). See *Supplementa Calviniana, VI. Sermons sur les Livres de Jérémie et des Lamentations*, ed. Rodolphe Peter, Neukirchener Verlag, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1971, XV.

<sup>22</sup>CO 51.173 B; Eph. 2,17.

<sup>23</sup>CO 51.175 A; Eph. 2,20. In his first biblical commentary, on Romans (1540), the distance from Luther is not yet present, or not yet measurable. See T.H.L. Parker ed., *Iohannis Calvinii Commentarius in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos*, SHCT 22, (Brill, Leiden 1981), 223f.

<sup>24</sup>CO 53.31 A.

<sup>25</sup>"...*le principal est que nous soyons asseurez de notre salut.*" CO 53.29 B - 32 A; 32 A. Third Sermon on I Tim. 1, 5-7.

<sup>26</sup>CO 53.31 C.

<sup>27</sup>CO 53.30 A.

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<sup>28</sup>CO 51.173 B; Eph. 2,17.

<sup>29</sup>John 10,16.

<sup>30</sup>CO 51.179 C; Eph. 3,6.

<sup>31</sup>CO 51.199 B/C; Eph. 4,12.

<sup>32</sup>CO 51.152 A; Eph. 1,12.

<sup>33</sup>CO 53.31 C.

<sup>34</sup>Genesis 12,1.

<sup>35</sup>CO 13.63 C; cf. CO 31.709 C; Ps. 76,11.

<sup>36</sup>See his open letter to the reformed churches in France of August 18, 1561; CO 18.623 C: “*vobis denuncio restare duriores quam putatis pugnās.*”

<sup>37</sup>CO 49.307 B/C I Cor. argumentum. The Weak (infirmi) should not be excluded, since “God only begins his work in this life.” *Ibid.* 308 C; I Cor. arg. cf. CO 7.67.68. See further W. Balke, *Calvijn en de Doperse Radikalen*, Ton Bolland, Amsterdam 1977, 277.

<sup>38</sup>See note 15 above.

<sup>39</sup>In view of the rapidly increasing modern problem of the survival of refugee communities in alien cultures more help can be expected to be forthcoming from the social sciences for our understanding of the processes, pressures, and needs of such communities. For the psychological implications for a single profession, such as creative writers, see the suggestive study by Bettina L. Knapp, *Exile and the Writer. Exoteric and Esoteric Experiences. A Jungian Approach.* (Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, Pennsylvania, 1991). For a larger scope, see Wolfgang Benz, (ed.), *Das Exil der kleinen Leute. Alltagserfahrung deutscher Juden in der Emigration*, (Beck, Munich, 1991).

<sup>40</sup>A.A. van Schelven, *Kerkerads-Protocolen der Nederduitsche Vluchtelingen-Kerk to Londen 1560-1563*, (Amsterdam, 1921).

<sup>41</sup>*Die Kirchenratsprotokolle der Reformierten Gemeinde Emden 1557-1620, Teil 1: 1557-1574*, ed. by Heinz Schilling (Köln, 1989).

<sup>42</sup>Alfons K.L. Thijs, *Van Geuzenstad tot Katholiek Bolwerk*, (Brepols, Turnhout, 1990), esp. pp. 127-186. For the situation in Mechelen under Calvinist influence, see Guido Marnef, *Het Calvinistisch Bewind te Mechelen 1580-1585*, UGA, Kortrijk-Heule, 1987, 278-286.

<sup>43</sup>Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen. 1. Wandlungen des Verhaltens in den weltlichen Oberschichten des Abendlandes* (Basel, 1939; 2nd ed. Bern, 1969; 15th ed. Frankfurt, 1990).

<sup>44</sup>See Heinz Schilling, “Reformierte Kirchengucht als Sozialdisziplinierung?,” in W.Ehbrecht/H.Schilling, ed., *Niederland und Nordwestdeutschland*, (Cologne, Vienna, 1983), 261-327; Iden, “Die Bedeutung der Kirchengucht für die neuzeitliche Sozialdisziplinierung,” in G.

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Schmidt, ed., *Stände und Gesellschaft im Alten Reich*, (Klett, Stuttgart, 1989), 265-302. Cf. R. Po-chia Hsia, *Social Discipline in the Reformation. Central Europe 1550-1750*, (Methuen, London, 1989).

<sup>45</sup>See Stephen E. Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities*, (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1975).

<sup>46</sup>See Cap. V, De Falsis Sacraments, *OS I*, 169-202.

<sup>47</sup>See my contribution to the Festschrift for G.W. Locher, "*Subita Conversio: The Conversion of John Calvin*," ed. Alfred Schindler e.a. (Zürich, 1992).

<sup>48</sup>Rather than a list of quotations from the Commentaries and Sermons, I refer to the basic liturgical service, *La Forme des Prières...* (Geneva, 1542; perhaps earlier edition Strasbourg, 1541) particularly *CO* 6.179 B/C and 181 B - 182 B. See also the liturgy which replaced the Last Rites, *De la Visitation des Malades*, *CO* 6.208-209. In the summer of 1542 *La Forme des Prières et Chants Ecclésiastiques* was published in Geneva with thirty Psalms by Clément Marot and five by Calvin. See A.-L. Hermingard VII, *Correspondance des Réformateurs*, Paris, 1886, 409, n. 8. Cf. VIII, 71 n. 11.

<sup>49</sup>See Krister Stendahl, *Paul among Jews and Gentiles*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1976.

<sup>50</sup>Calvin knows about their endless variety: "*Est enim hominis anima quasi officina satanae ad fabricandos mille desperationis modos.*" *CO* 31.430 C; Ps. 42.7.

<sup>51</sup>Throughout the parallel to the 'good conscience' is 'the pure heart.' See e.g. *CO* 31.616 B; Ps. 66,17.

<sup>52</sup>For the cold air outside the confessional see *CO* 31.308 A; Ps. 31,14; cf. 205 A-C, Ps. 19,13; 510 B, Ps. 51,5; 511 A/B, Ps. 51,6.

<sup>53</sup>Calvin points to the fact that the exile in the 'desert' means that one leaves behind both the fatherland and its rituals, the sacrifices: "*privatus et patria et sacrificiis.*" *CO* 42.242 A; Hosea 2,14. But in the desert the same powerful God is present, the God of the Fathers: "*praeditum esse eadem virtute et potentia, quam exseruerat erga patres ipsorum.*" *Ibid.* 242 B.

<sup>54</sup>*CO* 31.571 A/B; Serm. 8 on Ps. 119; 26 February 1553. In keeping with this tenet is the psychological interpretation of 'invocation,' which God does not need, but which strengthens faith: "*quia fidem nostram his futuris confirmare utile est.*" *CO* 31.416 C; Ps. 40, 17.

<sup>54a</sup>Jerome Friedman. ARG

<sup>55</sup>See his introduction to the New Testament of Olivétan: "*Il les a accompagnés nuit et jour en leur fuite, eétant comme fugitif au milieu d'eux*"; he accompanied the Children of Israel night and day on their flight, 'present among them as a fugitive himself.' "*L'Épître à tous amateurs,*" '*La Vraie Piété,*' *Divers traités de Jean Calvin et Confession de foi de Guillaume Farel*, ed. Irena Backus and Claire Chimelli, *Histoire et Société*, No. 12 (Geneva, 1986), 26. 607.

<sup>56</sup>See my article "The Impact of the Reformation: Problems and Perspectives." *Politics and Society in Reformation Europe*. Essays for Sir Geoffrey Elton on his Sixty-Fifth Birthday, eds. E.I. Kouri and Tom Scott (Maxmillan, Houndmills and London, 1987), 3-31.

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<sup>57</sup>See Robert M. Kingdon, *Geneva and the Coming Wars of Religion in France, 1555-1563*, (Droz, Geneva, 1956), 68-78.

<sup>58</sup>See Denis Crouzet, *Les querriers de Dieu: La violence au temps des troubles de religion, v. 1525-v. 1610*, 2 vols. Ed. Seyssel, Champ Vallon, 1990, I 384ff.

58a

<sup>59</sup>In his last sharp public letter (Basel 1537), Calvin still designates Roussel—without naming him explicitly—as “*amicus singularis*.” CO 5.239 A. Translated into German by Leo Jud and published in Zürich on February 29, 1540. See CO 5.SL-XLI.

<sup>60</sup>See esp. the letter of October 22, 1558; CO 17.361-362. Rejection of Toussaint’s plea of six days before, who had still signed as “*Tuus ex animo*.” CO 17.358.

<sup>61</sup>See Etienne Giran, *Sébastien Castellio et la Réforme Calviniste*, Paris, 1914. Cf. Heinz

<sup>62</sup>*My Secret History*, (Ballantine Books, New York, 1989), 269.