
Calvin and Theocracy in Geneva: Church and World in Ordered Tasks*

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French historian Émile G. Léonard, in his famous *Histoire générale du protestantisme*, pictures Calvin as the “founder of a civilization” Indeed, according to Léonard, Calvin was not so much the author of a new theology as the creator of a new type of person, that is, the *re-formed* man of modern times (1988, 258). Epithets given to Calvinists confirm this understanding; they have been pictured as “secular monks” or “wordly saints” (Ryken) and their doctrine described as the finest example of “innerwordly asceticism” (Weber; Bainton 1956, 52). For Robert Kingdon, the real explanation of this moral austerity “lies in the fact that early Calvinist communities *enforced* morality...by the creation of the Calvinist consistory...established in Geneva by Calvin himself (1972, 4). It is therefore not surprising that Calvin is seen as the fountainhead of the moral austerity and rigidity that was for long a distinctive of Protestant countries.¹

Geneva’s linking with Calvin is one of the great symbiotics of history. It is now among the *loci communes* of Reformation textbooks to speak of Geneva as “Calvin’s city.” Yet, however suitable and handy, this expression is nevertheless inaccurate because it has the effect of surmising that Calvin held the position of a religious potentate in the small Swiss republic. It has in fact often been suggested that Calvin’s political thought was profoundly theocratic. It is important, however,

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to clarify what this nuanced term might mean. In its popular sense, a theocracy designates a political regime in which a priestly caste rules over human affairs.² *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* defines a theocracy as “a form of political government in which the deity directly rules the people...through a human representative, usually a priesthood or a divinely chosen king” (Schall 1967, 13). Among the eight historical examples listed in the article figures “the Geneva of John Calvin.” It will be argued in what follows that such an interpretation of the ruling system in Geneva is totally mistaken and devoid of historical foundation. Although the Presbytery unquestionably represented a dissuasive symbol for wrongdoers and the like-minded, still the city was never submitted to the ruling power of any clergy after the Genevans solemnly adopted the Reformation in May 1536. On the contrary, one can show that the new clergymen grappled for decades with the city magistrates before their rights—guaranteed by the Ecclesiastical Ordinances of 1541—were finally recognized in 1555; that is, only after the defeat of the Perrinists, Calvin’s old political enemies. In short, there is a need to demythologize the role and power of both Calvin and the reformed clergy in Geneva during the sixteenth century.

The Making of a Dictator: Calvin in the Hands of Controversialists

Modern historiography has not encouraged Calvinists to give in to triumphalism. Anachronistically judged by post-Enlightenment values of liberty and tolerance and seen only through particular doctrines and punctual events Calvin is depicted as a harsh, cruel and surly dictator who ruled unopposed over the Genevans. “Better with Beza in hell than with Calvin in heaven!” went a coined saying by Calvin’s enemies in the city. No less a historian than Jean Chelini, a mediaeval scholar, echos this understanding when he writes: “Calvin established a rigid theocratic dictatorship in Geneva, much heavier than that of the gregorian papacy! Those who did not profess the same faith were arrested, sentenced, banished and [note the plural] even burned at the stake, like the Spaniard Michael Servetus.”³

Caricature however culminates with Austrian writer Stefan Zweig and Swiss novelist Georges Haldas who have compared Calvin to twentieth-century despots Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin.⁴ In contrast to such extreme comparisons, it would surprise many to learn that Calvin never had any jurisdiction over the city of Geneva and that he could not even vote or carry a weapon since he was not granted the status of citizen before 1559; that is, only five years before he died. As writes Alister McGrath: "Despite his ability to influence through his moral authority, [he] had no civic jurisdiction, no *right*, to coerce others to act as he wished. Calvin could and did urge, cajole and plead; he could not, however, command" (1990, 109). The idea that he was a dictator in the city of Geneva is a historiographical myth that runs counter to a basic understanding of the ruling bodies of the city. If this myth finds its main roots in the polemical writings of the counter-reformation, Protestant figures like Jérôme Bolsec, a contemporary of Calvin, and Genevan historian Jacques-Augustin Galiffe (1776–1853) have also put their shoulder to the wheel in the shaping of the Calvinophobic legacy (Mützenbergh 1979, 33–45).

Part of the reason that the French Reformer is seen so negatively today lies in the fact that his life has been read mostly through the Servetus Affair and the doctrine of double predestination. It is not our purpose here to try our hands at untying the knots in these old issues. Identifying historiographical currents is more relevant to the topic at hand. Historiography of the nineteenth century makes a case in point in this regard. Indeed, it is significant to note how recent studies have tracked down ideological agendas behind the caricaturing of Calvin as the grand inquisitor of Protestant faith. In 1903, after a long period of debates, a monument was erected in Geneva to expiate the crime of Servetus's execution on 27 October 1553. If one cannot deny that Calvin was involved to some extent in the trial of the Spanish antitrinitarian, one must also keep in mind that the condemnation and execution (including the choice of the particular mode of execution of Servetus) were entirely the work of the city council, at a period in its history when it was particularly hostile to Calvin. Alister McGrath has proposed a different interpretation of the affair than the usual one. His argument states that the party hostile

to Calvin—that is, the Perrinists (under the leadership of the French noble Ami Perrin)—had recently gained power and were determined to weaken Calvin’s position: “Their prosecution of Servetus was intended to demonstrate their impeccable orthodoxy as a prelude to undermining Calvin’s religious authority within the city” (McGrath 1990, 116).

As regards Calvin, if one wishes to put him on the grill, he was confronted by a dilemma. To have let go the antitrinitarian Servetus would have meant for his enemies, both in Geneva and in Catholic countries, that he was indifferent to God’s truth and honour. It is thus more than likely that Calvin wanted to give a clear proof of his trinitarian orthodoxy which, we shall recall, had been called in question by Pierre Caroli in a public charge against Calvin in 1536. This accusation seemed to have haunted Calvin, if we are to judge by the energetic retort attributed to him: *Pro G. Farellio et collegis eius adversus Petri Caroli theologastri calumnias defensio Nicolai Galasii* [1545] (“In defence of William Farel and his colleagues against the calumnies of belly-theologian Peter Caroli by Nicolas Des Gallars”). In short, the Servetus Affair has been studied extensively and the historiographical data indicates that Calvin was not directly responsible for the death of the Spaniard.⁵ The Inquisition in Vienna (France) had already sealed his fate. As for Protestants, all the authorities of Switzerland approved his prosecution and execution. The only figure who openly opposed Calvin over the execution of Servetus was Sebastian Castellio, who happened to be on bad terms with Calvin because the latter had previously rejected his exegesis of the *Song of Songs*. Nevertheless, the Servetus Affair falls totally on Calvin. In most textbooks, he alone is blamed for the death of the Spanish heretic. Examples are as tedious as redundant. The reasons to this can be found mostly in the liberal agendas of nineteenth century Europe and America. For instance, Valentine Zuber has pointed out how for the occasion of the 350th anniversary of Servetus’s death in 1903 it was mostly the Anticlericals, the Free-thinkers and the Freemasons of the Third Republic in France who led the debates on this issue. It is under their pen that Michael Servetus became the victim of Reformed Protestantism and the hero par excellence of free thought (Zuber 1995, 100–1).

As for this side of the Atlantic, Thomas J. Davis has shown how nineteenth-century American history books have also played a significant role in the shaping of pejorative and intolerant images referring to Calvin. Davis points out how, "As Americans developed an identity for themselves, Calvin came to represent, in his very name, a broad tradition repudiated by the American public; indeed, Calvin came to stand for things un-American" (1996, 234). This resulted not only in caricaturing a man and his message, but in a fundamental misunderstanding of his age and our day. This way of portraying him turned him "into an authoritarian theocrat who preached an authoritarian (and despotic) God. This Calvin threatened the freedom that had come, ideally anyway, to define what being American meant. Thus, Calvin became the very image of intolerance, and he came to represent what it is that Americans, in their cultural attitudes, abhor" (246).

There is no question that through such lenses Calvin does appear as a misanthropic joy-killer. Scholarship however gives a somewhat different understanding of the man and his *ethos*. This is well indicated by Heiko Oberman: "[In Calvin's thought] redemption [a starting point in his *Weltanschauung*] is far more than just restoration, and grace does not merely repair nature, but reopens the intended path of evolution towards fulfillment and happiness...; [thus,] in looking for the 'historical Calvin', it would be a learned, but basic, error to find here a philosophical 'pessimism', dictated by Platonic dualism" (Oberman 1993, 272, 282).

Understood in such terms, the notions of redemption and grace throw new light on Calvin's theology of creation and society, a question to which we now turn.

Church and World in Ordered Tasks

Conscience and reason are helpless in showing us how to live our lives according to our creational purpose, and nature cannot show us the path to justice and holiness, for it can be both cruel and kind. Hence Calvin's judicial thought rests on a revelation, that is, the Decalogue. Let us be clear on his understanding: if God had to give us a *written*

law it is only because the *natural* law ingraved in our conscience had become insufficient because of our fallen state.⁶

Calvin distinguished three functions in the law whereas Luther distinguished two. First, the law is meant to convict us of sin (*usus elencticus*) and secondly to supply norms for civil society (*usus politicus*). The reformed tradition went a step further, "identifying a third use of the law (*usus in renatis*) as the guide to life lived in gratitude for the grace of redemption" (Hillerbrand 1996, 1: 241). Related to this was a strong emphasis on "ecclesiastical discipline" as a mark of the visible church. "This stress on good administration and responsible living was one of the great strenghts and main attractions of the Genevan model in a world full of turmoil and of the exercise of arbitrary power."

Calvin saw the state as a creation of God and not as a human by-product as it was understood to be in the Aristotelian tradition. He thus departed from the scholastic legacy of the Middle Ages and renewed the teachings of the early Fathers (Chenevrière 1937, 127, 129). Rather than being a basis for justice, the state was considered to be the source from which justice springs. Justice springs from God through the state, hence disobedience to the state is disobedience to God.⁷

The need for a political organisation is based on the will of God as expressed in his word. Until eschatological expectation comes to an end, society must avoid chaos and be maintained in relative morality and in this regard, as André Biéler points out, "the faithful presence of the church is indispensable to social life and all its aspects. The church ought to be a leaven inspiring and generating social, political, and economic life. If the church is dead, if the church exists but is not the community of the members of the body of Christ, if the church is present but does not impart to society as a whole the impulse of her constant regeneration by God's Word, the church herself co-operates in the propagation of social disorder" (Biéler 1965, 23; see *Inst.* 4.20.2).

This understanding naturally runs counter to the Spiritualists' dualistic views on the magisterial and Christian government. Calvin's response to their teachings can best be captured in his *Briève instruc-*

tion pour armer contre les erreurs de la secte commune des anabaptistes (1544) and in the fourth book of the *Institutes* (4.20.1–10). Calvin argues that the magistracy is ordained by God himself. The Bible gives them lofty titles and functions, such as gods and vicegerents of God. Calvin calls magistrates “vicars of God” on earth.⁸ In themselves magistrates are nothing but mere dust sustained by God’s power, yet God’s authority is embodied in their function (*Inst.* 4.20.6). The reign of the magistrates is God’s doing; that is, divine providence and holy ordinance. The author goes on to give Scriptural examples in support of his arguments. The Bible speaks of kings such as David, Josiah, Hezekiah, of lordships such as Joseph and Daniel and of civil rulers of a free people like Moses, Joshua and the Judges. Hence there is no point in opposing evangelical freedom to human government. Civil authority far from being carnal is, in Calvin’s *Weltanschauung*, the most honourable of all callings in the life of mortal men (see Battle 1980, 413). Therefore Anabaptists are wrong in asserting that the political order can be separated from God’s creational ordinance since the state has two functions: to insure that sin does not entail to great effects in human affairs and to secure a relatively peacefull life for all.⁹ The state and the Magistrate act as God’s restricting and constraining agents against sin (Chenevrière 1992, 176). This explains why the duties of the magistrates extend to both tables of the Decalogue.¹⁰

Calvin’s doctrine of the state not only contrasted with that of the Spiritualists, it also differed from the traditional Catholic understanding as well as from Luther’s and Zwingli’s. Calvin rejected both political Augustinianism and Thomism. In political Augustinianism, the Pope ruled over society with the Emperor acting as his secular arm. In Thomism, the church as a divine institution was to rule over the state, a natural institution. For Calvin however church and state had equal powers and were linked together by ties of cooperation and not by ties of subjection. Thus, one can hardly see how this understanding can be defined as “profoundly theocratic.”¹¹

First Experience in Geneva: Dictator or State Functionary?

In the middle of the sixteenth century, the population of Geneva amounted to approximately 10,000 inhabitants. Before the Reformation, the clergy was composed of about 400 persons. If we add all the lay workers whose incomes depended on the church, the total amount of clerics added up to approximately 1000, that is to say around 10 percent of the total population. After 1536, the clergy fluctuated between nine to twenty-two pastors during the time of Calvin (Kingdon 1982, 170). Kingdon has argued that the Genevan Reformation was basically an anticlerical social revolution. Prior to the Reformation, the city was ruled by the bishop and the diverse councils. By 1530, the council was virtually judicial master of the city. When the republic was inaugurated, it inherited a financial crisis contracted during its war for independence. The city of Berne, Geneva's powerful ally against the catholic duchy of Savoy, had helped the city with its armies and supplies, but it was now pay-back time (McGrath 1990, 89, 93–94). The population of Geneva thus remained under a certain supervision by the city of Berne and had to pass through the initial thicket of a precarious economical situation. This would entail future consequences, as W. G. Naphy explains: "The concentration of judicial, social and economic power in the hands of foreign clerics was a serious threat to Genevan independence. It was left to the magistrates to discover ways to curtail or destroy this power. Moreover, as Geneva was in serious need of money to finance its new-found freedom, the city had a further reason to move against the entrenched privileges of the church. *That the State was able to resolve most of these issues without reference to the clergy would have lasting implications for the future*" (1995, 18, *emphasis mine*).

When Calvin came to Geneva in 1536, there was only the general body of citizens maintaining preaching and the sacraments under the control of the councils without any church organization. The magistrates had control over ecclesiastical property and hired or dismissed preachers as they wished. They could also declare parishioners freed from excommunication, and could pass any legislation regarding religious matters as they saw fit (Foster 1992, 74–75).

In January 1537, a formulation of the new program was presented to the Council by Farel, Calvin and other preachers. Calvin had previously learned from Myconius and Oecolampadius the importance of church discipline. His emphasis on the communion was ethical rather than dogmatic. The essential question for Calvin was not whether Christ was present in the bread and wine, but whether he was present in the life of the communicant (Foster 1992, 79). Calvin recommended that the council should appoint "in every quarter of the city certain persons...who would have an eye on the life of every one" and report "any notable vice to a minister for private admonition."¹² The way was open in 1536 for a new conception of church and state as two distinct entities working in co-operation for the advancement of the Reformation and the well being of society.

It might seem that by the end of 1537 much had been achieved in constructing the New Jerusalem of which Calvin and Farel dreamed. In fact, writes McGrath, "a backlash had been precipitated" (1990, 99). The public oath to a confession precipitated a crisis and the council refused to allow the pastors to excommunicate unworthy members from the sacraments. In addition, the Bernese liturgical pattern was imposed upon Geneva. The climate was deteriorating and tension was high before Easter. The night preceding the service, angry mobs shot off muskets before the doors of the preachers and threatened to throw them into the Rhone if they refused to give them communion. On Easter Sunday, 21 April 1538, Farel and Calvin preached in spite of the prohibition. On 23 April, the general council voted that the two pastors should leave the city within three days (Foster 1992, 90–91). Calvin left for Strasbourg and Farel for Neuchâtel. They would not return to Geneva unless the church could lead its own affairs, including the right to discipline its membership and ordain pastors. In short, this episode shows that it is impossible to speak of Calvin's first experience in the city as one of a religious potentate.

Exile: Reformed Discipline in a "Bucerian" Embryo (1538–1541)

It was in Strasbourg that Calvin truly became "Calvin." It was at the age of thirty that he found a formula for a Reformation that was distinct from that of his predecessors. In all things, Martin Bucer served as Calvin's spiritual mentor. Perhaps one would be closer to the historical reality and fairer to this important figure, if one asserted that Calvin truly became "Bucerian" in Strasbourg. As a matter of fact, Jacques Courvoisier has pointed out long ago how much Calvin owed to Martin Bucer after his sojourn in the Alsacian city. Prior to 1538, he writes, Calvin is Lutheran, after 1541 he is Bucerian, or better, Reformed. This influence is most evident in Calvin's ecclesiology. For instance, before 1538 Calvin spoke of *the* ministry of the church, but after 1541 he speaks of the *ministries* in the plural when alluding to the church.¹³ Calvin thereafter based his ecclesiology on the four ministries mentioned in Ephesians, chapter 4; namely, pastors, doctors, elders and deacons. It is the office of elders, understood as the ministry of discipline, that best relates to the topic at hand. It is worth taking note how the institution of elders came to be in Strasbourg. This will enable us to compare their status and ministry with the order that Calvin instituted in Geneva upon his return in 1541.

First we need to know how Bucer and Calvin's view of the state differed from that of Luther and Zwingli. The Reformers of Wittenberg and Zurich saw the state as the main holder of civil and religious authority. As a consequence, the church, an organism almost devoid of any independence, soon becomes a kind of vassal of the latter. For Luther and Zwingli, the city was subject to the prince on the basis of the divine nature of secular power. The church was left with only a relative independence at the side of the state. Practically, we must say, the church was absorbed by the state.¹⁴

The emergence of territorial churches had preceded the Reformation by many years. Surprisingly, the seeds of the Protestant state church can be tracked down in the writings of Erasmus of Rotterdam. In his *Institutio principis christiani* (1516), Erasmus presented the newly emerging modern state as an autonomous, self-contained entity subordinated neither to Empire nor to papacy or church. As James Estes

explains, Erasmus concentrated on the tasks of the state and did not define the boundaries between church and state except by implication (1992, 52). In practice, this entailed the absorption of the church by the state: "The state has been turned into something so overwhelmingly religious in nature that the church is left with no separate, distinct goal or identity.... In their goal, church and state are one, and leadership clearly belongs to the state. This, in broad outline, is the relationship between church and state established in the Protestant territories during the Reformation" (62–63, 67).

As is well known, many humanists made their first steps in the Reformation through Erasmus and brought some of the latter's ideas into their agenda. Bucer is among those whose writings echo Erasmus's *Institutio*. His first published book *Das ym selbs niemant, sonder anderen leben soll* (1523) includes numerous direct borrowings from it. His emphasis on moral reformation and progress in piety as the goal of church discipline reflects the influence of Erasmus. As Amy Burnett points out: "throughout his life he retained an Erasmian concern for inner piety and outward acts consistent with Christian faith and love" (1991, 454). The main line in Bucer's theology is the kingship of Christ, a doctrinal and ethical principle basic to Reformed theology per se.¹⁵ In dealing with the *Corpus Christi* and its effective power in society, Bucer "shows an astounding inventiveness, by bringing the entire society as a *corpus christianum*, under a system of law that bears witness to the dominion of Christ" (Spijker 1993, 111). Here discipline was to play an important role in pruning communities in the Christian faith. Church discipline preoccupied Bucer as it had previously Oecolampadius (Courvoisier 1965, 24). In Strasbourg, as in Berne, Basel and Zurich, Reformation was still the concern of the civil power who secured the observation of the two tables of the Law. Bucer wished to set forth a disciplinary power distinct from civil power in the "Ecclesiastical Ordinances" of 1534, but this was not granted by the magistrates. So instead he made a detour. In 1531, the magistrates had established the *Kirchspielpfleger*, whose main duties were to watch over pastors and insure good order in the parish through the profession of faith, catechism, moral life and administration of the church. There were three *Kirchspielpfleger* in each parish

(Pulman 1912, col. 1017 and Courvoisier 1977, 134). Bucer vested these civil servants with an ecclesiastical power by linking them to the “elders” of the New Testament. Bucer inserted this idea in the Ordinances of 1534 (Courvoisier 1977, 135). However, the provision to give church wardens the authority to meet regularly and to summon parishioners with a free-and-easy attitude apparently remained a dead letter, since in January 1539 the senate, urged by the pastors, resolved to see to it (Burnett 1991, 449). This campaign on the part of the preachers to introduce an ecclesiastical discipline independent of the state was at its highest when Calvin arrived in Strasbourg in 1539. In the end, discipline was affirmed but the right to excommunicate remained in the hand of the magistrate (Courvoisier 1977, 35 n. 44). All these debates no doubt have had a great influence on Calvin during his sojourn in the Alsacian city.

Second Experience in Geneva: Skirmish and Duel over Church Policies

“Calvin’s return [to Geneva] was in no sense that of a triumphant potentate,” stresses Philip Hugues. “At no time did he attempt to usurp the authority of civil magistrates” (1966, 6). Nevertheless, Calvin remained vigilant. Basel reformer Myconius had warned long before to beware of the laymen who equated the council with the church through the formula *Senatus Ecclesia est*. Indeed, magistrates often attempted to justify their stand with a subtle interpretation of the Old Testament that saw in Moses a secular prince who gave orders to his brother Aaron the high priest. For Calvin, the ministry of the Word would immediately be lost if the church allowed the magistrate to put such a yoke on her (Cottret 1995, 174). Calvin would take steps to insure that Caesaropapism would not prevail once more over the church’s rights to determine its own policies in matters of discipline. Calvin’s first task when he returned to Geneva would be that of a legislative writer. The Genevans adopted many laws between 1541 and 1543: the *ordonnances ecclésiastiques* of 1541, the *édit du lieutenant* [of justice] and the *ordonnances sur les offices et officiers* of 1543. Taken as a whole, these texts formed a constitution for the young

Republic. For such a task, Calvin, a *homo trinlingus* formerly trained in law in Orléans and Bourges, seemed particularly well suited (Kingdon 1987, 210–11).

Calvin did not create new laws as such, but rather drew on former edicts. Nor was he an autocrat in the coining of the policies since he simply followed the aristocratic trend already existent in Geneva (Chenevrière 1992, 220). Calvin favoured a government that could be run by a team. As Kingdon indicates: “The fundamental laws of Geneva always gave power to teams, never to individuals” (1987, 214 n. 61). Let us recall that Calvin did not benefit from the status of citizen until 1559 (and hence could not vote), and that he was never part of any of the city councils. As regards his political advices, evidence show that they often came under scrutiny before they were declared *nihil obstat* by the magistrates.¹⁶

The text most relevant to our problem here is the *Ordonnances ecclésiastiques* of 1541. Calvin started a first draft when he arrived in Geneva. The final document was promulgated by the General Council on 20 November 1541 and became the foundation for the whole organization and discipline of the church of Geneva. Compared to the *Articles concernant l'organisation de l'église de Genève* of 1537, the *Ordonnances* of 1541 represent a major ecclesiological shift. The second document is much more precise and contains a substantial explanation of the doctrine of the four ministries that Calvin had grasped in Strasbourg. As regards church discipline, the Articles of 1537 did not specify clearly who was in charge of it.¹⁷ The Ordinances of 1541 now bestows the ministry of discipline to “the Elders of Delegates (*Commis*)” and specifies how the latter ought to proceed in admonishing the offender. The purpose of the disciplines imposed “should act as medicines to bring sinners back to our Lord.” The original text ended with this sentence but an additional article was proposed by the commission and was inserted in the final version. The addition is again revealing of the attitude of the Magistrate towards church discipline. The final paragraph reads as follows: “All this [i.e., discipline] is to be done in such a way that the ministers have no civil jurisdiction...and that there is no derogation by this Consistory from the authority of the Seigneurie or the magistracy; but the civil power shall

continue in its entirety. And in cases where there is need to administer some punishment or to restrain the parties, the ministers together with the Consistory...shall report the whole matter to the Council, which thereupon shall take steps to set things in order and pass judgment according to the requirements of the case" (Hugues 1966, 44; see CO 9:30).

The Ordinances of 1541, written by Calvin and revised by the Council, clearly prevented any possibility of a later drift toward theocracy. In addition, the 1541 edition of the *Institutes* marks a clear distinction between the political and religious powers.¹⁸ This distinction did not, however, stipulate that each institution had to work independently. The reciprocal collaboration between the institutionalized state and the institutionalized church served a purpose: "Geneva was to be a place where the Christian social organism, the visible church, was to recreate both the spiritual and temporal dimensions of the human set in closed unity" (Alves 1989, 9).

The question is whether the Ordinances brought some order in the relations between church and state. De facto, the state kept the right to control much of the church's affairs. For instance, pastors were chosen by pastors but they had to be approved by the councils. The doctors charged to teach theology were also presented by the ministers, but only provided they were elected with the approbation of the councils. Moreover, the Consistory was composed of members of the councils chosen by the councils before they were presented to the pastors and the Council of Two Hundred.¹⁹ And most importantly, the question of who had the right to excommunicate remained a bone of contention between the Magistrate and the company of pastors for nearly fifteen years. The council recognised the Consistory's right to admonish but not to punish. This understanding however was in total contradiction with the Ordinances which granted the Consistory the authority to excommunicate.²⁰ In March 1543, the Council went as far as to rule that the Consistory had no such power (Léonard 1988, 300). This long dispute culminated in a well-known case that lasted from 1553 to 1555. In February 1553 Ami Perrin was elected a second time as First Syndic. Philibert Berthelier, a prominent member of the Perrinist clan, had been banned from commun-

ion by the Consistory in 1551 (Cottret 1995, 205ff). Just before Christmas 1552, the council sought to bring those who had been excommunicated to the sacraments, including Berthelier, but the latter was not admitted to the Lord's Supper. On 21 December of the following year, the council itself ruled that, because of his intransigence, Philibert Berthelier should not be readmitted to communion. Furthermore, his brother François was excommunicated because of outrageous accusations he had made against the ministers in presence of the council (Hugues 1966, 11–12 n. 49). The council was then dominated by the Perrinists and 1553 was also the year of the Servetus Affair. It is therefore hard to speak of Geneva as "Calvin's city" during these years.

Things would soon change, however. From 1555 onwards Geneva saw the arrival of many French refugees. Most of them would be granted *bourgeois* status. By 2 May 1555, the names of fifty-seven persons had been added to the *Livre des bourgeois*, "with the Genevan cofers significantly augmented as a result" (McGrath 1990, 122). These newcomers were full of admiration for Calvin, their celebrated fellow countryman, and this contributed not a little to promote his influence in Geneva. The Perrinists, who, on the other hand, considered themselves to be Geneva's truest most faithful citizens, tried in vain to block the voting rights of the new citizens.

A riot broke out on 16 May 1555 that further discredited the Perrinists. In addition, the immoral behaviour which erupted immediately before the 1555 elections "may have swayed a few more people to support the Calvinists and their tough policies against corruption" (Naphy 1995a, 199). In the end, Calvinists won a majority; measures would soon entail. The same year, excommunication was recognized as incumbent on members of the presbytery.

The last decade of Calvin's life was a time during which he had an increasing influence upon the city. Kingdon speaks of "a kind of moral reign of terror" after the victory against the Perrinists (1996, 12 n. 4). Those who were charged as Perrinists after the revolution were either sentenced to death, banned, fined or warned. Penalties were also imposed on individuals charged for contact with Perrinists, but this "reign" was rather short.²¹ The victory of Calvinists, how-

ever, significantly increased the moral power of the Consistory. Kingdon notes how: "After 1555, no one could oppose the consistory effectively.... There was a sharp increase in the number of moral cases referred by the consistory to the council and then acted upon.... Only after 1560, when Calvin and his colleagues began to be distracted by the demands of tremendous missionary campaign in France, was there any slackening in the consistory's campaign to purify Geneva" (Kingdon 1996, 12).

To avoid any anachronism, one must bear in mind that during the sixteenth century all Christians—except for libertines and free-thinkers—believed in maintaining a certain degree of church discipline (Po-Chia Hsia 1989, 123). On the other hand, if Geneva arrested a rather high percentage of her total adult population late in Calvin's lifetime, the city council however did not punish them as severely as the surviving evidence seems to indicate (Monter 1973, 286). Between 1562 and 1563, that is, at a time when John Calvin was at the pinnacle of his authority, surviving documents lists a total of 197 trials of which the most severe account for fewer than a fourth. Of the 197 trials, 39 were for extra-marital sex (adultery, rape, fornication), 40 for theft and 21 for various professional infractions. The list mentions that thirteen people were put to death. Of these, three men were sentenced for raping children, three for homicide, three for theft, two for homosexuality, and two women for witchcraft (Monter 1973, 283–84). The execution of Servetus for his heterodox beliefs thus stands as an unfortunate yet anomalous event in Calvin's career in Geneva. It was only after his death that the presbytery, as one author puts it, "degenerated into little more than a crude instrument of social control, verging on the hysterical."²²

Of course, popular resistance to the Consistory existed during the time of Calvin. Perhaps one of the most significant concerned the names properly used in baptisms. Calvin rejected Genevan names, especially that of Claude (Geneva's former patron saint), as vestiges of superstition.²³ This created much tension over the years, but the citizens saw this tough policy more as French domination over Genevans than theocracy per se. In short, the Consistory in Geneva (like presbyteries elsewhere) did function as an apparatus of moral control,

but it would be a mistake to emphasize its repressive features, at least in the sixteenth century.

Conclusion

When one circumscribes the scope of Calvin's power and influence in Geneva, one is led to a more nuanced understanding of the case in point. Calvin never advocated nor did he ever try to establish a system that would place the church above the secular power. Therefore, if "Calvin's Geneva" is to be understood as a theocracy it can only be in the following sense: a system in which all authority is recognized to derive from God.

Jewish historian Josephus, who coined the word theocracy, defined it in the following terms: "Our legislator [Moses]...ordained our government to be what, by a strained expression, may be termed as a theocracy, by ascribing the authority and power to God" (See *C. Ap.* 2.16.165, quoted by Schall 1967, 13). It is significant to recall that Calvin was also a legislator and that his theology is deeply rooted in the Old Testament (see *Inst.* 2.2). However, in no way does his doctrine of church and state entail a domination of the clergy over civil power. One must run in face of the evidence to assert that Geneva was a theocracy in this popular sense of the word. Furthermore, one must also stress how such a regime would have been impossible to establish in Geneva. Indeed, the city councils were proud of the independence they had then gained through the anti-episcopal revolution in 1536 and, from there on, were determined to oppose vehemently any regime that resembled that of the former bishop. Hence, the popular image of Calvin as the dictator of Geneva has to be exposed as a myth and a remnant of controversialist historiography.

Notes

¹ On the passing from "Calvinian morality" to "Calvinist moralism," see Biéler 1995, 77ff. and Fuch 1986.

² McGrath 1990, 106. McGrath here draws on Chenevrière 1937, 244.

³ “Calvin installe une dictature théocratique sans faiblesse, bien plus lourde que celle de la papauté grégorienne! Ceux qui ne professent pas la même foi sont arrêtés, condamnés, bannis et même brûlés, comme l’Espagnol Michel Servet” (Chelini and Chelini 1993, 169).

⁴ Stefan Zweig, *Castellio gegen Calvin, oder ein Gewissen gegen die Gewalt* (Vienna, 1936); Georges Haldas, *Passion et mort de Michel Servet* (Lausanne, 1975). Both examples are quoted by Mützenberg (1979, 15, 20–21).

⁵ Such is the conclusion of Pierre Chaunu, who is currently working on a life of Calvin; see Chaunu and Dosse 1994, 198.

⁶ Chenevrière 1937, 74, 89; Fuch 1986, 45, 46. In a commentary on Exodus 32:27, Calvin represents God as forcing man to trample upon the Law of Nature in order to show that His Will stands above all things.

⁷ Chenevrière 1992, 112. See Calvin’s commentaries on Romans 13:1: “La raison pourquoy nous devons estre sujets aux Magistrats, c’est pource qu’ils sont instituez par l’ordonnance de Dieu. Que s’il plaist au Seigneur de gouverner ainsi le monde, quiconque mesprise et rejette la puissance, il s’efforce de renverser l’ordre de Dieu, voire il résiste à Dieu mesme: d’autant que mespriser la providence de celui qui est autheur de la puissance politique, c’est entreprendre la guerre contre luy” (quoted in Chenevrière 1992, 359).

⁸ See Ps. 45:7–8 (quoted in Heb. 1:8–9). The Old Testament sometimes applies the word *god* to men (Ps. 82:6; Ex. 4.16, cf. Jn. 10. 34, 35).

⁹ Chenevrière 1992, 135–36. See Calvin’s Commentaries on 1 Tim. 2:2: “souvenons-nous qu’il faut avoir soin de ceux, par le moyen desquels nous recevons ces biens tant excellens. Et de ceci nous recueillons que les Anabaptistes, et autres tels esprits fantastiques, qui veulent oster les Magistrats, sont despourvus de toute humanité, et n’ont autre chose en eux, qu’une barbarie cruelle” (quoted in Chenevrière 1992, 364).

¹⁰ See *Inst.* 4.20.9 and the *Confession of La Rochelle* (1559), art.8: 39–40: “Dieu a mis le glaive dans la main des magistrats pour réprimer les péchés commis non seulement contre la seconde Table des commandements de Dieu, mais aussi contre la première.”

¹¹ Chenevrière 1992, 176. Tommaso Campanella’s *Civitas solis* offers a good example of a theocratic worldview in the Renaissance.

¹² Foster 1992, 81–82. Many expressed the desire for ecclesiastical discipline in Geneva at that time, but opposition found its way through the “Philippists.” Bonivard recalled these events in the late 1550’s: “il n’en havoit [alors] point [de police] Ecclesiastique, pour censurer les meurs, combien qu’il y eut des

gens de bien beaucoup qui la desiroient, & taschoient le mettre a Geneve, comme elle estoit aux autres villes Euvangeliques du pays des Lignes; mais les brouillons [i.e., the Phillipists] craignants correction ne y vouloient consentir, alleguans pour leurs raysons soustenir que cela seroit renouveler une Papauté, donnant telle jurisdiction aux ministres, que jadis havoient le Pape & les Evesques; pourquoy ne se peut decrer l'autorité Ecclesiastique & Senat d'icelle jusques apres la mort de johan Philippe pasteur des brouillons..." (text reproduced in Kingdon 1996, 391).

¹³ Courvoisier 1933, 143–44. Professor Edward Furcha often stressed the need of a thorough study on Bucer's theological influence on Calvin. On this important question, see Eells 1924; Courvoisier 1936; and more recently two studies by Willem van't Spijker (1986, 1993).

¹⁴ Chenevrière 1992, 135–36, 176. Jacques Courvoisier nuances this understanding as regards Zwingli: "jusqu'à la fin de sa vie Zwingli a toujours distingué les deux domaines et souligné les droits imprescriptibles de la communauté ecclésiastique"; see Courvoisier 1965, 85. On Luther's views on this question, see in particular Greiner 1984.

¹⁵ Alexandre Ganoczy sees in the Christos-Kyrios "the first and most fundamental principle of Calvinist ecclesiology"; see 1968, 78–79, 83.

¹⁶ For instance, Calvin's preface to Robert Olivétan's French translation of the Bible, first printed in 1543 and known since 1551 as the "Épître aux fidèles montrant comment Christ est la fin de la loi," ended with various exhortations to kings, princes, lords and magistrates as to their respective duties. These exhortations were suppressed by the civil authorities; see Millet 1995, 26, 49–50. The *Ordonnances ecclésiastiques* of 1541 were also revised and substantially modified by the Petit Conseil and Calvin was not granted the right to review these modifications (Chenevrière 1992, 261).

¹⁷ "Il faut doncq que ceux [who?] qui ont la puissance de fayre ceste police mettent ordre que ceux qui viennent en ceste communication soyent comme approuvez membre de Jesuchrist". Again, it was the council that elected these "personnes de bonne vie et de bon tesmoignage" (CO 10: 9–10).

¹⁸ "Il faut se garder d'une idée simpliste, celle d'une Réformation religieuse contrôlant le pouvoir civil, pour édifier un État théocratique, voire fondamentaliste. En fait c'est presque le contraire, ainsi que le démontre la chronologie" (Cottret 1995, 125, 126). See Calvin's sharp distinction between spiritual and temporal powers in the *Institutio* 4, 9.5, 9.9, 9.15, 9.16, and also in his *Commentaires sur l'harmonie évangélique* (on Mt. 22:21, Mk. 12:17, Lk. 20:25): "Il y a yci une distinction toute évidente entre le gouvernement spirituel, et le politique ou civil.... Christ s'accomodant à la façon commune du peuple, s'est

contenté de discerner le règne spirituel de Dieu, d'avec l'ordre politique et l'état de la vie présente. Parquoy il faut retenir cette différence" (quoted in Chenevrière 1992, 357).

¹⁹ Chenevrière 1992, 260. The Ordinance reads: "Pareillement nous avons déterminé que la maniere de les eslire soit telle: c'est que le Conseil estroict advise de nommer les plus propres qu'on pourra trouver et les plus suffisans; et pour ce faire, appeller les ministres pour en communiquer avec eulx, puis qu'ilz presentent ceulx qu'ilz auront advisé au Conseil des Deux Centz, lequel les approuvera..." (Kingdon 1996, 389).

²⁰ This right is mentioned several times in the last rubric of the Ordinances.

²¹ For names and penalties see tables 24 and 25 in Naphy 1995a, 195–96.

²² McGrath 1990, 113. Between 1564 and 1569, 1 906 excommunication orders were made.

²³ Naphy 1995b, 87–97. For names prohibited and the reasons why, see Hugues 1966, 71–72.

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