The Latent Pluralism of Calvin’s Political Theology

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ABSTRACT
While Calvin was neither a democrat nor a liberal, Calvin’s political theology remains useful to Christians who endorse certain forms of liberal democracy. His principled (if qualified) support for religious liberty, his respect for the limits of law given human nature, and his support for the limited autonomy of civil life emerged from a theological outlook rooted in the distinction between the two kingdoms that remains relevant for Christians in contemporary pluralistic societies. It provides the contours of a theological foundation for a principled Christian support for religious, moral, and social pluralism that is consistent with a faithful Christian witness to the lordship of Christ over all of life.

KEYWORDS
Two kingdoms; pluralism; religious liberty; democracy; John Calvin

Calvin was neither a political liberal nor a democrat. But that has not stopped a steady stream of writers over the years – many of them Calvinists, some of them not – from claiming that Calvin or Calvinism in some way lay the foundation for the emergence of democracy. Typically the path to democracy has been traced from Calvin through either the English Puritans who established the New England colonies in America or through the Netherlands’ pioneering legacy of toleration. And yet, whatever we might say about Calvinism, it is not difficult to array the evidence against viewing Calvin, who is perhaps most popularly known for his role in the burning at the stake of the heretic Servetus, as even a proto-democrat. Like all the magisterial reformers, Calvin insisted that civil government was responsible to enforce both tables of the Ten Commandments. It was obligated to establish public worship as well as civil peace, outward piety as well as justice. Even if scripture did not teach this truth, Calvin wrote,

we could learn this from secular writers: for no one has discussed the office of magistrates, the making of laws, and public welfare, without beginning at religion and divine worship. And thus all have confessed that no government can be happily established unless piety is the first concern; and that those laws are preposterous which neglect God’s right and provide

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only for men. Since, therefore, among all philosophers religion takes first place, and since this fact has always been observed by universal consent of all nations, let Christian princes and magistrates be ashamed of their negligence if they do not apply themselves to this concern.2 Scripture confirmed that the philosophers were correct. The law of Moses called for the destruction of entire cities that were guilty of pursuing false worship. How much more a willful heretic like Servetus? “[I]f so many together are to be dragged to death in crowds, their impudence is more than detestable, and their pity cruelty itself, who would take no account of God’s injured majesty so that one man may be spared.”3 Calvin likewise argued for the continued relevance of the Mosaic penal code, insisting against Augustine that those who committed adultery deserved capital punishment.4 He argued that magistrates were appointed by God, and that even when they were legitimately elected by a well-informed citizenry, they were responsible to God to enforce the piety and justice of his law.

And yet, if we set aside these undoubtedly illiberal elements of Calvin’s political track record, clear evidence as they are of Calvin’s commitment to Christendom, and if we dig into the underlying foundations of his political theology, we find a set of political theological principles that are far more amenable to a Christian principled pluralism than we might at first expect. To put it another way, while Calvin’s practical commitments and judgments clearly show him to have been a proponent of Christendom, his more careful theological reasoning sometimes points in a quite different direction. And for those Christians who are interested in promoting a sort of Christian political liberalism that is genuinely rooted in the political theology of the Christian tradition, this is of no little value. I argue that Calvin’s two kingdoms theology led him to articulate grounds for respecting what we might legitimately (if anachronistically) consider to be expressions of religious, ethical, and social pluralism. I begin by briefly summarizing Calvin’s two kingdoms theology, which I have explored in detail in my book, Calvin’s Political Theology and the Public Engagement of the Church: Christ’s Two Kingdoms.5 I then explore its implications for religious, ethical, and social pluralism.

Before turning to the argument, let me offer my working definitions of some key terms.

When I refer to liberalism I am thinking broadly of constitutional systems of democratic or representative government designed to protect basic human and civil rights, including rights to life, speech, association, property, religion, and political participation, in accord with the rule of law under a system of checks and balances that includes the separation of church and state.6

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2Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion. Hereafter such as this one, to the 1559 edition of the Institutes are cited in parentheses.
3Commentary on Deuteronomy 13:12 [1563]; Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia [hereafter CO] 24:362. For the English translations on which I have relied, with occasional adjustments of punctuation and language for the sake of clarity, see Calvin’s Commentaries.
4Commentary on John 8:6 [1553]; CO 47:189.
6See my broader discussion of this point in Tuininga, Calvin’s Political Theology, 4.
Calvin’s two kingdoms theology

Calvin’s two kingdoms concept was designed to explain how Christ’s lordship affects all of life given the eschatological nature of the kingdom of God. Creation is being transformed into the kingdom of God in accord with God’s purposes from creation, he argued, but the consummation of this process will not occur until Christ’s return at the end of the age. In the meantime, the kingdom of Christ comes to expression in the present age through the word of God and the Spirit, and wherever the word and the Spirit are, there we find the church. Hence Calvin consistently refers to the church as the spiritual kingdom of Christ. Where did that leave the institutions of this age, such as marriage, property, or civil government? All of these features of temporal (or secular) life were destined to pass away in the fullness of time, Calvin believed, but that did not mean that they were in the meantime abandoned to the effects of sin and the curse. Rather, God graciously preserved a modicum of order through his providence, authorizing coercive civil government to restrain the worst effects of sin and injustice. Calvin maintained that Christ’s kingship extends to the temporal affairs of the present life, but he nevertheless insisted that such temporal affairs should not be confused with the kingdom of Christ, which is spiritual and eschatological. Thus it was to distinguish between Christ’s spiritual kingship, which works by the word and the Spirit to reconcile human beings to God and to one another, and Christ’s kingship over temporal affairs, which works to preserve temporal righteousness, that Calvin articulated the two kingdoms distinction.

At the heart of the two kingdoms concept was Calvin’s insistence that genuine righteousness, which he called spiritual righteousness, can only be established through Christ’s word and Spirit. Apart from the Spirit, the best humans can hope for is a sort of civil, or outward, righteousness. Two of Calvin’s famous three uses of the (Mosaic) law corresponded to these two sorts of righteousness. The civil (or second) use of the law was to establish a basic modicum of outward righteousness among all human beings, whether Christian or not. The spiritual (or third) use of the law was only for Christians, who were no longer under the law, and instructed and exhorted Christians toward the sort of genuine righteousness through which they would be conformed to the image of Christ. Civil government could only operate according to the civil use of the law, while the church ministered the spiritual use of the law. Government could, and if possible, should, promote the spiritual kingdom of Christ, but it could only do so indirectly, which is to say, by protecting and promoting the spiritual ministry of the church.

Religious pluralism

Although Calvin is widely known for his involvement with the accusation, trial, and execution of Servetus, fewer people are aware that Calvin defended religious liberty for Jews, Muslims, and other non-Christians. In the 1536 edition of the Institutes Calvin condemned the persecution of “Turks and Saracens, and other enemies of religion.”

Far be it from us to approve those methods by which many until now have tried to force them to our faith, when they forbid them the use of fire and water and the common elements, when they deny to them all offices of humanity, when they pursue them with sword and arms.7

7Institutes of the Christian Religion, II.28; CO 1:77.
Although he did not specifically mention the Spanish Inquisition, he may have had it in mind. Calvin omitted these sentences from subsequent editions of the *Institutes*, but he again rejected the persecution of “the Jews, the Turks, and similar peoples” in his *Defense of the Orthodox Faith*, which he wrote in 1554 in defense of his support for the execution of Servetus.

In that work, which included Calvin’s most sustained defense of religious persecution, Calvin argued that idolaters and false teachers were only to be punished in societies where the truth about religion was known with certainty and was accepted by public consensus. In such cases, it could be said that those who promulgated false doctrine were not acting in ignorance but were intentionally perverting the truth so as to lead the ignorant astray. It could even be said that they were to be punished for lying, or for distorting the truth, rather than for believing or teaching false doctrine, *per se*. Such was the case with those who promoted pagan worship in Old Testament Israel, Calvin believed, and it was the case with those who denied the Trinity in Christendom. Given the divisions within Christendom, on the other hand, Calvin did not believe Roman Catholics or Anabaptists should be subject to capital punishment.

Calvin carefully expressed the logic of his position in his commentary on the books of Moses:

> It must then be remembered that the crime of impiety would not otherwise merit punishment unless the religion had not only been received by public consent and the suffrages of the people, but, being supported also by sure and indisputable proofs, should place its truth above the reach of doubt.

Implicit in this statement is a respect for individual conscience, by which I mean a recognition that a person should not be coerced into a way of life that he or she might reject on reasonable grounds. Where there is doubt about religious truth, or even where there is room for doubt about religious truth, there should be respect for freedom of conscience.

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8As R. White demonstrates, the omission is best explained by literary and pastoral considerations rather than a change in views (or as Sebastien Castellio charged, in Calvin’s opportunism). See White, “Castellio Against Calvin.” Cf. Strohm, “Calvin and Religious Tolerance.”

9The work remains untranslated into English and has received little scholarly attention. The Latin title is *Defensio orthodoxae fidei de sacra Trinitate, contra prodigiosos errores Michaelis Serveti Hispani, ubi ostenditur haereticos iure gladii coercendos esse* et nominatim de homine hoc tam impio iuste et merito sumptum Genevae fuisse supplicium (CO 8:453–644). The extended French title is: *Déclaration pour maintenir la vraye foy que tiennent tous chrestiens de la Trinité des personnes en un seul Dieu: Congre les erreurs détestables de Michel Servet Espaignol. Où il est aussi monstred qu’il est licite de purin les hérétiques, et qu’à bon droit ce meschant a esté executé par justice en la ville de Genève.* This citation is from my translation of the French edition, page 46. Cf. Hillar and Allen, *Michael Servetus*, 193–201.

10Calvin, *Déclaration pour maintenir la vraye foy*, 11–58. Calvin articulated his nuanced position on religious coercion as follows: “Thus there are to be differentiated three degrees of errors: [1] those we admit, that are to be tolerated, and [2] others that are to be punished by moderate means so that [3] only the obvious impiety may be punished by a capital penalty… Certainly this means that if there is a certain small superstition or ignorance occupying the minds of the simple people, one should be patient in trying to correct them rather than too hastily seek violent retribution. Thus people should be punished according to their errors. Even the moderate type of errors call for severity. However, though the errors producing damage to the Church and resulting from negligence and ambition deserve a punishment – nevertheless, when there is no contempt of God and rebellion combined with mutiny, the severity should not be excessive so that the indulgence may not nourish the audacity and defiance of those who would desire to tear apart the unity of faith. But since there are those who attempt to undermine religion at its foundations, and who profess execrable blasphemies against God and by impious and poisonous dogmas they drag the soul to ruin, in sum – those who attempt to revolt the public from the unique God and his doctrine, it is necessary to have a recourse to the extreme measure in order to prevent further spreading of the mortal poison. Such a rule which Moses received from the mouth of God he himself had followed faithfully.” Quoted in Hillar and Allen, *Michael Servetus*, 201, a translation from the Latin text: *Defensio orthodoxae fidei*, CO 8:477. For the French see *Déclaration pour maintenir la vraye foy*, 48–9.

11Commentary on Deuteronomy 13:5 [1563]; CO 24:356.
What made heresy so worthy of punishment was not that it was false, but that “its authors, being educated in the doctrines of the law, could not be deceived involuntarily, nor unless they had ... set their hearts on the impostures of the devil.”12 Thus Calvin warned,

this severity must not be resorted to except when the religion is suffering which is not only received by public authority and general opinion, but which is proved on solid grounds to be true, so that it may clearly appear that we are the avengers of God against the wicked.13

Needless to say, much has changed in the world since Calvin’s day, and it seems quite obvious that the criteria which he establishes for the persecution of heretics do not apply to any political community in existence today. On Calvin’s own terms, then, the objective reality of religious pluralism (i.e., the presence of multiple religious groups) in contemporary societies demands that Christians support a form of normative religious pluralism (i.e., religious liberty) as a matter of principle. But, it may be objected, is not Calvin merely offering a begrudging respect for pluralism, one that only applies when religious uniformity cannot be imposed? There is some evidence in defense of this interpretation. Calvin pointed to Joseph as an example of a faithful servant of God who not only protected the religious liberty of pagans, but who actively upheld a pagan religious establishment. But he wondered if Joseph “may have erred in not resisting these superstitions with sufficient boldness.”14 Similarly, Calvin praised the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar for proclaiming “punishment to all who spoke reproachfully against God,” claiming that “King Nebuchadnezzar’s edict was praised by the approval of the Holy Spirit.”15 And this despite the fact that Daniel was on occasion required to resist the king’s coercive edicts against pagans out of respect for equity and due process of law.16 What is more, Calvin vigorously criticized those Protestant princes who justified caution in matters of religion based on the need to preserve peace, order, and stability in a divided society. He reminded such leaders,

First, we ought to inquire what is the will of God. Next, we ought to follow boldly whatever he enjoins and not to be discouraged by any fear, though we were besieged by a thousand deaths, for our actions must not be moved by any gust of wind but must be constantly regulated by the will of God alone. He who boldly despises dangers, or at least, rising above the fear of them, sincerely obeys God, will at length have a prosperous result.17

No doubt Calvin would have argued that the true religion was known with certainty in Christian Europe, and that while there may have been disagreement regarding doctrine or worship, there was at least consensus regarding the truth of Christian revelation. Thus princes had no excuse to remain passive.

At the same time, it is difficult not to sense that in these moments Calvin’s politics outran his own theological principles. Calvin was a product of Christendom, and given the crisis facing Christendom during the 1550s and 1560s, it is understandable that he increasingly turned to magistrates to do what they could for the Reformed cause. In any case, we are free to follow the logic of Calvin’s political theology without enslaving

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12Commentary on Deuteronomy 13:15 [1563]; CO 24:363.
13Commentary on Deuteronomy 13:12 [1563]; CO 24:362.
16Commentary on Daniel 2:13–15 [1561]; CO 40:570.
ourselves to his political judgments. And Calvin’s politics notwithstanding, his defense of religious liberty on behalf of Jews, Muslims, and other religious groups, even in Christendom, suggests that his defense of religious liberty was principled rather than merely pragmatic. I am not suggesting that it was mature or sufficient. It contained dangerous inadequacies on numerous fronts. Still, it offers a principled foundation for a Christian embrace of meaningful religious pluralism on which contemporary Christian political theologians can build.

**Moral pluralism**

Although Calvin has been called the tyrant of Geneva and is commonly characterized as trying to force Christian morality on the people of Geneva (through a rigorously coordinated system of civil punishment and church discipline), Calvin recognized that all civil laws must tolerate sin and injustice due to human depravity, or what he often followed Jesus in calling humans’ “hardness of heart.” Calvin derived the principle from Jesus’ interaction with the Pharisees recorded in Matthew 19. When the Pharisees asked Jesus if it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason, Jesus responded by declaring that Moses permitted men to divorce their wives due to their hardness of hearts, but that such divorce was nevertheless a serious violation of the moral will of God.

Although what relates to divorce was granted in concession to the Jews, yet Christ pronounces that it was never legitimate, because it is directly repugnant to the first institution of God, from whence a perpetual and inviolable rule is to be sought. It is proverbially said that the laws of nature are indissoluble.18

To put it simply, the Mosaic law tolerated actions that were nevertheless immoral by virtue of God’s will from creation. Or as Calvin puts it in the French version of his commentary on the synoptic gospels, “strictly speaking, he did not permit [permis] it; but in so far as he did not strictly forbid it, he is said to have permitted [permis] it.”19

The key was to understand the necessary difference between political laws and spiritual laws: “political laws are sometimes accommodated to the manners of men, but God, in prescribing a spiritual law, looked not at what men can do but at what they ought to do.”20 One cannot conflate what is legal with what is moral, for “political and outward order is widely different from spiritual government.”21 A magistrate is constrained to bear many things which he does not approve, for we cannot so deal with mankind as to restrain all vices. It is indeed desirable that no vice should be tolerated, but we must have a regard to what is possible.22

Laws that sought perfection from human beings would not be enforceable. Cutting unrealistically against what was possible for sinful human nature, they would be ignored, if they did not provoke rebellious opposition. An attempt to thoroughly eliminate an evil that was intrinsic to human nature would spawn consequences far worse than if that evil had been

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19Commentary on Matthew 19:7 [1555]; CO 45:529–530. For a fuller exploration of this point, see my article, “Because of Your Hardness of Heart.”
21Commentary on Matthew 19:7 [1555]; CO 45:529–530.
tolerated and, to a certain extent, regulated. That was, for instance, the purpose of the law that permitted divorce.

For the law was made solely for the protection of the women, that they might not suffer any disgrace after they had been unjustly rejected. Hence we infer, that it was rather a punishment inflicted on the husbands than an indulgence or permission fitted to inflame their lust. 23

Calvin used the same principle to explain many other difficult parts of Old Testament civil law. For example, the Mosaic law permitted Israelites to force captive women into marriage. Such marriages were against God’s will, but God indulged the practice in order to prevent the women from being treated even worse. 24 Similarly, God permitted the Israelites to murder all of the male inhabitants of a city they captured in war, even though it was a gross violation of the law of nature. “[H]ow does God, the father of mercies,” Calvin wonders, “give his sanction to indiscriminate bloodshed?” Calvin can only speculate that the purpose of the law was to regulate killing of captives so as to prevent an even more horrific result: the indiscriminate slaughter of women and children. 25 Other laws permitted various forms of injustice against slaves. 26

It is important to note that Calvin did not articulate this principle in order to promote greater toleration for injustice. On the contrary, in each case, Calvin argued that Christian nations should not seek to slavishly follow the law of Moses but should improve upon it. The hardness of heart principle did not justify magistrates’ “indolence, if they voluntarily abstain from correcting vices, or neglect what the nature of their office demands.” 27 In his commentary on the incest laws in Leviticus 18 Calvin concedes that civil governments might tolerate certain forms of sexual immorality, but he insists that they cannot make them morally good.

It may indeed be decreed that it should be lawful and unpunished, since it is in the power of princes to remit penalties. Yet no legislator can effect that a thing, which nature pronounces to be vicious, should not be vicious, and if tyrannical arrogance dares to attempt it, the light of nature will presently shine forth and prevail. 28

Calvin’s point was balanced. During the present age, civil government must tolerate much evil, yet it should never cease striving for greater justice.

One might question whether the toleration of sin due to the hardness of human hearts amounts to a genuine respect for moral pluralism. Calvin believed in an objective natural law written on the human heart and confirmed in the Ten Commandments. He would have rejected any understanding of moral pluralism that implied moral relativism (i.e., lack of belief in the existence of objective moral truth). Nevertheless, Calvin’s concern

23 Commentary on Matthew 19:7 [1555]; CO 45:529–530.
24 Commentary on Deuteronomy 21:10 [1563]; CO 24:353.
25 Commentary on Deuteronomy 20:12 [1563]; CO 24:632. For a contrast between Calvin’s view of this law and the Zurich reformer Heinrich Bullinger see Larson, Calvin’s Doctrine of the State, 44–50.
27 Commentary on Matthew 19:7 [1555]; CO 45:529–530.
28 On the sexuality laws of Leviticus 18 Calvin writes,

If any again object that what has been disobeyed in many countries is not to be accounted the law of the Gentiles, the reply is easy, viz., that the barbarism which prevailed in the East does not nullify that chastity which is opposed to the abominations of the Gentiles, since what is natural cannot be abrogated by any consent or custom.

for what is possible for sinful human beings implies a potential appreciation for an understanding of moral pluralism rooted in respect for human nature (i.e., a willingness to recognize and tolerate a range of ultimately inconsistent moral belief systems and commitments). He recognized that when governments run roughshod over human nature and ability, they merely undermine respect for the rule of law. He understood that when governments focus on what is ideal rather than what is possible, they lose the practical ability to mitigate the worst consequences of evil. Ultimately, he realized that a government that seeks peace, order, and justice in a world of real human beings has to accept the reality of what we might call practical moral pluralism.

Calvin did not merely offer a negative defense of moral pluralism (i.e., one rooted in human sinfulness). In at least one instance, with respect to the legal arena, he offered a positive argument rooted in the nature of human responsibility and freedom. He pointed out that the law must grant people broad rights of litigation even though they will inevitably abuse those rights. People must be permitted to sue one another in court even where their actions violate the principle of charity. As he put it, “the right [of litigation] cannot be conferred on individuals unless there be an open door for demanding it.”

A citizen cannot be given the responsibility to perform a legal or social obligation unless she is also free to abuse that responsibility. Similarly, if a man is given the legal obligation to care for his family, he must also be given wide discretion to do so in the way that seems right to him, within certain constraints. The law must respect the freedom of the individual to fulfill his or her social responsibilities, and this inevitably gives rise to moral pluralism. That does not mean morality is relative, nor does it mean that government should tolerate all manner of evil. But it does mean that, based on Calvin’s own political theological principles, both to avoid evil and to promote good, government must respect a meaningful measure of plurality in the moral lives of its citizens.

Social pluralism

Calvin’s respect for the moral freedom necessary for people to fulfill their social and legal responsibilities points toward a third sort of pluralism that finds support in Calvin’s political theology: social pluralism. The concept of social pluralism arises from that of social differentiation. As society becomes more complex it becomes characterized by an ever-increasing division of labor. It is progressively differentiated into a range of institutions and vocations, each with its own logic, expertise, and authority. Reformed Christians sometimes follow Abraham Kuyper in speaking of this social pluralism in the language of spheres. Kuyper argued that each sphere of society possesses its own sovereignty in accord with God’s will in creation and providence, even as each sphere remains under the overarching lordship of Christ. Respecting social pluralism thus requires deference towards the modes of knowledge and authority that operate in any given sphere when the affairs of that sphere are in question, even as the moral logic of every sphere must ultimately be consistent with the moral will of God. For instance, working out a Christian ethic of stewardship with respect to the environment requires a familiarity with the tradition of Christian ethics, but it equally requires expert knowledge of ecology. Likewise working out the implications of Christian teaching regarding care for the poor requires

29Commentary on Matthew 19:7 [1555]; CO 45:529–530.
an understanding of market economics and political economy in addition to a familiarity with the Bible and the writings of Thomas Aquinas. The upshot is that it is no longer possible – if it ever was – for clergy to dictate morality for every area of life. Christians must be free to work out the implications of the kingdom and its righteousness in their own vocations and communities.\footnote{Kuyper, “Sphere Sovereignty.” Cf. the various essays on vocation by Max Weber in From Max Weber; Walzer, Spheres of Justice; Dooyeweerd, A New Critique of Theoretical Thought; Taylor, Modern Social Imaginaries; Tipton, “Social Differentiation and Moral Pluralism.”}

Here I draw the opposite implications from Calvin’s political theology as does André Biéler. Biéler calls Christians to reject the moral pluralism that arises from social differentiation in favor of an emphasis on the all-encompassing lordship of Christ.

The time has come to put an end to the alienation of modern men and women, who – in obeying all kinds of different, frequently contradictory imperatives in their professional political, family and individual behaviour – find their personalities thus chopped into compartments and their responsibility brought to naught.\footnote{Biéler, Calvin’s Economic and Social Thought, 458.}

Biéler goes on,

Too many believers … condemn what they call the faith’s or the church’s meddling in political, social or occupational matters. Having lost the fundamentally biblical vision of the universal Lordship of Jesus Christ, they take refuge in sentimental pietism that allows only a rudimentary part of the individual to be governed by the faith … For lack of a systematic theological vision of the purposes of society and of the appropriate ways for acting, they want to work for their faith but remain unconsciously prisoners of the sociological pressures from which they suffer.\footnote{Ibid., 459.}

Of course, it is true that Christians should not take refuge in the sort of “sentimental pietism” that tempts them to cease striving for obedience to God in every area of life. But they should seek to apply the kingdom and its righteousness in a spirit of humility, with respect for both the limits of biblical revelation and the limits of Christian understanding. Too often Reformed theology has been associated with what Max Stackhouse called “imperial Calvinism,” what John De Gruchy referred to as Calvin’s “self-righteous triumphalism,” and what Nicholas Wolterstorff describes as “that most insufferable of all human beings, the triumphalist Calvinist.”\footnote{Stackhouse, Creeds, Society, and Human Rights, 56.} Reformed believers have sometimes acted as if their faith gives them access to a worldview that can be imposed on a complicated world from the top down, on behalf of the sovereign Lord Jesus, who declares every square inch of creation “Mine!”

But this triumphalism does not reflect Calvin’s theology. Calvin’s two kingdoms theology led him to articulate a careful distinction between the spiritual authority of the church and the civil authority of the various vocations of the temporal kingdom. The former is “bound up within the word,” as Calvin put it, while the latter is subject to all manner of influences ranging from scholarship to intuition, from reason to experience, in addition to the overarching authority of the word of God. Calvin sharply distinguished the true church, which faithfully taught God’s word, from the Roman church, which, he argued,
tyrannically sought magisterial authority over Christian consciences. The Roman clergy falsely imagined that their power was a function of their office, to be used at their discretion. It was “as though they had said, ‘We possess an ordinary jurisdiction, for God has set us over his church. Whatever then proceeds from us ought to be deemed inviolable.’”\(^{36}\)

The church’s authority, Calvin maintained, is ministerial, not magisterial, and that requires respect for a certain autonomy within civil life. “The power of the church, therefore, is not infinite but subject to the Lord’s word and, as it were, enclosed within it” (4.8.4). When pastors faithfully taught Christ’s word, their teaching was as authoritative as if it came from Christ himself. But when they went beyond that word, it could be safely disregarded.

Men must listen to the church, they say. Who denies this? The reason is that the church makes no pronouncement except from the Lord’s word. If they require anything more, let them know that these words of Christ afford them no support. (4.8.15)

The implication was that pastors couldn’t use their pulpits to advance their own agenda. “The power of the church is … to be kept within definite limits, that it may not be drawn hither and thither according to men’s whim” (4.8.1). Ministers “may not mix any of their own fictions with his pure doctrine.”\(^{37}\) Indeed, Christians “are at liberty to withhold our assent to their doctrine until they show that it is from Christ.”\(^{38}\) Pastors did possess authority to speak to political and social affairs insofar as the word of God speaks to such affairs, but they had to be exceedingly careful not to step beyond that word lest their office be politicized.

[I]f they quarrel with this or that man about worldly things, then it cannot be but that the word of God will be evil spoken of through their fault. Hence great care ought to be taken that those who sustain the office of public teaching should not engage in worldly business and be thus exposed to the necessity of contending about worldly things. They have enough to do, and more than enough, in the warfare in which the Lord has engaged them.\(^{39}\)

Calvin thus warned while commenting on Romans 13 that “it does not belong to us [ministers or subjects] either to prescribe to princes how much they ought to expend in every affair or to call them to account.”\(^{40}\) During his time in Geneva Calvin consistently preached about the social and political implications of Christianity, but he avoided addressing overly particular points of policy or politics. In a sermon on 1 Samuel, he preached,

The gospel is not to change the administration [polices] of the world and to make laws which pertain to the temporal state. It is very true that kings, princes, and magistrates ought always to consult the mouth of God and to conform themselves to his word, but our Lord has given them liberty to make the laws which they know to be proper and useful by the rule which is committed to them.\(^{41}\)

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\(^{37}\) Commentary on Jeremiah 1:9 [1563]; CO 37:479–483. “If … a prophet mingles anything of his own, he is proved to be false and is not worthy of any credit” (14:14; CO 38:193. Cf. Commentary on Matthew 28:20 [1555]; CO 45:825–826; Commentary on Ezekiel 3:16–17 [1565]; CO 40:90; Commentary on John 3:29 [1553]; CO 47:71.

\(^{38}\) Commentary on 1 Corinthians 3:22 [1546]; CO 49:361. Cf. 4:3; CO 49:363.

\(^{39}\) Commentary on Jeremiah 15:10 [1563]; CO 38:219.

\(^{40}\) Commentary on Romans 13:6 [1556]; CO 49:252.

\(^{41}\) Sermon on 1 Samuel 42; CO 51:797. Cited in Graham, The Constructive Revolutionary, 158–9.
For Calvin, the church does not have the right to pontificate on the demands of righteousness beyond what is clearly taught in scripture. Beyond that, it must respect Christian liberty, leaving Christians free to work out the implications of the moral law of God within the demands of time, place, and vocation, consistent with Christian teaching.

An excellent example of Calvin’s approach to social matters was his application of the biblical teaching concerning usury. The church had long rejected lending at interest based on a literal reading of Old Testament law. Calvin, however, argued that the church had no authority to teach more than the principle that one should not charge excessive interest to the poor. How that principle would be worked out in particular economic contexts depended on circumstances, but it could not be predetermined in advance by an authoritative clergy.42

While the spiritual authority of the church was bound up within the Word, Calvin emphasized that temporal authorities were obligated to exercise an authority that was both magisterial and discretionary. The ultimate criteria of government for Christian societies were not found in the Mosaic law but in natural law.43 And although scripture was an authoritative source for determining or confirming natural law when interpreted properly, natural law was also to be interpreted through reason, intuition, experience, and scholarship, all of which were available to varying degrees to all people. Yet even natural law revealed only the most general principles of charity and equity. In social and civil affairs humans were required to use discretion that went far beyond purely moral reasoning. And Calvin was nothing if not eloquent about the deference Christians owed even to pagans when they demonstrated expertise in civil affairs.

Shall we deny that the truth shone upon the ancient jurists who established civic order and discipline with such great equity? Shall we say that the philosophers were blind in their fine observation and artful description of nature? Shall we say that those men were devoid of understanding who conceived the art of disputation and taught us to speak reasonably? Shall we say that they are insane who developed medicine, devoting their labor to our benefit? What shall we say of all the mathematical sciences? Shall we consider them the ravings of madmen? No, we cannot read the writings of the ancients on these subjects without great admiration. We marvel at them because we are compelled to recognize how preeminent they are (2.2.15).44

Alongside his emphasis on the limits of the spiritual authority of the church and the broad availability of natural law, Calvin’s appreciation for pagan knowledge in civil affairs and the liberal arts demonstrates how his two kingdoms theology lay a foundation for a Christian embrace of social pluralism. Calvin fought long and hard to distinguish the spiritual authority of the church from the temporal affairs of this life, preserving for Christians the liberty to work out the implications of the kingdom and its righteousness in a complex society according to their own reason, experience and vocational expertise. In doing so, he lay the foundation for a Christian support for social pluralism in a context of social differentiation far more developed than anything Calvin could have anticipated.


43Calvin recognized that a Christian society is not in the same political situation as was the people of Old Testament Israel, who were in a unique, covenantal relationship with God governed by the Mosaic law. The Mosaic law was only relevant for Christian politics insofar as it reflected the natural law.

Conclusion

While it would be wrong to argue that Calvin was a democrat or a liberal, or even some sort of proto-democrat, Calvin’s political theology remains useful to Christians who endorse certain forms of liberal democracy. His principled (if qualified) support for religious liberty, his respect for the limits of law given human nature, and his support for the limited autonomy of civil life emerged from a theological outlook rooted in the distinction between the two kingdoms that remains relevant for Christians in contemporary pluralistic societies. It provides the contours of a theological foundation for a principled Christian support for religious, moral, and social pluralism that is consistent with a faithful Christian witness to the lordship of Christ over all of life.

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