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## **Calvin and Calvinism in early modern England, Scotland and Ireland**

Crawford Gribben

In the England, Scotland, Ireland and their colonies, throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, no intellectual system may have exercised greater structural or imaginative significance than the theology of John Calvin. In this context, the influence of Calvin's ideas far outweighed the circulation of his published works, and the tradition of translating his publications into English, especially in the second half of the sixteenth century, continued as his ideas were received, adapted and disseminated in the distinctive and sometimes tumultuous religious environments of the Tudor and Stuart territories. These ideas took impressive hold. By the middle of the seventeenth century, Calvinist ideas had moved from the margins to the centre of the religious, cultural and political life of the three kingdoms, feeding into the outbreak of civil war, and facilitating the revolution that in turn created the short-lived Cromwellian republic. Simultaneously, Calvinism began to variegate, as the Reformed theologies that circulated within and occasionally between the English, Scottish and Irish churches took on distinctive flavours, in reaction to which, and with the goal of uniting these divided Reformed churches, Calvinist theologians created some of the most important of the early modern confessions of faith. One of the longest of these, the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), was intended to achieve, but never achieved, the doctrinal unity of the three established churches, though it remains a constitutional benchmark of Presbyterian denominations around the world. Despite some extraordinary achievements, Calvinist theology was in decline by the end of the seventeenth century, being defended by a shrinking number of clergy and adherents of established and dissenting churches, haunted by its association with political instability and constitutional

chaos, and challenged by the presuppositions of the early Enlightenment and the emergence of trans-Atlantic evangelicalism as a variety of popular Protestantism better adapted to the circumstances of the early eighteenth century. This chapter will describe the reception of Calvin's work, and the origins, evolution, and eventual eclipse of Calvinist theology, in the three kingdoms and their colonies in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

I

The protestant reformation of the English church had begun under Henry VIII and continued, with much greater doctrinal clarity and precision, under Edward VI, before being partially reversed under Mary I and settled, with various degrees of commitment, under Elizabeth I, James VI/I and Charles I. This reformation was facilitated by networks and personal relationships that were established in the 1550s, when many of those who would become the leaders of these reformations met in exile. The efforts made by Mary to re-establish the Catholic faith had led to the most sustained period of religious persecution in English history, with the notorious "fires of Smithfield" consuming almost 300 protestant martyrs between 1555 and 1558, including one archbishop and four bishops as well as almost sixty women and children. Escaping for their lives, a further 800 protestant refugees migrated to the intellectual centres of the Calvinist reformation, where, in locations such as Frankfurt am Main, Basel and Geneva, they collaborated with theologians of other nationalities to create the defining texts of the theological system that by the later sixteenth century would become the doctrinal consensus of the established churches of England, Scotland and Ireland, and a source, as well as a foil, for the churches of their colonies.

The communities of exiles, while disagreeing on certain aspects of the form of a truly Reformed church, created a shared literary culture, the key achievements of which would exercise extraordinary influence in popularising the principal themes of Calvin's theology. Developing the arguments of John Bale's study of *The Image of Both Churches* (1547), exile writers rooted their anti-Marian polemic and their theological and confessional-historical constructions in an apocalyptic register. John Olde translated Rudolf Gualter's *Antichrist* (1556), and published his own *Short Description of Antichrist* (1557) in the same year that Bartholomew Traheron's lectures on Revelation and Robert Pownall's *Admonition to the towne of Callys* invoked the apocalyptic themes to warn of impending judgement upon the English church. John Knox's *First Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558) challenged the propriety of female monarchical rule, aiming to subvert Mary but appearing in time to do the same for Elizabeth, her protestant successor. In 1557, William Whittingham prepared what became the first English New Testament to include verse divisions, a text that presaged the first full Geneva Bible (1560), the fruit of his scholarly collaboration with Miles Coverdale and Christopher Goodman, which included hundreds of thousands of words of theological and exegetical annotations in defence of Reformed theology. The Geneva Bible, in its various editions, became the central text of Calvinist reformation in England, where 140 printings of its most popular edition appeared between 1560 and 1644, and where, between 1575 and 1618, at least one new edition of the text appeared annually. The Geneva Bible had similar influence in Scotland, where in the form of its 1599 edition, it retained a monopoly on Bible publication until 1610. It was never printed in Ireland, where the market for Reformed print was small, undeveloped and always depended upon imports, or in the new world. Providing popular readers with maps, illustrations, introductions and explanatory annotations, and sporting the innovation of

verse divisions, Geneva Bibles were “used and pored over by three generations of English Protestants before the Civil War,”<sup>1</sup> and likely did more than anything else to popularise the principal ideas of the Genevan reformer among those most critical of the established churches and their hesitant reformations. Its achievements were supported the work of John Foxe. The historical themes he explored in his drama, *Christus Triumphans* (1556), were developed in his *Acts and Monuments* (1563), a massive narrative that in its millions of words traced the history of the true church through centuries of persecution. The “Book of Martyrs,” as the *Acts and Monuments* was also known, appeared in multiple editions of various lengths, and was circulating in around ten thousand copies by the end of the seventeenth century, with its arguments echoing throughout the genre of historical-confessional polemic that it helped to inspire. Even in the 1680s, the “Book of Martyrs” could be “esteemed (as the learned confess) the next of all human penn’d Books to the sacred Bible.”<sup>2</sup> The print culture that was developed by exiles from Mary’s England established the themes and tropes that would define Calvinism across the three nations until the end of the seventeenth century.

## II

In the later sixteenth century, the programme for protestant reformation moved from a Lutheran to a Calvinist agenda, and from an English to a British and Irish agenda, partly as a consequence of the print culture of the Marian refugees and partly as a consequence of the translation into English of Calvin’s works and of the wide circulation of his ideas in

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<sup>1</sup> Hill, *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Foxe, *Acts and Monuments* (1684), i. [a]r.

catechisms, confessions of faith, sermons and other publications. Calvin's reputation was established in print, and illustrated how translators, editors and publishers thought that he might be most effectively introduced to English-language reading publics whose interest in his work the Marian refugees had primed. The translation and publication of Calvin's work pre-dated Mary's accession, but notably increased in the aftermath of her death. But Calvin's reputation had to be promoted. A number of his publications appeared in translation in 1548: *A faythful and moost Godlye treatyse concernynge the most sacret sacrament of the blessed body and bloude of oure sauioure Christe* was described as having been "co[m]piled by Iohn Caluyne, a man of no lesse lernyng and literature, then Godlye studye, and example of liuyng," while *The mynde of the godly and excellent lerned man M. Ihon Caluyne, what a faithfull man, whiche is instructe in the Worde of God, ought to do, dwellinge amongst the papistes* set out its commendation of the author in its title, and *Of the life or conuersation of a Christen man* (1549) was advertised as work by "maister Iohn Caluyne, a man of ryghte excellent lernynge and of no lesse godly conuersation." As English readers grew in their regard for his character and achievements, London printers serviced their demand by publishing an edition of his homilies (1553), as well as editions of his catechism, in both French (1552) and English (1556). *The forme of prayers and ministracion of the sacraments, &c. used in the Englishe Congregation at Geneua* (1556) may have described Calvin as a "famous" "godly learned man," but this world of illicit print was not propitious for the making of a protestant reputation.

The publication of Calvin's works was suddenly ramped up after the death of Mary and the accession of Elizabeth in 1558. Printers rushed to supply multiple editions of his sermons, catechisms, and books of church order. In the later sixteenth century, Calvin's reputation rested supremely upon the achievement of his *Institutes of the Christian*

*Religion*, which was widely circulated. Thomas Norton's translation of the final Latin text of the *Institutes* (1559) was published in London in 1561, 1562, 1574, 1582, 1587, 1599, 1611, and 1634. Abridged versions of the *Institutes* were prepared by Edmond Bunnie (1580) and William Lawne (1585, 1586, 1587), while aphorisms lifted from the text were published in Latin in 1595 and in English in 1596, offering the general reader access to an expensive and technically demanding volume that, its publishers claimed, enjoyed unique "acceptation and general approbation."<sup>3</sup> An enterprising London publisher marketed a Spanish translation of the *Institutes* in 1597, with uncertain results. Other editions of the text were likely aimed at different kinds of reader: London printers published Latin editions of the *Institutes* in 1576, 1579, 1583, and 1584, with another appearing from the Oxford university printer in 1655. But the appearance of this Oxford edition was late and rare, suggesting that a great deal of demand for the *Institutes* was being met by its circulation in second-hand copies, and that the appetites of English-language readers had changed from the preoccupations of the late sixteenth century. Throughout the period, Calvin's works continued to circulate on the second-hand market, through lending libraries, and were likely imported into Scotland and Ireland, even as English publishers were selling fewer editions of his work. In the mid-sixteenth century, Calvin's works had appeared suddenly in the marketplace of English print, and their disappearance from publishers' lists at the beginning of the seventeenth century was just as rapid. But this was a sign of the success, not the failure, of Calvin's ideas. And there was, ultimately, no significance in the fact that his works were never published in Scotland or Ireland, nor the *Institutes* in the new world, for it was in the very different

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<sup>3</sup> "To the reader," *Aphorismes of Christian religion: or, a verie compendious abridgement of M. I. Calvins Institutions set forth in short sentences methodically by M. I. Piscator: and now Englished according to the authors third and last edition, by H. Holland* (1596), n.p.

contexts of the Scottish and Irish national churches, and the churches of the New England colonies, that Calvin's ideas were put on their firmest institutional foundation.

### III

As the market for Calvin's published works declined, his ideas were widely and variously disseminated in the expanding print culture of early modern England, as well as in the much smaller print cultures of Scotland and Ireland, even as they were adapted to the distinct circumstances of each of these nations and developed to create the distinctive cultures of trans-national and trans-Atlantic Puritanism. This process of local adoption threw up some ironies: the Scots Confession (1560), which provided the doctrinal standard for the Calvinist reformation of the Church of Scotland for almost one century, contained no reference to justification by faith, but generated fewer complaints than did the 39 Articles of the Church of England (1563), which provided a more balanced summary of Reformed doctrine while attracting criticism from the emerging puritan party, whose key commitments were reflected in the Irish Articles (1615), the double-predestinarian, apocalyptically anti-Catholic and consequently short-lived doctrinal platform of the Church of Ireland. Nevertheless, by the end of the sixteenth century, and despite these local peculiarities, Calvinist ideas were supporting the doctrinal consensus of the three established churches, despite their having different systems of church government, and motivating the concerns of some of their critics, even as James VI/I, the Scottish king who had recently also acceded to the English crown, dispatched a delegation to the Synod of Dort with the purpose of finding a middle way in the dispute within the Dutch church that threatened to undermine the distinctive claims of the Calvinist reformation across Europe. James could represent his Calvinism as a



system of political and religious moderation because this theology, represented in the confessions of faith of his three established churches, was also taught in catechisms, defended in university disputations, preached in sermons, and elaborated upon by philosophical and creative writers from Francis Bacon to William Shakespeare to John Donne. Within this consensus, Calvin was not regarded as the fountainhead of true theology, nor as being uniquely or distinctively associated with the system of doctrine that has come to bear his name. His name, where it was cited at all, was most often listed as part of a sequence of Reformed theologians, and his ideas were celebrated not because they were his but because they were thought to be biblical. Consequently, Calvin's ideas could be sustained, adapted, challenged or transfigured even as his contribution to the shaping of Reformed theology went unacknowledged.

The eclipse of Calvin within Calvinism occurred as this theological system took on local colour. Whatever their differences, the Protestant theological cultures of England, Scotland, and Ireland rallied around a number of ideas by which they were distinguished from the Continental Reformed churches. The British and Irish churches took advantage of the fact that trans-national Calvinism lacked a central confessional text – unlike the Lutheran churches, which had rallied around the Augsburg Confession (1530) – to develop an emphasis upon the Sabbath that was distinctive within international Protestantism, as well as a famously self-reflexive spirituality. This approach, which was simultaneously legalistic and pietistic, was codified in the major seventeenth-century confessions of faith. But these theological statements were never as effective as their framers had hoped. Neither could they stifle theological creativity. The Westminster Confession was adapted by Congregationalists in 1658, and this redaction was in turn modified by Baptists in 1677. This confessional tradition appropriated some new ideas into the Reformed mainstream,

including the covenant of redemption, an agreement between the members of the Trinity before creation to achieve the salvation of the elect, and the active imputation of the righteousness of Christ in justification. These ideas it became commonplaces in high Calvinist circles by the end of the seventeenth century, but they were always contested by others who also claimed the identity of Reformed. Debates about justification in the 1670s crossed divisions between the established and dissenting churches in Britain and Ireland, and reached across the Atlantic. Participants on both sides of this debate believed that the gospel itself was at stake, and appealed for support to central texts in the Calvinist tradition. But, for all the raising of stakes, the dispute was about the boundaries of Reformed theology, and about who had the right to set them. As competition between denominations diffused religious authority, individuals looked increasingly to their own resources to establish religious truth. The emergence of evangelicalism in the 1730s was both a cause and consequence of the erosion of Calvinism, and undermined the aspiration of individuals across British and Irish Protestant spectrum to see their churches finally settle upon a shared orthodoxy. As born-again Protestants came increasingly to emphasise subjective piety over objective statements of faith, they abandoned or modified the sources to which earlier generations within the same Calvinist tradition had made their appeal, so that Calvinism lost its doctrinal centre. Calvin's theology had provided British and Irish Protestants with so many strategies for spirituality, systems of government for the church, and competing doctrines of church-state relations to frustrate any hope that the divisions among early modern Christians could easily be healed.

After the Restoration (1660), Calvinism was eclipsed within the British and Irish churches. In terms of popular religion, Calvinism was most secure in New England, where it had permeated the new society that the early colonists had created. Scotland remained a puritan nation, with solid ecclesiastical institutions that would be settled on Presbyterian models after the Glorious Revolution (1689-90). Calvinism was increasingly contested within the Church of England, and more popular within dissent, even as a number of key dissenting communities moved into Arminianism and Unitarianism. In southern and western Ireland, where the number of Protestants remained small, Calvinist theology was socially irrelevant, while in the north of the island, where Presbyterians retained strong links with Scotland, it was infused with unstable political overtones and presented a serious threat to stable government. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Calvin's ideas had infused religious, political and imaginative cultures. In the mid-seventeenth-century, they had driven a revolution and underwritten a government that, for the first time, effectively controlled the three Stuart nations. But, by the end of the seventeenth century, popular culture and religious politics had moved on, and Calvin's ideas were being regarded as useful for little more than religion. Even in the new world, the revivals of the 1730s were evidence not of the total power of Calvinist thought, but of its failure, and of the impossibility of its being renewed. No system of thought had done more to shape the imagination and experience of individuals and institutions in early modern England, Scotland, Ireland and their colonies. But, by the end of the seventeenth century, as an intellectual system exercising any significant degree of structural and imaginative significance, the theology of John Calvin had had its day.

### **Suggested Further Readings**

Jane Dawson, *John Knox* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

Crawford Gribben, *John Owen and English Puritanism: Experiences of defeat* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

D. G. Hart, *Calvinism: A history* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

Nicholas Tyacke, *Anti-Calvinists: The Rise of English Arminianism c. 1590-1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

Dewey D. Wallace, *Shapers of English Calvinism, 1660-1714: Variety, persistence, and transformation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).