

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

History 12500=Fundamentals 24300
Autumn 2001
TU TH 1:30-2:50
Cobb 101
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CALVIN'S INSTITUTES

Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* are the most complete and influential statement of Christian theology to come out of the Protestant Reformation. Calvin (1509-1564) published it first in a relatively short version in 1536, but continued adding to it, reorganizing it, and clarifying it throughout his life until the great Latin edition of 1559 and the corresponding French translation of 1560. Contrary to wide-spread perceptions, and in spite of some points of fundamental contention between Lutherans, Zwinglians, Calvinists, and other kinds of Protestants, there is no better work to introduce readers to Reformation theology as a whole.

The main purpose of this course is simply to give students an opportunity to read the *Institutes* cover to cover and analyze Calvin's ideas in as much detail as possible in a ten-week quarter. Instead of emphasizing the familiar "theological" issues (predestination, original sin, salvation, resurrection) we shall rather pay close attention to Calvin's views on such fundamental questions as the nature of knowledge, writing and interpretation, truth and meaning, morality and law, freedom and necessity, self-denial, justice, action, power, and the relationship between individuals and society. In short, we will have occasion to consider some very basic aspects of the human condition. The instructor will begin each class with a brief introduction to the readings for the day. The main part of the class will consist of discussions and dialogue, occasionally interrupted by professorial monologues, as the occasion requires and time permits.

We are going to use the following translation: John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960). It is available for purchase at the Seminary Co-op Bookstore, 5757 South University Avenue. It has also been placed on reserve in Harper Library.

Registration is limited to undergraduate students. There are no prerequisites other than a willingness to do a lot of reading and to speak your mind in class.

Requirements:

The main goal of this course is for you to read all of Calvin's *Institutes*. You should be under no illusions that this will be easy. The reading amounts to about 1,500 pages of sometimes easy, sometimes quite difficult prose. Moreover, it's not possible to divide the reading into even pieces. In some weeks you will have to read up to 250 pages, in others you will have to read only (!) about 100. Since I understand perfectly well how difficult it is to pay attention to so much prose, especially for beginning students, I have thought long and hard about assigning only selected passages. But in the end I decided firmly against it. If nothing else, I would like you to be able to say at the end of this course that you have in fact read the whole of Calvin's *Institutes*. That in itself will be no small accomplishment.

At the same time I would of course like you to do something more than just read a lot of pages. I would also like you to understand as much of Calvin's argument as deeply as possible in ten weeks. For only then will you be able to recognize that what looks like somewhat dated theology on the surface actually deals with perfectly familiar and often quite contemporary questions in a perfectly plausible manner.

For those reasons, I have decided to organize the class in the following way.

First of all, I am going to make as sure as I can that you do the reading thoroughly. By thorough reading I mean something more than that you sit down and read all of the assigned pages carefully before class begins. I want you to go beyond reading to the point where you can talk with confidence about what you have read. Taking notes will be useful for that purpose, not merely because it helps to plant certain points in your memory, but also, and far more importantly, because it encourages you to think about what you are reading, and to put your thoughts into your own words. Don't just read. Don't just underline whatever you find important. Stop and think every now and then; especially when something you are reading brings you up short. The most important points in your reading are not those you understand perfectly, but those that confuse you or present you with some problem. Don't try to solve the problem. That would take too long, and that's what class is for. But definitely do try to figure out what the problem is. And then write down the result in full sentences. Writing down your own honest, unvarnished, questioning, doubtful, admiring reaction to the text is the best way for you at one and the same time to understand what you read, assimilate it into your active knowledge, and generate questions about it.

But all of that is still a solitary activity. I would also like to encourage group discussion. Group discussions are the best way by far to lay a common foundation for interpreting whatever may turn out to be more complicated or esoteric. Without group discussion you can never know how many of your thoughts and questions are shared by your classmates, and where you genuinely disagree with them. And since no man (or woman) is an island, you cannot even begin to know what you really think unless you know what other people

think. Moreover, unless you participate in group discussion, I cannot know what you really think. You may think that is none of my business. Fine. But in that case I will almost certainly lecture past your interests and above your heads. I will not know the questions that are actually on your mind, and will therefore not be able to answer them. Unless you have the courage and the initiative to present your views to the group, I will be guessing what your views are. I will therefore inevitably tell you things you don't need to know, and not tell you things that you really do want to know. In other words, group discussion is crucial for the success of a class such as this.

Given the importance I attribute to your speaking in class, I am going to keep track of your attendance and your participation in class discussion. This will count for 20% of your grade. If you cannot attend a class, I would like to know ahead of time. If you have to be late for a class, or have to leave early, I would also like to know ahead of time. If for some reason you cannot let me know ahead of time, please let me know the reason for your absence as soon as possible thereafter. You are allowed two unexcused absences. Three or more will affect your grade.

Furthermore, I am going to divide the class into groups of three, four, or five students each and ask each group to prepare together for class discussions. Students in each group will meet with each other prior to class and answer the following four preparatory questions:

1. What do you regard as the two or three most important points that Calvin made in the readings for today?
2. What do these points contribute to Calvin's general argument?
3. What did you find most difficult to understand in the readings for today?
4. What did you find most interesting in the readings for today?

In order to ensure that you actually engage in this form of co-operative learning, I expect each group of students to submit their collectively formulated answers in writing at the beginning of one of the two meetings we have each week. I leave it up to you whether you prefer to submit your written statement on Tuesday or Thursday. I will observe this practice during weeks two to nine, so that you will have to submit a total of 8 such statements. These statements should be brief (one, at most two pages); they must be handed in at the beginning of class; and they should reflect the consensus of the group as a whole, not just the views of one of its members.

I leave it entirely up to you how you complete this task. You could, for example, divide the labor of reading (one student focuses on the first third of the readings, another one focuses on the next third, and so on), and then meet in order to formulate your views together. This may make it much easier to deal with especially lengthy reading assignments. Or you could delegate the task of answering the questions to one of you, and then meet with that person in order to see what the results are. You could delegate this task to the same student every time (if someone can be found who would think that

this is fair), or you could rotate the responsibility among the members of your group as you see fit. You can decide to submit your written statements every Tuesday from week two to nine, or you could alternate between Tuesday and Thursday. You could meet once a week in order to handle the readings for the whole week at once, or you could have two meetings. And so on.

However you choose to complete this task, you will be expected to hand in a total of eight written statements, one in each week from week two to nine. I will grade each statement and average the grade at the end of the quarter. These statements will count for 20% of your grade for the course. This component of your grade will be the same for every member of the group to which you belong.

I realize that this can result in certain inequities: it is not fair if every student in a given group gets an A while only one student did most of the work. But such inequities are impossible to avoid, and they are far outweighed by the advantage of encouraging group learning -- especially since they affect only 20% of the grade. Perhaps more important, they are no greater than the very real inequities that separate students who attended an outstanding high school from students who were less fortunate, older students from younger students, premeds from prelaws, and so on—not to mention students who applied to study at the University of Chicago and were rejected.

I will collect the written statements from each group at the beginning of each class, but I will not base class discussions directly on them. Instead, I will begin with a brief introductory lecture (up to twenty minutes), in which I will explain what I believe is most important about the readings assigned for the day, and why it may matter to people who are not the least bit committed to "Calvinism" (whatever that may be; people disagree about it). At the same time I may take up questions that were left dangling in the preceding class, or respond to questions that have arisen since then.

Once I have finished my remarks, I will ask each group of students to meet separately for a few minutes in order to digest the information I have just presented and prepare for the discussion to follow. This will be useful because my introduction may answer some of the questions you wanted to discuss, and it may raise new ones as well. It will also give you an opportunity to remind yourselves of the results of your class preparation, especially if for some reason you couldn't attend the meeting of your group. In short, these few minutes will give you a chance to prepare the live event. They will also give me an opportunity to look over the written statements you have submitted at the beginning of the class (assuming there are any on that day).

Once you are ready, I will begin class discussion by turning to one student in each group and ask him or her to present the group's questions and concerns to the class. Once each group has had a chance to voice its views through one of its members, I will open the floor for general discussion. If necessary, I will give mini-lectures in order to clarify

some particular point, furnish historical or intellectual background information, or establish connections to other contexts.

Finally, at the end of each class I will once again set aside a few minutes in which each group of students will meet separately in order to answer the following questions:

1. What were the most important things you learned in class today?
2. What were the most important questions that were left open?
3. What would you like me to clarify in the next class?

I would like each group to write down their answers and give them to me before they leave class so that I can use them to plan my teaching for the next class.

So much for class preparation and class discussion.

In addition, each student will also be expected to write a paper of no less than four and no more than eight pages on a choice of subjects that will be announced in class and may be modified in consultation with me. The paper is due on Tuesday, November 13, at the beginning of class. The paper will count for 30% of the grade.

The course will conclude with a final examination. I will prepare a list of study questions that will cover the material of the whole course. In the final examination you will be asked to answer a certain number of questions to be drawn from that list. The final examination will count for 30% of your grade.

Summary of course requirements:

1. Attendance and class participation: 20%
2. Eight written statements: 20%
3. A paper due on November 13: 30%
4. A final examination: 30%

Schedule of readings:

I have marked especially lengthy reading assignments (more than 100 pages) with an asterisk, so that you can plan your reading more effectively. You will note that most of those have fallen in the second half of the quarter. This is deliberate: by that time you ought to be familiar enough with the *Institutes* to find it easier to digest larger amounts of text.

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| 1. | Introduction to the class | 9/25 |
| 2. | <i>Institutes</i> , book 1, chapters 1-5 | 9/27 |
| 3. | <i>Institutes</i> , 1.6-10 | 10/2 |
| 4. | <i>Institutes</i> , 1.11-13 | 10/4 |

5.	<i>Institutes</i> , 1.14-18	10/9
6.*	<i>Institutes</i> , 2.1-5	10/11
7.	<i>Institutes</i> , 2.6-8	10/16
8.	<i>Institutes</i> , 2.9-11	10/18
9.	<i>Institutes</i> , 2.12-17	10/23
10.	<i>Institutes</i> , 3.1-3	10/25
11.*	<i>Institutes</i> , 3.4-10	10/30
12.*	<i>Institutes</i> , 3.11-18	11/1
13.	<i>Institutes</i> , 3.19-20	11/6
14.	<i>Institutes</i> , 3.21-25	11/8
15.*	<i>Institutes</i> , 4.1-7	Paper is due 11/13
16.*	<i>Institutes</i> , 4.8-13	11/15
17.*	<i>Institutes</i> , 4.14-17	11/20
18.	Thanksgiving	11/22
19.	<i>Institutes</i> , 4.18-20	11/27
20.	Review and exam preparation	11/29

Suggestions for further reading:

The only required reading for this course is Calvin's *Institutes*. At the same time I recognize that you may want to read up on Calvin's life and thought, as well as the historical, intellectual, and theological background. If so, here are some suggestions.

If you know nothing at all about the Reformation and would like to read a good short introduction, take Roland H. Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952) [call number: BR305.B22]. This is somewhat dated, and will give you no sense of the very different views that historians take of the Reformation nowadays, but it is also a classic account of the basic theological issues and the main lines of Reformation thought: clear, well written, and to the point.

If you would like a more recent introduction to the Reformation as a whole look at Vivian Hubert Howard Green, *The European Reformation* (Stroud: Sutton, 1998) [call number: BR305.2.G73 1998], or James D. Tracy, *Europe's Reformations, 1450-1650* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999) [call number: BR290.T73 1999]. Both are written for beginners, but the former is briefer, follows a more conventional organization, and places more emphasis on theology. Tracy is very good at covering all of Europe and in paying equal degrees of attention to intellectual issues, political history, and changes in society. In fact, he divides his book into three separate parts in order to be able to give equal weight to these subjects.

If you already have some basic knowledge of the Reformation, but would like to deepen your understanding of the historical background, I would recommend Euan Cameron, *The European Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991) [call number: BR305.2.C350 1991]. This is a relatively thorough survey written relatively recently

from the perspective of a social historian with real interest in questions of theology and a very good sense of the current state of the scholarship. It serves a similar purpose as Tracy's *Europe's Reformations*, but at a somewhat more advanced level. What is particularly good about this book is that it shows very clearly how the revolutionary energy of the Reformation depended on an alliance of theologians with a huge and genuinely popular movement. As soon as that alliance broke up, the revolutionary potential of the Reformation was curtailed.

If you are more interested in the intellectual side of the Reformation, there is an excellent, clear, short overview of all of the main theological issues by Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993) [call number: BT26.M370 1993]. McGrath's book is very well designed from a didactic point of view. It gives you a lot of direction towards the central issues, explains most of the things that other authors take for granted, and is very well informed. Its main disadvantage is its brevity and sharp focus.

If you would like to have something perhaps a little less didactic, and more along the lines of a book that you can read like a story, a book that tells you, one by one, who the main figures were, what they thought, what happened to each of them, and the place they occupied in the course of the Reformation, you'll probably like Bernard M. G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Reformation*, 2nd ed. (London - New York: Longman, 1995) [call number: BT27.R360 1995]. The approach here is more old-fashioned, but the information is very good, and the story is richly detailed.

Concerning Calvin himself, I recommend two standard biographies, one study of his theology, and one non-standard biography. The best recent biography is by Alister McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin: A Study in the Shaping of Western Culture* (Oxford - Cambridge, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1990) [call number: BX9418.M290 1990 Harper/Regenstein]. This is the same McGrath who wrote the introduction to *Reformation Thought* just mentioned above. The other biography is by T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (London: Dent, 1975) [call number: BX9418.P245 1975]. This is a bit older, but Parker is one of the greatest experts on Calvin and therefore very much worth reading. Parker is also the author of a recent overview of Calvin's theology that follows the structure of the *Institutes* and will therefore be especially useful for those of you who have a hard time understanding the logic of Calvin's argument, namely, *Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) [call number: BX9418.P330 1995].

You should also be aware of William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1988) [call number: BX9418.B7150 1988]. This book has attracted a lot of attention, but it is controversial. It is not really a biography. As the author himself makes perfectly clear, it is a "sixteenth-century portrait." If you want to know what that means, you'll have to take a look. But I would urge you to be careful: this book is not for beginners. It is an attempt to get at the essence of Calvin's thought,

because the author believes that the essence of Calvin's thought reflects the "anxiety" (his term) of the age. The result is very interesting, as is only to be expected. Bouwsma is without any doubt one of the most perceptive historians of early modern European intellectual life. But there are a good number of readers who believe that his approach results only too easily in a misleading perspective on Calvin.

If this is still not enough, I have two other suggestions. One is Thomas A. Brady, Jr., Heiko A. Oberman and James D. Tracy, eds. *Handbook of European History, 1400-1600: Late Middle Ages, Renaissance and Reformation* (Leiden - New York - Köln: E. J. Brill, 1994-95) [call number: D203.H360 1994 RR3]. This is an up-to-date collection of relatively short, but comprehensive essays and bibliographies designed to introduce novices to most aspects of European history from 1400-1600 according to the best scholarship available today. It is especially good on the Reformation. It includes, for example, an excellent essay by Robert Kingdon on Calvinism, and an equally good one by Philip Benedict on Calvinism in France. This is for those who have a real taste for scholarship, or who want to do some further research, or perhaps simply want to know what it means when people talk about "current scholarship."

Finally, no list of further readings on Calvin can afford not to mention an old, but still unsurpassed study of Calvinism as a whole, namely John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954).