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## SUMMARY

In this study, I trace a recurrent yet curiously understudied linguistic dimension in John Calvin's *Institutes of Christian Religion*. Highlighting this dimension justifies an adjustment of the popular image of Calvin as a staunch theologian whose iron voice mirrors an equally iron theology. Careful analysis shows his famous 'iron voice' to be based on literary techniques rather than accessible descriptive dogmatic content. Re-staging major discussions on Calvin's works as questions regarding textuality, this study furthermore offers a new view on Calvin's theology as well as on the theological heritage of notions of modernity and political agency.

Basing myself on recent developments in Reformation-studies, in which the linguistic effects of the *sola* doctrine in Reformation theology has been charted, I propose to read Calvin's text, rather than as a treatise that is to serve as a systematic and logically consistent foundation of religious dogma, as a textual object that combines logically contradictory forces into a textual whole. The tension between these contradictory forces, far from being a flaw in a theological system, as it has often been perceived, in fact provides for a dangerously ungraspable element in Calvin's language. When assessing the doctrinary content and results of Calvin's text, I propose taking the movements his text makes when expressing this content into consideration. In short, I propose to read Calvin's text not merely as a descriptive manual but also as a work whose textual movements and performative nature can be called literary. This approach enables a comparison between the textual movements that make up Calvin's text and other textual objects more properly deemed literary. Comparing Calvin's text with other literary texts, like those of Samuel Beckett and Henry David Thoreau enables me to further define the specifics style of Calvin's voice.

The literary dimensions in Calvin's text are shown to consist of circularities that appear on multiple levels of theological discourse. On each of these levels, access for the reader to what is being argued is fundamentally problematic. Yet the circularities of each of the levels is shown to be part of the same concentric structure, that might organize "access" to the discourse from the vantage point of the absent centre of Calvin's authorial voice.

The introduction describes the first of these circularities: Calvin stresses in a prefatory epistle to the French king François the First that the Reformed lack the theological ground to stage a rebellion. They would much sooner pray for the good of the divinely elected King than craft a man-made rebellion. This stance can be linked to Calvin's lack of trust in human capacities, and it can be linked to later discussions of the typically protestant acquiescence in matters political. Yet, at the same time, Calvin's *magnum opus* ends with what can be read as a call to rebellion when a King behaves unjustly. Questions about the parameters for such critical activity immediately arise. For, if man's sinful nature highly problematizes man's capacity to distinguish good from evil, and the *Institutes* spends a large part arguing just that, what will be the touchstone with which to distinguish just political revolt from ungodly revolt against a divinely sanctioned situation? In this sense, the end of the *Institutes* refers right back to the beginning, leaving the reader without an easily accessible exit from this quagmire.

These moments that frame the *Institutes* are symptomatic of what I have suggested to call Calvinian language. That is to say, the circularity I have just sketched recurs on many different levels of Calvin's theology. In the first chapter I discuss the opening of the first book of the *Institutes*, in which Calvin discusses the right order in which to teach religion. Should one start with the knowledge of God, whose splen-

dour should continually remind us not to trust in figments of human imagination, or with the knowledge of man, whose iniquity should serve as a reminder that any image of God that man can craft is inherently tainted and should be distrusted from the beginning? Typically, Calvin leaves this question open-ended, stating that, merely for practical purposes, we will start with knowledge of the divine. This chapter describes how in Calvin's discussion of divine knowledge a human element should always be included and, vice versa, how every knowledge of man should be pierced by knowledge of God. In the first book of the *Institutes*, Calvin sets up a demand for the reader to interact dynamically with the knowledge that man can formulate about God. As I show in this first chapter, for Calvin, this dynamic and circular attitude includes the interaction with theology, it includes the interaction with the *Institutes* itself.

The second chapter discusses the role of the Last Supper and of reflections on divine presence in the created order in general. The eucharist, with its conflation of earthly and divine presence, functions for Calvin as a reminder of the 'extra' dimension of the created order. Instead of a fixed stable signifying presence, the eucharist becomes with Calvin a circular and dynamic process of mediation between, and conflation of, the material and spiritual parts of creation. Again, the parameters of this process, lying outside of reach of subjects of creation, cannot be given in descriptive language.

In the third chapter we will see how even in man's interaction with Scripture, one should not trust in descriptive accessibility. The notion of *accommodatio*, or accommodation, lies at the center of Calvin's interaction with Scripture. God, in communicating with us, stooped and lowered himself to our level, and spoke to us in a lisp, 'as nurses commonly do with infants'. Again, this dimension includes the demand

that is placed on the reader / believer to continually distrust descriptive value of words, yet retain the extra-linguistic affirmation that, for the true believer, is couched in them.

In the fourth chapter we will see how this recurring descriptive insecurity extends to the practical use of Calvin's text itself. Although Calvin could be seen as paradoxically filling in the insecurity that Scripture should create with his own theology, thus opening up religious affirmation to fundamentalist assurance of one's own election, it can also be argued that the lack of closure is supposed to continue in the praxis of religion. By comparing Luther's letters of spiritual counsel with Calvin's less than comforting counsel, Calvin's reluctance to provide proof for or imagery of the afterlife gains a practical dimension and shows that the interpretative questions discussed in the previous chapters spread outwards into the attitude the believer is to assume regarding questions of mortality and salvation.

In the conclusion, I suggest seeing Calvin's theology as a theology riddled with 'zones of indiscernability'; that is to say, moments in the text in which the text itself reaches its limits and the filling in of these zones is subsequently left up to the reader. I outline the impact this study could have for study of early modernity and Reformed theology at large, including its political components. For these 'zones of indiscernability' generate potential new conceptualizations of fundamentalism and nihilism. As such this study argues for an inclusion of notions of textuality in the study of Reformed theology and early modernity.