

mal at best. A section of primary and secondary literature that follows each chapter is a good addition, but is not enough. The work almost seems to naturally beg, welcome, and require additional historiographic discourse.

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*John Calvin's "Institutes of the Christian Religion": A Biography.* Bruce Gordon. Lives of the Great Religious Books. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016. xxii + 278 pp. \$27.95.

It is strange to think that a book could have a biography, or that one could write the life of something that has been written. The oddity rests in the assumption that a work of literature can, perhaps in some literal sense, be born, nurtured by a community, reach maturity, and then die. As unusual as this may seem, writing the biography of a book is precisely what Bruce Gordon has undertaken in his compact treatment of the life of one of the great theological texts, John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

Gordon's small work helps unravel the historical knot of a subversive document, one that was deployed, for example, to underwrite key elements of the American Social Gospel movement and yet to justify the draconian segregationist policies of South African apartheid. The author also describes how the *Institutes* came under scrutiny as one of the focal points of disagreement at key moments in the development of Christian doctrine in the United States and Europe, such as in the Princeton-Mercersburg controversy over the "static" versus "progressive" nature of divine revelation and the Barth-Brunner contest over "natural" versus "revealed" theology. In many ways, the tale of the *Institutes* is a tale of conflicts born out of sibling rivalries. And in this sense, Gordon's biography is really a story about the uses of a text by a committed readership. It is a book about the way a religious family used one of its primary texts over the course of nearly 500 years of social and political flux. Thus Gordon hasn't so much written a book's biography as a biography of a religious community who used a book to find solace in the midst of upheaval and the rationale for protest in the midst of perceived social immorality.

Over twelve epigrammatic chapters, Gordon carries the reader from the initial production of the 1559 Latin edition of the *Institutes* through 450 years of textual reception. Along the way, one encounters a steady stream of debates over the doctrine and legacy of Calvin's masterwork, ranging from Calvin's immediate ecclesiastical heirs to variegated Enlightenment responses to his eventual American reception. These contests, as Gordon points out, stand as testimonies to the subtlety, intricacy, and ultimate ambiguity of Calvin's thought, as well as the indeterminate nature of the theological tradition he helped institute and nurture. An impressive range of reactions to the *In-*

*stitutes* are captured, beginning with the years immediately following the Reformer's death (among second-generation followers like Theodore Beza, Edmund Bunny, and William Delaune), and carrying through to twenty-first-century appropriations among liberationist, black church theologians, and leaders in the Chinese house-church movement.

While the book follows a chronological structure, Gordon returns to two major themes throughout. On the one hand, in order to help us understand the history of ambivalence toward Calvin himself, Gordon unfolds his role in the execution of the sixteenth-century Spanish controversialist and lay theologian Michael Servetus. On the other hand, Gordon grapples with a popular caricature of the theology of the *Institutes*, that Calvin's God is a self-centered tyrant obsessed with punishing helpless creatures for the sake of God's own glory. By introducing and revisiting these themes, Gordon confronts one of the most enduring assumptions about Calvin's Calvinism—that in the end it is perversely concerned with divine glory and the sadistic degradation of the creature in service of this glory, and that in his complicity with the execution of Servetus, Calvin was enacting this grotesque theology with impunity. Against these popular caricatures, Gordon suggests that Calvin's role in Servetus's death was actually much more complicated than the dominant story indicates. And, more than this, the history of the *Institutes's* reception points to a readership that found in the work much more than an austere theology reducible to the doctrine of double predestination. At various times and in a variety of places the *Institutes* has been placed in service of human liberation and the repudiation of tyranny, as in the work of Karl Barth and Allan Boesak.

As a final comment, at some points there is slippage between the language of "Calvin's *Institutes*," or the literary work itself, and "Calvinist influence," which seems to refer to the constellation of theological positions that the literary work produced and cultivated. Due to the occasional conflation of these terms, it isn't clear whether Gordon is really telling the story of the *Institutes* or if he's ultimately concerned with the community of readers (in most cases self-identified Calvinists) that received and responded to the work. While not a major distraction, it does raise questions about what Gordon himself calls "the vague relationship between Calvin and Calvinism" (189). Regardless, due to the broad intellectual history it develops, this book would work quite well in the classroom as a secondary source on Calvin and Reformed theology for upper-level undergraduates and seminary students. It could also be recommended as a primer on these topics for interested nonspecialists.

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