

Lutheran elector of Saxony, introduces a discussion of confessionalism while the adventures of Jesuit missionaries in Quebec foreground an assessment of Catholic expansion in New France. Despite its length, the text reads quickly, and though Eire keeps notes to a minimum, he does include an extensive bibliography, thematically arranged (nearly 150 separate headings). A final comment on geography: as the title suggests, Eire does provide coverage of the early modern world. Not surprisingly, his coverage is strongest with the Catholics, as he tracks their missions to the New World, Asia, and to a lesser extent Africa. His analysis of Europe, though, is more traditional. He focuses primarily on western Europe and the Mediterranean. Generally, he devotes little notice to Scandinavia or eastern Europe. Poland/Lithuania, geographically the largest polity in early modern Europe and confessionally its most diverse, receives only a few pages, despite the fact that its cosmopolitan Protestant, Catholic, and Antitrinitarian reformers busily crisscrossed the continent. Europe's Orthodox communities receive little mention. The Ottoman borderlands in southeastern Europe, a region that played host to enterprising Franciscan and Jesuit missionaries, merit some attention as well. Still, these are minor criticisms, for coverage must necessarily be selective for any author who writes such an ambitious overview of Christianity in the early modern world. We are in Eire's debt for providing us with such an insightful guide to this critical and transformative period of the past.

**Howard Louthan**  
University of Minnesota

doi:10.1017/S0009640716000974

***John Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion: A Biography.*** By **Bruce Gordon.** Lives of Great Religious Books. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2016. xviii + 277 pp. \$27.95 cloth.

Premier historian Bruce Gordon has written a highly interesting and strikingly engaging "life" of one of the great theological classics, John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Through its Latin and French editions from 1536 to 1560, Calvin's work became "a book for the church and for many churches spread across Europe" (xii).

Over the past five-hundred years, the *Institutes* "never disappeared," though "it often sat on shelves for long periods of time" (xiv). This "biography" of the *Institutes* traces its origin and development during Calvin's life and after his death through its appropriation in the following centuries and in as varied places as the United States, The Netherlands, and today in South Africa and

China. Along the way, Gordon looks at the 1930s clash of the “Titans”—Barth and Brunner—over interpreting Calvin’s views on “natural theology.” He concludes with a chapter on “Contemporary Voices,” maintaining that “in many respects, Calvin and the *Institutes* have never been more present”—in academia and in engagement of Calvin’s thought—both pro and con, on a variety of fronts (199).

Gordon presents both Calvin’s passionate defenders and his detractors. Calvin saw himself foremost as an interpreter of Holy Scripture, sharing the Reformation conviction that *sola scriptura* put “biblical interpretation at the heart of the movement” (16). Calvin’s *Institutes* was his comprehensive summary of his biblical interpretation, expressed in Christian doctrine (36). His work “in style and conception” was “distinctive, both eloquent and accessible.” According to Gordon’s analysis, “As a literary voice on doctrine, Calvin was alone” (14). Calvin’s book was not a work of “academic theology”—a designation Gordon says “Calvin would have hated” (xiii). Instead, the book spoke of relationships: between us and God, between us and our neighbors, and within ourselves. These relationships are “inseparable in the sanctified life Calvin envisaged for women and men.” Concretely, “the *Institutes* is a book to be lived” (xiii).

After Calvin’s death in 1564, “the intellectual world of the Protestant Reformation was changing, moving away from the humanist forms of writing that shaped the *Institutes*” (50). Scholasticism became the preferred academic and theological method. Calvin’s inheritors did not jettison his work, but adapted it for their times. Critical apparatus structures were added to *Institutes* editions, and compendia and epitomes appeared to summarize Calvin’s *Institutes* “in more manageably sized books that could be used by pressed pastors and frazzled students” (52). Gordon does not try to adjudicate the contested issue of Calvin’s relationship to developed seventeenth-century Reformed Orthodoxy. Instead, he urges a contextual reading of Calvin during the Orthodox period, indicating Calvin’s successors “did not treat Calvin’s writings as canonical or of special authority. His words did not appear in red letters. He was venerated as a founder of the Reformed tradition and as its first great theological author, but as the decades passed after his death, others, in particular his successor Beza, led the church” (56).

Calvin’s voice was most influential in England under Elizabeth I; his *Institutes*, “with its clarity and elegance, had no competition, certainly none from English authors” (58). For emerging Reformed Christians, including Presbyterians and Puritans, “the *Institutes* became the definitive statement of doctrine” (58).

In the Age of Enlightenment, “knowledge” became, not what Calvin discussed in the opening of the *Institutes*, but “scientia became ‘reason,’ which rendered possible religion without doctrine” (68). So churches adopted a new creed of “reasonable religion” as “an ethical, exemplary, and

reasonable Christ, the supreme moral example, replaced the God as redeemer from books two and three of Calvin's *Institutes*" (69). Calvin's part in the "Servetus affair" became "the morality tale of all that had been wrong with Reformation religion" (71). Yet Calvin's classic continued to be influential through theologians such as Cotton Mather and, earlier, the Englishman John Cotton. When Cotton was asked why he stayed up late reading the *Institutes*, he replied, "because I love to sweeten my mouth with a piece of Calvin before I go to sleep" (64, 82). John Wesley even quoted Calvin on a crucial point on the doctrine of justification (83).

After the French Revolution and the fall of Napoleon, "Reformed Christianity was in danger of becoming a relic, an irrelevant and unwanted reminder of intolerance and dogmatic rigidity" (89). But Schleiermacher often quoted Calvin, was a critical reader of Calvin, and argued that predestination was at the heart of the *Institutes*. Schleiermacher showed a new way of reading Calvin, though, as Gordon comments, he "adopted a form of universal election that had little to do with the *Institutes*" (94).

Gordon expertly tells the story of "America's Calvin," especially in the Civil War context where there was "a generation of Presbyterian writers on both sides of the conflict who claimed Calvin" (118). By the time of the anniversary of Calvin's birth, in 1909, there were three leading Calvin interpreters: B.B. Warfield, Abraham Kuyper, and Herman Bavinck. While admitting Calvin's mistake in consenting to Servetus's death, Bavinck and Dutch Neo-Calvinists saw the *Institutes* as "the embodiment of a man who was in turn a model for what they should be" (131).

Kuyperianism was used to justify apartheid in South Africa. But for figures such as Allan Boesak and John de Gruchy, with the discovery of Calvin as "a champion of refugees, the weak, and the poor, and critical of the powerful and wealthy" (through André Bielier's *The Social Humanism of Calvin*, Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1964), Calvin's *Institutes* "inspired black and white South Africans to transform a nation" (181).

After its cultural revolution, Calvin scholarship emerged in China. Gordon shows different strands here as today the *Institutes* is read as "a guide for Christian living and church renewal, as a link to Western culture, as part of modernization, and as support for political dissent" (184).

Gordon's splendid study shows that the *Institutes* provided a theological vision for its own day, while "speaking powerfully to the present," as it offers exquisite renderings of Christian beliefs and experiences, "by one of the faith's greatest authors" (221).

**Donald K. McKim**

Memphis Theological Seminary, Emeritus