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The impact of Calvinism on the European mind – a plea for revisiting the issues

ABSTRACT

In the attempt to find ‘a soul for Europe’ Europeans should take into account the major religious movements that have shaped their common identity. The celebration of Calvin’s 500th birthday reminds us of the fact that Calvinism was one of these movements. In this paper, it is argued that there is ample reason to renew the old quest for a reliable account of the influence of Calvinism on the formation of the modern European mind-set. Current research on this issue seems to have reached a stalemate, from which it can only escape when the separate areas that have been traditionally examined (among which economic thought, politics, law, science and spirituality are the most prominent) are related to one another in a comprehensive scholarly approach. In such an approach, both insider and outsider perspectives should be allowed to play a role, in order to avoid ideological distortions in whatever direction.

‘The decay of actual religious practice in Europe during the last century makes it all the more urgent a task to explain the reasons for Europe’s continuing diversity. The common Latin inheritance of Catholic and Protestant ... is the shaping fact of European identity, but is has become a divided inheritance.’²

INTRODUCTION

Since Europe has been hit by a worldwide financial and, in its wake, economic crisis, the call for a new common ethos is becoming louder. It seems that what is needed to structurally overcome such a crisis and to prevent it from returning in the future is not primarily a number of technical and legal measures, but a change in our common mentality. Rather than short-sightedly putting our private interests, selfish as they often are, before our public responsibilities, we should act in reliable and responsible ways in serving the common good. That implies, however, that we need some kind of spiritual vision of what constitutes this common good and what form(s) it may take in Europe. Already in 1992 the former President of the European Commission, Jacques Delors, launched the search for a ‘soul for Europe.’ In a historical speech in Brussels, Delors argued that it will be impossible to succeed with the European Union solely on the basis of legal expertise and economic know-how. Therefore, he wanted Europe to point its citizens to something beyond economics and legal systems. In the wake of his call, *A Soul for Europe* was launched as an initiative with the aim of giving a spiritual and ethical dimension to the European Union.³ The relevance of such calls and initiatives became only more evident when throughout

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2 MacCulloch (2003: xxii).

3 See www.asoulforeurope.eu (last visited 15 September 2009).

the past couple of years more and more European countries (especially from Europe's eastern and southern parts), each with its own cultural background, joined the European Union.

Although it is, of course, a common phenomenon that politicians look for some form of civil religion, theologians need not be a priori dismissive of such initiatives. Instead, they might rather try to point out that giving a spiritual dimension to a continent is something that, if at all, cannot be done from scratch. We can only know who we are and what factors can mould our common identity, if we know where we come from. Therefore, from a European perspective it is important to know which religious and non-religious cultural factors have shaped the European mind-set throughout the centuries, and in what ways. To what extent do the different spiritual traditions and cultural forces that moulded Europe's past still influence the European way of life today? It is a well-known fact that even in largely secularized societies the impact of their formative religious traditions often continues to be pervasive beneath the surface, influencing for example people's social ethos, people's attitude towards labour, human rights, human flourishing, et cetera. In light of this, it might be investigated how Europe's Humanist, Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Islamic traditions have contributed in shaping what one might call the European mind, i.e. the common mentality in terms of which Europeans identify themselves (or, more often perhaps, are identified by others) as Europeans. Given the huge cultural, historical and religious differences between the uniting European countries, what values and traditions may be seen as – at least to some extent – binding them together?

It would be overly ambitious, however, to attempt to chart all the different religious and non-religious cultural forces that shaped Europe's mind-set. It is much more reasonable to deal with the different formative traditions one by one, given the complexity of the issues. For, clearly, it is a daunting task to establish indubitable causal connections between large-scale spiritual movements and present-day cultural accomplishments. As Dirkie Smit says: 'How does one demonstrate historical impact, causality, influence in major historical movements? By their very nature, such claims will and should remain controversial.'⁴ Still, this is not to deny that further research on such issues may lead to compelling new and more refined insights. In this paper I want to make plausible that a revisiting of Calvinism's impact on Europe may yield such new insights, thus increasing our awareness of who we are as Europeans, and that therefore a large-scale research programme on the role of Calvinism in the formation of the European mind may turn out to be very fruitful.

In its most succinct form, the central question of such a programme might be: *What impact did Calvinism have on the European mind-set?* In what follows, we will briefly elaborate on the need and relevance of new research in this area in relation to the current state-of-the-art (part II); next, the directions into which such research should be developed will be briefly sketched (part III); and finally, a note will be added on the methods to be used in order to gain reliable new results (part IV).

WHY FURTHER RESEARCH IS NEEDED

During the year 2009 John Calvin's 500th birthday is celebrated all over the world. In many places, the commemoration festivities are even more exuberant than ever before. As Europeans we are again reminded of the fact that, apart from other cultural and religious forces, our continent has also been influenced by the spirituality of Calvinism. This is true of course for such countries as Switzerland, Germany, Hungary, France (with its 'Huguenots'), the Netherlands and the United Kingdom; but it is also true for some countries that never had a large Calvinist population, since

4 See Dirkie Smit's 'On Calvin's reception in South Africa – reminders and questions' elsewhere in this edition.

the many contacts between European communities over the centuries led to complex forms of cultural cross-fertilization and osmosis. Moreover, Calvinism heavily influenced important other parts of the world, such as the USA, e.g. through the Pilgrim Fathers, and South-Africa, e.g. in both the rise and fall of the Apartheid regime. So worldwide it has been and still is a cultural force of the first rank.

Even now many European countries have become secular to a large degree and/or moved towards post-Christian forms of spirituality, the Calvinist ethos continues to be pervasive in many places. A disputed question among scholars in the social sciences and humanities, however, is how exactly this Calvinist ethos has influenced and still influences our public life. How, for example, did it influence our economic thinking, the constitution of our liberal democracies, our legal system, and the development of the sciences? And how can these different lines of influence be explained from a common spiritual and doctrinal core – or, to reverse the hermeneutical direction, help us in identifying this spiritual and doctrinal core?

Although much research has been done on issues such as these⁵, up to now no unanimity has been reached. On the contrary, the results of most case studies continue to be controversial and disputed. Now it can be conjectured (as a kind of working hypothesis) that this is to a large part due to the fact that the traditional concrete issues – economics, politics, law, science, spirituality⁶ – are usually examined independently from one another on a one-by-one basis, rather than in an overarching and comprehensive way. Moreover, previous investigations have sometimes been weakened by hidden agenda's of either an apologetic or an anti-religious nature. Therefore, we are in need of a large-scale revisiting of Calvinism's influence in a couple of different cultural areas by means of a new comprehensive approach in which these areas are interrelated to one another (part III), and in which a method is used that as far as possible will avoid ideological distortions in whatever direction (part IV).

FIELDS OF RESEARCH: THE MAJOR ISSUES

Calvinism and economics

A first topic to be re-examined concerns the ongoing discussion raised by Max Weber's classic *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*⁷ – a discussion that focuses on the influence of Calvinism on the development of Europe's economic system. As a sociologist, Weber showed that at least six existing explanations for the rise of capitalism, all of which ignored the role of religion, were inadequate. Instead, Weber insisted that the spirit which made possible the rise of capitalism had important non-economic and non-political roots in religiously inspired cultural values. According to the famous 'Weber thesis', two conditions in particular are crucial for explaining the rise of the spirit of capitalism: the extent to which religious belief elicits sustaining motives for organizing life in a rational way, and the degree to which it directly connects economic activity with psychological rewards.⁸

5 Cf. to mention just a few of the more recent examples, Reid (1982); Heiko A. Oberman, 'John Calvin – the mystery of his impact', in: Leith (1992: 1-11); John Leith, 'The ethos of the Reformed tradition', in: McKim (1992: 5-18); R. Ward Holder, 'Calvin's Heritage', in: McKim (2004: 245-273); and most recently Hizel & Sallmann (2009). A still thought-provoking classic work in the area, but more general in scope, is Troeltsch (1912).

6 It might be suggested that art is another field in which the influence of Calvinism should be reconsidered.

7 Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus was first published (not as a book but as a two-part essay) in 1904-05, revised and expanded in 1920, and translated for the first time into English in 1930. Its continuing relevance appears from the fact that a new German edition was published in 1993, whereas a new English translation appeared in 2002. See Kalberg (2009: 5). Cf Lehmann & Roth (1993).

8 Kalberg (2009: 17-18).

Both of these conditions Weber saw fulfilled in Calvinism, especially in its Puritan variety. Here, Calvin's 'terrifying' doctrine of predestination was combined with the conviction that the sustained attempt to lead a disciplined ('sanctified') life was a clear sign of one's being among the elect.⁹ Moreover, ascetic Puritan divines in the sixteenth and seventeenth century connected this disciplined life to methodical work in a vocation and a systematic pursuit of wealth and profit. Here the spirit of capitalism finds one of its deepest roots: 'The rigorous and focused conduct of these ascetic saints contrasted dramatically with the unsystematized lives of Catholics and Lutherans'.¹⁰

During more than a century now, Weber's thesis (and to a lesser extent also the more nuanced and therefore more convincing variety that was put forward by R.H. Tawney¹¹) has been criticized, questioned, qualified, but also supported from all sorts of perspectives – but none of the views on the historical role Calvinism played in the rise of capitalism has gained general acceptance. So it seems that research on this topic has reached an impasse. Therefore, we want to investigate anew the influence of Calvinism on Europe's economic thinking by evaluating the *status quaestionis* of the discussion on the Weber-thesis, and by subsequently exploring new directions into which any connections between Calvinism and economic thought might be established.

It is important to realize that such connections will not by definition contribute to a more positive evaluation of Calvinism as a cultural force. Rather, the nature of such connections will often be morally ambivalent. For example, if it turns out that after all (and despite all sorts of qualifications) Weber had a point with his thesis, then the question arises to what extent Calvinism must be held co-responsible for the system of slavery, for our contemporary large-scale ecological problems, et cetera.

Calvinism and the rise of political democracy

A second field to be examined concerns the influence of Calvinism on the making of the modern state. This is another exciting topic, on which a lot of research has recently been done. Again, however, the results are far from unambiguous. In a by now classic study, John T. McNeill has emphasized the significance of the, purportedly typically Calvinistic, allowance of violent resistance to unjust autocratic rule by lower authorities. Next to that, he pointed to the consistorial and presbyterial-synodal forms of church government which arguably paved the way towards lay people's involvement in the governing of the state.¹²

In more recent research, however, the tracing of clear and consistent connections between Europe's confessional traditions and its modern democratic state constitution has become more and more problematic. For example, the writer of the latest extensive history of Reformed Protestantism, Philip Benedict, comes to the conclusion that 'the connections historians once saw as evidence of an affinity between Calvinism and representative or limited government now appear to be either the product of contingent historical circumstances or simply unnecessary to account for the evolution of the basic features of modern political arrangements in the West'.¹³

9 Weber emphasises that his analysis concerns Calvinism and not Calvin's personal views (Kalberg 2009: 489 n.11). See on the latter the classic Biéler (1959) (ET Geneva 2005). Cf Graham (1971); Dommen & Bratt (2007).

10 Kalberg (2002: xxxiii – this pointed sentence seems to have been omitted in the recent fourth edition of Kalberg's book).

11 Tawney (1926).

12 McNeill (1954). Incidentally, McNeill's view can be traced back to ideas of Alexis de Tocqueville in the first half of the nineteenth century. See further on Calvin, Calvinism and politics: Kingdon & Linder (1970); Hancock (1989).

13 Benedict (2002: 537).

This conclusion squares well with the contemporary tendency to deny or qualify causal relations between religious views on the one hand and any common goods that we may have on the other. It fits ill, however, with the common presumption that theological ideas and religious sentiments often did have and still do have a *negative* influence on public life. For example, there is a broad consensus that traditional Christian anti-Judaism is co-responsible for fostering anti-Semitism, that the Vatican view on sexuality contributes to the spreading of HIV/aids in Africa, and that religions in general often lead to violence and repression, et cetera. It seems strange, however, to assume (and often rightly so) negative influences of religious traditions, including Calvinism, on public life, but to deny all possible positive ones. Moreover, the so-called ‘confessionalisation thesis’, put forward by historians of the early modern era since the 1980’s, points in a different direction.¹⁴ The parallel processes of ‘confession-building’ taking place in Europe between the Peace of Augsburg (1555) and the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1649) is often described as a stage towards the centralised state of the 18th century and so towards the modern welfare state.

Did Calvinism play some specific role in this process? At least a new look at the evidence, in which older and newer hypotheses are being carefully evaluated, seems desirable.

Calvinism and law

It is a well-known fact that Protestant jurists in the 16th and 17th century have contributed considerably to the emancipation of civil and criminal law from ecclesiastical tutelage. Their opposition against papal and other ecclesiastical power aspirations stimulated them to develop a legal system that was deemed to be independent from church and state. As Harold Berman argues, ‘(...) beginning in the late 1520s and 1530s, leading jurists, chiefly German and chiefly Protestant, undertook to derive from basic principles and concepts not simply individual aspects or parts of law but the entire body of law. This completed the shift (...) to a new legal science’.¹⁵

Traditionally, it has been suggested that Lutheran thinkers in particular were involved in this project, since they subscribed to Luther’s theory of the two kingdoms – a theory that attributed a wide-ranging and independent (i.e. free from church interference) task to civil authorities. It should be realized, however, that this theory belongs to the common Protestant doctrinal heritage. Thus, in a meticulous study of confessional aspects in the work of Reformed jurists during the early modern period, Christoph Strohm has made plausible that ‘inner-Protestant differences [especially between Lutheranism and Calvinism – GvdB] should be drawn upon only with utmost caution’.¹⁶ Both confessions equally contributed to the rise and flourishing of faculties of law at European universities that were largely independent of theological influence.

Nevertheless, Strohm also takes into account that the break with established tradition was more radical in the Reformed than in the Lutheran part of the Reformation, so that the willingness to fundamentally restructure the legal system was particularly great among the Calvinists.¹⁷ Moreover, as a result of the more intensive international exchange of both law students and professors among the Reformed, they often enjoyed the best and most modern legal education in Europe.¹⁸ Without noticing this, Strohm ties in here with an hypothesis that was previously put forward by Heiko Oberman, who applied the so-called ‘law of the restraining lead’ to Calvinism: precisely because they had to flee to other countries more often than adherents of

14 Cf the seminal work Schilling (1981).

15 Berman (2003: 108-9).

16 Strohm (2008: 449) (‘... dass innerprotestantische Differenzierungen nur mit stärkster Zurückhaltung in Rechnung zu stellen sind’).

17 Strohm (2008: 453).

18 Strohm (2008: 52-53).

other confessions, in many places the influence of Calvinism became disproportionately great.¹⁹ Finally, it has recently been suggested that Calvinism in different countries and at different times contributed to the rise of the notion of human rights, to freedom of religion, and (by means of its covenant theology) to the idea of a political commonwealth.²⁰

To get a sharper picture here, it has to be sorted out how this idea of a specific development of Calvinism should be evaluated against the rival thesis that the distinct identities of Calvinism, Lutheranism and Roman-Catholicism were construed only in the late 17th century as attempts to show the superiority of the own tradition to the other ones.²¹ Even so, however, a specific impact of Calvinism on the development of modern law cannot be dismissed out of hand.

Calvinism and the rise of modern science

The relation between Calvinism and science is a very delicate one in recent research. On the one hand, there are those who still hold to the conflict model, according to which religious traditions in general are almost by definition opposed to science and its progress. These scholars, for example, point to the fact that Calvin rejected the Copernican world-view (without taking into account that at that moment Copernicanism among the general public still had the status of a rather weird and speculative theory).²²

On the other hand, there are a growing number of scholars who sees a much more constructive relationship between Calvinism and science. In his seminal work on religion and the rise of modern science, Reyer Hooikaas attempted to establish that Christianity in general and Calvinism in particular had a constitutive impact on the rise of experimental science.²³ Recently, his conclusions have been confirmed by Peter Harrison, who points out that in Calvinist circles the experimental method was especially recommended by appeals to the deficiency of human reason as a result of the Fall.²⁴ If we can no longer trust our rational capacities, then we can only *look* as carefully as possible to find out how things are... Next to this, the metaphor of the beautiful 'book of nature' as it figures for example in the famous second article of the Calvinistic *Belgic Confession* (1561), is considered by some to have had a tremendous influence on the development of natural research, especially as a result of the fact that e.g. in the Dutch Republic everyone who had a public function had to sign this document.²⁵

It should also be taken into account here that Calvinism is no monolithic unity. If we look at later developments (as distinct from the earlier Calvinism of the 16th and 17th century), there has above all been a profound awareness of the *limits* of science as well as of its possible harmful effects. Thus, for example, in the Calvinist philosophy of Herman Dooyeweerd the tendency to absolutise the knowledge claims of science is strongly resisted.

A crucial question for today is not only how to evaluate this mixed evidence on the influence of Calvinism on our contemporary Western 'scientific mind', but also to what extent the Calvinist heritage can help us in developing a healthy view of science, which on the one hand fully

19 Oberman (1992: 91-111).

20 Witte (2007). Cf for a brief discussion of this issue A. van Egmond, 'Calvinist thought and human rights', in An-na'im, Gort & Vroom (1995: 192-202).

21 Cf eg Graf (2006: 61-63).

22 Cf for a succinct rendering of the state-of-the-art on Calvin's response to Copernicus: Ernst M. Conradie, 'Calvin on Creation and Salvation', elsewhere in this edition, footnote 40. As to Calvin's views on science, see more generally Schreiner (1991); Young (2007); and especially the anthology Gamble (1992).

23 Hooikaas (1972).

24 Harrison (2007); cf his earlier book (Harrison 1997), in which he elaborates the thesis that Reformed Protestantism's more literal (anti-allegorical) reading of the Bible went hand in hand with a more literal (i.e., experimentally based) reading of nature.

25 Cf Jorink (2006) (English translation is in preparation).

appreciates its methods and results, but on the other is aware of its shadow sides as these become apparent e.g. in the ecological crisis.

The underlying unity – Calvinism’s spiritual heart

Finally, we will have to focus on what might be called the inner side of Calvinism: what is its spiritual and doctrinal heart, and how did this contribute to the formation of the European mental disposition? Clearly, Calvinism is a matter of heart, head and hands – it has spiritual, intellectual and practical dimensions, and we have traced a lot of these in the projects 1-4. In this final project the different threads have to be drawn together by inquiring into Calvinism’s inner core.

A recent multi-author volume on the identity of Reformed theology shows a large variety of ideas and proposals as to what characteristic(s) should be seen as constitutive for the distinctive nature of Reformed theology, and therefore of lasting significance.²⁶ Even when we realize that ‘Reformed’ is a broader category than ‘Calvinistic’²⁷, this is slightly bewildering. Eberhard Busch locates the identity of Reformed theology in its theocentric orientation, its attempt to reform society according to the divine commandments and its anti-hierarchical ecclesiological concept; Colin Gunton focuses on its doctrine of predestination, Daniel Migliore sketches a Trinitarian ecclesiology as essentially Reformed, whereas Mark Achtemeier concentrates on the notion of the *unio cum Christo*; Douglas Farrow considers the Reformed conceptions of the Ascension and of the Lord’s supper to be crucial, George Hunsinger holds the combination of its orthodox doctrine and progressive social ethics to be unique and Bram van de Beek its anti-ideological attitude.²⁸ When perusing these different proposals, one cannot avoid the suspicion that at least some contemporary Reformed theologians tend to project their own favourite ideas back into the heart of the Calvinist tradition. So what would happen if we try to approach the matter in a more comprehensive way, allowing for the possibility that there is not *one* doctrinal core of Calvinism?

Special attention should be given in this connection to the interaction between what we might call inner and outer Calvinism. As MacCulloch argues, the rapid spread of the Reformation cannot be explained by an alleged deplorable situation of the medieval church. Rather, ‘the old church was immensely strong, and that strength could only have been overcome by the explosive power of an idea’ – viz. Augustine’s doctrine of grace.²⁹ This old theological idea received new cogency, and became of crucial importance for the ‘success’ of the Reformation. Therefore, ‘(s)ocial and political history cannot do without theology in understanding the sixteenth century’³⁰ So what were the leading theological motives, the inner convictions and dominant proclivities of Calvinism in different stages of its history, and how did they stamp out conduct and attitudes? Is it possible to find a heart, or at least some distinctive focal points, of Calvinist spirituality – or is this search almost by definition in vain, as postmodern anti-essentialists would hold? In that case, was F.J.M. Potgieter right after all, that ‘no particular dogma is distinctive, characteristic or central’ to Calvin, since Calvin, following Scripture, holds ‘a plurality of basic truths’?³¹

26 Alston & Welker (2003).

27 This point is emphasized in MacCulloch (2003: 319 and passim).

28 See their respective contributions to the volume mentioned above (footnote 16). For a more general survey see also Busch (2007).

29 MacCulloch (2003: 111) (cf. xxiii). MacCulloch refers to BB Warfield’s well-known summary in this connection: ‘The Reformation, inwardly considered, was just the ultimate triumph of Augustine’s doctrine of grace over Augustine’s doctrine of the Church’ (Warfield 1956: 332).

30 MacCulloch (2003: 110); it may be argued that this important caveat of MacCulloch merits a more general application than only to the sixteenth century.

31 Potgieter (1939: 75-76); cf Engdahl (2006: 81). Of course, if Potgieter’s views were right indeed here

But then also the opposite question comes to mind: How did external circumstances mould Calvinist thinking into different directions?³² Usually Calvinist theologians supported the right to resistance, but in some specific situations (e.g. when their own king happened to be Reformed) they rejected it... Clearly, internal religious convictions and external cultural circumstances interact in a complex variety of ways, and it will be informative to chart how this has worked within Calvinism, and how Calvinism both helped to shape and was itself shaped by the arising European mind-set. Thus, the leading question in this final sub-programme, in which the threads of the other ones will be drawn together, has to be as follows: In what ways are inner Calvinist convictions, feelings and motivations interrelated to outward patterns of cultural behaviour? When the attempt to find an answer to this question turns out to be successful, our insight in the impact of Calvinism on the European mind, and therefore in the development of the European mind as such, will have increased.

A NOTE ON METHOD

When it comes to method, it seems that this type of research can only be adequately carried out when what has been called emic and etic research approaches are combined with each other in reflective ways.³³ Since proponents of both orientations are often opposed to one another, it is acknowledged that this is a risky endeavour. Nevertheless, it is also a very important and promising endeavour, moving towards the cutting-edge of present-day research in religious studies and theology. Weber, for example, followed an emic approach, trying to understand the believers' motives 'from within', but it has become clear that he did not fully succeed. Therefore, this approach should be followed more radically, and at the same time balanced by a more distanced etic orientation, as became particularly clear in the description of sub-programme 5.

The best way to secure this rare-but-promising combination of research methods is by attracting both systematic theologians (either belonging to the Reformed tradition themselves or otherwise) and practitioners of the social and historical sciences to do the research. It would be highly challenging, however, not to divide the different disciplines neatly over the various sub-programmes, but to strive after forms of close cooperation and cross-fertilization *within* the different sub-programmes. Such a truly inter-disciplinary approach that strives after comprehensiveness rather than limiting itself to a single issue will hopefully lead to reliable scholarly results that will not only enlarge our knowledge and understanding of the European mind, but also have an influence on the direction of future research on the issue.

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from a historical point of view, this does not mean that the political consequences he drew from them were justified as well.

32 For the way in which the *theological* development of Calvinism was co-determined by external circumstances such as the requirements of the newly founded Protestant academic theological education system, see the work of Richard A. Muller, eg Muller (2003).

33 An emic account is a description of behaviour or a belief in terms meaningful (consciously or unconsciously) to the actor; an etic account is a 'neutral' description of a behaviour or belief by an observer. The classic study here is Pike (1967).

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TREFWOORDE

Calvinisme
Europese identiteit
Weber-tese
Wortels van moderne wetenskap
Wortels van moderne reg
Demokrasie

KEY WORDS

Calvinism
European identity
Weber-thesis
Roots of modern science
Roots of modern law
Democracy

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