

The career of a book

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The *Institutio* of 1536 was the first stage of a book that grew with its author. Calvin revised and expanded it throughout his life. The second Latin edition appeared in Strasbourg in 1539, printed by Wendelin Rihel, when Calvin was living there after his expulsion from Geneva. It was three times as long as the first. In 1541, Calvin published his own French translation, the *Institution de la religion chrestienne*, printed in Geneva, which became one of the founding texts of French prose. Further Latin and French editions followed, until the definitive Latin edition of 1559 and its French version of 1560.¹

The *Institutio* was translated into most European languages: English, by Thomas Norton, in 1561; Dutch, German, Italian, Spanish, Czech, Hungarian and Polish in the following decades. It was read by pastors, students, lawyers and educated laymen throughout the Reformed world, from Scotland to Transylvania. It shaped the theology, the church order and the political thought of the Reformed churches for centuries. In terms of its influence, it was one of the most important books of the sixteenth century. In terms of its commercial success, it was one of the great bestsellers of the Reformation.

The career of the *Institutio* illustrates the international book market that the printers of Basel, Strasbourg and Geneva served. A book written by a French refugee in Basel, revised in Strasbourg and Geneva, translated in London, Heidelberg and Amsterdam, and read from Edinburgh to Kolozsvár, moved across borders more freely than its readers could. Ideas, like capital, sought the places where they could circulate without restriction. The Protestant cities of the Upper Rhine and Lake Geneva were such places. The financial centres of Basel and Geneva would later offer capital the same freedom of movement that their printers had offered to ideas.

1 Notes

1. On the editions of the *Institutio* (Basel 1536; Strasbourg: Wendelin Rihel, 1539; French translation Geneva 1541; definitive Latin edition Geneva: Robert Estienne, 1559; French 1560), see the standard bibliographies of Calvin's works. To be verified. ↩

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