

Calvin the jurist: training, Ordinances and civil order — overview and summary

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Posterity has remembered Calvin the theologian, the preacher and the polemicist. It has often forgotten the lawyer. Yet Calvin studied law at two of the best universities of his day, he practised the method of the humanists who were then renewing legal scholarship, and he contributed to the drafting of several normative texts of the Republic of Geneva. This training illuminates his way of reasoning, including on economic questions. His position on lending at interest, which the following chapter analyses, belongs as much to legal interpretation as to theology. The present chapter retraces this training, presents the *Institution de la religion chrétienne* (Institutes of the Christian Religion) as a treatise that contains a genuine doctrine of civil government, analyses the Ecclesiastical Ordinances of 1541 and shows how Calvin's legal culture left its mark on the civil order of Geneva.

1 In five sentences

1. Calvin, the son of an ecclesiastical administrator and fiscal procurator, studied law at Orléans and Bourges, in the milieu of legal humanism.
2. From this training he retained a method — a return to the sources, contextual reading, a search for the purpose of rules, clarity of expression — which he applied to theology and to the organisation of the city.
3. The *Institution de la religion chrétienne*, published in Basel in 1536 and completed in 1559, contains a doctrine of civil government that legitimises the authority of the magistrates and entrusts them with the regulation of trade in the name of equity.
4. The Ecclesiastical Ordinances of 1541, a law of the Republic, organise four ministries and create the Consistory, an institution of moral supervision that extended to economic life.

5. The Calvinist demand for equity in business finds echoes in contemporary Swiss law on good faith, unfair advantage and usury, as well as in the rules of conduct imposed on financial service providers.

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