

Civil government according to Calvin

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The last chapter of the *Institution* is devoted to civil government.¹ It is one of the most influential political texts of the sixteenth century. In it Calvin distinguishes two forms of government: spiritual government, which concerns the conscience and eternal life, and political government, which organises the outward life of men in society. The two are distinct and yet complement each other. The mission of civil government is to protect worship, to maintain peace, to uphold justice, to protect property and to enable men to live together in honesty.

For Calvin, the magistrates exercise an office willed by God. Their authority is legitimate and deserves obedience. Without setting up any one form of government as an absolute model, he shows a preference for a regime in which several govern together, so as to check one another, a regime he considers safer than the power of a single ruler.² This preference, moreover, corresponded to the Genevan reality, where power was exercised by councils.

Calvin devotes substantial passages to the laws. Within the law of Moses he distinguishes the moral law, which expresses the permanent will of God and corresponds to what lawyers call natural law or equity, the ceremonial law, which concerned the worship of ancient Israel, and the judicial law, which regulated the civil life of that people. Only the moral law binds all men at all times. The judicial laws of ancient Israel are not imposed on other nations: each people may give itself laws suited to its circumstances, provided they respect equity.³

This distinction has considerable implications for economic questions. It allows Calvin to relativise the prohibition of lending at interest set out in the Old Testament: if that prohibition belongs to the judicial law of Israel, it does not bind the Christians of Geneva as it stands. What does bind them is the principle of equity and love of one's neighbour that inspired it. The Genevan legislator may therefore regulate the question of lending

according to the circumstances, on condition that it respects this principle. The reasoning is that of a lawyer who distinguishes the letter of a rule from its purpose.

Calvin also addresses the question of obedience and resistance. He requires obedience to the magistrates, even unjust ones, on the part of private individuals. He accepts, however, that certain lesser magistrates, instituted to moderate the power of kings, may and must oppose tyranny, after the manner of the ephors of Sparta or the tribunes of Rome.⁴ This cautious doctrine would be developed by his successors in a far more radical direction at the time of the Wars of Religion.

For economic life, the Calvinist doctrine of civil government entails several consequences. Private property is legitimate and must be protected. Taxes are legitimate, provided they are used for public purposes and are not excessive. The magistrates may and must regulate economic activities in order to prevent fraud, exploitation and disorder: control of weights and measures, supervision of the prices of staple foodstuffs, regulation of credit. The Calvinist state is a regulatory state, concerned with order and justice in trade.

Key points. Calvin's distinction between moral law, ceremonial law and judicial law makes it possible to relativise the economic prescriptions of the Old Testament, in particular the prohibition of lending at interest, while maintaining the principle of equity that inspired them. The civil legislator thus regains a margin of discretion, framed by the requirement of justice.

1 Notes

1. Wikipédia (fr), art. "Institution de la religion chrétienne": in the definitive edition of 1559, "the text grew from six chapters in 1536 to 80 chapters divided into four books"; Wikipedia (en), art. "John Calvin": on civil government, Calvin prefers "a combination of democracy and aristocracy" with checks and balances against the concentration of power. ↩
2. Wikipedia (en), art. "John Calvin": preference for "a combination of democracy and aristocracy" accompanied by "checks and balances"; Wikipédia (fr), art. "Institution de la religion chrétienne" (four books, 80 chapters in 1559; "Scripture stands above political power"). ↩
3. Calvin, *Institution de la religion chrétienne*, Book IV, chap. XX, §§ 14–16 (English text, biblestudytools.com): Calvin distinguishes "the moral, the ceremonial, and the judicial law" of Moses, the ceremonial

and judicial laws being capable of being “changed and abrogated without affecting morals” (§ 14); the moral law is “the true and eternal rule of righteousness prescribed to the men of all nations and of all times”, the ceremonial laws being a temporary instruction and the judicial laws an equity peculiar to Jewish society (§ 15); diversity of civil laws is admissible “provided they all alike aim at equity as their end” (§ 16). ↩

4. Calvin, Institution de la religion chrétienne, Book IV, chap. XX, § 31 (biblestudytools.com): where popular magistrates have been instituted to restrain the tyranny of kings — “the Ephori ... among the Spartans, or Tribunes of the people to consuls among the Romans, or Demarchs to the senate among the Athenians” — it falls to them to oppose the excesses of the prince; Calvin reproaches those who stay silent for closing their eyes to oppression. ↩

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