

Discipline put to the test: resistance, compromise and change

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Calvinist discipline did not establish itself without resistance. During the first decade after Calvin's return, a section of the old Genevan families opposed the influence of the pastors and the admission of refugees. This party, of which Ami Perrin was one of the leading figures, contested in particular the right of the Consistory to exclude people from the Lord's Supper without the supervision of the magistrates.¹ Tensions reached their height in the mid-1550s, when the admission of many refugees to the bourgeoisie altered the political balance. Disturbances broke out in 1555; their ringleaders were condemned or went into exile.²

After this crisis, the position of the pastors and of the Consistory was consolidated. Discipline was exercised with an intensity that remained strong for several generations. It nevertheless evolved. In the seventeenth and above all in the eighteenth century, the supervision of morals relaxed, the elites adopted a more refined way of life, and the sumptuary laws lost much of their force. The Consistory survived, but its role in social life diminished. The Geneva of the Enlightenment, which Part C will describe, was no longer the Geneva of Calvin.

This evolution offers a lesson on the durability of rules. A discipline imposed by a minority against part of the population provokes resistance. It endures as long as it enjoys legitimacy and the support of the authorities. It adapts when mentalities and economic conditions change. The rules that last are those which the community eventually internalises.

The contemporary financial centre experiences comparable dynamics. Regulatory reforms imposed from outside, such as the end of bank client secrecy towards foreign tax authorities, at first met with resistance. They gradually prevailed and were then absorbed into the practices and the discourse of market participants. Compliance, long perceived as a

constraint, has become an argument of quality. This internalisation is the condition for rules to be effective.

1 Notes

1. Wikipedia (en), “John Calvin”: defeat in 1555 of the opposition faction (the “Perrinists”) and consolidation of Calvin’s authority; William G. Naphy, Calvin and the Consolidation of the Genevan Reformation (reprint, Westminster John Knox Press, 2003). ↩
2. Wikipedia (en), “John Calvin”: “1555: Opposition faction (Perrinists) defeated; Calvin’s authority secured”; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Calvin, Jean” (Calvin became a bourgeois of Geneva only in 1559). ↩

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