Anyone coming to this subject for the first time might notice at once the reluctance of many British scholars active in the field to acknowledge the Anglican church of the sixteenth century as fully Calvinist. True, all specialists who have devoted themselves to the doctrine and practice of the English church will acknowledge that Anglicanism had Calvinistic features, not least a personal affection for Calvin’s writings and a general fidelity to the reformer’s theology; nevertheless most argue that the particular features of English Anglicanism are sufficient to deny it full membership in the family of European Calvinist churches.

One of the best examples of this style of argumentation can be found in Patrick Collinson’s elegant article on England and International Calvinism in the collected volume on International Calvinism edited by Menna Prestwich.1 His careful, subtle formulation makes an excellent starting point for this discussion. By the 1580s, Collinson contends:

Calvinism, if it meant anything, no longer signified Geneva and the churches that looked to Geneva for guidance, but a loose and free alliance of churches, universities, academies and other intellectual, political and spiritual resources located in France, the Netherlands, South-West Germany, England and Scotland, not to speak of more distant outposts. . . . All of this must be borne in mind as we concede that the Church of England was putting down its anchors in the outer roads of the broad harbour of the Calvinist or (better) Reformed Tradition.2

Note the extreme caution of this formulation: “outer roads”; “Calvinist (or better) Reformed tradition.’ But Collinson’s formula probably represents as close as we will get to a consensus position. The Anglican church of the Elizabethan period was essentially Calvinistic in doctrine,

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2 Ibid., 215.
so much so that it is customary to talk of the “Calvinist consensus” of the Elizabethan church, a consensus fundamentally challenged only in the 1620s. Nevertheless its aberrant position on church discipline, and its affection for bishops, makes it something less than a fully Calvinist church.

There are several aspects of this construction that are worth testing. For anyone standing somewhat outside the intricacies of the debate, the insistence on the distinctiveness and separation of the English church can be somewhat puzzling. For despite Collinson’s caution, the general stress on the peculiarity of English Calvinism carries with it the implication that, England apart, Calvinism was a quite clearly defined system, into which a number of the main continental Calvinist churches can comfortably be placed. Yet from the perspective of scholars whose primary focus has been on these continental churches, it is clear that the individuality which British writers claim for Anglicanism, allegedly taking it away from the Calvinist mainstream, was every bit as characteristic of other European churches.

For instance, those familiar with recent writings on Dutch Calvinism know that much scholarly debate has concentrated on the question of whether the Dutch Reformed Church, as it emerged in the new free northern state, was not characterized by such variety of belief and practice, that to speak of it as “Calvinist” is inappropriate. Certainly if discipline is to be regarded as the touchstone of a fully Calvinistic system, then the Netherlands can hardly be made to qualify, since fewer than 15 percent of the population ever became full confessing members of the church.

Similarly in the French church, an assumption of allegiance to Genevan practice and doctrine is more a function of the comparatively underdeveloped state of research, and poor survival of sources than a

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