The present article attempts to offer a first outline of the fortuna of the figure of Nicodemus in Italy at the time of the earliest reception of the Excuse à Messieurs les Nicodémites by John Calvin. First published in Geneva in 1544, and later translated into Latin and Italian, the Excuse belongs to the group of treatises written against sectarians,¹ and it is one of Calvin’s most notorious and debated works. The term ‘Nicodemites’, chosen by Calvin, as well as the related abstract ‘Nicodemism’, coined by later historians, have a scriptural origin in the figure of Nicodemus, the Pharisee who believed in Jesus but visited him only by night out of fear (John 3:1–15) and did not dare to manifest his faith in public. We will deal more in detail below with Calvin’s understanding of the term; for now we can summarise—however much a simplification—that Calvin used the word ‘Nicodemites’ to condemn and stigmatise those Christians who, following the example of Nicodemus, had embraced the true religion (i.e. the Reformed one) but were too scared to show it publicly and lived in secret, disguising their true beliefs. Calvin’s polemic against such men was much older, however, and by this time entrenched: it had started already in 1537,²

* All quotations from Calvin’s work have been taken from the editions in the Corpus Reformatorum: Calvin John., Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia, eds. W. Baum – E. Cunitz – E. Reuss (Brunswick: 1863–1880). Hereafter abbreviated as CO.


² With the publication of his Epistolae duae de rebus hoc saeculo cognituis necessariis.
was reiterated on several occasions (notably in 1541 and in 1543) and it would continue after the publication of the *Excuse* as well, as we will see later in this article. Calvin's works, moreover, were not isolated but inserted in a larger debate on religious dissimulation, especially strong in Central and in French-speaking Europe. It is mainly to Italian historiography—to Carlo Ginzburg of course, but also to Delio Cantimori, Antonio Rotondò, Albano Biondi and Massimo Firpo—that we owe the use of the abstract term 'Nicodemism' to label not just the specific group of people against whom Calvin wrote in 1544.