“Calvin’s spirit was tyrannical,” according to one Frenchman, Voltaire, speaking about another Frenchman, John Calvin.¹ No one will be surprised by Voltaire’s opinion about the Reformer (Voltaire being positive about the religious Reformer certainly would be more remarkable), but his remark gives a good impression of the overall image of Calvin in the French collective memory. The basic color of Calvin in the French collective memory was black. In the course of the nineteenth and twentieth century some grey accents were added, mainly due to huge efforts of Protestants like Doumergue. Although not exceptional at all, the negative image of Calvin in France cannot be understood without the specific French context. From a methodological perspective we have to begin our account of Calvin in France with an introduction to the fundamental discussions and political developments in the post-revolutionary era.

The French Revolution certainly was a decisive historical event. Nineteenth-century French history cannot be understood without the preceding events since 1789. That does not mean, however, that the political and cultural situation had become consolidated at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The Revolution clearly provided the most important themes of discussion, but its outcome was still to be decided. It is perfectly possible to see the 1946 constitution as a peace treaty after 150 years of conflict, with revolutions in 1830, 1848 and 1871 and other vehement clashes, like the Paris Commune (1871), the Boulanger Coup (1889) and the Dreyfus Affair (starting in 1894). This period has even been labeled as the ‘guerre des deux France’ (The

¹ This introduction was written by the editors in order to provide an introduction to the articles on Calvin's memory in France, written by Michèle Sacquin and Patrick Cabanel. Dieu et les hommes, 1769, quoted under the heading ‘Calvinisme’ in Dictionnaire de la pensée de Voltaire par lui-même, éditions Complexe (1994).
War of the Two Frances), because it divided all of French society and affected almost every aspect of French culture.\(^2\)

Two related themes did dominate the political debates: the role of religion and the issue of French identity. The clash between the old idea of one public Catholic religion and the new ideas about the separation of church and state finally led to the modern French state with ‘Laïcité’ as one of its fundamental values. This new definition of France and French identity was heavily discussed and only became accepted halfway through the twentieth century.

This contribution and the next one by Patrick Cabanel deal with the discussions about French identity and the positions taken by various groups. Calvin was a Protestant and a small minority of the French people were Protestants. Being Protestant meant not being Catholic, which almost automatically put the Protestant on the modern, Republican side. The Protestants themselves tried to find their way in the nineteenth-century debates and to define their own identity as Protestants and as French people. Cabanel introduces their history and analyses how Calvin was used and discussed. He shows that the ‘guerre des deux France’ was also visible within French Protestantism.

This contribution takes the prerevolutionary situation of France as a Catholic country as its starting point. Nineteenth-century France (unlike, perhaps, sixteenth-century France) was deeply permeated by Catholicism. After more than a century of eradication of the Protestant past and reality, most adversaries of the Roman Church—so called anticlericals, whether deist or atheist—developed their hostility against clericalism from a Catholic background. For them religion could only mean Catholicism. Only a minority, as for instance the historian Edgar Quinet, whose mother was a Protestant, offered Protestantism as an alternative to Catholicism. The weight of Catholicism was such, in post-revolutionary French society, even among educated classes, that the title “Calvin’s image in Catholic France” makes sense, despite the variations and eventual blurring of this image.