Book Reviews


John Calvin the Catholic theologian? As one of the contributors to this lively and thought-provoking collection puts it, ‘square circles, red-hot icebergs, and the sound of one hand clapping might be easier to imagine’ (p. 145). Yet Calvin’s constructive rather than merely confrontational relationship with Roman Catholicism was the agenda for a 2007 colloquium at the University of Notre Dame, out of which this volume emerged. The result, understandably, is an overtly, at times almost fastidiously, ecumenical exercise. Presumably in the interests of transparency about this, authors were invited to declare confessional allegiances or denominational backgrounds in the notes on contributors (though, interestingly, not all were prepared to do so). A foreword from Notre Dame theology professor Lawrence Cunningham advocates viewing Calvin’s relationship to earlier Christian tradition ‘from the vantage point of time and free from the controversial context in which it was undertaken’ (p. 7), an approach which historians of religion would consider problematic, and which, thankfully, is not followed by all the contributors.

As is often the case with edited collections spawned by conferences, the essays here range quite widely, and not all engage directly with the editorial theme of Calvin’s own relationship to Roman Catholicism. Charles Parker, for example, examines the fate of Catholics in an officially Calvinist society, the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, and concludes that a pattern of dialectic identity-formation with a Calvinist ‘other’ produced a highly confessionalized and well-informed religious minority, with a pattern of local congregations evincing both lay activism and robust clericalism. Closer to home, but after Calvin’s time, Jill Fehleison discusses the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century ‘rules of engagement’ in the diocese of Geneva between Protestants and followers of what she calls, in a curious phrase, ‘the Roman cult’. Despite robust Counter-Reformation evangelism, there were significant points of contact as well as considerable de facto toleration of neighbouring communities.
holding the other confession. Whether, however, this amounts to ‘mutual valorization’ is a moot point. Karen Spierling’s essay brings the theme of relations between Calvinist Genevans and Catholic neighbours back to Calvin’s life time, and finds the Reformed citadel possessed of a ‘permeable boundary’, which people from both sides regularly moved across for a variety of business and personal reasons. Her contribution has relatively little to say about what Calvin felt about such border-hopping (he was against it), though it chimes nicely with the volume editor’s introductory emphasis on the value of placing Calvin and the Reformed ‘in the context of their ongoing and dynamic interaction with their Catholic neighbors’ (p. 17).

Other chapters concern themselves directly with Calvin’s life, writings, and immediate influence. In a thoughtful and rounded contribution, the late George Tavard examines Calvin’s relations with a group of friends – Nicholas Duchemin, Gérard Roussel and Louis du Tillet – who, despite sympathizing with the Reformation’s ideals, remained within the institutional Catholic Church and were thus, in Calvin’s censorious terminology, ‘Nicodemites’. These ties were eventually broken amidst bitterness and recrimination, though not until after Calvin and du Tillet had carried on an extensive correspondence debating the demands of conscience and nature of Christian ministry. Tavard broadens the discussion to encompass the wider phenomenon of ‘evangelical Roman Catholics’ in France and Italy who did not regard justification by faith alone as incompatible with Catholic tradition and authority. This group suffered at the hands of the ‘fanatic’ Paul IV, and received some belated recognition of their stance in the 1999 Lutheran-Catholic joint declaration on justification (though Tavard might have mentioned the decrees of Trent, which for centuries rendered the position of such spirituali just about untenable within the Roman Catholic Church). Randall Zachman, meanwhile, poses the question of ‘what Calvin learned from dialogue with the Roman Catholics’. ‘Dialogue’ here is a polite term for polemical confrontations, and, in the absence of any concession on Calvin’s part that his opponents may have had a point, Zachman seems determined to put a cheerful spin on matters. Yet he demonstrates that successive editions of the Institutes show Calvin’s thought evolving in a more ‘Catholic’ direction on some key issues: the recognition of ordination as a sacrament, and of episcopacy as a legitimate and scriptural component of church government. In a characteristically elegant and erudite contribution, Carlos Eire places Calvin’s understanding of true and false religion under the microscope, and pronounces him an ‘accidental anthropologist’. Where traditional Catholic teaching attributed the origins of idolatry to the devil, Calvin regarded it as a natural instinct of man, and false religion as