

POSTSCRIPT

This book of sermons has been a return to my early love: theology and Biblical exegesis. It is the first one of my sixteen books that is not about sociology. Yet it is also about taking stock. It is an attempt to make sense of the intervening fifty years. For a long time now I have wanted to discover how these years have affected that early love.

In 1951 I was a final year theological student at St Andrew's College at the University of Sydney. I had just won the prize for the best student in theology and I decided to blow it all on the forty-odd volumes of Calvin's commentaries. Yet having all these books is not a major reason for finally making greater use of them.

It has been just as much an attempt to what was uppermost in Calvin's mind: to unify knowledge. He felt (and so do I) that the search for truth is a basic one and that the Christian faith gives a more comprehensive answer to that quest than the assumption that individual rationalism alone is sufficient.

It has also been an attempt on my part to persuade many of my friends and relatives who are enthralled by the latest book of Bishop Spong that there is a more sophisticated way of looking at religion generally and Christianity in particular. After all Spong has never fully understood the rich heritage of which we in the West are all part and thus suffers from having married the 'spirit of the age' which Dean Inge once observed is very likely to soon make widowers of those who espouse it.

Yet these sermons have also been the product of a typical 'mature age' problem: how to combine what hitherto has been held in two rather separate, watertight, compartments. The first one is my academic teaching and writing. This was and is an intellectually exciting study of the effect of religion on society and vice versa. Yet knowing and learning all about commitment is quite different from being committed.

The other, second, compartment is my religious activity. I wore two hats: at the university I wore the hat of the objective observer carefully weighing arguments, pro and con. At church I wore the other hat of participant in worship. But as I observed in the last sentence of the keynote address on 'Religion and Identity' opening the Fifteenth World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions in Sydney in 1985: 'Studying identity does not necessarily lead to one, learning about salvation does not make one saved, religious scholarship does not produce religious people, in the same way as knowing all about love does not help one much to be in love.'

The intention of the sermons preached over a number of years, mainly at the national Presbyterian Church in Canberra was to marry Calvin with up-to-date

research in the social scientific study of religion. Right from the beginning I wanted to do this without injustice to either and without intellectual compromise. After all, centuries separate the social sciences and Calvin. And particularly the former have recently made impressive advances.

To make the same point differently: in my sermons I assumed that my fellow worshippers shared my commitments, whereas in my lectures, seminars and academic books I observed these commitments and attempted to unravel for my students what function and social effects they had.

Calvin's view of the comprehensive intent of religion fitted like a hand in a glove with my own belief in the unity of truth. Even more important was his openness for what he called 'the works of the ungodly' and his disdain for the 'lazy believers who do not make use of those works (*Inst.* II ii 16-18).'

If anything I became more of a critic than Calvin tended to be particularly about the divinity of reason, being convinced that analytic reason tended not to be particularly helpful for the synthetic intention of all religions.

Usually, however, I shared from the outset many of Calvin's assumptions. One is that basically existence is a constant symbiosis of order and chaos. Actually Plato believed that too as do many other philosophers and historians, such as Toynbee and Bryce. Social scientists, such as Comte, Spencer and Parsons also contrasted integration with differentiation.

Another assumption I shared with the Bible and Calvin is that transcendental order is not only well documented and described, but also emotionally anchored through faith and that its social effect is impressive and for all to discern.

I learnt more and more about Calvin the more I consulted his voluminous writings while preparing the sermons. I slowly developed a sense of (1) what in the modern social sciences he certainly would agree with, (2) what he only probably would agree with, and (3) what he would out and out reject. Let us take each of these in turn.

(1) What he most certainly would agree with:

(a) In the sociology of religion values and norms are judged according to whether or not they make for greater solidarity. Always when Calvin (and the Bible!) approved of certain values and norms such as humility, understanding, love, etc. they were on the plus side of the sociological balance. And the other way round. Always when Calvin (and the Bible!) disapproved of certain values and norms, such as the ones mentioned in the Ten Commandments or the seven deadly sins, they were on the minus side of the sociological balance.

(b) In the sociology of religion beliefs are treated as shorthand summaries of what a particular culture thinks about itself. Also in Calvin (and the Bible!) the

authority of Yahweh/God/Allah sums up what is expected by the citizens of a particular society.

(c) In the psychology of religion there is extensive literature on personal and social commitment as whole making. When Calvin follows both the Bible and Luther on the importance of 'salvation by faith' he is usually talking about the same thing. I say 'usually' because he sometimes includes in that phrase the rational consent to propositions which 'commitment' tends to exclude.

(d) In anthropology religion is very often identified with a charter for order. So does Calvin occasionally. Much more often he uses such concepts as 'God's sovereignty', 'predestination', 'election' which don't seem to differ much, if at all, from what is meant by 'order.' Certainly in the passages where he uses the phrase 'God's order' it is closely associated with sovereignty, predestination and election.

(e) Max Weber's views about charisma as a vitalising force in any society together with his insistence on the Calvinistic ethic possessing the Archimedean point for leveraging the development of capitalism would have Calvin's amused approval. Here as well as in Jelineks' work on the effect of Calvinism on democracy or Merton's on science, Calvin would say that all this had nothing to do with his enterprise and that the consequences were wholly unintended.

(f) Marginality, as a major explanation in the 21st chapter on St Stephen's martyrdom, is based on extensive sociological research which Calvin would certainly accept as valid.

(2) What he might agree with:

(a) Another fellow Frenchman, Emile Durkheim, suggested that the sacred tended to be contagious. I translate this to mean that organization has its own laws and principles and that religious organization and the boundaries it necessarily creates around its core beliefs tend to also become untouchable. Calvin's views about church order and ritual, for instance, would be in that category. Would he be happy to separate core beliefs and the organization necessary to protect them and perpetuate them? Some of the Biblical views (e.g. Hosea view's of sacrifice) and Calvin's own distinction between civic and heavenly order or the visible versus the invisible (less corrupted) church makes one confident that he would be inclined to take the extra step.

(b) Sigmund Freud regards the 'id' (instincts) as in conflict with the 'super-ego' (social morals and rules) with the 'ego' as a compromise. Similarly Calvin (like St Paul's remarks about the 'flesh') has a good deal to say about spirituality as bolstering whatever lifts humans beyond 'preying beasts.' Freud also has a lot to say about sexuality as the basis for the sublimation of other, socially relevant, kinds of love. Others have related this not only to the virgin birth, but also to the Pauline recommendation of sexual abstinence in order to strengthen the

sublimation, its social effect and to distance it from its physical ('animal') origin. Yet Freud's ideas, analysis and rational awareness as the only means for salvation and restored integrity would be strongly rejected by Calvin.

(c) Calvin would probably be sympathetic to the stress on 'understanding' by the phenomenologists of religion. After all it fits again with the Biblical and his views of altruism. It encourages the empathetic, bird's eye view that he perceives God to have for mankind. Yet he would be rather critical of their tendency to ignore the crucial relevance of the transcendental frame of reference for motivation and action.

(d) Calvin would be sympathetic to the Marxist view of class as potentially harbouring discriminating, unfair, power abusing propensities. He would certainly have sympathy for the Marxist concern with the powerless and marginal in any society. After all the Bible in general and the New Testament in particular are full of examples of those who suffered unjustly and immensely (Jesus' crucifixion, John the Baptist's decapitation, Jeremiah's and Stephen's stoning) from displeased establishments, whether religious, political or social. Yet he would be very critical of Marxist utopianism and particularly its incapacity to think in terms of a moving equilibrium between the social need for firm authority and yet consent of the people, as is so obvious from his own writings.

(e) Calvin would be interested in the progress made about the function of dreams. There seems to be scientific agreement that all dreams are integrative and that therefore his distinction between those that are divinely inspired and others that are not may have to be revised.

(f) Calvin is convinced that the word of God (as uniquely expressed in the Bible) has come to humans via agents who were not only strongly committed to accurately communicating God's intentions but also to having it received as well as possible by those for whom it was intended. Calvin is aware that humans are invariably conditioned by the culture and society which they take for granted.

Yet to make God's message relevant, this taken for granted culture and society has to be effectively used for God's message to be heard at all. He therefore would be vitally interested in cultural, social and scientific change. This certainly would apply to changes in thinking about evolution, DNA, genetic engineering, cosmology and computer science.

His reaction, I imagine, would be twofold. He would emphasize that none of these changes have made a difference to the basic human condition of disorder, sin and propensity to make gods out of mundane concoctions and fabrications. In other words salvation is not any less urgent, he would conclude.

Yet his other reaction would be that God's world can only be vaguely understood and known and that therefore no one can presume that findings of a particular

time and place should be regarded as final, however much they might be appropriate vehicles for communicating God's message.

He would also be intrigued by God's creating order out of chaos or salvation from sin being rather similar to the symbiosis between inertia and force in physics, structure and process in chemistry, heredity and variation in biology, gravity and radiation in cosmology, analysis and synthesis in philosophy and integration and differentiation in the social sciences.

(3) What Calvin would out and out reject:

(a) Calvin would condemn in the strongest of terms the attempt of Comte (the father of sociology) to trample on many biblical ideas (such as God's disapproval) which Comte barely understood. Even more would he be upset by his fellow Frenchman's embarkation on the new religion of society, in which Comte would be pontiff. He would also shake his head where Comte expressed his profound regret for not yet having found a worthy successor to his reign.

To Calvin this would be despicable heresy and would totally negate the importance, and therefore effect, of God's pure order as quite distinct from man's disorder. To Calvin this would make man's authority holy rather than God's. For very similar reasons he would also be scathingly critical of Nietzsche's 'ubermensch' or Feuerbach's elevation of the self as the source of all religious sentiment.

(b) Calvin would be just as adamant about any commitment leading to 'wholeness' or salvation. He might grudgingly admit that this might be so, but then add that all the other commitments would lead to segmental idolatries rather than the more comprehensive canopy provided by Yahweh and therefore inevitably issue in the fatal mistake of human navel-staring.

(c) Calvin would not likely be very happy with the hermeneutic enterprise in religion. Scholars interested in this approach appear to search for the key to unlock the interpretation of religion as it were from the outside. The assumptions in this search seems to be that the linear, progressive, thinking of Darwinists, the rationalist assumptions of the creationists and the cognitive positivism that has some of the sciences teetering on the brink of bankruptcy are all possible ways of interpretation, even if one totally disagrees with them. Calvin would deny this. He would strongly maintain that all religions are attempts to interpret existence from within their frame of reference and that the assumption that they could be studied otherwise would ignore what they are basically all about. Of course, Calvin would also maintain that his Christian interpretation is finely attuned to the heritage of the West and as such superior to any competing way of looking at the world.

Hans Mol, 26 February 2008