

Society for Ecumenical Studies

## **Calvinus Catholicus et Ecumenicus**

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*St Thomas More Room, St Mary's Catholic Church, London SW3*

### ***John Calvin: Catholic and Ecumenical? Reformed, Catholic & Orthodox Perspectives***

## **A Roman Catholic Perspective**

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Calvin was long seen as a purely negative figure by Roman Catholics, even more than Luther – because of Calvinism's near victory over Catholicism in XVI/XVII, when even Poland and the Ukraine came under strong Calvinist influence.

Donald Norwood says: Calvin anticipated Vatican II over baptism (presence of the parents), eucharist (weekly communion, use of the vernacular), ecumenism (concern for the unity of the Church).

Such a claim is plausible. See John Bossy, *Christianity in the West 1400-1700*, on where the real divide lies – not between Catholicism and Protestantism, but between medieval Christianity and early modern Christianity, of whatever denomination. Yet the Roman Church was inhibited from root and branch reform by the need it felt to defend its tradition. Development became problematic and self-conscious. Developments in religious devotions and pastoral work gave Catholicism the edge in the inter-confessional competition of XVI/XVII, but some obvious reforms, particularly of the liturgy, were delayed for centuries.

But Vatican II doesn't need precursors: it can look after itself. And the differences are just as interesting as the common features. Randall Zachman in his collection *John Calvin and Roman Catholicism* (2009) argues that Calvin's sacramental theology became more Catholic as years passed – with a shift from viewing the sacraments as mere symbols of divine grace to recognizing them as channels of divine grace. But even in his account it is clear that Calvin continued to deny that the water of baptism and the bread and wine of the eucharist were themselves the channels of grace. He was particularly concerned to stress that Christ's humanity is in heaven, and that the purpose of the eucharist is to help us raise our hearts and minds to heaven, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of the Father. This is very different from the Catholic emphasis on a return to Calvary. This has been somewhat modified, however, by the new eschatological emphasis in the revised form of the Roman mass.

For me the most interesting part of Calvin's legacy lies in his teaching on justification and predestination. Here he claimed simply to follow St Augustine. The main points of Augustine's doctrine are as follows:

- The depravity of fallen mankind (not total viciousness, but a lack of a pure love of God), and the inability of 'free will' to rescue us.
- We need divine grace to teach us to know and love God, and further divine grace to enable us to begin to live our lives accordingly, and yet more divine grace if we are to reach the haven without shipwreck. God's love and grace achieve what they intend. God can force conversion, as in the case of St Paul. More often, he works on his elect – through the influences they encounter, and the awakening of the spirit within us by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. – We genuinely respond, we are not merely passive, but God does all the real work. 'For it is God who is at work in you both to will and to do according to his goodwill' (Phil 2:13). 'It depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy' (Rom 9:16).

Calvin put this pithily: ‘Certainly, we obey God willingly, but with a will which he has formed in us’ (*Opera* 7, 474).

The Council of Trent, Decree on Justification (1547), ch. 16: ‘To those who work well right till the end and hope in God eternal life should be held out, both as a grace promised to the sons of God through Christ Jesus in his mercy and as a reward to be faithfully bestowed on their good works and merits according to God’s own promise... Christ Jesus continuously infuses strength into the justified, which also precedes, accompanies and follows their good works... Therefore, we must believe that nothing further is needed by the justified for them to be regarded as having entirely fulfilled the divine law in their present state of life by the works they have done in God, and for them to be regarded as having truly deserved to receive eternal life.’ – Note how this combines *congruent* with *condign* reward (‘congruent’ meaning that is appropriate for God to reward the just, in view of his promise to do so, while ‘condign’ means that he is obliged to do so by the requirements of justice, quite apart from his promise). It is clear from the debates, however, that the notion of condign reward was in fact insisted upon.

Contrast Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* III.12.1: ‘[Those who bluster about the righteousness of works] do not reflect on the righteousness of Christ, which, if they had the slightest perception of it, they would never treat with so much insult. It is certainly undervalued, if not recognized to be so perfect that nothing can be accepted that is not in every respect entire and absolute, and tainted by no impurity; such indeed as never has been, and never will be, found in man. It is easy for any man, within the precincts of the schools, to talk of the sufficiency of works for justification; but when we come into the presence of God there must be a truce to such talk. Let us contemplate that Judge, not as our own unaided intellect conceives of him, but as he is portrayed to us in Scripture, with a brightness which obscures the stars, a strength which melts the mountains, an anger which shakes the earth, a wisdom which takes the wise in their own craftiness, a purity before which all things

become impure, a righteousness to which not even angels are equal... Even if a man could satisfy the Law, he could not stand the scrutiny of that righteousness which transcends all our thoughts.'

The New Catechism follows Trent, but concludes (§2011) with quoting St Therèse of Lisieux: 'In the evening of my life I shall appear before you with empty hands.... All our good works are tainted in your eyes.' – It has been said that good Catholics live according to Trent, and die as Calvinists.

The question we need to ask is not what deserves 'damnation': damnation is a rhetorical notion, intended to scare sinners, but not to reveal the exact nature of an eternal life in separation from God. The key question is rather, what enables the beatific vision, and participation in the life of the Trinity. How could we claim that even the 'righteous' deserve this as a matter of justice?

### **Predestination**

Can God save all those he wishes to save? Or is the best he can do to make salvation an option for those who so choose? Rom 8:30, 'Those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.' It is really intolerable to think that God created a world outside his control.

It is an observed fact that not all come to faith or are regenerated in baptism. Even among baptized Christians, there are many in whom there are no visible signs of spiritual growth. To Calvin, as to Augustine, it is manifest that not all are saved. This follows St Paul's insistence on faith as a precondition for salvation: salvation, he insisted, is for all who *believe*.

Why does God not convert everyone? He does not *owe* everyone, or indeed anyone, entry into heaven. His mercy consists of the fact that he saved *some*, when he could with perfect justice have chosen not to save *any*. Again thought of hell as a place of everlasting torment confuses the issue.

Augustine says: not all are saved, because God does not wish to save all. He has chosen a holy remnant.

Compare Aquinas, who is thoroughly Augustinian:

STh 1a. 23.3, *Is anyone reprobated by God?* ‘It must be asserted that God reprobates some... Since by divine providence men are ordained to eternal life, it also pertains to providence to let some fall short of this goal. This is called reprobation... For as predestination involves the will to confer grace and glory, so reprobation involves the will to let someone fall into guilt, and to inflict the penalty of damnation accordingly. It is true that God loves all human beings and indeed all his creatures, inasmuch as he wills some good to all, but he does not will every kind of good to each. In that he does not will to some the blessing of eternal life, he is said to hate and reprobate them... Reprobation is not the cause of what exists here and now, namely guilt, but it is the cause of abandonment by God... But guilt comes from the free will of the one who is reprobated and deserted by grace... Although anyone who is reprobated by God cannot acquire grace, nevertheless the fact that he flounders in this sin or that happens as a result of free choice, and therefore he is deservedly accounted guilty.’ [RP: we sin freely, but predictably, if God does not give us efficient grace, as contrasted to merely ‘sufficient’ grace.]

23.5 ad 3. ‘The reason for predestination of some and the reprobation of others must lie in the divine goodness... God has willed to manifest his goodness in men, in those whom he predestines in the mode of mercy by sparing them, and also in those whom he reprobates in the mode of justice by punishing them. This is why God chooses some and reprobates others... If God prepares unequal lots for those who are not unequal, this does imply injustice in God. This would only be contrary to justice if the effects of predestination were a due to be paid and not a gift of grace. As regards the gifts of grace, anyone is free to give to whom he wills and as he wills, be it more be it less,

provided that he does not deprive anyone of what is his due.’

See STh 1a. 19.6 for Aquinas’ explanations of 1 Tim 2:4, ‘God wills all men to be saved.’ (1) God wills all those who are saved to be saved – in other words, no one can be saved contrary to God’s will. (2) God saves some from every class of human being. (3) God’s ‘antecedent’ or preliminary will is that all should be saved, since this is good in itself, but his ‘consequent’ will, that takes everything into account including the requirements of justice, is that some should be damned.

Applying this reasoning to reprobation, we could say that the desirability *in se* that all be predestined for salvation is overridden by the need to manifest God’s justice as well as his love.

Calvin followed this traditional and established orthodoxy. There is nothing new in Calvin that he himself thought to be of prime importance. He did, however, introduce supralapsarian predestinationism – not only is the ultimate destiny of all men and women since the Fall predestined, but the Fall itself was predestined.

*Divine Institutes* III.23.7, ‘They eloquently deny that it was by divine decree that Adam should fall away and perish – as if God, who (according to Scripture) does whatever he wishes, had created the most noble of his creatures for an ambiguous end. They say that Adam had the free will to determine his own fortune and that God decreed nothing, save to treat him according to his deserts. If this frigid fiction is accepted, where will be the omnipotence of God, by which, according to his secret plan, which is itself dependent on nothing, he controls everything? ... The decree, I admit, is, fearful; and yet it is impossible to deny that God foreknew what the end of man would be before he made him, and foreknew it because he had so ordained by his decree... God not only foresaw the fall of the first man, and in him the ruin of his descendents, but also ordained it by his own decree.’

II.4.3 *How God acts on the hearts of men.* ‘This comes about in two ways. When God’s light is withdrawn, nothing remains but blindness and darkness; when his Spirit is taken away, our hearts become as hard as stone; and when his guidance ceases, they immediately wander off in the wrong direction.’

III.23.8 [*Does this make God the author of sin?*] ‘Although the perdition of the wicked depends on the predestination of God, the cause and matter of it is in themselves... Man therefore falls according to the decree of divine providence, but he falls by his own fault. The Lord had declared only just before that everything he made was very good (Gen 1:31). From where then comes the depravity of man, which led him to fall away from God? To exclude the supposition that creation was the cause, God had expressly approved what proceeded from himself. Therefore it was man’s own malice that corrupted the pure nature God had given him, and his ruin brought with it the death of his whole posterity. Let us then perceive the evident cause of condemnation in the corruption of human nature (a cause which comes more closely home to us), rather than inquire into the hidden and almost incomprehensible cause in the predestination of God.’

In all, according to Calvin the Fall was ‘free’, yet according to the divine plan and intention. The opposite view, called ‘infralapsarianism’ (that predestination only came into effect *after* the Fall), makes the whole history of salvation a second thought, after ‘Plan A’ (the history of man without a fall) had failed. It also implies that we do not know what sort of God it is with whom we have to do in creation. But God’s plan of salvation was pre-eternal. The ‘*felix culpa*’ was eternally pre-ordained.

The Synod of Dort (1618-9), confirming Calvinism against its Arminian critics, insisted on: (1) total depravity of man, (2) unconditional election, (3) limited atonement [Christ died only for the elect], (4) irresistibility of grace, (5) the certainty of the

perseverance of the elect and the reliability of the gift of assurance.

Assurance depends not on confidence in our own powers and free perseverance, but in trust that God will protect us from ourselves. – Though Trent criticized the notion of ‘assurance’ as presumptuous, yet in a slightly weakened form (stopping short of declaring ‘I am saved’) it is standard in Catholic spirituality.

Limited atonement: does God owe everyone entry into heaven? He manifestly does not bestow on all his creatures all possible benefits. It is *plausible* to say that in his infinite love he intends that all his rational creatures enter into heaven, and we can *hope* that this is the case; but it would surely be presumptuous to *expect* it.

### **Molinism (Catholic)**

Molina published in 1588 *De concordia liberi arbitrii cum gratiae donis, divina praescientia, providentia, praedestinatione et reprobatione*. God offers sufficient grace to all. God foreknows our response (by *scientia media*) but does not determine it; his ‘predestination’ respects our anticipated response. ‘Efficacious’ grace (which saves) is no different in kind from ‘sufficient’ grace (in effect, ineffective grace): the difference is simply that God foreknows by *scientia media* that it will actually be accepted. This is quite different from Augustine’s belief that God sends the elect the graces that he knows will be efficacious.

### **Arminianism (in the Reformed tradition)**

Developed by Arminius (d. 1609), his teaching set out in the five articles of the *Remonstrance* (against strict Calvinism) of 1610. The following is a summary of them:

1. God’s eternal decree is to save those who believe and obey and to condemn the incorrigible and unbelieving.
2. Christ died to win forgiveness of sins for every human being, this forgiveness being received by every believer.
3. Man is dependent on divine grace to achieve anything that is ‘truly good’
4. All good thoughts or deeds require grace, but grace is not



irresistible.

5. Those incorporated into Christ by true faith are assured of the assisting grace of the Spirit. Whether those with true faith can fall away and be lost ‘must be more particularly determined out of the Holy Scripture, before we ourselves can teach it with the full persuasion of our mind.’

So the divide is not between Roman Catholics on the one side and Reformed Christians on the other, but exists within both traditions – with Augustinians (and Thomists) lined up against Molinists in just the same way that Calvinists are against Arminians. This continued right down into living memory. Contrast the *Catholic Encyclopedia* (Molinist) to Garrigou-Lagrangé in the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* (Augustinian) – both early twentieth-century texts. I suspect that since Vatican II Molinism has become almost universal. Likewise, I was once told by a teacher at the then London Bible College (now the London College of Theology) that when he started teaching there 30 years ago most of his students were Calvinists, but now most of them are Arminian.

For the drawbacks in Arminianism consider this passage from an Arminian poet:

JOHN MILTON, *PARADISE LOST* (1667), III. 93-128

*[The Father in heaven is addressing the Son]*

For man will hearken to his [Satan's] glozing lies,  
And easily transgress the sole command,  
Sole pledge of his obedience: so will fall,  
He and his faithless progeny: whose fault?  
Whose but his own? Ingrate, he had of me  
All he could have; I made him just and right,  
Sufficient to have stood, though free to fall.  
Such I created all the ethereal powers  
And spirits, both them who stood and them who failed;  
Freely they stood who stood, and fell who fell.  
Not free, what proof could they have given sincere

Of true allegiance, constant faith or love?  
Where only what they needs must do, appeared,  
Not what they would, what praise could they receive?  
What pleasure I from such obedience paid,  
When will and reason (reason also is choice)  
Useless and vain, of freedom both despoiled,  
Made passive both, had served necessity,  
Not me. They therefore as to right belonged,  
So were created, nor can justly accuse  
Their Maker, or their making, or their fate,  
As if predestination overruled  
Their will, disposed by absolute decree  
Of high foreknowledge. They themselves decreed  
Their own revolt, not I; if I foreknew,  
Foreknowledge had no influence on their fault,  
Which had no less proved certain unforeknown.  
So without least impulse or shadow of fate,  
Or aught by me immutably foreseen,  
They trespass, authors to themselves in all  
Both what they judge and what they choose; for so  
I formed them free, and free they must remain  
Till they enthrall themselves. I else must change  
Their nature, and revoke the high decree  
Unchangeable, eternal, which ordained  
Their freedom; they themselves ordained their fall.

Repellent in this passage is the egoism of a God whose prime concern is self-justification, accompanied by a shoulder-shrugging indifference to the fate of man. Does God desire our well-being or not? It is wholly inadequate for Milton to present him as an impartial umpire, presiding over human destinies after subjecting them to a test of their obedience.

Note how akin Milton's position is to the so-called 'freewill defence' so popular nowadays with philosophers of religion – that there cannot be human virtue without a real possibility, and therefore in practice the actuality, of sin and sinners, even to the extent of alienation from

God. Against it I would argue:

1. A world in which creatures invariably but freely choose the good is a possible world, and therefore God could have created it. God as creator is not like an agent in the world (who, if omnipotent, would have the greatest difficulty in respecting human freedom) but more like the author of a novel, who has to decide what his characters are freely going to do.
2. The free will defence attributes to freedom an unqualified value in a way that no sane person would do in a real situation. Parents have to teach their children to develop their freedom and use it responsibly: but they would themselves be utterly irresponsible if they allowed a child a freedom that could lead to self-harm.
3. In any case, freedom has plenty of scope outside morality. The valuable choices in life are choices between different goals, all of real but varying value, and the adoption of particular means, leading to the creation of a wide range of distinctive lifestyles. That we sometimes find ourselves in situations where we are faced with a choice between good and evil, and a choice where evil is genuinely tempting, is an unfortunate accident. To imagine that God created the world to be a moral obstacle course is to fall into the sort of crude moralism that could be plausibly attributed only to a vindictive governess.
4. If moral goodness requires resistance to temptations that the agent is capable of yielding to, then the saints reach a state where they are incapable of moral goodness, and moral goodness cannot be attributed to Christ, as he is presented in Scripture and Tradition. Here again it is surely clear that the situation where one is faced with a genuine choice between the simply good and the simply bad, with both possible choices being psychologically credible, is not a desirable one. If this is what 'human freedom' means, human freedom is not a great endowment, but a debility.
5. But in fact choices that are morally significant and truly free, involving a real and genuinely moral choice between good and evil, are surely rare. Most morally wrong choices involve moral blindness – a failure to perceive clearly that a tempting course of

action is wrong. Such a failure may well be partly voluntary, resulting from self-interest or the indulgence of an irrational drive, but it remains the case that, more often than not, human misbehaviour resists analysis in straightforward terms of culpable sin arising from a conscious misuse of freedom. Likewise, most good behaviour involves no real choice. If the whole purpose of human freedom is that we should consciously choose to follow God, despite a real allurements to do the opposite, we would need to possess a real freedom over against habit, inhibition, social control, and mere caution. But most decent people have been so shaped by strict upbringing and other early influences that they have no inclination to murder, to defraud, or to commit adultery. They are never, or only rarely, put to the test; and even when they are put to the test and pass with flying colours, it will only sometimes be the case that this is due to real moral goodness or the love of God: it will more often be due to a fortunate lack of the indeterminacy of will and psychological freedom that are required for wrong-doing.

Why, then, is there evil? The answer of Augustine and Aquinas, powerfully restated by Calvin, is that God wishes to display both his justice and his mercy.

Christopher Ness, *An Antidote against Arminianism* (1700), 48: ‘The Arminians may be called sub-mortuarians, for their holding no full election till men die; and post-destinarians, for placing the eternal election beyond the course of man’s life... And may they not also be styled re-lapsarians, for saying that the elect may totally and finally fall away?’

Spurgeon: ‘Arminianism marries Christ to a bride he did not choose.’

In contrast, Calvinism preserves the sovereignty of God, and offers a real possibility of assurance. Augustinian Catholics, like myself, look on Calvin as an ally.

## Note

Predestination does not necessarily mean that God dooms some to hell, for it can be combined with universalism: in fact universalism requires universal predestination – to salvation, of course. Note the subtle position of the great Reformed theologian Karl Barth, who argues that Christ himself is simultaneously elect and reprobate:

‘What did God elect in the election of Jesus Christ? By the one decree of self-giving he decreed his own abandonment to rejection and also the wonderful exaltation of endowment of man to existence in covenant with himself, that man should be enriched and saved and glorified in the living fellowship of that covenant... The only knowledge that we have of man’s preordination to evil and death is in the form in which God of his great mercy accepted it as his own portion and burden, removing it from us and refusing to let it be our preordination in any form... We know nothing above or beyond the will of God as it is thus realized in time. And for this reason we do not find a proportion but a disproportion between the positive will of God which purposes the life and blessedness of man and the permissive will of God which ordains him to seduction by Satan and guilt before God... God willed that the object of this election should be himself and not man. God removed from man and took upon himself the burden of the evil that unavoidably threatened and actually exercised dominion in the world that he had ordained as the theatre of his glory.’ (*Church Dogmatics* II. 2, pp. 168, 172)

The meaning appears to be that Christ exhausts in himself the decree of reprobation, and that everyone else will be saved. This combines, brilliantly, an implication of universalism with taking the notion of human guilt and reprobation seriously.