

## 2. Calvin and the Humanists

### 2.1. Definitions of the Humanist, Humanism, and the Meaning of Humanism for Calvin

In presenting the current state of research, one must address the question of who deserves to be called a humanist. In the secondary literature, very different definitions of Renaissance humanism compete with each other (see Spitz, *Humanismus*, 653-659). To see how Calvin deals with those who are viewed in research literature as humanists depends on which definition one chooses. McGrath has correctly concluded that “any discussion of the relation of humanism and the Reformation will be totally dependent upon the definition of humanism employed” (McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 32).

Further, one must from the outset decide how the characterizations of Calvin as a humanist will be ranked, if one wants to observe him as such. Calvin can be seen, for example, as a humanistically educated theologian or as a humanist who acted as exegete, systematic theologian and polemicist, preacher, congregational leader, and educator-politician. The weight of the humanist education, the qualification for and leaning to the *studia humanitatis* within his person as a whole, differs greatly between both characterizations. The modern concept of research cannot be easily located in the epoch in which the phenomenon of Renaissance humanism emerged; thus the decision cannot be made by assuming that one could directly engage the language usage of that age. The Italian term *umanista* for a teacher of the *studia humanitatis* at a university was not especially widespread in the sixteenth century. It is true that the concept of “humanism” goes back to Cicero, who viewed the orator and the poet as appropriate transmitters of humanistic studies (*humaniora*). But it was not until 1808 that the German pedagogue F. J. Niethammer coined the word *humanism* for a form of teaching that emphasized the Greek and Latin classics. L. W. Spitz defined humanism, building on Paul Joachimsen, as an “intellectual movement predominantly emerging from the literary and philological endeavor which has its roots in the enthusiastic turning to antiquity and the wish for its re-birth.” “Form” and “norm” would be important points of view (Spitz, *Humanismus*, 639, 41-46).

In the Calvin research of the last decades, the relationship between Calvin and the humanists was represented in very different ways, each according to

how one defined a humanist and whether one saw Calvin himself as such. Many researchers represented the view that the Renaissance humanists had raised not only formal but also normative claims. Humanists had been bound together through shared ideas. Thus, for example, in 1986 at the International Congress on Calvin Research in Debrecen, C. Augustijn argued with the old standard works on research on Calvin and humanism by J. Bohatec, Qu. Breen, B. Hall, A. Ganoczy, and Ch. Partee, and defined humanism: "The central point of Humanism is, in my opinion, rather the question: What have Christianity and antiquity, sacred literature and belles lettres, to do with each other? . . . Can the non-Christian arrive at deeds and virtues which do not differ from those of the Christian?" (Augustijn, "Calvin und der Humanismus," 129, 131). On the basis of this determination of content, Augustijn asserts that on this fundamental question Calvin's thought differed from that of the humanists. "Calvin . . . emphasizes that there is no connection between the piety and way of life of the heroes of antiquity and the God of the Bible. When one nevertheless calls him a Humanist, one has excluded the essence of Humanism, its core" (Augustijn, "Calvin und der Humanismus," 140). In his contribution to the manual in 2003, "The Church in Its History," Augustijn viewed "Bible humanism," also called "Christian humanism" in American literature, as a facet of humanism. This approach "is expressed in a recourse to Christian antiquity and thus to the Bible and the church fathers as well as to the formation of the Christian religion in the first centuries of the church" (Augustijn, "Calvin und der Humanismus," 47). This view, which presupposes a common opinion shared by all humanists and makes "Bible humanism" one of the facets within humanism, is, in any case, not without controversy.

In 1988, McGrath used a rather formal definition of humanism: "Humanism was concerned with how ideas were obtained and expressed, rather than with the actual substance of those ideas" (McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 32). He refrained from postulating a common conviction shared by all humanists, with the exception of the manner of acquiring and expressing ideas. He also reduced the definition of humanism to its formal aspect in his Calvin biography (1990). In addition, other writers of more recent Calvin biographies such as W. J. Bouwsma (1988) and B. Cottret (1995) were oriented to the rather formal definition of humanism. They also refrained from formulating a substantive position on what defined a humanist, but rather located the primary characteristic of the humanists in their interest in rhetoric. Bouwsma claimed of Calvin: "He remained in major ways always a humanist of the late Renaissance" (Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, 13; see 240, n. 18). In McGrath's view, Calvin was a "humanist thinker and practical lawyer" (McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin*, 59). Cottret called Calvin a "lost son of humanism," without exactly defining what the alienation might have consisted of (Cottret, *Calvin. Biographie*, 46).

Presently, there does happen to be agreement among most Calvin researchers that the North European humanists at the time of Calvin's activity were oriented to the *belles lettres* of antiquity and that they hoped to gain from it an improvement in the sorry state of affairs then current. The majority of them also showed a lively interest in the *sacrae litterae*, the Bible, and the writings of the church fathers. It was not characteristic of most of these humanists to turn against Christian understandings of faith on the basis of their own orientation to the writers of antiquity. Thus they contradicted the idea that a militant anthropocentric worldview that defined itself as an alternative to a Christian worldview could see itself at the same time as the only legitimate heir of Renaissance humanism (see on this Spitz, *Humanismus*, 641, 30-41).

## 2.2. Humanistic Education, Qualification and Inclination, and Social Position

One can represent the idea that Renaissance humanism was more consistent with certain occupations such as the rector of an upper school or an editor than it was with those of a church leader, lawyer, or doctor (see Spitz, *Humanismus*, 641, 15-30). If one sees this way of thinking as important, then one can differentiate between people who have been able to use their abilities, dedicating themselves completely to their humanistic inclinations, and those who have been able to use their acquired abilities and inclinations simply by practicing their respective bread and butter jobs. An occupation as editor, rector of a school, or teacher on the philosophical faculty of a university relates very well to humanistic abilities and interests. One would then be what could be called a "full-time humanist," while others could only be "part-time humanists" because they would have to devote a large part of their strength and time to bread and butter jobs.

If social position and work are seen as important for this classification, then one can make a differentiation between three groups of humanists: first, those who through belonging to the nobility (such as Pico della Mirandola) or to the urban patricians (such as Willibald Pirckheimer, Nuremberg) could carry on humanistic activity; second, successful writers and editors who could earn their living through the support of patrons or payment by printers (such as Erasmus of Rotterdam) or rectors of upper schools (such as Johannes Sturm, Strasbourg); and third, people for whom humanism decisively determined the viewing of their sources and access to them, but who had chosen a profession that caused them to ask completely different questions (such as Huldrych Zwingli). If one looks at Philipp Melanchthon, one sees clearly that he is known primarily as a reformer, and yet he remained closely bound to humanistic efforts through his activity on the philosophical faculty.

Indeed, Calvin acquired in the course of his studies excellent knowledge of language and sources that he also flaunted in his early letters, while such classical citations are missing in his later correspondence. In his commentary on Seneca's *De clementia*, he, in his early years, already showed proof of his philological abilities. However, since this commentary, printed in April 1532 at his own expense, and his teaching on this basis did not produce the desired success, he failed to receive a position as a teacher of the *studia humanitatis* at the university. His becoming a convinced reformer steered his interest from classical texts to biblical texts. And thus, following his work on the first edition of the *Institutes*, he set his abilities primarily on being the author of commentaries on biblical books, polemical writings, innumerable letters, sermons, and ever new reworking of the *Institutes*. If one sees in Calvin primarily a humanistically trained theologian, then one looks primarily at his work on the exegesis of the Bible with his interest in a renewal of the Christian church based on the apostle Paul and his interpreter, Augustine. If, on the other hand, one sees Calvin primarily as a humanist who happened to be a theologian, then one will especially attempt to observe in what ways his humanistic schooling is visible in his work and letters.

### 2.3. Calvin's Humanistic Schooling

Humanism had already sunk deep roots in France when Calvin was introduced to it. The chancellor Jean de Montreuil (1354-1418) admired Cicero. Nicholas of Clémanges (ca. 1360-1437), around 1430, contradicted Petrarch's claim (formulated in 1368) that the Italian *oratores et poetae* led the field. In 1535, Guillaume Budé (1468-1540) composed the work *De transitu hellenismi ad christianismum* (*The Transition from Hellenism to Christianity*). There can be no question that Calvin was schooled in the spirit of humanism. He learned good Latin from Mathurin Cordier in Paris (see Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique de la parole*, 29 with n. 5). Cordier, in the summer of 1537, followed Calvin into exile in Geneva. From his friend Melchior Wolmar in Orléans Calvin learned Greek. He dedicated his commentary on 2 Corinthians to Wolmar. In Paris he studied Hebrew, and he deepened his knowledge of this language under the tutelage of Sebastian Münster in Basel. The Italian lawyer, Andrea Alciati, with whom Calvin studied in Bourges in 1529, read the classical legal sources with his students in the original language and thus, by virtue of this direct access, led them to view medieval glosses and commentaries (such as that of Accursius) as less significant. Alciati worked as a lawyer and showed himself in his approach to the sources as a humanist. In March 1531, Calvin indeed supported Étoile (COR VI/I, 44-46; ET: Battles/Hugo, 385-386).

In his early letters, Calvin's familiarity with texts from classical antiquity is especially clear. In the earliest letter of Calvin's which has been preserved, for example, he alludes to Seneca, Cicero, and Juvenal (COR VI/I, 40-42; ET: Letters I, 53-58). Up until 1538, the end of his first period of activity in Geneva, one letter from Calvin to Simon Grynaeus remains (Nr. 40 in COR VI/I; ET: Letters I, 56), but eight letters exist from Grynaeus to Calvin (and Farel). However, they write to each other not primarily as humanists, but as reformers. Calvin writes, for example, that Farel, Viret, and he himself should not worry that Pierre Caroli's attacks have gained the attention of "you and all the godly" (Letter 40, COR VI/I, 211; ET: Letters I, 56). Calvin pleads before Grynaeus as an influential representative of the Reformation against Pierre Caroli, who seeks to paint Calvin as a heretic and does not speak as one humanist to another. Grynaeus, for his part, in one of his letters contrasts Calvin's education "in the center of France among the extremely educated" with that of the Bernese pastor Peter Kuntz, who behaves like a rustic, having been reared in the center of the Alps (Letter 63, COR VI/I, 336-337). But this comparison only serves the goal of spurring Calvin on to get along with Kuntz so as not to endanger the progress of the Reformation. As excellent as the Latin of both writers may be in these letters, it has simply a serving function. Grynaeus dedicates his commentary on Romans to Calvin in 1540 (Herminjard, Vol. 6, 74-78; CO 10b, 402-406).

Even from the side of a Catholic opponent, the view of Calvin as a representative of the Protestant cause outweighs the view of him as a skilled humanist. In 1551, the Belgian Carmelite Nikolaus Blanckaert (Alexander Candidus), who was working in Cologne at the time, defends the veneration of relics against Calvin. He recognizes, on the one hand, that Calvin's writings are composed in faultless Latin. Yet he claims that Calvin poisons the simple folk with his teachings: "The great number of works that he [Calvin] has laboriously produced testify that he is experienced in the Latin language to such a degree that I regret the loss of a spirit so favored by good fortune. If he had turned his energies to true Christian subjects, he would doubtless have become immortalized in glory, while he now will probably remain in eternal shame" (Blanckaert, "Ludicium," fol. B4v; Latin text by Burger, Nikolaus Blanckaert, 78, n. 65; see also Burger, "Der Kölner Karmelit," 44).

Apparently, two souls struggle against each other in Blanckaert's breast: that of the humanistically educated man who recognizes in Calvin an outstanding intellectual and that of the Catholic theologian who condemns Calvin primarily as a heretical seducer of the simple folk and who, against their mutual membership in the world of the *studia humanitatis*, resolutely decides to be his literary opponent.

## 2.4. Summary

If one decides for the more formal definition of Renaissance humanism and of a humanist, then one will arrive at the conclusion that Calvin was a humanist. His education, his qualifications, and his inclination to the *studia humanitatis* justify that designation. Because of his field of activity, his writings, and his letters, one will be more likely to call him a *humanistic theologian* rather than a *humanist* who works as a theologian. If one proceeds from this definition, then he preferred understandably, as a humanistically schooled theologian, to associate with others who were similarly educated and influenced in all of their behavior, such as Simon Grynaeus, than with uneducated and coarse churchmen like Peter Kuntz. Regarding the judgment of the Carmelite Nikolaus Blanckaert, one will emphasize his recognition of the polished formulations of Calvin, even though he stood on the other side in the religious controversy.

On the other hand, if one chooses the definition which, beyond the schooling in and the love for the *belles lettres* of a humanist, also expects that he represents the position that a non-Christian could from just as good a motivation perform just as worthy deeds as a Christian, then one must arrive at the conclusion that Calvin was, it is true, excellently schooled humanistically and that this had ramifications in his writings, sermons, and letters. Because of his particular orientation to the letters of the apostle Paul and to the late anti-Pelagian writings by Paul's interpreter Augustine, he holds a position on what for Renaissance humanists was a fundamental question that prohibits one from calling him a humanist. One is simply left to see him as an outstandingly schooled theologian humanistically. His anger about an uneducated churchman like Kuntz will be judged as the oversensitivity of the young Calvin. In the statement of the Carmelite Blanckaert one will emphasize that for Blanckaert, the differing position on the place of the Catholic Church was ultimately decisive.

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