

### Jennifer Powell McNutt

*Calvin Meets Voltaire. The Clergy of Geneva in the Age of Enlightenment, 1685–1798.*

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Since the eighteenth century continues by and large to be somewhat overlooked by historians of Protestant religious history, any serious work on this neglected period is welcome. That is certainly true of *Calvin Meets Voltaire*, a fine prosopographical, socio-historical, and theological study based on an impressive survey of archival material from various Genevan deposits. Powell McNutt situates her work against the background of persistent accounts of eighteenth-century religious decline in Geneva, extending from Voltaire and the ‘Geneva’-article in the *Encyclopédie* (1757) right through to John Roney and Martin I. Klauber’s edited volume *The Identity of Geneva* (1998) and beyond. With this she contributes to the growing literature that calls into question the secularization thesis and suggests a greater place for religion in the Enlightenment.

The Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 marks the starting-point for Powell McNutt’s analysis. The growing opposition to France and Roman Catholicism in the wake of the *Refuge* helped to shape and enhance Genevan Protestant identity over the course of the ‘long’ eighteenth century—albeit with a greater openness toward (Protestant) pluralism. But did this “Calvinist toleration open the door to Socinian concepts and tendencies as the *philosophes* believed?” (p. 66) Before this central question is addressed (ch. 5), chapter two details the high standards expected of the Genevan pastor in his many roles and responsibilities, setting the stage for a third chapter on ministerial renunciations and jeremiads. Clergy members who left their ministry have been consistently cited in traditional historiographical paradigms to support a narrative of religious decline, but Powell McNutt’s prosopographical analysis demonstrates that the reasons for their departure are much too disparate for such conclusions. Similarly, the concerns raised by the ministers are difficult to press into a ‘decline’-mould, and, if anything, witness of a recurring pattern of complaint and reform. Chapter four then details how the members of the Company of pastors, in facing the challenge issued by Voltaire and other *philosophes*, were committed to defending the Christian faith, their Genevan church, and also the memory of Calvin.

The first four chapters indeed present a convincing case for religion’s continuing importance in Geneva during the Enlightenment period, and for the perceived importance of Calvin’s legacy. Chapter five comes to the heart of the fictive encounter between Calvin and Voltaire in examining the veracity of the claim by the *philosophes*, and many after them, that Geneva’s eighteenth-

century pastors could hardly be called 'Calvinists' and were rather 'Socinian.' It does so not by studying single figures and their individual publications, but by offering the very first systematic analysis of Genevan eighteenth-century sermons. Powell McNutt notes how these sermons display an Enlightenment character, but also insists that they witness an "enduring presence of Christian orthodox affirmations (i.e., Chalcedonian) and persisting consistencies with the theology of John Calvin (...), thereby revealing the complex dynamic of 'Reasonable Calvinism'" (pp. 191–192). This overall assessment may be correct, but the chapter itself perhaps lacks the incisiveness of the earlier analyses. The level of detail provided in the discussion of the continued affirmation of original sin (pp. 199–201) is, for example, hardly at the required level for determining the scope of its mention by the preachers cited. Similarly, the passage from Le Cointe's sermon does not necessarily suggest that he "moved toward Arminian theology" (pp. 217–218); his explanation of the universality of the remission of sin is entirely amenable also to 'strict' orthodox accounts, in that the latter do maintain a universality albeit understood in terms of all *kinds* of people (with a view to age, class, nation, and time). One wonders in fact whether the homiletical context of the sermons offers sufficient precision for the question this chapter seeks to address—a potential obstacle that Powell McNutt herself acknowledges (p. 206), along with the problems involved in the use of the term 'Socinian' and in the identification of parallels between Calvin and his legacy (p. 228). These issues are indeed real, but one wonders whether this fifth chapter succeeds after all in advancing the discussion.

The sixth chapter shows the author at her best again, and takes the reader through the role of the Genevan clergy in state-building across the changing political context of the long eighteenth century. Far from becoming irrelevant, the clergymen could consistently be relied upon by the government in times of unrest. Until the entire church-state relationship in Geneva changed forever in 1798 (which therefore marks the endpoint for this study), the most remarkable aspect of Calvin's clerical legacy was its ability to adapt to the various versions of Genevan government.

All in all, Powell McNutt offers a convincing argument that "Calvin's Geneva did not wholly become 'Voltaire's Geneva' during the long eighteenth century" (p. 287). This highly readable monograph is a refreshing alternative to accounts of eighteenth-century religion dominated by notions of decline, which have long pervaded historiography from the side of orthodox theological quarters as well as secular Enlightenment historians.

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