THE SOCIAL ETHICS OF JOHN CALVIN

IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Master of Arts

by

Jonathan Walter Zophy, B. A.

The Ohio State University
1968

Approved by

[Signature]
Adviser
Department of History
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter I - Calvin and Geneva</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter II - Calvin's Social Thought</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter III - Calvin's Political and Economic Thought</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter IV - The Practice of Calvin's Social Ethics</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

Twentieth-century historians have been studying social and economic problems with increasing frequency. The history of political events without the wider context of social and economic developments now seems to the modern student of history almost meaningless. A part of this concern may have arisen as a result of the complexity and immediacy of twentieth-century social and economic problems. By examining how past societies and individuals have dealt with similar difficulties, it is hoped that history may reveal valuable lessons for understanding present perplexities. The assumption that the study of the past can aid one's understanding of the present has traditionally been one of the chief justifications for the study of history. Given this assumption, it is hoped that this study of John Calvin's social ethics will have some value in the understanding of present and past social conditions.

The subject of John Calvin and his social ethics has come to be of great interest and significance to students of Western culture. A good deal of this interest has arisen as a result of Max Weber's well known essay, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Unfortunately, this essay has led to a great deal of confusion about Calvin's social teachings as Weber drew most of his illustrations from the writings
of seventeenth-century English Puritans and not from the works of Calvin. R. H. Tawney, who largely subscribes to the Weber thesis in his Religion and the Rise of Capitalism, is somewhat more successful in separating Calvin from his spiritual descendants. Both men's opinions seem a great deal exaggerated to many historians who have not seen the relationship between Protestantism and capitalism in such a direct causal fashion. Ernst Troeltsch, the German theologian, is another scholar whose well known work, The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches, has done much to confuse the issue of Calvin's social thought. Far better treatments of Calvin's social ethics have been given by Georgia Harkness, John Calvin: The Man and His Ethics, and more recently by Ronald Wallace, in Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life, and by André Biéler, in his La Pensée Economique et Sociale de Calvin.

In addition to these works, numerous articles have been written which pay particular attention to Calvin's political and economic thought. However, much work still needs to be done on Calvin and his social ethics. This paper represents an attempt to analyze some of Calvin's social thought in both theory and practice. The theory of Calvin's social thought will be illustrated by selections from some of his commentaries, sermons, and other formal writings. The practice of Calvin's social thought will be illustrated by selections from his
correspondence and as reflected in the social legislation of Geneva during Calvin's life there. The first section of this thesis will deal with Calvin's life, personality, and the conditions he encountered in Geneva in an effort to provide a background for the problem of his social ethics.
Chapter I
Calvin and Geneva

Picardy, the region in France which was later to produce Maximilien Robespierre, was the birthplace of another French gentleman concerned with virtue, John Calvin. Calvin was born in the town of Noyon on July 10, 1509. His father, Gérard, was a notary who held a number of responsible positions in the service of the clergy and magistrates. Calvin's mother, Jeanne, was the daughter of a successful, retired innkeeper who was known for her beauty and piety. John was the fourth son of the family. His younger brother, Antoine, was later to join him in Geneva. Two of his older brothers died very young. His oldest surviving brother, Charles, had a stormy career as a cleric and died excommunicate in 1537. Calvin's mother died when he was three years old and his father re-married. Little is known about his stepmother except that she became the mother of two daughters, one of whom, Marie, accompanied John to Geneva in 1536 and married there.

John was educated by private tutors and attended an endowed school in Noyon in the company of the sons of the aristocratic de Hangest family. At the age of fourteen, he was sent to the University of Paris, with the de Hangest boys as companions and schoolfellows. Apparently Calvin distinguished himself at an early age for his brilliance in his studies and his precocity.
He received financial aid from several benefices which his father had obtained for him in 1521 and later.

The serious young student did not seem to have any difficulty making or retaining friends. In addition to his continued friendship with the three de Hangest boys, Calvin associated with his scholarly cousin, Pierre Robert Olivier (Olivétan). He also became a welcome guest in the homes of two of the university's greatest men, Guillaume Cop and Guillaume Budé. This would seem to indicate that Calvin had a certain amount of social grace and an intellect capable of attracting prominent persons. His sociability is further illustrated by a letter which he wrote to his friend, François Daniel, in which he assures him that he will "take care that the inner chamber be well supplied with wine."¹

Calvin had been preparing for the priesthood but in 1528 he left Paris for Orléans to study law. His father was by this time having difficulties in his relations with the cathedral chapter in Noyon. This apparently influenced him into reconsidering his son's future and the dutiful son obeyed his father's wishes. The relationship between Gérard and his children does not seem to have been a close one. Obedience rather than warmth of feeling seems to have characterized the relationship.² Nevertheless, Calvin continued in his study of the law until relieved of the obligation by his father's death in 1531. However, he seems to have
completed his work for he received the degree of licen-
tiate in law in Orléans the following year. Even as a
law student, Calvin's greater passion was for the
languages, literatures, and cultures of antiquity and
other humanist pursuits. Whatever his resentment may
have been for his father's vocational decision for him,
he put his legal training to good use in Geneva in the
early 1540's.

After receiving his law degree, Calvin devoted
his full attention to the pursuit of humanistic
learning by studying Greek and Hebrew and publishing
in 1532 his *Commentary on Seneca's Treatise on Clemency.*
In 1533 Calvin was forced to flee Paris as a result of
his involvement with Nicholas Cop. He spent the first
half of 1534 in Saintonge as the guest of another
student friend, Louis du Tillet, and made use of his
host's extensive library. During this period he gave
up his benefices and began a period of wandering. It
is difficult to date Calvin's conversion but certainly
the surrender of his benefices indicates he no longer
intended to take orders in the church.

In his travels Calvin came into contact with a
number of prominent Protestant reformers, several of
whom were to remain life-long friends. He continued
his scholarly interests as well and in 1536 he published
the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian
Religion.* He was then only twenty-six years old and the
Institutes, although revised and enlarged in later editions, was to become the classic statement of Calvinist theology. It was also in 1536 that Calvin made the fateful detour which brought him into Geneva.

The Geneva which Calvin entered in July, 1536 was a city of about 10,300 inhabitants. E. William Monter has characterized Geneva as an important commercial city but almost devoid of manufacturing. Monter also points out that in addition to being politically independent, Geneva was very much a frontier city religiously, politically, and even culturally. During Calvin's lifetime, Geneva stood at the southwestern edge of organized Protestantism, a natural center for French and Italian religious refugees. It had only recently emerged as an independent buffer state between Berne and France. Along with her political revolution, Geneva had been undergoing a religious revolution since the first overt signs of "Lutheranism" appeared in 1532. The key personality in organizing the Protestant movement in Geneva was Guillaume Farel who persuaded the reluctant Calvin to join him in his work.

It seemed that in the period between 1536 and 1538 Calvin was not really ready for Geneva and Geneva certainly did not seem ready for him. After a series of disputes and difficulties, Calvin and Farel were expelled from Geneva in April of 1538. In many ways this period of exile proved a crucial turning point in his life. In July he accepted a position as pastor to the French-
refugee church in Strasbourg and it was there that he gained the experience necessary to play a more successful role upon his return to Geneva on June 13, 1541.

It was while in Strasbourg that the young theologian was encouraged to marry by Martin Bucer among others. In a letter to Farel, Calvin described what he was seeking in a wife,

I am none of those insane lovers who embrace also the vices of those they are in love with, where they are smitten at first sight with a fine figure. This only is the beauty which allures me, if she is chaste, if not too nice or fastidious, if economical, if patient, if there is hope that she will be interested about my health.  

Hardly a very romantic ideal for a young man not yet thirty years of age. However, despite the lack of romance, the widow of an Anabaptist, Idelette de Bure, whom Calvin married in August, 1540 proved to be a good wife and the marriage, while it lasted only eight years, was a good one for Calvin.

Unfortunately, ill health plagued the marriage from the beginning. Even the honeymoon was marred by illness. Calvin wrote of it,

I could scarcely lift a finger on account of bodily weakness...it seemed, indeed, as if it had been so ordered on purpose that our wedlock might not be overjoyous, that we might not exceed all bounds, that the Lord thus thwarted our joy by moderating it.  

Idelette also suffered from a weak constitution, especially after the premature birth of their only child, Jacques, who was born on July 28, 1549.

Calvin was greatly upset by her death and described
his grief in a letter to Pierre Viret saying,

And truly mine is no common source of grief. I have been bereaved of the best companion of my life, of one who, had it been so ordered, would not only have been the willing sharer of my indigence, but even of my death. During her life she was the faithful helper of my ministry. From her I never experienced the slightest hindrance. She was never troublesome to me throughout the entire course of her illness; she was more anxious about her children than about herself.  

A few days later he wrote in a similar vein to Farel saying, "I do what I can to keep myself from being overwhelmed with grief." Calvin's domestic life was in many ways a very tragic experience. It is little wonder he would one day remark that marriage may have a "bitter taste mixed with its sweetness."  

It was fortunate for Calvin that he always had a great deal of work to accomplish. This and the concern of his friends helped mitigate the sorrows of the loss of his wife and infant son. He had returned to Geneva at the insistence of the municipal councils with the expression of a great deal of reluctance. Throughout the remaining years of his life, he faced continual opposition, although the strength of his opponents was reduced after the death of Servetus in 1553. In 1555 one of his greatest opponents, Ami Perrin, fled Geneva after an unsuccessful attempt to incite the populace to kill the French refugees. Some of the opposition to Calvin was part of the general fear on the part of some of the older inhabitants of Geneva that the city was
being taken over by the French religious refugees. Added to this was the resentment over the attempts of Calvin and his associates to enforce ecclesiastical discipline upon the city. Many of Geneva's "blue laws" were already in existence long before Calvin's arrival although they were not always enforced.

Calvin did not fail to respond to criticism. Indeed, at times he seemed to be overly defensive. On one occasion he wrote,

But what could I do? On me nevertheless, the odium redounds, though I strove with great vehemence to prevent the ground of it, but I bid adieu to the perverted judgments of men.\textsuperscript{11}

Later when he was insulted by a woman whom he had tried to help, he remarked, "I leave these wounds untouched, because they appear to me incurable until the Lord apply His hand."\textsuperscript{12} In the face of all opposition, Calvin was maintained and strengthened by an absolute faith in God and the righteousness of his cause.

Calvin also possessed a considerable amount of courage. The following incident vividly reveals this quality in Calvin as well as illustrates some of his conceit.

The appearance of matters was terrible. I cast myself into the thickest of the crowds, to the amazement of almost everyone. The whole people, however, made a rush towards me, they seized and dragged me hither and thither, lest I should suffer any injury I called God and men to witness that I had come for the purpose of presenting my body to their swords. I exhorted them, if they desired to shed blood to begin with me. The worthless, but especially the respectable portion of the crowd, at once greatly relaxed in their fervour. I was at length dragged through the midst to the Senate.
There fresh fights arose, into the midst of which I threw myself. All are of the opinion that a great and disgraceful carnage was prevented from taking place by my interposition.\textsuperscript{13}

It is clear that Calvin at times was more than just the humble scholar which he called himself on his death bed.

Perhaps, another reason for Calvin's rigor can be seen in his \textit{weltanschauung}. He saw "great and boundless licentiousness...everywhere throughout the world."\textsuperscript{14} He saw the cause of Christ's kingdom at odds with numerous and malicious enemies whose fury was already kindled and whose strength was growing greater day by day. Even greater than the active forces of evil were the masses of men who are indifferent; "in a word, how much deadness there is throughout the world."\textsuperscript{15}

There was also in Calvin a curious inconsistency which may be partly accounted for by the precariousness of his own position and, indeed, the precariousness of the entire Protestant movement in the first half of the sixteenth century. Calvin was very aware of the religious persecution going on throughout much of Europe and he was especially concerned with the condition of his co-religionists in France. He wrote on one occasion, "I am struck with horror when I hear with what cruelty the godly are persecuted in France."\textsuperscript{16} Yet at other times, Calvin can exhort Protestant rulers to persecute others. In a series of letters to Edward Seymour, the English regent under the minority of Edward VI, Calvin urges him
to repress by the sword religious dissenters and those
"who persist in the superstitions of the Roman Antichrist." 17

Like Luther, Calvin was afflicted with a hot temper
which sometimes exploded into un-Christian rage and
vituperation. At times Calvin seemed almost to exhibit
vicious cruelty in some of his letters. His letter to
Farel concerning his hope for Servetus' death is well
known. In another letter he attacked an unknown person
in even more explicit terms. He wrote,

Knowing partly the man he was, I could have wished
that he were rotting in some ditch; and his arrival
gave me as much pleasure as the piercing of my heart
with a poniard would have done. But never could I
have deemed him to be such a monster of all impiety
and contempt of God, as he has proved himself in this.
And I assure you, Madame, that had he not so soon
escaped, I should by way of discharging my duty, have
done my best to bring him to the stake. 18

In fairness to Calvin, it must be said that such utterances
were by no means typical.

Although some of Calvin's defenders have tried to
minimize some of the darker aspects of his personality,
both his defenders and detractors have often overlooked
his wit and humor. Even amidst the serious tone of
his formal writings, rare glimpses of wit can be found
after diligent searching. In one of his commentaries
he wrote:

Some have raised the question, whether, seeing it
is criminal to overleap walls, it could be lawful
to get out of the city by a window? But it ought
to be observed first, that the walls of cities were
not everywhere sacred, because every city had not a
Romulus, who could make the overleaping a pretext
for slaying his brother. 19
His letters contain a few more examples of his humor but most of his wit seems to have gone into private conversations which are not available for the historical record.

One additional aspect of Calvin's personality should be mentioned which does seem to have a direct connection with some of his social thought. Several of Calvin's biographers have noted what amounts to almost a preoccupation with sex in his writings. Indeed, it has been suggested that the bachelor-widower was possibly the victim of his own reaction-formation. This is altogether possible for Calvin frequently uses sexual terms while inveighing against his enemies and in many of his references to priests and nuns. In one instance he wrote of some of his Genevan opponents, "their profligacy has now reached such a pitch, that having shaken off all shame, they obstinately desire to convert the House of the Lord into a brothel."\(^{20}\) This type of language may in part be accounted for by the fact that some of the chief leaders of the Genevan opposition were members of the Favre family which was noted for its loose morals. Geneva itself was known as a city which at one time abounded in centena of dissolute pleasure.\(^{21}\)

Perhaps, Calvin was also influenced by the shortness of his own married life and the marring of it by ill health and tragic death. His later years were not made any more joyous by the fact of his brother's wife's
adultery with his hunch-backed servant or the scandal of his step-daughter's conviction for adultery. Calvin was further upset when his good friend, Farel, surprised everyone by marrying a young girl when he was sixty-five years old. Calvin wrote of it,

As it is, what will the sneerers say, what will the simple think, but that the preachers wish to have law for themselves; and that, in favor of their profession, they violate the most indissoluble ties in the world?...Half a year ago our poor brother would have declared that they should have bound like a madman the person who at so advanced an age desired to marry so young a woman. But the deed being accomplished, it is by no means so easy to annul it.\textsuperscript{22}

It is apparent that for Calvin sin and sex were closely connected. And if the concept of God was ever present in his thinking, the concept of Satan was not far removed.

Calvin's last years in Geneva were not as turbulent as his earlier career had been. Much of the opposition to his program had been reduced and many more of the positive aspects of his work became apparent. Unfortunately, his health continued to worsen and, finally, in the evening of May 27, 1564, he died after a prolonged illness. Calvin's life had not been an easy or happy existence. All men's thoughts reflect their experience and personality. It is hoped that what has been suggested about Calvin will make his social thought more understandable. It is to certain aspects of that subject that we turn our attention in the next chapter.
Notes


4 Ibid., p. 22.

5 Calvin to Farel, Strasbourg, May 19, 1539, in Bonnet, Letters, I, 117.

6 Calvin to Farel, Strasbourg, October 1540, Ibid., I, 180.

7 Calvin to Viret, Geneva, April 7, 1549, Ibid., II, 202-203.

8 Calvin to Farel, Geneva, April 11, 1549, Ibid., II, 203.


12 Calvin to Farel, Geneva, September 1, 1546, Ibid., II, 57.

13 Calvin to Viret, Geneva, December 14, 1547, Ibid., II, 134-135.

14 Calvin to Somerset, Geneva, October 22, 1548, Ibid., II, 182.


16 Ibid., I, 158.

17 Calvin to Somerset, Geneva, October 22, 1548, Ibid., II, 173.


Chapter II
Calvin's Social Thought

R. H. Tawney has stated, "It was on this practical basis of urban industry and commercial enterprise that the structure of Calvinistic social ethics was erected."¹ Even the most cursory examination of Calvin's social writings should be sufficient to show that Tawney's statement is incorrect when applied to Calvin. The central feature of Calvin's theology was his concern for the glory and majesty of God. In relation to God, all men "are only vermin and rottenness."² However, the basic notion that all men are created in God's image for the purpose of his glorification was sufficient justification for a concern with man and his ethics. Even Calvin's social thought was primarily theologically oriented.

Economic problems were not a major consideration for Calvin even though some of his economic thinking reflects a great deal of sophistication by sixteenth-century standards. In his personal life there is evidence that Calvin may at times have been somewhat absent-minded about financial matters. He wrote on one occasion,

> I have enjoined Peter Textor to pay to you sixteen crowns; for although I had ten with me when I came to the marriage, it escaped my memory. But here is a greater lapse of memory; when I found them laid aside in my desk, I stood still for sometime, not knowing whether I had ever seen them before.³

Calvin's lack of interest in his personal finances can also be illustrated by the modest manner in which he
lived, which at times reflected a financial status near penury.

Calvin was continually concerned with the problem of men becoming too involved in earthly concerns. He wrote of this problem,

> Whoever is attached to this world deprives himself of heavenly life, to which we cannot be heirs unless we live as strangers and sojourners in this world. Hence it is that anyone who is too anxious for his security in this world is an alien to the Kingdom of God, or the true life.

In this matter there was no medium between extremes; "either the earth must become vile in our estimation, or it must retain our immoderate love." He felt that God's approval "should mean more to us than the plaudits of the whole world." In short, the problems of getting and spending and winning earthly honors and recognition were not important matters for Calvin who regarded the temporal world as of only secondary significance.

The two basic ideas that all men are created in the image of God and that all share a common human nature serve as the foundation for much of Calvin's teachings about the nature of human relationships. In his writings the concept of neighbor includes the whole of mankind. He wrote,

> God testifies that any man whoever he may be is our neighbor, in order to keep us in the bond of brotherly love with which we are bound one to another by our common nature; for it is necessary that whenever I see another man, who is my own flesh and bone, I see my own self. Even though most men, most often, break away from this holy society, their depravity does not remove the
the order of nature; for we must remember that God himself is the maker of this union. It follows that the precept of the law which commands us to love our neighbor applies to all men. Therefore, all men are bound to love one another and to sin against our fellow man is to sin also against God.

Calvin's concept of brotherhood was universal and he made no exceptions. Whether a man be a Moor or a barbarian, the fact that he is a man means that he is of the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God. Calvin equated hatred with murder stating that, "all who hate their brethren are murderers." He felt that brotherly love must be illustrated by deeds as well as words. He wrote,

Therefore, let the first proposition be, that only he truly loves his brother who testifies as much by the actuality whenever an opportunity occurs. The second is, that anyone is bound to help his brethren to the extent of his means; for in this way the Lord supplies us with the opportunity to exercise love. The third is, that the necessity of every man should be looked to. For inasmuch, as anyone needs food and drink or other things which we have in abundance, so he entreats our aid.

Out of Calvin's concern for brotherhood and brotherly love came his concern for friendship and hospitality, especially towards strangers. Michael Servetus may have found Genevan hospitality a little too warm but, nevertheless, the concern was there in Calvin's writings. He wrote of it,

Moreover, hospitality holds the chief place among these services; because it is no common virtue to assist strangers, from whom there is no hope of reward. For men in general are wont, when they do favours to others, to look for a return; but he who
is kind to unknown guests and persons proves himself to be disinterestedly liberal.\textsuperscript{10}

Calvin would even censure a bridegroom who did not have enough wine for his guest at his marriage feast.\textsuperscript{11}

One of the most attractive things about Calvin was his social consciousness and his concern for the welfare of the poor. He regarded it as a Christian's duty to ease the afflictions of the less fortunate whenever possible. "It is that we should be moved to pity when we see any poor folks in adversity, and to go about providing for them each according to his ability."\textsuperscript{12} This should be done with an open and generous heart and not for the sake of self-glorification. He was also aware of the need to exert care and discrimination in giving, "but in the meanwhile let us beware that we seek not to cover our stinginess under the shadow of prudence."\textsuperscript{13} He was particularly concerned with the oppression of the foreign born, widows, and orphans whom he saw in a more vulnerable position and therefore more in need of society's protection. This concern must have certainly been influenced by his own experiences and the refugee problem in Geneva. His social welfare principles were neatly summed up by his phrase, "justice must be practiced always towards all."\textsuperscript{14}

Although man's charity must be general, Calvin recognized that there are also a number of degrees of
friendship which God has put into the world. A friend will be more attached to another friend, relatives will be close to one another, the husband will be attached to his wife, and the children to their father. Indeed, Calvin felt that there should be distinctions in rank as well as in friendships. He wrote,

Celebrity of name is not in itself condemned; since it is necessary that they whom the Lord has adorned with peculiar gifts should be pre-eminent among others; and it is advantageous that there should be distinctions of ranks in the world.

However, Calvin was not in favor of a hierarchy which would make of some men slaves while others ruled over them. He felt that social inequalities were part of God's will which man must accept but cannot fully comprehend.

Calvin saw the relationship between man and woman as the most important human relationship. Because man was created to be a social animal, "no bond whatever in human relations is more sacred than that by which husband and wife unite to become one body and one soul." God's purpose in creating woman was that human beings should inhabit the earth and cultivate mutual society between themselves. After the couple, the second most important social unit for Calvin was the family. The natural bonds by which parents and children are united constitutes the foundation for all human society.
Calvin recognized three principal purposes for marriage: to provide a helpmate for man, to beget children, and to serve as a remedy for incontinence. Often Calvin would only make mention of the two physical reasons for marriage. "For what else is marriage than the union of male and female? Why indeed, was it instituted except for these two reasons, either to beget offspring or as a remedy for incontinence." He explained this viewpoint more fully when he wrote,

For in order to avoid fornication each one ought to have his wife, and each woman her husband, so that all who have not the gift of continence are obliged by the command of God to marry, in order that the holy temple of God, in other words, our bodies, be not violated and corrupted. For seeing that our bodies are members of Jesus Christ, it would be a gross outrage to make them the members of a harlot. Wherefore we ought to preserve them in all holiness. For whoso pollutes the temple of God, him will God destroy.

Calvin apparently felt that most men had not the gift of continence and this belief led him to make abusive attacks on monasticism.

At the present day it is well ascertained that there is more obscenity in the cloisters of monks and nuns than in common dens of infamy. Wherever priests penetrate they leave some impress of their unchastity: as if they had been prohibited from marriage solely for the purpose of their unchastity;...solely for the purpose of giving free scope to their lust in any quarter.

Calvin was by no means opposed to marital sex. He felt it was "good in itself" and "lawful intercourse is not imputed as a fault" because of the divine grace given to marriage. However, even the marriage bed may be
defiled if the couple does not observe the bounds of moderation in their sexual relations.

In regard to offspring, Calvin did not explicitly urge his followers to have large families. This, like all else in human affairs, is in God's hands. Nevertheless, it is apparent that a large family is an evidence of God's favor and a blessing upon the parents. So important was the physical aspect of marriage for Calvin that when arranging a marriage for a girl in Geneva, he wrote to inquire whether the prospective suitor may have had venereal disease in his youth. It was primarily on sexual grounds that he objected to marriages between those of dissimilar ages. We shall later examine how these concerns were reflected in Genevan legislation.

Because marriage, although not a sacrament for Calvin, was such an important bond, infidelity became an unpardonable sin against society. Calvin's severe feelings on this subject were expressed when he stated,

> It is certain that fornicators and adulterers should not be tolerated as they are; but everyone should hold them in horror, there should not even be anyone who would check his feelings against them, and who would not be his judge, and this sentence should be for law and regulation....It is certain that there should be greater zeal to cut off this evil from the midst of us.

By adultery "one robs the honor and everything, and not only those who are not yet formed in the womb." But the chief evil is that the wife disgraces the husband by prostituting herself, "and violates the sacred covenant of God, without which no sound holiness can continue to
to exist in the world."\textsuperscript{27}

So great was Calvin's outrage against adultery that he seemed to suggest death as the proper punishment for adulterers.

When a woman is thus in the hands of the devil, what remedy is there except that all this be exterminated? ... And so it must be that, in such great extremity when the punishment is so severe, that the Lord wishes this to serve as an example to us, that those who have lived in such scandal in their lives may teach us by their death to keep ourselves chaste.\textsuperscript{28}

Calvin would even extend the guilt of adulterers to those who tolerated such behavior. "If we suffer them to be nourished by our indifference, we shall be held before God as brothel-keepers and procurers."\textsuperscript{29} Feeling as he did, it is not surprising that the adultery in his family came as a great blow to him.

Although marriage was considered by Calvin to be a sacred bond, he recognized that "quarrels arise, and hurt feelings, bitterness, discords, and a great sea of trouble."\textsuperscript{30} Nevertheless, no matter what kind of unhappiness marriage may bring, a man should strive to remain with his wife:

True it is that wives will oftentimes give their husbands cause to hate them, and there be some of them such beasts as were able to vex even the angels in heaven, and put them out of patience. This is true. But yet must a man fight against such temptations and overcome them howsoever he fare, by the power of God's spirit. When he is come with a wife, he must not think it haphazard but that it was by God's will. And therefore he must bridle himself, insomuch that it be right hard and grievous to do so, yet must he take pains to reform the vices of his wife that is so evil disposed, and yet in the meantime bear with her and use her as gently as possible.\textsuperscript{31}
However, Calvin did allow divorce for adultery, physical incapacity for sexual intercourse, desertion, and extreme religious incompatibility. He felt that divorce was far more tolerable than polygamy. Here Calvin would seem to differ from Luther's handling of the bigamy of Philip of Hesse.

Within the family, the husband was to love his wife as Jesus loved the true believers for whom he died. The man was placed above the woman in authority but he must not be tyrannical over her for they are both part of the same body and soul. The wife was admonished by Calvin to serve and obey her husband. Only with regard to the marriage bed was the wife to have equal rights. Both parents share in the responsibility of raising their children "as God will not have the father alone to have the governing of the child, but that the mother should also have part of the honor and preeminence." 

The purpose of having children is to increase the glory of God.

Let such as have children teach, though not for the reaping of any earthly profit by them. Forasmuch as God has done them the honor to let them be fathers, they must do their best to yield unto him their children whom he hath put into their hands, that there may always remain some good seed to honor him withall. For we see how scripture telleth us often times that God's name must flourish from generation to generation. The father is obligated to provide for all of his children. Calvin was against primogeniture which stems from evil pride and a desire to "have their houses continue in their name, and not be diminished." He did feel that the eldest
could be given a larger share but that the rest of the children must also be taken care of.

The parents also bear a strong obligation for the disciplining of their children.

If a man has laid the bridle upon his child's neck, and let him play the loose colt, he is worthy to have his eyes plucked out by him, and all the evil that the child doeth is to be imputed to his father, because he was negligent in correcting him. 57

However, fathers were not to be unduly harsh in their discipline. "For divers times it falleth out that a child is put of heart, because he sees his father use no mildness towards him, nor any reason or love in his doings." 38

Calvin also felt very strongly about the mother's duty to nurse her children.

Meanwhile, it is to be observed, that Sarah joins the office of nurse with that of mother; for the Lord does not in vain prepare nutriment for children, in their mothers' bosoms, before they are born. But those on whom he confers the honour of mothers, he, in this way, constitutes nurses; and they who deem it a hardship to nourish their own offspring, break, as far as they are able, the sacred bond of nature. If disease, or anything of that kind, is the hindrance, they have just excuse; but for mothers voluntarily, and for their own pleasure, to avoid the trouble of nursing, and thus to make themselves only half-mothers, is a shameful corruption. 39

This is an interesting statement in the light of the practice of French noble families of having their children raised and nursed by others. One of the chief contributions of Rousseau's *Emile* was to make breast-feeding and child care fashionable.

For Calvin the duty of children was to love, honor,
respect, and obey their parents. He felt that children must not despise and disobey even those fathers who as individuals were unworthy of that honor. Calvin felt that parents "next to God are most deeply to be revered." Calvin did place limitations on parental authority, especially if it threatened freedom of choice in marriage.

Although it is the office of parents to settle their daughters in life, they are not permitted to exercise tyrannical power and assign them to whatever husbands they think fit without consulting them. For while all contracts ought to be voluntary, freedom ought to prevail especially in marriage that no one may pledge his faith against his will.

Calvin was at his humanitarian best in many of his views about marriage and the family. The use of the term humanitarian must be qualified by the severity of some of Calvin's language and the severity of his views on adultery.

Indeed, using the term humanitarian to describe the rigorous Genevan reformer seems to contradict his traditional image in history. Yet there was much of the kind and humane about Calvin which unfortunately was contradicted and often obscured by his severity. Much of the literature devoted to Calvin either vilifies him or goes to the other extreme in defending him. And this has obscured the real man who seems to have been possessed of great virtues but with major flaws as well. The best Calvin scholarship, works by such people as R. N. Carew-Hunt, John T. McNeill, and Georgia Harkness, for example, has shown him to be neither a saint nor a Puritanical
villain. Calvin was an intensely human man who was caught in the inevitable consequences of his concept of God and God's will. Calvin never seems to have doubted the essential correctness of his understanding of God's will and purpose. This led him to make clear-cut and absolute distinctions between good and evil which resulted in a number of actions and ideas of whose inconsistency he never seems to have been aware.

The contradiction of Calvin's life and thought was reflected in his social thought in which he betrays elements of both humanitarianism and "Puritanism." Calvin was often humane and progressive in his thought while yet retaining a basically conservative and God-centered outlook on life. This is shown in his thoughts concerning the relations between servant and master. He admonished servants not to chafe against their masters but masters may not oppress those who serve under them. These sentiments were expressed in one of his sermons:

Let us be kind and humane toward those over whom we have superiority, when our Lord owns them for his children; and let us all get along with them in such a way that God may be glorified by all, both great and small; and let us follow such an order that each one may acquit himself of his duty according to his vocation.42

These concepts of vocation and contentment with one's lot are shared by Luther, who also felt that man may honor God in his performance of menial tasks as well as in more exalted occupations.

It has been commonly charged that Calvin was a kill-
joy who regarded all forms of pleasure as sinful. Calvin's comments below show more of his real attitude towards pleasure:

Although the invention of the lyre and of other musical instruments serve our enjoyment and our pleasures rather than our needs, it ought not on that account be judged of no value; still less should it be condemned. Pleasure is to be condemned only when it is not combined with reverence for God and not related to the common welfare of society. But music by its nature is adapted to rouse our devotion to God and to aid the well being of man; we need only to avoid enticements to shame, and empty entertainments which keep men from better employments and are simply a waste of time.43

Calvin saw the good things of life as gifts of God which are to be enjoyed within the bounds of moderation. He numbered among the good things of life such things as wine, which gladdens the heart of man, and flowers with their beauty and sweetness of smell. He raised the question about God's world:

Did he not so distinguish colors as to make some more lovely than others? What? Did he not endow gold and silver, ivory and marble, with a loveliness that renders them more precious than other metals or stones? Did he not, in short, render many things attractive to us, apart from their necessary use?44

He answered it by stating, "away, then with that inhuman philosophy which, while conceding only a necessary use of creatures, and not only malignantly deprives us of the lawful fruits of God's beneficence but cannot be practiced unless it robs a man of all his senses and degrades him to a block."45

However, the more kindly God treats man, the more it becomes necessary to exercise self-restraint and
temperance. Calvin was by no means a hedonist or a
Playboy philosopher. Wine was considered among the gifts
of God but Calvin's injunctions against drunkenness are
explicit and severe.

Drunkards are so bereft of their senses that they
kill themselves, as if they wanted to cut their
own throats. When they come to the table they sit
down like dogs and get up like hogs. If a man gives
himself over to drunkenness and gluttony, he puts him-
self in his grave before his death. For we see
drunkards who are like corpses, they are half-rotted.
And why? It is their pay for gourmandizing, and
abusing God's handiwork. 46

Georgia Harkness criticized Calvin's argument for not
recognizing that intemperance may have social and economic
causes.

Calvin placed great emphasis on the principle of
moderation. He referred to humility as the mother of
moderation: The two virtues work together and are
essential in the effort to avoid extremes. Calvin's use
of common sense moderation is typical in many instances
and contrasts sharply with some of his severity.

It would be immoderate strictness wholly to forbid
neatness and elegance in clothing. If the material
is said to be too sumptuous, the Lord has created
it, and we know that the skill in art has proceeded
from Him. Then Peter did not intend to condemn
every sort of ornament, but the evil of vanity to
which women are subject. 47

Neither excess nor asceticism was a frequent recommendation
of Calvin's in regard to food and drink as well as clothing.

Moderation applied to all aspects of human behavior.
It was because Calvin feared disorder, which can enter
the life of society through individual loss of self-control,
that he disapproved of the loose talk, suggestive songs, and dancing of his day. He felt that to teach a young girl to sing suggestive songs was to make a wanton of her before she had any knowledge of sexual vice or choice in the matter of chastity.\textsuperscript{48} Dancing, which in Calvin's Geneva was said to be lascivious to a high degree, was regarded by Calvin as a preamble to sexual vice. Perhaps a part of Calvin's strictness in regard to dancing came from the association of dancing with some of his enemies in the Favre and Perrin families.\textsuperscript{49} It is interesting to note that in reference to the dancing of the Israelites in the Old Testament, Calvin praised it as a form of worship and as showing reverence towards God. Although condemning dancing as practiced in Geneva, Calvin failed to suggest alternate forms which constitute more appropriate social behavior.

Although Calvin expressed disapproval of the theater, he seems not to have opposed it in principle. In fact, there is evidence that he intervened to stop the efforts of an over zealous colleague to suppress the theater and games planned for a celebration in July, 1546.\textsuperscript{50} He himself showed a familiarity with the works of both Plautus and Terence. All seemed to depend on the nature of the play as to whether the theater was supported as a desirable institution or not. He approved of a certain piece "provided one scene was suppressed in which shop-keepers were ridiculed and traduced."\textsuperscript{51} Once he consented to post-
pone the evening sermon to allow time for a play to be
given in its completeness.\textsuperscript{52} Albert Hyma quotes Calvin
from an unidentified source as stating,

The women who mount the platform to play comedies
are full of unbridled effrontery, without honor,
having no purpose but to expose their bodies, clothes,
and ornaments to excite the impure desires of the
spectators.\textsuperscript{53}

Generally Calvin seems not to have especially
countenanced the theater unless a play had a strong
educative value. In some instances, Calvin seemed to
feel that the money spent on the theater might be better
employed in works of charity. For the most part, the
drama in Calvin's Geneva came to exist only as a school
boy exercise. Coincidentally, Calvin died one month
after Shakespeare's recorded baptismal date of April 26,
1564. Card playing was another amusement for which
Calvin expressed even less sympathy. He regarded it as
a waste of time and felt it contributed to the more
serious problem of gambling.

In summation, Calvin's social thought can be
characterized by a good deal of concern for all classes
and aspects of society with particular emphasis on the
family and marriage. He placed great stress on brother-
hood, natural law, moderation, common sense, and the
example of Scripture to aid sinful man in living a
Godly life. Much of his social thinking reflected his
life experiences and was consistent in many cases between
his word and deed. He was also subject to the limitations of his century and his own human character. In the next chapter, we shall further explore Calvin's social ethics as they are reflected in his economic and political thought.
Notes


3 Calvin to Viret, Geneva, December 3, 1546, in Bonnet, Letters, II, 73.


6 Haroutunian, Commentaries, p. 321.

7 Ibid., pp. 330-331.


9 Ibid., p. 277.


12 Calvin, Sermons from Job, p. 199.

13 Ibid., p. 205.

14 Haroutunian, Commentaries, p. 330.

15 Calvin, Sermons from Job, p. 112.

16 Calvin, Genesis, I, 246.

17 Haroutunian, Commentaries, p. 357.

18 Calvin, Genesis, I, 128.

19 Quoted in Harkness, John Calvin, p. 136.


22 Ibid., p. 219.


24 Calvin to Nicholas Parent, Worms, December 14, 1540, Ibid., I, 199.


26 Ibid., p. 151.


29 Ibid.

30 John Calvin, *Sermons on the Fifth Booke of Moses Called Deuteronomie* (London, 1583), Ch. 21: 15-17, p. 750.


34 Calvin, *Sermons on Deut.*, Ch. 21: 18-21, p. 755.


36 Ibid., Ch. 21: 15-17, p. 752.

37 Ibid., Ch. 21: 18-21, p. 755.

38 Ibid., p. 757.


40 Ibid., I, 302.

41 Calvin, *Commentaries on Joshua*, p. 207.

42 Calvin, *Sermons from Job*, p. 196.


45 Ibid.

46 Quoted in Harkness, John Calvin, p. 161.


48 Ibid., p. 175.


50 Calvin to Farel, Geneva, July 4, 1546, Ibid., II, 47-48.


52 Ibid.

Chapter III
Calvin's Political and Economic Thought

Calvin's political and economic thought has received far more attention than his social thought. The controversy over the Weber-Tawney thesis has drawn scholars on both sides of the issue to examine Calvin's economic ideas for their relevance to the development of modern capitalism. Similarly, a lively debate has arisen over whether Calvin contributed more towards authoritarian or democratic political development. As is the case with Rousseau, it is possible to draw evidence which can support either hypothesis or both.

Calvin stressed throughout his writings that God is intimately involved in the world of mankind. Because of this belief, Calvinist piety embraces all the day-by-day concerns of life, in family and neighborhood, education and culture, business and politics. Within these spheres of activity, man was to act so as to honor God and benefit his fellow man. Calvin, therefore, called for active and positive political behavior. Although he wrote no extended formal treatise on government, his views can be found by examining his formal theological works such as the Institutes or his Commentaries.

Calvin regarded civil government as sanctioned by God. Christ means that they were furnished with a definite command from God. From this we infer that empires did not spring up by chance or from men's mistakes.
but were appointed by the will of God, who wished political order to flourish among men and that we should be governed by right and law....In short, let us know that magistrates are called 'gods' because God has committed the rule to them.

Calvin approved of civil government "which provides that the true religion which is contained in the law of God, be not violated and polluted by public blasphemies with impunity." He saw three branches of civil administration:

the magistrate, who is the guardian and conservator of the laws; the laws according to which he governs; the people who are governed by the laws and obey the magistrate.

Calvin was not especially concerned with the form of government. "And even if we compare the different forms together, without their circumstances, their advantages are so nearly equal that it will not be easy to discover of which the utility preponderates," wrote Calvin. He recognized three basic forms of government: monarchy, which is the dominion of one person; aristocracy, or the dominion of the principal persons of a nation; democracy, or popular government in which the power resides in the people at large. He felt that monarchy tended towards despotism, aristocracy towards oligarchy, and democracy towards anarchy.

He felt that "either aristocracy or a mixture of aristocracy and democracy" far excelled all other forms of government. Since man is imperfect, it is far more tolerable that power be in the hands of many, "that they may afford each other mutual assistance and admonition, and that if any one arrogate to himself more than is right,
the many may act as censors and masters to restrain his ambition.⁷ No kind of government is more happy than where liberty is regulated with moderation and property established on a durable basis. He recognized that safeguarding liberty would require continual effort on the part of both the people and their magistrates. For this reason, Calvin placed great stress upon man's political duty.

Calvin felt the use of police power and even capital punishment was fully justified.

Experience fully justifies the observation of Solon: "That all states are supported by reward and punishment; and that when these two things are removed, all the discipline of human societies is broken and destroyed." For the minds of many lose their regard for equity and justice unless virtue be rewarded with due honor; nor can the violence of the wicked be restrained unless crimes are followed by severe punishments.⁸

For Calvin, man's sinful nature necessitates the public use of violence to coerce proper behavior. He felt that capital punishment was an effective deterrent to crime. He would probably be surprised by the studies of modern sociologists and criminologists who have proven that concept to be false.

Indeed, Calvin felt that even the worst of atrocities could be justified by God's command. Writing of Joshua he stated,

Had he proceeded of his own accord to commit an indiscriminate massacre of women and children, no excuse could have exculpated him from the guilt of detestable cruelty, cruelty surpassing anything of which we read as having been perpetuated by savage tribes scarcely raised above the level of brutes. But that at which
all would otherwise be justly horrified, it becomes them to embrace with reverence, as proceeding from God.9

This, of course, represents an extreme situation but Calvin does not answer the question of how one determines God's will in such matters.

Although Calvin extended his justification for the use of police power and the sword to include wars between nations as well, force of arms was justified only by extreme necessity and only as a last resort. He felt that force should only be used with modest restraint and all excessive anger, hatred, passion, and cruelty must be avoided. Yet even when war is properly conducted it is marked by the tragedy that men in the image of God are done to death.10 For these reasons, Calvin would only justify defensive wars against direct hostile aggression. "Moreover, on the right of war depends the lawfulness of garrisons, alliances, and other civil munitions."11 Calvin also felt that no war which leads to widespread and extreme confusion could be justified. His views on the American involvement in the Vietnamese civil war would, indeed, be interesting.

Calvin also regarded taxes and tribute as the legitimate revenues of princes. However, princes themselves ought to remember that their finances are not so much private revenues as the incomes of the whole people.
They are to be considered as the blood of the people, not to spare which is the most inhuman cruelty; and their various imposts and tributes ought to be regarded merely as aids of public necessity to burden the people with, without cause, would be tyrannical rapacity.\textsuperscript{12}

Similarly, governments must use their judicial powers with moderation.

There ought not, however, to be any excessive or unreasonable severity, nor ought any cause to be given for considering the tribunal as a gibbet prepared for all who are accused. For I am not an advocate for unnecessary cruelty, nor can I conceive the possibility of an equitable sentence being pronounced without mercy.\textsuperscript{13}

Moderation and balance between severity and clemency was to be a guiding rule for governmental justice. For "it is hard to live under a prince who permits nothing, but much worse to live under one who permits everything," wrote Calvin in quoting Nerva.\textsuperscript{14}

One of the most controversial aspects of Calvin's political thought centered on the duty of obedience in conflict with the right of resistance. Calvin's injunction would appear to be that man must obey even the worst of governments.

Wherefore, if we are cruelly vexed by an inhuman prince, or robbed and plundered by one prodigal and avaricious, or despised and left without protection by one negligent; or even if we are afflicted for the name of God by one sacrilegious and unbelieving, let us first of all remember our own offenses against God which doubtless are chastised by these plagues. Thus humility will curb our impatience. And secondly, let us consider that it is not for us to remedy these evils: for us it remains only to implore the aid of God, in whose hand are the hearts of kings and changes of kingdoms.\textsuperscript{15}
It is God's pleasure to appoint kings and other rulers but it is the duty of the private citizen "to be obedient to our governors whom God has established."¹⁶

However, Calvin seems to have taken an increasingly radical attitude toward resistance to authority in his later years. By that time, the reformer saw rulers opposing his work on all sides. Calvinism was fighting for its very existence in Scotland and France.¹⁷ In his commentaries on Daniel, Calvin wrote of a civil ruler that "by lifting his horns against God, he had virtually abrogated his power."¹⁸ One must not obey magistrates if it means disobeying God whose authority is superior to man's.

Earthly princes lay aside all their power when they rise up against God, and are unworthy to be reckoned in the number of mankind. "We ought rather to spit on their heads than to obey them when they are so restive and wish to rob God of his rights."¹⁹

It is interesting to note that these are far stronger statements than can be found in the Institutes which were written in their final form in 1559.

Calvin's views on female rulers were consistent with his concept of the woman as inferior to the male. Answering a question of his famous disciple, John Knox, on this point, he wrote,

Since it is utterly at variance with the legitimate order of nature, it ought to be counted among the judgments with which God visits us; and even in this matter his extraordinary grace is sometimes very conspicuous, because to reproach men for their sluggishness, he raises up women endowed not only
with a manly but a heroic spirit, as in the case of Deborah we have an illustrious example. But though a government of this kind seems to me nothing else than a mere abuse, yet I gave it as my solemn opinion, that private persons have no right to do any thing but deplore it. For a gynaecocracy or female rule badly organized is like a tyranny, and is to be tolerated till God sees fit to overthrow it.20

It would appear that Knox went beyond this in his Blast of the Trumpet against the Monstrous Regiment of Women, which caused Calvin a great deal of embarrassment with Elizabeth I of England.

Because Calvin saw the earthly life as only a temporary state whose primary purpose was to serve as preparation for the next life, he regarded earthly matters and economic problems as of only secondary importance. Nevertheless, because of man's corruption work had become necessary for his survival, Calvin, therefore, praised work and condemned idleness. "Wherefore, nothing is more contrary to the order of nature, than to consume life in eating, drinking, and sleeping."21 He also regarded the other extremity of forgetting all else but work and money as just as bad. Indeed, hard work alone may be futile,"for hard work wins success only so far as God blesses our labor...for we prosper only when our hope rests wholly upon God; and moreover the outcome of our work will depend on how we pray."22

Calvin's concept of the other so-called middle class virtues was consistent with his views on industry. He approved of sobriety and frugality but he warned his
followers against extremes even in this. Similarly, he condemned vain display and feared that over-indulgence in earthly luxuries might result in continual intemperance.

Let us cultivate temperance and frugality; and let us always fear, lest a superfluity of food should impel us to luxury; lest our minds should be infected with pride on account of our wealth, and lest delicacies should tempt us to give the reins to our lucts.23

However, "God does not deal so austerely with us, not to allow us, sometimes to entertain our friends liberally; as when nuptials are to be celebrated, or when children are born to us."24

Weber and Tawney have pointed out that by practicing the virtues of industry, frugality, and sobriety it was possible for many of Calvin's followers to become rich. This surely was not Calvin's intention as he rather feared earthly riches. "Let those who have abundance remember that they are surrounded with thorns, and let them take great care not to be picked by them."25 His own recommendation seemed to be that it was better to avoid the snares of wealth. He wrote,"If quiet tranquility is an inestimable good, then we should see that our wisest course is to have a small house and to live unpretentiously within our family."26

Despite Calvin's mistrust of wealth, he was a staunch defender of the sanctity of private property. One of his chief criticisms of the Libertine party was that they like a number of the Anabaptists wished to
eliminate private property.

Let us recognize it as a just punishment of God that these fanatics come to overthrow all order, wishing to abolish all distinctions of goods, making the world like a forest of brigands where without account or payment everybody takes as his own whatever he can get. However, there are so many witnesses in Scripture to rebuke the villainous confusion, that if we were to recite them all there would be no end.27

Calvin also maintained the inviolability of oaths and contracts.

The obligation of an oath ought to be held in the greatest sacredness, so that we may not, under the pretext of error, resile from pactions, even those in which we have been deceived since the sacred name of God is more precious than the wealth of the whole world.28

Great emphasis has been placed on Calvin's active concept of vocation or calling by Weber and Tawney among others. Calvin's ideas of vocation are consistent with his concept of God's active role in human affairs.

Therefore, to prevent universal confusion being produced by our folly and temerity, he has appointed to all their particular duties in different spheres of life. And that no one might rashly transgress the limits prescribed, he has styled such spheres of life vocations or callings. Every individual's line of life, therefore is as it were, a post assigned him by the Lord....Hence also will arise peculiar consolation, since there will be no occupation so mean and sordid (provided we follow our vocation) as not to appear truly respectable, and be deemed highly important in the sight of God.29

Calvin also found that this concept of calling had been twisted by human perversity. He made this point with bitter irony when he wrote;

Let a brothel-keeper, they [the Libertines] say, ply his trade—let a thief steal boldly, for each is pursuing his vocation. If a lawyer wants to get
fees, if he helps one party oppress the other, if he crushes the good cause to favor the wrong, he is not to blame! For each must follow his vocation. If merchants destroy the world with monopolies, if they counterfeit and disguise their goods, if they perjure themselves every hour to defraud and circumvent, if they plunder and consume all they can snatch, let nobody speak! For that would blaspheme the vocation of the Lord.30

It has been said that the only difference in business ethics between J. P. Morgan and Jesse James was that James was more honest because he used a gun. Calvin centuries earlier remarked, "men steal not only when they make money by injuring others, accumulate wealth in objectionable ways, or are more concerned with their own advantage than with justice...for there is no difference between robbery by force and by fraud."31 Calvin showed great sensitivity for the welfare of those on the lower end of the economic scale.

When a rich man traffics in goods...and a poor man lives by his day's work and there is no money in his [the poor man's] pocket, he will be obliged to sell what he has at a loss. If the purchaser buys thus, knowing the poor man's necessity, it is a manifest oppression; and we ought to quote the familiar proverb, "That is putting one's foot on another's throat." It is a form of brigandage.32

Calvin was not anti-business but he was more concerned with equity than profit.

Calvin's toleration of usury when practiced with equity was a significant contribution to the growth of capitalism but one which Weber does not give much attention. Calvin was not especially happy to see money loaned at interest but since it's banishment from the earth was
impossible, he felt it necessary to concede to the common
good and allow it. He attacks squarely, and demolishes,
the Aristotelian notion that interest must not be taken
because money is barren.

How do merchants derive their profit? By their
industry, you will say. Certainly if money is shut
up in a strong-box, it will be barren—a child can
see that. But whoever asks a loan of me does not
intend to keep this money idle and gain nothing.
The profit is not in the money itself, but in the
return that comes from its use....I therefore
conclude that usury must be judged, not by any
particular passage of scripture, but simply by the
rules of equity.33

In his private correspondence, Calvin suggested to a
minister that he avoid all controversy by not engaging
in the practice of lending money for profit.34

The matter of usury was such a delicate subject
that although Calvin declared it lawful to lend money
he made the following exceptions.

(1) Interest must not be taken from the poor.
(2) One must not be so bent on gain as to neglect
the necessary offices, scorning his poor brethren.
(3) One must not go beyond the bounds of equity.
These are to be ascertained by the Golden Rule.
(4) He who borrows must make as much or more gain
from the money borrowed.
(5) We must not judge what is equitable according
to "vulgar custom" or the iniquity of the world,
but take our rule from the word of God.
(6) We must regard the transaction, not as a private
affair, but for the good of the public.
(7) One must not go beyond what the laws of the region
permit. This is not always a sufficient rule,
for they often permit what they cannot restrain.
It is better to ask to little than too much.35

As Benjamin Nelson has pointed out, much of Calvin's
thinking on usury reflects his intense concern for the
brotherhood of man.36 Indeed, much of Calvin's thought
on political and economic matters reflected his concern for the problems of social ethics. The next and concluding chapter will contain a discussion of Calvin's social ethics as they were reflected in the social legislation of Geneva.
Notes

2 Calvin, St. John 1-10, pp. 275-276.
3 McNeill, God and Duty, p. 45.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., p. 50.
6 Ibid., p. 51.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., p. 54.
9 Calvin, Commentaries on Joshua, pp. 163-164.
10 Quoted in Wallace, Calvin's Doctrine, p. 174.
12 Ibid., p. 59.
13 Ibid., p. 57.
14 Ibid.
15 Quoted in Harkness, John Calvin, p. 228.
16 McNeill, God and Duty, pp. 51-52.
18 Harkness, John Calvin, p. 229.
19 Ibid., p. 230.
20 Calvin to Bullinger, Geneva, April 28, 1554, in Bonnet, Letters, IV, 38.
21 Calvin, Genesis, I, 125.
23 Calvin, Genesis, I, 491.
24 Ibid., p. 352.
26 Ibid., p. 352.
27 Quoted in Harkness, John Calvin, p. 219.
28 Calvin, Commentaries on Joshua, pp. 142-143.
30 Ibid., p. 212.
31 Haroutunian, Commentaries, p. 330.
32 Quoted in Harkness, John Calvin, p. 215.
33 Ibid., p. 206.
34 Calvin to M. de Colonges, Geneva, January 10, 1562, in Bonnet, Letters, IV, 253.
35 Harkness, John Calvin, p. 207.
Chapter IV

The Practice of Calvin's Social Ethics

Calvin's Geneva was in actuality a theocracy. Although not directly governed by the clergy, Geneva was in theory governed by God through a balance of spiritual and secular powers, through clergy and magistrates acting in harmony.¹ The intimate association of the ecclesiastical and secular government of a community was assumed to be both natural and desirable. However, the sphere of authority given to the secular government was undoubtedly greater than the two. E. William Monter has shown that the share of the Venerable Company of Pastors in the everyday government of the republic was far less than has often been assumed.²

The locus of effective power within the Republic of Geneva was placed in the hands of the Small Council, a body of twenty-five men headed by the four chiefs of state, or syndics, and including the republic's treasurer and two secretaries. The Small Council was charged with the conduct of all foreign affairs, pronounced and executed death sentences, ran the public mint, and in short exercised all the prerogatives of sovereignty. The Small Council also served as the administrative center for Geneva. Its activities ranged from craft regulation to sanitation. It handled petitioners and dispensed justice in a large number of civil cases as well as in criminal cases, in
addition to supervising the work of a large number of ill-paid public officials.\textsuperscript{3}

Below the Small Council were the Two Hundred, who assembled at least once a month in order to vote on important legislation, to pardon convicted criminals, and to elect the members of the Small Council each February. In addition to this body, Geneva also had a medieval commune or general assembly of all male citizens which usually met twice a year. The general assembly elected the presiding judge of the civil court and fixed the price of wine in November, and elected the four syndics each January. All the magistrates in Calvin's Geneva were native born, sons of men who had purchased the rights of the bourgeoisie.\textsuperscript{4} Calvin himself was not made a Genevan bourgeois until 1559.

Justice in Geneva was administered by a Lieutenant's Court created in 1529 to handle civil justice while the Small Council had cognizance of criminal cases. Neither the Lieutenant's Court nor the Small Council was a court of last appeal. After 1541, the republic established a review court for civil cases, composed of twelve judges drawn equally from the Small Council, the Sixty, and the Two Hundred who could pardon both Genevan citizens and foreigners alike. The most famous institution of Calvin's Geneva was the Consistory.

The Genevan Consistory was composed of a dozen
laymen, chosen from the members of the Small Council or the Two Hundred presided over by a syndic, who met each week with the Company of Pastors. Calvin's church was composed of four orders; pastors, teachers, deacons, and elders. The elders as members of the Consistory were "to keep watch over every man's life, to admonish amiably those whom they see leading a disorderly life, and where necessary to make fraternal correction." Calvin regarded this body as essentially remedial rather than oppressive, as one phase in the care of souls. He felt that the activities of the Consistory should be thorough and its members chosen from all parts of the city, "so that its eyes may be everywhere."

As is the case with all human institutions, Genevan government had its problems with personnel. In 1547, Calvin wrote of his colleagues,

The whole council is in a state of groundless agitation. I see no one of the whole number in whom I can put confidence. I certainly observe no one here who can be said to be judicious. They show no boldness in a good and praiseworthy cause. So childish are they all, that they are frightened by the silly shake of a head, while a man of no consequence displays his insanity. I do not defend my cause under the form of a public one, carried on in my absence. If I desist in prosecuting it, the whole Consistory will of necessity go to ruin.

Problems arose even with the morality of certain ministers as one of them, Jean Ferron, was summoned before the Consistory and found guilty of "d'attouchemens deshonnestes" with his servant girls.
The rough structure of Genevan justice was first comprehensively organized in a code of fifty-one articles passed by the councils in the early 1540's. Calvin, who assisted in the preparation of the city's ecclesiastical and political codes during the same period, had another opportunity to utilize his legal training. Few changes were made in Geneva's customs, which were based upon the episcopal charter of 1387. Calvin made no attempt to increase the punishments prescribed by canon law or Genevan traditions. His intention was to make the punishments less severe, while weeding out impractical features, attempting to ensure that all men were equal before the law, and that the laws were actually enforced. Calvin's code lasted twenty-five years and served as the base for the comprehensive Genevan law code of 1568.

The enforcement of law in Geneva remains something of a mystery as the city had no actual police force. As in a totalitarian state, every man was encouraged to report his neighbor's unorthodox behavior. Indeed, municipal law required all inn and hotel keepers to report any significant news they heard their guests discussing. Fines and revocations of licence faced violators. The elders helped enforce ecclesiastical discipline by visiting every family in their ward at least once in each year and conducting inquiries into the moral conduct of those visited. For the most part, Genevan authorities were able to rely on the public
fears of "scandals" to ensure that most of the laws were kept most of the time.\textsuperscript{11}

One of the most redeeming features of Genevan legal practices was the fairness and impartiality with which they were conducted. Even Michael Servetus, when asked if he wished to be tried elsewhere, begged that he might be judged in Geneva.\textsuperscript{12} Calvin's concern for brotherhood seems to have influenced his demand for the equality of all men before the law. In maintaining this position, he wrote to an influential Genevan,

But I wish you to consider, that we cannot enjoy weight for weight with an unequal balance; and if impartiality must be observed in the administration of human law, any departure from it cannot be tolerated in the Church of God. You yourself either know, or at least ought to know, what I am; that, at all events, I am one to whom the law of my Heavenly Master is so dear, that the cause of no man on earth will induce me to flinch from maintaining it with a pure conscience.\textsuperscript{13}

The impartiality of Genevan justice can be seen in the conviction and sentencing in March 1546, of Ambland Corne, who was then president of the Consistory.\textsuperscript{14}

It would appear that many other features of Genevan legislation and governmental practices reflected concepts which were in agreement with Calvin's ethical concerns. For example, market wares were inspected and anything bad or rotten was thrown into the Rhone. Unscrupulous business practices such as the charging of exorbitant prices were severely dealt with. In the Ordinances for the Supervision of Churches in the
Genevan countryside of 1547 which was approved by Calvin, no one was allowed to lend at interest or for a profit greater than five per cent, on pain of confiscation of the capital sum. To prevent children from falling over windows, an order was issued that a solid ballustrade or secure railing as high as the breast must be provided. Even the humane and proper care of infants was considered by Genevan legislation.

Calvin's concern for the welfare of the poor resulted in legislation which has been termed Calvin's Christian socialism. On December 29, 1544, it was proposed that silk manufacturing be established to relieve the distress of the indigent. Calvin also supported a type of socialized medicine and Geneva built a hospital for the indigent sick. In 1536, the councils fixed the prices of bread, wine, and meat. In 1543, Calvin and the pastors ordered collections to be taken for the needy for a period of several weeks and in the following year the Small Council voted funds for the maintenance of the poor. Because of these measures "begging could now be absolutely forbidden, any foreigner found practicising it being promptly expelled."

Unfortunately, not all of the republic's legislation was as enlightened as the measures for the welfare of the more vulnerable sections of Genevan society. Some of Geneva's legislation can be described as petty and grand-
motherly in nature. A. Mitchell Hunter provides the following examples:

It was forbidden to have too many dishes at dinner and to wear apparel cut in certain ways or made of forbidden stuffs; also to adorn one's person with jewellery. Girls of the poorer classes must not wear red. Men must not wear their hair long. Novel-reading, too, and swearing even at animals were prohibited. Card-players were exposed in the pillory with the cards hanging round their necks. A woman was publicly whipped for singing a worldly song to a psalm tune. Only a certain number of guests might be invited to a marriage, for poor people not more than ten, for rich no more than twenty, while the noblest were allowed thirty.19

Even the choice of proper names for children at baptism was subject to regulation as names which pertained to God and Jesus Christ, which mocked religion or sounded absurd, and even certain abbreviations were forbidden.20 Calvin even had a dispute with the Libertines over the controversial matter of slashed breeches.

Many of Geneva's judicial cases involved religion and the worst crimes seemed to be those involving blasphemy. There were cases involving Genevans who could only pray or say a credo in Latin, who still asked the Virgin Mary to forgive their sins, or who kept altars with images. Offenders included a widow who said requiescat in pace on her husband's grave, a goldsmith who tonsured a priest, a man who owned a copy of Amadis of Gaul, somebody who said the Pope was a fine man, and a woman who drank from a sacred spring near Geneva.21 The penalties imposed frequently involved humiliating acts of penance such as kissing the ground after blasphemy which were
modeled on those used by Christians of the second and third centuries. One of the worst cases in the Genevan records was the case in 1549 of Roux Monet who "was tortured and beheaded for his braggadocio about having the favors of four magistrates' wives and for carrying around a book filled with obscene pictures which he called his 'Gospel.'"\textsuperscript{22}

The provisions drawn up for the outlying villages are a useful source for reflecting Genevan opinion on certain social problems. In dealing with drunkenness, the ordinances provided that,

(1) There is to be no treating of one another to drinks, under penalty of three sous.
(2) The taverns are to be closed during Service, under penalty that the taverner pay three sous and everyone entering them the same.
(3) If anyone be found drunk, he is to pay for the first time three sous and be brought before the Consistory; the second time he must pay the sum of five sous; and the third ten sous and be put in prison.
(4) There are to be no carousals, under penalty of ten sous.\textsuperscript{23}

As for songs and dances,

If anyone sings songs that are unworthy, dissolute or outrageous, or spin wildly round in the dance, or the like, he is to be imprisoned for three days, and then sent on to the Consistory.\textsuperscript{24}

Brawling was to be punished according to the needs of the case.\textsuperscript{25}

In keeping with Calvin's concern for the family, marriage and divorce were carefully regulated in Geneva. Young men under the age of twenty and girls under eighteen were not to marry without parental consent. When
the proper ages had been reached, the permission of the parents was considered desirable but not obligatory. No one was to be forced to marry against his will by either parents or guardians. The marriage promise could be rescinded for people of legal age if the girl was taken to be a virgin and was not, or if either party had contracted a contagious and incurable disease. If it was discovered that any person had encouraged young people into the folly of a thoughtless marriage, his punishment was to be three days in prison on bread and water and to be forced "de crier mercy devant la Justice à ceux à qui il attouchera." A marriage could be declared null if the woman complained that her husband was malformed or in any way rendered incapable of having relations with his wife, and if upon examination or confession, this was proven to be true. If the woman were at fault in this respect, and refused to have it remedied, the marriage could be annulled. The ordinances were quite humane in their concern for the problem of wife beating. They provided that if a husband made a practice of beating and tormenting his wife, he might be called before the Council to explain his actions and forbidden to beat his wife with the threat of sure punishment. Women's rights were equal to men's with respect to matters of divorce. Adultery was regarded as sufficient grounds for granting a divorce in order that the innocent party might remarry.
However, it was forbidden for anyone who had committed adultery with another man's wife to then take her in marriage, because of the scandals and dangers of rewarding concupiscence.\textsuperscript{31}

Considering the extremity of Calvin's views on adultery and fornication, the penalties imposed by Genevan legislation are comparatively mild. If those who are caught in fornication are un-married, they are to be imprisoned for six days on bread and water, and pay sixty sous amends. If it is a case of adultery, the penalty is nine days imprisonment and a fine at the discretion of the officials. Those who are betrothed must not co-habit until the marriage is celebrated in the church, otherwise they will be punished as for fornication.\textsuperscript{32} On November 15, 1556, an attempt by Calvin to have an ordinance passed imposing stiffer punishments for blasphemy and adultery was defeated.\textsuperscript{33} However, for the most part Calvin's ideas concerning marriage seem to have been effectively incorporated into Genevan legislation.

In making an evaluation of Genevan justice and legal practices, it is well to keep in mind the contemporary standards prevailing in sixteenth-century European societies. Those wishing to illustrate the unbelievable severity of her justice point to a five-year span in which fifty-eight people were executed and seventy-six were banished. Yet all crimes for which
capital sentences were pronounced were also punishable by death in the famous *Constitutio Criminalis Carolina* promulgated earlier in the reign of Charles V by the Diet of Regensberg in 1532. Thirty-eight of Geneva's executions were for witchcraft or for spreading the plague which the *Carolina* punished with hideous torture and executions. Among those banished, twenty-seven were tainted with sorcery or with spreading the plague, and fifty-three were foreigners; banishing foreigners was common practice for most European governments in the age.\textsuperscript{34}

Contrary to legend, no one was ever executed in Geneva for blasphemy or for disobedience to his parents even though the laws of Charles V did permit capital punishment for certain forms of blasphemy. Excluding the sixty-seven rural subjects put to death for malign sorcery, the total number of recorded executions in Calvin's Geneva amounted to eighty-nine for sixteen years.\textsuperscript{35} Geneva executed nobody for reasons which sixteenth-century Imperial law would have considered unusual.

Calvin like many of his contemporaries shared the belief in witchcraft, evil spirits, and the necessity of torture in judicial proceedings. He declared that, "God would condemn to capital punishment all augurs, magicians, and consulters with familiar spirits, and necromancers and followers of magic arts, as well as
enchanters." The reformer also believed in the use of torture. "I am persuaded that it is not without the special will of God that, apart from any verdict of the judges, the criminals have endured protracted torment at the hands of the executioners," wrote Calvin in 1555.  

Geneva was struck with the plague intermittently throughout the years between 1542 and 1545. Calvin had previously lost several close friends to a plague which struck Strasbourg during his tenure there. The end of the plague in Geneva was followed by a large-scale witch hunt. There were forty victims in all. First it was the plague spreaders, then the sorcerers who were uncovered. There was the usual ghastly process of torture, and confessions of poisoning cattle and Witches' Sabbaths. A few unfortunate servants, the barber-surgeon, and a grave digger employed at the plague hospital were among those arrested. Calvin, although not sharing the panic of many of his fellow Genevans, nevertheless, concurred with the burning of the plague spreaders.

The trial and execution of Michael Servetus in 1553 has remained the most famous blemish on Calvin's record in Geneva. The law under which Servetus had first been imprisoned was that of the Holy Roman Empire; the law by which he was finally condemned was that of the Justinian Code which prescribes the death penalty for two ecclesiastical offenses: the denial of the Trinity
and the repetition of baptism. Murmurs of criticism so speedily reached Calvin that, in 1554, he issued his Defense of the Orthodox Trinity Against the Errors of Michael Servetus. However, most public opinion of the age was in favor of the execution. Philip Melancthon wrote Calvin,

I have read the writing in which you have refuted the detestable blasphemies of Servetus, and I return thanks to the Son of God who was the arbiter of your combat. To you also the church owes, and will in the future owe, gratitude. I am in entire agreement with your judgment. I affirm also that your Magistracy has acted justly in putting this blasphemer to death after a regular trial.

Even the usually mild Martin Bucer had declared from the pulpit that Servetus was "worthy of having his bowels pulled out, and torn to pieces." Even the usually mild Martin Bucer had declared from the pulpit that Servetus was "worthy of having his bowels pulled out, and torn to pieces."

Indeed, Calvin was chastised by Farel for desiring to mitigate Servetus's punishment by replacing burning with the chopping block. The Swiss churches expressed approval over the sentencing of Servetus. Berne later beheaded the famous anti-Trinitarian, Gentilis, in 1566 and Zurich had been drowning Anabaptists since the 1520's. In judging the practices of the sixteenth century, it is well to refer to the remarks of Roland Bainton.

Today any of us would be the first to cast a stone against Calvin's intolerance; and seldom do we reflect that we who are aghast at the burning of one man to ashes for religion do not hesitate for the preservation of our culture to reduce whole cities to cinders.
Notes

1 Monter, Geneva, p. 144.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p. 145.

4 Ibid., p. 146.

5 Ibid., p. 137.

6 Ibid.

7 Calvin to Viret, Geneva, March 27, 1547, in Bonnet, Letters, II, 92-93.


10 Kingdon, Coming of the Wars, p. 43.


13 Calvin to Ami Perrin, Geneva, April 1546, in Bonnet, Letters, II, 42-43.

14 Harkness, John Calvin, p. 34.


18 Hunter, The Teaching of Calvin, p. 257.

19 Ibid., p. 261.

20 Registres, I, 29.


22 Ibid., p. 80.
23 Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, pp. 81-82.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.


27 Ibid., p. 32.

28 Ibid., p. 30.

29 Ibid., p. 34.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Calvin, *Theological Treatises*, p. 82.

33 *Registres*, II, 69.


35 Ibid.


37 Quoted in Hunter, *The Teaching of Calvin*, pp. 269-270.


43 Farel to Calvin, September 8, 1553, Ibid., 399.

44 Monter, *Geneva*, p. 84.

Conclusion

John Calvin has seldom been considered as a great social and ethical thinker. Although a humanist, Calvin differed from many humanists in denying the essential dignity of man and in stressing theology rather than ethics and philosophy. He used the humanist tools of scholarship but his central concern was with God not man. Nevertheless, Calvin did have definite ideas about the proper conduct of human affairs. His ideas flowed naturally out of his intellectual and personal background but above all else from his concept of God and God’s purpose for human life.

Calvin regarded marriage and the family as the basis of human society. He, therefore, stressed the necessity of chastity before marriage and fidelity within marriage. He felt man was to live in accordance with the laws of nature and nature’s God. In so doing, it is necessary to observe the principles of brotherhood and moderation. Calvin was at his best when expressing concern for the more vulnerable segments of society. He stressed the necessity of equity in all economic matters. In politics, he emphasized the duties of citizenship and obedience to man’s law if not in conflict with God’s.

The weaknesses and inconsistencies in Calvin’s social thought are mirrored in the limitations of his
experience and understanding and the limitations of the knowledge and understanding inherent in the sixteenth century. He shared many of the assumptions of his age about the necessity of judicial severity, torture, the public use of violence, and the efficacy of sumptuary legislation. His inconsistencies were a necessary result of his belief in his own absolute understanding of God's will and the nature of good and evil. Calvin saw man as essentially sinful and therefore he stressed the need for discipline. At times Calvin's discipline became excessive severity in practice.

Calvin was a brilliant man who lived a difficult life in a difficult age. It is certain that Calvin was neither a hypocrite nor a liar. He practiced as he preached and urged others to do likewise. The virtues and defects of Calvin's social thought are reflected in Genevan legislation. Calvin had the quality of certainty which so many men in the twentieth century lack. Calvin's certainty resulted in the burning of Servetus but it also contributed to the humaneness of the Genevan welfare laws.
Bibliography

A. Primary Accounts


B. Biographies


C. General Accounts


