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*Calvin's Political Theology and the Public Engagement of the Church: Christ's Two Kingdoms.*

By Matthew J. Tuininga. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. Pp. 402. \$41.99

(paper). ISBN: 9781316622346.

This volume is sharp, engaging, and was a pleasure to read. It represents a welcome study of an important aspect of John Calvin's thought. It began life as Matthew Tuininga's PhD dissertation (which this reviewer tried to obtain a copy of but was unfortunately unable to). Tuininga is an extremely bright scholar from whom we are surely going to hear more, which is very good news. This is an exceptionally thoughtful piece of work and very well written.

In terms of working out Calvin's logic in relation to the two kingdoms and his application of them to various arenas of his thought, Tuininga does an exceptional job. He does fine work in articulating the eschatological character of Calvin's understanding of the kingdom of God. He includes discussion on Calvin's terminology, issuing an astute warning that Calvin's use of terminology is subject to misinterpretation if read too rigidly. Tuininga has plainly reflected very deeply on Calvin's thinking on the two kingdoms. He has also read an enormous amount of Calvin and exhibits a deep knowledge of the reformer's writings.

While additional praise could be heaped on this volume, I will spend the remainder of this review commenting critically on some aspects of the study. My comments are, to some degree, predicated on the conviction that this study simply could have been stronger; the thoughts offered below are intended to demonstrate how. That said, some of my criticisms do reflect genuine problems I see with this (nonetheless) fine study.

Tuininga states his premise early on and does not waver from it: Calvin's "political theology should be an important source of guidance for Christians as they participate in the

politics of contemporary pluralistic liberal democracies” (1). What follows is an analysis that seeks to ensure this premise is established. Tuininga raises the specter of Whig historiography and warns that the “danger of any study that seeks the contemporary relevance of a theologian such as Calvin is that we find in the reformer those things we want to find” (20). As good as this volume is, proposing this as its premise is a red rag to a bull. No matter how good an historian is, she or he ought, in this reviewer’s judgment, to focus on the work of history *simpliciter*. This seems to me to be particularly true when discussing political themes. The temptation to alter one’s research is just too great. The historian “can only make truth claims about the world that they attempt to reconstruct in their investigations.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, when we come to chapter nine of *Calvin’s Political Theology and the Public Engagement of the Church* and read in relation to contemporary application that Tuininga’s findings “leave open the possibility that . . .” (321), this reviewer feels unease.

In line with this premise, Tuininga introduces a distinction. On page 3, he distinguishes between political theology and practical politics. The latter refers to “practical actions and commitments, such as [Calvin’s] support for the capital punishment of Servetus” that “were not derived from his theology” (3). The former refers to his “theological and ethical account of human life and society,” with its implications for church, government, and the like (3). Elaborating, Tuininga explains that Calvin’s practical politics reflect his particular time and place. They represent his application of natural law, *lex gentium*, and pagan philosophy. While interesting, the distinction raises questions. Is Tuininga suggesting that Calvin’s theology does

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Muller, “Historiography in the Service of Theology and Worship: Toward Dialogue with John Frame,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 59, no. 2 (1997): 301–10, at 306.

*not* reflect his unique historical context? If so, how—that is, out of what mind—did Calvin produce it? Out of a mind that had not been shaped by his unique historical context? The questions along this line of thought carry on almost endlessly. Also, as mentioned, Tuininga asserts, “most of Calvin’s practical political judgments were not derived from his theology” (3). Again, it is difficult for this reviewer to understand how Calvin’s theological beliefs could *not* have informed his political judgments in at least some ways.

It is also worth noting that Tuininga’s handling of the chronology of Calvin’s political theology is weak. In chapter 8, “The Magistrate’s Care of Religion,” on page 314, Tuininga discusses Calvin’s thinking on the prince (i.e. civil authorities) and priests, which the reformer argues were appointed by the Lord to serve as “two eyes” which govern “the body.” He explains that Calvin introduced this as a “new metaphor,” which he employed “in his lectures on the prophets” and which he had “no trouble synthesizing” with his two kingdoms doctrine. I have three concerns regarding this characterization. First, Calvin did *not* introduce this metaphor in his *praelectiones* on the prophets, which he did not begin until late 1555 or early 1556. The citations from Calvin on page 314 focus on material published in 1559 and 1563, giving the impression (whether intentionally or not) that this was a very late addition on Calvin’s part. In fact, Calvin discussed this metaphor in his sermons on Micah, which he began in 1550. Thus, this metaphor should have been discussed in chapter 6, “Christ’s Political Government: Early Formulations,” which covers material up to and including 1552. Second, Tuininga’s treatment of this metaphor does not acknowledge that Calvin employed it quite frequently. Thus, to refer to it as something that Calvin had no trouble synthesizing with his two kingdoms doctrine seems to ascribe less significance to this metaphor than it deserves. In fact, the idea that this was something Calvin felt compelled to “synthesize” with his two kingdoms doctrine suggests an odd kind of encounter—

as if Calvin had stumbled upon the metaphor only after his two kingdoms doctrine had been formulated and felt himself in the position of needing to decide how he should grapple with his discovery. Third, the presence of the metaphor in Calvin's sermons would seem to erase any doubt one might have entertained as to whether Calvin believed this metaphor carries on in perpetuity: to him, it plainly did.

All of this raises some concerns. It would appear that Tuininga did not know quite how to handle the metaphor. His treatment of it, particularly his placement of it in chapter 8, seem odd to this reviewer. But additionally, it would appear, at the very least, that Tuininga could have wrestled more successfully with the question of balance: to what extent did Calvin focus on the body politic as a single entity and to what extent on the church and the civil government as separate entities with different (though related) functions? It is, to be sure, an extremely difficult question and open to different interpretations. It is also, however, a question of profound importance for anyone addressing Calvin's political theology.

Another tricky problem relates to how to characterize Calvin's understanding of the political realm. To explore this, I note that Tuininga writes that Calvin articulated a sharper distinction between church and political society than did the papacy and other magisterial reformers. Elaborating, he explains: "[Calvin] conceived of politics not as a means of transforming society into the kingdom of God according to the dictates of Christian scripture, but as an endeavor to secure temporal order and civil righteousness in accord with reason, natural law, and the virtues of charity and prudence" (1). Calvin himself, however, in one of his discussions of the "two eyes" analogy in his sermons on Micah, explains, "The office of the magistracy is to maintain the honor of God, to use the sword that has been put into its hands in such a way that God is honored and worshipped as God should be, so to maintain integrity and

equity among all that no one's rights are denied, or anyone is caused harm, and to put an end to corruption and scandal."<sup>2</sup> While the assertions by Tuininga and by Calvin are not contradictory, the differences between them raise interesting questions, even when Tuininga's warning about Calvin's use of terminology is taken into account. Particularly intriguing here is Tuininga's emphasis (as seen in the first of the two quoted assertions) on reason, natural law and the virtues *rather than* on the scriptures—an emphasis which is potentially challenged by the quote from Calvin's sermons on Micah.

To push this challenge a bit further, consider the Genevan consistory and the *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*. The consistory, a religio-political body that served as a morals court, had a massive impact on daily life in the city. (In this regard, I take issue with Tuininga's characterization of it. On page 72, he states, "Although historians used to portray the Consistory as harsh, invasive, and even tyrannical, Robert Kingdon and others have revised that picture." Kingdon, however, described the consistory as promoting a hatred "akin to the religious hatred that now poisons life in Israel, throughout the Middle East . . . the type of hatred that opposes part of the Moslem world to the West" and as seeking to control even the most private aspects of human life.<sup>3</sup> I would tend to side with Kingdon here). The consistory represents difficulties for anyone assessing Calvin's thought on the two kingdoms precisely because it straddled eternal-temporal, church-state divisions in ways that do not fit comfortably with clear-cut theoretical

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, sermon on Micah 3:9–10, in *Sermons on the Book of Micah*, trans. and ed.

Benjamin Wirt Farley (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2003), 169–183, at 175–76.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Kingdon, *Reforming Geneva: Discipline, Faith and Anger in Calvin's Geneva* (Geneva: Librairie Droz, 2012), 121.

distinctions. As William Naphy has noted, the consistory's religious focus was undeniable and yet "[t]he state actively and personally involved itself in the work of the Consistory."<sup>4</sup> Tuininga does treat the consistory, but only in chapter 2, page 295 (there is also a relevant section on discipline in chapter 5, pages 206–16). Much of chapter 2 is, in fact, not focused on the consistory as such but rather on Calvin's establishing of control over Geneva during the 1540s and 1550s. It is one of the least satisfying portions of the monograph. That said, the consistory does raise difficult questions related to Calvin's assessment of the political realm, a few of which I note briefly.

The consistory raises questions concerning Calvin's conception of politics and scripture and questions concerning politics and grace. On the former, Kingdon has argued explicitly that Calvin's thinking on the consistory sprung from biblical sources and a theological understanding and was designed to counter an "antinomian temptation" that Protestants were particularly liable to as evidenced by problems that appeared within Lutheranism regarding faith and works.<sup>5</sup> This view challenges Tuininga's emphasis on the role played by reason, natural law, and the virtues in regards to politics. It would have been brilliant had Tuininga interacted with such a line of thought as articulated by Kingdon and others. On the latter (politics and grace), scholars like Ralph Hancock and William Stephenson, when commenting on the political character of the

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<sup>4</sup> William Naphy, "Church and State in Calvin's Geneva," in *Calvin and the Church*, ed. David Foxgrover (Grand Rapids: CRC Product Services for the Society, 2002), 13-28, at 20.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Kingdon, "Calvin and the Establishment of Consistory Discipline in Geneva: The Institution and the Men Who Directed It," *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis* 70, no. 2 (1990): 158–72, at 158.

consistory, argued that Calvin believed government could serve in a spiritual role as a means of grace. Happily, Tuininga does devote a bit of attention to just this question on three pages (295–97). Sadly, however, these pages focus solely on book 4 of the *Institutes*. Within this material, we find the assertion “Nowhere in [Calvin’s] writings does he describe civil government as one of the ‘external means’ or ‘outward helps’ of spiritual grace” (295). But the claim is difficult to credit and would be a more persuasive one if Tuininga had tested it by dedicating more space to the consistory.

Although Tuininga interacts with a sizeable amount of secondary literature, he could have dealt with more scholarship produced outside the United States. Conspicuous by their absence are such major scholars as Olivier Millet, Max Engammare, Denis Crouzet, Bernard Roussel, Alain Dufour, Francis Higman, Alexandre Ganoczy, and Christian Grosse. Tuininga mentions almost no non-English-language scholarship. Noteworthy absences in English-language scholarship include Carlos Eire’s *War Against the Idols* and Jonathan Reid’s study on Marguerite of Navarre and her evangelical network.<sup>6</sup> While the work of pointing out research that another author has failed to mention in a study may seem captious, it is not (on this occasion) intended as such. Everyone overlooks important studies and authors when writing; it is unavoidable. However, interaction with more scholarship produced outside of the United States would have strengthened the monograph.

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<sup>6</sup> Carlos M. N. Eire, *War Against the Idols: The Reformation of Worship from Erasmus to Calvin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Jonathan A. Reid, *King’s Sister—Queen of Dissent: Marguerite of Navarre (1492–1549) and her Evangelical Network*, 2 vols. (Leiden: Brill, 2009).



Tuininga also has a somewhat frustrating habit of interacting with scholars only in footnotes and occasionally in ways that verge on dismissiveness. This manifests itself in footnotes such as one on page 351: “I am unpersuaded by Whitford’s and Skinner’s claims that Calvin took a more radical stance.” The late change in Calvin’s views on active resistance is an extremely important issue for which several other scholars, including this reviewer, have argued. Quentin Skinner and David Whitford are sufficiently reputable to deserve fuller consideration. On page 14, a footnote describes the scholarship of Willem van’t Spijker as “simplistic.” The same word is used on page 17 of a study by Nicholas Wolterstorff. Other examples could be provided in which severe verdicts are produced in footnotes without sufficient grounds being given for the severity. I must hasten to acknowledge that Tuininga may have been urged by the publisher or by a senior colleague to remove tedious analyses of other scholarly views in order to make the volume more readable. Thus, I am happy to give him the benefit of the doubt here. But in the judgment of this reviewer, the volume would have been better had it contained such analyses.

As already mentioned and despite these criticisms, I adjudge this volume to be a fine analysis of Calvin’s political thought. It exhibits an impressive knowledge of Calvin’s corpus and deep reflection on crucial issues. It is an extremely thought-provoking piece of research and a thoroughly enjoyable read. It is the work of a fine scholar and a welcome addition to the research on Calvin studies.

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