
Pro Rege

Volume 10 | Number 3

Article 10

March 1982

Analysis of the Institutes of the Christian Religion of John Calvin (Book Review)

John Van Dyk
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege

Recommended Citation

Van Dyk, John (1982) "Analysis of the Institutes of the Christian Religion of John Calvin (Book Review)," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 10: No. 3, 28 - 29.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol10/iss3/10

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

clear distinction between Christians and humanists. In his view Christian Democratic parties must seek a cultural unity, not a common religious basis. While admitting that Christian Democratic parties are losing their sense of identity, Papini hopes they will regain their distinctiveness by studying their own history.

III.

Both books demonstrate that, at the end of its existence, the Anti-Revolutionary Party favored an ecumenical synthesis which is the basis of the CDA. Runner's essay is the most important contribution in either book because he raises the fundamental question of whether one who holds to the biblical antithesis can accommodate himself to ecumenical synthesis. Raising this question makes *Christian Political Options* somewhat controversial, since the debate is still alive internationally. On the other hand, the Dutch-language volume has no tension within its covers because the

Analysis of the Institutes of the Christian Religion of John Calvin, by Ford Lewis Battles, assisted by John Walchenbach. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1980. 421 pp. Reviewed by John Van Dyk, Professor of Philosophy.

In the foreword to this book John Walchenbach tells us: "One of Ford Lewis Battles' favorite expressions, and indeed admonitions to all of us, was, 'Ad Fontes,' Back to the Sources!" If there was any one single feature that characterized the scholarship of Ford Lewis Battles, it was his astounding familiarity with patristic, medieval, and Reformation literature. I vividly recall the first time I visited Professor Battles. He was still in Pittsburgh. I had gone to see him to arrange for collaboration on a translation of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, a key theological textbook of the High Middle Ages. Battles took me into his study and showed me his work: numerous editing and translation projects, detailed catalogs of references and cross-references, outlines and analyses of dozens of writings existing only in Latin and spanning a period of more than 1500 years—the entire place was literally filled with work on source materials. Already at that time I noticed Battles' predilection for outlines, analyses, and study guides. He was, after all, not only a painstaking scholar, but also a superb teacher.

Happily for us, his love for the outline has now provided us with a remarkably helpful guide to the *Institutes* of John Calvin. The *Analysis of the Institutes* appeared within a year after Battles' untimely death. The book is essentially a point-for-point outline and summary of the *Institutes*. Battles himself instructs us concerning its use. He tells us on page 24 of the introduction:

[D]o not hesitate to place this *Analysis* beside you as you read [the *Institutes*]. For some of you who prefer to grasp the structure of the book as a whole before you plunge into it, the

decision for the CDA had been made several years earlier within Christian Democratic circles in Holland. But *Christian Political Options* is important because it encourages serious discussion about the relationship between Christian faith and public affairs in Christian colleges and seminaries in America.

Both books provide many good insights for applying one's world-view to such matters as economic stewardship and political responsibility. The progressive stance taken by the authors can help us re-evaluate our own political views in the context of the larger debate. Both books demonstrate high levels of discussion of often controversial matters by many distinguished authors. The ecumenical synthesis at the heart of the Christian Democratic Appeal is a most controversial matter with worthy defenders on both sides of the discussion. Can this synthesis be justified? Opinion is divided. Runner's gracious yet clear warning of the chasm between antithesis and synthesis must be taken seriously.

Analysis can be a help, for it faithfully sets forth the tripartite book, chapter, and section organization of the work. Each section is concisely analyzed into its salient points. The user can, of course, read the book and chapter headings for a quick survey. For a deeper perusal he can scrutinize the sectional topics; at the most detailed level he can study the subordinate categories within each section. . . . Others who wish to approach the book directly without being "briefed" by the *Analysis* may still find the *Analysis* of help. When you seem to lose your way (and we all do in a work of such length and complexity), glance at the analytical outline of what you have just read. It may highlight the points to be kept in mind. And months or years later, as you search your memory for Calvinian insights only partially remembered, this little summary may lead you painlessly to what you are seeking.

A number of features add to the value of the book. The chart on page 15 gives us a bird's-eye view of the shifts and additions in the content of the five chief editions of the *Institutes*. Additional charts and diagrams appear at various points in the book. These are designed to help us understand some of the more complex concepts and relationships in Calvin's theology. The introduction also contains an outline depicting the antithetical structure of the *Institutes*. It illustrates Calvin's technique of contrasting his own views with those he considered to be false. And finally, Battles provides us with a number of helpful hints for reading the *Institutes*.

Although the book bears a somewhat clumsy title and lacks what would considerably enhance its usefulness, namely, a complete index of subjects and topics, I nevertheless concur fully with the judgment of my colleague Dr. James De Jong who reviewed this book in the January 21, 1981, issue of *Renewal*. He says: "Reformed ministers, other serious students of Calvin, church and school libraries, and classes on the thought of Calvin will all need this important tool." Particularly so, I would add, in view of the frequency and carelessness with which the word "Reformed" is tossed about today. I suspect that many who claim to possess a measure of authoritative knowledge about the sources of the Reformed tradition have in fact never made it past Book I of the *Institutes*. Professor Battles himself knew of such people. He recognized "the Calvinist of

Patterns in History: A Christian View by D. W. Bebbington. Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1979. 188 pages, \$7.25. Reviewed by Louis Van Dyke, Professor of History.

Bebbington argues that the historical process is usually visualized as a pattern such as a wheel or a line; hence the title of his book. He defines this process as what people write about the past (historiography), and what people have done and suffered, and he attempts to delineate both themes in his book. Bebbington's thesis is that man's thoughts about mankind are shaped by the same influences that have shaped historical thought (p. x.); and he aims to examine how man's understanding of the historical process has influenced how history was written. The book presents the traditions of thought about history from ancient China to the present day, although the author concentrates on how more recent developments in Western civilization affect the English-speaking world in the twentieth century.

In separate chapters, Bebbington traces the development of such patterns as the cyclical view, the linear view, the idea of progress, the historicist reaction to the idea of progress, and Marxism as a theory of history. According to Bebbington each of these views is involved in some way with the on-going (and everlasting) argument between the positivists and the idealists. In lucid prose, Bebbington takes each school of thought, examines its roots, gives an assessment of it, and reviews the historiography of that particular school.

Perhaps the most interesting part of the book is the author's analysis of historians' notions of progress and of historicism. The idea of progress, arising from Eighteenth Century rationalism, argues that events move according to natural laws and that therefore history can be studied as a science. Historicism, coming out of the Romantic reaction to rationalism, claims that all cultures are shaped by history and that the customs and beliefs of any group result from that group's historical experience. Thus no generalization about the process of history can be made. The view of progress is epitomized in Comptian positivism, while historicism is epitomized in Kantian idealism. Bebbington asserts that

the first five chapters of the first book." As he says on page 23 of the introduction, "I can generally tell, when people speak of Calvin whether they know him only by hearsay, have read a few pages, or have sampled him anthologically. They have no clue to the wonderful interconnectedness of Calvin's thought. They ask questions which a fuller reading of the *Institutes* could have answered."

We do well to spend time with the history of the Reformed tradition—indeed, with the history of the Church of all ages. The *Analysis of the Institutes* will make it much easier for us to delve into the richness of Calvin's thought. By the same token, the existence of this book will make it considerably more difficult to excuse ignorance of the roots of our Reformed heritage.

both of these approaches are secularized views of Christian belief and that the only way that they can be reconciled is for historians to return to the Christian overview from which they sprang. Thus the true historian is the Christian who through his Christianity provides the proper synthesis by writing from what Bebbington calls a "providential framework" of history. The Christian recognizes that God has control over all of human history (progress) and at the same time realizes that men are responsible for their actions (historicism).

Of the many quotable passages in *Patterns in History*, perhaps the following could serve as a warning for us all:

The consequences for a Christian outlook on history are serious. If a Christian historian tries to write without a thought for providence, he is likely to succumb to some alternative view or blend of views that happens to be in fashion. He will probably grow accustomed to the current assumptions of the academic world, positivist, historicist, Marxist or whatever. His Christian understanding of history will decay. It is far better to make no attempt to compartmentalize. Faith and history should be brought together, not separated out. (p. 186)

This is a well-written book which will serve as an excellent introduction to the study of history for the undergraduate. Furthermore, the author's contention that Christianity provides the synthesis of positivism and idealism serves as food for thought. One wishes that Bebbington had spent time elucidating his own views on this topic since it may hold the key to fruitful discussion on just what it is that Christian historians do. One drawback is that the book does not treat North American historiography and one will have to look elsewhere for adequate treatment of that subject.