

THE STARTING POINT OF CALVIN'S THEOLOGY by George H. Tavard *Wm B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids/Cambridge, 2000. Pp ix + 199, £12.99 pbk.*

At the very beginning of Calvin's theological career, at around the time of the placards affair of October 1534, he was asked by admirers to write a short work defending the doctrine of the immortality of the soul against attacks from sections of the Radical Reformation, notably the Anabaptists. Rife among these was the belief that the soul either dies with the body, to be raised again alongside it at the Resurrection, or else that it sleeps for the intervening period. Calvin duly produced his first work – though only the second to be published – the *Psychopannychia*, a work much neglected among scholars of the Continental Reformation, even among Calvin specialists, yet in Tavard's view not only a formative work in the development of Calvin's thought, but one that offers an indispensable insight into the theology both of Calvin and of Calvinism. Tavard goes so far as to claim that a reading of Calvin that begins with the *Psychopannychia* could give some much-needed impetus to the dialogue between the Catholic and the Calvinist traditions.

Tavard's work begins with an outline of the background to the *Psychopannychia*, first in relation to Calvin's own early biography, and secondly in terms of the Renaissance humanist and late-scholastic debates about the nature of the soul; of the whole book it is this second chapter which for many readers will prove to be of most interest. It outlines engagingly the impact of the rediscovery of Plato's anthropology during the Renaissance upon the topic of the immortality and nature of the human soul, an issue which appears to have been highly fashionable among Italian scholars in particular, each vying to produce a more convincing, more polished *De Anima* than the last. Tavard shows how tendencies in this area reflect broader movements in both the content and the method of philosophy in this period, and it is perhaps unfortunate that he does not allow himself the scope to explore further the place of Calvin in the complex relationship between the vibrant humanism of his day and the scholasticism that was steadily losing its grip on theology. For many scholars, Calvin's theology – as distinct from the later theology of Calvinism – is a curious hybrid of Bonaventurian scholasticism and humanism, even as it also reacted against both, and Tavard might have taken the opportunity to explore whether Calvin's earliest work upholds that interpretation.

Tavard's purpose, however, is rather different, since rather than engage in a critical analysis of Calvin's thought, he takes the *Institutes*, Calvin's *summa theologiae*, as a normative theology against which to measure the *Psychopannychia*. He moves on quickly, then, to give an outline of this work, of considerable intrinsic value to the Calvin scholar if only because Tavard's is the only outline of the *Psychopannychia* in English. Inevitably, unless one has the time and energy to read Calvin's work in the original Latin or its early French translation, one is obliged to rely on Tavard's picture, but it is a clear and convincing one. It falls, as did many contemporary scholastic texts, into two parts, beginning with an outline of

the true doctrine of the immortality of the soul, and concluding with a somewhat polemical demolition of the arguments of his opponents. Whether Calvin was entirely just in his portrayal of the Anabaptists' position is doubtful, since in truth their arguments as he relates them seem somewhat feeble; one may suspect that for Calvin this work's principal purpose was less an impassioned defence of the orthodox doctrine, for all its polemic, than a humanist *habilitationsschrift*, a possibility at which Tavad himself hints.

Certainly what is intriguing about the *Psychopannychia* is not so much its specific arguments in favour of the immortality of the soul and against the Anabaptists as its view of the role of the soul in religion: for Calvin, true religion simply is the journey of the soul to God, and Tavad traces in this position a line from Augustine to Calvin via Bonaventure, and pointing beyond Calvin to John of the Cross. The soul is seen as the *locus* of the relationship between God and the human person, and the real value for understanding Calvin of studying the *Psychopannychia* is in discovering that this strong primacy of the soul over the body, with the strong anthropological dualism that is thereby implied, is a theological presupposition that does indeed run through Calvin's later theology, as Tavad goes on to demonstrate in his later chapters. It is beyond question that for Catholics to grasp this is essential if there is to be fruitful ecumenical dialogue with the Reformed tradition; but if there is a flaw in Tavad's clear and enormously helpful exposition of the background and later significance of Calvin's *Psychopannychia* it is that Tavad is unwilling to question this presupposition. The ecumenical endeavour will ultimately benefit greatly if it is admitted on both sides that in this respect the Catholic understanding of the human person, and so of religion, is often subtly but importantly different.

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CHRISTIAN ETHICS: A HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION by J. Philip Wogaman, and **READINGS IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS: A HISTORICAL SOURCEBOOK**, ed. by J. Philip Wogaman and Douglas M. Strong *Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, 2000. Vol I, Pp.xi + 340, vol II, Pp. xi + 388, £14.99 each pbk.*

J. Philip Wogaman, formerly of Wesley Theological Seminary, has produced a stimulating introduction to the history of Christian ethics, which contains a wealth of information in one convenient volume. The book, published first in 1993, has been reissued. A brief history of this kind, as Wogaman notes, cannot be encyclopedic but must be dependable and interesting. It is clear, concise, and succeeds in introducing the student to a vast field in a methodical and carefully balanced manner.

In Part I the author provides a simple but effective approach to the ethical dimension of scripture, by way of a discussion of six pairs of apparently conflicting concepts that have given rise to much of the debate surrounding the ethical interpretation of both New and Old Testaments. These pairs of concepts are revelation and reason, materialism and the life of the Spirit, universalism and group identity, grace and law, love and force, status and equality. There follows a brief review of some of the major