

# Subita Conversio

The Conversion of John Calvin

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## *I. The Anatomy of the Soul*

Martin Luther characterized Erasmus of Rotterdam as an eel; in the modern language of road signs this means a man <with soft shoulders>, who is <slippery when wet>. The reformer of Wittenberg is most certainly not an objective judge; later scholarship, however, documents the degree of difficulty in penetrating the inner domain of Erasmus the man.

Yet, as compared with the Genevan reformer John Calvin, forty years his junior, Erasmus seems truly an open book. Even if we had at our disposal some record of Calvin's table talk, which proves to be such a rich source for grasping Luther's personality, it would by no means be certain that we would be able to catch even so much as a glimpse of Calvin's inner life. Throughout he remained true to the principle of reticence expressed in his answer to Cardinal Sadolet (1539): «De me non libenter loquor»<sup>1</sup>. This does not mean that his screen of reticence is impenetrable. But in his extensive psychological analyses of Moses, Abraham, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Job, and the Apostle Paul, to mention only his most nuanced and elaborate psychographs of key biblical figures, Calvin concentrates on common characteristics of the human condition rather than on uniquely individual traits. Moreover, Calvin is able to identify with so broad a spectrum of biblical characters and personalities that the crude principle of projection necessarily leads to uncontrolled conclusions.

The most promising method in each of these cases is to highlight so-called exegetical comments for which there is no explicit basis in the biblical text concerned. Yet more often than not, as soon as the observant reader has identified such a revealing interpolation, Calvin opens the following clause with the expression <as we all know> (scimus), thus alerting the reader to the fact that he believes he is drawing here on a wider knowledge and experience shared by all auditors and readers. The standing medieval expression <experientia docet>, which Renaissance humanists took over with new gusto, reminds us that there was a time when experience was not yet individualized but still referred to the common historical record. This is not to deny that there are other windows that open onto private

<sup>1</sup> Responsio ad Sadoleti Epistolam (1539), OS 1, 460, 42. OS 1: Joannis Calvini Opera Selecta, vol. I, ed. P. Barth, Munich 1926, reprint 1963. To assist the reader I have added line numbers to the pages when citing OS 1; for all CO references a page division in three parts, A, B, and C, has been provided.

convictions. The newly spreading formula <nisi fallor><sup>2</sup> is not to be understood as a confession of ignorance or unreliable memory<sup>3</sup> but as an indication of the emerging ego on the crucial threshold between medieval and early modern individuality. It is the forerunner of the firm intellectual claim hidden in the phrase: «I am inclined to believe ...». But unless explicitly documented<sup>4</sup>, the mere appeal to experience does not necessarily reveal Calvin's own stance in the matter.

A further obstacle is to be found in Calvin's overriding interest in establishing group characteristics, which either divide mankind into the two parts of the elect and the reprobate or, more often, into three parts, by counting among the reprobate – often indiscernible from the *impii*, *les méchants* – both the misdirected believers, particularly those in the papacy, and the forerunners of modern atheism who no longer take the existence of God seriously. Whenever Calvin lists the characteristics of these two or three groups it is even less likely that we will find access to his own unique psychology, revealing his own psyche.

When not concerned with the distinctive features of these groups Calvin sets out to sketch the turbulent conglomeration of sentiments, fears, hopes, and frustrations of mankind in general. This map of the soul documents his gifts of incisive observation; but again, it does not necessarily reflect individual self-analysis. A case in point is his interpretation of the Book of Psalms (1557) which he designated as «the Anatomy of all parts of the soul»<sup>5</sup>. A comprehensive list of the emotional forces which batter the human soul is drawn up in order to allow for a thorough self-examination and to provide a blueprint to uncover the hypocrisy of hidden drives. After all, such self-knowledge feeds the hunger for the promises of God and leads to the boldness of speaking directly to God in personal and private prayer. The boldness (*hardiesse*) with which the believer should speak to God is highlighted by the foil of shame (*pudor*) which prevents Calvin from opening up and confiding to anyone else<sup>6</sup> – a factor to be remembered if one wants to under-

<sup>2</sup> Cf. CO 31, 425 C, Ps. 42,1; cf. 466 A, Ps. 47, Argumentum.

<sup>3</sup> *Robert Stupperich* finds herein the acknowledgement of what may be called «Gedächtnisschwäche». See *Robert Stupperich*, *Erasmus von Rotterdam und seine Welt*, Berlin 1977, (de Gruyter Studienbuch), p. 36.

<sup>4</sup> See the formulation documented in note 37.

<sup>5</sup> CO 31, 15 C, Com. Ps., Preface. For the history of Calvin's study of the Psalms and for the present state of scholarship see *Wulfert de Greef*, *Calvijn en het Oude Testament*, Amsterdam 1984, pp. 22-24; *Thomas Henry Louis Parker*, *Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries*, Edinburgh 1986, pp. 202-205.

<sup>6</sup> The Book of Psalms not only displays the great privilege of free access to God, but also shows that it is perfectly legitimate to place before God one's «infirmities», which shame prevents one from owning up to others: «... ut infirmitates, quas pudor hominibus fateri prohibet, fas ac [CO: as] liberum sit coram eo explicare», CO 31, 17 C. In his deathbed speech to the Petit Conseil (27 April 1564) Calvin seems to have changed his mind: here he asks forgiveness for his «weaknesses» (*infirmités*) which he does not want to deny «since what God and the angels know he is not ashamed to confess before man» (*il n'a pas honte de les confesser devant les hommes*); CO 9, 890 B. This confession is not repeated in his last recorded words spoken the next day to his colleagues in the ministry, CO 9, 891-894. I hesitate to assume a shift on such a central point in the

stand Calvin's passionate critique of auricular confession. At least part of Calvin's reticence about himself is that his threshold of shame, his <Schamgrenze> is strikingly low: to appear naked is throughout his works a situation of extreme horror.

However, the overriding reason why it is so hazardous to analyze Calvin's psyche is precisely the fact that both his teaching and his preaching are programmatically directed at awareness and mental health. Therefore psychological observations cannot be interpreted as revealing slips of the pen: they are part and parcel of a consciously and consistently developed theological program. The <cognitio nostri> of the opening chapter of the *Institutio* (I.1.1) does not refer primarily to a series of doctrinal <truths> about the fallen state of man, but stands for the emotionally complex self-analysis which lifts the lid or cover of the soul, allowing for the discovery of the underlying abyss of drives and frustrated longings. The <cognitio dei> is not merely the intellectual attainment (*notitia fidei*) of revealed truth about God<sup>7</sup>, but the awakening of longings (*affectus*) which enable the thoughts and meditations to soar high to get a <taste> (*gustus*) of the mysteries of God, even though they will never succeed «*ultra tenuem gustum conscendere*»<sup>8</sup>.

Here it must suffice to say that the long-acknowledged, basic theme of the <secret operation of the Holy Spirit> is not sufficiently grasped unless it is seen that the Spirit as the divine therapist has access to the inner stirrings of the human soul, undermining its resistance and renewing it by lending it both appetite and taste. What the *Institutio* shows only implicitly, the commentaries document too clearly to overlook, namely that Calvin's theology is designed to include the analysis of the psychic reverberations and repercussions of the revealed Word. His extreme reticence in speaking about himself and his own experiences is in keeping with the traditional wisdom that mental patients are not helped or healed when encouraged to pay attention to the autobiographical experiences of the doctor. Yet he authenticates his claim that the Psalms offer the Anatomy of the soul with the important information that the biblical account is in keeping with his own experiences: «... *privato quoque meo exemplo expertus sum* ...»<sup>9</sup>.

It would be unwarranted to use this acknowledgement by Calvin as a license for presenting this anatomy as his own psychogram and therefore as a projection. It is quite reasonable, however, to assume that among the multitude of mental states and feelings as presented in the Book of Psalms, Calvin would be inclined to pay particular attention to those which he found confirmed by his own experi-

few years between 1557 and 1564. The common theme remains the liberation from the need of priestly mediation. The inconsistency in the treatment of shame (*pudor, honte*), seems to point to the psychological problem which is concomitant with the <escape from the confessional>. See *Heiko Augustinus Oberman, Initia Calvini, The Matrix of Calvin's Reformation*, Amsterdam 1991, (*Mededelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen* 54.4), p. 29f [abbr.: Oberman, *Initia*].

<sup>7</sup> <Sentire> – one of Calvin's favorite verbs – does not stand for <to judge> or <to deem>, not even for <to perceive>, but for <to experience> or <to be affected by>.

<sup>8</sup> CO 31, 409 A, Ps. 40.6.

<sup>9</sup> CO 31, 15 B, Preface.

ence. For an understanding of Calvin's conversion it is therefore of unquestionable relevance to establish at least the main coordinates of this anatomy.

Such a summary must include three points of departure:

1. Contrary to traditional assumptions, Calvin does not present an abstract tripartite anthropology along the lines of the demarcation between body, soul, and psyche but targets the disorders of the <Old Adam> which in the Pauline, non-Platonic sense pertain to both soul *and* body<sup>10</sup>.
2. As is to be expected, a good many of Calvin's presuppositions and terminology are traditional. In keeping with his respect for Augustine and the ensuing monastic tradition of self-observation in the dual relationship to God and fellow human beings, he stresses that <concupiscentia> is the root of all evil<sup>11</sup>. But against the tendency to associate concupiscence only with physical – especially sexual – hunger, this disorder is often specified as <superbia> (in the French Sermons: <orgueil> or <haultesse>; and associated with the expression <dresser les cornes>). In the social and political order this rebellion manifests itself in <ambitio> and <avaritia>, as hunger for power and possessions.
3. The most intriguing and frequent expressions are to be found in the transition from traditional Latin terminology to words of Greek coinage. The image of <viatores> is as such unremarkable indeed, but for Calvin it no longer has the general medieval meaning of mortal human beings in contrast with the <beati> in heaven, but often refers to those pilgrims who have been guided to the right path. The general characterization of mankind is rather that it is <devius> and has lost the right path or, as Calvin does not tire of pointing out, is disoriented, running to and fro, <huc et illuc>. Since the Fall man is <off course> and, in his wild surge and search, <phreneticus>, caught in a <labyrinth> and threatened with becoming lost in the <abyssus><sup>12</sup>. The bottom line is that the <viator>, instead of being goal-directed, is at once wild and bewildered, running like a wild horse, deviant while <off course> in a state of <amentia><sup>13</sup>,

<sup>10</sup> See here the excellent presentation of Calvin's general anthropology provided by *Thomas Forsyth Torrance*, *Calvin's Doctrine of Man*, London 1949; two years later translated as *Calvins Lehre vom Menschen*, Zollikon-Zürich 1951. The continued lack of scholarly interest in Calvin's <Anatomy of the soul> seems to me due to the preoccupation with the theological issue of <natural theology>, which the two final chapters of Torrance should have satisfied – and laid to rest.

<sup>11</sup> Even when using such traditional terminology, Calvin is intent on explicating the psychological dimension: «... mala concupiscentia quasi stupor quidam est mentis», *Psychopannychia*, ed. *Walther Zimmerli*, Leipzig 1932, (QGP 13), pp. 68, 33 – 69, 1. As in the case of OS 1, line numbers have been added.

<sup>12</sup> *T. F. Torrance* (see note 10) already pointed to this imagery in passing (English original, p. 166; German translation, p. 190f) and *William J. Bouwsma* made it the mainstay of his presentation of the most basic conflict in Calvin's personality. See *William James Bouwsma*, *John Calvin, A Sixteenth-Century Portrait*, New York 1988.

<sup>13</sup> The striking – and for modern readers at times irritating – use of the word <absurd> for the characterization of dissenting opinion may well be related to this identification of sin and <mental illness>. Most striking, however, is Calvin's defense of the significance

and above all in need of the bridle (fraenum) in order to be brought back on track<sup>14</sup>. The assumption that a heretic like Bolsec or Servetus (condemned in Geneva respectively in 1551 and 1553) is a political threat, does not necessarily reveal – as usually supposed – the malicious manipulation of public opinion; it is the <obvious> conclusion that psychological disorder spells public rebellion.

## II. «Me in vitam tuam recipere»<sup>15</sup>: The Account of 1539

We are fortunate to have two accounts available from Calvin's pen about his conversion experience<sup>16</sup>, the first recorded some six years after the event in 1539 and the second written some twenty years afterwards in 1552. Both passages are well known in Calvin scholarship but have been read primarily in the light of the question of dating the conversion experience, which is indeed a crucial question for every biographer<sup>17</sup>. Assuming here that it is possible to agree that the available evidence and the best arguments advanced in the scholarly tradition strongly point to the year 1533, we will bypass this issue and turn instead to the earliest account to look at the key points in his recorded experience in response to the letter of Cardinal Sadolet of 1539.

of the Old Testament against the <slanderers> who regard its anthropomorphisms as sheer <absurdity>.

<sup>14</sup> «Et d'autant plus devons nous estre attentifz quand nous voyons que Dieu nous appelle à la connoissance de sa verité, et qu'il nous monstre que nous la devons tenir certaine. Et sur cela qu'ung chacun s'y submette, que nous ne facions point des chevaux eschappez, mais que nous baissions le col pour porter son joug», *Supplementa Calviniana, Sermons inédits, vol. V: Sermons sur le Livre de Michée*, ed. *Jean Daniel Benoît*, Neukirchen-Vluyn 1964, p. 1, 16-19; Sermon on Micah 1,1, 12 November 1550. Whereas Calvin can be shown to have read intensively Erasmus' *Diatriba* (1524), Luther's *De servo arbitrio* (1525), and Erasmus' response in the *Hyperaspistes* (1526) – probably in the time he describes himself as still wavering before his conversion – his wild-horse simile makes it <obvious> (for all contemporaries) that he sides with Luther against Erasmus. See esp. *Hyperaspistes in: Desiderii Erasmi Roterodami Opera omnia*, vol. 10, Lugduni Batavorum 1706, reprint London 1962, 1287 E.

<sup>15</sup> For text and context see note 30.

<sup>16</sup> *Euan Cameron* has provided a helpful comparative perspective in his chapter on «The Conversions of the Reformers», where the threshold is marked by the transition from <reforming theology> to <Reformation>. See *Euan Cameron, The European Reformation*, Oxford 1991, pp. 168-185; for Calvin, p. 184f.

<sup>17</sup> The best description of the state of scholarship with incisive critical comments is provided by *Ernst Saxer, Aberglaube, Heuchelei und Frömmigkeit, eine Untersuchung zu Calvins reformatorischer Eigenart*, Zürich 1970, (SDGSTh 28), pp. 139-150. *Saxer* acknowledges a letter of Gottfried W. Locher in helping to disentangle the apparently contradictory statements of Calvin and his first biographer, Theodor Beza; see p. 144, note 22.

Calvin introduces the theme in answer to Sadolet's charge that ambition and avarice lay behind his <defection from the Church><sup>18</sup>. After pointing out that personal advancement would have been much more certain under papal tutelage he rephrases this alleged defection as <conversion> with the rhetorical question: Do you really think that personal advancement could lead <to such a conversion>?<sup>19</sup> At this point it is already clear that by conversion Calvin meant the transfer of loyalty, the shift from submission (obedientiam humilitatemque) to the Roman Church, as required by Sadolet, to obedience to the word of God<sup>20</sup>.

The experience of conversion is not spelled out until the epilogue in which Calvin places himself before the tribunal of God where his deepest motivations are laid bare. At this point it is crucial to record those stages, which Calvin discerns in his analysis:

1. In keeping with my earliest education I have always been a confessing Christian<sup>21</sup>.
2. This implied not an extensive exploration of the Scriptures; after all, lay folk should «submit themselves to obedience to the Church» (se ad ecclesiae obedientiam subigerent)<sup>22</sup>. This wording will prove to be relevant for the interpretation of the account of 1552.
3. I came to fear judgment day as a horrible threat<sup>23</sup>.
4. This fear was not due to my personal makeup but to the doctrine which was taught and preached everywhere<sup>24</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> «Postea vero contendis manifestam esse ab ecclesia defectionem, quod a vestra societate disiuncti sunt», OS 1, 460, 28-30.

<sup>19</sup> «Putesne fame fuisse adactos, ut a vobis demigrarent, et rebus desperatis, ad istam conversionem, velut ad novas tabulas profugisse?», OS 1, 461, 22-24.

<sup>20</sup> «Et adhuc obedientiam humilitatemque vestram nobis venditas, quod vos retineat ecclesiae veneratio, quo minus ad exigenda haec flagitia manum admoveatis. Quid homini christiano cum ista praevaricatrice obedientia, quae verbo Dei licentiose contempto obsequia sua defert hominum vanitati?», OS 1, 475, 31-36.

<sup>21</sup> «Ego, Domine, ut a puero fueram educatus, christianam semper fidem professus sum», OS 1, 484, 9f. Calvin stresses the same point in David's life: «Certe iam a puero ... formatus erat ad pietatem», CO 31, 319 A, Ps. 32.4.

<sup>22</sup> «... plebeiis ingeniis non altiore intelligentiam convenire, quam ut se ad ecclesiae obedientiam subigerent», OS 1, 484, 17f; cf. 475, 31-36; see note 20 above.

<sup>23</sup> «Expectabam futurum resurrectionis diem, sed cuius memoriam, velut rei infaustissimae, abominarer», OS 1, 484, 28f.

<sup>24</sup> «Atque hic sensus non mihi privatim domi natus erat, sed ex ea doctrina, quae tum a populi christiani magistris populo passim tradebatur, conceptus», OS 1, 484, 29-32. In a translation widely used in the English speaking world, *John C. Olin* slips at this one crucial point by changing the denial <not> into <not only> and by rendering the locative <domi> as if Calvin had written <dominari>: «I anticipated a future resurrection, but hated to think of it, as being an event most dreadful. And this feeling not only had dominion over me in private, but was derived from the doctrine which was then uniformly delivered to the people by their Christian teachers», John Calvin & Jacopo Sadoletto, *A Reformation Debate*, Sadoletto's Letter to the Genevans and Calvin's Reply, ed. *John Charles Olin*, 7th printing, Grand Rapids, Mich. 1987, p. 87.

5. Forgiveness of sins (*clementia*)<sup>25</sup> was made conditional on our worthiness; absolution in the confessional could not bring solace because of the requirement of a satisfaction which could not stand up to the scrutiny of a severe judge: «The more I scrutinized myself the more my conscience plagued me so that I could only find relief by means of suppression»<sup>26</sup>.
6. Then a very different (Reformation) doctrine reached me. For a time I was held back by my respect for the Church; «but once I had opened my ears and allowed myself to be taught, I learned that this fear of disregarding the authority of the Church was groundless»<sup>27</sup>.
7. The last obstacle fell when Calvin learned to distinguish between the Church as defined by the Bishop of Rome and the domain of the Kingdom of Christ, laid low by tyranny<sup>28</sup>.
8. The conclusion of the conversion account also contains its climax. Once Calvin had reached this point in his quest he realized, in a flash of illumination (*tanquam illata luce*), how deeply he had really sunk<sup>29</sup>: «Profoundly shaken by the realization of my present fallen state (*miseria*) and even more by the imminent threat of eternal death I could not but forswear my former life, though not without bitter tears, and render myself into your hands»<sup>30</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> I agree with the findings of *André M. Hugo* that Calvin's commentary on Seneca's *De Clementia* does not allow for the conclusion that he was already <evangelical>. Nevertheless the choice of the theme which would be so important for his conversion is not likely to have been a mere coincidence. See *André Malan Hugo*, *Calvin en Seneca, een inleidende studie van Calvijns Commentaar op Seneca, De Clementia, anno 1532*, Groningen 1957, p. 76f.

<sup>26</sup> «Ac quo me propius considerabam, eo acrioribus pungebatur aculeis conscientia, ut non aliud restaret solatium, quam me ipsum oblivione ludere», OS 1, 485, 10-13.

<sup>27</sup> «Una praesertim res animum ab illis meum avertibat, ecclesiae reverentia. Verum ubi aliquando aures aperui, meque doceri passus sum, supervacuum fuisse timorem illum intellexi, ne quid ecclesiae maiestati decederet», OS 1, 485, 23-26.

Calvin <grew up> when the reformation-debate had already moved from the issue of indulgences and justification to ecclesiology, obedience to the Church. In 1526 Erasmus points out that the authority of the Church was already his focus two years earlier in 1524, in his <Disputation>, i. e., in his *Diatribes* on free will: «... quaero an aliquid momenti debeat habere veterum et ecclesiae auctoritas. Hic erat scopus disputationis meae, ad quem oportebat argumenta tua dirigere», Erasmus (as note 14), 1298 C.

Calvin must have been held back (*avertibat*) by such a penetrating contrast as Erasmus suggested in the sarcastic juxtaposition of the <See of Rome> and the – dissenting – <See of Wittenberg>: Is it such a monstrous crime, Erasmus snidely asks, that when we encounter some kind of difficult passage [literally <ambiguity>, in contrast with Luther's *claritas scripturae*] «we, simple minds, prefer to listen to the See of Rome rather than to the See of Wittenberg, a dissenter at that?», Erasmus, 1303 D.

<sup>28</sup> «... prostratum denique fuisse Christi regnum, quum erectus fuisset hic principatus», OS 1, 486, 12f.

<sup>29</sup> «Quum iam animus meus ad seriam attentionem comparatus foret, hic vero, tanquam illata luce, animadverti, in quo errorum sterquilinio fuisset volutatus, quot inde sordibus ac maculis foedatus essem», OS 1, 486, 19-23.

<sup>30</sup> «Quod ergo officii mei fuit, eius, in qua prolapsus eram, miseriae, multo etiam magis eius, quae mihi imminebat, aeternae mortis agnitione vehementer consternatus, nihil

9. Calvin contrasts this conversion with the defection of which Sadolet had accused him. This becomes clear from the final sentence: «And now, oh Lord, no defense is left but to beseech you to forgive me and discount the horrible defection from your word from which you have liberated me once and for all (semel) through your wondrous goodness»<sup>31</sup>.

*III. «Subita conversione ad docilitatem subegit»<sup>32</sup>: The Account of  
1552*

Before we are in a position to draw conclusions about the characteristics of Calvin's conversion experience we must turn to his second description, the account of 1552.

Against the backdrop of Calvin's general reticence he proved to be decidedly frank and personal in his rejoinder to the accusations of Cardinal Sadolet. This is even more evident in his biographical sketch in the Preface to the Commentary on the Psalms. Though we will concentrate on the central passage in this second account of his conversion, it should be noted that in the surrounding autobiographical passages Calvin is surprisingly generous with statements about his own character. Thus he owns up to being <by nature> awkward and unpolished, <subrusticus>, which the French version renders as «un peu sauvage et honteux»<sup>33</sup>. Before we have fully fathomed the full implications of this admission, Calvin goes on to say that when he merely wanted to pass through Geneva, Guillaume Farel put the fear of God in him: <terrore percussus> he decided to stay though not to accept a pastoral office, <well aware that I am by nature reserved and timid><sup>34</sup>.

prius habui quam ut damnata, non sine gemitu ac lacrymis, superiore vita, me in vitam tuam reciperem», OS 1, 486, 23-27. I am inclined to interpret the unusual formulation «in vitam tuam reciperem» with reference to the preceding emphasis on John 17,3: «Non enim fallere posset oraculum illud: Esse hanc vitam aeternam, nosse te verum Deum, et quem misisti Iesum Christum (Ioann. 17,3)», OS 1, 482, 18-20. Intended is doubtlessly the <Great Awakening>, the <resurrection> of the soul (before, in, and after death): «Ergo, qui in Christum credunt, quum prius mortui essent, incipiunt vivere, quia fides spiritualis est animae resurrectio, et animam ipsam quodammodo animat ut vivat Deo ...», CO 47, 262 C, Com. John 11,25.

The briefest formulation of the <Great Awakening> is to be found in the commentary on Isaiah 19,22: «Hinc collige, conversionem esse quasi resurrectionem ab aeterna morte», CO 36, 347 B.

<sup>31</sup> «Et nunc, Domine, quid aliud misero mihi superest quam ut deprecationem tibi pro defensione offeram, ne horrendam illam a verbo tuo defectionem ad calculum revoces, a qua me semel mirifica tua benignitate vindicasti?», OS 1, 486, 27-31.

<sup>32</sup> For text and context see note 39.

<sup>33</sup> CO 31, 22 C; cf. 21 C; in Dutch <een schuwe binnenvetter>, in German <ungehobelt und scheu>, in English perhaps best <shy and without social grace>.

<sup>34</sup> «... et verecundiae et timiditatis meae conscius ...», CO 31, 25 B, Preface.



Twice more exactly the same point is driven home in the same Preface. He admits that when he was thrown out of Geneva three years later, he was inordinately relieved, indeed delighted – due to his psychological makeup: «Ego, qui natura timido, molli et pusillo animo me esse fateor ... turbulenta eiectione plus quam decebat laetatus sim»<sup>35</sup>. Two years later, the same <timidity> makes him give in again, this time to the pressure of Martin Bucer who enlists him for the Strasbourg Reformation by terrifying him with the example of Jonah<sup>36</sup>. When called back to Geneva in 1541 it was the same timidity (*mea timiditas*) which made him hesitate. Only the fear (*metus*) of failing in his duties made him overcome <the horrible prospect of return which, God knows, filled me with tears and trembling (anxietate)><sup>37</sup>.

It is before turning to these stages on his path as a reformer – in Geneva (1536-1538), in Strasbourg (1538-1541), and again in Geneva (since 1541) – that Calvin places the description of his conversion, i.e., the way in which he discovered this path.

As he makes perfectly clear, by nature he was most unsuited for public office. And, as the story leading up to his conversion shows, he was not only unsuited but also not intended for the career of a reformer. He records his curriculum vitae in the Preface to the Commentary on the Psalms exactly because he sees in David, conscripted from behind the oxen (*rusticus!*) and a man not born to become king, a mirror of the unexpected turn in his own life. Though originally intended for theology, his father changed his mind and had the young Calvin take up law. But when Calvin obediently tried to apply himself to his legal studies, «God gave another direction to my life through the hidden bridle of his providence» (*arcano providentiae suae fraeno*)<sup>38</sup>. In this introductory sentence lies the key to the riddle of the second conversion account which has puzzled Calvin scholars over the years. Early in his studies, Calvin reports, he was still so addicted to the superstitions of the papacy that it was very difficult to free himself from this quagmire: though for his young age remarkably intent on sticking to his path, «subita conversione ad docilitatem subegit»<sup>39</sup>.

The best known part of this much-studied passage is doubtlessly <subita conversione>. Rendered as <sudden conversion> in the sense of radical change from

<sup>35</sup> CO 31, 25 B/C.

<sup>36</sup> «Ionae itaque exemplo quod proposuerat territus in docendi munere perrexi», CO 31, 25 C.

<sup>37</sup> «... quanto tamen cum moerore quantis lacrymis et quanta anxietate, Dominus mihi optimus testis est ...», CO 31, 27 A.

<sup>38</sup> «... magnopere tamen profuit, quasi in speculo cernere tum vocationis meae exordia, tum continuum functionis cursum: ut quidquid praestantissimus ille rex ac propheta pertulit, mihi ad imitationem fuisse propositum certius agnoscerem», CO 31, 21 A. «... Deus tamen arcano providentiae suae fraeno cursum meum alio tandem reflexit», CO 31, 21 B.

<sup>39</sup> «Ac primo quidem, quum superstitionibus papatus magis pertinaciter addictus essem, quam ut facile esset e tam profundo luto me extrahi, animum meum, qui pro aetate nimis obdurerat, subita conversione ad docilitatem subegit», CO 31, 21 C.

one moment to the other, this event has been placed by Calvin biographers on the time-line of the known stages of Calvin's development. However, as his use of the adjective <subitus>, or of the adverb <subito>, shows<sup>40</sup>, Calvin does not define his conversion as <sudden> in the temporal sense of the word, but as <unexpected>. Just as its synonym <repente>, <subito> refers to an event which takes place <praeter spem> (Rom. 1,18)<sup>41</sup>, <against all expectations>, intended to make the point that <the event> is not the conversion *of* Calvin but the conversion brought about *in* Calvin.

In keeping with this observation is the fact that conversion does not necessarily mean a religious change of heart (*resipiscentia*), but can mean any alteration (*mutatio*), such as the miraculous change of mind in David's scheming enemies, when he escaped suddenly the clutches of his persecutors, <repente> and <praeter spem><sup>42</sup>. Brevity in time can very well be an aspect of God's miraculous intervention. Indeed, the rule of Christ over the whole world was initiated when, through the preaching of the apostles, the Gospel reached the nations around the world <with lightning speed><sup>43</sup>. The conversion of the world, however, is not to be un-

<sup>40</sup> *Paul Sprenger* merely draws on the vocabulary of the *Institutio*. See *Paul Sprenger*, *Das Rätsel um die Bekehrung Calvins*, Neukirchen Kreis Moers 1960, (BGLRK 11), p. 99f [abbr.: Sprenger, Rätsel]. As a more immediate, and therefore the more relevant and reliable resource, we will draw primarily on the Psalms commentary and the French sermons on the Psalms.

<sup>41</sup> See for <repente> and <subito> CO 31, 99 B, Ps. 9,7-8; 106 A, Ps. 9,18; 114 C, Ps. 10,8; 140 B, Ps. 14,5; 174 A, Ps. 18,8; 311 B, Ps. 31,21; 459 C, Ps. 46, Argumentum. The <subita conversio> is part of the Augustinian epistemological tradition which highlights the element of <suddenness> in every true act of cognition when <sapientia> or wisdom breaks into our world of confused sense perception. In mystical sources <subito> expresses the passivity of the mystic in the <visio Dei> and the unexpected nature of the gift of illumination. For references see *Heiko Augustinus Oberman*, *The Dawn of the Reformation, Essays in Late Medieval and Early Reformation Thought*, 2nd ed., Edinburgh 1992, p. 111, with notes 14 and 15. In the commentary on John 1,12 <subito> articulates the act of amazing grace leading up to the conclusion: «Incredibilis enim rerum conversio tunc facta est, quum Christus ex lapidibus excitavit Deo filios», CO 47, 11 C.

The connection between *subito* and *praeter spem*, <beyond expectation>, is existentially present in the life of Rebecca. After twenty years of sterility God suddenly turned to her: «... mais au bout de vingt ans, Dieu vient soudain ...», CO 58, 29 A/B; Sermon on Gen. 35,20.

<sup>42</sup> «Conversio hic non pro *resipiscentia*, sed tantum pro diversa voluntate accipitur: ac si dixisset, fuisse in arbitrio hostis, quidquid dictasset libido, perficere. Unde melius apparet quam admirabilis fuerit quae repente praeter spem sequuta est mutatio», CO 31, 86 A, Ps. 7, 13.

<sup>43</sup> «Porro quum orbem terrarum non ante sibi Deus subegerit, quam dum evangelii praedicatione sponte se passi sunt in ordinem cogi qui prius indomiti fuerant, conversionem hanc non nisi Christi ductu et auspiciis factam esse, colligere licet. Si quis obiiciat, nunquam totum orbem fuisse conversum: facilis solutio est, tempus quo repente per evangelium passim innotuit Deus, conferri cum veteri illo statu, dum sui notitiam Iudaeae finibus inclusam tenuit. Scimus enim fulgetri instar celeriter Christum ab ortu

derstood as an event that took place in one moment of time but rather as one which continues through the following centuries<sup>44</sup>.

To summarize our findings, the <sudden conversion> refers to the action of God as unexpected intervention. Whereas the first account of 1539 reports on the horizontal search for truth by trial and error with its story of growing inner turmoil and increasing leanings towards the evangelical movement, the account of 1552 highlights the vertical dimension of conversion as unprepared illumination from above. For the historian who sets out to reconstruct Calvin's road to reformation in time and space the first account is richer in psychological windows, whereas the second account anchors the experience of conversion more firmly in Calvin's curriculum vitae.

#### IV. «Ad docilitatem subegit»<sup>45</sup>: *The Great Awakening*

The conversion of individual Christians is only part of the larger global strategy of mission by the word directed at submission of the world. <Tolerance> is a concept often used by Calvin, not in its modern sense of the duty of a majority to grant the right of dissent to a minority, but as the duty of a minority to endure amidst the travails caused by a majority unwilling to accept God's dominion<sup>46</sup>. The resulting persecution calls for strict obedience in the ranks of the underground movement. <Docility> is at best a weak, actually a misleading rendering: conversion is at once submission and the vocation to endure and persevere in what Calvin called <toler-

in occasum penetrasse, ut undique gentes in ecclesiam accerseret», CO 31, 235 B, Ps. 22,28.

<sup>44</sup> «... orbis conversio de qua loquutus est, non momentanea tantum erit, sed per continuas aetates propagabitur», CO 31, 236 B, Ps. 22,31. See also the vision formulated in the Catechism of 1537, where the Our Father is interpreted («Ton regne advienne»); OS 1, 407, 15-38.

<sup>45</sup> For text and context see note 39.

<sup>46</sup> «Est quidem aspera haec conditio, sed quia Deo visum est, ut nos continua militia exerceat, Christi regnum circumdare hostibus, paremus nos ad tolerantiam et mansuetudinem», CO 32, 162 B, Ps. 110,2. Because of his Ratschlag of 1510 in defense of the Jewish books, Johannes Reuchlin is often named in the same breath as Calvin's opponent Sebastian Castellio, as one of the founding fathers of religious tolerance. See *Religiöse Toleranz, Dokumente zur Geschichte einer Forderung*, ed. Hans Rudolf Guggisberg, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1984, (Neuzeit im Aufbau 4), pp. 45-57; cf. notes on p. 15. Yet the traditional meaning of the word <tolerance> can still be discerned in that the <Sanftmut> intended is first to come from the side of the Jews. In a little noticed primer on the significance of modern rhetoric for homiletics – completed seven years earlier in January 1503 – Reuchlin discusses the use of <loci communes> for moving the audience to conversion (in the sense of commiseration) and tolerance: «Conversione atrocitatis in nos ipsos vel nobis coniunctos, si simili fortunae subiicemur ... Tolerantia magni, excelsi, et fortis animi et patientis incommodorum», *Liber Congestorum de Arte Praedicandi*, Pforzheim 1504, fol. [b VIv].

ance><sup>47</sup>. These preliminary observations provide the right access to a clause that had to be baffling as long as one tried to translate it with the help of dictionaries for classical or medieval Latin.

The French parallel version – which if not written by Calvin himself, was penned by a disciple who was steeped in his thought – helps to strip away the last remnant of sweetness which a later pietistic tradition has associated with conversion: «... par une conversion subite il domta et rangea à docilité mon coeur ...»<sup>48</sup>. In keeping with Calvin's favorite image of the <wild horses> these verbs <dompter> and < ranger> refer to the taming of wild animals to be placed and kept on track by receiving a <fraenum> or bridle. A whole series of other images crystallize around this nucleus. Without re-direction (*rectitudo legis*), the <wild horses> get lost and rush about <to and fro> in *flexuosas vias*<sup>49</sup>: they are caught and perplexed in the <labyrinth><sup>50</sup>, tire out and finally lose their way completely, to be drowned in the <abyss><sup>51</sup>.

Calvin's conversion accounts allow for conclusions which throw light in three different directions: (1) on his personality, (2) on the matrix of his religious thought, and (3) on the question of his impact.

1. There are two modern assumptions which Calvin did not claim for his conversion: first, he did not <discover religion> or – in the tradition of Augustine – abandon a lifestyle of moral dissolution. Second, and even more important for a characterization of Calvin, he does not record a change in his basic psychological chemistry: before and after his conversion he knew fear in all the gradations which the Latin language suggests on the escalating line from <metus> and <timiditas> via <timor> to <anxietas> and <terror>. His sense of being threatened is not restricted to subtle psychological anguish. He later remembers that he once was stricken by fear (*destresses*) during the early wave of persecutions in France<sup>52</sup>.

<sup>47</sup> In the early Romans commentary for which the basis was laid in the years 1536-1539 and which was published with some changes in 1540 (1539?) and revised by Calvin himself in 1551 and 1556, we find *tolerantia* used both as the tolerance of God mitigating his judgment (Rom. 3,25) and as the perseverance of the Saints (Rom. 2,7). See *Iohannis Calvini Commentarius in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos*, ed. *Thomas Henry Louis Parker*, Leiden 1981, (SHCT 22), p. 74, 70-72; p. 41, 57.

<sup>48</sup> CO 31, 22 C, Preface.

<sup>49</sup> CO 31, 200 C, Ps. 19,8.

<sup>50</sup> CO 31, 368 C, Ps. 37,5. CO 32, 642 A; Sermon 14 on Ps. 119, 23 April 1553. Cf. CO 52, 447 B.

<sup>51</sup> CO 31, 368 C, Ps. 37,5.

<sup>52</sup> See *Supplementa Calviniana, Sermons inédits*, vol. I: *Predigten über das 2. Buch Samuelis*, ed. *Hanns Rückert*, Neukirchen Kreis Moers 1936-1961, p. 122, 28; Sermon on II Samuel 5,17; quoted by *Paul Sprenger* to argue for an early conversion date, c. 1527/1528; Sprenger, *Rätsel*, pp. 29-33, 80. This passage is misunderstood when taken as the admission of Calvin to have been a <Nicodemite> in his early years. His point is rather that the small underground movement would have been easily wiped out if he had not maintained silence: I would rather have had my tongue cut out than to speak out. Even David was «*pavoribus vehementer concussus*» – a powerful consolation; CO 31, 337 C, Ps. 34,5.

The other incidents pertain to the fear of falling short and not measuring up to the standards set by the Church or – later – by the word of God as applied to him by Farel and Bucer. Calvin was, and remained on intimate terms with fear<sup>53</sup>. In the conversion account, the incapacitating aspect of this fearfulness plays a special role.

Generally it can be said that for Calvin the primary connotation of conversion is not salvation but vocation as a call<sup>54</sup> to service<sup>55</sup>. This conversion comes <sub-ito>, i.e., <praeter spem>, against all expectations, exactly because it could hardly have come to someone less suited to public office – an insight not reflected in later biographies.

2. One might be tempted to leave the matter thus and privatize Calvin's frank admission of fearfulness were it not that his insistence on the <timor Dei> or <crainte de Dieu> became a characteristic theme of Calvinist teaching. In this teaching, Calvin was conscious of deviating (meo quidem iudicio<sup>56</sup>) not only from medieval but also from prevailing reformation thought.

In the first version of his *Institutio* (1536) Calvin discusses conversion in the context of penance and insists that the horrible sense of fear of God is not merely operative in an initial phase, overcome and left behind by the consolation which comes with conversion<sup>57</sup> or replaced by trust (fiducia) in the mercy of God<sup>58</sup>. Penance or mortification is as much part of post-conversion life as vivification and continues to engender in us a <verus ac sincerus timor Dei><sup>59</sup>. This is the

<sup>53</sup> In a penetrating essay *Eugénie Droz* points to «le caractère craintif de Calvin». Wisely *Droz* relates this to the inflexibility of Calvin (intransigent), who insists that the <dissimulators> make a choice between martyrdom or exile. *Eugénie Droz*, Calvin et les Nicodemites, in: E. Droz, *Chemins de l'hérésie, textes et documents*, vol. 1, Geneva 1970, pp. 131-171; 132.

<sup>54</sup> In the preceding commentary on Isaiah (1551) <conversion> is defined as the <Great Awakening>; CO 36, 347 B, Isa. 19.22. See further Oberman, *Initia*, p. 24.

<sup>55</sup> On the meaning of <vocation> see the definition in the explanation of Rom. 4,17; ed. Parker (as note 47), p. 94, 83-86.

<sup>56</sup> OS 1, 171, 20; see note 59 below.

<sup>57</sup> With genuine respect Calvin reports the medieval contritionist view of the <docti quidam viri, etiam ante haec tempora>; «Ubi scilicet homo peccati conscientia prostratus, ac Dei timore percussus, postea in Dei bonitatem, in misericordiam, gratiam, salutem quae est per Christum, respiciens sese erigit, respirat, animum colligit et velut a morte in vitam redit», OS 1, 170, 15-18.

<sup>58</sup> Turning to unnamed <alii> who <subsume> or identify faith and penance, Calvin most likely has Luther in mind; cf. *Sermo de poenitentia* (1518), WA 1, 323, 33f; *De captivitate Babylonica* (1520), WA 6, 545, 1-8. The editor of OS 1 refers to the *Confessio Augustana* (1530), Art. XII; see OS 1, 170, note 83.

<sup>59</sup> «Est itaque, meo quidem iudicio, poenitentia carnis nostrae veterisque hominis mortificatio, quam in nobis efficit verus ac sincerus timor Dei», OS 1, 171, 20-22. Calvin's conclusion that penance (mortification) and forgiveness (faith) form the two chief parts of the one Gospel (tota evangelii summa, OS 1, 171, 32), supports the thesis of *Gottfried W. Locher*, that already in 1536 Calvin knew Zwingli's *Commentarius* (1525): «Calvin muß Zwingli's Hauptwerk, den *Commentarius* gekannt haben; in der Erstausgabe wie in den späteren Fassungen der *Institutio* finden sich eindeutige Anklänge»,

<crainte de Dieu><sup>60</sup>, best rendered as a trembling before God's holy majesty and not to be confused with the fear of the unbelievers. Yet it is the same rule of terror for all: the unbelievers are <broken> while the believers are <bent><sup>61</sup>. In keeping with this emphasis on the function of fear in the Christian life<sup>62</sup> is Calvin's understanding of the righteousness of God, which in contrast to Luther's, is an unchanging property in God (active) and not the gift of faith<sup>63</sup>. The proximity and close

*Gottfried Wilhelm Locher*, *Die Zwinglische Reformation im Rahmen der europäischen Kirchengeschichte*, Göttingen 1979, p. 627. See especially Zwingli's formulation: «Est ergo evangelii pars altera poenitentia ...», Z III 702, 11f. However, not <timor> but spiritual renewal is Zwingli's theme. For a more comprehensive comparison between Zwingli, Luther, and Calvin <on penance> see *Gottfried Wilhelm Locher*, *Zwingli's Thought, New Perspectives*, Leiden 1981, (SHCT 25), pp. 190-195.

<sup>60</sup> «Comme les infideles en craignant Dieu sont esperdus et tellement abbatus, qu'ils ne peuvent avoir le courage d'approcher de lui: aussi, à l'opposite, il y a une crainte liberale en ceux qui sont gouvernez par l'Esprit de Dieu, qui emporte reverence à sa parole, pour les faire trembler devant icelle», CO 32, 663 A; Sermon 15 on Ps. 119, 30 April 1553.

<sup>61</sup> When pondering the different modes in which the <timor Dei> strikes the elect and the reprobate, the element of <sincerity> is found in the fact that in the case of the elect this trembling respect is not extorted but rendered <sponte>: «Porro, videndum est de qua timoris specie loquatur, nam Deus communiter electos etiam suos timore subigit ad obsequium. Sed quia suum erga eos rigorem temperat, et simul emollit lapidea ipsorum corda, ut sponte et placide se submittant, proprie non dicitur eos metu cogere. Erga reprobos diversum agendi modum tenet, quia enim inflexibilis est eorum durities, ut facilius sit eos frangi quam corrigi, violenter indomitam ipsorum contumaciam subigit ...», CO 31, 107 A/B, Ps. 9,21. Cf. Rom. 5,3; ed. Parker (as note 47), p. 105, 2-4.

<sup>62</sup> In the earliest version of his Romans commentary, Calvin firmly connected genuine fear (timor) with respect (reverentia) for God: «Fieri enim nequit quin ubi est serius Dei timor, talis quoque sit nominis eius reverentia», ed. Parker, p. 20, 25f. The opposite of this proper <Christian> fear, is not the medieval timor servilis but complete disregard for God. So is perjury for the godless a game (ludus), whereas the faithful avoid it like the plague: «... gravior mille mortibus exhorrent», Rom. 1,9; ed. Parker, p. 20, 25. Cf. the revealing comment on Rom. 2,25: «Nam quicumque serio Dei timore tactus est et affectus, nunquam in caelum oculos attollere audebit ...», ed. Parker, p. 53, 45-47.

<sup>63</sup> Luther's description of his exegetical breakthrough by interpreting the righteousness of God as <iustitia passiva> (grasped in faith), articulated in the Praefatio to the first volume of his Latin works (Wittenberg 1545; WA 54, 185, 17-20; 186, 3-8), may very well have been read by Calvin. If so, he contradicts the validity of Luther's interpretation with an inversion of terminology: «Caeterum *iustitiam Dei* non interpretor active, qua donat suos electos, spiritu suo eos regenerans: sed vitae sanctitatem quae ei probatur», CO 31, 650 A, Ps. 69,28. Cf. CO 31, 658 C, Ps. 71,14; 660 A, Ps. 71,16; 661 B/C, Ps. 71,19. Always careful to interpret the expression <iustitia Dei> in terms of the changing biblical context, Calvin, in interpreting the Psalms, does relate <iustitia> to <fides>, yet not to the faith of the believer but to the <active> faithfulness of God as the stable foundation of salvation. See his exegesis of Ps. 7,18, CO 31, 87 B; cf. Ps. 22,32, CO 31, 237 B. When the *iustitia Dei* is interpreted as the goodness of God (pro bonitate accipitur), it means again an attribute of God; Ps. 51,16, CO 31, 520 C. Cf. CO 31, 247 A; 301 A; 364 B. As for Luther it is also crucial for Calvin that the *iustitia fidei* is the *iustitia Christi* (Rom. 3,22; ed. Parker, p. 70, 43f) and that <we are justified in Christ extra nos>, Rom. 3,21; ed. Parker, p. 69, 86f. But the believer and his works (double

alliance of Calvin with Luther in his confrontation with the medieval papal church and its teachings is beyond question: he continues to honor Luther as the Inceptor and profited greatly from studying Luther's publications in finding his own road to reformation. But the traditional assessment that Calvin is best characterized as a <faithful disciple> of Luther who only redressed the balance by emphasizing sanctification as much as justification, does not reflect sufficiently the differences in religious motivation, in piety, and ultimately in formative impact<sup>64</sup>.

3. Once Calvin transferred the receiving of the <bridle> of God's holy will from his own individual experience to the characteristic of all the elect<sup>65</sup>, Calvinism received an activist direction which would propel it onto the political stage in the European conflict of interests, which was never far from Calvin's mind.

The puzzling question of how the reformer who was most insistent on leaving armed intervention and retaliation<sup>66</sup> to God, could become the spiritual leader of the most militant wing of protestantism in a century of conflict (1550-1650), can-

acceptation or imputation) are to be lifted up «ad Dei tribunal, ubi nulla iustitia cense-  
tur nisi perfecta absolutaque Legis obedientia ...», Rom. 3,22; ed. Parker, p. 70, 38f.  
This is in keeping with the preceding definition: «Iustitiam Dei accipio, quae apud Dei  
tribunal approbetur ...», Rom. 1,17; ed. Parker, p. 26, 22. In 1551 Calvin inserted the  
sentence which best marks both the independence from Luther and the point where the  
fear of God retains the element of terror present in the medieval timor servilis: «Nam ut  
a Deo amemur, prius iustos esse necesse est: quum iniustitiam odio habeat», Rom.  
1,17; ed. Parker, p. 26, 14f. Calvin uses the terms <active> and <passive> from the per-  
spective of human action. See Rom. 5,5; ed. Parker, p. 106, 50-54.

<sup>64</sup> On the level of theological teaching Calvin locates the assurance of salvation (certitudo  
conscientiae; fiducia) squarely on the righteousness of Christ <extra nos>. For the prox-  
imity to Luther see *Karl-Heinz zur Mühlen*, *Nos extra nos, Luthers Theologie zwischen  
Mystik und Scholastik*, Tübingen 1972, (BHTh 46). Sanctification is its <necessary>  
fruit and consequence. Yet in the treatise in which this theme is most clearly articulated  
the experience of sanctification is limited to the elect: «... non omnes promiscue hanc  
spiritus efficaciam sentire[!], sed qui ad vitam sunt ordinati», *Vera christianae pacifi-  
cationis et ecclesiae reformandae ratio* (1549), CO 7, 600 A. I surmise that without this  
experience, the conscience must be troubled, since <frustra> is the claim of adoption for  
those «in quibus spiritus regenerationis non habitat», CO 7, 596 C.

<sup>65</sup> The iudicia Dei cause fear (metus), which fills the heart of the believer with <rever-  
ence> and <piety>. See comment on Rom. 4,23; ed. Parker, p. 100, 65f. «Nam generali-  
ter <timorem> accipio pro sensu pietatis, quem in nobis generat potentiae, aequitatis et  
clementiae eius agnitio», CO 31, 406 C, Ps. 40,4. This <respect> leads to self-control:  
«... reverenter se contineant sub eius imperio, quia agnoscunt iustum mundi iudicem»,  
CO 31, 407 A. Accordingly, the very purpose of the Book of Life is said to be that God  
keeps the elect under control: «... sub iugo suae disciplinae eos contineat», CO 31, 412  
C, Ps. 40,9; cf. the characterization of <timor> in CO 31, 201 C, Ps. 19,9.

<sup>66</sup> In a revealing passage – which I take to point to the emotional motivation or <Sitz im  
Leben> behind Calvin's doctrine of reprobation – Calvin shows how out of the experi-  
ence of persecution and repression emerges the longing for the Day of Reckoning. But  
he insists: «... non hominis hoc, sed Dei esse iudicium», CO 31, 217 B, Ps. 21,10. Cf.  
CO 32, 153 A, Ps. 109,16.

not be answered fully in terms of later Lutheran influences or as a reaction to the trauma of the St. Bartholomew Massacre of 1572<sup>67</sup>.

What at first sight seemed to be a record of the most intimate and private religious experience of Calvin acquired, through the emphasis on <docility> as battle call and marching orders, wider social and political implications. The Church is only a minority and as such a resistance movement. Yet this resistance movement does not have to wait <until Kingdom comes><sup>68</sup>. What the medieval tradition had placed at the other side and beyond Judgment Day is for Calvin already unfolding in his times: the justice of God protects and liberates his own<sup>69</sup>. Those who willingly have accepted the bridle of obedience can call upon their unfailing ally in heaven progressively to put an end to all tyranny<sup>70</sup>.

<Lex orandi est lex agendi><sup>71</sup>: what Calvin taught to be the legitimate prayer for the destruction of the enemies of God<sup>72</sup> became the legitimacy of self-defense, actual resistance and finally the Rule of the Saints<sup>73</sup>. Hence we may conclude that

<sup>67</sup> Both in France and in the Low Countries, organized resistance and the concomitant resistance theory emerged already in the sixties and therefore cannot be explained as a reaction to the St. Bartholomew Massacre of 1572. See the nuanced analysis by *M. E. H. N. Mout*, *Armed Resistance and Calvinism during the Revolt of the Netherlands*, in: *Church, Change, and Revolution*, Transactions of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch Church History Colloquium (Exeter 1988), ed. J. van den Berg, P. G. Hoftijzer, Leiden 1991, pp. 57-68. See further the important early article of *Robert M. Kingdon*, *The Political Resistance of the Calvinists in France and the Low Countries*, in: *ChH* 27, 1958, pp. 220-233; reprinted in: *Robert M. Kingdon*, *Church and Society in Reformation Europe*, London 1985, XI.

<sup>68</sup> The total <ruina> of the enemies of the Gospel will not occur before the End; CO 32, 161 C. But in the meantime they will be held «comme en bride courtes»; CO 32, 667 C; Sermon 16 on Ps. 119, 7 May 1553.

<sup>69</sup> CO 31, 87 B, Ps. 7,18.

<sup>70</sup> «Deo in cunctis gentibus obedientiam iure deberi, iusque dominandi perperam et iniuste ei eripi a tyrannis, dum posthabito eius mandato fas et nefas permiscent. Itaque rogandus est ut mundum rite ordinando, imperium suum recuperet», CO 31, 772 B, Ps. 82,8.

<sup>71</sup> It is in keeping with Calvin's indicated emphasis on the psychological nature of the operation of the Holy Spirit that prayer does not <inform> God but strengthens the supplicant: «... fidem nostram his futuris confirmare utile est», CO 31, 416 C, Ps. 40,17. Cf. «Non pas que Dieu ait besoin qu'on le sollicite, ny importune, mais c'est pour exercer nostre foy, et pour esprouver tant mieux si c'est en luy que nous cerchons tout nostre bien», CO 32, 571 A/B; Sermon 8 on Ps. 119, 26 February 1553.

<sup>72</sup> «Nam ut solide quiescat fides nostra, in Deo simul haec duo consideranda [CO: consideranda] sunt: nempe immensa virtus, qua ad totum mundum subigendum instructus est: deinde paternus amor, quem verbo suo patefecit. Ubi autem haec duo coniuncta sunt, nihil ob stare potest quominus cunctis hostibus insultet fides nostra, neque enim dubium est, velintne opitulari nobis Deus, qui se hoc facturum promisit», CO 31, 464 B, Ps. 46,8.

<sup>73</sup> The most articulate description of the conditions of legitimate <revolt> is not presented in the *Institutio*, but in Calvin's letter to Gaspard de Coligny in Paris, dated 16 April (?) 1561. See letter no. 3374 in CO 18, 425-431; 426 B.



– praeter spem – the militancy of later Calvinism can be retraced to the very cradle of the sudden conversion of Calvin himself.

As far as the psychological quest for Calvin's personal make-up is concerned we need neither shrewdly unmask nor snidely catch him: he is forthright about his experience of fear and terror<sup>74</sup>. Instead of repressing or eluding it – as he did before his conversion – he made it a central part of his mission to teach Christian Europe a new <reverence> for the Lord of Hosts, reshaping existential Angst into the <crainte de Dieu>. The songs of the Huguenots testify to the fact that this is a common and communal feature which marked, sustained, and mobilized Calvinism in its century-long battle for survival.

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<sup>74</sup> In what must be regarded as the first post-conversion treatise, the *Psychopannychia* (1534), we find another autobiographical passage, which though not explicitly a conversion account, describes the experience of <point zero>, the confrontation with God as Judge:

<What do you think went on in his [=Adam] mind, yes indeed in every nerve of his being when he heard those horrible words <Adam where are you> (Gen. 3,9)? It is easier to think this than to say it; indeed, you cannot even think this through, unless you have experienced it. And just as the majesty of God in its sublime heights cannot be expressed in words, neither can the terrifying nature of his wrath. Those who are <hit>, are confronted with the weight of the omnipotent and they cannot escape him even though they try to flee to the deepest possible abyss. Who would not confess that this is truly death!

I repeat that those who have once experienced this in their conscience do not need to be told. But those who have not had this experience, let them read in the Scriptures how God is a burning fire (Deut. 4,24), who strikes to death when he speaks as the Judge. This is the experience behind the statement in Exodus 20,19: <Let God not speak with us since this will kill us>.

Do you want to know what the death of the soul is? It is to be without God, to be deserted by God, to be abandoned to yourself. Since God is life, every person loses his life who loses the presence of God. To translate this general statement into graphic detail: Since there is no light outside of God who lights our darkness, when he withdraws his light then our soul is certainly *blind* and buried in darkness; our soul is *mute* because it cannot confess, and call out to embrace God. The soul is *deaf* because it cannot hear his voice. The soul is *crippled* since it does not have a hold on the God who has promised that he will <take my right hand ...> (Ps. 73,23)» (italics mine), ed. Zimmerli (as note 11), pp. 67, 5 – 68, 14; cf. CO 5, 204 B-205 A.

Though this passage has not yet been drawn upon, traditional Calvin scholarship has properly pointed to the fact that for the elect God does not spell fear but trust (*fiducia*). Yet, the horrible story of the reprobate (*decretum horribile*) is for Calvin not only a <dogma> but also a powerful rhetorical device to keep the elect on the path of *mortificatio*, i.e., aware of the abyss into which the reprobate is running: <... mirabili Dei virtute se fuisse retractum a profunda illa abyssu in quam se proiciunt reprobi>, CO 31, 686 C, Ps. 73,23.

