

John Calvin’s “*Institutes of the Christian Religion*”, by B. Gordon

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This is a volume in a new series, “Lives of Great Religious Books.” It offers a novel genre of religious literature—the biography of significant Christian writings. This genre acknowledges that even writings have a life span which extends far beyond that of humans. Yet, like humans, writings are subject to change over time in terms of validity, reception, interpretation and usefulness. This volume on Calvin’s *Institutes* has been the subject of more use and abuse than most books of its kind—now more than 450 years since its various editions were published. And, of course, it is impossible to tell the story of a book without also telling the story of its author; and this is particularly well done here.

The author takes us on a global journey over almost five centuries and highlights the high and low points of the life of the *Institutes*. Calvin’s work has been exposed to brands of Calvinism which make the original almost unrecognisable—from fundamentalists to black theologians, while Calvin was neither. Within our South African context, he has been abused in support of apartheid and in the cause of liberation, notably by Allan Boesak. Such are the vagaries of the art of hermeneutics.

Despite the excellence of this book, two issues emerge for me. First, I think the constant harping about Calvin’s involvement in the death of Michael Servetus becomes quite tedious, especially since there is no clear evidence regarding what his involvement was other than that he was somehow implicated. Second, I believe the author misunderstands Calvin somewhat by focusing on the doctrine of predestination and election. It is more helpful to see Calvin’s overarching theme as the absolute sovereignty of God, into which predestination fits more appropriately. This also undermines some of the negativity with which many view Calvin.



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However, this book makes a substantial contribution to Calvin scholarship and ought to be read by anyone who is interested in rehabilitating Calvinism from its complex yet rewarding history.