

The Providence of God and the hypostasis of evil in Calvin's theology¹

Paolo de Petris*

1. Calvin's doctrine of divine Omnipotence

It has been commonly acknowledged that the divine Omnipotence represents the foundation of Calvin's theology. But how did Calvin understand God's Omnipotence? In the *Instruction on Faith* Calvin had already answered this question by explaining the words of the Apostle's Creed «I believe in God, the Father Almighty» mean that «all power is attributed to God», who «administers all things by His Providence, rules them by His will, and guides them by His virtue and might».²

In the *Sermons on Job*, instead of giving an abstract definition of God's Omnipotence, Calvin preferred to direct the attentions of his audience to its features. To the question «What is the power of God?», Calvin repeatedly stated that it is «infinite»³, «out of measure»⁴, «invisible»⁵, «beyond our capacity»⁶, «wonderful»⁷,

* Born In Milan on October 27, 1947. Doctoral degrees in Law (Dr. jur.) at Università degli Studi di Milano (It) and in Philosophy (Ph.D.) at McGill University of Montreal (Ca). Ordained Minister of the Swiss Reformed Church in Bellinzona, Tessin, Switzerland, lecturer (professore incaricato) at the Facoltà di Teologia of Lugano and professor of Systemic (or Dogmatic) Theology at the Shepherd University in Italy. E-mail: paolodepetris@ticino.com.

¹ The article gives a summary of some aspects treated in the author's study: *Calvin's Theodicy and the Hiddenness of God: Calvin's Sermons on the Book of Job* (European University Studies XXIII, 926), Bern et al. 2012.

² CALVIN, *Instruction in Faith*, 47.

³ *Sermons on Job*, 381. See also CO 33:349, 427, 428; CO 34:246, 336, 340, 360.

⁴ *Sermons on Job*, 188: CO 33:501.

⁵ CO 33:426.

⁶ *Sermons on Job*, 246: CO 34:246.

⁷ *Sermons on Job*, 695: CO 35:367.

«inestimable»⁸, and it cannot be enclosed in our brain since «it is deeper than the deeps»⁹. «God shrinks not into corner»¹⁰, but He «has such a power and preeminence, that nothing is hidden from Him»¹¹.

What did Calvin meant exactly with these statements? Did he hint that God is not liable to any moral limitation, as the theologians of voluntarism held? While the influence of John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham on Calvin's thought is now widely accepted, a substantial disagreement has remained regarding its extent and its significance, especially with reference to the distinction between *potentia Dei absoluta* (God's absolute power) and *potentia Dei ordinata* (God's ordained power), that is to say between what God can do in view of His sheer and unlimited ability to act and what He has chosen to do in the light of His wise and sometimes inscrutable purposes. Albrecht Ritschl expressed the opinion that the French Reformer stood in the voluntarism tradition of Scotus and Ockham, inasmuch as the notion of God informing his doctrine of double predestination would lead to the idea of «*potentia absoluta*» conceived as synonymous with sheer caprice and of total «*arbitrium*»¹².

This conclusion, drawn from selections of the *Institutes of Christian Religion* and from the *Commentaries*, was deeply questioned by Reinhold Seeberg¹³ who clearly demonstrated that «diese *potentia absoluta* Gottes hat zur Schranke nur das logisch Unmögliche sowie das eigene Wesen Gottes oder seine bonitas»¹⁴.

Calvin had chance to dwell frequently on the distinction between *potentia absoluta* and *potentia ordinata*, especially during the period from 1551 to 1563, in his *Commentaries* on Gen. 18:13, Gen. 25:29, Rom. 9:19¹⁵, Isa. 23:9¹⁶, not to mention in the *Treatise on The Secret Providence of God*. In all of these texts, as Steinmetz rightly points out, he read the distinction between the *potentia absoluta* and the *potentia ordinata*, not as a distinction between the absolute and the ordained power of God, but as a distinction between *potentia ordinata* and *potentia inordinata*, between ordered and disordered power. Whatever God has done, is doing, or plans to do is

⁸ *Sermons on Job*, 704: CO 35:392.

⁹ *Sermons on Job*, 203: CO 33:541.

¹⁰ *Sermons on Job*, 588: CO 33:588.

¹¹ *Sermons on Job*, 35: CO 33:541; «il a une telle puissance et maîtrise que rien ne Luy est caché».

¹² A. RITSCHL, *Geschichtliche Studien zur christlichen Lehre von Gott*, in *Jahrbücher für deutsche Theologie* 1865-1868, *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, Neue Folge (1896): 25-176.

¹³ R. SEEBERG, *Die Theologie des Johannes Duns Scotus*, Leipzig 1900, 163.

¹⁴ R. SEEBERG, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, III, 654, quoted by R. STAUFFER, *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans la Prédication de Calvin*, 137 to whom I owe the quotation.

¹⁵ CALVIN, *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans*, 363. See D. STEINMETZ, *Calvin in Context*, New York 1995, 40-52.

¹⁶ CALVIN, *Commentaries on Isaiah*, vol. 8, 152.

an expression of His *potentia ordinata*, even if the Justice that guides His will is secret and hidden from us¹⁷.

In other words the power of God is infinite but not absolute. Nevertheless, it was mainly in the *Sermons on Job* that Calvin had the opportunity to develop his insights by developing two different argumentations. First, he argued, God's power cannot be separated from His Justice, Wisdom and Goodness. In Sermon 123 he wrote:

«When we speak of His power, or His justice, or His wisdom, or His goodness, we speak of Himself; they are things inseparable, and cannot be severed (that is to say, they cannot be taken away from His Being): for they are so joined together, as the one of them cannot be without the other. Is God mighty? So is He also good. His mightiness defeats not His goodness, nor yet His justice»¹⁸.

He stressed the same idea when he emphasized that «God's mighty Power is matched with His Goodness»¹⁹, or that «His Justice, Goodness, and Wisdom must be linked with His Almightyness»²⁰. For Calvin it was unimaginable to state that God can be defined in terms of *potentia absoluta*, «as if He governs the world like a tyrant»²¹. The Almighty God does nothing without reason, since «it is impossible that He should do anything that is not good and rightful»²². How could God judge the world, Calvin provocatively asked, «if He should not perform all right?»²³ «God would cease to be God and His being would diminish»²⁴, if He could turn aside from right and equity.

Calvin held that all the divine attributes, Power, Goodness, Wisdom and Justice are nothing else than constitutive elements of God's glory, as he highlighted in Sermon 46²⁵ and he sharply criticised those who «would abolish His mighty Power in order to prove that God is righteous»²⁶. Repeatedly he exhorted the church «to look still to the Power that God shows therewithal and to His Goodness» in order «to discern that God governs the world rightfully»²⁷.

¹⁷ D. STEINMETZ, *Calvin and the absolute power of God*, in *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 18/1 (Spring 1988).

¹⁸ *Sermons on Job*, 581: CO 35:60. I owe these references to R. STAUFFER, *Dieu, la Création et la Providence dans la Prédication de Calvin*, 115.

¹⁹ *Sermons on Job*, 615: CO 35:154. See also CO 35:59.

²⁰ *Sermons on Job*, 675: CO 35:315.

²¹ *Sermons on Job*, 137.

²² *Sermons on Job*, 137: CO 33:371.

²³ *Sermons on Job*, 138.

²⁴ See *Sermons on Job*, 138.

²⁵ *Sermons on Job*, 215: CO 33:571.

²⁶ *Sermons on Job*, 415: CO 34:340.

²⁷ *Sermons on Job*, 730: CO 35:459.

Commenting on the questions «Does God subvert judgment? Or does the Almighty pervert justice?» Calvin concluded firmly that God could do only that which is just and good:

«Some can well find that God is Almighty, but in the meanwhile they acknowledge Him not to be righteous, as they ought to do. For the one of them must not be separated from another. We must not imagine that there are things in God which can be divided one from another. True it is that one has to put a difference between the wisdom and the goodness, and the justice, and the almightiness of God, but yet notwithstanding, in respect that He is God, all these things must need be in Him at once and they must be as it were himself or His very being. Then let us beware that we surmise not a lawless power in God, as if He governs the world like a tyrant or used excess or cruelty. But let us understand whereas He has all things in His hand, and is of endless power and does all things, yet notwithstanding He ceases not to be righteous»²⁸.

He held as unacceptable that the Power of God could be regarded as «lawless»²⁹, «tyrannical or inordinate»³⁰, «excessive»³¹, «having no rule nor measure»³² and «separated from His Justice»³³.

If God would be not just, He shall be no longer God, since «His glory, and His Godhead and His Being would be quite abolished»³⁴.

Calvin deemed that the most important feature of God is that He is just. Even while stressing that God is Omnipotent and Omniscient, Calvin was convinced that these attributes could be rightly understood only in the light of the divine Justice. The main task of God is to administer justice by rewarding and punishing His creatures accordingly to their deeds.

Refusing to hold the adjectives «infinite» and «absolute» as equivalent, the French Reformer criticized Job, for having blasphemed God and pointed out that «although God's power be infinite, yet notwithstanding to imagine it to be so absolute and lawless is as much as to make Him a tyrant»³⁵.

Only in the last day «God shall be found righteous» and He «will make feel His power and might: not a tyrannous power, but an infinite power»³⁶. Taking Job as an example, Calvin warned against the temptation to «enclose God's mighty power,

²⁸ *Sermons on Job*, 137: CO 33:371.

²⁹ *Sermons on Job*, 442: CO 34:360.

³⁰ *Sermons on Job*, 354: CO 34:175.

³¹ The right translation of the French word «exorbitante» is excessive and not lawless.

³² *Sermons on Job*, 421: CO 34:357.

³³ *Sermons on Job*, 303: CO 34:336.

³⁴ See *Sermons on Job*, 41: CO 33:125.

³⁵ *Sermons on Job*, 159: CO 34:336.

³⁶ *Sermons on Job*, 159: CO 33:428.

righteousness and wisdom within the state of this present world, so as it might be discerned»³⁷ and from indulging in the fantasy «that God governs not the world when He shows not Himself as a judge»³⁸.

Confronted with the inexplicable sufferings of the righteous Job and eager to dispel the suspicion that history was floating randomly, without the guidance of a just God, Calvin never tired of emphasizing the absolute mystery of God's Power, which is understandable only by faith³⁹ and not by reason⁴⁰. In Sermon 123 Calvin strongly stigmatized the attempt of those who, whilst thinking of God's mighty Power, attributed Him a «tyrannical power»⁴¹. He did not hesitate to call this point of view «not only outrage, but also cursed blasphemy»⁴², «a devil's blasphemy forged in hell»⁴³, and «a cursed and devil's thing»⁴⁴.

In Sermon 90 he had the opportunity to define more precisely the meaning of the sentence that God would have a «lawless power without rule and measure»⁴⁵. This sentence, he said, could be rightly interpreted only by keeping in mind that God «is always at one point or in one mind, that is to say, that He is constant and invariable and cannot be turned one way nor other»⁴⁶. On the contrary, he pointed out that «God is so gracious unto us, as to join and knit His Justice to our salvation, like as He has matched His Mightiness with it also»⁴⁷.

In order to stress once again the Justice of God in *The Sermons on Job* Calvin did not hesitate to term God's works as «judgments and righteousness»⁴⁸. From Romans 11:33 he adopted the characterization of God's action as exercise of His jurisdictional competence. In other words, whatever God is doing is not indifferent or neutral, but always serves the purpose of establishing His Justice. The close connection between God's Providence and God's Justice was clearly expressed, when Calvin provocatively asked:

³⁷ *Sermons on Job*, 467: CO 34:480.

³⁸ *Sermons on Job*, 309: CO 34:53.

³⁹ CO 34:604.

⁴⁰ In Sermon 109 he provocatively asked: «Or quand nous voudrions comprendre ceste puissance et ceste vertu-la, ie vous prie, Je pourrions- nous enclorre à nostre cerveau? Il est impossible». In CO 34:603.

⁴¹ *Sermons on Job*, 580.

⁴² *Sermons on Job*, 580: CO 34:362.

⁴³ *Sermons on Job*, 415: CO 34:339-340.

⁴⁴ *Sermons on Job*, 203: CO 33:540.

⁴⁵ *Sermons on Job*, 421: CO 34:357.

⁴⁶ *Sermons on Job*, 421: CO 34:357.

⁴⁷ *Sermons on Job*, 423: CO 34:357.

⁴⁸ *Sermons on Job*, 34: CO 33:108.

«Can we deny the Providence of God? Can we abolish His power? Can we say that He has not done and disposed all things with wisdom? Can we bring any of these things to pass? No, it is impossible»⁴⁹.

Secondly, he argued that God's Power cannot be disjointed from His Will. For Calvin it was unthinkable to state that God can do whatever is feasible. It is the divine Will (and not external forces) which determines what God can do. Although God is *legibus solutus*, «He is law to Himself and to all»⁵⁰.

«We see many fantastical persons, who when they talk of God's almightiness fall to gazing at this and that saying: If God be almighty why does He not such a thing? If God be almighty, then can He do this? Yea, but we must not range abroad so after our own imagination, God's almightiness aims not a tour dotages no rat any common thing. Whereat then? God's almightiness and His will are things inseparable. God is almighty: but it is to accomplish whatsoever He hath ordained in His own purpose. So let us learn to knit these two things together, namely His almightiness and His will»⁵¹.

The voluntaristic aspect of Calvin's theology became particularly clear when the French Reformer pointed out that «the righteousness, whereby we must be ruled and whereto we must be subject, is above us, but is God's will above that»⁵².

Calvin was also adamant in emphasizing that any notion of goodness or justice is sheer abstraction independently from God's Will. He held the basic *theonomous* notion that whatsoever God is doing is righteous by that fact alone. In other words, nothing in itself is good or evil, but it is the divine Will that establishes the criteria of justice and goodness. In Sermon 90 he wrote: «God's will is the rule of all reason and the fountain of all righteousness, in the sense that God wills anything which is not rightfult and indifferent»⁵³. The primacy of the divine «Will which surmounts all righteousness», was repeatedly stressed, whenever Calvin emphasized that God is not bound to any laws⁵⁴, that is, if with this word one intends the human law.

On the other hand, whenever one speaks of God's Will, should be taken into account His revealed will rather than His hidden counsel. To avoid any misinterpretation Calvin related God's Omnipotence to «His good Will such as He show it to be in His word»⁵⁵, and His Righteousness to His whole Law»⁵⁶. All these elements

⁴⁹ *Sermons on Job*, 722: CO 35:438.

⁵⁰ J. HESSELINK, *Calvin's Concept of the Law*, Allison Park 1992, 22.

⁵¹ *Sermons on Job*, 737: CO 35:479.

⁵² *Sermons on Job*, 222: CO 33:590.

⁵³ *Sermons on Job*, 423.

⁵⁴ *Sermons on Job*, 624: CO 35:178.

⁵⁵ *Sermons on Job*, 738: CO 35:480.

⁵⁶ *Sermons on Job*, 627: CO 35:186.

recurred in the final edition of his *Opus Magnum*, in which he made unmistakably clear that what God commands is not whimsical, but rooted in His Goodness.

«The will of God is the supreme rule of righteousness, so that everything which He wills must be held to be righteous by the mere fact of His willing it. When, therefore, one asks why God has so done, we must reply: because He has willed it. But if you proceed further to ask why He so willed, you are seeking something greater and higher than God's will, which cannot be found. We fancy no lawless god who is a law unto himself. For, as Plato says, men who are troubled with lusts are in need of law; but the will of God is not only free of all fault but is the highest rule of perfection, and even the law of all laws»⁵⁷.

2. Divine Providence in the homiletic works

Even emphasizing the incommensurable dimensions of the divine Power, Calvin never hinted that it is absolute and unordered. He was interested neither in sheer speculations about the essence and the power of God, nor to build up a theological frame for a scholar's audience, but to develop a series of theological reflections that could contribute to increase the faith and be a source of comfort for the church. This is the reason why his intuitions on God's Omnipotence, far from being an end in themselves and an academic exercise, found their best expression in the doctrine of Providence. The passage from a sheer theoretical analysis on God's Omnipotence to his practical consequences had been already anticipated by the Catechism. To the question «In what sense do you give him the name of Almighty?» the answer sounded clear:

«Not as having a power which He does not exercise, but as having all things under His power and hand; governing the world by His Providence, determining all things by His will, ruling all creatures as seems to Him good»⁵⁸.

The doctrine of Providence, far from being restricted to his theological works, held an important position in his homiletic production⁵⁹. This point is well made by Harold Dekker:

«The utter Theocentricity (of his sermons) involves certain characteristics stressed in Calvin's effort to meet the spiritual needs of God's people. One of these is the stress on Providence.

⁵⁷ ICR III.23.2.

⁵⁸ CALVIN, *Tracts and Letters*, Vol. 2, 40: CO 6:15.

⁵⁹ It needs only to highlight that the locution «Dieu gouverne» occurs 25 times in the *Sermons on Job*: For instance in CO 33:257, 551, 584, 592, 594, 598; CO 34:20, 52, 204, 221, 222, 370, 404, 407, 428; CO 35:70, 246, 254; 255, 256, 266, 334, 478, 483.

The doctrine of God's all-inclusive Providence is a staple in feeding the hungry of heart. It is balm for every wound. One feels that it is basic to every sermon and it comes out in one way or another in a majority of them. Providence is understandably prominent in the *Sermons on Job*. Job must come to rest in the ultimate goodness of the divine purpose, wrought by a strange and vexing plan»⁶⁰.

Instead of being the conclusion of abstract speculation, detached from daily concerns, the doctrine of Providence can be understood only in the wider context of the sixteenth century, in which the belief that «God governs and that all things are directed by His guiding and Providence»⁶¹ was «under attack»⁶². Some years before, in the 1539 edition of *The Institutes*, Calvin had insisted that «ignorance of Providence is the greatest of miseries; the knowledge of it is attended with the highest felicity»⁶³. In order to stress its further practical implications he entitled the second chapter on Providence significantly: «How we may apply this doctrine to our benefit»⁶⁴. In a period of deep predicament, he was convinced that faith in God's governance could be a source of release and encouragement. Being fully aware that one of the critical temptations to which believers might succumb, when they are suffering without apparent reason, is nihilism, he repeatedly stated that without God's Providence, life would be unbearable⁶⁵.

Calvin did not develop his doctrine of Providence in a *vacuum*. A long series of debates had preceded him. The doctrine of God's Providence came out gradually as a consequence of Predestination. Yet another element contributed to the establishment of this doctrine. In Calvin's opinion the belief that God created the world would be incomplete and illogical without being associated with the axiom of God's rule. Even the mere suspicion that something could happen by chance⁶⁶ was intolerable for Calvin, although he recognized that believers are led into such a temptation when they look at the apparent disorder and injustice of the world. In Sermon 91 he singled out this state of mind:

«I have said already, that it is a very sore temptation to the faithful, when things are confused in the world, so as it may seem that God meddles no more with them, but that fortune rules and governs all things. And this has been the cause of all these devils proverbs, that all things are

⁶⁰ H. DEKKER, *Sermons on Job*, trans. L. Nixon, Grand Rapids 1979, XXX.

⁶¹ *Sermons on Job*, 372: CO 34:222.

⁶² S. SCHREINER, *The Theatre of His Glory*, Grand Rapids 1995, 16-37.

⁶³ In CO 1:900.

⁶⁴ In CO 3:249.

⁶⁵ ICR I.17.10.

⁶⁶ In the *Sermons on Job* the references to the risk of believing in chance are more extremely frequent in the most various contexts of time and situations.

tossed by casual fortune, that things are blindly guided, that God plays with men as with tennis ball, that there is neither reason, nor measure in His doings, but rather that all things are governed by a certain secrete necessity and that God vouchsafes not to think upon us»⁶⁷.

The statement according to which God would be only a «temporary creator», who after creation would leave the world and history to go their own way, not only portrays a crude and cold description of God's creative work, but also imperils His honor, since it implies the existence of another god. Sermon 130 stigmatized this point of view with unmistakable accents:

«Therefore when we call God the maker of heaven and earth, we must not restrain it to one instant; but we must bear in mind that like as God has framed the world so all power is still in Him and He disposes things here beneath, so as He has a care of us and the hears of our head are numbered, yea He guides our footsteps, so as nothing cometh to pass which is not fore appointed by His Providence. Then if we imagine that God governs not all things, but that some things happen by chance and fortune, it follows that fortune is a Goddess that has created part of the world, and so is not all praise due to God alone. It were a cursed blasphemy if we should think that the devil could do anything without God's leave. Therefore let us learn that there is an inseparable bond between these two things: namely that God created all things and He governs all things»⁶⁸.

Calvin held that «the word *Creator* implies that God has done everything in such a way that all power and sovereign dominion must remain His»⁶⁹. God upholds universe and history and His Power shines forth in keeping order, in restraining the destructive forces of nature and in bridling the wicked. Contrary to the Aristotelian idea according to which God is only the first mover, Calvin assumed that God does not limit Himself to observe what happens, but governs and leads all events.

The French Reformer stated that the hypothesis of those who «babble to destroy or to restrain God's Providence»⁷⁰ would be «a very slender and cold tale»⁷¹. A God, who would simply create a universe, without being involved in its conservation, would cease to be God, as Calvin repeatedly highlighted:

«The philosophers can well say, that God has created and fashioned us and that we have our being of Him, but therewithal they are of the opinion that after God has set us in our race every man guides and governs himself. Lo how they deface the goodness and power of God»⁷².

⁶⁷ *Sermons on Job*, 427: CO 34:371.

⁶⁸ *Sermons on Job*, 614: CO 35:151.

⁶⁹ *Sermons on Job*, 26: CO 33:99.

⁷⁰ *Sermons on Job*, 221.

⁷¹ *Sermons on Job*, 685: CO 35:341.

⁷² *Sermons on Job*, 184: CO 33:491.

Undoubtedly with the words «God has set us in our race», Calvin intended to challenge the Aristotelian principle of *prima movens*. God has not only given a general impulse to nature, but governs the world by His Providence. «His majesty is spread through the whole world»⁷³. God has to be conceived not only as the maker of the world, but also as a Father⁷⁴, since the denial of His fatherhood would entail the collapse of any moral system. The dissolute attitude of the Libertines and Epicureans was nothing other than the sheer consequence of a philosophy which wished to put aside God, as Calvin one aptly pointed out:

«The women that have no children and the widows are the preys that wicked men hunt after, because they think there is no body to withstand them, and that they may do what they will, without regard to God, who names Himself the defender of the widows»⁷⁵.

Undoubtedly, there was, in Calvin's opinion, a close relationship between Aristotle and the Epicureans. Despite starting from different premises, they had a «horrible blasphemy» as common denominator, namely to think that man «is master of his own life» and that «God shall not meddle with commanding him anything»⁷⁶.

Calvin sought to avoid the risk that God could be conceived deistically, as an impersonal and distant entity, since, so he pointed out, «His immortal being and His authority of governing are things inseparable»⁷⁷. Faith in creation implies a belief in divine governance. God's decision, alone, is the basis of everything that occurs in the world. God is the cause and source of all motion and there is not multiplicity of decisions-makers. He did not hesitate to term as a «beastly» the opinion of those, who would shut God out of this word⁷⁸. By making recourse to the juridical jargon, Calvin stated that God exercises a «sovereign jurisdiction»⁷⁹, when He controls the universe and history. Consequently, the three aspects wherein God's Providence can be substantiated are, in Calvin's opinion, creation (*creatio*), preservation (*sustentatio*) and government (*gubernatio*).

Although Calvin did not go into detail in his *Sermons on Job* about the way God's Providence operates, he assumed *de facto* the distinction he had already made in his treatise *Contre la secte phantastique et furieuse des Libertines* between a General Providence and a Particular Providence. He exhorted the believers to contemplate «the

⁷³ *Sermons on Job*, 398: CO 34:294.

⁷⁴ *Sermons on Job*, 677.

⁷⁵ *Sermons on Job*, 436: CO 34:396.

⁷⁶ *Sermons on Job*, 526-27: CO 34:637.

⁷⁷ *Sermons on Job*, 613: CO 35:150.

⁷⁸ *Sermons on Job*, 401: CO 34:301.

⁷⁹ *Sermons on Job*, 264: CO 35:173.

Providence of God in the order of nature»⁸⁰. He maintained that all natural events, even the movements of stars, are not due to causes operating independently of God, but to the incessant action of God's will⁸¹. The idea of ascribing to God every natural event, from the rising of the sun to the rain and drought found its highest expression when he termed them as «His artilleries, His spears and His swords wherewith to fight against His enemies»⁸².

Calvin called into question God even in natural catastrophes, reminding that God can «chastise the world by rain, heat, cold tempests, storms and even dearth»⁸³. Although «the philosophers can well bring reason, that it has some beginning, and that is disposed by some inferior causes», he asked: «do not the chastisements that God sends upon us, come of Him?»⁸⁴. Even the forces of nature are controlled by God, as he repeatedly highlighted: «Moreover, as oft as we hear it thunder, let us understand that it is a found which proceeds from the mouth of God»⁸⁵. «Although the stars have their natural courses and properties, yet notwithstanding they be not driven by their own power, neither do they give influence to the world otherwise than as God commanded them, so that they obey His sovereign dominion which He hath over His creatures»⁸⁶.

In Sermon 96 the French Reformer, after having stated that «God is above the order of nature»⁸⁷, warned that in the alteration that are in heaven, and in earth, we have to think that God is not idle in heaven and He has not created the world once, and afterwards to let it alone there, but also He disposes all things and guides His creation⁸⁸.

He also sharply stigmatized the tendency of human beings to attribute the cause of natural disasters to «some misfortune or evil fortune»⁸⁹. «This manner of speech», he wrote, «proceeds of that we look ever at that which is nearest hand, and can mount no higher to know that all things are of God's disposing»⁹⁰. If the believers know God's Providence which reigns above all worldly means», they should not be astonished «to see a plague to depopulate a country, or if there happen a famine, or if

⁸⁰ *Sermons on Job*, 682: CO 35:334.

⁸¹ CO 35:401-402.

⁸² *Sermons on Job*, 704: CO 35:393.

⁸³ *Sermons on Job*, 682: CO 35:335.

⁸⁴ *Sermons on Job*, 682: CO 35:335.

⁸⁵ *Sermons on Job*, 677: CO 35:401.

⁸⁶ *Sermons on Job*, 708: CO 35:321.

⁸⁷ *Sermons on Job*, 449-450: CO 34:432.

⁸⁸ *Sermons on Job*, 450: CO 34: 432-433.

⁸⁹ *Sermons on Job*, 330: CO 34:111.

⁹⁰ *Sermons on Job*, 330: CO 34:111.

the land that has been fruitful becomes barren»⁹¹. To assume that God would allow «all things by a free course to be borne along according to a universal law of nature» would it tantamount to «defraud God of His Glory»⁹².

The Providence of God also rules the wider universe, as Calvin reminded in Sermon 150:

«Although the stars have their natural courses and properties, yet notwithstanding they are not driven by their own power neither do they give influence to the world, otherwise than God commands them, so as they obey His sovereign dominion which He has over all creatures»⁹³.

Even in this case Calvin concluded his sermon by inviting his listeners «not to learn to gaze at the stars as though they had power of themselves to do either good or harm»⁹⁴.

Excluded by the order of nature, chance plays no role even in history, as Calvin made unmistakably clear, when he wrote that «the changes and turnings in the world come not to pass by haphazard, but by God's volition»⁹⁵, and «are to be attributed «upon the hand of God»⁹⁶. In Sermon 47 a deep sense of astonishment caught him when, through a careful analysis of the events of the past starting from the Assyrians to the Roman Empire as well as of the present, he recognized that only the Providence of God and not chance is «the cause why so great alterations happened in the world»⁹⁷.

«When a man reads the Chronicles, he would wonder how it should be possible, that whereas had been so great monarchies, things have been overthrown in so small time and after so strange fashion that nobody would ever have thought»⁹⁸.

Other times his sense of wonder was overwhelmed by a deep sense of disquiet. If God disposes all things in the world, how is it possible to believe that He stirs up wars and persecutions⁹⁹? Keenly aware that the term, «General Providence», used in his previous treatise *Contre la secte phantastique et furieuse des Libertines* could give the impression that only major historical events are under the Providence of God, the French Reformer stressed that every single creature, as well as every futile event

⁹¹ *Sermons on Job*, 614: CO 35:178-179. See also CO 35:335.

⁹² ICR I.16.3.

⁹³ *Sermons on Job*, 708: CO 35:401.

⁹⁴ *Sermons on Job*, 708: CO 35:401.

⁹⁵ *Sermons on Job*, 213: CO 33:593.

⁹⁶ *Sermons on Job*, 472: CO 34:492.

⁹⁷ *Sermons on Job*, 222: CO 33:595.

⁹⁸ *Sermons on Job*, 213.

⁹⁹ *Sermons on Job*, 189: CO 33:503.

of human life remain under «God's wings»¹⁰⁰. Far from disagreeing with the idea of a General Providence where God sustains the universe, Calvin was firmly convinced God rules not only the most important events of history but even the lives and destinies of human beings, and that «we are not governed by fortune, but God has an eye upon us and full authority over us»¹⁰¹. In Sermon 90, after having reminded that God's Providence «extends even to the sparrows, and to the worms of the earth»¹⁰², he pointed out that, when God did put us into the world, it was not to let us walk at all adventure, but He determined what should become both of our life and of our death¹⁰³.

By rejecting chance and stressing that God is not «idle»¹⁰⁴, Calvin emphasized that the entire spectrum of events both natural and historical is ruled by God. And in doing so, he kept two basic biblical principles: God rules and governs nature and history, but at the same time He is distinct from them. With the first principle, he attacked the Epicureans, who hold that world is floating randomly¹⁰⁵. With the second principle, he distanced himself from the Stoics who identified God with natural processes. In Calvin's opinion God rules creation, but He does not identify with it.

Whilst pointing out that universe and history are ruled by the divine Providence, Calvin was adamant in refusing the possibility of restricting Providence to the bare prevision of the future events. Omniscience represents the other side of Omnipotence. When God created the world, everything was present in His mind.

The concept of Providence involves that not only God foresees the future, but also guides and governs everything, as Calvin made unmistakably clear in Sermon 130:

«We must consider God's Providence: namely that He has a care of the whole world and watches over all His creatures, not only to foresee what may happen, but also that nothing may be done which He has no determined, so as His will is the rule of all things»¹⁰⁶.

¹⁰⁰ *Sermons on Job*, 624: CO 35:181.

¹⁰¹ *Sermons on Job*, 14: CO 33:57.

¹⁰² *Sermons on Job*, 423.

¹⁰³ *Sermons on Job*, 423: CO 34:361.

¹⁰⁴ *Sermons on Job*, 15: CO 33:58; CO 33:194; CO 34:174 and 432.

¹⁰⁵ Patrick H. Reardon summed up the distinction between these two philosophies: «The Epicureans lived in a world in which they were totally free, because there was neither meaning nor pattern in which to work out the terms of one's existence. They were like men at sea on a boat with no shore. The Stoics inhabited a world in which there was, if you will, too much meaning. Man could put no more in it. Everything was programmed and happened on schedule. They were like men in a boat tied at the shore. The Epicureans could go nowhere, as there was nowhere to go. The Stoics could go nowhere, because their craft was tied in a cosmological blueprint»: P. H. REARDON, *Calvin on Providence: The Development of the Insight*, in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28 (1975) 525.

¹⁰⁶ *Sermons on Job*, 614: CO 35:153.

In accordance with these principles Calvin frequently denied any form of contingency. Nothing happens by chance or accident, or without God's Providence. There are no mere contingencies or possibilities relative to God. For Calvin, the negation of any form of Epicureism is essential for the Christian faith. As Torrance Kirby points out, for Calvin «to affirm Epicurus's swerve is to deny that all events are governed by the secret counsel of God, and is tantamount to atheism. This doubtless accounts for Calvin's vituperative dismissal of Lucretius as that *filthy dog*»¹⁰⁷. Calvin repeatedly pointed out that «God were not Almighty if things might be done in this world against His will and without meddling them»¹⁰⁸. He held as unacceptable and even blasphemous the idea that something could happen by chance and repeatedly warned, «God is above all this common order of nature, so that He can work after a fashion that is new and strange to us»¹⁰⁹.

Contrary to what Satan's craftiness leads us to believe, that «God fights against us»¹¹⁰,

«everything is in the hands of a loving Father who takes care of us. Whereby He does us to understand that we are not governed here by fortune and haphazard. And why? For God had determined what shall befall us. When He did put us into the world, it was not to let us loose at rovers, and let us walk at all adventure, but he determined what should become both of our life and of our death. Therefore let us understand, that we walk in such wise under the guiding of our God, that there cannot one hear fall from our head, but by His good will. For His Providence extend even to the sparrows, and to the worms of the earth: what does it unto us whom He esteems much more, as whom He has created and shaped after His own image and likeness?»¹¹¹.

Every fact, every seemingly irrelevant event proceeds necessarily from God's Will, as Calvin recognized when he provocatively asked: «Shall God be careful for a flea, for a worm, for a bird of the air and for this and for that?»¹¹².

On the basis of the premise that it is unthinkable to believe that «Satan can overcome his maker»¹¹³, Calvin was adamant when confronting his listeners with the dreadful consequences that would have resulted from the negation of God's Providence. If divine Providence would not exist, the world would decay early and come to nothing, as he pointed out in Sermon 130:

¹⁰⁷ ICR I.5.5. W. J. TORRANCE KIRBY, *Stoic and Epicurean? Calvin's Dialectical Account of Providence in the «Institute»*, in *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5/3 (2003) 309.

¹⁰⁸ CO 33:586.

¹⁰⁹ *Sermons on Job*, 281-82: CO 34:248.

¹¹⁰ *Sermons on Job*, 24: CO 33:82.

¹¹¹ *Sermons on Job*, 423: CO 34:361.

¹¹² *Sermons on Job*, 401: CO 34:300.

¹¹³ *Sermons on Job*, 36: CO 33:111.

«We see then that the creatures continue no longer in their being, then it pleases God to maintain them: and that as soon as He withdraws that power by and by all returns to nothing»¹¹⁴.

Sometimes Calvin gave to understand that Providence could be easily inferred from the visible tokens of God's presence. In the *Treatise on the Secret Providence of God* he exhorted his listeners in this direction:

«For marvellous are the judgements of God, in punishing the wicked, in teaching the faithful patience and crucifying their flesh, in purging out the wickedness of the world, in awakening the sleep and sloth of many, in breaking down the arrogance of the proud, in making the wisdom of the wise a laughing-stock; at another and in destroying the machinations of the malicious. The surpassing goodness of God is brightly displayed in succoring the distressed, in protecting and defending the cause of the innocent, and in coming to the assistance of those who are in despair of all help»¹¹⁵.

Although Calvin constantly refused to consider Providence as an empirical doctrine¹¹⁶ and strongly criticized the opinion of Job's friends, sometimes he seemed to adhere to the idea that through the eyes of faith the believers could get some unmistakable signs of the divine Justice. Sermon 153 reflects this point of view, when Calvin provocatively asked:

«Can we deny the Providence of God? Can we abolish His power which shows itself? Can we say that He has not done and disposed all things with wisdom? Again, can we displace His justice which appears to us matched with His goodness and wisdom? Can we bring any of these things to pass? No it is impossible»¹¹⁷.

In spite of these statements which can give the impression that divine Providence could be *sic et simpliciter* be understood by a general contemplation of the created order, more often Calvin was less optimistic and could not help but recognize that the apparent chaos of history constitutes a serious obstacle to understand the dialectical dimension of God's Providence. While the righteous suffer, the wicked thrive and have success. Although «the universe reflects the glory of God», as S. Schreiner points out, history «is awash in blood»¹¹⁸. It was for this reason that, as Gerrish

¹¹⁴ *Sermons on Job*, 615: CO 35:154.

¹¹⁵ The English translation of this *Treatise* in H. HOEKSEMA, *Calvin's Calvinism*, Grand Rapids 1996, 225. The original text in CO 8:255-256.

¹¹⁶ S. E. SCHREINER, *Through a mirror dimly, Calvin's Sermons on Job*, in *Calvin Theological Journal* 21 (1986) 180.

¹¹⁷ *Sermons on Job*, 722: CO 35:438.

¹¹⁸ S. E. SCHREINER, *Through a mirror dimly, Calvin's Sermons on Job*, 183.

points out, «Calvin's doctrine of Providence was in fact developed despite God's Hiddenness»¹¹⁹.

3. The nature of evil in Calvin's interpretation of Augustine

In entering into the controversial question of the nature of evil, Calvin was dealing with the mainstream tradition, represented by Augustine. In his exhaustive essay *Saint Augustin dans l'oeuvre de Jean Calvin*¹²⁰, Luchsius Smits of Louvain underlined and fully documented the French Reformer's great indebtedness to Augustine by emphasizing the extensive influence of his thought on the entire theological corpus of Calvin. As Horton Davies points out, «Calvin's works reveal a total of 4119 references to Augustine: 1175 in the *Institutes*, 2214 in other theological treatises, 504 in the commentaries, 47 in the letters, 33 in the sermons, and 146 in the letters of authors cited by Augustine that Calvin used»¹²¹. In the Treatises on *The Eternal Predestination* and on *The Secret Providence of God*, which are of utmost importance to understand Calvin's teaching on these sensible questions, the references are around 120. No other theologian elicited as much esteem as Augustine whom Calvin often referred to as *Totus Noster*¹²². Nevertheless, if Calvin's indebtedness to Augustine remains unquestionable, any reference to Augustinian theodicy – evil being a mere *privatio boni*, conceived as *deprivatio*, *corruptio*, *amissio*, *vitium*, *defectus*, *indigentia* and *negatio*¹²³ seems to have passed unnoticed.

Did Calvin have difficulties following his great master on this question? In order to answer this question, it is worth quoting the only two references to the privative conception of evil shared by Augustine. In the first text, *The Treatise Against the*

¹¹⁹ B. A. GERRISH, *To the Unknown God: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God*, in in *The Journal of Religion* 53/3 (1973) 142.

¹²⁰ L. SMITS, *Saint Augustin dans l'oeuvre de Jean Calvin*, Assen 1957, 8.

¹²¹ H. DAVIES, *The Vigilant God*, New York 1992, 110.

¹²² In *De Aeterna Praedestinatione Consensus*, Calvin wrote: «Porro Augustinus ipse adeo totus noster est, ut si mihi confessio scribenda sit, ex eius scriptis contextam proferre, abunde mihi sufficiat». CO 8:266. Other references quoted by L. Smits are CO 6:287, 292, 301, 317, 319, 326, 330, 353, 359; CO 8:266 and CO 9:149 in *Saint Augustin dans l'oeuvre de Jean Calvin*, 117.

¹²³ Augustine wrote: «And I inquired what iniquity was, and ascertained it not to be a substance, but a perversion of the will, bent aside from Thee, O God, the Supreme Substance, towards these lower things, and casting out its bowels and swelling outwardly...For what is that which we call evil but the absence of good». Confessions 7. 16. 104. Various theologians of the past have held a privative view of evil, like ORIGEN, *De Principiis*, II, 9, 2 and *Commentary on St. John*, II.13; ATHANASIUS, *Contra Gentes*, chapter VII and *De Incarnatione*, IV, 5 not to mention BASIL THE GREAT, *Hexameron*, homily 2, par. 4; and GREGORY OF NYSSA, *The Great Catechism*, ch. VII.

*Fantastic and Furious Sect of the Libertines, who are Called Spirituals*¹²⁴, John Calvin dissociated himself very sharply from the point of view held by this group, writing:

«Someone might well ask, “What then is their opinion of the devil?” My reply is that they use the title and speak of him, but in accordance with their meaning. For they interpret’ the “devil”, the “world”, and “sin” as an imagination that is nonexistent¹²⁵. And they say that man is such until he is remolded in their sect. For this reason they understand all of these things under a single word, i.e., imagination. By this they mean that whenever we think of the devil or of sin, these are only frivolous fantasies which we have conceived. And not only do they speak of devils as they do angels-taking them as inspirations without essence but they think they are only vain thoughts which we ought to forget as dreams»¹²⁶.

The Libertines held that God determines all our actions. According to this perspective evil is only an illusion, since all that happens depends on God. The central tenet of Libertine dogma resided in the word «cuider» which could be translated by the verb «to believe» («croire») or by the nouns «belief» or «opinion» («croyance» or «opinion»). Evil is «cuider» because it is only a creation of human imagination or fantasy and does not represent an autonomous reality¹²⁷. Calvin was clear that one of the greatest temptations that confronts the believers is to believe that evil is merely something subjective. Convinced that the consequence of this pantheistic determinism is the downplaying of the tragic and devastating reality of evil and making God author of sin, Calvin tried to discredit the Libertine theology by showing its incompatibility with biblical revelation. He wrote:

«As for sin, they do not simply say that it is a privation of good, but in their estimation it is a notion that evaporates and is gone once we move on to something else. In brief, they speak of these things in the same manner that Saint Paul speaks of idols. For when he says that “an idol is nothing” (I Cor. 8:4), he means that it exists only as a conception, without reason or foundation, in the minds of the ignorant. Therefore we can dismiss it»¹²⁸.

The risk underlying this position, in Calvin’s opinion, was to eliminate any distinction not only between good and evil, but also between God and the devil. On the

¹²⁴ J. CALVIN, *Contre la Secte Fantastique et furieuse des Libertines que se nomment Spirituelz*, in CO 7:149-248.

¹²⁵ Here I do not follow the version of Benjamin Wirt Farley, who translated: «as imagining something to be real that is nonexistent».

¹²⁶ J. CALVIN, *Treatises against the Anabaptists and again the Libertines*, Grand Rapids 1982, 235. CO 7:181.

¹²⁷ This point of view is shared by *Christian Science*, which was founded by Mrs. Mary Baker Eddy. She maintained that evil is an illusion with no real basis and that», the only reality of sin, sickness and death is the awful fact that unrealities seem real to human, erring belief»: M. BAKER EDDY, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, Boston 1934, 480.

¹²⁸ CALVIN, *Treatises against the Anabaptists and again the Libertines*, 235: CO 7:181.

contrary, as Calvin pointed out, «the Scripture teaches us that devils are evil spirits that constantly war against us in order to lead us into perdition»¹²⁹.

Far from being autonomous entities Calvin assumed the instrumental character of evil spirits «are mere instruments of the wrath of God and his executioners»¹³⁰, denying the objection that his conclusions could entail the risk to fall into dualism.

Undoubtedly, the *Treatise against the Libertines* represents the most resolute negation of a form of mechanical determinism in favor of the principle of secondary causation. Calvin felt obliged to go back to the theme of the reality of evil in the wider context of God's Providence in the Treatise *The Secret Providence of God*¹³¹ which was published in 1558. Even here, in order to avoid the constant underlying risk of dualism, Calvin made recourse to his dialectics by distinguishing between cause and authorship: Whereas «the will of God is the great cause of all things that are done in the whole world», he wrote, «God is not the author of the evils that are done therein»¹³². Fully aware of the questionability of such statement, Calvin did not take refuge as in the past in Augustine:

«But I will not say with Augustine, which, however, I readily acknowledge to have been truly said by him: "In sin or in evil, there is nothing positive. For this is an acuteness of argument which, to many, may not be satisfactory"»¹³³.

How is it possible to interpret this statement in the wider context of Calvin's theology? Whereas Allen Fitzgerald held that «the mildness with which Calvin rejects the teaching, suggests that he did not think it worth of serious refutation»¹³⁴, Lange Van Ravenswaay suggested that the French Reformer, being uncomfortable in criticizing his great master Augustine, tried at least to avoid contradicting him¹³⁵.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ The English translation of this treatise in H. HOEKSEMA, *Calvin's Calvinism*. The original text in CO 8:255-256.

¹³² H. HOEKSEMA, *Calvin's Calvinism*, 233; CO 8:353: «Primo loco videndum est, quomodo Dei voluntas rerum omnium quae in mundo geruntur causa sit: neque tamen malorum autor sit Deus».

¹³³ H. HOEKSEMA, *Calvin's Calvinism*, 233; CO 8:353: «Non dicam cum Augustino, quod tamen ut vere ab eo dictum libenter amplector: In peccato, sive in malo, nihil esse positivum. Est enim argutia, quae multis non satisfaceret».

¹³⁴ A. FITZGERALD, *Augustine through the Ages*, Grand Rapids 1999, 119. He further adds that «Calvin made such sparing use of Augustine's voluminous anti Manichean literature is presumably to be traced to Calvin's hesitations concerning the grand principles that dominated it: *malum ist privatio boni*».

¹³⁵ L. VAN RAVENSWAAY, *Augustinus Totus Noster, das Augustin Verständnis bei Johannes Calvin*, Göttingen 1990, 100. He writes: «Die Formulierung zeigen deutlich, wie schwer Calvin die Kritik am Kirchenvater hier fällt und wie geschickt er sie anderseits zu verdecken sucht. Obwohl Calvins Lösung der Beschreibung des Bösen ganz anders aussieht, gibt er so dennoch vor, Augustin im Grundsatz nicht zu widersprechen».

I would dare to suggest another interpretation. Calvin was very far from being tactful and whenever he desired to distance himself from Augustine, he did not have the slightest hesitation¹³⁶. Already in other works he recognized the acuteness of Augustine arguments¹³⁷. Here there is more than the simple desire to refrain from contradicting his great master Augustine. In the words *argutia* and *vere ab eo* he was ready to recognize the sharpness and the exactness of this argument. Yet unlike the Reformer Peter Martyr Vermigli, who adhered *sic et simpliciter* to the Augustinian perspective¹³⁸, Calvin held that the statement *in peccato, sive in malo, nihil esse positivum* is far from being satisfactory and exhaustive. In fact, if «the will of God is the great cause of all things», as he had stated before, there must be another and more significant reason to discharge God from any responsibility in causing evil, as Calvin pointed out:

«I would rather assume another principle of argument, and say, those things which are vainly or unrighteously done by man are, rightly and righteously, the works of God!»¹³⁹.

Calvin aimed to integrate Augustine's statement, rather than to contradict him. He deemed that the privative conception of evil, right in itself, could not be an exhaustive defense of God's Justice. In other words, to single out in evil a *privatio boni* could be, in Calvin's opinion, a necessary starting point, but not the conclusion of a proper theodicy. From Calvin's statement some conclusions can be gleaned:

- 1) Evil does not have an ontological hypostasis and consequently any dualistic solution to the problem of theodicy is firmly excluded. Only God is responsible for whatsoever happens in universe and history.

¹³⁶ CO 2:966; «Nec recipienda est illa Augustini argutia, in spe dimissa fuisse peccata baptismo Ioannis, Christi baptismo re ipsa dimitti».

¹³⁷ In his *Commentary on the Book of Ephesians* he recognized the acuteness (*argutia*) of Augustine, although he did not share his opinion: «Augustine is quite delighted with his own acuteness, which throws no light on the subject. Endeavoring to discover some kind of mysterious allusion to the figure of the cross, he makes the *breadth* to be love, — the *height*, hope, — the *length*, patience, and the *depth*, humility. This is very ingenious and entertaining: but what does it have to do with Paul's meaning?» (vol. XXI), 263.

¹³⁸ «I will say something about evil, the genus under which sin is included. Evil is a lack (*privatio*), I mean of goodness; not of all goodness, but of such a good as is required for the perfection of the creature... as a privation, evil cannot exist without good, for it must have a subject. Since a subject is a substance (*natura*), it is good; so evil can exist only in some good; blindness is a deprivation of sight; it does not hang in the air, but stays in the eye»: P. M. VERMIGLI, *Whether God is the author of Sin. Scholium on 2 Sam. 16*, in *Philosophical Works*, vol. 4, trans., by J. P. McLelland, Kirkville 1996, 223, quoted by P. HELM, *John Calvin Ideas*, Oxford 2004, 117.

¹³⁹ H. HOEKSEMA, *Calvin's Calvinism*, 233: CO 8:353: «Sed aliud mihi principium sumo: Quae perperam et iniuste ab hominibus fiunt, eadem recta et iusta esse Dei opera».

- 2) Evil and sin are quite synonymous concepts, in the sense that evil is nothing else as an act.
- 3) An act is in itself neither good nor evil.
- 4) The only criterion to distinguish whether an act is good or evil is related to the person who performs it: whatsoever God is doing is righteous by that fact alone, whereas whatsoever man is doing and will to be is sinful and evil.

These elements constituted the background of the *Sermons on the book of Job*, in which Calvin faced the ticklish problem of the relationship between God and the Devil.

Strange as it might seem, in his homiletic production Calvin was not interested in answering the question of how it was possible that a perversion could have occurred in the good creation of God.

Calvin did not take on the traditional distinction between metaphysical, physical and moral evil. Undoubtedly, he did not ignore the natural tragedies¹⁴⁰. Yet it was essentially the moral evil, perpetrated by the evildoers that deeply upset him: cruelty, injustice, brutality and perversion. Echoing his great master Augustine, he was convinced that the greatest part of evil in the world is caused by human beings. Therefore, moral evil turns out to be the consequence of transgression of God's commandments¹⁴¹, whereas metaphysical and physical evil are only God's just punishment and the consequences of sin.

From the above considerations it is plain that Calvin entirely shared the Augustinian perspective of evil as a *privatio boni* and of sin as an *actus*. It is also worth noting that Calvin, even assuming some basic tenets of Augustinian theology, did not share every speculative and neo-platonic aspect of his thought. He did not utter a word on the principle of plenitude, that is to say, the idea that the most rich and valuable universe is one exemplifying every possible kind of existence, lower as well as higher, ugly as well as beautify, imperfect as well as perfect.

¹⁴⁰ CO 35:377. See also CO 35:335.

¹⁴¹ In Sermon 18 he stated: «Things fall not out by chance in this world, nor that it is long of the earth, air or heaven that men are afflicted, but that men bear their bane in themselves... so that all the mischief cometh of ourselves». *Sermons on Job*, 83: CO 33:232.

Abstract

Calvin's Theodicy has been substantially ignored or simply negated until now on the assumption that the issues raised by the modern problem of evil and Calvin's discussion on Providence and evil are different. The unspoken premise underlying this conviction is that theodicy would be a modern problem, since earlier formulations in no way attempted to justify God's actions. The goal of the present article decisively goes in the opposite direction. It aims to shed light on the doctrine on Providence of God which constitutes the basic presupposition of Calvin's attempt to defend God's justice.

