

CALVIN AT THE CENTRE by Paul Helm (Oxford University Press, 2009) Pp.x + 368, £68.00

There is an old bumper sticker that contains a light-hearted prayer for protection: "God, save me from your followers!" In a fourth and (confessedly) final book on Calvin, Paul Helm turns again to the great French reformer to save him from his followers and from detractors of various sorts. According to Helm, *Calvin at the Centre* deepens and extends the "approach to Calvin's thought" found in Helm's 2004 book, *John Calvin's Ideas*. In both books, Helm offers closely argued readings of Calvin's positions on a wide range of difficult issues. His method for doing this is, in a sense, historical, as it relies on comparisons among Calvin and his forebears and successors. Yet Helm is cordially indifferent to questions of actual historical influence flowing to or from Calvin. For example, Helm finds it useful to read Anselm and Descartes alongside Calvin, whether or not either figure bears real genealogical connections to Calvin. Helm is content to use historical comparisons to set Calvin in relief against non-Calvinian positions and to explore intellectual affinities that bring forward characteristic features of Helm's genuine Calvin. In this sense, he places Calvin at the "centre" between patristic and medieval theologians on the one hand and modern and early modern thinkers on the other. In particular, Helm toggles between the venerable trio of Augustine, Anselm, and Aquinas, who allow Helm to illuminate the traditional cast of Calvin's thought, and a wide variety of later Calvinists (with Kant and Descartes also included), who permit him to show, by contrast, what Helm believes to be the biblical, humane – and misunderstood – character of Calvin's theology.

Helm's apologetic focus does not prevent him from offering in this book a series of fresh and remarkably creative essays. It rather provides a structure within which to portray the bold thrusts of Calvin's thought while, at the same time, attending to underappreciated moves that kept Calvin tethered to the Bible, the church, and the larger Western theological tradition. In ten very substantial chapters, Helm continues the exposition of Calvin begun in his earlier book. He begins with "The Knowledge of God and of Ourselves" in chapter one, navigating between Augustinian and Cartesian conceptions of self-knowledge to argue for a distinctive Calvinian position based on the ineluctably moral, "immediately reciprocal", quality of God- and self-knowledge. Chapters three ("Scripture, Reason, and Grace"), eight ("Calvin the Compatibilist"), and ten ("Pure Nature and Common Grace") are also philosophically focused. Here Helm explores reason, determinism, and human nature (respectively) by placing Calvin between earlier figures like Aquinas, the Stoics, and Augustine and later ones like Pierre Bayle, John Gill, Jonathan Edwards, and Dutch Calvinists such as Herman Bavinck. On the whole, Calvin's philosophical ideas appear in these chapters to be less extreme, and more positive in their assessment of human capacities, than familiar characterizations of Calvin suggest. Edwards, Bavinck, Bayle, and others, then, are foils to Calvin's bold but sensitive *viae mediae*.

Chapters four ("The Visibility of God"), five ("Providence and Predestination"), six ("The Atonement"), seven ("*Duplex Gratia*"), and nine ("Intermediate States") treat theological topics. Anselm features prominently in the chapter on atonement. Aquinas lurks in the background in several discussions, but Augustine is, for good reason, the most important pre-Calvinian source in these chapters. Helm ranges widely to find modern and early modern interlocutors for Calvin. These include Peter Vermigli on soul sleep and the Eucharist, Turretin on justification and sanctification, the Puritans on the atonement and predestination, and Karl Barth on the hiddenness of God. Because of his firm and admirable control of Reformed theology, Helm succeeds in bringing an eclectic group of figures to bear on illuminating presentations of Calvin's theological ideas. Helm locates Calvin in the sensible middle ground of long-standing controversial discussions,

conceding enough to retain the sharpness of Calvin's ideas (for example on divine unknowability) while separating them carefully from later misconstruals (positing a Calvinian basis for modern agnosticism, for example).

Helm also devotes a chapter to natural philosophy (chapter two: "Descartes and Reformed Theology"). His somewhat tentative argument is that Cartesianism *might have* "provided the philosophical underpinning for the Reformed theological curriculum" (p. 40) in the era of Reformed Orthodoxy even though it did not. As Helm notes, Cartesianism briefly made inroads among Dutch Reformed theologians and Genevan scholars in the seventeenth century. In the end, though, the "Reformed Aristotelianism" of theologians like Gisbert Voetius carried the day. Helm's interest in this material, however, is not simply historiographic. The point is to dissociate Calvin from the (to Helm's mind) rigid and retrograde scholasticism of his followers by suggesting that "Calvin's stance is sufficiently elastic as regards philosophy to permit an eclectic approach" (p. 63). In this way Helm turns an unpromising counter-factual (could Reformed orthodoxy have accommodated Cartesianism?) into an oblique argument for a kind of Calvinian scientific progressivism.

Drawing on an impressive range of canonical and lesser-known figures and also on a deep knowledge of Calvin's writings, Helm offers a moderate portrait of Calvin. Calvin comes into focus as a philosophically astute reformer who never became a philosopher; a forceful, clear-minded biblical interpreter who never became a theologian; a catholic with Thomistic affinities who opposed Rome; a champion of biblical faith but not a scholastic; a modern but not a modernist. This portrait depends on what Helm calls a "cumulative case" (p. 3) for a well-centred Calvin. Interested readers will find a great deal to learn and like in the agile but substantial essays accumulated in this volume. They will also get help in deciding whether a renovated Calvin may yet "speak to us afresh" (p. 3) or whether Calvin's theological legacy is – as essay after essay suggests – central in another way: as symptomatic of the confusions that destabilized the Western church at the time of the Reformation, and which persist in many forms today.

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THE POSSIBILITY OF CHRISTIAN PHILOSOPHY: MAURICE BLONDEL AT THE INTERSECTION OF THEOLOGY AND PHILOSOPHY by Adam C. English (*Routledge*, London and New York, 2007) Pp. x + 144, £80 / \$145 hbk

Few detailed studies exist in English of Catholic philosopher Maurice Blondel. He is best known for his highly controversial 1893 *L'action*, in which he demonstrated the incoherence of any analysis of human action that sought to deny its ultimate grounding in absolute, divine action. In this lucid, concise, well-researched, and carefully-argued study, Adam English extends our horizons forwards through Blondel's later and less well-known *oeuvre*, in particular his later trilogy on thought, being, and action.

For much of his life, Blondel was swimming against two tides: the caustic secularism of the Third Republic *philosophes*, who regarded philosophy as a self-validating, nihilistic discourse, and the neo-Thomism of his own Church, which saw philosophy's function as being to interpret data already provided by revelation. Neither could countenance the possibility that philosophy might lead to knowledge of God. On the contrary, protested Blondel, if the philosopher commences not with ideas but with action, the reverse is proven: that the soul harbours within itself a will to be, which necessarily closes the gap between the will that wills objects in the abstract (the *volonté voulante*) and the will that chooses the concrete purposes actually willed in reality (the *volonté voulue*), and