

## Calvin and the Resignification of the World

Calvin's 1559 *Institutes* is one of the most important works of theology that emerged at a pivotal time in Europe's history. As a movement, Calvinism has often been linked to the emerging features of modernity, especially to capitalism, rationalism, disenchantment, and the formation of the modern sovereign state. In this book, Michelle Chaplin Sanchez argues that a closer reading of the 1559 *Institutes* recalls some of the tensions that marked Calvinism's emergence among refugees, and ultimately opens new ways to understand the more complex ethical and political legacy of Calvinism. In conversation with theorists of practice and signification, she advocates for reading the *Institutes* as a pedagogical text that places the reader in the world as the domain in which to actively pursue the "knowledge of God and ourselves" through participatory uses of divine revelation. Through this lens, she reconceives Calvin's understanding of sovereignty and how it works in relation to the embodied reader. Sanchez also critically examines Calvin's teaching on providence and the incarnation, in conversation with theorists of political theology and modernity who emphasize the importance of those very doctrines.

Michelle Chaplin Sanchez is Associate Professor of Theology at Harvard Divinity School, where she teaches courses on the Protestant Reformations, intersections between Protestant theology and modern philosophy, theories of sovereignty and modernity, and other themes in Christian theology including providence and the existence of God. She has won several teaching awards, and has also published scholarly articles in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, *Journal of Religion*, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, and *Political Theology*.

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# Calvin and the Resignification of the World

*Creation, Incarnation, and the Problem  
of Political Theology in the 1559 Institutes*

MICHELLE CHAPLIN SANCHEZ

*Harvard Divinity School*



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- 1 *Tabula Peutingeriana* (first–fourth century CE). Fascimile by Conradi Millieri (1887–8) [Map] At: <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/50/TabulaPeutingeriana.jpg> (accessed May 9, 2014) *page 64*

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If this is the space for thanking everyone who made vital contributions to this book in ways that are difficult to cite in the footnotes, then it is a task that is both impossible and necessary. A project like this may be watered and fertilized by the scholarly exercises of reading, note-taking, testing ideas, writing, and rewriting. But its soil is life: human relationships; political anxieties; ethical dilemmas; decades of Sundays in churches that have caused me both pain and joy; conversations mundane and accidental that somehow set off a spark in my mind or made me realize I'd been wrong.

Over the course of cultivating this manuscript from dissertation to book draft and finally to publication, I have lost three people who were important to me, and those losses are inscribed in the pages that follow.

First, in 2012, I said goodbye to Professor Ronald F. Thiemann, my first doctoral advisor and the person who first cultivated my eagerness to explore the impossibly complicated living impact of Christian doctrinal writing. I remember sitting in his office one day and running out of words to describe what it meant to see the world through the lens of ideas like providence – to read doctrine with a kind of “translucence” that sees the world only more clearly. He told me he didn't know, but that was what he wanted to do, too – to figure out how to say it and write it. When he died of pancreatic cancer, I had only my dissertation prospectus in hand. But I also had the echo of his voice against which to test these readings as they grew: “Never forget to be dialectical.”

In 2014, soon after I'd defended my dissertation, I said goodbye to my own father. Norm Chaplin was a building contractor who had an Evangelical conversion in 1980, before I was born, and after that he rarely



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missed a Sunday in church. My dad was unfailingly kind and unflinchingly true to himself. He had no time for things airy and intellectual, but he knew when something didn't sit right. Providence was one of those things that didn't sit right. He believed that God was all the things Christians ordinarily believe God to be, but he also bristled at the suggestion that God causes suffering simply for "divine good pleasure." People were too important to my dad, and being faithful to God meant being true to the way Jesus loved people. He taught me that you could be both pious and honest about the things you don't know, and in fact that the two must go together. When I began to ask hard questions about things in college, as one does, my dad felt like the only one who had faith that I would be "just fine" – and he was right, because his faith was always in something bigger than what any one of us can grasp at any one point. And I believe him now about things being "just fine," because watching him suffer and die from dementia taught me that even when things are so far from just fine – so ghastly far – it's possible to love God and the world so much that you'll still be fundamentally at peace with who you are and able to say "let it be" to what has come your way.

Just as I finished the first draft of this book, in late April 2017, my dear friend Lorraine Stanfield was diagnosed with metastatic cancer that took her life less than five months later. She was fifty-six, a physician and a professor known for living and teaching compassionate care; a pastor's wife who stood at some skeptical distance from the faith of the church, but never from its love; a mother who mothered like she sang – like each moment of music was enough to make up for the exhaustion of a full life. On the surface, she didn't have much in common with my dad, but over time I saw the telltale marks: the unfailing kindness, the presence, the unquestioned conviction that people are always more important than ideas and things, the ability to savor life even in pain, to love your own skin because it's what's real and what's sacred.

I've long subscribed to the definition of theology that Marilynne Robinson's character, Lila, puts best in her inner reflection that, "when the Reverend talked about angels . . . the notion helped her to think about certain things." I've found Calvin's theology to be worth reading and writing on because it helps me think about certain things. At the same time, these lives have helped me think about Calvin's theology, setting up the relationship that Calvin himself narrates when he cites Augustine at the close of his final preface: "I count myself one of the number of those who write as they learn and learn as they write."

There are, of course, many others who are indelibly woven into this product of writing and learning and writing. I am grateful to Amy Hollywood, first for taking me under her wing and guiding my dissertation to completion, but also for so much more: for years of honest, warm, and good-humored mentorship that always felt fundamentally like care, as well as for always supplying brilliant questions to provoke better thinking. Mark Jordan, perhaps more than anyone else, has taught me through example what it means to read theology for life – in and beyond its traditional disciplinary bounds – and I am deeply grateful to have his voice among those that guide my thinking in and outside of academic settings. And if this book displays any precision of analysis in its reading of Calvin, that would be thanks to David Lamberth’s sharp early reading and always-informative conversations. His unwavering interest in this project has given me the courage to continue cultivating it at critical times.

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There is another pedagogical space of great importance to me, one without which this book would not have been possible, and that is the community at Fourth Presbyterian Church in South Boston. While no words feel sufficient to describing what it has meant to live life alongside

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such a variety of humanity in that wild and sacred space, I will just say that being at Fourth has taught me what it looks like to relate scriptural words to real bodies and real bodies to scriptural words in ordinary time. As such, it's persuaded me that when a church invites anyone who walks through the door to take up, challenge, and bear the doctrines being preached, this can in fact upset the violence that hegemony has otherwise exerted over those bodies. I am grateful to routinely bear witness to the steady and generous heart of Reverend Burns Stanfield in particular, who week after week allows his own voice and body to serve as the vessel for that divine love that looks first to the outsider, the refugee, the oppressed – the one in a hundred who have wandered away. His love is never pity but the fullest affection for the vast profundity of creation.

Finally, there remain my two loved ones whose contributions to this work are the most ineffable and most important: my mother and my husband. My mom, Jennifer Chaplin, was my first theological interlocutor. She couldn't talk about theology at church at the depth she desired because she was a woman, so she talked to me instead. My husband, Tim Sanchez, came to the church as an adult, as an outsider, and embraced it, having the audacity to respond to the words being spoken even when his own belonging wasn't quickly recognized by others. Over the years, both of them have graced me with endless conversations that shape my thinking about everything – about pain, politics, and what it means to live a truly responsible life. They make me believe that the experience of goodness here on earth is real and worth praying for. I am grateful to my mom for all of this, but also for the more mundane gift of proofreading this work as dissertation, as first draft, and yet again as final draft. I am grateful to Tim for his care for me as a human being. He is the most stable sign through which I daily perceive divine grace. He was also the first person to occasion my awareness of all the more subtle things this book is about: how admitting what we don't know is not a failure, but the condition for the possibility of love.

This book is dedicated to them, and to anyone who hears the words of the gospel from the margins and has the audacity to think that those words refer to them.

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