Was not Protestant reformer John Calvin instrumental in the arrest and execution of physician-theologian Miguel Serveto for anti-Trinitarian heresy in Protestant Geneva in 1553? Without doubt, but in legal historian John Witte’s estimation Calvin also developed “arresting new teachings” (xi) on political authority, liberty, human rights, and church-state relations that shaped the law of Protestant lands. Major crises such as the French Wars of Religion, the Dutch Revolt, the English Civil War, and American colonization regularly challenged Calvin’s original teachings, yet in each one a major Calvinist figure emerged – Theodore Beza, Johannes Althusius, John Milton, John Winthrop, and others – who “modernized” Calvin’s teachings and translated them into “dramatic” new legal and political reforms (xi). According to Witte, Calvinist rights doctrines were gradually cast into enduring institutional and constitutional forms, rendering early modern Calvinism “one of the driving engines of Western constitutionalism” (xi, xii). Many fundamental Western laws on religious and political rights, social and confessional pluralism, and federalism and constitutionalism apparently owe much to this religious tradition.

Witte divides his work into six chapters, the first of which attempts to demonstrate that Calvin laid much of the groundwork for the development of human rights in his work as a religious reformer. While in his early years in Geneva Calvin echoed Luther’s earlier calls for Christian liberty, in his later years he worked out a much fuller theory of law, religion, and human rights – foundational for the ensuing development of Calvinist theories of religious rights. In chapter 2 Witte explores how Calvin’s successor Theodore Beza reworked Calvin’s original rights teachings in response to the French Wars of Religion (1562-1629), especially the Saint Bartholomew’s Day massacre of French Huguenots in 1572. Chapter 3 reveals how Beza’s concern with political covenants and fundamental rights was expanded over the next century in the wake of the Dutch rebellion against Spanish rule. The Dutch Revolt attracted a number of Calvinist theorists, the most notably Johannes Althusius, who systematized the core political and legal teachings of Calvin and Beza while developing his own theory of natural law that layered the Decalogue with other biblical and classical teachings. In chapter 4 Witte explores John...
Milton’s theoretical integration of rights and liberties during the English Civil War of the mid-seventeenth century. While some of Milton’s ideas admittedly strayed beyond Calvinist conventions, in Witte’s view they remained within the tradition and even extended it. Chapter 5 contends that Puritan jurists and theologians in England’s North American colonies expanded and refined prevailing Calvinist views of personal rights into a straightforward theory of authority and liberty, society and politics. Witte’s sixth and final chapter contains concluding reflections on the “biography and biology of liberty” (321) in early modern Calvinism, while also arguing that religion should play a more active role in the cultivation and implementation of human rights in the twenty-first century.

The major virtue of Witte’s work lies in its painstaking effort to clearly track specific notions of political and religious rights in the thinking of the most prominent Calvinist intellectuals in the early modern period. Readers are also provided with an accessible exposition of early Calvinist thought and its relationship to various Western constitutions. In addition, Witte’s attempt to depict the controversial Calvin and his successor Beza in a positive light provides a useful – though perhaps not unquestionable – counterpoint to recent scholarship depicting the Genevan reformers as harsh and unfeeling inquisitors.

Criticism of Witte’s work centers on its progressivist and rather teleological character, as well as its seemingly quick dismissal of historians’ perceptions of the undemocratic nature of sixteenth-century Genevan ecclesiology, chiefly its concentration of power in the Consistory. Specialist historians of sixteenth-century European religious history will justifiably take issue with Witte’s assertion that Calvin urged “respect for the democratic process within the church” (79). Witte’s inclusion of the 1598 Edict of Nantes into the list of “landmark constitutional documents” that “gradually expanded the Western regime of human rights” (2-3) is also somewhat problematic, especially in light of recent scholarship contending that guarantees the Huguenots received under the edict were tentative and provisional, contingent upon continual re-authorization by the French crown. Perhaps most troubling, Witte’s exposition of rights and liberties in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England fails to seriously consider Puritans’ toleration of – and indeed participation in – African slavery and similar conventions of
legal unfreedom. In this specific context, conceptualizations of liberty and human rights were both racialized and hierarchized.

Criticism aside, this ambitious book is highly relevant to scholars and students of both intellectual and religious history, as well as those interested in law, political theory, ethics, and human rights.

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