

## “Supporters of the Devil”<sup>1</sup>: Calvin’s Image of the Libertines

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Among Calvin’s writings are a pair of treatises against two different sects. The first of these, his *Brieve instruction pour armer tous bons fideles contre les erreurs de la secte commune des anabaptistes* appeared in 1544. In 1545, he followed with a polemic against the libertines, *Contre la secte phantastique et furieuse des libertins qui se nomment spirituelz*. In 1547, he published the second edition of the treatise against the libertines, extended with a second part: *Contre la secte phantastique des libertins, avec une epistre contre un cordelier de Roan*.<sup>2</sup> Calvin saw the Anabaptists and libertines as two branches of the same tree, both of which sought to resurrect the old heresy of the Manichees. In fact, Calvin used the Anabaptist doctrine on the incarnation of Christ to reproach them for propagating illusions similar to those the devil had evoked hundreds of years previously: “the Anabaptists, following the example of their predecessors, the Manichees, conclude that Jesus Christ had a heavenly body and was neither formed nor created from human seed, that is, from the substance of the Virgin His mother.”<sup>3</sup> According to Calvin, the libertines had taken over the dualism of the Manichees and shared their basic outlook: “that there is only one spirit who is God, and on the other side is the world; that all creatures are nothing unless the spirit of God, indwelling men, sustains them until it is withdrawn from them; and that all else that men possess that is beyond this is either of the world, or of Satan, or nothing.”<sup>4</sup> Calvin’s opponents, if we are to believe the Reformer, were not only propagating false doctrine, they were subverting social order and posed a threat to human morality. Calvin felt a deep obligation to speak out against these dangerous sects. In his writings, he rises like a prophet to warn readers of how easy

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<sup>1</sup>J. Calvin, *Contre un cordelier*, 1547 (CO 7, 362); J. Calvin, *Sermons sur le deuteronomie*, 1567 (CO 27, sermon 86, 237). Calvin preached on Deuteronomy during 1555 and 1556.

<sup>2</sup>For bibliographical details on these three texts against the Anabaptists and libertines see: J. F. Gilmont and R. Peter, *Bibliotheca Calviniana: Les oeuvres de Jean Calvin publiées au XVIe siècle*, 3 vols. (Genève: Droz, 1991-2000), 44/7; 45/4; 47/7. The *Bibliotheca Calviniana* will be abbreviated BC.

<sup>3</sup>Calvin, *Brieve instruction* (CO 7, 103). The translation is taken from B. Wirt Farley, *John Calvin: Treatises against the Anabaptists and against the Libertines* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982), 115.

<sup>4</sup>Calvin, *Contre la secte . . . des libertins* (CO 7, 158). The translation is taken from Wirt Farley, *John Calvin*, 198.

it would be to fall into bondage to the false doctrines of the libertines and Anabaptists. According to Calvin, these sects were not open and honest but resorted to jargon as a smokescreen to obscure their beliefs.

Calvin's polemical treatises against the libertines and Anabaptists follow a regular pattern.<sup>5</sup> The texts open with a description of the insignificance of Calvin's opponents. They continue with an outline and a refutation of the libertine, or Anabaptist, doctrines. The two polemics conclude with Calvin's declaration that he is right. The entire body of the text is marked by invectives, ranting against the silliness and moral worthlessness of the Anabaptists and libertines. On asserting that his opponents are not worthy of refutation, Calvin goes on to say that the sects have led many simple people astray. He explains that his main objective is to give readers information about the false doctrines of these sects and to arm them with the shield of the Holy Scriptures.

The accuracy of Calvin's portrait of the Anabaptists is easy to investigate, as it can be compared to the self-portrait the Anabaptists presented in the vast body of treatises they published. What is more, it has long been known that Calvin painted them in the darkest possible light, thus creating a one-sided, overly demonized portrait of the sect. We will examine two examples of this here.

Calvin's accusation that the Anabaptists were teaching a community of goods was extremely one-sided, because the vast majority of Anabaptists did not propagate this view.<sup>6</sup> The same applies to Calvin's remarks on the language that the Anabaptists used. Calvin reproached them for obscuring their speech and clouding their conversation. According to Calvin, they jumped from one subject to another, refusing to treat a subject following a certain order. Calvin's treatise targets primarily the "Schleitheim Confession," an Anabaptist confession that was anything but confused.<sup>7</sup> In short, Calvin's polemic against the Anabaptists is not a reliable source of information—either on the views of the Anabaptists or on their behavior.

The reliability of Calvin's portrait of the libertines is far more difficult to corroborate, as our information on the libertines is only second hand. *Libertine* was always a term of abuse, and during the sixteenth century, no one would proclaim himself a libertine.<sup>8</sup> This explains the lack of first-hand information

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<sup>5</sup> On Calvin's rhetoric see F. M. Higman, *The style of John Calvin in his French Polemical Treatises* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967); O. Millet, *Calvin et la dynamique de la Parole: Etude de rhétorique réformée* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1992).

<sup>6</sup> See for example, D. J. Grieser, *Seducers of the Simple Folk: The Polemical War against Anabaptism (1525-1540)*, (Ann Arbor, 1993), 187-91.

<sup>7</sup> Calvin, *Brieve Instruction* (CO 7, 140). [M. Sattler], *Brüderliche vereynigung etzlicher kinder gottes siben artickel betreffend* (Schleitheim, 1527); H. Fast, *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer in der Schweiz* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 1973), 2:26-35.

<sup>8</sup>J.C. Margolin, "Réflexions sur l'emploi du terme libertin au XVI siècle," in *Aspects du libertinisme au XVI siècle: Actes du colloque international de Sommières* (Paris: Philosophique J. Vrin, 1974), 1-33.

on the ideas and identity of the libertines. To this day, we are still largely dependent on Calvin’s writings against them. Consequently, the question of the reliability of his portrait of them gains all the more significance.

The fact that Calvin’s portrait of the Anabaptists is so one-sided may indicate that his image of the libertines is also one-sided. By and large, however, historians have assumed that Calvin’s information is trustworthy. In 1922, Müller proposed that Calvin’s picture of libertines was distorted. According to Müller, this was not Calvin’s fault. The Dutch correspondents who had informed him about libertinism had simply provided him with incorrect information.<sup>9</sup> Seven years later, in 1929, Niesel sought to demonstrate that Müller’s thesis was mistaken. Niesel pointed out that Calvin had not been dependent on these correspondents; he had personally met a number of libertines. Moreover, Niesel compared Calvin’s accusations against the libertines with accusations made by contemporaries and noted a marked similarity.<sup>10</sup> Niesel won the debate. Modern scholars generally sided with him and used Calvin’s *Contre la secte . . . des libertins* as a reliable source of information.

This article seeks to defend Müller’s thesis. In my discussion here, I will demonstrate that Calvin’s picture of libertinism was in fact distorted. Unlike Müller, however, I do not attribute the distortions to misinformation from Calvin’s Dutch correspondents but rather to the type of rhetoric Calvin used. Calvin’s portrait of the libertines fits with contemporary stereotypes on heretics and was largely based on old-church and medieval polemics against them. In light of this, the accuracy of the information Calvin provides cannot be accepted without question. This thesis has far-reaching consequences for scholarship on the libertines, because it changes the picture we have today of sixteenth-century libertinism. In presenting proof for this thesis, I will begin by describing what prompted Calvin to launch this fierce polemic against the libertines.

Reports from the Low Countries about the emergence of sects induced Calvin to write against the libertines. Valérand Poullain, a Flemish-born minister who had been ready to spread one of Calvin’s treatises against the Nicodemites in his home country in 1543, wrote to Calvin about Quintinists’ and Davidjorists’ disturbing the brethren. He asked Calvin to write something against them. To this end, he provided Calvin with information and sent some libertine tracts to Geneva.<sup>11</sup> It appears from Poullain’s letters that Strasbourg Reformer Martin Bucer was also involved in this stand against the libertines.

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<sup>9</sup> K. Müller, “Calvin und die ‘libertiner,’” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 40 (1922): 128-29.

<sup>10</sup> W. Niesel, “Calvin und die libertiner,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 48 (1929): 74.

<sup>11</sup> V. Poullain to Calvin, Strasbourg, May 26, 1544 (Herminjard 9, ep. 1358, 247); Poullain to Calvin, Strasbourg, October 13, 1544 (Herminjard 9, ep. 1398, 342). For more on Poullain’s involvement in Calvin’s anti-Nicodemite polemic, see also M. G. K. van Veen, “*Verschooninghe van de roomsche afgoderye*”: *De polemiek van Calvijn met nicodemieten, in het bijzonder met Coornhert* (Het Goy-Houten: Hes & De Graaf, 2001), 41.

According to Poullain, however, he had written something to the Dutch brethren without contesting the libertines' errors. Indeed, Bucer did take a more moderate view of libertinism and had even been ready to house some of the libertine leaders. In my opinion, Bucer's role is an indication that the libertines were not as heretical as Calvin portrayed them to be.<sup>12</sup>

Other Reformers took a more radical stand toward libertinism than did Bucer. Pierre Viret described it as a dangerous heresy, spreading like an infectious disease, and he hoped that Calvin would take up his pen against them.<sup>13</sup> Calvin's tutor, Guillaume Farel, also advocated decisive action against the libertines. In fact, he wrote Calvin a letter, urging him to stamp them out.<sup>14</sup> In October 1544, Calvin set to the task of writing a treatise against the libertines. In it, he used the information Poullain had given him and tried to refute the Quintinists and their leaders, Quintin Thiery and Antoine Poquet. In *Contre les libertines*, Calvin mentioned a number of writings by these leaders. Unfortunately, because these writings have been lost, we cannot use them as a reference point for studying the accuracy of Calvin's portrait of the libertines. On hearing of Calvin's action against libertinism, Poullain wrote the Reformer a delighted letter, expressing his gratitude.<sup>15</sup> Aside from Poullain's request, Calvin probably had a second motive for taking up his pen against the libertines. The sectarians were rivals of the evangelicals, and Calvin feared they might attract potential evangelicals to their own ranks. Moreover, the sects were a blot on the escutcheon of the Swiss Reformation. Both the Catholics and the disputatious Lutherans used their appearance to discredit Calvin and his followers.<sup>16</sup> Thus, Calvin had at least two interests at stake in opposing the sects: (1) to dissuade people who might be attracted to the sects, and (2) to demonstrate that the Reformation was a completely different movement from that of the sects.

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<sup>12</sup> C. Paillard, *Le procès de Pierre Brully, successeur de Calvin comme ministre de l'église française réformée de Strasbourg* (Paris/ La Haye: Sandoz et Fischbacher, 1878), 148.

<sup>13</sup> P. Viret to R. Gualther, Lausanne, September 5, 1544 (Herminjard 9, ep. 1392, 329).

<sup>14</sup> G. Farel to Calvin, Neuchâtel, October 2, 1544 (Herminjard 9, ep. 1395, 335). On the relationship between Calvin and Farel, see F. P. van Stam, "Calvin in the Light of the Early Letters," in *Calvinus Praeceptor Ecclesiae: Papers of the International Congress on Calvin Research, Princeton, August 20-24, 2002*, ed. H. J. Selderhuis (Genève: Droz, 2004), 153.

<sup>15</sup> Poullain to Calvin, Strasbourg, October 13, 1544 (Herminjard 9, ep. 1398, 341-342).

<sup>16</sup> J. Calvin, *Institutio christianae religionis*, ed. P. Barth and G. Niesel, *Opera Selecta* 3, (Monachii in Aedibus: Chr. Kaiser, 1957), 15; J. Calvin, *Des scandales, 1550*, ed. O. Fatio (Genève: Droz, 1984), 146-47. See for example: J. Westphal, *Adversus cuiusdam sacramentarii falsam criminationem* (Franckfurt 1555), 26, 33-34. For information on the heated polemic between Calvin and Westphal regarding the eucharist, see: BC, 56/4 and A. Pettegree, "The London Exile Community and the Second Sacramentarian Controversy, 1553-1560," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 78 (1987): 223-52. On the Catholic accusations directed against the Reformation, see: P. Nissen, *De katholieke polemiek tegen de dopers* (Enschede: Quick Service, 1988), 148.

Let us now turn to the question of how Calvin described his adversaries. In his treatise, Calvin portrays libertinism as a satanic invention. The false doctrines of the libertines did not stem solely from humans. On the contrary, it was the Devil himself who inspired people to proclaim false doctrines. That was his way of combating the truth. God permitted the devil to do this and used these heresies to test the steadfastness of believers. Thus, believers should avoid dabbling out of curiosity in all sorts of new doctrines and simply adhere to God’s Word.<sup>17</sup> Instead of allowing the devil to blind them with fantasies, believers should rely on the gospel.<sup>18</sup> The proclamation of the gospel was the right medicine to stop the spread of the heresies. Calvin refuted the idea that the sects and the Reformation were closely intertwined, pointing out that heresies were sprouting up in the very places the gospel had not been preached.<sup>19</sup> According to Calvin, it stood very much to reason that heretics had become this active in the time of the Reformation. He interpreted their activities as Satan’s attempt to fight the truth. The dissemination of false doctrine was the Devil’s primary weapon against the truth, which had come to light again thanks to the Reformation.<sup>20</sup>

To propagate their lies, the libertines obscured their speech. They were rarely forthright in expressing what they meant, often speaking in veiled terms. Calvin warned his readers against the jargon of the libertines, which made it hard for an ordinary person to understand their real intentions. As a result, many had fallen into the bondage of libertine lies.<sup>21</sup> This lack of clarity was part of the libertines’ tactics to attract followers. It was only once they ensnared someone in their sect that they were prepared to clarify their real meaning.<sup>22</sup> Calvin exhorted his readers, therefore, to demand straightforward answers when conversing with libertines, and on encountering refusal to speak clearly, one should end the conversation.<sup>23</sup> The libertines used jargon like a mask to hide their real meanings.<sup>24</sup>

The false doctrines the libertines proclaimed were anything but new. Calvin described his opponents as a revival of the heretic movement in the early church. The libertines had simply resurrected the ideas of Manichees on dual-

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<sup>17</sup> Calvin, *Sermons sur le deuteronomie* (CO 27, sermon 86, 225-26, 230, 233).

<sup>18</sup> Calvin, *Contre un cordelier* (CO 7, 360).

<sup>19</sup> Calvin, *Contre les libertins* (CO 7, 166).

<sup>20</sup> Calvin, *Des scandales*, ed. Fatio, 146. On Calvin’s antagonism, see Higman, *The style of John Calvin*, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Calvin, *Contre les libertins* (CO 7, 166).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Calvin: “mais ilz tiennent long temps suspens et pourment par ambages ceux qu’ilz veulent amener à leur secte, sans leur reveler le mot du guet, jusque à ce qu’ilz voyent qu’ilz ont desia ensorcelez, pour leur faire à croire ce qu’ilz voudront”; *Contre les libertins* (CO 7, 159).

<sup>23</sup> Calvin, *Contre les libertins* (CO 7, 169-170).

<sup>24</sup> Calvin, *Contre les libertins* (CO 7, 156).

ism and the incarnation. Throughout history, the Devil had propagated several heresies, and was still working away at it in Calvin's time. Calvin discussed the roots of his opponents at length, dedicating an entire chapter to it. He wanted his readers to believe that the opinions propagated by the libertines had already been refuted by St. Peter and St. Jude.<sup>25</sup> The rhetorical use of such a gallery of heretics is evident. Calvin's opponents were lumped into the same category of heretics who had never had a legitimate place in the church, and who had always been contested by the decent-minded majority of Christians. Calvin himself was doing nothing more than what had always been done by the respectable body of the church. He was also continuing the work started by the apostles, Peter and Jude. Calvin's claim that he was called to refute the libertines bangs the same rhetorical drum. He portrayed himself as a prophet, arming simple people with the Word of God against the poison of the libertines.<sup>26</sup>

Calvin attributes the appeal of heresies to human curiosity. Curiosity, an eagerness to learn more, was what drove people to novelties. This form of curiosity, as Calvin depicts it, is rooted in human arrogance. Humans want to know more than what they ought to and are not satisfied with God's revelations in the Scriptures. Using a reference to the myth of Icarus, Calvin writes that people try to fly higher than becomes them in their desire to pry into divine decrees. Instead, people should bow in commitment to the plainness of the Bible. Calvin compares and contrasts the plainness of the Scriptures and the willingness to obey them with the arrogance of heretics, whose curiosity drives them to desire knowledge too high for them.<sup>27</sup> In writing against the libertines, Calvin asks his opponents sarcastically whether the gospel is too low for them.<sup>28</sup>

According to Calvin, his opponents' very use and treatment of the Scriptures unveiled their wickedness in its fullest extent. In fact, the libertines openly ridiculed the Scriptures. Aside from their mockery of the Bible, the libertines used allegories to divest it of its strength. This relieved them of any obligation to adhere to the Bible and enabled them to twist Scripture to say what suited them.<sup>29</sup> Once again, Calvin uses the contrast between plain and artificial. While

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<sup>25</sup> Calvin, *Contre les libertins* (CO 7, 152-159).

<sup>26</sup> See for example: Calvin to Marguerite de Navarre, April 28, 1545 (CO 12, ep. 634, 66). On Calvin's awareness of being called, see: M. Engammare, "Calvin: A Prophet without a Prophecy," *Church History* 67, no. 4 (1998): 643-61.

<sup>27</sup> Calvin, *Contre les libertins* (CO 7, 164). Another example can be found in: J. Calvin, *Advertissement contre l'astrologie judiciaire, 1549*, ed. O. Millet (Genève: Droz, 1985), 51-52. On Calvin and curiosity see: E. P. Meijering, *Calvin wider die Neugierde: Ein Beitrag zum Vergleich zwischen reformatorischem und patristischem Denken* (Nieuwkoop: De Graaf, 1980).

<sup>28</sup> Calvin: "Et de fait quel deshonneur font à Dieu les premiers, de chercher questions nouvelles à travers champs, comme si ceste sagesse celeste qu'il nous revele en l'Evangile, estoit trop basse pour eux?"; *Contre les libertins* (CO 7, 165).

<sup>29</sup> Calvin, *Contre un cordelier* (CO 7, 346).

his opponents obscured the truths in the Scriptures with their artificial arguments and their subtle allegories, Calvin and his followers simply listened to what the Bible says. In describing the exegesis of his opponents, Calvin often uses words such as *distort*, *blaspheme*, and *falsify*.<sup>30</sup> The purport of Calvin’s argument is clear: The way the libertines dealt with the Bible was not only wrong, it was morally reprehensible.<sup>31</sup>

Calvin wanted his readers to believe that libertine views posed a threat to civil society. According to Calvin, they deliberately aimed at the subversion of human society. One of their means to this end was the introduction of a community of goods. This entire idea was an invention of the Devil who was out to spread chaos and disorder among the human race. Calvin accuses his opponents of trying to abolish all human contracts and all political means. Once again, Calvin suggests that libertine ideas were morally reprehensible, proclaiming that a community of goods had led to a “horrible robbery.”<sup>32</sup> Aside from this community of goods, which Calvin claims was first propagated by some Anabaptists, the libertine rejection of the magistracy and of the government’s authority to use the sword placed God-given order in jeopardy. Human laws, as Calvin explains to his readers, safeguard human justice and human order. The libertines, however, were out to abolish these laws, thus blaspheming God who had established this holy order.<sup>33</sup> A third libertine tactic to wreak the most destructive confusion was—if we are to believe Calvin—their abolishment of marriage. The libertines’ ambitions to abolish this divine institution clearly showed that the Devil had taken possession of Calvin’s opponents.<sup>34</sup>

The libertines’ ethics were as reprehensible as their other views. Accusing his opponents of allowing people to live like beasts, Calvin once again reinforces the impression that libertinism posed a threat to human society. According to Calvin, the libertines believed that born-again believers could no longer sin; thus, by definition, their acts could never be wrong. This effectively abolished the law and allowed people to live in libertine freedom. In the picture Calvin paints, libertine doctrine would incite people to live with the wrong sense of vocation. The libertines ascribed every human inclination, including those that stem from bad habits, to divine vocation. Using highly charged language, Calvin indicts the libertines for adhering to an ethic of their own invention and desire:

every inclination in man, whether it is natural or a bad habit, is a calling of God. As in the case of a man who is inclined toward drunkenness, it is not lawful to reprimand him for it. For that is his calling. If by nature someone

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<sup>30</sup> Calvin, *Contre les libertins* (CO 7, 158, 173-76).

<sup>31</sup> Calvin, *Contre un cordelier* (CO 7, 349-50).

<sup>32</sup> Calvin, *Contre les libertins* (CO 7, 214-20).

<sup>33</sup> Calvin, *Contre les libertins* (CO 7, 243-44).

<sup>34</sup> Calvin, *Contre les libertins* (CO 7, 213).

is fond of playing, let it pass. For it is improper to deprive him of his calling. In brief, they want each person to be governed by his own desires and for man's heart to be the master of his calling, according to where it leads him.<sup>35</sup>

In his polemic against a certain Friar Minor, the sequel to the *Contre la secte . . . des libertins*, Calvin takes an even harder line in describing his opponent's moral decay, charging him with the sin of Sodom.<sup>36</sup>

At this point, we can conclude that Calvin depicts his adversaries in a very negative light. They did not work through their own power but were driven by the Devil. They were guilty of arrogance, abuse of the Scriptures, and hypocrisy. In the ethical realm, the libertines were no better than animals. Their ideas were a menace to all human society. In other treatises written by Calvin, we can detect a similar picture of heretics. Michael Servetus was described as a confederate of the Devil who, driven by arrogance and self-conceit, was subverting the foundations of Christianity.<sup>37</sup> In a sermon, Calvin warned his audience that the Anabaptists were supporters of the Devil, explaining to them that the source of heresy should be sought in human arrogance and curiosity. He exhorted believers to steadfastness. By permitting the Devil to inspire heresies, God wanted to test believers.<sup>38</sup>

Calvin's framework for describing his adversaries was far from unique. It can also be found in other sixteenth-century polemics.<sup>39</sup> Catholic polemical writings also attribute the emergence of the Anabaptist movement to the power of the Devil. They were the inhabitants of the Empire of the Devil and were prompted by human arrogance.<sup>40</sup> When Calvin became embroiled in the controversy with Lutheran polemicist Joachim Westphal, he himself became the object of such stereotypes. In an all but subtle manner, Westphal placed Calvin on one and the same level with the Sacramentarians. These Sacramentarians were instruments of the Devil. The fact that they met in secret bore testimony

<sup>35</sup> Calvin, *Contre les libertins* (CO 7, 212). This translation is taken from Wirt Farley, *John Calvin*, 279.

<sup>36</sup> Calvin, *Contre un cordelier* (CO 7, 353).

<sup>37</sup> Calvin, *Des scandales*, ed. Fatio, 148-49. See also: J. Calvin, *Defensio orthodoxae fidei de sacra trinitate, contra prodigiosos errores Michaelis Serveti Hispani: ubi ostenditur haereticos iure gladii coerendos esse, et nominatim de homine hoc tam impio iuste et merito sumptum Genevae fuisse supplicium*, 1554 (CO 7, 457, 459).

<sup>38</sup> Calvin, *Sermons sur le deuteronomie* (CO 27, sermons 86-87, 225-50).

<sup>39</sup> Examples can be found in P. Matheson, *The Rhetoric of the Reformation* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1998), 5, 9, 68, 72, 91, 144, 155, 174, 185. On the division of the world into good and evil parts in sixteenth-century propaganda, see also M.U. Chrisman, "From Polemic to Propaganda: The development of Mass Persuasion in the Late Sixteenth Century," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 73 (1982): 182-83.

<sup>40</sup> Nissen, *Katholische polemiek*, 242-47. One can find clichés on heretics comparable to those in Calvin's polemic in the judgement of the Bernese ministers on Servetus. Satan's activities were manifest in Servetus's ideas, which were, in fact, a revival of early church heresies. (CO 8, 818-19).

to their wickedness: They could not stand the light, and a major cause of their heresy was their curiosity.<sup>41</sup>

The image that Calvin created for heretics was also far from new. Like the Catholic polemicists, he used old stereotypical descriptions of heretics, continuing the polemic against heretics started by the early and medieval church.<sup>42</sup> In an epoch-making article, Grundmann described these stereotypes: heretics belong to the Empire of the Devil, and heresy is rooted in human arrogance. They are marked by hypocrisy because they always conceal their true meanings and always disguise themselves.<sup>43</sup> Calvin applied some of these stereotypes to the libertines. This should not be surprising. In *Contre la secte . . . des libertins*, Calvin examines explicitly a variety of early church heresies, drawing a line from old Gnostic groups, such as the Manichees, Marcionites, and Cerdonites, to the libertines. Calvin’s reference sources in describing early church heresies were works by Irenaeus, Tertullian, Augustine, and Eusebius. He not only drew on their descriptions of the theology of heretics but also took over certain elements of their stereotypes of heresy. This is manifest in the literary formula of the gallery of heretics that Calvin used. The church fathers had also used this form, and medieval polemicists had traced an ongoing line of heresies, beginning in the early church and extending to the time of the author.<sup>44</sup>

The discussion here will present a few examples of stereotypes that Calvin took over from the church fathers. To begin with, Calvin adopted Augustine’s conviction that heretics were under the Devil’s dominion. Augustine believed that the moment sound doctrine begins to take root, the Devil raises heresies. These heresies are permitted by God in order to test believers.<sup>45</sup> Calvin’s insistence that human pride lies at the root of all heresy stemmed from the same church father.<sup>46</sup> The accusation that libertines refused to express their views openly to the world also falls in line with an old stereotypical image of heretics.

<sup>41</sup> Westphal, a6r, 18-19, 29, 33-34, 48-49, 79-80, 97. On Westphal, see also above p. 25.

<sup>42</sup> Calvin’s typology of heresy shows a remarkable continuity of older typologies on heretics. The same can be said of his views on how they should be combated. Calvin advocates an active role on the part of the civil government. According to Calvin, death was a just penalty for heresy. He believed the right constitution of the state and right religion were inseparably interwoven. In one sermon, Calvin explained that he shared this view with the pagans and with the Catholic church. Calvin, *Sermons sur le deuteronomie* (CO 27, sermon 88, 250, 253). See also the title of Calvin’s treatise against Servetus, mentioned in note 37.

<sup>43</sup> H. Grundmann, “Der Typus des Ketzers in mittelalterlicher Anschauung,” in *Ausgewählte Aufsätze*, ed. H. Grundmann (Stuttgart: Hiersemann, 1976), 313-27.

<sup>44</sup> L. G. Müller, *The De haeresibus of Saint Augustine: A Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (Washington: America Press, 1956), 1; Nissen, *Katholieke polemiek*, 246.

<sup>45</sup> Augustine, *De civitate Dei* (Corpus Christianorum 48, XVIII. 51). Cf. Grundmann, “Der Typus des Ketzers,” 315.

<sup>46</sup> Calvin, *Des scandales*, ed. Fatio, 148. Calvin refers to: Augustine, *De genesi contra manichaeos*, ed. J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae Latinae*, 34, II, 8, 11.

Tertullian, for example, accused the Valentinians of using jargon.<sup>47</sup> In the preface to *Contra Haereses* by Irenaeus, we can also recognize elements of Calvin's stereotypical image of his opponents. According to Irenaeus, heretics distorted the Bible. By posing irrelevant questions and tapping into the insatiable thirst for knowledge, they led ordinary people astray. It was difficult to unmask these heretics because they came like wolves in sheep's clothing. Unlike these heretics, Irenaeus would not use fancily dressed reasoning but would speak the truth simply (*simpliciter*).<sup>48</sup>

Calvin embraced certain elements of these hoary heresy clichés and adapted them to his own time. His stress on the virtuous citizenship of the evangelicals, contrasted with the chaotic behavior of the libertines, so destructive to society, fit into the refutation of the Catholic accusation that the Reformation had wrought nothing but uproar and resistance. Calvin's emphasis on the libertines' reprehensible treatment of the Bible was motivated by his own claim of preaching in compliance with the Bible and by the evangelical desire to exclude non-Scriptural sources as foundation stones for Christian doctrine. Libertines did draw on the Bible but drew different conclusions from it. Reading the Bible, they arrived at convictions abhorrent to Calvin. Calvin explained this by pointing to his opponents' wrong intentions. While Calvin and his followers conformed to the Scriptures, the libertines distorted them. This treatment of the Bible was not merely wrong, it was satanic.

In his article on stereotypes of heresy, Grundmann emphasizes the importance of recognizing these stereotypes in studying polemics against heretics, especially when a reply is lacking.<sup>49</sup> This is the case with Calvin's treatise against the libertines. The question of the identity of the libertines is still unresolved, and scholars differ as to who was hidden behind the label "libertinism." Calvin mentions some libertines by name, but because their writings have never been located, we are unable to learn about their ideas firsthand. Modern scholars on libertinism are largely dependent on Calvin's polemical writings against them. As I have pointed out above, the information Calvin presents has generally been assumed to be reliable.<sup>50</sup> Modern scholars use Calvin's characterizations to detect libertines. However, if I am right in supposing that Calvin used early church and medieval heresy stereotypes, one should take these stereotypes into account. The examples below illustrate this point.

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<sup>47</sup> Tertullian, *Adversus Valentinianos* (Corpus Christianorum 2/2, I.1).

<sup>48</sup> Irenaeus, *Contra haereses*, ed. J. P. Migne, *Patrologiae Graecae* 7, Praefatio, I, 1-4.

<sup>49</sup> Grundmann, "Der Typus des Ketzers," 314-15, 325.

<sup>50</sup> See for example: A. Verhey and R. G. Wilkie, "Calvin's treatise 'Against the libertines,'" *Calvin Theological Journal* 15 (1980): 197. See also: G. W. Locher, ed., *Wider die Sekte der libertiner (1545)*, in *Calvin-Studienausgabe* 4 (Neukirchen: Neukirchener Verlag, 2002), 239-40.

Scholars often draw on Calvin’s accusations regarding libertine jargon. Based on such accusations, Farley suggests that the libertines may have practiced glossolalia. Heller also draws on Calvin’s accusations to identify some libertines, pointing to individuals who spoke in incomprehensible and childish language. Heller specifically mentions Briçonnet and Marguerite de Navarre. Wirth follows the same method in an article on libertines and Epicureans, where he points to Agrippa and Brunfels.<sup>51</sup> I would suggest, however, that it is far from certain that the libertines spoke in an actual jargon. It is entirely possible that Calvin simply adopted this charge from old heresy clichés. The same applies to Calvin’s accusation regarding the libertines’ lack of ethics and morality. This accusation fits all too well with the existing clichés regarding heretics.<sup>52</sup> As regarding discussions on whether Calvin’s charge about immoral libertine behavior tallied with the facts, I would propose that the possibility that this is yet another stereotype is not taken into sufficient account.<sup>53</sup> One author who does take account of the possibility of a distorted image is Moreau. In his treatise against the Friar Minor, Calvin described the death of one of his libertine opponents, Quintin Thiery. According to Calvin, Thiery was prepared to deny his beliefs and to say exactly what his interrogators wanted him to in order to escape a painful death. In his monograph on Tournay, lacking any other description of this occurrence, Moreau took over Calvin’s report but appended a critical note. Calvin’s report on his opponent’s death corresponds with the cliché that heretics were always ready to deny their own convictions and that they never expressed their ideas honestly.<sup>54</sup>

The fact that Calvin’s descriptions of his adversaries sometimes match the classical pictures of heretics does not necessarily mean that those descriptions do not reflect the facts. However, given the literary form of Calvin’s writings, it does reveal a need for caution in using them as a source on libertine ideas.

We can conclude that the heresy stereotypes used by the church fathers and by medieval authors were still alive and well during the sixteenth century. Calvin was one of the authors who used existing clichés to discredit his adversaries. As a result, the picture of libertinism he presents to his readers is dis-

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<sup>51</sup> Farley, John Calvin, 176; H. Heller, “Marguerite of Navarre and the Reformers of Meaux,” *Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance* 33 (1971): 307; J. Wirth, “‘libertins’ et ‘Epicuriens’: aspects de l’irrégion au XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle,” *Bibliothèque d’Humanisme et Renaissance* 39 (1977): 601-627.

<sup>52</sup> Grundmann, “Der Typus des Ketzers,” 324; Chrisman, “From Polemic to Propaganda,” 186-187; H.J. Hillerbrand, “The ‘other’ in the age of the Reformation. Reflections on social control and deviance in the sixteenth century,” in *Infinite boundaries. Order, disorder, and reorder in early modern German culture*, ed. M. Reinhart (Kirkville: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 1998), 245-269.

<sup>53</sup> See for example H. Busson, *Le rationalisme dans la littérature de la renaissance (1531-1601)* (Paris: Philosophique J. Vrin, 1957), 315-316.

<sup>54</sup> Calvin, *Contre un cordelier* (CO 7, 361-362). G. Moreau, *Histoire du Protestantisme à Tournai jusqu’à la veille de la Révolution des Pays-Bas* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1962), 115-116.

torted. In conducting research into the identity and ideas of Calvin's opponents, it is important to take account of Calvin's use of these heresy clichés. This will require a significant shift in scholarship regarding libertinism and a return to Müller's 1922 thesis. Calvin's accusations against the sects cannot be taken at face value.