

# Calvin's interpretation of the first commandment and the implications for religious pluralism and equality of religion

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## Dates:

Received: 14 Feb. 2014

Accepted: 13 Aug. 2014

Published: 05 Dec. 2014

## How to cite this article:

Coetzee, C.F.C., 2014,  
'Calvin's interpretation of  
the first commandment and  
the implications for religious  
pluralism and equality of  
religion, *In die Skriflig* 48(1),  
Art. #1810, 9 pages. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ids.v48i1.1810>

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Scholars agree that we live in a pluralistic world. For the purpose of this article, the emphasis is on religious pluralism as distinguished from other forms of pluralism. The religious pluralism addressed in this article, can be seen as synonymous with equality of religion. From the paradigm of the Calvinistic-Reformed tradition, the question is asked what the implications of Calvin's interpretation of the first commandment are for the phenomenon of religious pluralism and equality of religion. His interpretation in the *Institutes* (1536 and 1559) and *Catechisms* (1538 and 1545) as well as his commentaries on Exodus 20:3 and Deuteronomy 5:7 emphasise that there is only one God: the triune God of Scripture. He alone should be worshipped as he commands in his law. This claim also applies to the government. In the pluralistic context of today, the Church ought to maintain and proclaim this truth – both in its apologetic calling and witness to government.

**Calvyn se verklaring van die eerste gebod en die implikasies daarvan vir godsdienspluralisme en godsdiensgelykheid.** Navorsers stem saam dat ons in 'n pluralistiese wêreld leef. Wat die fokus van hierdie artikel betref, val die klem op godsdienstige pluralisme in onderskeid van ander vorme van pluralisme. Godsdienspluralisme kan, sover dit die skopus van hierdie artikel betref, gesien word as sinoniem met godsdiensgelykheid. Vanuit die Calvinisties-reformatoriese tradisie word die vraag ondersoek wat die implikasies van Calvyn se verklaring van die eerste gebod vir die verskynsel van godsdienspluralisme en godsdiensgelykheid is. In sy verklaring in die *Institusie* (1536 en 1559) en sy *Kategismus* (1538 en 1545) sowel as in sy kommentare op Eksodus 20:3 en Deuteronomium 5:7, beklemtoon Calvyn dat daar net een God is, die drie-enige God van die Skrif. Hy alleen moet aanbid word soos Hy in sy wet beveel. Hierdie eis geld ook vir die owerheid. In die pluralistiese tyd en samelewing moet die kerk hierdie waarheid handhaaf en uitdra in die apologetiese roeping sowel as in die getuigenis teenoor die owerheid.

'I have often said, and I will say it again: Whoever rightly understands the Ten Commandments and especially the First Commandment, I will gladly sit at his feet and let him be my doctor [teacher].' (Martin Luther, as quoted by Price 2008:61)

## Introduction

Scholars from all over the world agree that we live in a pluralistic world (cf. *inter alia* Koyama 1999:160; Van den Toren 2011:83; Coertzen 2010:334). '[P]luralism has become the politically correct attitude' (Van den Toren 2011:13). In this article the focus is on religious pluralism, as distinguished from, *inter alia*, cultural pluralism, ethnic pluralism and language pluralism. The problem statement of this article can be formulated as follows: What are the implications of Calvin's view of the first commandment for religious pluralism and equality of religion? In the Reformed (Calvinistic) tradition, the Genevan theologian, whose position on most theological subjects is still relevant, is still regarded as one of the great theologians of all times. Calvin research is alive and well. As far as the scope of this article is concerned, it is important to remember that Calvin was not only a theologian, but also a jurist, who studied law before he engaged in theology. His views on the relationship between Church and State are well-known and much research has been done on his views on natural law, law and Gospel, et cetera (cf. *inter alia* Hesselink 1992). In this article the focus is on Calvin's interpretation of the first commandment.

## Calvin's interpretation of the first commandment

Calvin gives his view on the Decalogue in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, his *First Catechism* of 1538, the *Geneva Catechism* of 1542–1545 as well as in his commentaries on the relevant texts in Scripture.

## Institutes of the Christian Religion

As far as the first commandment is concerned, it is mainly dealt with in chapter 8 of book 2 of the final edition of his *Institutes* (1559). Before coming to his interpretation of the commandment, however, it is very important to note that the Decalogue applies to every human being. Although, Hesselink (1992:87) also points out that, for Calvin, the law is essentially the law of the covenant. Calvin himself (*Inst.* 2.8.1, footnote 1) refers back to book 1, chapter 1 and 2, where he deals with the so-called *semen religionis* [seed of religion] and the *sensus Divinitatis* [a feeling of the Divine] that is present in every person. The knowledge of God and the knowledge we have of ourselves are thus directly linked to the law (*Inst.* 2.8.1). He also refers back to book 2, chapter 2, paragraph 22 where he states, with reference to Romans 2:14–15, that the gentiles have the righteousness of the law naturally engraved on their minds ('the work of the law written in their hearts').<sup>2</sup>

In the interpretation of the law, Calvin (*Inst.* 2.8.8) is of the opinion that the best rule would be to be guided by the principle of the commandment – that is 'to consider in the case of each what the purpose is for which it was given'.<sup>3</sup>

In the case of the first commandment, the principle is that only God is to be worshipped: 'The sum of the commandment, therefore is, that true piety, in other words, the worship of the Deity, is acceptable, and impiety is an abomination to him'<sup>4</sup> (*Inst.* 2.8.8).

With reference to the division of the law into two parts, Calvin (*Inst.* 2.8.11) emphasises that God assigned the first part to the duties of religion, 'which relate especially to his worship [...] The first foundation of righteousness undoubtedly is the worship of God'.<sup>5</sup> If there is no fear of God, there can also not be justice and charity amongst men (*Inst.* 2.8.11). Wherever the worship of God is wanting, 'any degree of equity, or continence, or temperance, existing amongst men themselves, is empty and frivolous in the sight of God'<sup>6</sup> (*Inst.* 2.8.11). Calvin (*Inst.* 2.8.12) also refers to Augustine who said that, religiously, only one God should be obeyed and no idol should be worshipped.

Whether the first sentence of the law ('I am the Lord thy God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage') is part of the first commandment, is to Calvin (*Inst.* 2.8.13) 'a matter of indifference' ('*mihi in medio est*'; CO

2-3:275), as long as we maintain that it is a kind of preface to the whole of the law. Nevertheless, Calvin also deals with this first sentence in his interpretation of the first commandment. God reveals himself as Lord, by which name he claims to himself power and authority to command. The name 'Lord' denotes power and lawful dominion (*Inst.* 2.8.13). However, God also reveals himself as the God of the Church, the God of the Covenant ('thy God'; *Inst.* 2.8.14).

God also reminds them of the deliverance from the bondage in Egypt: 'In like manner, to keep us to his true worship, he often describes himself by certain epithets which distinguish his sacred Deity from all idols and fictitious gods'<sup>7</sup> (*Inst.* 2.8.15).

In the first commandment, God forbids us to have any other gods before him. The purpose or scope of this commandment is thus that, as Lord, he alone will be exalted and shall claim his people as his own (*Inst.* 2.8.16). This can only be so if we abstain from ungodliness and superstition of any kind 'by which the glory of his divinity is diminished or obscured; and for the same reason, he requires us to worship and adore him with truly pious zeal'<sup>8</sup> (*Inst.* 2.8.16). Calvin then sums up the duties we owe to God under four headings, namely adoration, trust, invocation and thanksgiving (*Inst.* 2.8.16):

- Adoration, according to Calvin, is the veneration and worship that we render to God when we honour his majesty, and it also consists in bringing our consciences into subjection to his law.
- 'Trust is secure resting in him under a recognition of his perfections, when ascribing to him all power, wisdom, justice, goodness and truth'<sup>9</sup> (*Inst.* 2.8.16).
- Invocation is dependence upon his aid as the only resource in every case of need (*Inst.* 2.8.16).
- Thanksgiving is the gratitude 'which ascribes to him the praise of all our blessings'<sup>10</sup> (*Inst.* 2.8.16).

Calvin then, finally, once more emphasises that the first commandment means that all fictitious gods are to be driven away and that God alone must be worshipped (*Inst.* 2.8.16).

## Calvin's First Catechism, 1538

In 1997 the renowned Calvin scholar, John Hesselink, published a unique commentary on Calvin's *First Catechism*. Calvin wrote his *First Catechism* with the primary intention to instruct the youth of Geneva. He also translated it into Latin the next year so that it could reach a wider audience (Hesselink 1997:40). In his *First Catechism*, he does not use the traditional question and answer form, but a more topical approach (Hesselink 1997: 41).

1. '*opus legis scriptum in cordibus suis*' (CO2-3:203).

2. The same view is shared by Reformed theologians like Gispen (1968:62) and Ridderbos (1963), although Ridderbos (1963:107) also points out the difference between the law that is engraved in every person and the revealed law. '*Deze wet geldt alle mensen*' [This law applies to all human beings] (Gispen 1968:63).

3. '*nempe ut in unoquoque praecepto expendatur, cur datum nobis fuerit*' (CO 2-3:272).

4. '*Primi praecepti ratio est, ut Deus solus colatur. Summa igitur praeceptum erit veram pietatem, hoc est numinis sui cultum Deo cordi esse, impietatem abominari*' (CO 2-3:272).

5. '*quae peculiariter ad numinis sui cultum pertinent [...] Primum sane iustitiae fundamentum est Dei cultus*' (CO 2-3:273).

6. '*quidquid inter se aequitatis, continentiae, temperantiae homines exercent, inane est ac frivolum coram Deo*' (CO 2-3:274).

7. '*Solet etiam (quo nos in vero sui unius cultu retineat) certis ephithetis sese insignire, quibus sacrum suum numen ab omnibus idolis ac diis commentitiis discernit*' (CO 2, 3-276).

8. '*qua divinitatis suae gloria vel minuitur vel obscuratur, a nobis abesse iubet; atque eadem ratione, vero pietatis studio coli se a nobis atque adorari praecipit*' (CO 2, 3-277).

9. '*Fiducia est, ex virtutum eius te cognitione, aquiescendi in eo securitas; quum in eo sapientiam, iustitiam, potentiam, veritatem*' (CO 2, 3-277).

10. '*qua laus bonorum omnium illi tribuitur*' (CO 2, 3-277).

Calvin's interpretation of the first commandment corresponds in essence with what he later wrote in his last edition of the *Institutes*. It goes without saying that there is also a striking correspondence with the 1536 edition of the *Institutes* (cf. Calvin 1980:47; Hesselink 1997:11). When God declares himself as the Lord our God, it is to imply that it is he who has the right to command and that his commandments are to be obeyed (Hesselink 1997):

His forbidding us to have other gods means that we are not to give to another than himself what belongs to God. And he adds: 'before his face' in order to make clear that God wills himself to be acknowledged not only by outward confession but also to be held in truth within the depths of the heart [...] we are to worship him alone; we are to rely upon him with complete faithfulness and hope ...; and we are to direct all praise for goodness and holiness to him. (p. 11)

In his commentary, Hesselink (1997:79) points out that Calvin emphasises that 'Christ is the heart and soul, the life and spirit, the purpose, end, and fulfillment of the law' – Calvin sees 'the Decalogue through the eyes of Christ'. Interpretatively, the preface to the law was important for Calvin (Hesselink 1997:80).

### The Geneva Catechism of 1545

The so-called *Geneva Catechism* (French edn. 1542; Latin edn. 1545) was written after Calvin's return to Geneva from Strasbourg (Hesselink 1997:41). Calvin wrote it because he realised that his *First Catechism* was too difficult for children (Hesselink 1997:41). In the *Geneva Catechism* he uses the question and answer form (Hesselink 1997:41).

Calvin (1981:27–28) deals with the first commandment in questions and answers 137 to 143. Once again there is a striking correspondence with his interpretation in the *First Catechism* and the *Institutes*. In the preface God calls himself Lord (Jehova) to claim the right and authority to command for himself. Secondly, he adds that he is our God to reconcile us with his law (Calvin 1981:27).

In the first commandment God commands that we should glorify him alone and should not give any glory or honour to another (Calvin 1981, answer 141). Question 142 then asks: 'What is the specific homage that we should not pay to another?' (author's translation from Simpson's translation), and the answer is that we should worship him, put our trust in him, pray to him and give him everything that his majesty deserves.

Regarding the words 'before my face', the *Geneva Catechism* confesses in answer 143 (Calvin 1981:28) that nothing is hidden that may escape his attention. God knows and judges our deepest thoughts. Therefore he does not only expect a clear confession, but also true piety of the heart.

### Calvin's commentary on Exodus 20:3 and Deuteronomy 5:7

In his commentary on the first commandment as it was given in Exodus 20:3 and Deuteronomy 5:7, Calvin expresses

the same views we find in the *Institutes* and in the two Catechisms. God alone should be worshipped, and he requires worship free from all superstition (Calvin 1852):

[I]f God have not alone the pre-eminence, His majesty is so far obscured [...] God would not have companions obtruded upon Him, and placed as it were in His sight. [...] true and pure religion was so revealed in the law, that God's face in a manner shone forth therein. (p. 417)

The legitimate worshippers of God are those who distance themselves from all idolatrous figments and cleave to him alone. Whenever we turn away from the true worship of God in the smallest degree, we make for ourselves 'other gods, and degrade Him from His right place' (Calvin 1852:417–419).

Apart from the interpretation of the first commandment itself, the priority that Calvin gives to this commandment is clearly illustrated when he deals with 'passages which have reference to the exposition of this commandment' (Lv 18, 19; Dt 6; 10:20; 13; 18; Calvin 1852:420–453) as well as to the 'ceremonial supplements of the first commandment' (Ex 12; 13; 30, Lv 12; Nm 6; 9; Dt 16; 26; Calvin 1852:454–502).

### Calvin's view on the relationship between the law of God and the State

Within the scope of this article it is also relevant and important to briefly deal with Calvin's view of the State's obligation as far as the law is concerned. In book 4 of the *Institutes*, he deals explicitly with the relationship between Church and State.

Calvin finds the main reason why God instituted the State in Romans 13:4 (*Inst.* 4.20.10; cf. also Strauss 2010:319). The government is a minister of God, and as ministers of God they not only should obey the law, but also implement it. The duty of the government extends to both tables of the law (*Inst.* 4.20.9). Even the profane writers in old times agreed that 'no man has discoursed of the duty of magistrates, the enacting of laws, and the common weal, without beginning with religion and divine worship'<sup>11</sup> (*Inst.* 4.20.9). Polity can only be successfully established when piety is its first care. The office of magistrates is specially assigned them by God and consequently they should exert themselves 'in asserting and defending the honour of him whose vice-regents they are, and by whose favour they rule'<sup>12</sup> (*Inst.* 4.20.9). It is the duty of magistrates not to neglect the care of divine things and devote themselves only to the administration of justice amongst men, as if 'God had appointed rulers in His own name to decide earthly controversies and omitted what was of far greater moment, his own pure worship as prescribed by his law'<sup>13</sup> (*Inst.* 4.20.9).

11: 'Nullus enim de magistratum officio, frendis legibus et publico statu disseruit, qui non exordium faceret a religione et divino cultu' (CO 2-3:1099).

12: 'tuendo et asserendo eius honori operam impendere, cuius vicarii sunt et cuius beneficio imperant' (CO 2-3:1099).

13: 'Quasi vero praefectos Deus suo nomine constituerit, qui terrenas controversias deciderent; quod vero longe gravioris momenti erat praetermisit, ut ipse pure coleretur ex legis suae praescripto' (CO 2-3:1099).

Calvin (*Inst.* 4.20.14) therefore calls the law ‘a dumb magistrate’ (*mutum magistratum*, CO 2-3:1104) and ‘the magistrate a living law’ (*magistratum legem [...] vivam*, CO 2-3:1104). Magistrates should, ideally, adhere to the division of the law of God as promulgated by Moses into the moral, the ceremonial and the judicial law (CO 2-3:1104). Considering the moral law, it is:

[...] contained under two heads, the one of which simply enjoins us to worship God with pure faith and piety, the other to embrace men with sincere affection, is the true and eternal rule of righteousness prescribed to the men of all nations and of all times, who would frame their life agreeably to the will of God. For his eternal and immutable will is, that we are all to worship him and mutually love one another.<sup>14</sup> (*Inst.* 4.20.15)<sup>15</sup>

In the light of this view of Calvin, Reformed scholars agree that governments should choose the triune God as the only God and should glorify him by acknowledging both tables of the law and by implementing it in their God-given office and task (Strauss 2010:323). According to Du Plooy (1992:764, 768), Calvin ascribes a positive task to the State in promoting the Kingdom of God. The same principle is reflected in decisions of the *Gereformeerde Kerke in Suid-Afrika* [Reformed Churches in South Africa] – (the denomination to which this author belongs), that God claims the promotion of his Kingdom from the State. This decision was also taken in light of Mark 1:15 (GKSA 1970:407; cf. also Coetzee 2006:150).

It is very clear that the viewpoint of Calvin is also reflected in one of the reformed confessions, namely Article 36 of the Belgic Confession (BC).<sup>16</sup> Verboom (1999:277) states categorically that Guido de Bres proves in detail in Article 36 to be a pupil and follower of Calvin. Verboom (1999) goes so far as to say that Calvin prescribed to De Bres. De Bres clearly reflected the views of Calvin (Vorster 1993:311). In this regard it is important to take note of K. van der Zwaag’s doctoral thesis on Article 36 (Van der Zwaag 1999; cf. Coetzee 2006:149, 150).<sup>17</sup>

As far as the reformed confessions (including Art. 36) are concerned, there are two viewpoints that should be mentioned. On the one hand, there are scholars who regard the confessions as time-bound. In their view, Article 36, as the other confessions, was contextually relevant in the 16th century and therefore needs fresh implementation of

biblical principles in our days. On the other hand, there is the viewpoint still held by many scholars and churches in the reformed tradition, that Article 36, like the rest of the reformed confessions, is in agreement with Scripture and therefore still the living confession of reformed believers. In that sense it is not time-bound. This is also the viewpoint of this author and the reason for referring to Article 36 in this article.<sup>18</sup>

The viewpoint of Calvin, reformed scholars and churches, and Article 36, is based on principles found in Scripture. In the Bible it is expected of believers to serve in and obey any government on condition that they do not disobey God. We find the classical example in the book of Daniel (cf. Dn 1:8; 3:12; 6:14), and in the New Testament we find a clear example in Acts 5:29. Furthermore, it is clearly proclaimed in Scripture that all governments are under the authority of God, whether they acknowledge it or not. Apart from Romans 13:4 and the book of Daniel mentioned above, we can also refer to the prophecy of Isaiah, chapters 10, 13, 14, 15, 17, 19, 21, 23, et cetera. The same principles apply today.

## Conclusion

In conclusion of the first part of this article, Calvin’s interpretation of the first commandment can be summarised as follows.

There is only one triune God who reveals himself to us in Scripture. He is at the same time also the God of the Covenant. This God has the right and the authority to command obedience to his law and in particular the Decalogue, which is engraved in the hearts of all human beings. The main principle of the first commandment is that God alone should be worshipped as prescribed in his law.

God instituted the State and governments as ministers of God. Therefore, adherence to and implementation of the principles of both tables of the Decalogue is a God-given task. The idea of a neutral state is not found in Scripture or the reformed confessions. In accordance with Scripture and influenced by the formulations of Calvin, churches in the reformed tradition confess their faith regarding the task of the government in Article 36.

## Defining religious pluralism and equality of religion

The question that is addressed in the second part of this article is: What are the implications of Calvin’s Scriptural interpretation of the first commandment for the principles and practice of religious pluralism and equality of religion? First of all, the different terms will be defined.

14. ‘duobus capitibus contineatur, quorum alterum pura Deum fide et pietate colere, alterum sincera homines dilectione complecti simpliciter iubet, vera est aeternaque iustitiae regula, gentium omnium ac temporum hominibus praescripta, qui ad Dei voluntatem vitam suam componere volunt. Siquidem haec aeterna est et immutabilis eius voluntas, ut a nobis ipse quidem omnibus colatur, nos vero mutuo inter nos diligamus’ (CO 2-3:1105).

15. It is the purpose of this article to give Calvin’s view on the relationship between Church and State and the calling of the State (government) in this regard. Calvin’s viewpoint is clear: the law of God applies to all people and nations (governments), even those who reject his will and mock and fight his kingdom. Scholars and churches in the reformed tradition agree with Calvin, as is stated in the next paragraph. On page 2 of this article it was already pointed out that, according to Calvin and reformed scholars like Gispen and Ridderbos, the law of God applies also to the heathens, because it is engraved in their hearts.

16. All indications to only Article 36 refer to Article 36 of the Belgic Confession (BC).

17. The intention of this reference to Article 36 is to show the influence of Calvin, even in the formulation of the confessions by reformed churches after Calvin. Furthermore, it illustrates that the relationship between Church and State is regarded by reformed churches as a matter belonging to the core truths of Scripture that need to be part of our confessions.

18. Although it is not the focus of this article, the author is aware of the tension between the viewpoints of Calvin, reformed scholars, churches and confessions, and the reality of our day where we have to do with secular or non-Christian governments and pluralistic societies. However, it is the viewpoint of this author that the relevant biblical principles and the law of God have not changed. In the second part of the article it is argued that the challenge for the Church is to continue with its witness to the government of the day. The prophetic role of the Church should begin with the first commandment and the emphasis should be on freedom of religion instead of equality of religion.



Reformed theology and reformed churches have to deal with the reality that we live in a religious pluralistic world. Reasons for this are *inter alia* phenomena like globalisation and immigration, but pluralism is also promoted by paradigms such as secularism and postmodernism, to be discussed later (Netland 2001):

[O]ur societies are [...] marked by striking differences in basic values, lifestyles, worldviews and religious commitments. We live and work alongside atheistic naturalists, Wiccans, Muslims, New Agers and Sikhs. In school our children form friendships with Hindus, Buddhists, Jains, neo-pagans and Scientologists. (p. 9)

## Defining religious pluralism

According to D'Costa (1986:22) the pluralist paradigm has been described as one that maintains that religions other than Christianity are equally salvific paths to the one God. One of the main representatives of pluralism, John Hick, uses an astronomical analogy to plead for a Copernican revolution in theology whereby Christians (Hick, *Universe of faiths*, as quoted by D'Costa 1986):

[...] shift from the dogma that Christianity is at the center to the realization that it is *God* who is at the center, and that all religions [...] including our own, serve and revolve around him. (p. 23)

Netland (2001) also points out that the ideology of pluralism did not suddenly come from nowhere:

Rather, the cumulative influences of the disestablishment of Christianity in Western societies, the increased marginalization of traditional religion in modern life, a deepening scepticism about the claims of orthodox Christianity, and the existential awareness of cultural and religious diversity engendered by globalization work together to erode confidence in the truth of Christian faith in favor of more pluralistic alternatives. (p. 15)

Netland (2001:17) deals extensively with the basic philosophical questions lying at the heart of the issues prompted by pluralism about the nature of religious truth and the basis upon which judgements about rival claims to truth are to be made. He (Netland 2001:14) points out that the issues raised by pluralism touch the heart of Christian faith and every major area of theology.

According to Pasewark (1998:297), it is unavoidable that contemporary discussions in religious, philosophical or political circles have to deal with the fact of pluralism. As with other scholars, Pasewark (1998:298) also point out the influence of postmodernism on pluralism.

Within the scope of this article, the following definitions of pluralism may be applicable:

- Van den Toren (2011:12) states that 'pluralism in the ideological sense is characteristic of postmodernism and maintains that within this pluralistic society one can never defend one religion or worldview as true in distinction from the others'.
- Koyama (1999:160) refers to another definition that states that religious pluralism is 'the view that different, or

even contradictory, forms of religious belief and behavior could or even should coexist'.

- With reference to the so-called 'pluralist theology of religions', Waldenfels (2008:480) mentions that, in a pluralist attitude, 'each religion offers a valid way to salvation in its own right'.
- Van Niekerk (2008:881–882) states that pluralism in theology and religious philosophy maintain that different religions have the same claim on truth and that no religion can be seen as better than another. Within this broad paradigm, Van Niekerk (2008) then distinguishes between three viewpoints, namely exclusivism, inclusivism and a viewpoint that all religions are normative in the sense that they are all essentially the same. All religions worship the same God and are therefore legitimate responses to reality.

Also within the scope of this article, it is important to remember what the Dutch theologian, Van Ruler (1973:137–139), pointed out that recognition of religious pluralism brought about a radical shift in the view of the State. As a result of religious pluralism, according to Van Ruler, the State does not only acknowledge God, but also the not-god, the vacuum, the big X, the abstract of philosophy (cf. Coertzen 2008:345; Coetzee 2006:144–145).

## Pluralism, postmodernism and secularism

A number of scholars mention the close relationship between pluralism, postmodernism and secularism. Van den Toren (2011:12) goes so far as to say that postmodern relativism 'takes the form of *pluralism* in regard to religion, worldview and morality'. Van den Toren (2011:13–14) also correctly points out that postmodernism brings the whole issue of truth to the table when he states: 'One characteristic of many forms of postmodernism is the consideration of any claim of absolute truth as a tool of oppression against those who do not agree with you.' We will later come back to Van den Toren's views on the task of Christian apologetics in this pluralistic world.

Postmodernism leads to or is closely related to relativism and syncretism (Stuart 2007):

Religious freedom for some Christians thus becomes rooted less in specifically Christian truth and more in the dignity of the human person alone; less in confidence in the sufficiency of Christian faith and particular revelation, and more in the desire to be open to God's grace and truth in other religions. (p. 38)

Stuart (2007) also points out that secularism is part of the pluralism. He (Stuart 2007:39) quotes R.J. Neuhaus who said that Western Europe is 'an island of secularism in a sea of global religion'.

In such a world, the relativism that is so characteristic of the postmodern era becomes more and more of a reality (Van den Toren 2011:158). The globalisation and pluralisation of every sphere of society leads to religious doubt and to a

diminishing commitment to particular cultural values (Van den Toren 2011). Both cultural and religious pluralism lead to relativism (Van den Toren 2011).

## Pluralism, equality of religion and freedom of religion

Religious pluralism, as defined above, is actually synonymous with equality of religion. All religions are considered equal, not only in the political sense of the word (equal before the law), but also from a religious and theological point of view. One religion is not better than the other and one is not truer than the other. The plea for a 'theology of religions' came to the fore because religious pluralism is a reality (cf. Potgieter 2008:108; Netland 2001:308–348; Vorster 1993:308, with reference to Kritzingen).

Freedom of religion, on the other hand, as seen from a reformed perspective, is something different. Freedom of religion is seen worldwide as one of the basic human rights (Vorster 1993:307). It is therefore also defined in the light of Article 18 of the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (Coertzen 2008:342; Vorster 1993:307; Stuart 2007:36). As Coertzen (2008) states:

This view of religious freedom means that individuals and religious groups want to live their religion, act according to it, and be witnesses to the truth of their faith, also in public. (p. 342)

Stuart (2007:35) points out that religious freedom has many aspects, 'that infringements of religious freedom take many forms', and that there is a great variety as far as local contexts are concerned. From a reformed perspective it is also very important to note what Stuart (2007:38) points out, namely that the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights does not refer to the Creator, but speaks of 'the inherent dignity' and 'the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family'. More fundamental research is urgently needed on the relationship between human rights and religious freedom.

However, it is clear that, even amongst Christian scholars, there is not a consensus on what religious freedom implies. Vorster (1993:308), for instance, refers to the practice where different religions prayed together at the Codesa meeting in South Africa as an expression of religious freedom. The author of this article is of the opinion that such a practice is rather an expression of equality of religion. Coertzen (2008:343) refers to Witte who mentions the following six principles, namely freedom of conscience, the free exercise of religion, religious pluralism, religious equality, the separation of Church and State, and the disestablishment of religion by the State, which figured in the debates on 'Essential Rights and Liberties' in the United States in the 18th century. Coertzen (2008:343) then continues: 'They are indeed, handy distinctions to understand what freedom of religion exactly is'. Coertzen (2008:345) also makes the following statement: 'In order to keep and sustain freedom of conscience, and the free exercise of religion and religious pluralism, the equality of churches/religious communities are necessary.' This author is of the

opinion that Coertzen does not differentiate clearly enough between the different terms used. Religious pluralism and equality of religion seem to be part and parcel of religious freedom. From a reformed perspective the soundness of Coertzen's viewpoint can be questioned. Coertzen (2008:348) admits that the implementation of especially one of the six principles mentioned above, namely the disestablishment of the Church, can lead to a completely secular state.

## The task and calling of the Church and theology

The question arises what the task of the Church and reformed theology should be in this pluralist world in the light of Calvin's interpretation of the first commandment.

## The relationship between Church and State

In the South African context, where the author of this article is working, a number of scholars have given attention to the relationship between the Church and the State in light of the 'democratic' dispensation that began in 1994, and where the freedom of religion is entrenched in the Bill of Rights (Art. 15) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996; cf. Coetzee 2006:152).

Coertzen (2010:345) points out that South Africa, like many other countries, is a pluralist society in a religious, cultural and ethnic sense of the word. In such a pluralist society, both individuals and churches should witness to the government that in the end they will be accountable to God for the way in which they governed. In another article, Coertzen (2008:350) points out that one of the basic ideas of the South African Constitution is equality. In the end he (Coertzen 2008:352) concludes that the 'South African Constitution with its guaranteed right to freedom of religion offers ample space for Christians and churches to realize their Christian identity within the ambits of the constitution'.

Vorster (1993) deals with the issue of religious freedom and Article 36 of the BC. He (1993:310) points out that the laws of the government must be founded on God's law, understood with reference to Calvin, and that the State is bound to both tables of the Decalogue (1993:311). With reference to the new formulation of Article 36 by denominations in South Africa, Vorster (1993:314) concludes that Article 36 can accommodate a human right's principle of religious freedom. Vorster (1993:314–320) continues to develop a practical model for religious freedom, regarding the preamble of the South African Constitution (1996), prayers delivered at official meetings of the government, chaplain services and religious broadcasts on state-controlled media. It is significant, however, that Vorster focuses primarily on obedience to the second table of the Decalogue by Christians and not on obedience to the first commandment by the government.<sup>19</sup> The preamble of the South African Constitution can be left out as far as Vorster (1993:315) is concerned, as long as it includes a Bill of Rights that entails ethical principles, like maintaining law and

19. The relevant question, as far as this article is concerned, is not whether an unbelieving government will obey the first commandment, but whether every government is bound to God's law as given in both tables of the Decalogue.

order, freedom, general morality, protection of life, freedom of speech, reconciliation, free economic activity and peace. As far as public prayers at meetings of the government are concerned, Vorster (1993:316) is of the opinion that prayers by members of all the different religions must be allowed. As stated above, the question can be asked if such a practice would not be an expression of equality of religion rather than freedom of religion. A next question is whether such a practice will not neglect the claim of the first commandment.

A third South African scholar, Nico Koopman (2002), deals with the issue of freedom of religion and the prophetic role of the Church. He (2002:237) refers to the description of religious freedom in the 1992 Declaration on Religious Rights and Responsibilities of the South African branch of the World Conference on Religion and Peace. According to Koopman (2002), the South African missiologist, Gerrie Lubbe, stated that this Declaration can be summarised in three principles, namely the recognition of the reality of religious diversity in South Africa, the separation between religion and State, and equal opportunities for all religions in societal life. Koopman (2002:237–238) is of the opinion that these three principles are embedded in the Bill of Rights of the South African Constitution of 1996. As far as the prophetic role of the Church is concerned, Koopman (2002:239) pleads for a prophetic theology 'that is capable of discernment, of reading the signs of the times, of determining what the priorities for the life and witness of the Church should be'. Koopman (2002) opts for participation in the 'ethical discourse':

It is suggested that churches view the decision to participate in this discourse, that is the option for moral deliberation, not as optional but as a moral choice, that these moral positions are made as far as possible cognitively accessible to non-Christians, that churches strive to reach moral consensus with other role players without becoming unfaithful to their convictions, that churches table their religious convictions in the moral debate in a way that is, as far as possible, accessible to non-Christians. (p. 239)

Although Koopman has some points of criticism (2002:243), he is also of the opinion that we can learn much from the Dutch ethicist, Kuitert, 'who invested much of his theological labor in addressing the question on the place and contribution of the Christian faith and morality in a pluralistic context'.

It is significant that Koopman also focuses on the moral and ethical issues in society when dealing with the prophetic role of the Church. His focus is on the second table of the law (Koopman 2002:244–245). The new insight this article brings to the table is the question of whether the prophetic role of the Church should not begin with the first commandment.

Strauss (2010) draws a comparison between the *Institutes* of Calvin and the South African Bill of Rights (1996) regarding the actions of the State as far as principle points of departure (presuppositions) are concerned. He (Strauss 2010:323–324) comes to the conclusion that the Bill of Rights differs fundamentally from the views of Calvin. Firstly, it is Calvin's view that the government should

choose and glorify the triune God as the only God, also of the State, by acknowledging and implementing both tables of the Decalogue. The Bill of Rights on the other hand, by implication, seeks to maintain a religiously neutral state as point of departure. The South African Constitution (1996) does not refer in any way to God or a god. Secondly, the ideal Calvinistic view is that the State has the task to support the Christian religion. It goes without saying that this also is in conflict with the Bill of Rights and Article 9 of the South African Constitution of 1996.

### The apologetic task and calling of the Church and reformed theology

Religious pluralism not only poses a great challenge to the churches and reformed theology as far as the relationship between Church and State is concerned. It also poses a great challenge for the apologetic calling and task of the Church and reformed theology in a pluralistic world. In this regard, Van den Toren (2011:13) makes the following statement: 'Apologetics is [...] no longer morally *acceptable*, because pluralism has become the politically correct attitude.' In his study, Van den Toren (2011:15) therefore develops 'a theological argument for the need and legitimacy of apologetic witness'.<sup>20</sup> To be true to the Gospel, according to Van den Toren (2011):

[...] its proclamation would in the first place need to claim an objective referent for the truth of its message, it would second, need to hold on to the universal validity of its message and, third, appeal to human beings as reasonable. (p. 15)

Van den Toren (2011:18) further points out that the Gospel lays claim to all human beings and that all human beings are accountable to God. With reference to the law of God, Van den Toren (2011) states the following:

The accountability is presupposed in the idea of a commandment itself and in the idea of God as Judge. Human beings relate to God in a way that they are considered accountable to Him for their acts and way of life. (p. 21)

When the Church therefore addresses the world in proclaiming the Gospel, this proclamation is an expression of the Word of God, wherein God himself addresses human beings (Van den Toren 2011:23).

Christian apologetics should take seriously the challenge posed by postmodern criticism in order to develop a model of cross-cultural apologetics that 'can dialogue with the many religious and ideological alternatives the Christian faith encounters in our global and multicultural world' (Van den Toren 2011:36).

As far as the apologetic calling of the Church is concerned, the uniqueness and finality of the Christian faith and God's revelation in Jesus Christ can never be compromised in dialogue with non-believers and other religions (cf. Van den Toren 2011:204–210).

<sup>20</sup>The magisterial work of Van den Toren can be highly recommended on this subject. Space does not permit us to deal extensively with all the aspects of his study in this article.



Netland (2001) seems to be in full agreement with this. Although he is in favour of a 'theology of religions', he wants to develop a biblical theology of religions that 'should be shaped by the clear and dominant themes of Scripture informing us of the nature of God, the created world, humanity, sin and redemption' (Netland 2001:315). He (Netland 2001:315–325) then continues to formulate 'general themes that are foundational to an evangelical theology of religions', namely:

1. 'The one eternal God is holy and righteous in all his ways' (p. 315).
2. 'God has sovereignly created all things, including human beings, who are made in the image of God' (p. 315).
3. 'God has graciously revealed himself to humankind with the definitive revelation in the Scriptures' (p. 316).
4. 'God's creation, including humankind, has been corrupted by sin' (p. 318).
5. 'In his mercy God has provided a way, through the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross, for sinful persons to be reconciled to God' (p. 319).
6. 'The community of the redeemed is to share the gospel of Jesus Christ and to make disciples of all peoples, including sincere adherents of other religious traditions, so that God is honored and worshiped throughout the earth' (p. 323).

In this regard, Potgieter (2008) points out that Calvin's viewpoint on religions other than the Christian religion (paganism, Islam, Judaism) is still relevant, valid and of great value in today's pluralistic world, because he was led by the *Sola Scriptura* principle (Scripture alone). On the grounds of Scripture, Calvin also maintained the principle of *Solus Christus* (Christ alone) (Potgieter 2008:124). To deviate from this principle would be treason against the Lord Jesus Christ and therefore also against God the Father, who sent his Son to this world. Religion without Christ leads to eternal death (Potgieter 2008:124). Nevertheless, Potgieter (2008:125) also points out that Calvin was very much concerned about those who do not know Jesus Christ as their Saviour and that he urged us to strive in any possible way for their conversion.

## Concluding remarks

The research done for this article, leads to the following concluding remarks:

1. The truth and claim of the first commandment may never be compromised in the pluralistic, postmodern world of today. There is only one God, the triune God of the Bible. He has both the right and the authority to claim obedience to his will from all human beings. He alone is to be worshiped. True worship is obedience to his commandments.
2. Religious pluralism as defined in this article is not synonymous with religious freedom but with equality of religions. Reformed theology should distinguish much more clearly between religious pluralism, freedom of religion and equality of religion on philosophical, ideological and theological grounds. Much more research is to be done in this regard.

3. Religious pluralism as defined in this article can lead to relativism. In the end it can lead to the compromising of the uniqueness of the Christian faith and the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
4. The interpretation and implementation of religious freedom must not be in conflict with the principles of Scripture as confessed in Article 36. In this regard, the final conclusions of the thesis of Van der Zwaag (1999:534–539) are most relevant (cf. Coetzee 2006:149–150 for a summary of Van der Zwaag).
5. A policy of freedom of religion does not discharge the government from its obligation to serve as minister of God and promoting the Kingdom of God. This is not just a naive statement. The principle at stake is laid down in Romans 13 where Paul addresses the reality of the non-Christian Roman government. The same principle applies today to non-Christian governments.
6. A government cannot serve and promote the Kingdom of God and at the same time practice equality of religion and promote anti-Christian religions.
7. In the biblical witness to the government, priority should be given to the first commandment.
8. There should be no tension or difference between the conduct of the Church and its relationship with government and the fulfilling of the apologetic calling of the Church.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

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