Calvinist Contributions to Freedom in Early Modern Europe

John Witte
Center for the Study of Law and Religion, Emory University

Early-modern Calvinism played a critical role in the development of religious and civil freedoms in the West. In the 16th century, Genevan reformer John Calvin developed arresting new teachings on authority and liberty, duties and rights, and church-state relations that remained axiomatic for the hundreds of Calvinist communities that sprang up on the European Continent, and in Great Britain, North America, and Africa in the next three centuries. In a series of crisis moments, major Calvinist figures emerged who modernized Calvin’s original teachings and made them the basis of major legal and political reform. In France, Theodore Beza developed a Christian governmental contract theory that countenanced revolution against tyrants. In the Netherlands, Johannes Althusius developed a covenantal system of constitutional law and a detailed theory of religious and political rights. And in England, John Milton used the biblical image of each person as a prophet, priest, and king to defend the fundamental freedoms of speech, religion, and democratic rule. By 1650, Calvinists had built a religious theory of natural rights and covenantal politics that grounded the secular theories of human rights and political contracts later taught by the Enlightenment.