

The Ethical Basis of Calvinism

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they progressively obtain from the action of less selfish and personal motives. The bulk of the powerful classes are less intentionally tyrannical than they are merely stupid and unimaginative. Popular opinion has only to force itself upon them to begin to enlarge their notions of the extent of the public with which they care to stand well. And meanwhile in the background there are present the disinterested motives in the stricter sense, ready to play some part as soon as conditions are ripe. These seldom produce great changes by themselves. But when for other reasons changes have begun to take effect, they may have an indefinitely large influence upon the state of mind which will finally decide the issue, by undermining confidence on the one side in the justice of the cause, and by strengthening it on the other.

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THE ETHICAL BASIS OF CALVINISM.

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ONE of the results of the wide-spread diffusion of literary education at the present day is a certain indifference with regard to those systems or forms of religion which have come down to us from the past. Either all are rejected because they comprehend dogmas which cannot be believed in the light of modern knowledge, or all are accepted because all contain some elements of good. In neither case is there such a degree of belief as will influence conduct. Thus it frequently happens that literary culture is accompanied by lack of individuality and weakness of will, because the person possessing it cannot attach himself to any definite creed.

It might be suggested as a remedy that each person should enter, or endeavor to enter, as far as possible, into conscious sympathy with the religion of his forefathers,

especially if that religion has helped to stamp a notable character upon the people who have adopted it, and has exercised a powerful influence upon their history. Each person, it has been said, is an epitome of his ancestors. Their strength and their weakness are latent in him. If their strongest and best qualities have been developed by a certain religion, that religion is peculiarly adapted to develop the same qualities in the descendant. To renounce that religion is to cut off a source of vital energy. For this reason it may be contended that each person should make the religion of his ancestors the groundwork of his system of belief. If he cannot accept the dogmas in a literal sense, he should search for the kernel of truth in the dogmas and endeavor to apprehend the mental and moral attitude of which they may be interpreted as the symbolical expression. He will thus maintain a certain continuity with the past while proceeding to new phases of thought.

In applying this principle to Calvinism, and particularly to Calvinism in Scotland, I do not propose to attempt an elaborate exposition of the subject, but to approach it from a practical point of view, from the point of view of a layman and a Scotsman. How should a Scotsman of the present day regard the religion of his forefathers? In an age which calls for efficiency and does not allow much time for idle speculation, what has Calvinism to offer?

Calvinism was in its origin a transvaluation or a revaluation of accepted values. The authority of the Pope was rejected and the Bible, as the Word of God, was declared to be the supreme and final authority. Any religious doctrines or institutions or ceremonies, sometimes even civil institutions, and social customs, which appeared to be contrary to Scripture, or for which authority could not be found in Scripture, were liable to be questioned and to be swept away. The early reformers earnestly studied the Bible, and then proceeded to readjust existing institutions in the light of what they regarded as the

supreme and heavenly pattern. Their methods were drastic, and they admitted no compromise. On the ruins of the old religious system a fresh system was established with a well-defined creed. It would be in accordance with the spirit of early Calvinism to revalue this system and to apply the same uncompromising logic to its revaluation, if it were found that some of the assumptions on which it rested could not be maintained.

In many parts of Scotland it is still possible to attend a religious service which does not differ substantially from the services of three hundred years ago. There is the same simplicity of worship, the same logical precision in the sermon, the same emphasis on certain leading ideas, God's sovereignty, man's guilt and corruption, the need for redemption and regeneration, the absolute inspiration of Holy Scripture. There are guarded references to predestination and election. Among the persons who attend these services there are many who adhere firmly to the literal acceptance of the dogmas of Calvin. There is, therefore, in Scotland a very favorable opportunity of studying the subject not only by reference to old documents, but by reference to the opinions of living men, or of men who are dead but whose memory is green. It will often be important for the purpose of this inquiry to consider not so much what Calvin and other theologians believed with reference to any specific doctrine, but what form it assumed in the minds of practical men, not profound theologians, who believed and acted upon it.

It would profit little to discuss election and predestination except from the above point of view. The former doctrine, as stated in its most uncompromising form in the Westminster Confession of 1647, is to the effect that some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death, and the number of the predestinated and foreordained is so certain and definite that it cannot be either increased or

diminished. The modern mind recoils from such a proposition. The doctrine was stated in a much more guarded form in the early Scotch Confession of 1567, known as John Knox's Confession, the emphasis being on the duties and privileges of the elect, and it has generally assumed this form in Scotland. The orthodox Scotsman felt bound to accept the doctrine because he found authority for it in the Epistle to the Romans, and to question it was to question the inspiration of Scripture, but he looked upon it as a mystery into which he must not pry, and he generally acted upon the view that the Gospel was freely offered to all. The doctrine of predestination, the doctrine that every event has been foreordained, cannot in an absolute sense be reconciled with another doctrine of Calvinism which is in practice much more important, the doctrine of man's responsibility. We do not find that the belief in predestination has paralyzed the will, but rather that it has acted as a powerful stimulus. The idea of an over-ruling Providence and the idea of man's responsibility appear to be reconciled and harmonized in the mind of the individual. He regards himself as working under a 'great Taskmaster's eye.' For all sins of omission and commission he must lay the blame upon himself, since God cannot be the author of sin; but if he does that which is good the merit belongs to God, who has prompted the good deed through the working of the Holy Spirit. There emerges the general principle that for error and failure the individual must assume full responsibility, for success he must claim no credit whatever, a principle well adapted to produce or develop an energetic and heroic type of character.

It was formerly not uncommon in Scotland for a father to recommend his son to read the Epistle to the Romans as containing the general scheme of Christian doctrine. This scheme, as interpreted and expounded by Calvin and his followers, may perhaps be summarized briefly as follows: Man is a being who has fallen from a state of perfection, he is depraved and corrupt and stained

through and through with sin. He lives in a glorious¹ universe, but, because his eyes are darkened, he is unable to see the glory of it and the glory of its creator. A standard is set before him, a law of conduct every jot and tittle of which he is commanded to obey, and he falls far short of the fulfillment thereof. For these defects man is inexcusable and incurs the wrath and condemnation of God. When he becomes convinced of his sin, and, by the grace of God and by the operation of the Holy Spirit accepts the plan of salvation offered in the Gospel, and becomes justified by faith in Christ, his nature is regenerated. His mind is enlightened, his will is renewed, and he recovers something of the pristine glory of man before the fall. There is still, however, in his nature a spring of evil, and he is not freed from the taint of sin so long as he remains in this life. God chastens him by putting misfortune in his way, by exposing him to temptation that he may be always on his guard, by allowing him at times to stumble that he may be reminded of his infirmity, but he can never totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace. Whatever befalls him, pain, disease, loss of property, loss of kindred, he must never show impatience and expostulate, but recognizing justice and lenity in the rod, must welcome whatever happens with a humble and grateful mind, knowing that it has been so ordained by God.² When assured of his calling and election, he should in evidence of the faith that is in him devote himself to doing God's work and extending the glory of God.

There is more emphasis on God's sovereignty than God's love, and more emphasis on man's sin and corruption than in any other religious system. Perhaps we may

¹ Ergo frustra nobis in mundi opificio collucent tot accensæ lampades ad illustrandam auctoris gloriam; quæ sic nos undique irradiant ut tamen in rectam viam per se nequaquam possint perducere. Et scintillas certe quasdam excitant, sed quæ ante præfocantur quam pleniorum effundant fulgorem. (Calvin's Institutes, Book I, chap. 5 (14).)

² Calvin's Institutes, Book III, chap. 7.

say that this stern creed, with its emphasis on sin, on divine wrath, on inexcusable defect, on the need for redemption and regeneration, was peculiarly adapted to the development of a certain type of character, a type very common among those people to whom Calvinism has made an especial appeal. There are some men upon whom Nature pours her gifts abundantly, and what they produce they produce with little effort. There are others to whom everything is hard. They can achieve nothing good unless they live in a state of constant training, unless there is set before them a high standard, a law of conduct every jot and tittle of which must be obeyed. If they relax their efforts for even a short time they quickly degenerate and the labor of years may be in vain. Men of this type, endowed with native vigor, and vaguely conscious of great latent possibilities, would be stimulated by Calvinism to put forth their best energies. The doctrine of man's guilt and corruption, of the need for redemption and regeneration, would be taken to express in effect the tremendous potentiality of man, a potentiality not yet realized; for the healthy mind, that wastes no time in looking back, views sin as the difference between the actual and the potential.

It is difficult at first for a modern to enter into sympathy with such doctrines as the fall of man, and the depravity of man in his present state. We now believe in evolution, in continuous development. We do not think of man as the ruin of a noble building, to use Calvin's phrase. We think of him as a building in process of completion. We put perfection not in the past, but in the future. This idea is symbolically conveyed in the modern doctrine of the superman, which can be regarded as the expression of a modern Puritanism. The psychological effect of the old idea and the new idea is the same. Both ideas move men to discontent with their present condition and spur them to action. Having wider knowledge we must vary the language in which the idea is clothed. In the same way we can give a new

significance even to the doctrine of election in the light of recent discoveries with respect to the laws of heredity. By heredity and by environment some men appear to form an elect who have exceptional privileges and exceptional duties.

To return to the general outline of the subject,—God's sovereignty implies man's humility. Calvin constantly insists that no merit belongs to man, and he expresses entire agreement with a saying of Augustine that the first precept of the Christian religion is humility, and the second humility, and the third humility.³ We find, however, on reading the life of John Knox, the life of Cromwell, and the lives of other Scotch and English Puritans whose religion was Calvinism, that this humility was a humility before God which in human relations became a boundless self-assertion. There was not much of that humility which at the present day so often accompanies the study of religion and ethics, which allows the Philistines and the Amalekites to triumph and dominate the world, and which sometimes differs little from a vicious indolence. The Puritan asserted himself in matters spiritual and temporal. The regenerate man, feeling assured of his election and convinced of his mission, set out to regenerate the earth, or at all events to do as effective work as possible within the sphere allotted to him by Providence. Knowing that his nature was corrupt and would always be corrupt in this life, distrusting every impulse which did not spring from his inmost self, or, as he would express it, which was not inspired by the Holy Spirit, he nevertheless felt a boundless confidence, inasmuch as he knew that he could never fall from the state of grace, that he could commit no irretrievable errors, and that all things would work for good in the end. Having his mind anchored on that which is eternal, acknowledging the Word of God as superior to all earthly authority, he had no fear of man, and no undue regard

³ Institutes, Book II, chap. 2 (11).

for rank and wealth. The problems presented by this evanescent world, problems of politics, of law, of finance, the problems connected with the mechanism of life, he approached with a proud sense of mastery, as one accustomed to greater problems. If the Philistines and the Amalekites crossed his path, he met force with force, gentle methods failing; for he was not limited by the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount, but might derive his examples from the Old Testament which was to him equally inspired with the New Testament. To sum up,—we find that this religion developed a character presenting a remarkable combination of freedom and discipline, humility and confidence, reverence and absolute fearlessness, mysticism and practical energy, a character which could be hard and even cruel. It developed the will and the intelligence more than the emotions, and the will more than the intelligence. As a result the Puritan was very often irresistible on the battlefield and afterwards in the field of industrial enterprise, in any occupation which called for concentration of purpose and untiring effort, rather than expansive sympathies, artistic perceptions, and fineness of imagination.

The doctrine of man's corruption and the consequent distrust of natural inclinations, the constant feeling of responsibility, of duty undischarged, carried with them a condemnation of artificial amusements, of the theatre, the novel, of any occupation which did not appear to have a direct bearing on the main purpose of life. It is true that Calvin in his chapter in the Institutes on Christian Liberty, warns the Christian against excessive scruples about small matters which lead him into a labyrinth from which he cannot escape; and we find that the deeply religious Scotsman was tolerant about matters which he regarded as not essential, for instance, he insisted on temperance, but not on total abstinence. Still, the morality of Calvinism was necessarily very austere. The condemnation of the theatre is still universal amongst rigid Calvinists in Scotland. The early reformers would

have regarded art, in our sense of the word, as largely idolatry, a worshipping of images. Such an attitude as this should not be too hastily condemned. We may view life as an æsthetic spectacle or as a field for energetic action. The latter is the point of view of Calvinism. A scheme of life in which duty, discipline, work, are the paramount conceptions, leaves little room for art and no room for pleasures which insensibly weaken the will, dissipate the attention, and destroy unity of effort. Calvinism, to put it shortly, produced good men of business, it made for efficiency.⁴ The religion developed a morality which conducted to material success persons who retained that morality while they abandoned the theological dogmas out of which it arose. The process can easily be traced in Scotland, sometimes even in the same family, the intense religious fervor of a former age finding expression in more recent times in practical energy and worldly success. This austere morality may assume forbidding forms. As the older Puritanism in which a man sought to do God's work was sometimes corrupted into a selfish religion in which he sought only his own salvation, so the more modern Puritanism is sometimes the garb of a narrow, worldly ambition which sacrifices many generous instincts.

There are realms of thought and feeling which Calvinism does not touch. When we survey the ruins of Melrose Abbey, we feel a lingering regret for a religion which admitted art of the most exquisite kind as an essential of worship. Nevertheless a religion such as Calvinism, which in its purest form taught men to seek after the truth without turning to the right or to the left, to adhere with tenacity to convictions once formed and to impress these convictions upon the world as forcibly as possible, to recognize no fine gradations of good and

⁴ On this aspect of the subject see articles on "Calvinism and Capitalism," in the June and July, 1910, numbers of the *Contemporary Review*, by the Rev. Dr. Forsyth.

evil, but to maintain the good and extirpate the evil at all costs, such a religion was well adapted to fulfill its prime function of freeing the human mind from every form of despotism.

Under the heading of liberty we come to what is perhaps the most important aspect of the subject. When we speak of liberty in this connection we mean something very far apart from license. The idea of discipline meets us at every turn. In the early history of the church in Scotland, and up to a recent period, people were compelled to conform to the very rigid code of morality in force, on penalty of church censures, of excommunication, and social ostracism. There was a degree of interference with the private lives of the people which at the present day would not be tolerated, though now we may perhaps say that increasing pressure of work and a higher standard of efficiency exercise a more severe discipline over large masses than any ever exercised by Kirk Sessions. The contribution made by Calvinism to liberty arises out of the doctrine of the final authority of Holy Scripture as the Word of God; the doctrine that this authority overrides all other authority, any other authority being valid only as it is derived from God, and that if any pope or king, church or magistrate, or council, command to do that which is contrary to the Scripture, particularly in matters of faith and worship, the command must be disobeyed. The issues involved being eternal, any earthly penalty which follows such disobedience must be disregarded.

The consequences of this principle are written large in history. It overthrew the doctrine of the infallibility of the Pope, and the doctrine of the divine right of kings. It helped to bring about the fight between king and parliament in England, and the struggle between presbytery and episcopacy in Scotland. In the end liberty of conscience was established, but this liberty was at first a restricted liberty. A person was still limited by the letter of scripture, as interpreted in such documents as the

Westminster confession, and these limits were sufficiently narrow to prevent for a time the free development of thought. Nevertheless, the principle of liberty once established was bound to extend, and it has in fact extended.

Such a principle as that enunciated above would seem at first to encourage a rebellious spirit, a want of respect for the grades of authority in government. It certainly encouraged a spirit of independence and a tendency to regard the difference of worth between one man and another as something distinct from a difference of external rank.⁵ On the other hand, in the confession and the catechisms of the church of Scotland obedience to the civil magistrate, or, in other words, to any person who exercises authority over others in matters external, is strictly enjoined.⁶ The result is an admirable balance, a balance which we often notice in Calvinism in matters relating to the practical side of life. While the duty of obedience is emphasized, it is clearly laid down that if spiritual liberty is threatened, there is a duty of rebellion.

The belief in the Bible as the ultimate standard of reference developed individuality and moral courage. A person who felt himself firmly supported by the authority of Scripture was enabled to pursue his own line of thought and his own line of action without being deflected by public opinion or by any other external cause. Thus supported he might assert himself against the minister of the parish.⁷ As the Scriptures may be interpreted by different persons in different ways, the right of independent judgment, when exercised without due regard to common-sense, inevitably led to schism, one

⁵ This would also follow from the doctrine of election.

⁶ In John Knox's confession obedience is enjoined to those whom God has placed in authority 'while they pass not over the bounds of their office.'

⁷ This right of independent judgment and also the presence of laymen in the church courts and councils prevented ministers from forming a dominant caste in Scotland.

of the most noticeable features of the history of the Scottish church.

We no longer regard the Bible by itself as the ultimate standard of reference. We do not believe that every word of it has been written by the finger of God. The sacred canon is not sufficiently comprehensive. But the individual should still have his standard of reference, broader than the standards of the past, including and reconciling those standards. The encroachments upon spiritual liberty which must now be resisted are less crude and obvious than in the past, and more insidious. They may for the most part be summed up in the phrase,—slavery to the mechanism of life. The grievances for which men formerly sacrificed their lives do not now exist in civilized countries, except in rare cases. Men may be Catholics or Protestants, may worship according to the forms of presbytery or episcopacy as they please; but if their energies of soul and body are entirely expended in discharging some specialized function in relation to the mechanism of life, so that they have no spirit left for worship of any form, they may be in a worse slavery than their forefathers, often without being conscious of the fact. The principle that induced men to fight for liberty in the past still remains, but the issue is not now so clear and distinct, and the motive which formerly induced men to disregard material consequences cannot now be felt with such intensity.

Something has been said above of the abuses or corruptions of Calvinism. It may lead to self-seeking, it may lead to schism, to an incapacity to live and work with other men. The cruelty which we find in such matters as the persecution of witches is not peculiar to Calvinism. In a sense cruelty is not an abuse or perversion, but an inevitable consequence, not of Calvinism only, but of any system which teaches that the Bible presents rules of conduct for all time, and that one part of the Bible is inspired equally with another part, and which includes

belief in the devil and in eternal punishment.⁸ The doctrine of election in its crude form would accentuate the tendency to cruelty in Calvinism. It is often overlooked that Christianity in the form in which it was once presented by the orthodox, was a religion of cruelty no less than a religion of love, perhaps more so. All or most of the above doctrines we can now reject and yet retain much that is of universal value.

Most valuable, perhaps, is the principle of the spiritual liberty of the individual. Calvinism also comprehends much that is best in Stoicism. It presents a Spartan ideal of life, views life as a rigid discipline or an active campaign. Stripped of theological language, its ethic is in many respects the ethic which the practical man, the man of action, consciously or unconsciously, holds. Liberally interpreted, and tempered with elements from more humane and genial creeds, Calvinism is still a religion for Scotsmen.

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THE PRESENT ALTITUDE.

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TO what moral and social state have we attained in Europe at the present time? Two answers may be given to this question. It may be affirmed that we have advanced to a high civilization, to a degree of moral and social excellence such as the world has never known, but it may also be asserted that the advance has been largely neutralized by regressive forces and that we have made but little progress.

The first contention is supported by a certain set of

⁸ A certain natural sanity and common-sense has preserved Calvinists in Scotland, at all events in more recent times, from accepting these doctrines too literally, and from pursuing them to their logical consequences.