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Calvinism and Liberty

Reformed influences on America's founding principles.

Michael W. McConnell | posted 2/06/2009

King George III blamed the American Revolution on Calvinist clergymen, whom he called "the black regiment"—a reference to the austere clerical robes worn by New England preachers. He was not far wrong. But few educated Americans now are aware of the Calvinist contribution to founding-generation ideals of republicanism, equality, and resistance to tyranny. If asked, most modern Americans would attribute 18th-century political liberalism to the secular Enlightenment, and thus to the *decline* in religious belief among people of the West. Most think the idea of the social contract, along with the right of the people to rebel against tyranny, originated with John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government*, published in 1790. Some, whose knowledge of Puritanism extends no farther than the Salem witch trials, imagine that Calvinist theology must have opposed democracy and liberty.

John Witte's new book, *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism*, will therefore come as an eye-opener to many. According to Witte, Reformed Protestants developed a biblically based theory of social contract (or "covenant"), together with ideas of popular sovereignty, fundamental rights, and the legitimacy of revolution, more than 100 years before Locke. Witte offers the essential scholarly caveats—Calvinism was not the only source of ideas of political freedom; when Calvinists were in power they did not always extend the benefits of freedom to others—but fundamentally, he presents the claim that Reformed Protestantism was the "seedbed" of American constitutionalism: "American religious, ecclesiastical, associational, and political liberty were grounded in fundamental Puritan ideas of conscience, confession, community, and commonwealth." In fact, as he points out, "every one of the guarantees in the 1791 Bill of Rights had already been formulated in the prior two centuries," along with "a number of the core ideas of American constitutionalism—popular sovereignty, federalism, separation of powers, checks and balances, church and state, and more" by "Calvinist theologians and jurists."

More important, Witte addresses the questions of why and how. *Why* did Calvinists in Geneva, Holland, Britain, and New England develop a political theology conducive to republican government and political liberty? *How* did Reformed Protestantism develop a set of ideas that would inspire later generations first to rebel against the King and then to institute a government of ordered liberty? Witte has written not a political history but an internal and deeply theological account of the evolution of ideas and beliefs, which will be illuminating to intellectual historians and constitutionalists, but also accessible to educated readers with an interest in the relation of religious thought to ideas of freedom.

The story begins with John Calvin, whose *Institutes of the Christian Religion* defined the core of the Reformed tradition of Protestant Christianity. Calvin, trained as a lawyer in the classical tradition, was not only a pastor and theologian; he was also effectively leader of the city state of Geneva. He ascribed to the fundamental—and revolutionary—insight of the Reformation: that the Bible alone (and not the dictates and traditions of human institutions) is the authoritative source of understanding of God's will. This implies that each individual believer, whatever his education, birth, or social standing, has both the right and the spiritual duty to read and interpret the Scriptures for himself—and thus that each individual believer, in principle, has equal access to the truth about all significant matters. The egalitarianism of this theology is obvious. More troubling was its tendency to anarchy: to a rejection of all authority and hierarchy—no small threat, if humans are indeed

as sinful as Calvin and his followers also believed. Hence his political theory was an attempt to mediate individual judgment and political authority—to "avoid the extremes of both radical Anabaptist antinomianism and radical Catholic legalism."

Calvin's political teachings are found mostly in Book XX of the *Institutes*, the primary point of which is to justify the authority of civil magistrates, who rule according to written laws and not personal fiat. Calvin taught that individuals have a religious duty to obey their rulers up to the limits of Christian conscience. But there were two important qualifications to this message, which in more radical hands would become a doctrine of political resistance and a justification for revolution. First, Calvin argued that individuals have a duty to God to disobey political authorities when those authorities command actions in violation of Scripture or forbid actions commanded by Scripture. Note, though, the limits on this position: it does not warrant disobedience merely on account of suffering or oppression. "Even though [our princes] torture us bodily and use tyranny and cruelty toward us, it is necessary to bear all this, as St. Paul says. But when they rise against God they must be put down," Calvin wrote.

Second, and more interestingly, Calvin argued that every regime has "lesser magistrates" (counselors, legislators, judges, nobility) who have the duty to protect the people. When the higher magistrates, including the king, become abusive and tyrannical, these lesser magistrates have the obligation to organize and lead the resistance. In Witte's words: "The power to resist and remove tyrants, however, lay not directly with the people, but with their representatives, the lower magistrates, who were constitutionally called to organize and direct the people in orderly resistance to tyrants—in all out warfare and revolution if needed." In the hands of Calvin's successors, both of these lines of argument ripened into rich and sophisticated theories of limitations on the power of the monarch, enforced by a kind of right of rebellion.

Events were soon to test the commitment of Calvin's followers to submission to authority. On August 24, 1572, the government of France started a pogrom against its Protestant citizens. Called the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, it resulted in the slaughter of between 10,000 and 100,000 Huguenots, and the exile of many more. Calvin's successor in Geneva, Theodore Beza, drew on Calvin's writings, along with earlier Lutheran, medieval, and classical sources, to formulate a doctrine under which Christians had not only a right of self-defense, but also a duty of organized resistance against tyranny. As Witte sets forth, this doctrine was further amplified by Calvinist thinkers during the political crises of the Dutch rebellion against Spain, the English Civil War, and the numerous conflicts between the New England Puritans and the British authorities. When Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson designed a seal for the fledgling United States inscribed with the words "Resistance to Tyranny is Obedience to God," it was to this tradition they appealed.

Beza argued that each commonwealth is formed by a covenant or contract between God, the rulers, and the people, setting forth the just authority of the rulers and the rights of the people. Like Calvin (and many of our founders), Beza favored a "mixed constitution" that balanced monarchical power with the aristocratic and democratic power of the lower magistrates." Famously insisting that "The People were not created for the sake of the rulers but the rulers for the sake of the people," he argued—much as Locke would argue 116 years later—that when a legitimate ruler violated the terms of the social covenant and became a tyrant, the people had a right of revolution.

But Beza's theory differed from Locke's in two important respects, which cast light on the way Americans (most of them Calvinists) approached revolution, and which reward consideration on their own merits. First, Beza argued against the idea that mere private citizens or mobs had a right of revolution. Witte explains: "It can certainly not be left to random private persons to make and execute judgements whether ... a once-valid political covenant is now broken by reason of the magistrate's tyranny. These are constitutional judgments, not individual judgments. They are to be made only by properly constituted and authorized lower magistrates." Locke offered no such teaching. Thus, when American colonial legislatures remonstrated against British abuses and met in formal "congresses" like the Stamp Act Congress and the congress that adopted the Declaration of Independence, they were behaving in good Calvinist fashion.

Second, Beza offered a theory of inalienable rights, such as free exercise of religion, freedom to educate one's children, freedom to emigrate, freedom of speech and petition, property, and family, ingeniously derived from the Ten Commandments and based on the idea that individuals must necessarily have the rights necessary to carry out prescribed

duties to God and our neighbor. Locke, by contrast, had a very thin notion of inalienable rights, basing his limitations on government power mostly on the idea that individuals retain those rights not necessary to the preservation of property and public order.

America's revolution and constitutional founding were strikingly more ordered, less prone to mob-like excess, and ultimately more centered on the securing of fundamental rights and separation of powers than other revolutions, such as the French. One can only wonder (and here, Witte does not speculate) whether the Calvinist roots of American social covenant theory account, at least in part, for the difference.

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