

John Calvin in American Public Life*

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My task this evening is to describe the influence of John Calvin on public life in America, and I shall begin with an observation about commentators on that topic. As a whole, they have produced a strikingly mixed, even polarized interpretation.

From the early national period through the early twentieth century, Calvin did not fare well among American writers. The very name "Calvin" raised the specter of a harsh, repressive moralism, darkened by a series of distressingly un-democratic doctrines: the depravity of human nature, the omnipotence of a divine Being who issued impossibly harsh commands at odds with human happiness, and predestination. In the free-wheeling, expansive, and populist cultures of Jeffersonian and Jacksonian America, notions of individual virtue, private rights, and political freedom overwhelmed the supposedly staid and conformist regulations of theological tradition. So Methodist itinerants, anti-Calvinist Baptists, ex-Calvinist evangelicals, and idiosyncratic preachers such as Lorenzo Dow all pummeled the doctrine of predestination, derided the established ministry as moral tyrants, and emphasized the virtues of the common citizen along with liberties of the spirit-filled Christian. What historian Nathan Hatch has called the "democratization of American Christianity" issued in the popularity of Methodism, camp-style revivalism, new churches such as the Disciples of Christ, and a torrent of unabashedly anti-Calvinist rhetoric.

The populist rejection of Calvin as a purveyor of depressing doctrines and tyrannical church discipline echoed in literary circles. We can recall Nathaniel Hawthorne's numerous comic tales about dour and repressed Puritans giving way to cheery and confident New England Yankees and patriots. Herman Melville's Moby Dick can be read as a meditation on the awful Calvinist doctrine of divine sovereignty: the white whale as the terrifying power that drives Ahab insane.

Writing during the 1920s, the literary critic Vernon Louis Parrington drew on these writers to decry Calvinism as a hindrance to the development of democratic sentiment and liberal values. Twisted by the idea of an absolutely sovereign God, the Calvinist—the Puritan—mind held an "aristocratic contempt for the sodden mass of the people." Referring to the banishment of Roger Williams, persecution of Quakers, and burning of witches, Parrington characterized this inhumane legacy as "a rigid suppression of free inquiry" that "lingered out a harsh existence, grotesque and illiberal to the last." Jonathan Edwards, the eighteenth-century New England evangelical preacher and staunch Calvinist, fascinated Parrington like some sort of intellectual trainwreck. Edwards had the philosophical and literary genius to produce the first American literature, but wasted it on anachronistic dogmas. During the same period that Parrington wrote, the Baltimore journalist H. L. Mencken put the whole Calvinist legacy succinctly: "Puritanism was the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy."

Yet we should be struck by a remarkable counterpoint. For all of its supposed tyrannies, Calvinism appeared to many Americans to have been the source of an egalitarian spirit, a democratic ethos shot through with Protestant doctrine. Even as Hawthorne and Melville attempted to exorcise Calvin from the American soul, socially-reformist writers gave a begrudging nod to the Puritan founders. The French lawyer Alexis de Tocqueville located the origins of American democracy in an anti-authoritarian impulse among Calvinists. The hard-nosed Puritans, by Tocqueville's reading, were terribly talented leaders who turned their confidence in God into a reverence for the common citizen and disdain for monarchy and aristocracy. French Calvinists, after all, had long argued, under Calvin's guidance, for constitutional principles and the right of resistance against a tyrant; and English Calvinists had executed a King. Harriet Beecher Stowe, the abolitionist author of Uncle Tom's Cabin, believed that the theology of her New England ancestors bred a resolute fervor for political

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justice that sustained the American Revolution itself. She thought that the seriousness with which Puritans took God made it “rather a recreation to fight only British officers.”

Many American literary scholars and theologians of the mid-twentieth century pondered this revolutionary and democratic Calvinist influence as well. Harvard literary historian Perry Miller idealized the Puritans as high-minded intellectuals whose insights anticipated modern social criticism. Their doctrine of human depravity speared pretension and selfishness; their dogma of divine sovereignty buffered patriotic and nationalist chauvinism; and their intense spirituality challenged the soulless materialism of a new commercial age. It was no coincidence that Miller admired the so-called theological realism of Reinhold Niebuhr, his contemporary at Union Seminary in New York. Miller and Niebuhr confided in a Calvinist worldview to confront what they saw as the shallow self-absorption of modern American culture.

During the 1960s, Miller’s student Alan Heimert continued this recovery by arguing, against text-book versions of colonial history, that the strict, hot, and evangelical Calvinists of the 1740s, including Jonathan Edwards, inflamed the American Revolution. Inspired by visions of a society of love, virtue, and providential purpose, they led the revolt against Britain. Their more reasonable and balanced clerical contemporaries—the makers of a liberal Protestant tradition in America—dithered and stared blank-faced at the prospect of war against King and Parliament.

Heimert’s ideas were controversial, but nonetheless influential. A generation of political and social historians writing during the 1960s and 1970s observed that New England’s Calvinist-Congregationalist churches were in fact the most democratic of all American institutions. Early New Englanders absorbed constitutional principles as they ran their churches like mini-democracies, complete with voting and town-hall style meetings. In civic matters, they elected local and provincial officials with unimaginably high suffrage numbers. Calvinist villages were the seedbeds of American democracy.

Then too, we might recall the long-asserted connection between Calvinism and a modern, liberal, market-driven social order. A procession of books by economic and social commentators has refurbished the thesis of Max Weber’s The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism. Weber argued as follows: although Calvin never sanctioned free-market strategies such as usury or market-driven, hugely profitable price margins, he did demand that believers pursue commerce with a high sense of divine calling. Calvin also promoted personal dispositions that enhanced business: diligence, honesty, and frugality. Added together, these Calvinist convictions constituted a perfectly capitalist personality: disciplined, hard-working, rational, and confident in the divine origins of the latest techniques for making profits. When old theological doctrines and moral tradition fell away during the seventeenth century, the heirs to Calvin became fully capitalist and modern.

Several recent studies have highlighted the progressive and liberal implications of the Calvinist-capitalist nexus. Distinguished social commentators such as Walter Russell Mead, economists such as Benjamin Friedman, business historians such as Kenneth and William Hopper, and a cadre of early American historians have all, over the past two decades, given cheery variations on the Weber thesis. From their perspectives, Calvin bequeathed to his followers in early America a drive to economic development, reliance on scientific economic analyses, confidence in markets, and optimism that commercial success served God, the social order, and human community at the same time. The port towns in which commerce developed earliest and most fully were, after all, heavily populated by Calvinists: Puritan Boston, Dutch Reformed New York, Presbyterian Philadelphia, and Huguenot Charleston.

So, we have today a rather oddly polarized interpretation of Calvin in American public life. How should we account for this interpretive dilemma? Historians of other religious traditions—Lutheran, Episcopalian, Quaker—have not generated such contradictions. What is it about Calvinism? The answer lays partly in the very nature of Calvin’s moral method, and how early Americans adopted that method to their social contexts.

What I shall suggest is that Calvin’s humanistic realism did not sustain any one social theory, and thus lent itself to various, even contradictory interpretations. By humanistic, I refer not to optimism about human nature, but to Renaissance humanism: a trust in the authority of the ancient text. Calvin modeled for his followers a highly disciplined moral method grounded on the Bible. His vision for social order was breathtakingly rigorous and

demanding in such terms. Calvinists applied the Bible to everything. They attempted to shape civil law, secular jurisprudence, politics, national policy, domestic affairs such as marriage and divorce, and economic matters such as personal consumption and commercial exchange to the Old and New Testaments. The phrase “Bible Commonwealth,” which scholars apply to early New England, hints at the power and scope of this idealism.

Yet Calvin’s deployment of the Bible as an absolute rule for social behavior had a rather ironic consequence: it deflated the Calvinist’s enthusiasm for ideology. By elevating scripture above human traditions, Calvin laid the basis for a critique of political or economic systems that held sway at the time. Rather than build elaborate social theories, Calvin applied the text, in an almost *ad hoc* fashion, to public dilemmas as they presented themselves. He addressed local and immediate problems in their particular contexts. His pragmatism made it difficult to “fix” a Calvinist politics or economics but easier to identify its chief appeal: it was mobile, practical, and flexible. It was un-tethered to any theory: absolutism or republicanism, free markets or state control over exchange, capitalism or socialism. It avoided theoretical abstractions and absolute claims for any one set of social ideals.

Calvin’s letters, biblical commentaries, sermons, and treatises reveal this moral method, as did his activities as a pastor. Preaching from texts such as Deuteronomy especially during times of social crises, such as when Protestant refugees from England and France flooded Geneva, he urged native Genevans to employ new immigrants at fair wages. He warned well-to-do citizens against pursuing impoverished debtors in civil courts, and railed against almost all forms of usury—turning credit into a commodity for profit. He also urged an active pursuit of economic abundance, recommended a modest level of personal consumption, sought public funding for the development of new manufactures along with civic poor relief, and supported the establishment of a public bank to assist new entrepreneurs. He furthermore scolded cash-holding residents who refused to give alms, supply credit without interest, or offer jobs to the needy. Taken together, his economic ideas amounted to no consistent theory, but rather to a case-by-case application of the biblical text to specific economic conditions.

In Geneva, Calvin shaped his contextual approach into a disciplinary regime set against native merchants. He worked closely with the civil government (the town Councils) to enact price ceilings, fund local banks, enforce limits on interest, punish price-gougers and oppressors, and fine usurers. Yet Calvin gave different advice to his followers outside of Geneva. He advised French Protestants to heed the economic platform built by advisors to the crown: the development of French industries and internal trade. He also counseled a German merchant to conform his credit practices to local market conditions, which, in contrast to Geneva, required flexible, which to say potentially rising, interest rates on long-distance trade out of Baltic ports.

The Calvinist settlers of early America—English Puritans in New England, Dutch Reformed in New York, and Scots-Irish in Pennsylvania—carried this Calvin—the Renaissance Biblicist and pragmatic moralist—across the Atlantic. The mobility of Calvin’s social ideas rested on their non-ideological nature; they could be applied in different situations according to local needs and problems. The creative possibilities for this method may be sampled by a brief review of four crucial episodes in the history of the engagement between Calvinists and the American economy.

First, during the mid-seventeenth century, Anglo-American Puritans inherited nagging suspicions that the emergent market economy had corrupted commerce at home. Middling, mid-distance merchants and the great merchants of overseas trading companies in England turned to new modes of exchange that expanded and strengthened business networks: formalized correspondence between suppliers and merchants, the use of professional factors or agents, a nearly total dependence on paper credit, the extension of credit by contract with guaranteed profits to the creditor, determination of prices by market demands and current fashion, and the use of civil law courts to enforce contracts and coerce repayment of debts. These techniques, while facilitating exchange, appeared to their critics to depersonalize commerce: to un-moor it from the local, neighborly obligations encoded in the Bible. In sum, the growth of market mechanisms challenged customary assumptions about commerce—moral axioms derived from a blend of humanist and Protestant teaching.

To be sure, many Puritans were merchants. They did not deny the essential importance of trade, the value of profits (for employment, charity, and civic projects), and the courage of overseas merchants. Street preachers in London, learned divines in Cambridge, pastors of rural parishes outside London, and the religious founders of New England nonetheless voiced a nearly incessant critique of new techniques that threatened to sunder local moral solidarities.

Expositing scripture at every turn in their pronouncements, Puritans condemned new credit practices as usury cloaked in various guises. They fretted about price fluctuations as temptations to oppress neighbor. They damned the merchant who took his accounts more seriously than biblical mandates. Most tellingly, they employed the local congregation as an instrument of discipline against wayward merchants. In isolated parishes in England, and in the settled churches of New England, pastors and lay leaders formed disciplinary committees that excommunicated traders who oppressed neighbor through egregious prices, sued indigent debtors, and invested their profits in new ventures rather than relieve the poor in their community. In this first episode, Calvinist teaching stood for customary communalism against the most crucial components of a market culture.

Second, during the mid-eighteenth century, American Protestants faced different challenges from a market system that had developed far beyond the overseas trading networks of the preceding century. To make short work of a long story, Anglo-American commerce became entangled in imperial politics: the century-long conflict among England, France, Spain, and the Netherlands. To abet its dynastic program and fund imperial warfare, the British monarchy and Parliament increasingly co-opted commercial interests. They promoted a regularized system of national debt through the Bank of London, worked in concert with new trading companies to contest especially French colonial ventures, promoted the African slave trade, issued lucrative monopolies to manufacturing and mercantile firms, and attempted to control trade with its colonies through navigation laws and ever-mounting tariffs and regulations.

In America as well as in England, the result was a remarkable stratification of wealth among merchants—the growth of hugely wealthy trading houses and the failure of many smaller firms—as well as an inability to address the increasing problem of poverty. Indeed, several economic thinkers of this period, most famously Adam Smith but also his intellectual predecessors in London and Edinburgh, broke with the imperial-mercantile ideology precisely because they could foresee only a vicious trend toward monopoly, dynasty, slavery, and widespread starvation. They proposed, of course, what has become known as a free-market or *laissez-faire* economic system: individuals seeking profits and commodities according to their internal desires and rational acumen without state intervention.

For the most part, American Calvinists during the second-half of the eighteenth century embraced this critique of the mercantilist system and accepted many of the assumptions of a free market. As colonials, subject to unfavorable trade policies along with political malfeasance, they used the language of freedom and liberty to resist Parliament. Yet they also relied on moral arguments, assembled over several decades, that stressed the humane, even benevolent, agendas implied in unrestricted trade. Citing the very scriptural passages that previous Calvinists had used to condemn the market, they emphasized the capacity of the market to humanize exchange and ameliorate poverty. Evangelicals such as Thomas Prince (a devotee of Jonathan Edwards), severe Calvinists such as Samuel Hopkins (who denounced the slave trade), liberal Bostonian clergy such as Jonathan Mayhew, and Presbyterian leaders in the Philadelphia region, such as John Witherspoon, condemned imperial economics as oppressive, impoverishing, and inhumane. To their lights, a free market offered the possibility of economic exchange and prosperity without political favoritism, slavery, dynastic ambition, and artificial restrictions against social mobility. They hoped that wide commercial channels would speed the diffusion of wealth and prevent widespread economic calamity.

Nothing in this shift of economic opinion evidenced a secular mindset or abandonment of a Calvinist ethos. Indeed, the Congregationalist and Presbyterian pastors who combined free-market arguments with revolutionary fervor fastened on biblical exhortations to charity and social union. They alerted parishioners and political leaders to the dangers of a purely self-serving mode of exchange. Edwards and other evangelicals denounced high fashion, the emergent consumer culture, unbridled material ambition, financial speculation, and the inattention to private poor relief. Moral thinkers such as Witherspoon challenged the assumption made by more

extreme market advocates who urged people to pursue their private passions and self-interests without restraint from customary moral teaching. Their attention to the Bible formed a hedge against a complete devotion to laissez-faire economics.

These early American Calvinists, that is, valued the benefits of transatlantic trade and promoted the dismantling of imperial restrictions on international commerce; yet they did not accept the whole apparatus of a free market system. They hoped that the sort of exchange defended by the likes of Smith would redress the more oppressive effects of the old imperial system: from its implied political tyranny to its economic favoritism.

Third, from the end of the Civil War through the first decades of the twentieth century, when the American market developed into an industrial capitalist system, many Calvinists identified a new set of social problems. Among those problems, the status of labor and the laboring classes appeared quite acute. Evangelical social reformers along with proponents of the Social Gospel such as Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch claimed that the growth of economic inequality, the powerlessness of uneducated workers and decline in wages, and the miseries of a truly indigent, urban class bespoke widespread moral failure. The free market had produced devastating social problems.

At that time, varieties of progressive social theories, which we might lump under the rubric democratic socialism, appeared to provide antidotes to market-conveyed diseases. Inspired by Christian socialists in England such as F. D. Maurice and Charles Kingsley, American leaders of the so-called Social Gospel movement reconsidered the public implications of the Bible. They took texts once cherished by Calvin and the Puritans and set them into their particular context with striking results. As W. D. P. Bliss wrote, the great commands in Deuteronomy that distributed property to every tribe and prohibited usury “not only provided land for the worker, but defended him in the ownership of clothes” and “capital”. . . . the law was truly socialistic in providing in the name of organized society for both land and capital for every family.”

Critics of commercialization in nearly all of its forms, these Calvinist-reformers argued that the unregulated industrial system dehumanized laborers and degraded the meaning of economic production. They urged common ownership of large companies and government protection for labor unions. Evangelical and moderate social reformers of the same period suggested other remedies: temperance, the political enfranchisement of women, temporary assistance through inner city missions (the YMCA grew out of such efforts), and enhanced public education. The various proposals and efforts for social reform, legitimated through hundreds of tracts and sermons based on scripture, all indicated sensitivity to the failures of the dominant economic ideology.

This leads us to the fourth episode, the Calvinist response during the age of the American welfare state, from roughly the 1930s to the 1980s. In this period, debates about economic issues elided with overarching political contests: nativism and progressivism, fascism and liberalism, communism and democracy. Public theologians speaking from a Calvinist perspective explicitly rejected high-flown social theories from both sides of the ideological spectrum: a Christian socialism that had become identified with Marxism, and a fervently nationalistic liberalism that had become associated with capitalism. They attempted to recover a biblical perspective that highlighted the frailties of the human condition, the dangers of investing any ideology with an aura of divine will, and the absolute contingency of all human social projects.

Reformed thinkers such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Lehmann, along with later devotees such as Paul Ramsey, offered hard-headed, policy-based approaches to socioeconomic problems. Niebuhr’s writings on economic life, from his experiences as a pastor to employees of the Ford Motor Company in Detroit to his public essays in periodicals like *The Christian Century* and *The Atlantic Monthly*, emphasized the joint tasks of maintaining a critical distance from the contemporary economic system and designing countervailing political institutions to keep its power in check. He and his colleagues helped piece together a social safety net and questioned the excesses of American consumerism.

Niebuhr’s influential analysis reflected the Calvinist tendency to self-criticism: of dominant theories, of the traditions they received, of any system apart from the historic gospel. It also reflected the pragmatic and flexible approach of a Calvinist public ethics. For the Puritans, the early market broke apart local communities; their response included corporate discipline over merchants. For eighteenth-century evangelicals, the imperial

system threatened liberty and fairness with oppression and dynastic agendas; they embraced a (largely) free market. For religious social reformers and Social Gospellers in the industrial age, capitalism degraded laborers and produced frightening disparities of wealth; these Calvinists advocated a series of particular remedies to the ills of the laboring classes. For Niebuhr and other mid-twentieth century writers in the Calvinist tradition, socialism and capitalism threatened human community with totalizing power; they advocated reform and critique across the board.

Most American Calvinists, following their namesake, thought that trade, commerce, business (whichever term we use) ought to yield some economic returns to the producer, laborer, merchant, or entrepreneur. At the same time, they did manage, within broadly divergent and changing contexts, to develop critical tools for working toward justice and improvement of social conditions. They identified specific moral dilemmas and forged biblical responses within systems of exchange to which they owed no lasting allegiance. Such pragmatism explains why Calvin has been interpreted as demonic oppressor and democratic overseer in the American consciousness.

Nothing I have suggested should be taken to mean that Calvinists were always true to their moral method—or even that Calvinism produced a genuinely democratic ethos. Indeed, while a Calvinist moral method may help to explain the quite contradictory assessments of Calvin in America, it also highlights the often sad disjunction between actual practice and moral utterance. Undoubtedly Calvinists often betrayed their ideals: for every high-minded reformer there were crafty and avaricious citizens who played the system to the detriment of neighbor. Perhaps Calvin's critics have rightly detected the hypocrisies and self-promotions of Puritans and latter-day Puritans who preached justice and love while defying democratic and progressive principles.

That disjunction, however, may in the end merely serve to reinforce the genius of Calvinism. Its supposedly dark doctrines of human depravity can account for human failures in the midst of moral confidence. Even the most hardened Calvinist had to admit that stern sermons, disciplinary regimes, and lofty pronouncements might mask duplicity. That admission itself merely confirmed the Calvinist credo that the Kingdom of God rested on divine revelation and not any human agenda.

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