



The Continuing Carnage of Calvin

The “Paul” entry in the House of Infamy gives a history — up to the waning of the first wave of inquisitions — of the terrors introduced into the world by the inheritors of the dualistic view of mankind that taught that the physical was opposed to the spiritual. Those repressions, imprisonments, and executions did not disappear with the advent of Protestantism. The Protestant reformers were, if anything, even more fanatical, and they persecuted heretics and witches with even greater ferocity.

Martin Luther triggered the Protestant religious schism in 1517, but John Calvin best exemplifies the severe authoritarianism of a movement whose fear of the flesh can still be felt in today’s “enlightened” culture.

John Calvin, (Jean Cauvin) was a Frenchman born in the Picardy area, in 1509. His father insisted he attend law school but, after a few years, his desire to become a preacher won out, and he is generally considered the founder of the Presbyterian church.

Calvin believed in the Bible as an absolute statement of the word of God. In 1536, Calvin published his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, one of the most important theological works of all time. *Britannica* states, “From this time forward his influence became supreme.” Calvin spent considerable time in Geneva, where he set himself to the task of constructing a government based on the subordination of the state to the Church. Once the Bible is accepted as the sole source of God’s law, he argued, the duty of man is to adhere to it and preserve the orderly world which God has ordained.

Calvin not only stressed divine authority, but all paternal authority was inviolable. In Geneva a child was beheaded for striking his father; in Scotland, too — a country most strongly affected by Calvin’s teachings — severe penalties were prescribed for any child who defied his father. This emphasis on honoring one’s parents was not

limited to the Europeans. “Some laws in Puritan New England even declared the death penalty for young who might curse or smite their parents.”¹ Such is the result of believing that God actually told Moses: “Every one who curses his father or his mother shall be put to death.”²

“If there was anything worse than defying a father’s authority, it was to defy Calvin’s. Special penalties were prescribed for addressing Calvin as Calvin, and not as Mr. Calvin. Citizens who commented unfavorably on his sermons were punished by three days on bread and water.”³

Since Church and State were one, to hold the wrong opinion was not only heresy but treason. Jacques Gruet, who had criticized Calvin’s doctrine and who had written “nonsense” in the margin of one of his books, and Philibert Berthelier, who challenged Calvin’s authority to excommunicate, were both beheaded, along with several of their supporters. Calvin’s most formidable opponent within the Protestant movement was Michael Servetus, a well-respected man of medicine and a somewhat liberal theologian. His “sin” was denying the Trinity, claiming (correctly) that the earliest Christians had never heard of such a thing. Calvin betrayed him to the Catholic Inquisition in France, but Servetus escaped the French Inquisitors and went to Geneva hoping to discuss his differences with Calvin. Once there, he was seized, subjected to a sham trial, and burned alive — on Calvin’s express instructions.

As with any authoritarian or totalitarian dogma, Calvinism was fanatically opposed to intellectual freedom. Calvin himself stated that he had submitted his mind “bound and fettered” in obedience to God, and he expected a similar subservience from others. This is one of many views he shared with his contemporary, Martin Luther, who stated: “Reason is that greatest enemy that faith has. ... Reason must be deluded, blinded, and destroyed. Faith must trample underfoot all

reason, sense, and understanding, ... Know nothing but the word of God."⁴ Somehow, the fact that Luther used his reasoning powers to reach this conclusion seems to have escaped his notice.

One interesting aspect of Calvinism which differentiated it from the doctrines of the Middle Ages was a tendency to generalize feelings of guilt to cover every conceivable form of pleasure. Whereas the medieval authorities were inclined to dwell on sex in all its details and deviations, Calvinists devoted their ingenuity to the regulation of all the minutiae of daily life, just as the Puritans in England and America were to do after them.

In Calvin's world, not only were fornication and adultery strictly prohibited, but so were even the mildest forms of spontaneity. Records reveal that bridesmaids were arrested for decorating a bride too gaily. People were punished for dancing, spending time in taverns, eating fish on Good Friday, arranging a marriage between persons of disparate ages, singing songs against Calvin, etc. Items that might bring pleasure to the eye or ear, such as musical instruments, colored clothing, and even stained-glass windows in churches, were pronounced ungodly.

The churches may have been rather drab edifices, but they were surely popular, as attendance on both Sundays and Wednesdays was compulsory. The police went through the streets, shops, and homes to make certain that people weren't shirking their holy duty.

To impose such rigid standards, Calvin oversaw wholesale violence, torture, and executions. Before he was done, 150 of those who disagreed with him were put to death in Geneva.

It had long been the practice of the church to deny the reality of reincarnation — after all, the threat of eternal damnation for disobedience carried no weight if folks had multiple chances to get their lives in order. But Calvin went much further by carrying Augustine's doctrine of predestination

to an even more fearful extreme, condemning to eternal torment, not only all babies who died before baptism, but all persons in non-Christian countries, and all those living prior to the time of Christ. If the teaching of predestination — *i.e.*, there is nothing humans can do to save themselves, because God already decided who will perish and who will live prior to their birth — if that teaching were widespread today, it would certainly be classed as a Most Insidious Lie.

The Puritans, who based their religious experience on Calvin, "were obsessed with predestination and a terror that they would not be saved. Conversion became a central preoccupation, a violent, tortured drama in which the 'sinner' and his spiritual director wrestled for his soul. ... The heavy emphasis on hell and damnation combined with an excessive self-scrutiny led many into clinical depression: suicide seems to have been prevalent."⁵ Such a harsh and unpopular attitude toward life so irritated the rest of Europe that the Puritans were pressured to flee to the New World.

All this was necessary, according to Calvin because: "We are all made of mud. ... We are full of it, we are nothing but mud and filth both inside and outside."⁶ This seems to say that all people are the same; in contradiction to the idea of predestination. Also, Calvin failed to explain why the Almighty would bother to create all these dirty people. But then, reason and facts were of no concern to a man who had given his mind over to the "inerrant" Bible.

Calvin's dark shadow lingered for centuries over Europe and New England; its remnants still discernable in the U.S. today. In fact, there are numerous fundamentalist-Christian websites which applaud this perverted murderer as one of the greatest religious leaders of all time.



Thomas Jefferson on Calvin⁷

“I can never join Calvin in addressing his God. He was indeed an atheist, which I can never be; or rather his religion is daemonism. If ever man worshipped a false God, he did., a daemon of malignant spirit. It would be more pardonable to believe in no God at all, than to blaspheme Him by the atrocious attributes of Calvin.”

— letter to John Adams, 1823

“The atmosphere of our country is unquestionably charged with a threatening cloud of fanaticism, lighter in some parts, denser in others, but too heavy in all. I had no idea, however, that in Pennsylvania, the cradle of toleration and freedom of religion, it could have risen to the height you describe. This must be owing to the growth of Presbyterianism. The blasphemy and absurdity of the five points of Calvin and the impossibility of defending them, render their advocates impatient of reasoning, irritable, and prone to denunciation ... Their ambition and tyranny would tolerate no rival if they had power.”

— letter to Thomas Cooper, 1822

¹ Gaer, Joseph and Ben Siegal, *The Puritan Heritage: America's Roots in the Bible*, Mentor Books, 1964, p. 74.

² Leviticus 20:9.

³ Hefner, Hugh, *The Playboy Philosophy*, Installment 10, 1963, p. 4.

⁴ Morgan, Don, website: <http://www.2think.org/hii/mlquotes.shtml>

⁵ Armstrong, Karen, *A History of God*, Ballantine Books, 1993, pp. 283-284.

⁶ Delumeau, Jean, *Sin and Fear*, St. Martins Press, 1990, p. 27.

⁷ Quoted in *Jefferson: Magnificent Populist*, by Martin A. Larson, Devin-Adair Publishers, 1984.