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For

Roger L. Emerson,
an extraordinary scholar and closest of friends

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Kelly A. Spencer,
my enlightenment in everything

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CALVINISM

Were it not a theology, one might confuse Calvinism with an ideology of the American Revolution: it argues against the institutional power of established authorities; it does so in the name of higher, universal principles; it stresses the importance of a direct, sensual discernment of truth over the dogmatism of politically entrenched interests. What Calvinist theologians call a “sense of the heart”—the inwardly moving, irresistible presence of God’s grace in the believer—accords well with the Enlightenment’s concept of a “moral” or “common sense” that trumps all scholastic systems of abstract rationality.

But then, the theology of French-born church reformer John Calvin (*née* Jean Cauvin, 1509–64) puts forbidding limits on people’s ability to see themselves as free agents in their own lives. Calvin taught that the individual believer is saved by God’s grace alone (*sola gratia*), that is by having unconditional faith (*sola fide*) in Biblical revelation (*sola scriptura*) and the redeeming mission of Jesus Christ (*sola Christus*). Thus, Calvinism formulated a sternly deterministic philosophy based on a grim anthropology. Human beings are born depraved, inevitably tainted by original sin, and there is nothing they can do to change their lot. Only the will of a sovereign God can save them, but God has already decided whom he assigns to hell and whom he elects for salvation.

This doctrine of predestination left little room for ambition, negotiation, or self-improvement. Its fatalism was offset only by Calvin’s belief in the inscrutability of divine intentions. Since human beings cannot know their state of salvation, they are forced to keep examining their daily lives, looking for signs that indicate whether they are among the elect or not. Prosperity and economic success may be such signs, Calvin held, but industry and good works as such can never sway God’s sovereign decision. (It was the first part of this equation that prompted German sociologist Max Weber in 1904 to posit a causal relation between the Protestant work ethic and the rise of capitalism in early modern societies.)

Calvinist theology crossed the Atlantic with the English Puritans who founded Plymouth (1620) and Boston (1630). While holding fast to Calvin’s doctrines of divine sovereignty and predestination, these early settlers developed a more flexible religious system that balanced theological principles with the political and economic realities of an overseas colony. In particular, the American Puritans tried to contain their faith’s inherent tendency toward antinomianism (i.e. the privileging of individual spiritual justification over the communal letter of the law). Rather than establishing strictly Calvinist theocracies, they separated religious and political authority at the level of colonial institutions, while committing these institutions to a unified social ideology based on Christian notions of justice and morality.

Later revolutionaries, such as John Adams, regarded this Congregationalist system as a forerunner of the enlightened separation of church and state.

In reality, the relationship between American Calvinism and the American Enlightenment was more complicated. When empiricist philosophies took hold in the colonies, Congregational theologians such as Cotton Mather endeavored to demonstrate that enlightened knowledge was compatible with the basic tenets of Protestantism. In this manner, Mather’s books *Reasonable Religion* (1700) and *The Christian Philosopher* (1721) reveal something about the argumentative pressures put on religious discourse by Isaac Newton’s physics, John Locke’s empiricism, and Shaftesbury’s moral sense philosophy. At the same time, new religious movements, such as Neo-Arminianism and Methodism, challenged the authority of older doctrines by incorporating enlightened conceptions of free will and natural rights.

In the American colonies, the most sustained debate between Calvinism and the Enlightenment took place in the theological writings of Jonathan Edwards (1703–58). Edwards’s dual allegiance to Puritanism and to modern British thought was visible in publications such as *An Inquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions Respecting that Freedom of the Will* (1754) and *Dissertation Concerning the Nature of True Virtue* (1755). Edwards recognized that the moral philosophies of the (Scottish) Enlightenment were akin to fundamental Protestant beliefs. In this situation, he tried to show that the Calvinist notion of grace was corroborated by empirical research, whereas supposedly more advanced positions, such as Neo-Arminianism and Deism, made speculative—hence unenlightened—claims. Edwards thus meant to redirect modern philosophies toward their forgotten Protestant foundations. This was more than simply an attempt at reconciling Calvinist pietism with enlightened reason. It was an attempt to introduce Calvinist conceptions of knowledge into the

field of enlightened thought itself, in order to change that field from within.

In terms of social and institutional change, British America experienced the full impact of the debate between Calvinism and the Enlightenment during the so-called “Great Awakening” of the 1730s and 1740s. On the one hand, the Great Awakening brought into sharp focus Locke’s belief in the epistemological priority of the human senses; on the other hand, it reinforced the Calvinist doctrine of sovereign grace. The result was an explosive mixture of evangelical antinomianism and communicative modernization. In wave after wave of revivalist fervor, originally set in motion by the colonial travels of British Methodist George Whitefield, the Great Awakening brought the established denominational order in touch with an increasingly individualized, commercialized, and diversified society, while insisting on the absolute centrality of religious discourse in all social and political matters.

Colonial revivalists such as James Davenport and Gilbert Tennent held that God’s grace touches the believer suddenly and without mediators, in one supremely intimate yet eminently consequential moment of spiritual conversion. The evangelical vocabulary, with its emphasis on radical sensual transformation (*awakening, revival, rebirth*), illustrates that this new “religion of the heart,” while not an enlightened movement, participated in an intellectual climate that valued sensual evidence as the chief road to knowledge. As in Locke’s more secular version of the same disposition, this entailed a patent threat to established doctrinal authorities. Henceforth, religious competency—particularly the right to spiritual instruction—no longer depended on education, social background, or institutional standing.

It has been argued that the Great Awakening provided the intellectual foundations for the American Revolution three decades later. Ideologically, the movements had little in common. In terms of its sociocultural

reverberations, however, the Great Awakening did pave the way for the revolt of 1776, as well as later cultural upheavals, such as the sentimental reform literatures of the nineteenth century. As a movement that emphasized a subjective sense of faith over the institutional authority of clergy or sometimes even scripture, the Great Awakening drew numerous people from the lower classes and from marginalized groups into Protestant churches and sects, staking out a space of public speech for women, African Americans, and Native Americans.

In addition, the Great Awakening diversified American religion by weakening the influence of the established denominations (Congregationalism in New England, Quakerism in Pennsylvania, Anglicanism in the South) in favor of a pluralistic religious landscape, creating about 150 new denominations. As the first truly common experience of all thirteen colonies, the Great Awakening inaugurated a translocal and transcolonial public sphere in British America, which the secular elites of the American Revolution would put to political use in the 1760s and 1770s.

Ultimately, then, Calvinist principles were undermined in their exclusivist claims even as they successfully asserted themselves in the public arena. Their very publicity dissolved them within a mass-market of religious belief that produced numerous competing syntheses of religious faith and Enlightenment thought. One of the most original theologians in this regard was Charles Chauncy (1705–87), minister of the First Church of Boston. Equally committed to Congregationalism as to the Lockean promises of progress and natural reason, Chauncy diagnosed the religious upheaval of the 1740s as socio-psychological mass hysteria. In political terms, he complained that the revivalists' enthusiasm (i.e. their belief in immediate communication between God and believer) imperiled the stability of the New England commonwealth.

Chauncy saw himself engaged in a battle on two fronts, against the opposite threats

of Calvinist antinomianism and enlightened Deism. In the wake of this dual struggle, American theologies became increasingly interested in the social utility of religion. Benjamin Franklin built on Chauncy's position when he valued the public benefits of faith higher than its dogmatic substance. This pragmatic solution to the problem of reason and spirituality prepared the way for the American ideal of (trans)denominationalism, which regards all (Christian) churches as legitimate institutions of faith, as long as they stay within their sphere and do not interfere in public affairs. That such tolerance fulfilled a civic service was clear to those who drafted the American Constitution in 1787. Avoiding the absolutist fervor of traditional Calvinism and the secular scepticism of the radical Enlightenment alike, the Federalists opted for a maximum extension and diversification of the religious landscape, hoping that the existence of an abundant number of local sects and churches would prevent any one of them from establishing a monopoly, while each single creed would instill in its members that sense of civic dedication necessary for a pluralistic republic to flourish. Calvinism had arrived not only in a modern nation-state but in a dynamic sphere of public mass-communication.

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See also: CHAUNCY, CHARLES; GREAT AWAKENING, THE; EDWARDS, JONATHAN; PURITANISM