

Predestined for Greatness? An Analysis of the Impact of Calvinism on American Nationalism in the 18th Century

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April 13, 2019

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Introduction

From the Puritans of New England to the Anglicans of the South, a patchwork of competing religious ideals existed in colonial America. From within that diversity emerged a singular thread of religious influence which worked, during the American Revolution and beyond, to craft a nascent sense of nationalism: American Calvinism. Beginning with the reformer John Calvin and his disciple, Theodore Beza, in Europe, Calvinism expanded to the New World. There, emboldened by the isolation of the American continent, Calvinism became a rare source of commonality between colonies with disparate religious beliefs.

This paper analyzes the history of American Calvinism while focusing on how it crafted a sense of American national identity out of the throes of Revolution, proposing that American Calvinism was unlike its European counterpart in its uniqueness. This Americanized branch of Calvinism combined a Lockean focus on individual rights and republicanism with a traditional Calvinist focus on the necessity of morality and served an essential role in the formation of American nationalism. This paper demonstrates that the American Founders recognized the importance that Calvinism held for the masses of America and adapted their speech, mannerisms, and public statements to advance the cause of colonial unity, forming a unique version of American nationalism from separate colonies toward the end of the eighteenth century.

The Formation of American Calvinism

Though forced, initially, to remain an unrecognized offshoot of Protestantism after the unsatisfactory Peace of Augsburg in 1555, Calvinists gradually gained great popularity throughout Europe, and especially in the British Isles throughout the sixteenth and

seventeenth centuries.¹ There, planted in the soil of a nation that had seen their regents switch between Catholicism and Protestantism three separate times, the Puritan movement developed.² Recognizing a world in which God's "most holy and wise providence" reigned supreme, the Puritan worldview emphasized that "in all times some must be rich, some [poor], some high and eminent in power and dign[ty]; others mean and in submission."³ In that regard, some Puritans became disgusted with "episcopal policies demanding conformity to practices like kneeling to receive communion" and envisioned the creation of a "cit[y] upon a hill" upon which "[t]he [eyes] of all people" would be upon.⁴ They expected that their piety (i.e. "habitual reverence and obedience to God") would be seen by all, manifesting what Christianity truly was.⁵

While the infamously laborious, hard-nosed nature of Puritan society has made it the subject of endless debate and fascination, Puritans remain easily identifiable as Calvinists at heart. They represent a natural evolution of the religious community that Calvin had formed at Geneva, whose focus had laid in the regulation of nearly every aspect of human life into a nearly autonomous state.⁶ Puritan life encouraged concern for one's own affairs as well as concern for the community as a whole, emphasizing a shared moral responsibility to maintain the common good.⁷ This concern for the public good, combined with the passionate faith that drove many Puritans forward, proved tremendously impactful in the formation of

¹ Marshall, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Reformation*, 231.

² *Ibid.*, 196-197, 206-207, 209.

³ John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity, 1630," Hanover College Department of History, last modified August 1996, <https://history.hanover.edu/texts/winthmod.html>.

⁴ Marshall, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Reformation*, 226; Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity."

⁵ Jerald C. Brauer, "Types of Puritan Piety," *Church History* 56, no. 1 (March 1987): 39.

⁶ Marshall, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Reformation*, 89.

⁷ Donald E. Frey, "Individualist Economic Values and Self-Interest: The Problem in the Puritan Ethic," *Journal of Business Ethics* 17, no. 14 (October 1998): 1575.

an American state. The fires of Revolution that would forge the American state in the 18th century would find themselves lit by a spark of Calvinistic fervor, fervor first brought to the continent in the belly of the *Mayflower*.

Perhaps the most appreciable spark emerged from the throes of the Great Awakening. By emphasizing the relationship of the individual with God and by focusing on the role of God in determining their fate, men such as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield galvanized a generation of believers, transforming what had been base religiosity into genuine conversions of the heart. One can look at the example of Nathan Cole, an ordinary farmer transformed by Whitefield's message at Middletown, Connecticut. He notes that Whitefield "put [him] into a trembling fear before he began to preach" and that "[b]y Gods [sic] blessing; [his] old Foundation was broken up, and [he] saw that my righteousness would not save [him]." ⁸ While initially a source of concern for Cole, Whitefield's ideas about predestination would eventually give him "consolation instead of [...] conundrum[.]" and would change his life forever. ⁹ Large numbers of substantial transformations, such as Cole's, gave the colonies a much-needed jolt of what one European observer would call "enthusiasm," breaking down a calcifying religious structure that had maintained placidity within the colonies. ¹⁰

Revolution Breaks Forth

⁸ Mark A Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1992), 93.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5.

That “enthusiasm” would soon, however, lead to tensions between the colonies and Great Britain. Increasing population growth, burgeoning British taxation, and American resistance set the stage for a watershed moment in American history, a time where Calvinistic fervor spilled over into action.¹¹ Beginning, at first, as simple protest on behalf of the colonists, books such as *Common Sense* by the polemicist Thomas Paine—who propagated the idea of a covenant between God and the newborn nation—served to foment popular unrest toward what was seen as the unbiblical nature of monarchical government.¹² American elites, seeing the attention of the common folk divested in such a way and they, themselves, influenced by the religious fervor generated during the Awakening, followed suit.¹³

Whether it was out of political adroitness or fear of exposure that some of the Founding Fathers chose to subvert their Deist natures, drop their own fiery language against Calvinism, and emphasize a shared Christian religion, the answer is inconsequential.¹⁴ What is apparent is that the Founders recognized that “religious feeling flowed like an underground river through the colonies from New England to Georgia and might be brought to the surface with the appropriate codes and symbols.”¹⁵ Utilizing the nascent American clergy, the Founders were able to spread support for the Revolution even further. While most ministers avoided actively campaigning for Revolution until after 1776, their impact upon

¹¹ Ibid., 36, 80-81, 236-237.

¹² Paine, Thomas. *Common Sense*. Project Gutenberg, 2008.
<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/147/147-h/147-h.htm>.

¹³ Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, 52.

¹⁴ John Adams, *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 591.

¹⁵ Emory Elliot, “The Dove and Serpent: The Clergy in the American Revolution,” *American Quarterly* 31, no. 2 (Summer 1979): 188.

the Revolution is palpable.¹⁶ This manifested itself in the Declaration of Independence, which stands out as a compromise between the Deist principles of American elites and the Calvinist fervor of the population. Professing the ideals that “all men are created equal” and that it is “the Right of the People to alter or abolish” governments that had become destructive, the Declaration set the tone for the rest of the Revolution, emphasizing the role of God in bringing about lasting societal change, while intermixing Lockean aphorisms to conform to the Founders’ vision of America.¹⁷

The Americanized version of Calvinism espoused in the Declaration served as an embryonic national identity for the colonies. The nation, by combining, much as the Declaration had, Lockean philosophy with a Calvinist focus upon morality formed what Mark A. Noll calls “Christian republicanism[,]” a reflection of the unique relationship between civic humanists and common sense philosophy apparent in 18th century American culture.¹⁸ Indeed, the compatibility, due to a shared Calvinistic Puritan heritage, of John Locke’s thinking with the writings of men like Paine allowed the colonies to see their fight against Britain as a moral mission that had to be won at all costs.¹⁹ In this dualistic moral universe of right and wrong, the forces of America’s God wrestled against the forces of the demonic Britain, an image especially present in the works of men like the Reverend Samuel Sherwood. He used “every rhetorical device perfected by the Puritans to attack the British Satan [that] had unleashed the [Harlot] of Babylon to ride her dragon upon the American continent.”²⁰

¹⁶ Ibid., 190.

¹⁷ “Declaration of Independence: A Transcription,” National Archives, last modified June 26, 2017, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

¹⁸ Mark A. Noll, “The American Revolution and Protestant Evangelicalism,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 23, no. 3 (Winter 1993): 616-617.

¹⁹ Herbert D. Foster, “International Calvinism through Locke and the Revolution of 1688,” *The American Historical Review* 32, no. 3 (April 1927): 480.

²⁰ Elliott, *The Dove and Serpent*, 189.

By presenting the conflict in Britain as an eternal conflict between light and darkness and as the forces of God confronting the forces of Satan, Calvinist ministers aided the creation of a nascent American nationalism, furthering the development of a unique cultural and social identity.

What stands out as the most incredible attribute of the Revolution, however, is how it strayed from traditional, European Calvinism. Indeed, one of the greatest provocateurs of the Great Awakening, George Whitefield, emphasized that he had “never read anything Calvin wrote” but had been “taught [...] of God.”²¹ Calvin, himself, had never focused upon resistance to a central state but had doted over predestination rather than revolution, making only a singular note to it within the 1559 edition of the *Institutes*.²² Further, Calvin’s belief in the propagation of right doctrine first and foremost is hardly reflective of what the Founders attempted to accomplish through the Revolution.²³ No, the Calvinist movement in America that began with the expedition of the Puritans and reached its climax under the fires of the American Revolution was, in itself, already a completely different movement. It had transformed itself into an Americanized version of the eponymous Frenchman’s medieval ideas.

An example of this, from after the Revolution, can be found in George Washington’s Thanksgiving Proclamation in October of 1789. Embracing what he called the “providence of Almighty God,” Washington reminded the American people of how God had offered them

²¹ Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, 92.

²² John Calvin and Ford Lewis Battles, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Louisville, KY: Presbyterian Publishing Corporation, 2001), Online E-book, 1072; Marshall, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Reformation*, 97.

²³ Ronald VanderMolen, “Political Calvinism,” *Journal of Church and State* 11, no. 3 (Fall 1969): 460.

“kind care and protection” and “tranquility, union, and plenty” and, as a result, made obvious how much nationalistic Calvinism still held authority even after the Revolution.²⁴ Setting aside Washington’s own preclusion to the nomenclature of God (he listed it only twice within the document), the Thanksgiving Proclamation effectively demonstrates the impact that Calvinism had upon the burgeoning United States. While the nation would, eventually, strip out most established religion, Calvinism would hold great power over the people, their ideas, and who they chose as their leaders.²⁵ Religion would power nationalism within the United States, a direct result of the dynamic role that American Calvinism had played in the Revolution.

Conclusion: The Legacy of Calvinism

The American Revolution, far from a purely secular event, was a distinct result of the creation of American Calvinism. First demonstrated in the heart of Calvin’s approach to Christianity, which focused on the application of Biblical principles to the physical world, then planted in America by the Puritan’s “city on a hill” experiment, Calvinistic fervor would be encouraged by the Great Awakening, and emerge as a combustible source of nationalistic fervor in war against Britain.²⁶ Unlike what Calvin originally envisioned, however, this fervor would not result in the creation of a Calvinist state, but, instead, in the formation of a national identity that was uniquely American.

From its origins as a social movement during the sixteenth century, Calvinism developed into an unstoppable force within American political and spiritual life. Catalyzed

²⁴ George Washington, "Thanksgiving Proclamation, 3 October 1789," National Archives, accessed March 13, 2018, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-04-02-0091>.

²⁵ "The Bill of Rights: A Transcription," National Archives, last modified June 26, 2017, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/bill-of-rights-transcript>.

²⁶ Marshall, *The Oxford Illustrated History of the Protestant Reformation*, 240-241; Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity, 1630"; Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause*, 5; Elliott, *The Dove and Serpent*, 189.

by its ability to be adapted to nearly any social circumstance and by its focus upon living the best life for Christ and one's community that one can, American Calvinism fomented Revolution by asking its adherents to think about the community first. Its importance was enhanced by the Great Awakening, which had encouraged heated passion over cool rationalism.²⁷ When tensions between Britain became high and the colonists were undecided about rebellion, galvanizing sermons by Calvinist ministers encouraged them forward and gave them the assurance of God's approval in dismissing their king and in forging their own path ahead.

As the 18th century gave over to the 19th century, American changed immensely. While organized religion changed much during the following century, what did not change significantly was the American tradition of liberal democratic values forged during the Revolution.²⁸ That important milestone in the American story, a result of Calvinist fervor, still stands today, immortalized in the American Declaration of Independence, and the enduring rights which Calvinistic fervor helped establish.

²⁷ Ava Chamberlain, "Self-Deception as a Theological Problem in Jonathan Edwards's "Treatise Concerning Religious Affections."" *Church History* 63, no. 04 (December 1994): 541.

²⁸ Douglas H. Sweet, "Church Vitality and the American Revolution: Historiographical Consensus and Thoughts Towards a New Perspective," *Church History* 45, no. 3 (September 1976): 357.

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