



Abstract from Article

DEMOCRATIC FREEDOM AND RELIGIOUS FAITH IN THE REFORMED TRADITION

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Abstract

During recent years there has been an interesting shift in the attitude of many historians with regard to the relationship of Calvinism to the development of democracy. A generation ago, the contention that modern democracy was a daughter of Calvinism was eminently respectable in academic circles. The fact that modern democracy arose and put down its strongest roots in lands most deeply influenced by the Reformed faith – in England, Scotland, Holland, America and Switzerland – was regarded as self-evident confirmation of this contention. Within the present generation this thesis as to the relationship of Calvinism and democracy has been sharply challenged. The development of democracy in Calvinist countries is said to be a historical accident, and the forces which produced the democratic patterns of government are said to have been social and economic rather than religious. If ideological parentage is to be sought, it is asserted, it will be found in the essentially secular philosophies of the English Levellers and Deists rather than among the Calvinists. The Calvinists, far from fostering democratic ideas, resisted them. The interest of the Calvinists was in the establishment of a theocracy governed by the elect, and their true sentiments are revealed in the words of such men as John Winthrop and John Cotton. "A democracy" said Winthrop, "is, among most civil nations, accounted the meanest and worst of all forms of government." "Democracy?" Cotton asked rhetorically, "I do not conceive that ever God did ordain it as a fit government either for church or commonwealth." Marc-Edouard Cheneviere is, perhaps, the best spokesman for the newer point of view. In *La pensee politique de Calvin* (1937), he points out that to regard Calvin as the spiritual parent of democracy, it is necessary to consider Beza, Hotman, Mornay, William of Orange, Buchanan, Althusius, and Roger Williams as the true representatives of Calvinism. But, he continues, these men are not orthodox Calvinists, and to the extent that they defended liberal and democratic ideas they merely developed ideas arising before the Reformation in the "full" Middle Ages, and even these ideas were not democratic in the modern sense of the term. Furthermore, these men do not merit the title of Calvinist political theorists because they were far more preoccupied with meeting the immediate political needs of their coreligionists than with seeking, as did Calvin, to trace the fundamental principles of a political doctrine inspired by the Word of God. This is made clear, he asserts, when one notes that the infinite variations of the political doctrines of these men follow the needs of the moment and affect, not merely the application, but the fundamental principles of Calvin's thought. It is true, of course, that the Reformation indirectly favored the development of democratic ideas by the creation of religious minorities in a number of countries, but this fact scarcely makes the Reformers the spiritual parents of modern democracy. The central contention, then, is this: the Calvinists by creating religious minorities in certain countries prepared the way for democracy, but there was no rational basis for such a development in their thought. The inherent logic of their doctrines would not demand such a result, nor even make it possible without seriously compromising their principles. The development of democracy was at best an unintentional result. By throwing themselves into opposition to existing regimes, the Calvinists cultivated an

atmosphere and a sentiment which was congenial to democratic ideas and actually stimulated their development, but the end they sought was not rule by the people. Indeed, they created a situation which made impossible the solution they desired – the aristocratic rule of the elect. Nor was the opposition to the existing regimes due primarily to inherent political principles in Calvinistic thought, but rather to the fact that the Reformed groups found themselves compelled to struggle for existence in a hostile environment. Forced to demand rights for themselves, they found it difficult and ultimately impossible to deny them to others. This reconstruction contains large elements of truth but the overall conclusion is both false and misleading. Roland H. Bainton has said with reference to the development of religious freedom: "If Calvin ever wrote anything in favor of religious liberty it was a typographical error." To make a similar sweeping statement with regard to Calvin and democracy would be unjust and untrue. An examination of the literature of Calvinism, I believe, will disclose four basic propositions which should govern our thinking in this area.

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