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John Calvin - a pioneer of the spirit of capitalism?

An Essay

By

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Abstract

The thesis John Calvin (1509-1564) was the religious initiator of modern capitalist mentality is inconsistent with his teaching; just the opposite is true. Calvin represented a very traditional i.e. non- or even ant-capitalist socio-economic position. There one does not find on his doctrine what could have fostered and prepared a so-called spirit of capitalism.

Keywords: John Calvin this-sided and other-sided predestination spirit of capitalism

We read in Calvin's Instituto Christianae Religionis I.16.6:

Eodem pertinet illud Salomonis: Pauper et foenerator occurrunt sibi: oculos amborum Deus illuminat (Prov. 29:13). Quamvis enim permixti sint pauperibus divites in mundo, dum singulis divinitus assignatur sua conditio, admonet, Deum, qui omnibus illucet, minime coecutire, atque ita pauperes ad tolerantiam hortatur, quia onus sibi a Deo impositum excutere conantur, Sic et alter Propheta profanes homines obiurgat, qui industriae hominum vel fortunae adscribunt, quod alii iacent in sordibus, alii ad honores emergent. (Psal, 75.7).

[See appendices below.]

Translation

Just there (if God predetermines everything) belongs to that (which is Solomon's): the poor and the money-giver are hostile to each other; God (but) enlightens both eyes (Prov. 29:13). For although the rich are mixed with the poor in the world, as long as their status is assigned to the individual by divine connection, he reminds (sc. Solomon) that God, who makes his light shine upon all, is not blind in the slightest, and so he exhorts the poor to be patient, because they are dissatisfied with their lot and try to shake off the burden imposed on them by God. Thus, another prophet squints at the worldly-minded men who attribute to the diligence of men or to happiness, that some lie in the dirt, but others are honoured.

According to a widely held view John Calvin (1509-1564) and his followers had believed this-sided success be a sure sign of the other-sided predestination to eternal bliss.

This leads the Christian to think that he can recognise already on earth his eternal salvation i.e. the absolute value of his existence.

But this is by no means Calvin's and his followers' opinion. It is the position of a Pseudo-Calvinism which was created in the 19th Century to satisfy an urgent ideological need. It provided the socio-economically rising Protestant bourgeoisie with a religious justification for their adoption of the new spirit of capitalism.

These Neo-Protestants gladly took up the view Calvin and his followers would have brought about a radical break with feudal social culture, in this way preparing the new spirit of capitalism and by that religiously motivating even the poor people *industriā* i.e. by hard work and *fortunā* i.e. by risky business to accumulate riches and in this way to change their social position. The old socio-economic order had passed and therefore Protestants should replace their outdated feudal spirit with the spirit of the new successful socio-economic order of capitalism. For the Neo-Protestants this new spirit became the new historical form of the divine law which emerged as the centre of the new moral religion. This spirit that relied on hard work and risky business as a means of success was defended with the socio-economic slogan: God protects private property.

The basic moral principle of this new spirit was to be successful in this world.

Because the Neo-Protestants believed that earthly success were a sure sign of God's appointment to eternal bliss. They were therefore keenly interested in increasing their wealth by hard work and risky business however the theological consequence of that new moral spirit was unmistakable. Undeserved grace and granted faith no longer played an existential role. These two fundamentals of traditional Protestant soteriology were replaced with the moral principles of achieving success with hard work and risky business.

Although grace and faith continued to be recited, especially in the liturgy, but in fact they primarily served to emotionally stabilise the

opposite new morality. In the sermons the new morality was propagated but the old religious feelings were still fed in the traditional liturgy.

Turned into psychological means their liturgical re-use should help the traditional Protestants to endure the new morality, the new law of this-sided success achieved by hard work and risky business.

Compared to these ideas and practices of Pseudo-Calvinism, allegedly originating from Calvin and his followers, the Calvinists taught just the opposite: according to their doctrine God's predestination applied not only to the afterlife but also to life on this side.

In this respect, because God alone actually and directly determines everything, including all social conditions, man should not think he could change his social position on the basis of his own initiative.

If there would be no social change in this-sided life one should not try to remodel one's condition from e.g. poverty to wealth. God's predestination for worldly life is as immutable as the other-sided one. That's why there were no Calvinist plans for a new socio-economic world order. Rather, the old order should continue to apply regarded as a God given one. That is the reason why those who were born poor were required to resign themselves to get wealth and social advancement.

Those who were born rich were also due to their this-sided predestination rich and not because of their own hard work or risky business.

This-sided predestination does not permit any self-intentioned and self-executed change to the human being.

Calvin therefore warned the poor who were dissatisfied with their lack of wealth not to want to get rich, but to remain poor according to the divine this-sided predestination.

There is no doubt about Calvin's and his followers' position: A predestined this-sided e.g. socio-economic status should not be brought about by man's own successful work.

Socio-economic development is not the result of self-determined purposes and activities; it is directly determined only by God. Everything

that man thinks, does and feels only happens because God wanted and ordered it in advance.

A change of worldly conditions could only happen if God wants it that way. Only his unexplorable and irrefutable destination plans and realises all works and events.

Therefore, it is useless for the poor to seize the wealth of the rich, because like the rich they are completely subject to this-sided predestination. That's why it remains that even successful hard work or risky business cannot determine their earthly fate.

More than that: This, in truth, useless way of this-sided self-made success would be not only an illusion but also a rebellion against God's decree. It is a violation of God's will where man should remain in the status into which he was born.

Such a rebellion must fail because God determines all reality.

Even such a rebellion like all other operations and events would be only God's own work.

But this means nothing more than that such rebellion is not only planned directly by God, but also that God forces the perpetrator to rebel, so to speak. The perpetrator is only an involuntary enforcer of God's decision.

In any case, to prevent earthly success from being used as a sign of election on the other side, Calvin remains true to the basic rule of the traditional socio-economic order: *Cobbler stick to your last.*

So, you can say: Calvin does not give rise to the slightest doubt that there is not even the slightest this-sided sign on earth that one is redeemed or condemned for ever.

God's predestination is unpredictable and therefore unrecognisable.

By no means even by hard work or risky business which may achieve a tremendous this-sided success can never be a sign of other-sided redemption.

This is the fundamental difference between Calvinism and Pseudo-Calvinism.

Such an earthly sign would be an uprising of illusion only because it is impossible to get hold of a thing which is beyond the categories of human culture. But such a category is success.

As far as the other-sided predestination is concerned it cannot be recognised and certainly not by this-sided sign of success. Reason is that neither a successless poor as such nor a successful rich as such are chosen for salvation or condemnation.

But if one's worldly working has no meaning and consequence for the other-sided existence, then a conclusion from an earthly sign to God's other-sided unexplorable decision does not work.

The earthly actions and the after-life predestination have therefore nothing to do with each other.

A worldly sign at most says something about a worldly status but says nothing about the other-sided one.

Unlike this-sided predestination the other-sided one aims at the final truth of man's earthly existence. It is not based on man's working. It is beyond all his possible self-determinations. With other words: Even the highest cultural, moral, or religious most successful work is completely useless for the recognition and by that for a safe knowledge of eternal salvation. If someone says: earthly success is God's work it cannot, however, be a sure sign of the election to eternal bliss, as God's free will cannot be captured - especially not with powerless earthly works.

In the background of all these existential reflections one recognises that the final meaning of existence cannot be known, not because of man's inability to find it out, but because there is no final meaning of his this-sided life at all.

The fate of earthly life has substantiality nothing to do with this-sided systems of meaning, with finite culture, with man's worldly self-construction.

Just as the human being cannot make any final judgment about his other-sided existence, neither can he make it about his earthly existence. That's why a successful work can never become a sign of other-sided status.

Calvin's teaching on the basic meaninglessness of worldly existence for the other-sided one serves hedging the radical exclusion of working and so-called self-realisation as *signa salutatis* i.e. as signs for future salvation. This salvation is only a matter of undeserved grace and nothing else. This-sided existence has no other-sided purpose; it only has earthly goals set by man's will, which is nevertheless determined by God's will..

Therefore, the task of the divine law consists in the deliverance of rules which can help men to organise their worldly existence in the service of charity and appropriate worship as well as to judge and punish people's actions in accordance to these rules.

Although man is fully subject to God's determination, he is nevertheless fully accountable to the law.

And again: All legally compliant acts and all crimes are products of God's will and working alone.

The purpose of Calvin's doctrine that God is the direct author of all works and events is to prevent in all circumstances that even the slightest self-made human work affects God's all determining grace.

Calvin and his followers reminded the human being that even a this-sided most successful working does not give people security for other-sided salvation; one can only trust in God's uncontrollable grace.

Trusting faith just means there is no recognisable safe sign.

The constitution of existence is not manageable; rather it is unavailable.

With earthly eyes, there is nothing.

This unavailability of the existential constitution is the basic meaning of grace. Faith trusts in this gracious i.e. unavailable constitution or existence.

However, that trusting faith is not a work of man's will but only an undeserved gift from God. For if faith would be a product from man's will, it would be a work again, and salvation would no longer depend on free grace, and faith would be obsolete and superfluous.

Indeed, in Pseudo-Calvinism faith has lost its original meaning and has become a conviction of scientifically not accepted so-called supranaturals.

In the same way grace has become an emotional tool for Protestants who are unsettled by the new spirit in their consciences.

The claim that Calvin and his followers had propagated inner-worldly ascetism as a successful means to increase wealth which would be a clear and recognisable sign of predestination to other-sided salvation is also at odds with Calvinist doctrine that increasing wealth i.e. worldly success, accumulated e.g. by ascetic behaviour, does not refer to the status in the hereafter.

The basic principles of the Pseudo-Calvinist ideology of successful capital accumulation, hard working and risky undertaking, aimed at socio-economic success, are considered unsuitable means for ensuring eternal salvation. But future bliss is only a matter of grace and faith and never of a visible sign.

Faith trusts in grace that it can capture the consciousness of poor and rich regardless of their even ascetic works.

It is the realisation that the final value and meaning of man's existence does not depend on any this-sided work done with strict asceticism. It depends only on God's undeserved and not manageable grace. Man does not need a this-sided sign of earthly success to know to be an elected i.e. to be a perfect human being. To live a fulfilling life, earthly success is meaningless.

Calvin's theological teaching on predestination was directed against those Catholic and other Christian positions which acknowledged works as necessary means for salvation. Such a view, however, means nothing more than that man cannot transcend his own random self-

determination. Reason is: He has given up his basic nature of never-ending self-transcendence.

The fact that Calvin asks the poor to remain in poverty is not a socio-political programme. He only wants to prevent what later was dominant in bourgeois theology and religious sociology as well as in Neo-Protestant liberalism, that other-sided salvation could be directly connected with socio-economic progresses and social advancement.

According to Calvin's teaching on grace and faith, man can realise his absolute freedom from himself, from his products, from his works, from his meaningful answers to questions that cannot be answered at all. These earthly self-constructions misused as constitution of existence can only be merely illusionary substitutes for existence constituting grace. And faith is substituted by also so-called illusionary conviction.

According to Calvin God enfeoffs man with faith. That faith is a borrowed good. It means the awareness that the magic of self-dependence, of self-realisation, of bleak cultural fetishism can never constitute existence.

The constitution is God's unexplorable other-sided predestination which no one can decrypt.

Therefore, no earthly sign could reveal one's eternal salvation i.e. the mystery of one's own existence. That mystery is the result of uncontrollable grace, and an unconditionally granted faith. There is no steady and final meaning of existence neither possible nor necessary. That's because all meanings are only products of man's intellectual working. He who produces all meanings cannot be subjected to the rule of his own products. Submits to them, one only succumbs to self-delusion, i.e. to success as sign of illusionary self-determination.

There is no doubt: Calvin and his followers had nothing to do with the preparation of a spirit of capitalism. That successful work is a sign of heavenly salvation is a product of Pseudo-Calvinism only.

A this-sided extraordinarily successful entrepreneur, as well as a worldly completely failed one is according to the Calvinists only

referred to earthly culture. Success and failure are moments of man's external world, but grace and faith belong to his inner world, to the undeterminable constitution of existence. But they do not at all belong to the pseudo-constitution of existence which Pseudo-Calvinism had created from self-made constructs of existence i.e. of culture.

Therefore, success ideology of Pseudo-Calvinism was an attempt to control one's beyond or free and uncontrollable essence which consists in self-transcending. The attempt has the task to cover the final constructive and creative meaninglessness of this-sided constructions for the truth of existence at all.

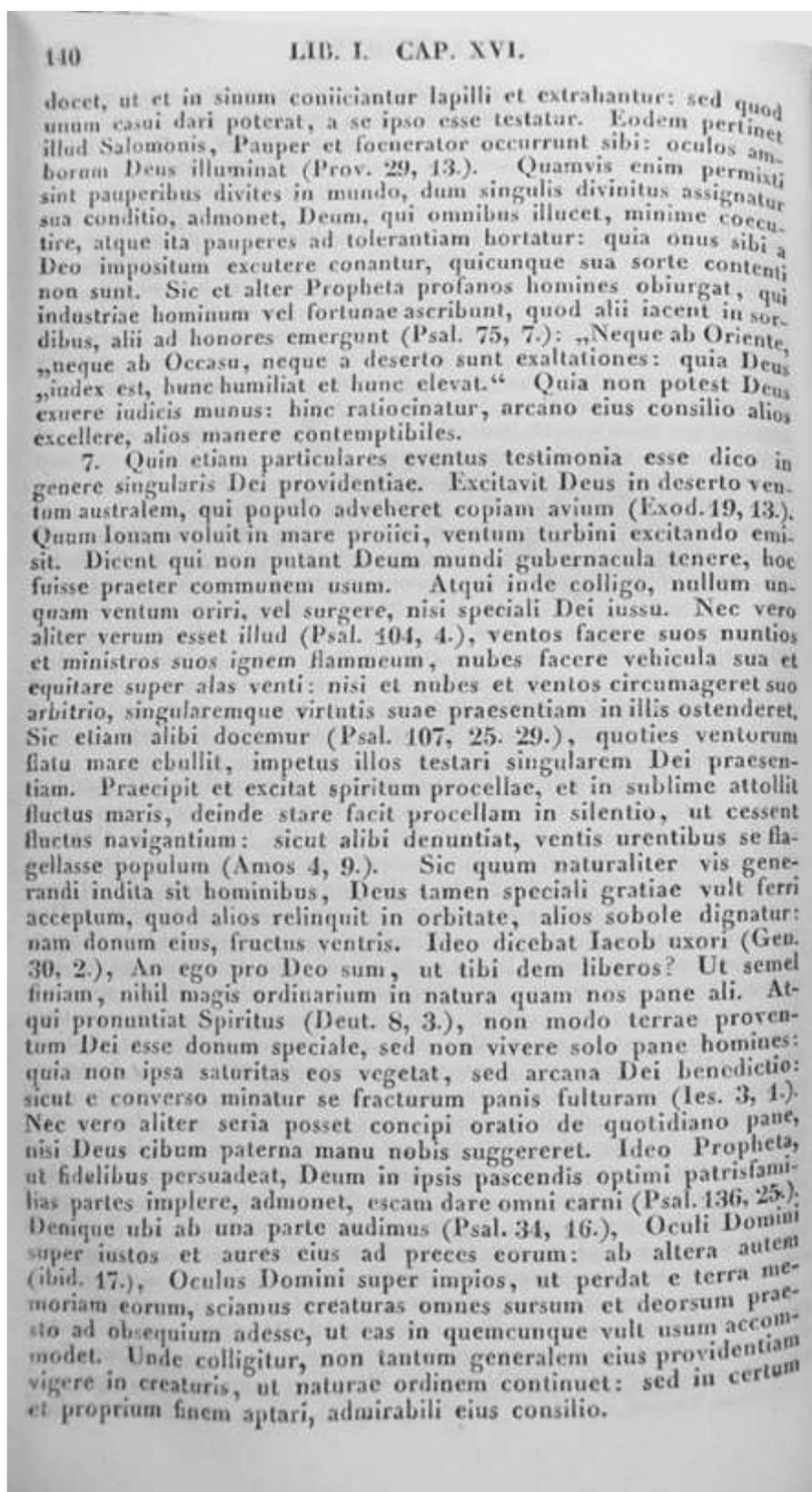
Summarising: Calvin and his followers were indeed pioneers of man's liberation from worshipping his own meaning products i.e. from his self-inflicted immaturity. Calvin's teaching on not-recognisable predestination has the existential purpose to prevent people from submitting themselves to their own products and for losing their existential freedom.

See the following appendices:

Appendix 1

Instituto Christianae Religionis (Berlin 1934 / Base 1536) I.16.6.

https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutio1/Page_140.html



Appendix 2 ICR Titelblatt

https://ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutio1/institutio1/Page_ii.html

