

# OUR CALVINIST LEGACY

By FRANCIS FRANKLIN

*This is the first of two articles on the contributions of Calvinism to American democracy.*

WHEN John Quincy Adams confided his reactions to the Missouri Compromise of 1820 to his diary, he foresaw in a flash the whole future course of American history for the next half century. He foretold the secession of the Southern states, and wondered if in the long run it might not prove a blessing; for in that event, he declared, the Yankees would not sit back on their rocks and take it. Southern secession, he predicted, would be the occasion for marching the Army into the South for the sake of preserving the Union. In that case, he asserted, military necessity would result in the emancipation of the slaves. Thus he concluded that Southern secession would really prove a blessing, for except through military force he saw no chance of abolishing slavery. If slavery was to become the sword by which the Union would be dissolved, by that same sword, he maintained, would slavery itself be destroyed and the Union restored. Such an event, he declared in his typically Calvinist manner, was like all the workings of Providence, awful to contemplate in its beginning but glorious in its ending.

Thus the son of John Adams, who served with Jefferson on the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence, "surveyed the problems of the future" and by the most brilliant dialectical thinking, did so correctly.

John Quincy Adams, member of perhaps the most continuously illustrious family in American history, was a unique figure in many respects, but also highly representative of vast numbers of his countrymen. He voiced in the period of the rising anti-slavery conflict the tradition of '76. He had freed himself from the violently anti-democratic outlook which his father manifested while President. He had dramatically broken with the Federalist Party in 1808 to take his place in the party of Jefferson. If he became the object of the Jacksonian attack in 1828, it was largely due to the maneuvers whereby certain politicians placed him in office against the will of the majority rather than to anything reactionary in his own program at the time.

What made John Quincy Adams, reserved New England Puritan and intellectual, so typical of many of his fellow Americans was that he voiced an earlier form of the philosophy which was incorporated in the Declaration of Independence, specifically that of Calvinism of the Independent variety.

Calvinism was that current of Christian thought which has influenced our country more definitely than any other variety. Most of those who followed Washington into battle in '76 followed the Calvinist faith in one or other of its many forms rather than the materialist philosophy of Jefferson. While materialism was popular among certain revolutionary leaders, it was never accepted by more than a tiny fraction of the population as a whole. Far from becoming more popular after the Revolution, materialist ideas tended to disappear to such an extent that they played an even less important role in our second revolution during the Civil War and Reconstruction than in the first. It was under the influence of the battle hymns of Calvinism that the Union armies marched in 1861. Calvinism is still a vital force in our country—even where the specific forms of early Calvinism have disappeared.

THE Calvinists were attacked in the seventeenth century for "Hebraizing" Christianity. It is well for Americans whose greatest religious tradition is Calvinist, to realize that the faith of their fathers was attacked on anti-Semitic grounds by the defenders of medievalism. Just as anti-Semitism today is not aimed simply at the Jewish people, but at all democrats and all who love elemental human decency, so in the seventeenth century it was not aimed only at Jews, but at all Calvinist Christians. There were instances in antiquity of course, as well as today, when all Christians were the victims of anti-Semitism, and it will take more than an analysis of Calvinism to explain why the Berlin Ministry of Propaganda some years ago published a book entitled *Jewish Bolshevism in the New Testament*. However, our aim in this article is more restricted, and we will find it more pertinent for an understanding of specifically American traditions to limit ourselves for the moment to the study of Calvinism alone.

On the surface, it seems to be a far cry from the fierce and in many respects hideous doctrines of the French theologian, Jean Calvin, as they were developed in sixteenth century Geneva, to the democratic philosophy of the Declaration of Independence, which is still our philosophy in this greatest of all liberating wars. Yet a certain connection exists.

Calvin rejected as pagan the whole Platonic-Aristotelian tradition which had been incorporated in Christian doctrine during the history of European feudalism. He demanded in the most literal sense that Christians go back to the Bible, and rejected everything for which he found no sanction in the Bible itself. In his interpretation of the scriptures, however, he focused attention on those teachings which served the interests of the rising mercantile bourgeoisie. Since he found the patriarchal and priestly Mosaic code more adaptable to his aims than the ethics of the poor and oppressed as contained in the early Christian gospel, he was attacked by feudal reaction for reversion to Judaism.

According to orthodox Calvinism, men, as stewards of God, were trustees of His property. They served God when they allowed the creative power of the Lord to work freely through them as His obedient servants. God's creative energy was revealed through man by the multiplication of that wealth with which each individual had been endowed by his Lord. Hence industry, thrift, and sobriety were the cardinal Calvinist virtues. This moral code of course was the perfect expression of the productive needs of a commodity producing economy.

These teachings implied that the feudal noblemen, the holders of the greatest wealth, were endowed by God with the greatest of all responsibilities. If they allowed God's law to work through them by working soberly to increase the wealth with which they were entrusted, they became the most righteous and upright of all God's servants. Thus orthodox Calvinism put forward no revolutionary program for the overthrow of the feudal nobility. However, the content of its teachings was definitely aimed at the feudal structure of society. The multiplication of wealth through individual enterprise was no part of the

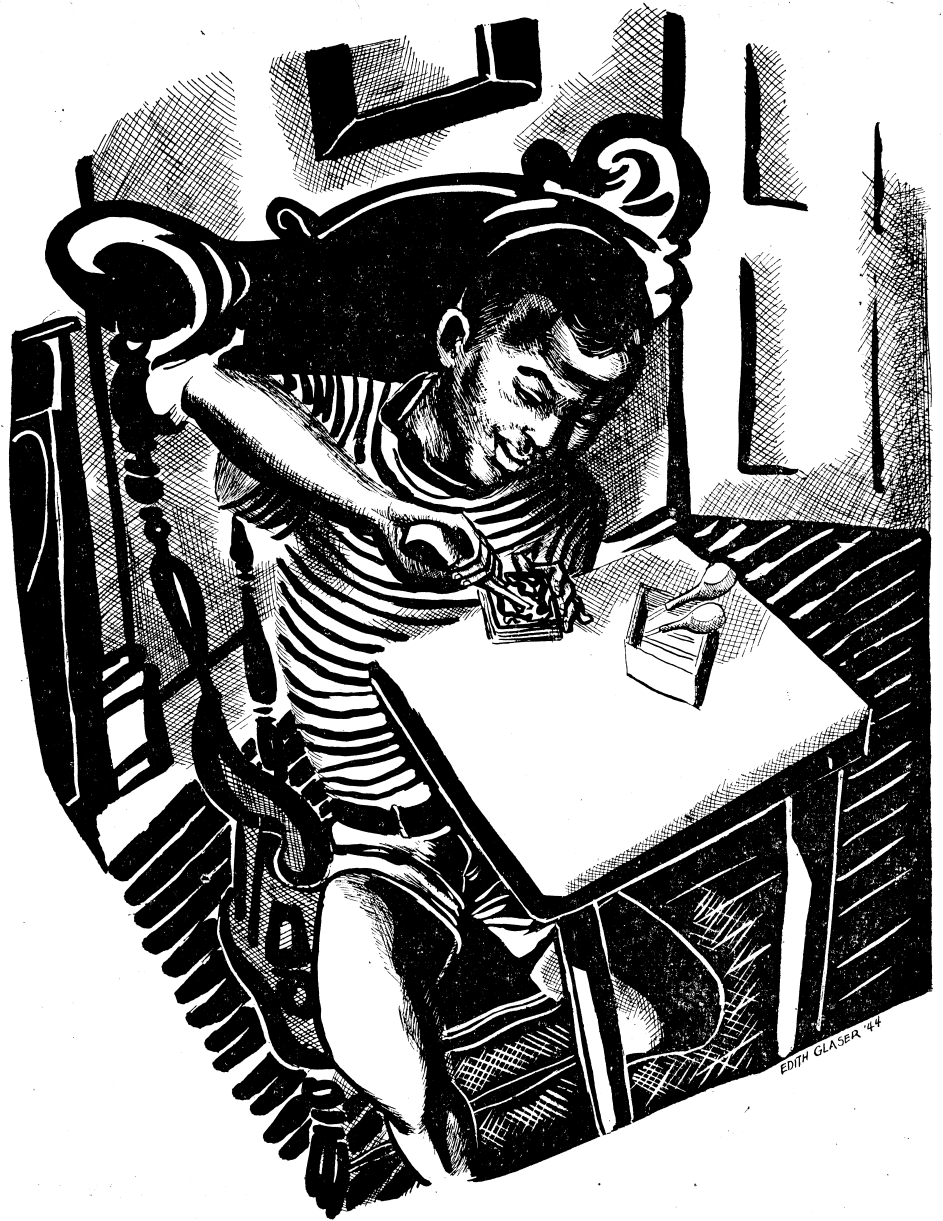
feudal code. On the contrary, feudal society was maintained by hereditary privilege.

Quoting St. Paul, Calvin declared in his great *Institutes of the Christian Religion* that "The powers that be are ordained of God." No matter how sinful a prince might be, none of his crimes could ever justify revolution. Thus Calvin tried to convince Francis I of France, to whom he dedicated his book, that he need not fear the Calvinist faith.

However, there lay behind Calvin's assurances a threat. Never, said Calvin, were the people justified in resisting an evil prince, for God for his own aims had given him power. However, God in his own time would punish that sovereign who defied the divine law. Throughout history, God had known how to smite down such rulers by raising against them *armies*, who thus wielded the sword of the Lord and executed his avenging wrath. The germs of revolutionary theory lay in that threat, for the armies of which Calvin spoke were composed of *men*.

Some princes were on their own initiative adopting the new and higher bourgeois methods of commodity production, and here and there an occasional monarch accepted Calvinism and in the course of time made it the official state religion. These princes—very few in number—represented a trend noticed by Marx, who declared in the *Communist Manifesto* that, in times preceding revolutionary crises, a small section of the old ruling class goes over to the new and rising class. Such princes received the blessings of the new bourgeois faith.

There was absolutely no program of democracy in early orthodox Calvinism. Pointing to the Biblical quotation that "Many are called, but few are chosen," the Calvinists asserted that *very few* were selected from among sinful men to receive God's grace. None deserved it. All alike were by nature, as sons of Adam, totally depraved and criminal at heart. Rightfully, all inherited eternal damnation in hell-fire. However, out of his bountiful goodness, God had decided to save a *few* from their well-deserved fate. These were the "elect," saved by no virtue of their own, but through God's loving kindness. Only the elect were regenerated. Thus they alone could rule according to God's law, and when placed in power by God, that law required that they rule with a rod of iron. Since the majority of men, including new-born infants, were totally depraved, nothing more blasphemous could be con-



"The Linoleum Cut," by Edith Glaser.

ceived than a government which granted men liberty. Liberty was license for criminals to run amok in society.

How could a prince know if he were among the "elect" and thus if he were ruling righteously? Only if he followed "God's law" and placed "the saints," God's "true" church, in a position of power. How, then, could a prince determine who was among the "saints"? This was relatively simple. Those who were elected for salvation followed "the law," i.e., habits of industry, thrift, and sobriety. This at once excluded those noblemen who continued to follow the feudal code. It opened the door for all who toiled *and accumulated*. Thus, only those enterprising men who by trade and industry amassed property could ever

hope to be numbered among the elect. According to orthodox Calvinism, those whom God has elected for salvation he smiles upon and blesses with ever-increasing material prosperity.

Here was the perfect religion of the rising bourgeoisie. Its sword neatly cut in two directions. Simultaneously it excluded from the number of the saints both all the privileged feudal princes who did not adopt bourgeois methods of production and likewise all the poor. The latter (in spite of statements to the contrary in the New Testament) were condemned as lazy and shiftless, blasphemers against God, who in this earth must be subjected to the merciless rule of the elect (a bourgeois dictatorship) and in the next to the eternal torments of hell.