

# OUR CALVINIST LEGACY II

By FRANCIS FRANKLIN

*This is the second of two articles by Mr. Franklin on Calvinism and American democracy. The first appeared in the August 8 issue of NEW MASSES.*

IN COMPARISON with Catholic doctrine, early Calvinism seems very harsh. Even at the period of its worst corruption, the Catholic Church was forgiving and tender toward ordinary human sin—so long as one did not attack the authority of the Church and its hierarchy. There was never a time when the Roman Church did not speak tenderly of the poor—even when it glorified their oppression and blessed armies raised to suppress their “heretical” movements. Orthodox Calvinism, on the other hand, seemed utterly devoid of any ordinary human compassion. Its moral code was uncompromising, fierce, and intolerant. It sent to the stake not only heretics, but women charged with adultery—in sharp contrast to the story told of Christ in the Gospels. Its God was no longer the loving Father, but a God of wrath.

Such was the early faith of large sections of the rising bourgeoisie, and it rallied to its church considerable numbers of simple middle class people. This was the doctrine of the Puritan theocracy of Massachusetts, and it remained the creed of those clergymen who became the chief lieutenants of the Federalist Party of Alexander Hamilton. Here we seem to be confronted by a mystery. How could it happen that under such doctrines a rising class could commence its struggle for power? And how could such teachings attract any except the wealthiest among the bourgeoisie?

In contrasting Calvinist “harshness” with Catholic “mercy,” we must recall what Marx said about the early bourgeoisie. It fought against feudalism for a higher mode of production. It stripped of its halo the old mode of production, with its patriarchal and chivalric modes of expression so glaringly in conflict with its actual practice. It reduced all personal relations to naked cash relationships. Thus, it played a progressive role in exposing and attacking feudalism. But it must not be forgotten that Marx declared that “capital came into the world soiled with mire from top to toe, and oozing blood from every pore.” Orthodox Calvinism was the perfect expression in religion of that phenomenon. In spite of this, it played a progressive role

in undermining the old order and opening the pathway to future development. Its attractive power among the middle classes lay in this, that its doctrines of toil and thrift corresponded to the productive needs of commodity-producing society. Membership among the “elect” was open to all who accumulated “by their own efforts.” Calvinism condemned the parasitical extravagance of hereditary feudal lords. Just as all the small producers were hoping to accumulate, so they hoped to be among the “elect.” Thus, many among the poor found in Calvinism an instrument through which they hoped to rise and prosper. Its horrible doctrines for mankind as a whole were accepted so long as each of the faithful believed that he himself might be among the chosen few.

IT IS obvious that such doctrines could not continue to be held for very long by those who, in spite of living sober lives of toil and thrift, still did not prosper. Thus, at a very early date, heretical sects began splitting away from the official Calvinist faith.

The orthodox Calvinists who held the doctrines that have been described were known in Holland and Central Europe as the Reformed Church. In France, they were called Huguenots. They took the name of Presbyterians in Scotland and England. All sects of Calvinists were known under the blanket name of Puritans in England, although this was originally the name of the English Presbyterians. The Puritan church of Massa-

chusetts was the same as the Presbyterian of England, and followed rigidly the views proclaimed by Calvin. (The American Presbyterians were never quite so harsh and unyielding.)

By the time orthodox Calvinism established its theocracy in Massachusetts, many liberal trends had arisen within the Calvinist fold, and it was these which moved in the direction of democracy and thus of the more popular American faith. All of the latter took their start from the Independents of England.

The Independents were the really revolutionary groups among the English Puritans. In the course of the long and bitter struggles with Charles I, the program of the Presbyterians was to secure a limited monarchy. After the seizure of Charles I following the triumph of Cromwell's army, the Presbyterians or orthodox Calvinists tried to preserve the monarchy. To prevent this, Cromwell marched into Parliament and arrested the Presbyterians, who no longer represented the will of the English people. The Rump Parliament, which remained, consisted of Independents. They found Charles I, who had entered into secret relations with the French monarchy for the purpose of defeating his own people with foreign aid, guilty of treason. Thereupon they beheaded the king and established the Commonwealth, the first national bourgeois republic in modern history.

In pursuing their revolutionary aim of establishing a new state power, the Independents resurrected from the Old Testament the doctrine that the power of the sovereign is derived from a covenant between God and the people. This was the form of the compact theory of the state which preceded its secular form as presented by John Locke and developed in America by Jefferson. According to the Independent teaching, the sovereign, as well as the people, was bound by the covenant, which required him to uphold the law of God. For as long as the sovereign remained true to the covenant, the people were bound to obey. But when the sovereign broke the covenant, the people were free, and it became not only their right, but their religious duty to overthrow such a sinful prince, who was guilty of blasphemy and rebellion against God.

It was under this faith that the Independent armies of Cromwell marched



Gordon

into battle against their king. Independent preachers marched with the soldiers, exhorting them to courage through prayer and scripture, assuring the troops that they wielded the sword of the Lord. These preachers performed a function similar to that of Tom Paine in our Revolution and to the recent political commissars in the Soviet Red Army. Filled with the faith that they comprised the army of the Lord, Cromwell's troops marched into battle singing hymns.

This covenant theory of the state lay at the basis of the Mayflower Compact and many of the early forerunners of American state constitutions, such as the Fundamental Orders of Thomas Hooker. It was voiced very clearly by Roger Williams.

Under the impetus of this revolutionary theory, which was the development of a thought Jean Calvin had refused to elaborate, Independent Calvinists began to arrive at conclusions more and more radical and democratic. As Independent preachers pored over their Bibles and as Cromwell's soldiers talked around the campfires in the effort to find Biblical doctrines that threw light on their problems, they found passages that Calvin himself seemed to have ignored. Contemplating real life, increasing numbers observed that many who accumulated wealth did not lead such sober, thrifty, and industrious lives as did the poor. They came closer to the primitive Christian doctrine that it is the poor who are beloved of God. All the Calvinists continued to advocate toil, thrift, and sobriety. However, more and more of them came to the conclusion that it was peasants and artisans who really followed God's law. They resisted rule by the Board of Elders and the Presbyterian Synod within the church. They demanded rule by a majority vote of the church members. Thus congregationalism was born. The Congregationalists continued to support the idea of an established state church. They were ready to disfranchise all who did not belong to the Calvinist faith, but they fought for universal suffrage within the Puritan church.

**T**HE bitter attacks launched by the orthodox Calvinists against Independents of all varieties and against Congregationalists in particular led many of the latter to question the whole idea of an established state church. Quoting the passages from the Bible about false prophets, they denied the right of any man to pose as an authority in interpreting the scriptures. All men alike were weak and frail. The Bible had been given



"Ernest and Tom, our allies," by Edith Glaser.

for all to read. All were endowed by God with reason and conscience. No man could judge the sincerity of his brother's interpretation of God's law. Religious belief was, therefore, proclaimed to be a relation between man and his Maker. The civil authority could prohibit wrong-doing on the part of man against man, but it had no authority to search the heart and conscience of man, to usurp blasphemously the role of God, the sole judge of the correctness of man's faith. With these doctrines, certain Independents demanded separation of church and state and full religious liberty, along with universal suffrage, freedom of speech, press, and assembly. The Separatists were thus the true democrats that arose within the Calvinist fold, and it was they who were the forerunners of the Jeffersonians.

In their opposition to a state church, the Separatists opposed the custom of infant baptism, through which children were reared from childhood in the official church. Basing themselves on Biblical practice, they advocated baptism by immersion after one who had reached the age of accountability decided to join the church of his own free will. Because of these doctrines, the Separatists, who were profoundly influenced by the peasant Anabaptists of the German Reformation, came to be known as Baptists, the name by which their organizational descendants in the present Baptist church are still known. The Baptist church was—and remains—extremely democratic in form.

The Baptists still point to Roger Wil-

liams as the outstanding founder of their church in America. The American Baptists were always in the forefront of all early fights for freedom of religion. They supported Thomas Jefferson almost unanimously during the early party battles after the Revolution, and formed a large part of his following. Jefferson expressed admiration of their democratic form of church organization, and is often quoted by Baptists as having pointed to their church as a model for American democracy.

Among the Separatists or Baptists, the left-wing movement of English and American Calvinism, were certain groups who proposed to make the virtue of toil compulsory on all by enacting into law the Biblical injunction, "He who shall not work neither shall he eat." To achieve this, they proposed to confiscate from the wealthy all property which made it possible for them to live without labor. This in turn, they maintained should be distributed among the poor, so that all would own enough to support themselves by their own labor, but so that none could live on the labor of others. Those who advocated this most thorough-going of all the democratic Calvinist doctrines were known as Levellers. It was the growth of the Levelling movement that led the English right-wing Puritans in 1660 to make a compromise with Charles II and the defeated nobility for the purpose of putting up a united front against democracy. Levelling teachings were extremely popular among many frontier democrats

(Continued on page 22)

## Our Calvinist Legacy

(Continued from page 15)

throughout colonial history in America.

John Locke bridged the gap after 1689 between the covenant theory of the Independent Puritans and the contract theory of the state as proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence. Locke laid the foundations for modern democratic theory by presenting the contract to which all sovereigns are bound as emanating from the people alone. Thus, he considered the state as purely secular, and completely severed political theory from theology.

While such leaders as Jefferson, Franklin, Paine, and others followed Locke's teachings, it is important to remember that the majority of Americans in 1776 continued to view the doctrines of the Declaration of Independence from the standpoint of Independent Calvinism. It was this older religious doctrine that was voiced by John Quincy Adams when he engaged in such bold and dialectical thinking concerning the future workings of divine Providence in reference to the conflict over slavery. The ethical and social outlook of the earlier view coincided with that of the more advanced philosophy in spite of the differences between the theology of one and the philosophy of the other.

Nothing could so illustrate the strong vitality of early revolutionary Calvinism as does the great *Battle Hymn of the Republic* which emerged from our second revolution, the Civil War.

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of  
the coming of the Lord,  
He is trampling out the vintage  
where the grapes of wrath are  
stored.*

*He hath loosed the fateful lightning  
of his terrible swift sword,  
His truth is marching on.*

In the spirit of that hymn innumerable Christians, together with Buddhists, Jews, Mohammedans, and followers of other ancient faiths, are today marching into battle. To whatever theology or philosophy the various citizens of the United Nations adhere, their ethical and social aims coincide with those of our Calvinist forefathers who in 1642 marched into battle against a tyrant, who in 1776 fought for the Declaration of Independence, and in 1861 marched against slaveholders with the *Battle Hymn of the Republic* on their lips. No one today can be a true follower of the great moral code of Christianity who does not manifest by his deeds the spirit of that great hymn.