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The Influence of Calvinism on the American System of Education.

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PART I.

Introductory.

The topic assigned to me is certainly one of great importance, — in fact, so much so that justice can hardly be done to it within the allotted space of time and in an essay as brief as this must needs be. All that can be done is to suggest a bare outline of the topic, together with a few noteworthy characteristics of American education which are due to the influence of Calvinism.

Definition of Terminology.

In order thoroughly to understand the subject, it is necessary to define its component parts. In the first place, we must know what the term Calvinism implies and in what sense it is here used. As is well known, the term Calvinism is ambiguous, inasmuch as it is currently employed in two or three senses, closely related indeed, but of varying latitudes of connotation. First, Calvinism designates merely the individual teaching or teachings of John Calvin. Again, it designates, in a broader way, the *doctrinal system* confessed by that body of Protestant churches known historically, in distinction from Lutheran churches, as the "Reformed churches," or the "Calvinistic churches," because the greatest scientific exposition of their faith was given by John Calvin. Lastly, the term Calvinism designates, in a still broader sense, the entire body of conceptions — theological, ethical, philosophical, social, political — which under the influence of the master mind of John Calvin raised itself to dominance in the Protestant lands of the post-Reformation age and has left a permanent mark not

only upon the *thought*, but also upon the *life* and *history* of man, upon the social order of civilized peoples, and even upon the political organization of States. (See *Schaff-Herzog Enc. s. v.* "Calvinism," by Benj. B. Warfield.) In the present article the term will, for obvious reasons, be taken in the third of these senses. When we speak of the influence of Calvinism on the American system of education, we have in mind such particular conceptions, traits and characteristics, affecting especially religion, as may be traced back to the work of John Calvin.

However, also the phrase "the American system of education" ought to be qualified, so that the scope of this essay may be clear from the start. It has been suggested that in a strict sense we cannot yet speak of an American system of education, although this term is being widely used. We have a system of schools, of schedules, of grading, etc., but an American system of education, in a truly philosophical and logical sense of the term, is still lacking. L. R. Klemm, in his *Public Education in Germany and in the United States*, quotes the editor of *World's Work* as saying: "We Americans do not live by any philosopher's plan or by any book-made scheme. A patch of anarchy on a cloth of orderliness; a piece of high wisdom here and a piece of low folly there — we take what we *will*, or what we *must* for the instant *need*. The theorists of every sort must do the best they can to catalog or to coordinate such political and social phenomena as exist at the same time in Massachusetts, South Carolina, Oklahoma, and Colorado. This is hard on the theory-builders; but the people seem to thrive reasonably well by these unorderly and unclassifiable zigzag methods of working out a democracy. It is equally easy to praise and to blame, to fear and to trust, according to one's mood. The best of it all is, one's fear or trust, or blame or praise, does not in the least interfere with the orbic quality of our swing forward." This applies also to education. Hence, when we employ the phrase "American system of education," we use it in the broader sense of "American education," in the same way as this term is used by Sarah A. Burstall in her book *Impressions of American Education in 1908*, or in the sense which Boone implies in his *Education in the United States*. We do this, however, also for another reason. While Calvinism has not contributed anything to an American *system* of education, it has certainly greatly influenced public education in our country, especially in its political, religious, and social aspects. Thus defined, the subject would read: What have

the theological, philosophical, social, and political conceptions which had their inception in the mind of John Calvin and his colaborers contributed to the shaping and molding of education in our country?

Life of John Calvin.

In order to answer this question, it is necessary that we first study the main events in the life of John Calvin; for the influence which a man exerts, be it wholesome or otherwise, depends largely upon his character and life. John Calvin was a Frenchman, born at Noyon, July 10, 1509, eight years before Luther posted his theses at Wittenberg. His father, Gerard Chauvin, was a notary public, a man of considerable influence and fairly well to do. John Calvin was first educated for the Church, and before he was twelve years old, he was presented to a benefice in the cathedral of Noyon. Six years later he was appointed to the curacy of souls at Montville, doing the work of chaplain and pastor, although he was not ordained for the priesthood. However, his father at this time changed his mind as to the career of his son; he desired him to turn his attention to practise of law as the road to wealth. This change was acceptable to the son, who from the study of the Scriptures had become convinced of many of the errors of the Romish Church. He accordingly repaired to Orleans, where he studied under the famous jurist Peter Stella, and thence to Bourges, where Andrew Alciat, another prominent lawyer, filled the chair of jurisprudence, and where Melchior Wolmar, the Reformer, taught him Greek. Here Calvin was confirmed in the doctrines of the Reformation, and soon he began to preach them in the villages. However, as his father, in the mean while, had died, leaving him without funds, he returned to Noyon, but after a short period went to Paris, where in 1532 he published commentaries on Seneca's two books *De Clementia*.

Calvin now resigned his benefices and devoted himself to the study of theology. When, in 1533, the rector of the University of Paris, Cop by name, had occasion to write a discourse on the Festival of All Saints, Calvin persuaded him publicly to declare his opinion regarding the new doctrines. This brought upon them both the indignation of the Sorbonne. They were forced to leave the city. Calvin finally found shelter in the home of Louis du Tallet, a priest at Angoulême, where he supported himself by teaching Greek. Here he also composed the greater part of his famous

work *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, which was published in 1536. Under the protection of the Queen of Navarre, sister of Francis I, he returned to Paris in 1534, but as the opposition against him was still strong, he quitted France the same year, having published a treatise in which he confuted the error of those who held that the soul between death and the resurrection remains in a state of sleep. He now went to Basle, in Switzerland, where in 1536 he published his *Institutes*, the design of which was to exhibit a full view of the doctrines of the Swiss Reformers. This work, written in Latin, he himself translated into French, and it has since been translated into all the principal modern languages. After the publication of the *Institutes* he went to Italy, where he was received with distinction by the Duchess of Ferrara, daughter of Louis XII. In spite of her protection he was obliged to leave Italy and now went to Geneva, where the Reformed religion had been publicly established the same year. At Geneva, at the request of Farel, Viret, and other eminent Reformers, he became a preacher of the Gospel and professor, or rather lecturer, of theology. Farel was twenty years older than Calvin, but they nevertheless united in effecting the complete reformation of Geneva. In the month of November a plan of church government and a confession of faith were laid before the public authorities of Geneva for their approval. These were sanctioned in the month of July, 1537. However, the popular will was not prepared for the severe discipline of the two reformers, and in a short time the people, under the direction of the libertine faction, met in public assembly and expelled Farel and Calvin from the city. Calvin now went to Berneand, afterwards to Strassburg, where he was appointed professor of theology and pastor of a French church. While at Strassburg, Calvin published a treatise on the Lord's Supper, in which he combated the opinions both of the Roman Catholics and the Lutherans. Here, too, he published his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. Lastly, at Strassburg he entered into marriage with the widow of a converted Anabaptist preacher.

However, at Geneva conditions, in the mean while, had become chaotic, and so in May, 1541, the banishment of Farel and Calvin was revoked, and in the following September Calvin was received into the city amid the congratulations of his flock. He at once laid before the council a scheme of church government, and after it had been adopted and published by authority of the council (November 20, 1541), he did not hesitate rigidly to enforce it.

Calvin was now the ruling spirit in Geneva, and he desired to make the church which he had established there the mother and seminary of all the Reformed churches. His personal labors were unceasing. He established a university, the high character of which was long maintained; he made the city a literary mart and encouraged French refugees and others who sought his advice to apply themselves to the occupation of printer or librarian. Having finished the ecclesiastical regimen, he directed his attention to the improvement of the municipal government. These efforts were continued throughout the remaining twenty years of his life, during which he was active as preacher, teacher, writer, and statesman. To the very last he maintained the same firmness of character which had distinguished him through life. On his death-bed he called God to witness that he had preached the pure Gospel and exhorted all about him to walk worthy of the divine goodness. He died without a struggle on May 27, 1564, in his fifty-fifth year, having been ill the greater part of his life.

Calvin was a man of middle stature, naturally delicate, reticent, but nevertheless a man of unusual will-power. His habits were frugal and unostentatious. He had a clear understanding, an extraordinary memory, and a firmness and inflexibility of purpose which no opposition could overcome, no variety of objects could defeat, and no vicissitudes could shake. In his principles he was devout and sincere, and the purity of his character and private life was without a stain. His wedded life lasted only a few years and left him without issue at his death, his only child, a son, having died in infancy.

It is impossible to contemplate without astonishment the labors of Calvin during the last twenty years of his life. He presided over the ecclesiastical and political affairs of Geneva; he preached every day, lectured thrice a week, was present at every meeting of the Consistory, and nevertheless found time for a vast correspondence and voluminous literary labors. Besides his printed works there are now in the library of Geneva 2,025 sermons in MS. During the years in which he labored in Geneva he was in feeble health, and yet he continued attending to his manifold tasks almost to the very day of his death. He chose to be poor, refusing on several occasions proposed additions to his very moderate salary, and he is said uniformly to have declined receiving presents, unless for the sake of giving them to the poor. His entire property at his death amounted to only \$225.

Influence.

The influence which John Calvin exerted, not only upon his own immediate surroundings, but over the whole of Europe, was tremendous. It was felt to a great extent in all the countries that received the Reformed faith. From Switzerland his doctrine spread over all Europe, being carried east to Hungary, Bohemia, and Poland; south to Italy; west to France; and north to Germany and Holland, even leaping the seas to England and Scotland. His first problem was to unite the two parties of Switzerland, the German in the north and the French in the south, who differed from one another not only in doctrine, but also as to church government. Gradually, however, Calvin's doctrines gained the victory in Switzerland, when, after some negotiations with Bullinger, the head leader of German Switzerland, they agreed, in 1549, on a new creed regarding the Lord's Supper, the so-called Tigurine Confession. Nor did his influence stop here. The Reformed churches in Germany, in Holland, England, Hungary, Scotland, etc., were the result of his ever-active and determined mind. However, not only on the theology of these countries did Calvin exert a striking influence, but also on their morals. Calvin's severe moral code, which made Geneva the model city of Europe, was to a greater or less extent followed in Switzerland and became the pattern of all nations that accepted the Calvinistic creed. Lastly, also, Calvin's social and political influence was very striking. Emelio Castelar, the leader of the Spanish Liberals, has declared that "Anglo-Saxon democracy is the product of the severe theology learned in the cities of Holland and Switzerland." Leopold von Ranke, the German historian, has given his weighty judgment in the words: "John Calvin was the virtual founder of America." James Anthony Froude, the English historian, has said that "nearly all the chief benefactors of the modern world have been Calvinists." (Vollmer, *Life of John Calvin*.) While these statements may be regarded as rather exaggerated, nevertheless they show how keenly the influence of Calvin has been felt up to the present time. Williston Walker, Titus Street Professor of Ecclesiastical History in Yale University, in his biography of Calvin, writes: "In Western Europe no influence was to be compared, during the latter half of the sixteenth century, with that of Calvin." John Knox, the Reformer of Scotland, himself a disciple of John Calvin, maintained: "The most perfect school of Christ that ever was on the earth since the days of the apostles is the Reformed Christian Community in Geneva."

Influence of Calvinism in America.

That the influence of Calvinism in our own country should be pronounced is but natural, since all the leading colonies were largely settled by people who directly or indirectly accepted the religious tenets of John Calvin. It is estimated that of the three million Americans at the time of the American Revolution 900,000 were of Scotch-Irish descent; the German and Dutch Calvinists numbered 400,000; the Puritan English, 600,000. While the Roman Catholic Church exerted no influence whatever, and that of the Lutheran Church was insignificant, the entire country before and after the Revolutionary War was controlled by men who acknowledged the Calvinistic creed as their own. (Vollmer, *Life of John Calvin*, p. 209.) Among these were the great leaders of the Constitutional Convention: James Madison, a graduate of Princeton (Presbyterian), Alexander Hamilton, of Scotch parentage, whose familiarity with Presbyterian government is fully attested, and, above all, George Washington, who, though an Episcopalian, had a high regard for the Calvinistic tenets as represented in its strictest form by the Presbyterian Church. Indeed, at one time the respect for the Calvinistic Church during the Revolutionary days was so marked that it was feared by Christians of other denominations that it might become the established Church in America, just as in Scotland, Switzerland, etc. (Vollmer, *o. c.*, p. 212.) Our own historian Bancroft says: "The Revolution of 1776, so far as it was effected by religion, was a Presbyterian measure. It was the natural outgrowth of the principles which the Presbyterianism of the Old World planted in her sons, the English Puritans, the Scotch Covenanters, the French Huguenots, the Dutch Calvinists, and the Presbyterians of Ulster." Some one has declared that the American colonists were either atheists or Calvinists, which, though a sweeping statement exceeding the truth, still shows the power of Calvinistic influence in our country. Vollmer, *o. c.*, states: "Such is the relation of Calvinism to our national life, such is the answer which as Presbyterians and Reformed we give to the question, What have these principles done for the Republic? To-day, as we look over our broad national domains, as we see the 80,000,000 of our inhabitants in the enjoyment of education, of religious freedom, of civil liberty, of the blessings which the Federal Union has secured to the nation, we can say, This hath Calvinism wrought! This, too, is our answer to the assertion made by some ill-informed persons, in whose minds prejudice has usurped the throne of sound reason, the assertion

that Calvinism is dead! Dead? Calvinism dead? Its fundamental principles are maintained to-day in this land not only by the Presbyterian and the Reformed Churches, but also by Baptists, Congregationalists, and many Episcopalians. The majority of American Protestants are Calvinists. Calvinism dead? It will cease to be both life and power only when popular education shall give place to popular ignorance, when civil and religious liberty shall vanish, when the Republic shall be shattered into separate and warring nationalities, and when the very life shall have perished from government of the people, by the people, and for the people. But never shall such changes be. Oh, America, America! The sovereign hand of the Almighty rocked thy cradle, the eternal purpose sustained and nurtured thy founders, and we believe that the unchangeable divine decree hath ordained thee to be an indestructible State, the leader of the hopes of mankind, the majority of thy citizens servants of God and lovers of humanity, until the hour when God shall in truth dwell with men and all mankind shall be His people." (pp. 214. 215.) We have quoted this passage as characteristic of Calvinistic hope and purpose in our country to-day. In itself it throws valuable light, not only on the educational, but also on the political and social questions of to-day.

(To be continued.)
