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Calvinism in American Economy, Politics, Education, and Life

The original Thirteen Colonies of the United States of America were founded by European settlers. Those settlers immigrated to America because of the religious unrest and persecution in their own homeland. In Europe, Protestants who practiced a different faith outside the approved church were persecuted. European settlers believed that the new world offered the opportunity to create an ideal community free from government interference (Osborne 268). At that time, most of the European settlers were Calvinists (Boettner par. 1). A Calvinist was a Christian who believed that God is in control of everything in his or her life. As Calvinism was not well received in Europe, those Calvinist European settlers came to the western hemisphere with a dream to create a new community with Calvinism principles. Although some argue that the principle foundations of America in its early years were actually influenced by other trends of the world; European non-Calvinistic culture and Native American culture. In truth, without the faith and belief of European Calvinists settling in America, the U.S. would not be the country it is today.

Calvinism refers to both doctrines and practices of the Reformed churches of which John Calvin was an early leader, as well as to the individual teaching of Calvin himself (“Calvinism”). Calvinism can be classified into five points: 1. Total depravity of humankind; it declares that because of the fall, people cannot believe the Gospel just by themselves. People already have their evil nature, so their hearts would never turn to God. Also, faith is “God's gift to the sinner,

not the sinner's gift to God"; and lastly, salvation is not something that people can receive from their own contributions (Steele and Thomas 16). 2. Unconditional election; it states that since people are totally unable to save themselves, then those who are saved, are chosen by God. He chooses the people freely in His decision and not because there are differences between them. He does it to show grace and mercy to some sinners who deserved nothing but His anger. Hence, salvation is "God's choice of the sinner, not the sinners' choice of Christ." (Steele and Thomas 17) 3. Limited atonement; it asserts that the death of Christ was intended to redeem the chosen people only. His death was a replacement of the punishment for the sinners who had been chosen. Besides redeeming the sins of the chosen people, salvation is also given to the chosen one. Just like what Steele and Thomas wrote "The gift of faith is infallibly applied by the Spirit to all for whom Christ died, therefore guaranteeing their salvation." (Steele and Thomas 17)

4. Irresistible grace; this states that there are two types of call for people, the external and internal call. The external call (which is made to all people without distinction such as, hearing the Gospel) can be rejected; while the internal call (which is made only to the elect by Holy Spirit) cannot be rejected and it always results in conversion. Since God chose the people, the Holy Spirit will irresistibly draw the people or sinners to God. Holy Spirit will graciously make the sinners "to cooperate, to believe, to repent, to come freely and willingly to Christ." Therefore, God's grace would never fail to give the chosen people salvation (Steele and Thomas 18).

5. Perseverance of the saints; which stresses "all who are chosen by God, redeemed by Christ, and given faith by the Spirit are eternally saved. They are kept in faith by the power of Almighty God and thus persevere to the end." (Steele and Thomas 18) These five points are believed to have greatly influenced the principle foundation of America's economic, political, educational, and social framework.

The U.S. economy is a capitalist system in which private individuals, businesses, or corporations are allowed to buy, sell, or exchange their properties or goods in order to maximize profit (“Capitalism”). According to Harry M. Johnson, modern capitalism was motivated in part by principles of Calvinism. First, Calvinist’s doctrine of predestination states that people can do nothing in order to get salvation; however, people are still wondering whether or not they are the chosen one. Early on, priests would give some relief from anxiety by telling Calvinists that if a person had been chosen by God, his worldly life should be virtuous and successful. Then, there exists an idea that stresses a successful life as a sign of God’s grace. (444) Therefore, Calvinists tried to prove that they were the chosen one by earning as much money as they can. If their worldly life was successful, especially in financial matters, then they should be the blessed and saved one. Nonetheless, some people argue that capitalism was not influenced by Calvinism; it was influenced by other factors, such as market trends. That argument may be true, but the market and money were not nearly as prevalent back then and were created by people. If everybody worked hard and tried to maximize profits, then market and money would grow successfully. Calvinism brought the notion of worldly success to make people work harder. Therefore, Calvinism was one of the factors that lead people, especially Calvinists, to develop a capitalist system in the colonies which later influenced the foundation of American economy.

In politics, Calvinism has also significantly influenced the development of American democracy. Democracy is a political system in which society has equal power and freedom. According to John Fiske, Calvin’s doctrine was considered as one of the most significant steps toward personal freedom. Calvinism taught that people are all helpless regardless of their status or wealth, God is the only One who chooses the elect. (58) This essentially implies that everybody is equal. Eventually, this principle of equality inspired people to fight for their

freedoms. People started to believe that they are all equal and nothing could differentiate them in God's eyes. The European settlers, who were mostly Calvinists, made perfect use of this freedom and equality by founding a government based on this principle (Monsma 143). Nevertheless, Jack Weatherford in his book argued that the Founding Fathers got their ideas on democracy directly from the native peoples of the Americas. (133) The beginning of American government and democracy was derived primarily from the first written Calvinistic constitution, written by Thomas Hooker, founder of the Connecticut colony. It embodied all the principles of freedom and democracy that he had studied in Calvin. It was then used as a constitution to set the government structures in Connecticut (Monsma 158). The U.S. government today is “in lineal descent more nearly related to that of Connecticut than to that of any of the other thirteen colonies.” (156) Hence, the New England town was a direct result of the influence of Calvinism, and this system of government had never been used in any other countries. In the southern colonies, where Calvinism had less impact, the town system of government was totally different than the north. Additionally, the Calvinist European settlers in New England refused to stand for any system of taxation. They recognized personal sovereignty in the matter of property. They argued that there would be “No taxation without representation.” This later became the principle that developed the House of Representatives in U.S. (Monsma 168). Overall, the foundation of American democracy had been greatly influenced by the first written Calvinistic constitution and the founding fathers; both of them held the principles of Calvinism, which are equality and freedom.

The American education system has also been greatly influenced by Calvinism. Beginning in the New England area, Calvinism has brought and spread its spirit in education to other colonial areas. The Calvinism spirit in education was first seen in the Dutch city, Leyden

Calvinists citizens thought that education as their first priority before food and drink. They chose to exempt school from taxation rather than food (Monsma 176). Likewise, in New England, Calvinists also put education first by enacting laws requiring children to be educated, but allowed locals to control the school. Their goal was to prepare their children to be ready for college (Segall and Wilson 61). Calvinistic influence was so immense that it became the national education system. However, some people argue that during the colonial era, education was only given in order to preserve religious beliefs, principally Puritan or Calvinistic (Gelbrich par. 12). Though true in some respect, there were other reasons attached in the principle of Calvinistic to the education. Monsma wrote:

“The principle of Calvinism restored to science its own domain, recognized the sovereignty of the sphere of science. Calvinism delivered science from the bonds in which it was during the middle ages and early Reformation times..... Calvinism, with its principle of the sovereignty of the social spheres, cast aside these old, unnatural bonds, and created a realm of science, where God alone was the Ruler.” (176 -178)

Calvinism placed first priority on education, and the New England Calvinists felt that a lot of children did not receive a sufficient education at home. They wanted to make sure that children got proper education before they studied in college. Since locals were in control of the schools, the churches were managing the colleges. In 1636, six years after the foundation of the Boston settlement, Harvard College was founded. The funding for the school was supported by the General Court of Massachusetts for the sum was equal to what the colony would use for a whole year. This resulted in all students, rich or poor, having an opportunity to study. Harvard College would later develop into the great and prestigious Harvard University. Not long after that, in 1700, another university was established with the same method, which is now known as Yale

University in Connecticut (Monsma 179). Calvinism had proved that science or education was their main concern. It emphasized the importance of education in America, which can still be seen in our modern American system of education.

Socially, the equality found in the U.S. would not be as great today without the influence of the European Calvinists. Some argue that there was no equality in early America as evidenced by the existence of slavery (Monsma 171). However, slavery primarily existed in the southern colonies and states. Slavery never flourished in the New England colonies, where most of the Calvinists lived. In the 1850s, one pastor from the Church of Puritans in New York City, George N. Cheever, said that

“The church is the conscience of the nation, and it was obligated to apply the bible to national sins, even the political sin of slavery: where the church does not apply God’s word against sin there, both the conscience toward God and the spirit of liberty are debauched and wasted, and the nation ripens for destruction.” (Long 113)

He wanted to revive religion, both in the North and South, in hopes that God’s will would help end the evil of slavery in America (Long 112). In fact, New Englanders were opposed to slavery. Overall, Calvinism had a significant impact the issue of slavery in America. Calvinist influence had partly helped push forward the abolishment of the slavery in the U.S. Though the equality and acceptance would not come until much later in history, the roots of equality were embedded by the Calvinist in early American history.

Most people might not realize what contributions John Calvin made to modern America. Calvin’s doctrine of predestination may seem to only impact America’s early religious development and history. Nonetheless, his principles helped develop American capitalist economic system through its notion of worldly success. As well as, helped lay the foundation of

American democracy through its principles of equality and freedom. Furthermore, America's education system was fostered behind the belief of stressing the importance of science. Perhaps most importantly, Calvinism supported the abolishment of slavery through the promotion of equality in social life. Consequently, John Calvin's principles have greatly affected and influenced the very foundation of American religious, economic, educational, and social history. From early colonial America to the United States of today, this country would not be the same without the principles of Calvinism rooted in its history.