DID CALVIN ADVOCATE THEOCRACY ?

I

Some illusions are extremely difficult to dispel ! Even to-day many Protestants imagine that the ideal politico-religious regime of Calvinism is a theocracy, understanding by that term a political regime which implies the domination of the clergy over civil society. In actual fact, however, no notion could be more erroneous ; Calvin never showed the least sympathy for a political regime of this sort, in proof of which statement may be cited his constant criticism of the Roman clergy for usurping the temporal power of princes. The most cursory examination of his teaching concerning the functions of Church and State will suffice to make it clear that our Reformer gave no countenance to theocracy envisaged in this manner.

At the same time, in the true sense of the word, which is far broader than its popular signification, a theocracy designates simply a society in which authority is regarded as emanating from God and exercised by His representatives. According to this definition, the expression " representative of God " denotes not the clergy exclusively, but any person endowed with power proceeding from Him. This, too, is the etymological significance of the term theocracy.

Now it is certain that for Calvin all authority, whether civil or religious, proceeds from God and has been delegated and divided by Him among His various representatives, civil magistrates as well as ecclesiastical authorities. It would even seem that for our Reformer the title " representative of God " pertains more particularly to the magistrate ; the pastor is considered by Calvin rather as the " messenger " of God. Probably this attitude arises from the fact that he does not attribute the actual material power to ecclesiastical authorities, as we shall have occasion to notice later.

From this point of view, but from this point of view only, it may be said that human society, as conceived by Calvin, is a theocratic society in which all power proceeds from God and in which all power is exercised by His representatives : an observation that is obviously not valid for theocracy in the popular sense of the term.

II

At this stage we may remark that the politico-religious thought of Calvin does not concern us, Protestants of the twentieth century, except in so far as it rests on a Biblical foundation. Such an attitude in regard to Calvin is natural on the part of Calvinists. If, then, we limit ourselves in the present paper to a consideration of Calvin's thought on the subject, without proceeding to a comparison with the sacred Scriptures, it is because his thought is that of a man whose sole preoccupation was to be loyal to the Word of God in thought as well as in action ; it possesses far more than mere historical interest for us ; it has the value of a testimony to eternal truth. It is important to remember this at a period when some Protestants would place in opposition the theology of the Reformers and what they are pleased to style " the true spirit of the Gospel ".

It is Calvin's fidelity to Scripture that gives so much value to his teaching ; it is this that *a priori* inspires our confidence in him, for we know by experience that it enables us to conserve practically intact the essence of his message. Confronted with the Gospel, Calvin was able to remain infinitely more independent in regard to his century, and more submissive to Scripture, than so many of the idealist theologians of to-day. Do not these latter display a certain naïveté when they imagine themselves nearer to the Gospel than he whose supreme preoccupation was to remain faithful to it, especially as they themselves claim to re-read the Gospel in the light of " the progress of the modern consciousness " ?

These observations appear to us particularly well-founded in regard to political doctrine. Nothing can be more dangerous, and at the same time more anti-Evangelical, than certain social utopias of a contemporary pseudo-evangelism.

III

Holy Scripture speaks of the Church, says Calvin, " under two aspects ". Sometimes the reference is to the invisible Church, which comprises all the children of God " who have been since the foundation of the world ", i.e. the Church complete, entire, including the living as well as the dead, and of which God alone knows the exact number of its members. Sometimes it speaks of the visible Church of which Jesus Christ

is the founder and head, of the " body of Christ " which appears to us in the form of a multitude of local Churches, distinct one from another, and each possessing a material organization. It is the totality of these local Churches which constitutes the true visible Church, the body of Christ, the Church universal.

Contrary to the views of numerous theologians, Calvin does not sacrifice one of these Churches to the other. He does not oppose one to the other; he merely distinguishes them. The one comprises the totality of the elect throughout all ages, while the other comprises only the totality of those who, regardless of the particular Church to which they attach themselves, or the particular place where they reside, make a profession of believing the Gospel message transmitted by the Church, and of conforming to it. That is to say, every member of the visible Church does not necessarily form part of the invisible Church, for the simple reason that external profession of the Christian faith does not necessarily imply that internal devotion which alone counts in the sight of God. In practice, however, given the means and spiritual discernment at our disposal, we are obliged to recognize as members of the Church all who make outward profession of faith.

IV

Let us now describe briefly the nature and the role of the visible Church which alone concerns our purpose. We have already observed that in the course of centuries this Church has become divided into a multitude of local Churches. This does not imply that all so-called Churches are authentic Christian Churches. Although Calvin may be broader than one might think in his critical examination of various Christian bodies, he considered nevertheless that a Church could not truly be reckoned among the members of the universal Church unless it could be recognized by two " signs ", viz. the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper). When a Church possesses these two signs, i.e. when it devotes itself to the ministry of the Word and the sacraments, it then forms part of the universal Church, independently of all secondary matters (e.g. order and liturgy) that may distinguish it from other Churches.

While these two signs enable us to distinguish a true Christian Church from a false one, they also define the essential role of a

visible Church: the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. It may not be unprofitable to recall this fact to the Reformed Churches of the twentieth century. The Church must not be occupied directly with temporal affairs. We do not find in Calvin's thought the element that characterizes a theocratic concept in the popular sense of the term. The Church should not even occupy itself actively with accessory questions, social or otherwise, which belong to the domain of the State, and which can only hinder the accomplishment of its Divine mission.

Calvin did not concern himself solely with defining the role of visible Churches; he was concerned also with their organization. He distinguishes in each of them a fourfold magisterium: that of pastors (which is to preach the Word and administer the sacraments); that of doctors (which is to study the sacred Scriptures); that of elders (which is to exercise discipline within the Church, i.e. to caution and rebuke the faithful and to pronounce excommunication); and finally, that of deacons (which is to dispense charity).

In the organization of these various ministries Calvin is careful to reduce State supervision to a minimum. In particular he is anxious that the Church shall have full liberty of preaching, and complete independence in regard to the interpretation of the Scriptures, and ecclesiastical organization and internal discipline. If he exercises great care in organizing the various Churches, he is careful above all things to ensure their independence of the State; but, on the other hand, he does not claim for them any power over the State or over temporal affairs. The mission of the visible Church is to bear testimony to Christ and the Christian faith, not to reign in a material sense over the world.

Calvin adopted a well-defined position in regard to the Church, which distinguishes him from the Roman theologians, who in principle confound the visible with the invisible Church, and also from certain neo-Protestant divines for whom the visible Church assumes no more than the character of a voluntary association among Christians and not that of the "body of Christ". He never claimed for the Church any power over the State, but placed it in the midst of the State as a spiritual guide commissioned to teach and preach the Word of God, and to enable the faithful to receive the grace transmitted in the sacraments.

V

For our Reformer the State stands side by side with the visible Church, its relation to the latter being that of a younger brother to an elder sister! The State is an institution created by God for the purpose of putting a rein on the disorder engendered in the world by the introduction of original sin. Human society is natural; the State in itself is not. On this point Calvin diverges markedly from the Roman view, and on this initial divergence of view depend all other divergences concerning the subject.

The role of the State differs *in toto* from that of the Church, although both have a common origin. The State for Calvin is essentially an organ of constraint in which the dynamic element is represented by the magistrate, while the static element appears in the laws. Hence he does not defend the State by invoking sentimental reasons for order such as patriotism, reasons which are perfectly legitimate, but which have the defect of convincing only those who already hold them. Instead he draws from Holy Scripture an entirely theological justification of the State which has the advantage of not depending on the subjective sentiments of Christians, but of imposing itself on them as an order laid down in the Word of God. It would be well at the present time, when the political parties which call themselves " Fascist " arrogate to themselves the monopoly of the defence of authority in political matters, to show that there exists also a Christian justification of authority, but an authority that is by its origin subordinated strictly to God, and obliged to respect the independence of the Church, while at the same time that authority is raised infinitely above men.

All authority for Calvin proceeds from God; to disobey authority is to disobey God. That is why Calvin teaches that the Christian must obey the magistrate, even if persecuted by him. The magistrate must render an account to God; he is not responsible to men. There can be no question of legitimate or illegitimate power; all powers and governments are legitimate and must be recognized as such by Christians. The form of government plays only a secondary part in our Reformer's thought. At the same time he teaches that in no circumstances can this duty of obedience compel men to deny their faith. Yet even though a case should arise in which the obedience that

the faithful owe to God obliges them to disobey human authority, complete submission to that authority is still due in political matters. Calvin, then, is very far from being a "democrat" in the modern sense of the term.

Nowadays there is much talk of the organization of labour in trades unions or on an occupational basis. Without denying whatever may be just in the one or the other of these two methods of solving the social problem, we believe that neither is capable of replacing the State. As we have seen, the State is raised by Calvin infinitely above men as a sort of supreme judge charged with arbitrating in the conflicts created by human selfishness and greed. In the net result the trade union or guild can do no more than form powerful groups composed of those sharing identical aspirations and desires. If one or the other of these systems materializes, the selfishness inherent in human nature will only reappear in another guise and on a larger scale, while the authority of a free and independent magistrate will be more necessary than ever to ensure the protection of smaller groups, and above all of isolated individuals. To imagine that harmony would be easier to establish or more natural among certain powerful groupings than among individuals, is to dream of a utopia impossible of realization.

To the radical politicians and economists who accuse Christians of tolerating and even of exploiting social instruments of restraint such as the army and the police, Calvin replies that God Himself has not willed to apply the methods of heaven directly to the world, and has ordained that men shall submit themselves to the State and to all the instruments of restraint which depend on it. God has ordained this because of the presence of evil in the world, evil which has rendered such institutions necessary to social life, and which does not permit men to live on the earth now according to the laws of the kingdom of heaven. As Pastor Jean de Saussure writes: "The contemporary pseudo-evangelism which would apply to mundane conditions the methods of heaven, is a dangerous utopia."

At the same time, the State is charged with the duty of restraining the anarchic and egotistical tendencies of human nature let loose by sin, and in the final resort of preventing the strong from taking advantage of the weak. The State has also a positive aim, which is to secure the minimum of peace and concord required by human society for its existence. That is

to say, the State has also for its mission the maintenance of a certain measure of social justice. We say " a certain measure " advisedly, for there can be no question of egalitarianism : the Calvinist idea of a particular vocation for each individual is absolutely opposed to that. The State has simply to ensure to each individual the possibility of accomplishing his vocation.

The State has not only to maintain peace ; it must also endeavour to maintain, here below, a certain standard of morality or, as Calvin calls it, " some taste of the celestial realm ". With this object in view it must apply to social life the principles that are found in the Decalogue, which set forth what was in a certain sense the natural law of humanity before the Fall. It would scarcely be possible to exaggerate the importance of the Decalogue in Calvin's political thought. By it alone he teaches the magistrate the normal rules of social life which human society must respect in order to secure happiness. It will be noticed that Calvin does not believe in the existence of a natural right proper to human nature. He knows well that sinful men prefer to obey their passions rather than the Divine law. Hence the magistrate is armed with the sword, the symbol of power, to constrain men to obey. In obliging men to respect the Decalogue the magistrate does not claim to effect an inward change, but merely to cause them to observe outwardly a relative morality sufficient to secure for them, in spite of themselves, or even contrary to themselves, an existence worthy of the name. To oblige men to live externally according to the Divine law also constitutes for Calvin the best means of teaching them to know the will of God and to obey Him. In order to fulfil his task in the best possible manner, the magistrate must first of all have been the subject of a true Divine vocation.

In Calvin's view the magistrate occupies a very important position in relation to the Church. It is he who is charged with the " grand task ", while the Church has only a purely spiritual activity. Moreover, the State is also commissioned to maintain peace and even a certain moral standard among men. How far exactly does this moral standard carry us ? A long way, according to Calvin, for it is the magistrate's duty to secure respect for the Decalogue, the first commandment of which instructs men to honour God. The magistrate must cause this commandment to be respected like the others, or, as Calvin will sometimes say, even before the others. That is to say, if Church and State are

two institutions absolutely distinct the one from the other, they are nevertheless united by a community of interests. There is no moat between the Church's sphere of action and that of the State. They impinge on each other; they are complementary one to the other. The Church's mission is to bear testimony among the people to Christ and the Christian faith; the State's highest function is to cause this mission to be respected. At the same time the Church has no power over the State; theoretically, indeed, the State must insist that men shall respect her teaching, but the Church has no means of constraining the State to do this. If the State disobeys the Word of God, the Church can only suffer in silence and continue to fulfil her mission, reprimanding the State without positively revolting against it. Above all, the Church must not barter away its independence to the State, for this is a precious possession.

The State, then, must cause the Church's teaching to be respected, but is not the judge of its doctrine. In principle Calvin concedes to the State the right to interfere in the life of Churches to purge them from scandals that may arise in them; this forms part of its right of police. He sought, however, to reduce the possibilities of State intervention to a minimum by the institution of the Kirk-Sessions, charged with administering ecclesiastical discipline, and of Presbyteries and Synods for the maintenance of discipline among the clergy in particular.

The Church's sole opportunity of intervening directly in temporal affairs is afforded in the execution of her duty of exhortation and reprimand in regard to the magistrate who openly disobeys the Word of God.

There is, then, no opposition between the mission of Church and State; they are rather complementary one to the other. Indeed, it may be said that the roles of Church and State are co-ordinated. Normally, however, the Church is not required to intervene in the affairs of the State, nor the State in the affairs of the Church. Their duty of collaboration alone can oblige one of these two institutions to intervene in the affairs of the other.

Such are the principal characteristics of the politico-religious thought of our Reformer. It will be seen that he has envisaged human society as a whole, directed simultaneously by Church and State, and not by one of these institutions to the detriment of the other.

Public opinion has often been led astray on the subject of Calvin by the example of Geneva. It is frequently assumed that theocracy in the popular sense of the term, prevailed in that city at the time of Calvin. There can be no doubt that from 1536 to 1541 Geneva was governed by a regime in which the State claimed to direct both the religious and the civil life of the citizens. This system of caesaropapism prevailed at the period in most of the Swiss towns. Calvin himself was exiled from Geneva because his theological opinions did not meet with the approval of the magistrates.

From 1541 onwards the public life of Geneva was characterized by a conflict which Calvin was compelled to sustain against the magistrates in order to induce them to concede a certain measure of independence to the Church, but even at this period one cannot truly speak of a "theocracy" at Geneva. The popular error is due to confusion between an actual power of Church over State which never existed, and the extraordinary but purely moral ascendancy which Calvin ultimately exercised over the Genevan magistracy towards the close of his life. But it is only from 1555 onwards, that is to say, about nine years before our Reformer's death, that one can speak of an actual ascendancy of Calvin over the magistrates. In any case, it is certain that this purely spiritual ascendancy never constituted authority in the juridical sense of the term.

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