

ARTICLE X.

BRUNETIÈRE ON THE WORK OF CALVIN.¹

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AGAIN has M. Brunetière succeeded in his favorite pursuit of stirring up an ant-hill with a stick, as a professor in the University of Geneva describes it.

The editor of the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, formerly a free-thinker, and now one of the most brilliant representatives both of French literature and French catholicism, was sure to give in the city which Calvin made a Protestant Rome an account of the great reformer's work which would be admirable in its form and suggestive in its thought. His conference, on December 17, 1901, was before a crowded audience of all sorts of nations and creeds, studiously polite but coldly critical. The unanimous conclusion is that no one was satisfied. Catholics regret certain frank avowals, and carefully omit them in their printed accounts. Genevans have written vigorous rejoinders to certain imputations of aristocratic and egoistic tendencies.

But the many who expected a tirade against Calvin were disappointed. M. Brunetière had a far deeper motive than simply to please or offend. At the beginning and end of his address he frankly revealed his motive in coming to Geneva. Under the most striking circumstances, likely to give the widest publicity to his words, he hoped, while speaking courteously of the Reformers, to show that Calvin was essentially mistaken; that all that was good in his work had been absorbed by the Catholic Church; and therefore that the hope of Christian unity, and the refuge

¹ Conference at Geneva, December 17, 1901.

from license lay in reunion with the church against which Calvin and Geneva had fought. He frankly disclaimed all pretense at impartiality, which he considered not so great a virtue in an historian, and in fact an impossibility. He does not regard even Samuel Rawson Gardiner as an example of impartiality.

M. Brunetière wished to speak as philosopher rather than historian. In reality, he spoke as advocate and orator, and herein lay his weakness and his strength. He showed his oratorical tact, at the beginning of his address, by attributing to Calvin sincerity and consistency in his life and writings, and by frankly condemning overzealous attempts to calumniate his memory.

But it was *the work*, not the life or personality, of the reformer, that was to be considered; and this work was not, in its essence, either literary, theological, or political. The essential work of Calvin was that he transformed the concept of religion: he intellectualized religion, he made it aristocratic, he individualized it. These three propositions form the framework of M. Brunetière's address.

As Calvin's work was not in its essence, literary, theological, or political, these three phases were passed over rapidly, and with a certain inadequacy and inaccuracy in the case of the theological and political work. Indeed, one feels more strongly each time one re-reads the address, that M. Brunetière, in insisting so strongly on the essential work of Calvin as the transforming of the concept of religion, failed sometimes to distinguish adequately between intellectual, theological, and political conditions, and between Calvin and later Protestants. Moreover, he showed appreciation of literary form rather than content; and a certain unfamiliarity with the history of Geneva, and other states where Calvinism was formative.

The *Institution chrétienne* he characterized as a work lacking color, but possessing *relief* and movement. The

language of Calvin was the first to express thought in French, and contained rare argumentative force and extraordinary power of propaganda and action.

M. Brunetière feared he would shock his hearers by his approval ("within the limits of orthodoxy") of those doctrines of Calvin which are most repugnant to men to-day; the profound perversity of human nature, and man's incapacity to raise himself above his natural baseness without succor from on high.

Brunetière failed to state whether predestination was one of the doctrines repugnant to modern men but accepted by himself; and he passed over it adroitly by saying it was a doctrine not yet entirely elucidated by the theologians, and one which he could not be expected to explore to its depths. He seemed to forget that Calvin was the very theologian who by his remorseless logic made double predestination luminous and conclusive—provided those terrible premises, impossible to the man of to-day, are granted. M. Brunetière, further on, wrongly attributes to Calvin the preoccupation of the individual with attaining his own salvation. He could not have made this error had he realized the logical and consistent application of the doctrine of predestination. Calvin by example and precept taught salvation was a thing already determined by infinite justice, and therefore a matter in God's and not in man's hands. He made, then, the object of religion not, as in the Middle Ages, the attainment of salvation, but the bringing of the reign of God on earth, and taught that it consisted in the practical love of God and one's neighbor. The evidence of this will be found either in the history of Calvin's practical work in Geneva (with all its incompleteness and errors), or in his writings.¹ M. Brunetière here violated both philosophy and history.

¹ E. g. in the *Institutes*, bk. iii. chap. xx., especially sects. 36, 38, 42, 43; bk. ii. chap. viii. sects. 54-55.

Regarding Calvin's political work, M. Brunetière modestly said, that, in so far as it was connected with the history of Geneva, his hearers knew more than he. He was clearly less at home here than in his treatment of the literary work, and failed to represent Calvin's work adequately because of a lack of historical perspective. For example, in speaking of Calvin's political principle, of the confusion of the political and moral, he compares rather with our modern conceptions than with those which Calvin found, and modified for the better. In a time when there had been the greatest confusion between church and state, and when Lutheranism had offered no solution but the absorption of church by state, Calvin presented the theory (and to a certain extent the practice) of a distinction between church and state as two coöperating bodies. It was not modern separation of church and state. It was a step in that direction. M. Brunetière made a strange error in saying that Calvin in the last chapter of the *Institutes* bases all the duties of magistrates and people on passages from Isaiah and the Psalms. As a matter of fact, Calvin bases these duties, not only on over seventy passages from nineteen other books of the Bible, cited in this chapter, but also sometimes on no express scriptural grounds, but rather on reasons of equity and historical experience and the "seeds of political order sown in the minds of all." M. Brunetière made not only an error of detail, but of fundamental principle, for Calvin neither advocated nor practiced the literal application of Scripture to later conditions.¹

Coming to what he considered the essential work of Calvin, M. Brunetière maintained, first, that Calvin intellectualized religion; i. e. out of a popular religion of love, sentiment, imagination, he made one "for men only";

¹ See *Inst.*, bk. iv. chap. xx. sect. 16, and his defense of interest-taking and lawsuits, in *Calvini Opera* (ed. Baum, Cunitz, Reuss), Vol. x. pt. i. pp. 245-249.

lacking the element of love, and the unknowable; "proving itself by the literalness of its agreement with a text, a question of pure philology, and the solidity of its logical structure, a matter of pure reason." M. Brunetière has here failed to distinguish between a well-recognized error of later Protestants (though not confined to them in the days of rationalism) and the teaching of Calvin. Calvin was a man of stern logic, of head rather than heart, but he stated most clearly in his text-book for Protestants the necessity for "a higher source than human reasons, the secret testimony of the Spirit . . . superior to all reason . . . a revelation from Heaven."¹ The same conclusion is strikingly expressed in his Commentary on Romans (x. 10), "the seat of faith is not in the brain, but in the heart"; and in Calvin's French Catechism, the oldest confession of the church of Geneva: "The Christian faith is not simply a bare knowledge of God or understanding of the Scriptures, which vaults to the brain without touching the heart . . . but it is a firm and solid confidence of heart."

M. Brunetière has also failed to grasp the bearing of Calvin's fundamental appeal to men's consciences, rather than to the mediæval hopes and fears for the future life. Again, Calvin did not originate the attempt to prove religion. That had been the child's play of the scholastics. But Calvin went at it man fashion, and made the appeal to sound reason, at the same time clearly recognizing its limits. M. Brunetière has used the word "*intellectualisé*," which might be applied in its ordinary meaning to Calvin's work, to give an unwarranted conception of Calvin's teaching and his historic position.

In representing Calvin as having made religion something aristocratic, and the church an *élite*, as the humanists had been, by reason of superior culture, M. Brunetière fails to distinguish between an intellectual but accessible

¹Inst., Bk. i. chap. vii. sects. 4-5.

aristocracy, and a religious or political aristocracy. To meet the argument that the Calvinists of Geneva, England, or New England were republicans, he replies that they always considered themselves an *élite*. He forgets that "the sifted grain" was secured, not by exclusion of the unlettered, but by the development of moral fiber through war, persecution, exile, in those men on whom, to quote M. Brunetière, "Calvin imposed the moral problem in all its amplitude." He misrepresents both the spirit of Calvin and the history of states where Calvinism prevailed, when he says, that the illiterate old woman would find herself not exactly excluded from the church, but admitted only to make up numbers, without special place or equal footing for such as she. Calvin recognized the need of education, as M. Brunetière admits, but he established a free, compulsory, popular as well as university education. That there remained a place for the poor and ignorant, too old for school, too busy to unravel the mysteries of predestination, is proved by the devotion of the poor woman, a baker in Geneva, with her five *sols* for the university, by the place occupied by the boatmen of the Netherlands, the shepherds of the Highlands, and the farmers and fishermen of New England. To be a follower of the fundamental teaching of Calvin meant, first, to believe with all one's heart, not simply with the head, in "God's government of every part of the world by his providence"; and, second, to govern one's life "according to the will of God . . . [which] consists not in the love of ourselves, but in the love of God and of our neighbors."¹ That is the essence of Calvin's teaching, whatever grievous errors he and his followers committed in its application.

There is no space here to discuss the aristocratic and democratic political tendencies in Calvin. Suffice it to say, he expressed, after seven years of practical experience (in

¹ Inst., Bk. ii. chap. viii. sects. 53, 54.

the second edition of the Institutes in 1531), his conviction, thereafter retained, that in political systems "either aristocracy or a mixture of aristocracy and democracy far exceeds all others."¹ The services of Calvinism in development of democratic principles have often been dwelt on and recently brought out sharply by Professor Borgeaud, in his monumental history of the University of Geneva. M. Brunetière does not seem to know that, in the church at Geneva, Calvin struggled to win from the small council not only the rights due the church officers, but also, notably in the election of ministry, a more adequate voice on the part of the whole church; or that Calvin kept the council from developing into an oligarchy; or that the aristocratic tendency he finds in Geneva was also in Catholic Fribourg and Lutheran Bern; or that it was in Calvinistic Geneva that the church restrained the aristocratic tendencies till the death of Beza; or, finally, that from Genevans like Calvin, Beza, Hotman, Rousseau, came doctrines of duties of magistrates to protect against violence of kings, of rights of people over their magistrates, right of revolution, and rights of man. When M. Brunetière passes from Calvin to discuss Calvinism and Calvinistic republicans, he opens a wide field which disproves his theory that Calvin made religion an essentially aristocratic thing, and republicans an *élite* of men of leisure.

M. Brunetière, in saying that Calvin "individualized" religion, once more uses a word in an unwarranted sense, namely, that Calvin made religion a preoccupation with one's own salvation, something individualistic, egoistic. The earlier part of this article, in discussing Calvin's theological work, has shown that such was not Calvin's teaching. Nor was it the characteristic of his sixteenth and seventeenth century followers in Geneva, Holland, and Old and New England. They were preoccupied with

¹ Inst., Bk. iv. chap. xx. sect. 8.

something wider than individual salvation, namely, the building of a Christian commonwealth. The sin of pre-occupation with individual salvation is not to be laid at Calvin's door.

M. Brunetière regrets the loss of the mediæval solidarity, of the conception of religion as a social matter, a "circulation of charity" by means of prayers for dead, reversibility of merits, indulgences. Even if Calvin rendered services to liberty, he questions whether the modern liberty which tends to license is worth the price, is better than the solidarity which binds man to man. A fairer question would be, Which is the better solidarity, that of the mediæval system of reversibility of merits, or Calvin's of love to God and therefore to all men,—a solidarity built not on rationalism and egoism, but on reason and individual liberty?

One must bear tribute, on the other hand, to M. Brunetière's significant and brave avowals of the services rendered to French Catholicism by Calvin:—the attempt to harmonize reason and faith, the larger importance of the sermon in the seventeenth century, and the development of pulpit eloquence of Bossuet, Bourdaloue, and Massillon; disavowal or rejection of superstitions; purifications of popular forms of worship; the air of gravity distinguishing the religion of the seventeenth century from that of the Renaissance; preparation of the spirit to receive the work of Pascal and Bossuet; the belief in the powerlessness of man without God, taught by Jansenius, Port Royal, and Pascal; Bossuet's strong idea of Providence; the check on the paganism of the Renaissance at a time when the papacy itself submitted too easily to its influence; placing conformity of conduct with creed in the first rank of the duties of the Christian by incorporating Calvin's statement of the moral problem in all its amplitude; and his contribution in imposing it on the conscience of the individual.

In conclusion, M. Brunetière felt that Calvin was wrong in not seeing where the individualization of morals would bring men; for self-respect, a necessary virtue, is, because of the pride it suggests, only one of the least of Christian virtues. Calvin's work was a great one, but it had a mixture of good and evil.

With the following significant avowal M. Brunetière closed his address: "Inasmuch as the Calvinistic conception of religion has reigned three hundred years, I see, not without some joy, that it seems to-day to be losing something of its empire, and, while those who believe it to be just, go over to free thought, I see, not without some joy, that the others, those who remain Christians, are very near to confessing that a religion is neither a purely intellectual affair, nor something aristocratic, nor an individual belief. . . . The day when they do come to confess it, there would be a great step toward a union, or a re-union, which has never been more necessary than in our time."

There is well-nigh universal admiration of the oratorical tact and power and the frank avowals of this champion of a return to Catholicism. He sought and has found criticism, and it is to be hoped will acknowledge certain errors. He lifted the discussion out of the realm of petty personalities into a higher atmosphere, and has given a criticism which displays insight, and which is leading already to frank and courteous discussion. For all this, every scholar will be grateful. And it may be added, the Calvinists or the French Protestants of to-day do not seem to have a champion who can adequately reply to the adroit master of eloquence.

But, although deserving all this high praise, M. Brunetière spoke from the bar, rather than the bench; twisted plausible terms from their usual and historical meaning; failed to grasp the logical conclusion of Calvin's reasoning; was sometimes inaccurate; and was inadequately familiar

with Calvin's practical work and with the history of Geneva. He showed the power of a master of literary form, and the ultimate weakness of the special pleader.

It was a brilliant piece of rhetoric, which is less convincing each time it is calmly read and compared with documents and facts. It will not stand as a piece of frank historical investigation done with the impartiality which the editor of the *Revue des deux Mondes* does not regard as so great a virtue in the historian.