

# THE REFORMED FAITH IN FRANCE<sup>1</sup>

## AN HISTORICAL SURVEY

I WISH to draw, in broad outlines, the history of Calvinism, more especially in France and Switzerland—the history of Calvinism, not the history of Calvinists; the history of the Reformed Faith, not the history of the Reformed Churches. It would be, for me, an impossible task to take even a brief survey of the struggles, the victories, the defeats of the Huguenots in fifty minutes. But I think I can succeed in giving you an idea of the Birth, the Progress, the Decline and Revival of the Faith commonly called Calvinism in the time measured for the present paper.

I mean by Calvinism the theological system evolved by John Calvin in his “Institutes,” and confessed in the symbolical books of the Reformed Churches, such as the Genevan, the Belgian, the Canons of Dort, the Westminster Standards, and the Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England.

Now I am not going to attempt to determine what are the principles of that theological system, neither to show the philosophical ideas one may evolve on its basis. That task does not fall into my province this afternoon. I am to act, here and now, as an historian, and not as a dogmatist or a philosopher.

But the historian aiming to make understood the motives of the changes he finds in the course of events, specially when he deals with the history of ideas, must necessarily point at the inward spirit of the movement he is describing, at its animating motive.

Luther, when he met Zwingli and his friends at Marburg, instinctively felt the invisible, unformulated, almost undefinable presence of a spirit in his opponent that seemed alien to his trend of mind. “We have not the same spirit,” said he. Of course that saying of Luther cannot be accepted without great qualifications. In a sense all evangelical Christians are moved by the same spirit, a spirit of faithfulness and devotion to the authority of God speaking to us, in and with the inspired Scriptures. But still, there ought to be some kind of feeling, or rather some idea permeating the depths of the soul, and kindling the heart, that

<sup>1</sup> Delivered at an International Conference of Calvinists held in London in May, 1932, under the auspices of the Sovereign Grace Union.

causes a Calvinist to be enthusiastic at some dogmas, as Predestination or Absolute Providence, which seem incredible, nay, unbearable to the minds of other Christians. And when that spirit is lacking in a Calvinist, he may, by the grace of God, remain still an honest Calvinist, as he finds these dogmas in his Bible. But they will be a burden to his mind, rather than a privilege. Without that Spirit, he will be, at the best, an half-hearted Calvinist, prone to every sort of concession or alteration not wholly irreconcilable with the letter of his dogmas, and nobody can tell where he will finally land or walk on the sands of shallow religious thought.

Well, I believe that Calvin has given us the key of Calvinistic psychology, when he wrote this sentence: "God will never come to His right unless we are totally reduced to nothing, so that it may be clearly seen that all that is laudable in us comes from elsewhere" (Calvin's "Commentary," 1 Corinthians iv. 7). And the Westminster Confession has beautifully embodied that spirit in this sentence: "The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him, as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him, as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which He hath been pleased to express by way of covenant" (Chapter vii. 1).

A Christian—a forgiven sinner—who believes that, who feels that in his heart, who cherishes that truth and lives by it, cannot but feel the absolute necessity of a supernaturally inspired Bible, and will find in his mind no valid objection to the doctrines of election or particular atonement he meets in his Bible.

We can distinguish four periods in the history of French Calvinism.

#### THE PRE-CALVINIAN PERIOD (1520-1536)

The first period (roughly from about 1520 to 1536) is the Pre-Calvinian period. It may seem strange at first sight to speak of a Pre-Calvinian Calvinism. But if we reflect that Calvinism is nothing but the religion of the Bible come to its right, then the thing will seem very natural. This first period is under the sign of Zwingli and the Swiss Reformers.

The French Protestants at the time were styled Lutherans. But these so-called Lutherans were, in fact, Zwinglians. When they translated Luther's Shorter Catechism they altered the

article on the Eucharist in the Zwinglian sense. Caroli, a future opponent to Calvin, was a Zwinglian. "The sacrifice of the altar," says he, "is nothing but the memorial of redemption." "*Nothing but*"—that is Zwingli in his primitive and lowest phase of thought. Martyrs, like Maigret and Pavane, on the salvation of the unbaptised and unevangelised pagans, utter on baptism sentences quite consonant to Zwingli's teaching. Marcourt, the most prominent dogmatist of that period in France, wrote a very able defence of the Zwinglian interpretation of the doctrine of the Eucharist.

We notice also in the martyrs of that period, in Jean Le Clerc, for instance, a strong iconoclastic zeal, which was quite abhorrent to the ideas of Luther. That iconoclastic trend and their low doctrines on the Sacraments are, perhaps, imperfect, but are certainly in the genuine Reformed spirit.

#### THE ORTHODOX PERIOD (1536-1630)

With the first issue of Calvin's "Institutes" begins a new era in the history of the Reformed Faith in France. The French Reformer had been a pupil of Bucer, and he owes much to his master. Calvin's genius is rather constructive and systematising. There were conflicting elements in Zwingli's theories. His philosophy had a somewhat pantheistical appearance, with some rationalistic shades, and his theology was strongly theistic and evangelical. Calvin eliminated the doubtful elements, emphasised what was genuinely Reformed, and succeeded in putting things into their right place. The absoluteness and sovereignty of God, in his system, are in their right place, which is the first; man, as a creature and a sinner, is in his right place, which is in the dust; Christ in His right place, at the Head of the Church; the Holy Spirit in His right place, that is, everywhere; predestination in its right place, as the keystone of devotion and theology; the Sacraments in their right place, not mixed with grace, as maintained by Luther, nor separated from grace, as it was held by the first French Protestants, but distinct from and in union with sovereign grace.

For not quite a century, the spirit of the Reformed Faith, commonly called Calvinism, unalloyed and in the fulness of its strength, permeated and overruled the Academies, Universities and Churches in France and French-speaking countries; and a long time after that period it stimulated the theological

activities of men like Lambert Daneau, François Turretin, the Thomas Aquinas of Calvinism in Geneva, Chamier in Montauban, Du Moulin and Jurieu in Sedan.

#### THE AMYRALDIAN ERA (1630-1689)

The third period, from about 1630 to 1689, is the Amyraldian and Panjonist period, the era of the Academy of Saumur. In 1618-1619 the Canons of Dort had condemned the Arminian doctrines. The French National Synod of Alais had ratified the sentence and approved the Canons of the Dutch Synod. But very soon French and Dutch laymen from Holland began to spread over the heresies of the Remonstrants in France. On the other hand, a kind of humanitarian spirit vindicated its position amongst Roman Catholics as well as Protestants. Moyses Amyrauld, deeply impressed by the objections against the Calvinistic motto, "Soli Deo gloria," thought it advisable to teach a sort of universal decree of salvation, preceding the decrees of salvation and reprobation. God was no more quite free in His grace. His *raison d'être*, His duty was to do His best to procure universal welfare to each of His reasonable creatures. His right of election began only when He had failed in His futile attempt.

Another professor of Saumur, Pajon, could not understand that the Spirit of God could work directly on the soul of man. So he substituted a kind of psychological and cosmic determinism to free and sovereign grace, in accordance with the scheme of the Jesuit Molina. And when the storm of persecution broke on the Reformed Churches of France, the faith of these churches was already in a bad condition of health. And after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes began

#### THE CRYPTO-ARMINIAN AND ARMINIAN PERIOD,

from 1689 to our days. Many refugees in Holland were half-hearted Calvinists. For instance, the great preacher, Jacques Saurin, does not think much of total corruption. He is a zealous disciple of Descartes. As a theologian he teaches terminism. He believes himself still a Calvinist, although in his system grace may cease to be sovereign in certain cases; when the sinner has reached a given degree of wickedness, grace becomes unable to overrule his rebelling heart. There is a term to God's power over His creatures.

In Lausanne, but more especially in Geneva, the state of things was worse. In the course of the eighteenth century the

last Calvinistic systematic theology had been written by B. Pictet in 1721. Under the sinister influence of three men—J. N. Osterwald, in Neuchatel; J. A. Turretin, a son of the great Calvinist dogmatist; and Werenfels—Arminians in their hearts—the spirit of Calvinism was expelled from academic teaching, and moderate orthodoxy passed very soon to moderate heterodoxy—Arminianism and even Romanism, with Lavater, J. Vernee, and others.

Now Lausanne and Geneva were during the period of the persecutions in the “desert,” and in the beginning of the nineteenth century the two mother Churches of the French persecuted the Huguenots. So it is easy to understand that, although some small congregations of countrymen, few individuals of the laity, and here and there a minister, remained faithful, if not to the spirit, at least to the letter of a moderate Calvinism, the body of French Protestants became supra-naturalistic Arminians or even Socinians, like S. Vincent and Athanase Coquerel.

The great revival at the beginning of the nineteenth century, with the Haldanes, the Gaussens, and the Cæsar Malans, who were Calvinists somewhat in the way of Whitefield, was not, in the main, favourable to the Reformed Faith. The Wesleyan Methodists, as J. P. Cook, strongly prejudiced against Calvinism, had the upper hand in the French Reformed Churches. The most influential thinker, Alexandre Vinet, though largely evangelical, was averse to the doctrine of predestination. Being more or less individualistic, that eloquent and fascinating personality could not have much sense for the doctrine of the covenant of grace, in any of the Calvinistic interpretations it has received, and his influence has been, on the whole, contrary to Calvinism. That influence was and is still very great on the minds of French Evangelicals. When they met in 1872, with the Liberals in a General Synod, they managed to draw up a new and colourless Confession of Faith to which any Arian, Socinian, and Arminian can subscribe, and just strong enough to keep out those who deny miracles and specially the resurrection of our Lord.

At the time I was a student, and not very long before the Great War, the philosopher of the evangelicals was Renouvier, a neo-Kantian. So, curiously enough, the freedom of the will, understood as absolute independence in relation to a limited God, became the motto of the great majority of cultivated

French Reformed. This very sad state of things is beginning to change under our eyes, and I hope to tell you tomorrow (D.V.) something about the revival of Calvinism in University and Church life.

I believe it will deserve a few moments' attention to try to grasp the causes of the decline of Calvinism in France. In liberal and secular circles it is often explained by the progress of science, historical science and natural philosophy. The idea seems to me a mistake. It is true, and very unfortunate, that under the influence of mediæval scholasticism the Reformed theology had somewhat lost the sense for the historical development of revelation. Despite Calvin's organic conception of Inspiration, some of his disciples took the wrong side in philological and moderate literary criticism. But my opinion is that, in France, the fact has had no great deteriorating influence upon the destinies of Calvinism. That deteriorating influence was exerted largely after the decline of Calvinism. I see it rather as a consequence of that decline than as a cause. At any rate, the lacking of historical sense in the domain of exegesis was only an accident. The recent Dutch reaction and, today, the beautiful work of Biblical scholars like Aalders, Van Gelderen and Grosheide, show that Calvinism, as such, is not bound to obsolete views as to Biblical science. Calvin did believe in the full inspiration of Scripture, but at the same time he did not think necessary to teach that the Holy Spirit inspired an unimpeachable Hebrew to the prophets of the earth, or an unmixed and pure Greek to the New Testament writers, and he could detect some mistakes of the Scribes in their copies of the originals.

Some lay great stress on astronomical discoveries. Copernicus, they say, has shown that our earth is not in the centre of the world, and Galileo discovered the infinite in 1610. It is no more possible to believe that man, a despicable atom, on a lost speck of dust, can be of any importance in the decrees of the Almighty. I must confess that I fail absolutely to feel the point of the argument. That the idea of the greatness of the universe, and of the insignificance of man, may disturb an Arminian I could understand in some way. But it ought to be evident to every candid mind that astronomy plays into the hands of Calvinism. Our faith does not seek the importance of man in his intrinsic value, but in the free choice of sovereign and unmerited grace. In fact, many years before the discoveries of astronomy, one of

the best disciples of Calvin, Hieronymus Zanchius, had made it a commonplace to say that our earth is an invisible speck compared to the stars. He took great pains to show that it was a very small thing in a practically immense universe, theoretically closed and finished, thus anticipating views held in our days by Einstein. One of the best amongst the new astronomers was David Fabricius, a German Reformed minister, and a theologian like Burman, a Calvinist after all, was in no way slow to profess the heliocentric theory of the universe.

The real cause, the cause embodied in real and living antagonism, is quite different. With Sebastian Castalio, in the time of Calvin, it is eudæmonistic humanism. The spirit of that eudæmonistic humanism has been lately formulated by William James endorsing the opinion of somebody who said : "Not God, but life, more life. We do not know God ; we use Him." That spirit was at the bottom of the opposition of Castalio and Bolsec against Calvin. We see it breathe in Jean Jacques Rousseau, and it leads either to Christian Science—an almighty God and the negation of evil—or to Marcionitism—a real and powerful evil threatening a limited and impotent God. Christian Science is almost nothing in France, but the Marcionite heresy is still a tremendous danger in our churches.

The other manifestation of humanism is rationalistic philosophy. We can perceive it in the sixteenth century cropping up with La Ramee, whose platonic theory of innate ideas led the way to Cartesianism. Through the medium of some of his zealous followers, the logic of Ramee passed to Holland. Arminius, who knew what he was doing, adopted it for himself. The way was open towards the autonomy of reason, and religion—the Christian religion—had henceforth the duty to stay in the limits of reason, as Kant puts it ; no miraculous revelation, no inspired Book, no mysterious decree. Reason cannot tolerate mystery of any sort.

It is easy to see what we Calvinists must aim at—the restoration in all domains of the spirit of Calvinism. God must come, at all costs, to His right ; human reason, human ethics, human feelings, must be dragged behind the victorious Christ ; and man as a rival to God, as a judge of God, must be brought to nought.

A. LECERF.

Faculty of Theology, University of Paris.