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CALVINISM IN NORTH AMERICA

James D. Bratt

An old story about the founding of America puts English Calvinists on the ground floor of that enterprise.¹ In this account the “Pilgrim Fathers”, separatists from the Church of England, and their much more numerous, non-separating Puritan kin are the architects of a uniformly devout New England, which in turn becomes the model of the independent nation divinely destined to arise on the New World’s shore. By logical transition, then, the United States was set upon Calvinistic foundations.

The reality turns out to have been much more complicated. Recent historians have discovered how variegated the settlers of New England were (the Puritans having comprised at most one-third of the whole) and how unusual New England was as a British colonial settlement in North America. The earlier-established Virginia turns out to have been more typical of the lot, and thus the proper home of the authors of the great documents and feats of American Independence. But even in the con-

¹ The following article is reproduced with permission from Hirzel, Martin Ernst/Sallmann, Martin (eds): *John Calvin’s Impact on Church and Society 1509-1909*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2009, pp. 49-66; in German: *1509 – Johannes Calvin – 2009. Sein Wirken in Kirche und Gesellschaft*, Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2008, pp. 71-94; in French: *Calvin et le Calvinisme: Cinq siècles d’influences sur l’Eglise et la Société*, Geneva: Labor et Fides.

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ventional tale the Puritans' theology was always a sticking point quickly left behind for more widely valued qualities. It was the Puritans' solid character, or their contributions to liberty and education, all somehow emerging despite their distasteful predestinarianism, that won Americans' affection.

The revised story of America's origins thus gives a better forecast of Calvinism's destiny on the North American continent. Always controversial for the rigour as well as the substance of their theology, vastly outnumbered by populist denominations like the Methodists, and an embattled minority even when they have been the establishment, Calvinists have nonetheless exerted an disproportionate influence in the development of American politics, academia and national self-conceptions. They have been the leaven in a now-resistant, now absorptive loaf. Their external influences have come despite – or perhaps because of – chronic internal fissuring, for from the start Calvinists in North America have split along lines of ethnicity, polity and theological interpretation. Prospering as a minority, they have become many minorities, each shaping and being shaped by the niche where they have landed.

1. The Puritan legacy

The Calvinism that came ashore in New England in the 1620s and '30s had already been altered from Continental standards by the exigencies of England's protracted process of church reformation. Neither outlawed nor in power, English Calvinists negotiated an indeterminate space by building congregations that were in part voluntary associations of the likeminded. This gave rise to the localistic polity that would be one of the most powerful legacies of Puritanism in America. A second would be a habit formed in England that became standardised in America: the expectation that full church membership be accorded only upon the applicants' testimony of a personal experience that settled any

doubts about their election. In this manner the Puritans in New England aimed at making the visible and invisible churches as synonymous as possible. At the same time their churches were state-supported to the exclusion of all others. If zeal for purity and broad public sway proved to be unstable associates, the combination contained a great deal of America's religious future, which lay in the separate, even rival, elaboration of these two impulses.

Two other Puritan tensions also reverberated down through the American future. Their insistence on experiential conversion potentially amplified the authority of the human soul in things religious, a precedent unflinchingly invoked by later generations of searchers and freethinkers. On the other hand, from the Cambridge (Massachusetts) Synod of 1648 to Connecticut's Saybrook Synod in 1708 the Puritans moved toward establishing the Westminster standards as collective authority and so resolutely asserted God's sovereignty over all things. Many who would leave established Congregationalism nonetheless took along this theology into their new fellowships. Likewise, a tension between piety and intellect marked Puritanism from the start. It is no accident that Harvard College, founded just six years after the Puritans' first landing in 1630, evolved over the eighteenth century into the American bastion of Enlightened rationalism, or that virtually every one of the oldest Puritan congregations was Unitarian by the mid-nineteenth century. On the other hand, the exuberant revivalism that swept America from 1740 to 1840 drew from models and sources in classic Puritanism. The earnest heart and the formidable systematic head of John Calvin was carried over to the New World in this manner, and in this potent combination.

The Puritans aimed at thorough reformation not only in church but in state and society; theirs would be a "Bible commonwealth" founded upon a social compact between people who were at once fellow citizens and fellow church members. Until its original charter was revoked in 1684, Massachusetts restricted the franchise in colony-wide elections to

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full church members. Yet the new charter formalised what had been the practice all along in local affairs, awarding the vote according to a property qualification that many could meet. Yet the “democracy” of the famous New England town-meeting should not be misunderstood; it aimed not to poll between discordant opinions but to establish and enforce communal consensus. Dissent was more begrudged by necessity than legitimated by right.

Still, cultivation of a responsible public ethos was high on the list of Puritan priorities – and high on the list of their accomplishments as well. Though the clergy were barred from civil office, they typically worked in close cooperation with the magistracy to shape a society that was at once formally secular and deeply Christian. Key instruments to this effect were not only churches, which all inhabitants were required to attend, but also the schools that appeared in nearly every town. Thus literacy, piety and social duty were each promulgated via the other. Commerce played a more ambiguous role. On the one hand, New England’s townships of small farmers and artisans generated a thoroughly, if modestly scaled, commercial nexus in which nearly everyone participated. On the other hand, a rough egalitarianism combined with suspicions of covetousness and luxury to keep market exploitation under control and to make the achievement of material prosperity as much a cause for introspection as for self-congratulation. Most of all, New England’s social behavior was marked by remarkably low levels of violence; its laws singled out crimes of aggression over those involving property, sexuality, or libel.

The Puritans took divine election to apply not only to individuals and churches among them but also to New England as a “nation”. This too gave as much occasion for lament as for celebration, so that the distinctive genre of colonial New England literature became the jeremiad – sermons recounting the myriad ways in which the chosen people had fallen short of their calling. The very punishments that God was visiting

upon them for these infractions became signs of hope, however, proof that God had not withdrawn his covenant from them. The rhetorical cycle traced out in the jeremiad would endure a very long time and at a very deep level in the American psyche, as the range of what counted as God's chosen nation gradually expanded to include, first, those adjacent territories where the children of New England spread in the search for land and opportunity, and later, but only in the 1820s, to the United States as a whole. The sense of national election could work to launch evangelism campaigns and crusades for social justice – and to launch holy wars against enemies. Not accidentally, the most epochal conflict in United States history, the Civil War (1861-65), joined those two prongs in fatal combination, as a war to thwart Southern disobedience became a war to abolish slavery. The fiercest and most accomplished rhetoric in that war on the Northern front came from New England ministers who consciously styled themselves as “sons of the Puritans”. Ironically, their equals on the Southern side were self-consciously Calvinistic Presbyterians.

Unfortunately, God's “New Israel” also had “Canaanites” near at hand to deal with. The grimmest annals in New England history recount the Pequot War (1637-1638) and King Philip's War (1675-1676) – proportionate to population, some of the costliest episodes in American military history. Land pressure, complaints about trade, and racism all played their part in causing the conflicts, but the sanction for genocide that Puritan leaders drew out of Scripture in these instances soaked their faith in the blood that condemns, not redeems. The more familiar Salem witch craze (1692) turned the hunt for the Lord's enemies inward, and its twenty victims count as the predictable sacrifice of an insular community trying to dam its tide of afflictions. The quiet anomaly of Salem is that such episodes did not occur more often in the region. For that New England's learned ministry and magistrates are due credit, as they usually nipped the folk mania of witch-hunting in the bud.

2. "The Great Awakening"

By the 1730s, under the strains of rapid economic growth and demographic dispersion, the New England pulpit triggered a new religious era that later historians would call the Great Awakening. Resoundingly Calvinistic sons of the region like Jonathan Edwards set this stage and upon it trod the British-born missionary George Whitefield (1714-1770), who spread the new model of heart religion across all the colonies. Combining theatrical charisma with a new emphasis upon the proximity of Christ's redeeming mercies, Whitefield simplified the exacting measures of Puritan conversion into a ready, wholesale plan. Still, Whitefield's was a Calvinistic gospel – he broke with his erstwhile Oxford friends, John (1703-1791) and Charles Wesley (1707-1788), over their Arminian² understanding of justification – and the Awakening can be understood in part as a wave of Calvinistic reform. It brought its converts to vital religious commitment; it multiplied colleges (Dartmouth and Brown in New England, Princeton in New Jersey, sundry academies in the South) to train ministers for further evangelisation. As in Calvin's own time it raised its adherents' religious sights beyond their native locale to an international vista. Yet the Awakening was Calvinistic only in part, for the Arminian Methodists on the Wesleyan side would eventually outnumber the converts Whitefield left. Furthermore, the most numerous fellowship among his progeny, the evangelical Baptists, however much they held to Reformed theology, repudiated the public sweep of magisterial Calvinism.

Baptists had been present in British North America from an early date, especially in Rhode Island where so many dissenters from the New England establishment fled or were exiled. Tolerated, they did not much

² A school of thought named after the Dutch theologian Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) that amplified the role of human will and initiative in the process of salvation, over against the orthodox Calvinist position ratified by the Synod of Dort (1618-1619).

multiply there. The zeal of the Awakening radically altered the scale of things. New Light (pro-revival) New Englanders began to form their own churches under the principles of strict local control and renewed insistence upon experiential conversion as test of full membership. (That had eroded with the spread of the "Halfway Covenant"³ in the New England establishment from the last third of the seventeenth century.) Many "Separates" then took the logical next step of requiring believer baptism and leaving Congregationalism entirely. The movement spread steadily across New England from 1750 on but really flourished on the back-country frontier, especially in Virginia and the Carolinas, where it was brought by New England missionaries. Theologically these Separate Baptists took a soft Calvinist line, insisting on agreement only in "essentials", but mandated exuberant experience and strict discipline of life and fellowship as the definition of true Christianity. They met and gradually intermingled with Particular Baptists who had been evangelised by the more consistently Calvinistic Philadelphia Association founded in 1707 by streams of Welsh immigrants. Together, the Baptists' lay leadership and localist polity made them self-sufficient as communities. Their hostility to established churches left them oscillating between radical libertarianism and world-renouncing quietism⁴ during the American Revolution, and their ethical sobriety made them one of the most effective instruments of social discipline on the post-revolutionary frontier without their assuming much claim upon or for the public order.

The Presbyterians, the third large body of Calvinists in colonial America, also expanded rapidly over the eighteenth century, bolstered

³ The Half-Way Covenant, affirmed by the Boston synod of 1662, opened the sacrament of baptism to children of parents who themselves had been baptized but had not experienced regeneration as was required for full church membership, so long as these parents professed believing knowledge of Christian doctrine, promised to obey church authority, and manifested a proper way of life.

⁴ An attitude distancing oneself from worldly affairs, particularly politics and warfare.

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by immigration as well as revival. By Independence some 150,000 Scots and Ulster folk had poured into the colonies, typically settling along the Appalachian backcountry from Pennsylvania south. Religiously their communities showed stout Westminster orthodoxy alongside vivid folk religion, and strong church assemblies jostling with prickly individualism in a libertine environment. This Scots-Irish phalanx soon came into tension with home-grown Presbyterians who had become allied with New England Congregationalists of semi-presbyterian polity. The alliance favoured revivals and regional autonomy, less so doctrinal uniformity and synodical controls. The issue was joined in the subscription controversy at the Synod of 1729, which passed an Adopting Act that required clergy to affirm the spirit though not the letter of the Westminster Standards, as the immigrant, pro-subscription party wished. The battle resumed with the Awakening, and the anti-revival Old Side split from the more evangelical party at the Synod of 1741. The two were eventually reconciled in 1758 on New Side terms: subscription on doctrinal essentials, relative regional autonomy and attention to the evangelical spirit as well as the formal education of clergy. Both the split and the reconciliation were propelled by the Log College founded outside Philadelphia by William Tennent (1673-1746) to provide ministerial training on site to avoid the hazards of traveling to and (in his mind) absorbing the spirit of Scottish universities. Ulster-born but a New Sider, a champion of heart religion but also of theological education, Tennent helped mediate the two poles, just as his son Gilbert Tennent (1703-1764), a fire-breathing revivalist, soon settled down to good order in his Philadelphia pulpit.

Helpful in the church's reconciliation but much more influential in the new nation about to be born was John Witherspoon, a Scottish pastor brought to New Jersey in 1768 to preside over the college founded at Princeton. His evangelical past did not prevent Witherspoon from purging the curriculum that Jonathan Edwards had installed there and substi-

tuting for it the moral-sense ethics and common-sense epistemology of the Scots Enlightenment. If this conciliation of rationalism and revivalism muted the implications of Calvinist doctrines of sin, it served admirably to pump political leadership into the American Revolution. In fact, Princeton produced more office-holders on all levels of the infant nation than did any other American college. Witherspoon's political Calvinism emphasised the responsibilities of public service, the centrality of law both to legitimate and stabilise the revolutionary process. Witherspoon's most distinguished student was James Madison (1751-1836), principal architect of the U. S. Constitution. The document reflects the naturalised Calvinism that Madison took away from Princeton: utterly secular, trusting in no redemptions, arraying structural mechanisms to control indelible self-centredness.

3. Theological and Regional Divergences in the 19th century

Once national independence was definitively secured at the end of the Napoleonic wars, Princeton returned to its original intent of producing ministers, founding a separate theological seminary that also became a font of undiluted Calvinist orthodoxy. Leading the enterprise for half a century from his arrival on the faculty in 1822 was Charles Hodge (1797-1878): professor of systematic theology, the vastly learned editor of perhaps the foremost academic journal in the nation, a force for moderation in denominational councils, but an unbending advocate of what he took to be the timeless faith of the church. His system combined François Turretin's Reformed dogmatics, Francis Bacon's induction as theological method, Common Sense Realism as philosophical frame, and earnest polemics against any deviation from this profile. Hodge's regime would endure at Princeton until the Modernist quarrels of the 1920s, and then lived on in the scholastic wing of American Fundamen-

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talism. Yet, for much of the nineteenth century, Princeton minted more ministers – and thus more professional leaders in local communities across the country – than did any other school in the land, cultivating in society as well as in church a respect for learning, a culture of *sobriety* and civil respect, and a model of piety fulfilled in institutional service.

Post-revolutionary adjustments in New England were very different. Loyal Congregationalism perceived a tide of unbelief and licentiousness at loose in the young republic and rekindled the revival enterprise against it, redoubling their efforts when their churches were disestablished in Connecticut (1817) and Massachusetts (1833). They entered a Plan of Union (1801) with their old New York Presbyterian allies to practise comity in planting churches across New York and the Midwest. They brought additional allies into a remarkable phalanx of national voluntary agencies to promote education, Bible and tract distribution, and the reformation of public morals. This “Presbygational” complex aimed to rebuild the old Puritan holy commonwealth by voluntarist means, and it achieved remarkable success. Separately and together these Calvinist bodies founded more colleges and published more books and Bibles than did any other church, including the Baptists and Methodists who greatly outnumbered them. Their agency budgets compared respectably to those of the federal government, and their network of local affiliates rivaled those of the greatest organisers of the age, the political parties.

Yet the Presbyterians at Princeton, along the border states and in the South became increasingly troubled by these efforts and banded together in 1837 to end the Plan of Union, evicting the “New School” congregations formed under its aegis from the Presbyterian Church. The Old Schoolers cited, besides errors of polity, a theological degeneration in the inheritance of the sainted Edwards. Edwards himself had so altered the Puritans’ covenant theology to qualify his as a neo-Calvinism. Con-

version amounted to a “divine and supernatural light” being imparted immediately to the affections, there implanting an entirely new sensibility that wrought in the redeemed a new vision of reality and a new motivation for conduct – a “true virtue” that consisted in “love for being in general”, free of the calculated self-interest dear to Enlightened moral theory. Such love was impossible for those still dead in their trespasses, Edwards said; yet these too had free will to do as they pleased. They simply could not by their own volition wish to please God.

Edwards’ followers modified this system further to accommodate the voluntarist-individualist canon of the new democracy. Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803) deemphasised the bonds of original sin, which Edwards had robustly reasserted, while translating the master’s ethical rule into a command for “disinterested benevolence”. This necessitated love for the least regarded, Hopkins declared, and he made good on his word by preaching against slavery from his pulpit in Newport, Rhode Island, a centre of the American slave trade. New England’s revival passions thus always bore moral urgency. That combination peaked in the next generation at the hands of Nathaniel William Taylor (1786-1858), professor at Yale Divinity School, and Charles Finney (1792-1875), master evangelist of the Yankee diaspora. Out of revival urgency the two laid the entire guilt of sin at the door of each individual’s will, and taught the power of that will to submit immediately to the moral law of God, which constituted true conversion. This Charles Hodge denounced as worse than Arminian – as Pelagian.⁵ On the other hand Boston Unitarians spied in Taylor and Finney a hyper-Calvinism fixated on guilt and depravity and prone to legalism. In either case, Finney’s revivalism launched a fleet of social reformers to crusade against all of America’s sins, including slavery.

⁵ A theologian active c. 400 C.E., Pelagius taught salvation by human merit and decision, thus not by divine grace. Arminians deem grace to be necessary for salvation though accessible by human-initiated decision.

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That activism helped prompt the Presbyterian split of 1837. The staunchest Calvinists among the Baptists voiced their own complaints at the same time, reasserting divine election in theology and the strictest localism in polity to forestall the erection of a new “religious establishment” by a Yankee “hydra” consumed with human pride and imperial ambition.⁶ These Particular or Primitive Baptists found New School deviations among fellow Baptists especially troubling, and their own campaigns via press and pulpit spread a resolute, populist form of Calvinism across the border states and rural South out to the plains of Texas.

Presbyterians in the South moved to withstand Northern critiques by discovering new doctrine. At the hands of James Henley Thornwell (1812-1862), a pastor and professor of theology at Columbia, South Carolina, the notion of “the spirituality of the church” sharply demarcated civil from ecclesiastical spheres and limited the church’s corporate authority to the latter. Not accidentally, slavery being deemed entirely a civil institution, Thornwell’s position exempted the foundation of Southern society from the church’s judgement. This did not prevent him, however, from writing the “Address to All the Churches of Jesus Christ throughout the Earth” (1861) by which Presbyterians in the new-found Confederacy warranted ecclesiastical separation from their Northern brethren and gave fulsome support to their region’s cause. Although Thornwell himself came to think that the South’s military reverses reflected divine punishment upon some abuses of the system, his denomination never doubted that their slave regime had biblical warrant and that Northern abolitionism necessitated all sorts of departures from orthodoxy. Their social outlook combined with rigorous Westminster confessionalism and Baconian common-sense hermeneutics to make the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) a strategic leader in

⁶ “Address to the Particular Baptist Churches of the ‘Old School’ (...),” in: Bratt (ed.): *Antirevivalism*, pp. 69-77.

the New South that emerged out of postwar Reconstruction, assimilating such change as was necessary within a matrix of tradition and order.

Leavening influences from Presbyterians above and Baptists below accentuated the disproportionately Calvinist aura of New South culture. Military defeat, economic straits, and the weight of a burdensome past reinforced the current of fatalism that was already strong in Southern lore and letters. "Calvinist" became the literary shorthand for this complex, which in fact derived as much from stoic and aristocratic sources as from Reformed theology. If scepticism about the illusions of progress helped rationalise the racial segregation of the South, warnings against pride and ambition could have been well used in the booming industrial North. Old School Presbyterians had warranted the Civil War upon constitutional grounds, while New Schoolers were more invested in it as a crusade to eliminate slavery. Notably, military and political triumphs eroded old theological tensions, and the two wings reunited in 1870 upon a moderate Calvinist base. The Congregationalists, who had been more uniformly of the crusader mind during the war, proceeded to become the friendliest ground for theological liberalism once the war was over.

In fact, more and more Northern Protestants in the last quarter of the nineteenth century became convinced that religion needed to innovate to match change in society and economy. As old theological distinctives faded, the traditionally Calvinist denominations became absorbed in a generic Protestant culture marked by prosperous respectability at home and a zeal for spreading "Christian civilisation" abroad. Thus in eight of the nine presidential elections from 1884 through 1916, the Democratic candidate was a Presbyterian – Grover Cleveland (1837-1908), William Jennings Bryan (1860-1925), and Woodrow Wilson (1856-1924). That each held political and theological attitudes clearly at odds with the others' illustrates the limits of denominational salience in the era. What religious historian Sydney Ahlstrom (1919-1984) said of the transit of Pu-

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ritanism is equally true of the fading Calvinism of the Gilded Age: it showed a “crucial susceptibility (...) to transmute its power into secular impulses (...) virtually sacrific[ing] itself on the altar of civic responsibility.”⁷ *African Americans and Canadian Presbyterian* experiences in two other nations illustrate the limits and lure of the American compromise. The freed African Americans of the post-Civil War South were indeed a people set apart, organising separate churches when whites refused to fellowship with them as equals. For black Presbyterians, who were far less numerous than their counterparts among the Baptists and Methodists, this posed a severe challenge, since they had typically worshipped (in segregated seating) at white churches prior to the war. Their numbers grew to about seventy congregations by 1898 when, with Jim Crow at its peak, they formed an independent body, only to rejoin the PCUS as a separate and subordinate synod from 1917 until 1951. The factors that kept Presbyterian numbers low in the African-American community – the insistence upon an educated ministry and “good order” in worship – also boosted their disproportionate leadership in the community’s life, North as well as South. Presbyterianism both pointed the way toward the respectability that black achievers yearned for in the face of white denials of the very possibility and agitated politically to make sure that neither side became comfortable in any state short of justice. Thus the escaped slave turned Presbyterian minister Henry H. Garnet (1815-1882) became one of abolitionism’s most radical orators in the decades before the Civil War, while after liberation Francis J. Grimké (1850-1937) – born to a South Carolina slaveholder, educated at Princeton Seminary, and Garnet’s successor at the leading black church in Washington, D.C – numbered among the foremost Presbyterian clergy in the nation, black or white, feared for his logic and learning by anyone admitting to second-class arrangements for reasons of race.

⁷ Ahlstrom: *Religious History of the American People*, p. 348.

The Calvinist experience in Canada was much more placid and fit readily into the pan-Protestant culture that took hold everywhere in that nation outside Quebec from 1830 to 1930. Canadians were more orderly than the Yankees they decidedly did not want to emulate: the Methodists were more serene, the Baptists more uniformly Calvinistic, and the Presbyterians more closely tied to developments back in Scotland whence most of them had emigrated. The Free Church secession (1843) in that motherland registered strongly across the water, holding the sympathies of more Canadian Presbyterians than not by the time of Confederation (1867). Yet the seceders too had affinities for establishment, and the erosion of the Anglican hold on that status in Canada led both Presbyterian sides to functionally fill that gap. They did so with a quieter version of the American New Schoolers' campaigns for evangelism and regulation of public mores. They followed a like inclination for alliance building. Most Canadian Presbyterians were in one house by 1875, then proceeded through long negotiations with Methodists and Congregationalists into the United Church of Canada in 1925. Much less theological backlash attended this process than was the case for even smaller ventures in the United States, partly because Protestants in Canada felt called to enter a common front against consolidated Roman Catholic Quebec, partly because church-state collaboration in educational policy promoted cooperation across denominations in forming universities.

Calvinists in Protestant Fundamentalism

The roots of Protestant Fundamentalism in America lie in protests against any policy of accommodation. Charles Hodge's son, Archibald Alexander (1823-1886), and Benjamin Warfield (1851-1921), who eventually succeeded both Hodges on the Princeton faculty, published a robust assertion of Scriptural authority in 1881; Fundamentalists derived from it one pillar of their theology, a doctrine of biblical "inerrancy".

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The other pillar would be dispensational premillennialism⁸, a wholesale remapping of eschatology that broke with traditional Reformed understandings of continuity in God's purpose and people but strongly reaffirmed divine sovereignty as well as biblical authority in an era that had begun to doubt both. Prime representatives of this doctrine were conservative Presbyterian clergy, including its chief publicist James Brookes (1830-1897)⁹ and its missions theorist Arthur T. Pierson (1837-1911).

Meanwhile, the rigorist ethics of "holiness" that was equally definitive of fundamentalism had a Reformed wing parallel to the more numerous Wesleyans and Finneyites in that movement. Named after the English conference site where its teachings were elaborated, Keswick holiness taught that an "in-filling" by the Holy Spirit would enable the believer to live "victoriously" over sin. The motivation to evangelism that drew off Keswick heroics, millenarian urgency, and confidence in Scriptural truth readily blended with the work of mainline church executives like the Presbyterian Robert Speer (1867-1947) to make the generation before World War I the great age of American missions. The Presbyterians were particularly effective in China, Korea, and Brazil; the Baptists were everywhere; the Congregationalists took pride in having started the movement a century before.

But controversy from the mission fields washed back into the United States to help trigger the attack upon theological modernism from which

⁸ The doctrine that Christ's return will precede (hence "pre") rather than culminate (as "post"-millennialism teaches) the thousand-year reign of perfection promised in some New Testament passages. Dispensationalism, popularised by John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) of the Plymouth Brethren in Great Britain, understands God's work in history as dividing into seven distinct phases, with the current epoch of the "church" or "grace" being sharply distinguished from that of "Israel" and soon to come to a catastrophic end.

⁹ A Presbyterian pastor long situated in St. Louis, Brookes presided over the Niagara Bible Conference, one of the principal avenues for disseminating dispensational premillenarian teachings. Brookes' many writings further popularised the movement as did the definitive Scofield Reference Bible edited by his disciple, Cyrus I. Scofield (1843-1921).

fundamentalism proper was born. The principal Baptist and Presbyterian denominations in the North underwent tempestuous assemblies in the 1920s from which small, resolutely Calvinist bodies emerged, unable to tolerate further membership in what they took to be theologically compromised churches. The General Association of Regular Baptist Churches grew out of a rupture in Northern Baptist circles and continues to the present, combining traditional Calvinism with dispensational eschatology and strict behavioral codes. More notable for its intellectual sophistication was the Presbyterian quarrel provoked by Princeton Seminary professor J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937), whose *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923) cast the two terms of its title as entirely different religions. The denominational courts faulted him, however, for supporting a separate mission board from theirs, leading to Machen's 1936 departure to form the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC). Holding to an unaltered understanding of their historic standards, the OPC's Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia cast itself as the true descendant of the "old Princeton" of Hodge and Warfield.

Fifty years later the drama was replayed among the southern Presbyterians when conservatives, protesting loose theology and political involvement on the part of the PCUS, withdrew into the new Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). Their founding statement replicated the title of Thornwell's "Address" and their conservative politics were never far from view. The PCUS in turn opened negotiations to reunite with their Northern counterparts, who had assimilated a number of smaller Presbyterian bodies already in 1958. The North-South union was accomplished in 1983, producing the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Given similar unions occurring on the Congregational side, the counter-play between ecumenical unity and separation for purity formed the principal twentieth-century plotline in the American churches with the oldest Calvinist roots. The unions have not halted the steady loss of membership that the ecumenical bodies have suffered since the late 1960s, nor the relative

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strength gained by the purists via separation. On the other hand, those purists gained most who have decked their Calvinist theology with generic evangelicalism; thus the PCA is far larger than the OPC. In all these manoeuvres, the oldest tension in American Presbyterianism has played out, but across both sides of the current divide. The ecumenical PCUSA breathes the socially activist New School, loose-subscription spirit; yet like eighteenth-century Old Siders it is adamant about proper polity, and its seminaries today affirm Reformed tradition as the proper bed of theological instruction. The PCA, on the other hand, proclaims its doctrinal orthodoxy but promotes an evangelical spirit and allows internal variations on a New Side model. The OPC resembles the small sects sprinkled across the American Presbyterian past, tenacious for the issues that defined them in a distant time or place.

4 Impulses from Dutch and German communities

Some of the freshest impulses on the twentieth-century scene came from German and Dutch Reformed communities that had been present in America from colonial days but remained at the edge of British-derived developments. A major voice sounded already in the 1840s in the person of John Williamson Nevin (1803-1866), a native-born Presbyterian who quit those circles in disgust over the split of 1837 and joined the faculty of the German Reformed seminary at Mercersburg, Pennsylvania. Faulting Old School scholasticism and New School's revival alike, Nevin found in contemporary German theology an inspiring recovery of the church in its confessional heritage, its historical evolution, and its role in Christ's continuing presence on earth. Nevin resurrected for American Protestantism (and to the disbelief of his teacher, Charles Hodge) Calvin's eucharistic theology and saw in sacrament, confession, and liturgy the means of believers' lasting union with Christ and with each other. Castigating the entire "Puritan" heritage as rational-

istic, subjectivist, and sectarian, Nevin's Mercersburg theology offered a dramatic departure on the American scene - nicely enough, in the name of recovering stability and tradition. His offering proved premature but Philip Schaff (1819-1893), his German-educated colleague at the seminary, showed how mediating theology could work on the postwar scene. Moving to the New School-founded Union Seminary in New York City, Schaff became the supreme scholar-statesman of the Protestant mainline, directing a new Bible translation and the English publication of the Church Fathers, among a myriad of other projects.

Mercersburg's deeper impulse began to be recovered in the 1930s as mainline Protestants talked of church union but also of recovering an authentic voice for the church, free of cultural conformity. In one merger the German Reformed in the U.S. joined with the immigrant children of the Evangelical Synod formed out of the post-Napoleonic Reformed-Lutheran union in the motherland. That Synod happened to be the American home of the two strongest theologians on the mid-century scene, Reinhold (1892-1971) and H. Richard Niebuhr (1894-1962). In their "neo-orthodoxy" the cultural captivity of the church found its keenest critics, and Barthian dialectical theology its American counterpart. Without affirming the letter Reinhold asserted the spirit of Augustinian theology and the voice of Calvin himself. It was not in the offerings of secular rationalism, technocratic fixes, or assimilated religion that the world crises of economic depression, total war, and cold war could best be fathomed, thundered Reinhold, but in a restored understanding of sin - original sin, structural sin, the hidden self-interest of the good citizen and the pious mantle of the churchgoer. Reinhold's appeal especially touched the rising generation in American academia and government, steeling them to endurance in the cause of free civilisation while alerting them to their own compromises and illusions. H. Richard's attentions went principally to the church, for which he constructed not only a critical but a constructive ethics of responsibility that would

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dominate mainline discourse into the 1970s. In the process he also worked as a pro-Calvinist church historian, rehabilitating Edwards and the Awakenings as the golden thread of the American Protestant heritage. His vision was fulfilled (and Nevin's spirit perhaps provoked) when the German Reformed & Evangelical church merged with the Puritan-descended Congregationalists.

Although they claimed to transcend it, the Niebuhrs clearly worked on the mainline side of the Protestant divide. Dutch Reformed voices helped rehabilitate fundamentalism's children who emerged from underground in the 1960s as "neo-evangelicals". The Reformed Church in America, planted in seventeenth-century New Netherland, had taken a guarded part in pre-Civil War evangelical collaborations, staying on the Old School side of theological debates but serving its own ethnic enclave. It was more enthusiastic for the missions enterprise later in the century and the Prohibition crusade at home. As part of its home missions extension it had helped Dutch immigrants in the 1840s-50s who settled in the farmlands of western Michigan and central Iowa, but since a crucial portion of the new arrivals had just passed through a bitter secession from the established Reformed Church in the Netherlands, suspicion of a quasi-established American Protestantism spread in the *colonies* and led to the formation of a separate Christian Reformed Church (CRC). It hewed to the strict confessionalism of the Seceded Church in the Netherlands and drew in a majority of the newcomers to America.

The pietist orthodoxy of the CRC was soon modified by the neo-Calvinist influences of Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), a multi-talented Dutch visionary who founded a university, two newspapers, and a political party, on his way to becoming prime minister of the Netherlands early in the twentieth century. Kuyper's project had two purposes: to awaken orthodox Calvinists from their pietistic slumbers to intentionally Christian participation in every domain of modern life; and, as a strategic part of that labour, to mount a wholesale critique of secularism and

theological liberalism that would expose their inadequacies and warrant integral Christian options instead. These proposals had two corollaries that Kuyper freely granted: an explosion of the Enlightenment – but also an old Christian – notion of human objectivity in the articulation of knowledge and public policy, and a frank pluralism by which adherents of each “worldview” received their fair share of public space and respected that of others as a matter of Christian principle, not just out of begrudging toleration. Kuyper’s dicta, no less than his example in founding a distinctively Christian university, galvanised any number of Christian Reformed youth to academic labours, most notably philosophers on the order of Cornelius Van Til (1895-1987), Alvin Plantinga (1932-), and Nicholas Wolterstorff (1932-). Their work exploded the Baconian common-sense approach that neo-evangelicals had inherited from nineteenth-century Princeton and replaced it with a presuppositionalist method that by the century’s end dominated American evangelical discourse - and opened it to creative interaction with some types of postmodernism which Kuyper’s critique of power and pretensions to neutrality had anticipated by a century. At the same time, Kuyper’s mandates for full-spectrum political and cultural engagement pushed the Christian Reformed out of their ethnic enclaves after World War II and inspired evangelical activism after the collapse of the Cold War consensus in the 1960s. This Kuyperianism could cut Right as well as Left, generating something of an evangelical liberation theology in critique of American domination abroad, but also militating against an expansive state and defending the organic orders of creation in a manner very friendly to the Christian Right’s “family values” agenda of the past quarter century.

Along with the Niebuhrians and Kuyperians have sounded some surprising voices from the Calvinist residuum of the erstwhile mainstream. The 2005 Pulitzer Prize for fiction went to *Gilead*, the story of a soulful Presbyterian minister by the doughty Presbyterian author, Marilynne

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Robinson (1947-). Her earlier collection of essays, *The Death of Adam*, stands in a long line of American mediations on the hollowness within the nation's experiment and on the possibility – explicitly averred in Robinson's case – that John Calvin had the essential things right, and not only for believers' eternal salvation but for moderns' life together. A fellow Presbyterian, pastor-novelist Frederick Buechner (1926-), has walked more mellow paths to inspire a new birth of interior spiritual reflection. Calvin's *Institutes* opined that the knowledge of God would lead to self-knowledge; Buechner and his followers have taken Calvin's other option, searching the self to open unto God. The Genevan's impact on the American psyche, politics, and cultural criticism has evidently not run out. If his predestinarian reputation will never endear him to American hearts, his long train of disciples still leavens American lives.

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