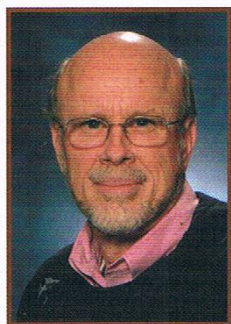


John Calvin's Institutional Thinking

BY WILLIAM R. STEVENSON JR.



When the young French aristocrat Alexis de Tocqueville visited the even younger United States of America in 1831 to explore the significance of “democracy in America,” he was quite surprised at the political and religious vitality he witnessed in America. Delving further, he concluded that religion in America “must be regarded as the first of their political institutions; for if it does not

impart a taste for freedom, it facilitates the use of it.” In asking the many Americans he met for an explanation of this vitality, he discovered that the universally understood cause was “the separation of church and state.” But most interesting to Tocqueville—and no doubt surprising to many of us—was his ultimate conclusion that American beginnings in Calvinist New England were the real heart and soul of America’s democratic genius.

Whatever our positions on the status of religious liberty in contemporary American life may be, Tocqueville’s insight should remind us that one of the most remarkable contributions of John Calvin to the political world was his legacy in *distinguishing* the institutional identities and responsibilities of church and state. Looking at either Calvin’s Geneva or Puritan New England from our contemporary vantage point and seeing only apparent religious oppression, then, misses Calvin’s key contribution to modern democratic politics. For Tocqueville saw the grounding genius of American democracy as the traditional Calvinist reverence for church and family as institutions that required their own authority, integrity and autonomy in their own spheres. For Calvin, church, family and temporal government had clearly articulated, divinely authorized and complementary but not interchangeable purposes. Such emphasis on both the distinct integrity and the coherent complementarity of these institutions grounded an energetic political experimentation, *but without unleashing moral disorder*. Individual conscience, unbounded by democratic politics, was institutionally hemmed-in by functioning church and family life.

Commenting on this Calvinist understanding, Tocqueville found himself first “struck with astonishment” by the particular coexistence of “two distinct elements: ... the spirit of religion and the spirit of liberty.” “In the moral world,” he remarked, “everything is classified, systematized, foreseen, and decided beforehand; [but] in the political world everything is agitated, disputed, and uncertain. In the one is a passive though a voluntary obedience; in the other, an independence scornful of experience, and jealous of all authority.”

By looking beyond appearances, Tocqueville came to see that “these two tendencies, apparently so discrepant, are far from conflicting; they advance together and support each other.” Beyond the fact that the strict moral codes in New England were *self-chosen*, the most impressive thing for Tocqueville was this clearly apparent sentiment among the Puritan colonists: “Liberty regards religion as its companion in all its battles and its triumphs, as the cradle of its infancy, and the divine source of its claims. It considers religion as the safeguard of morality, and morality as the best security of law and the surest pledge of the duration of freedom.” Far from contradicting each other, these two elements—one determinedly pulling in and one adventurously branching out—served to anchor genuinely constructive democracy. *Because* New Englanders practiced bounded religion, they were free to practice entrepreneurial politics.

Remarkable, but not coincidental, similarities appear in the Geneva of Calvin’s time. Calvin worked tirelessly—in both design and implementation—to set church and temporal government on

separate foundations. The fourth book of his final edition of the *Institutes* points to the extent of his determination, as he painstakingly laid out the boundaries between the spiritual and temporal realms of human life. Both church and “state” had defined responsibilities with divinely sanctioned authorities, requiring separate institutional identities. And, not surprisingly, both church and temporal government exemplified remarkable energy and vision. Not only did Calvinism spread quickly throughout northern and central Europe, it laid the foundations for religious liberty in ways that neither Catholicism nor the other forms of Protestantism were able to do.

Indeed, signs of Calvin’s determination show up as well in his professional life: always the pastor, never the holder of political office. And in the political and social realms of Calvin’s Geneva, one is struck by innovations: the public hospital; the public school; the reform of the laws concerning marriage and those regulating business activity; the institutional hedges to autocratic rule; and the fascinating partnership between church and city government represented by the Consistory, among many others.

In sum, the determination of Calvin—and later Calvinists—to work out a biblically based social pluralism, precisely in order to empower and protect the institutions of family, church, government and other public social institutions, has been a contribution to constructive democratic governance that is real but often underappreciated. ✠



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