Calvin and Calvinists on Resistance to Government

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It is a special pleasure for me to speak today in this country and on this subject. I am happy to speak in this country because it is the land of my mother’s birth, yet this is the first time I have visited it. I am happy to speak on this subject for two reasons. Calvinist resistance theory interests me very much and I have done research on it off and on for decades. But I have another and more personal reason. My grandfather, George Shannon McCune, a Presbyterian missionary and educator, was dismissed from his positions and forced to leave Korea in 1936 by the Japanese military government because of his resistance to its requirement that he participate in rites that he felt involved pagan forms of worship. To a rare degree, therefore, this lecture combines personal with scholarly interests.

When we speak of resistance we must first distinguish among types. We must distinguish between passive resistance, the refusal to obey certain commands of a government, and active resistance, the attempt to overthrow a government and replace it with another. We must also distinguish between individual resistance, as exercised by any single member of a society, and collective resistance, as organized on behalf of a society, most probably by its natural leaders. Passive resistance can be displayed by an individual or by a group. It can then lead to punishment, which traditionally had to be patiently accepted. Active resistance can also be displayed by an individual, for example one who tries to assassinate a tyrant, or by a group, for example one which tries to organize an army to force a tyrant out of power. It necessarily involves violence.

Passive resistance, it can be argued, is of the very essence of Christianity. Christ himself, some would say, was arrested, tried, and crucified for resistance to both the political and religious authorities of his day, climaxing with his provocation of a riot in the great Temple of the Jews when he drove out the money-changers and sellers of animals for sacrifice. And the earliest followers of Christ were explicit in their support of passive resistance. When the Apostle Peter was called before the Sanhedrin, and ordered to explain why he and other apostles were openly violating orders to stop teaching in the name of Christ and blaming the temple authorities for Jesus’ death, he answered simply,

“We must obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). That short verse in Scripture becomes the most important single justification for all Christian resistance.

Resistence, even when it led to death, became common in the earliest Christian churches. It is displayed in many of the martyrdoms in which the early church gloried and which it publicized widely. Tertullian, the great early Church Father, was only describing a historical fact when he observed that the blood of martyrs had become seed, seed for the church. One story of an early collective martyrdom that may have been familiar to people in Calvin’s Geneva was that of the Thaelan Legion. This legion was an all-Christian contingent within the Roman army in the days before the empire itself had become Christian under Constantine. Its members, while stationed in the valley of the Rhone near Geneva on the eve of an important campaign, refused to accept an imperial command, apparently to attend a rite of solemn sacrifices to the pagan gods thought to be patrons of the army. The infuriated commander of the army twice ordered that this legion be decimated—every tenth soldier, selected by lot, would be beaten and decapitated in front of his comrades. When that brought no change, he ordered that the entire legion be put to death. The Christian members of the Thaelan Legion remained steadfast in their refusal to join in a pagan religious ceremony; they also refused to fight back and meekly accepted this terrible death.1

Active resistance has a much less glorious history. Early Christians had been reluctant to adopt it, even in the face of savage persecution by governments of the most odious character. They usually agreed with the Apostle Paul, when he said in Romans 13:1-2, “Every person must submit to the supreme authorities. There is no authority but by act of God, and the existing authorities are instituted by him; consequently anyone who rebels against authority is resisting a divine institution.” It can be argued that early Christianity survived precisely because it did not practice active resistance. Jewish sects like the Zealots or Sicarii that did promote active resistance to Roman authority were completely crushed. Christianity, beginning as a Jewish sect but accepting the authority of the pagan Roman imperial government in areas not involving religious practice, was persecuted only sporadically. It managed to survive and prosper. In the sixteenth century, Christian advocates of active resistance, including many Calvinists, had to argue their way around the obvious meaning of the Pauline injunctions in Romans 13, and the extensive tradition built upon them, in order to make their case.

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1For a full account of this story, known only from martyrlogies written centuries later but widely circulated throughout Europe, no doubt exaggerated for dramatic effect, see H. Lecercq, "Maurice d’Aguene (Saint)" in F. Cabrol and H. Lecercq, eds., Dictionnaire d’archéologie chrétienne et littéraire, 10/2 (Paris: Letouzey & Ané, 1932), cols. 2699-2729.
In general Calvin taught passive resistance, by all individuals and groups committed to true Christianity. Toward the end of his life he also accepted active resistance, but only when led by governmental leaders of the rank of princes of the blood royal, with a reasonable chance of success. His conversion to active resistance, in fact, can be dated with some precision. It is not to be found in either his publications or his sermons. It is rather to be found in his letters and records of advice he tendered to governmental leaders in Geneva and elsewhere. As late as 1560, he was still discouraging proposals for overthrow of the French monarchy by young Protestant noblemen like La Renaudière. In 1562, however, he supported strongly the revolt against the French crown led by Louis I de Bourbon, the prince of Condé, of the French blood royal. This attitude reflected, it seems to me, considerable political shrewdness. He discouraged active resistance that was doomed to failure; he accepted active resistance that had a reasonable chance of success. Calvin's successors, especially in France, elaborated in some detail arguments for active armed resistance, but only when led by "inferior magistrates," agents with a legal if subordinate position within a government, never by individuals alone. The basic conclusions, it seems to me, are still supported by the consensus of scholars in the field, although with more and more nuance as the political ideas of individuals are analyzed more closely. Most of my work on Calvinist resistance theory has concentrated on the arguments of Calvin's successors, particularly Theodore Beza, as developed in his tract, *Du droit des magistrats*. Today I want to offer a fresh examination of Calvin's own ideas.

What, in Calvin's mind, justified resistance? One can sum up his answer in just one word: idolatry. If a government permits or even commands idolatry, it must be resisted. If a government misbehaves in other ways, it normally cannot be resisted. Calvin despised idolatry with a passion that deserves examination and reflection. It can be justly labeled an expression of the emotion of hate, as I argued in a recent research seminar at the Institute for Advanced Studies of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem on the "historicity of emotions" in early modern Europe. It can also be labeled an expression of the emotion of fear, as participants in that seminar pointed out to me. It might even be labeled as including a variant of the emotion of love, reflecting an honest desire to save the deluded. Human emotions are rarely pure types. They almost always come in bundles.

Calvin justified his dislike for idolatry by a close reading of the Hebrew Scriptures, as they are recorded in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. In this, as in many other fields, Calvin and his followers were deliberately returning to the Jewish roots of Christianity. Those Scriptures make a repeated point that the Almighty God despises and discourages the worship of any material objects as representations or substitutes for God himself, particularly if they are manmade objects, even if they be constructed of the most precious materials available to man, like gold and silver, as in the golden calf described in Exodus 32. These Scriptures go further and make the point that God threatens with punishment and destruction any community that permits the worship of these objects. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (especially 1:11), Calvin denounces idolatry at some length, using as his proof-texts citations from Scripture, including from the Ten Commandments, "You shall not make for yourself a graven image, nor any likeness..." (Exodus 20:4, quoted in Institutes, 1:11:1). These passages he uses to denounce both Catholic and Orthodox dependence on images and icons as a help to worship. The very word "idolator" becomes in the writing of Calvinist polemicians a code term for "Roman Catholic."

For some even more striking statements of Calvin's views on idolatry and their implications for political resistance, we can turn to his sermons, including those that only now are coming to light as a result of work leading to their edition for the *Supplementa Calviniana*. I think particularly of a number of examples brought to my attention by Max Engemann, as a result of his current work as an editor of the sermons on Genesis. He has uncovered about a dozen of these statements, some of them in sermons already published, some in sermons assembled for publication in the near future, some noticed by earlier students of the problem, many of them overlooked. Let me quote from just two of them:

1. In 1560, in his sermons on Acts, Calvin said that if princes "wish to turn us from the honor of God, if they wish to force us to idolatries and superstitions, they then have no more authority over us than frogs and lice."

2. In 1560, in his sermons on Genesis, Calvin said, "if kings wish to force their subjects to follow their superstitions and idolatries... they are no longer kings" and their subjects must be prepared to die a hundred times rather than abandon the true service of God. They must render to God that which belongs to him and denounce all edicts and menaces, all commandments and all traditions, holding them all for filth and dirt produced by earthworms in the face of him to whom alone obedience belongs."

This is rather strong language. It may not technically reveal full endorsement of active resistance, but it certainly was a step in that direction. In a period when rulers, particularly kings, were regarded as agents of God, who some would say ruled by divine right, who were to be treated with the greatest defer-

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Ibid., 2829.
ence and described only with the most obsequious language, Calvin is now calling them frogs, lice, and earthworms, deserving no respect or obedience if they stoop to idolatry. Those epithets in themselves would have gotten Calvin into serious trouble in many of the monarchies of his day. They remind us of how passionate and involved Calvin could become when in the pulpit. They clearly shocked at least some of the people in his audience. Max Engemann has brought to our attention one striking example. Antoine Cathelet, who spent eighteen months in Geneva from 1554 to 1555 before returning to Catholicism, reported in a pamphlet he published in 1556, that he had regularly heard in Protestant sermons preached in Geneva atrocious insults thrown at the pope, the emperor, and all Christian kings and princes, without any attempt by the local government to control this. 5

These denunciations of idolatry in themselves, replicated in other parts of Europe by dozens of Reformed preachers in sermons and by dozens of Reformed polemics in pamphlets, generated in the public arena intense emotions. They inspired Protestant mobs to storm into Catholic churches and religious houses, and smash images and altars. Chronicles of the period, even those composed by Protestants, record dozens of examples. Sometimes the mobs were disciplined, making careful inventories of every object removed; sometimes they ran amok, simply destroying every object of idolatry in sight. This violence, in turn, generated equally intense counter emotions, as mobs of Catholics attacked Protestant iconoclasts for breaking the bonds of community, for pollution and desecration, often killing them.

Even more upsetting to Catholics and government authorities were Calvinist applications of these strictures on idolatry to the central Christian sacrament of the eucharist, as celebrated in the Catholic mass. The argument that the mass is a form of idolatry was stated early by Calvin himself (Institutes, 2:17:35-37). It was then developed with more vehemence and popularized in a cruder and more provocative form by the preachers and pamphleteers to whom I have already alluded. 6 Both routinely spoke of "the idol of the mass."

Let me explain more fully the targets of these particular attacks on idolatry. Since approximately the thirteenth century, Catholic theologians had developed and then promulgated officially an explanation of what happens in the eucharistic sacrament, which they called transubstantiation. This doctrine holds that when an ordained priest in good standing celebrates a mass in the proper way, using the proper words, the elements of the sacrament, the bread and the wine, actually become the body and blood of Jesus Christ. This mirac-


6French examples of these pamphlets have been explored with particular care in Christopher Ehren, The Body Broken: the Catholic Doctrine of the Eucharist and the Symbolization of Power in Sixteenth-Century France (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).
spread rapidly throughout western Europe. Indeed it continues down to the present, if in vestigial form. In many Catholic countries the day of Corpus Christi remains a public holiday.

It was these practices that most fully triggered early Protestants’ hatred and fear of idolatry. It was bad enough from their perspective that Catholic priests were everywhere claiming to create God on the altar, of insisting that the pieces of bread and wine that they were distributing to the faithful were in fact God, of requiring worship of a material manmade object, of what Calvinist polemists routinely called a “dieu de pâté,” or “God of bread.” One could always, after all, refuse to go to church, refuse to attend mass, refuse to receive communion elements from a priest. It was far worse that this belief and the accompanying practices could be forced upon an entire community, that during a Corpus Christi procession those Protestants whose houses lay along a procession’s route might find themselves required to decorate them, sometimes at considerable personal expense, probably with pictures that in themselves could be regarded as objects of idolatry, and that all Protestants would be expected to join their neighbors in lining the route and show proper reverence when the monstrance passed.

Some of the nastiest riots of the early Protestant Reformation were provoked by Corpus Christi processions. In 1560, for example, in Rouen, the second largest city in France, members of the growing Protestant community refused to “tapissé devant leurs maisons,” to erect the usual Corpus Christi decorations in front of their houses. This so enraged local Catholics that mobs of them, led by priests, broke into several of these houses, smashed them up and killed a number of people whom they found in them—as many as eighteen according to one contemporary reporter. In other communities, Protestant zealots seem to have been even more provocative, grabbing hold of monstrances, smashing them open, throwing consecrated hosts into the mud and trampling upon them; Catholic reaction was likewise violent.

Both sides in these bloody riots were displaying fear as well as hate. They were trying to protect the entire community against divine vengeance. Protestants were afraid God’s vengeance would be provoked by idolatry; Catholics were afraid it would be provoked by desecration. This fear of divine vengeance is so pronounced, indeed, that it can be argued that fear rather than hate is the primitive emotion most evident in these displays of violence. It may also be the primary difference between Christians in the sixteenth century and today. Few Calvinists in Seoul, I suspect, really believe that the celebration of idolatrous rites in Catholic churches now is likely to bring down divine vengeance on your city, perhaps in the form of a tsunami, or an earthquake, or some other natural disaster. And few Catholics in Seoul today, I suspect, really believe that Protestant failure to adore the consecrated hosts as displayed in Catholic churches would provoke a similar disaster.

The primary target of Calvinist fear of idolatry was clearly Roman Catholic eucharistic practice. A secondary target, however, came to be Lutherian eucharistic practice. Lutherans continued to accept a variant of the doctrine of transubstantiation, although they would not use the word. Luther and his followers believed that in the eucharistic sacrament, when an ordained minister pronounces the required words, the elements of bread and wine really do become the body and blood of Christ, inasmuch as Christ really is present “in, with, and under” the elements, to use proper Lutheran terminology. For Lutherans, however, the miraculous change is only temporary. While Christ really is present in the elements during a communion service, when the service is over he departs. The consecrated bread becomes ordinary bread again. The consecrated wine becomes ordinary wine again. Luther himself developed a striking metaphor to explain the process. Consider what happens when a smith puts a bar of iron into a fire. It turns color, becomes red and then white. It grows hot, emitting intense heat. It is manifestly something different. But withdraw the bar from the fire, and it becomes plain iron again. It becomes gray instead of brightly colored. It becomes cold instead of hot.

To someone adopting this understanding of the eucharist, there would be no point in reserving the elements after the communion service, or adoring them in a ceremony like a Corpus Christi procession. For Calvinists, however, this version of eucharistic theology still remained an element of idolatry. Lutherans, like Catholics, are still worshipping a God of manmade bread, even if they limit their worship to the period of a communion service. This led to ferocious polemics in the later part of the sixteenth century, particularly in Germany where tensions between Lutherans and Calvinists became explosive. Jakob Andreae, superintendent of the Lutheran Church in the duchy of Württemberg, led the polemical charge for the “Evangelical” Lutherans. Theodore Beza, Calvin’s successor in Geneva, led the charge for the “Reformed,” including Calvinists. The controversy reached a climax in 1577, when a coalition of Lutherans led by Andreae developed an official summary of theology called the Formula of Concord, a summary that explicitly and formally excludes Calvinists from the community of true Christians, and then asked every Protestant government in the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation to endorse this statement.

In the Calvinist polemics that accompany this controversy, Lutherans are often accused of advocating cannibalism. Do they not claim that Christians are

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1 For a full study of the early development and shape of this festival, see Miri Rubin, Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

2 See the accounts in Histoire ecclésiastique des villes reformées au voyage de France... (1589), 1:399-10, and in the notes attached to the Baum-Ganit-Reus edition of this chronicle (1883-1889), later reprinted (Nieuwkoop: de Graaf, 1974), 1:352-53.
actually eating the body of Christ? And since Christ was in part a human being, does this not mean they are eating human flesh, thus becoming cannibals? To drive the point home, these Calvinist polemics then consider some of the corollaries of such a point of view. If Christians eat the actual body of Christ, does that not mean that they digest the divine body? And if they digest the body of Christ, does that not mean that the remnants of that body, like all food, must be excreted? So what these Lutherans are actually advocating is not only the eating of God but also the excreting of God. This version of the argument, naturally enough, enraged Lutherans. A striking example of their anger can be found in an oration drafted by Andreae for repeated delivery in a tour of Germany at the height of the controversy over the Formula of Concord. At the point in which, according to the rules devised (by Cicero) for the drafting of an oration, the speaker is advised to attack his enemy, he named Theodore Beza. Then he charged that Beza had said that, if we adopt the view of Lutheran theologians, we must conclude that the bread in the holy sacrament becomes “excrementum Satanae,” satanic excrement. We can imagine the gape of horror that statement must have provoked every time Andreae repeated it among his audiences of pious ministers and lawyers.

The tensions between Calvinists and Lutherans never reached the intensity and tensions between Calvinists and Catholics. They seldom led to riots and killings. But they did lead to wholesale dismissals of clergymen and teachers, as they were forced out of jobs by governments that had adopted one version of Protestantism and felt that they had to eliminate all traces of the other. This in turn provoked substantial migrations of intellectuals from one country to another during the later sixteenth century, and many kinds of related human distress. It left Protestantism hopelessly split into two main camps, of two groups of churches, both of which call themselves heirs of the Reformation. In our own century ecumenical initiatives like the Leuenberg Konkordie are finally seeking to escape from these polemics and bring our churches back together.

Let me now sum up my argument: Calvin and his followers hated and feared idolatry, and they were convinced that Roman Catholic practices, particularly those surrounding celebration of the eucharistic sacrament, constituted blatant forms of idolatry. They also thought that their Lutheran brethren had not gone far enough in ridding worship of all traces of idolatry. They were convinced, furthermore, that continuation of these practices, even after the preaching of the pure gospel made clear their idolatrous nature, created a real threat that divine punishments of the most terrifying sort would soon be visited upon their communities. They insisted that no Christian government should permit these expressions of idolatry. They were prepared to resist any government that persisted in trying to force them to participate in idolatry. In the beginning that resistance was expected to take a passive form, even if it led to martyrdom. Later on, however, specifically after 1502 in France, it was permitted to take an active form, although only if led by “inferior magistrates,” authorities who themselves held legal positions within government.

Let me now pass on to what seems to me a more recent example of the same problem of resistance. In the 1930s, here in Korea, the Japanese military government in control of the peninsula tried to impose rituals of state Shinto on the entire population. They required that students at all the schools in the country regularly attend services at jinja or shrines, and perform a ritual of obeisance or bowing. They required that the teachers and administrators of these schools attend the shrine services as well, doing obeisance themselves to set a good example for the students. In the beginning these requirements were not imposed upon all the many Christian schools set up and partially staffed by foreign missionaries. In 1935, however, these requirements were imposed upon the Christian schools as well. When Christian leaders protested, the Japanese authorities claimed that these shrine services were not religious, that they were simply patriotic. In an official statement, a Warning tendered to my grandfather, it was asserted “jinja (shrines) are dedicated to the memory of our Imperial Ancestors and to ancestors of the people who have contributed distinguished services to the nation, and are public institutions through which the people of the nation display the sincerity of their veneration.” They insisted that these ceremonies would teach children the respect and obedience that they must show to the government which now reigns over them, that by visiting a shrine and making the required Keoini or obeisance, students would be doing nothing more than displaying “their spirit of patriotism and allegiance.” Americans will think of the parallel of the pledge of allegiance to the flag which many American schools still require of their students at the beginning of a school day. Christians all over Korea and Japan had to make a decision on this requirement. Was participation in the rites at state Shinto shrines simply an expression of political loyalty? Or did it contain a religious content that was incompatible with Christianity? Did the Christian faith require its supporters to accept or to resist this requirement?

Many Christian leaders of the period accepted the assurances of the Japanese government that the rites were purely political, and instructed their followers to obey its orders to attend services at state shrines. Among them was the Congregatio de Propaganda Fide in Rome, which sets general religious policy for Roman Catholics throughout the world. Among them also was the National Christian Council of the Protestant Churches in Japan. Among them also, I understand, were a number of missionaries here in Korea and a number of executives of bodies in the United States and elsewhere sponsoring missionary work here.

Other Christian leaders, however, flatly refused to accept these assurances. They insisted that the rites celebrated at state Shinto shrines were in fact religious, that participation in them would involve a betrayal of basic Christian principles, that this was a requirement that must be resisted. Among them was

my grandfather, George Shannon McCain (in Korean, “Yun San-on”), then principal of the Soongsil Boys’ Academy and president of the Union Christian College in Pyongyang. He was led to this conclusion by his understanding of the nature of these shrines and of the rites that occurred within them. He understood that in each state shrine in Korea the Sun-Goddess, Amaterasu-omikami, the first ancestress of the household of the Emperor of Japan, was enshrined, and that each of these shrines was ritually purified to drive off any influences or spirits from other religions. He further understood that the ceremonies held at these shrines involved: (1) an invocation of spirits to descend into the shrine and then to ascend after the ceremony; (2) prayers for forgiveness of sins, bountiful harvests, victories in war, and other goals; (3) offerings to the spirits of gifts of grain, wine, and other objects.\(^{11}\) These ceremonies, furthermore, were tied into the Japanese war effort then underway. A part of many of these services was special prayers and offerings to the spirits of Japanese soldiers who had recently died in the wars of aggression against Manchuria and China. This political dimension of Shinto services became even more apparent after my grandfather left Korea. In September of 1937, for example, all schools in this country were ordered to send their students and teachers to state shrines in order to pray to the Sun Goddess for victory for the Japanese armies in China.\(^{12}\)

It was my grandfather’s conclusion that these rituals were obviously religious and that the shrines were obviously houses of worship. He felt that most of the Korean people would agree with him and find the Japanese claim that the rituals were purely political to be ridiculous. For this he was disciplined by the Japanese. In a meeting held on December 31, 1935, the Honorable Watanabe, Educational Director of the Japanese Government General in Korea, and a number of other representatives of the government, confronted my grandfather and representatives of the Northern Presbyterian Mission’s Executive Committee. The Japanese representatives presented my grandfather with the formal Warning from which I have already quoted. In this Warning he was informed that he must himself go to a shrine to make ritual obeisance and that he must agree to send his students to the shrine for the same purpose, or face serious consequences. On January 16, 1936, my grandfather submitted a formal reply to the Japanese, which I gather was not printed at the time in either Korea or Japan, but copies of which are in my possession. In that document, my grandfather stated: “I am a Christian and the Government statements have failed to meet my conscientious objections to the act of doing obeisance at the Shrine. I greatly regret the necessity of informing your Excellency [the Japanese Governor of the South Héian Province] that (1) because these ceremonies held at Shrines dedicated as they are and conducted as they are, seem to me to con-