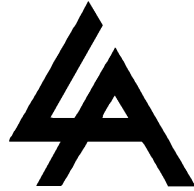


COMPULSION VERSUS LIBERTY IN EDUCATION (1):

THE CALVINIST ROOTS



**DAVID
BOTSFORD**



LUTHER

The model of education characterised by a system of state-owned schools, and universal compulsory attendance by young people within age groups set by the state, is so universal today that most discussions of education take it for granted, and some find it difficult to imagine that the transmission of knowledge and skills could ever be carried out in any other context. In fact, this model emerged from specific historical circumstances and for a specific ideological purpose, namely at the time of the German Reformation, as a means of imposing the new Protestant religion on all individuals under each Protestant ruler. In 1524, Martin Luther wrote to the rulers of German states:

Dear rulers ... I maintain that the civil authorities are under obligation to compel the people to send their children to school ... If the government can compel such citizens as are fit for military service to bear spear and rifle, to mount ramparts, and perform other material duties in time of war, how much more has it a right to compel the people to send their children to school, because in this case we are warring with the devil, whose object it is secretly to exhaust our cities and principalities of their strong men.¹

Under Luther's influence, the states of Gotha (in 1524), Thuringia (1527) and Saxony (1528) established the first compulsory state school systems, and in 1559 the duchy of Wurttemberg also introduced compulsory school attendance, with detailed records kept and fines levied on the

families of truants. Compulsory state schooling subsequently spread throughout most of the Protestant German states.

Luther was a theologian who enjoyed political influence rather than political power. It took the combination in one individual of the sadism of the theologian with the criminal mind of the politician to create the sophisticated model of the compulsory state school which we know today. John Calvin, the other great Protestant reformer, was one of the rulers of Geneva in the 16th century, and in 1536 he established state schools, to which parents were forced by law to send their children, as a part of his construction of a theocratic state in the city. Because all the key features of the school as we know it today — compulsory full-time attendance, state ownership, an externally imposed, mandatory curriculum, the imposition of conformist attitudes, values and behaviour, examinations which divide people into “passes” and “failures”, and so on — derive ultimately from this man, it is worth examining the theological doctrines and political purposes in which this model finds its origin.

CALVIN'S DOCTRINES

Calvin taught that original sin had resulted from the Fall of Man, through Adam's disobedience to God in eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As a result, human nature was utterly depraved:

[B]eing thus perverted and corrupted in all the parts of our nature, we are, merely on account of such corruption, deservedly condemned by God, to whom nothing is acceptable but righteousness, innocence and purity. This is not liability for another's fault. For when it is said, that the sin of Adam has made us obnoxious to the justice of God, the meaning is not, that we, who are in ourselves innocent and blameless, are bearing his guilt, but that since by his transgression we are all placed under the curse, he is said to have brought us under obligation. Through him, however, not only has punishment been derived, but pollution instilled, for which punishment is justly due. ... Hence, even infants bringing their condemnation with them from their mother's womb, suffer not for another's, but for their



Educational Notes No. 15

ISSN 0953-7775 ISBN 1 85637 157 3

An occasional publication of the Libertarian Alliance,
25 Chapter Chambers, Esterbrooke Street, London SW1P 4NN
www.libertarian.co.uk email: admin@libertarian.co.uk

© 1993: Libertarian Alliance; David Botsford.

David Botsford is a freelance writer and desktop publisher,
and a trainee hypnotherapist.

The views expressed in this publication are those of its author,
and not necessarily those of the Libertarian Alliance, its Committee,
Advisory Council or subscribers.

Director: Dr Chris R. Tame Editorial Director: Brian Micklethwait
Webmaster: Dr Sean Gabb

FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

own defect. For although they have not yet produced the fruits of their own unrighteousness, they have the seed implanted in them. Nay, their whole nature is, as it were, a seed-bed of sin, and therefore cannot but be odious and abominable to God. Hence it follows, that it is properly deemed sinful in the sight of God; for there could be no condemnation without guilt. ... For our nature is not only utterly devoid of goodness, but so prolific in all kinds of evil, that it can never be idle. ... [E]verything which is in man, from the intellect to the will, from the soul even to the flesh, is defiled and pervaded with this concupiscence; or, to express it more briefly, that the whole man is in himself nothing else than concupiscence.²

As a result of their fallen state, according to Calvin, human beings possessed neither free will nor any abilities of their own:

For when we are taught to contend in our own strength, what more is done than to lift us up, and then leave us to lean on a reed which immediately gives way? Indeed, our strength is exaggerated when it is compared to a reed. ... [H]e who is most deeply abased and alarmed, by the consciousness of his disgrace, nakedness, want, and misery, has made the greatest progress in the knowledge of himself. ... And, assuredly, whenever our minds are seized with a longing to possess a somewhat of our own, which may reside in us rather than in God, we may rest assured that the thought is suggested by no other counsellor than he who enticed our first parents to aspire to be like gods, knowing good and evil. ... For although there is still some residue of intelligence and judgment as well as will, we cannot call a mind sound and entire which is both weak and immersed in darkness. As to the will, its depravity is but too well known. Therefore, since reason, by which man discerns between good and evil, and by which he understands and judges, is a natural gift, it could not be entirely destroyed; but being partly weakened and partly corrupted, a shapeless ruin is all that remains. ... In like manner, the will, because inseparable from the nature of man, did not perish, but was so enslaved by depraved lusts as to be incapable of one righteous desire. ... We are all sinners by nature, therefore we are held under the yoke of sin. But if the whole man is subject to the dominion of sin, surely the will, which is its principal seat, must be bound with the closest chains.³

He advanced the doctrine of predestination, in which every detail of every event, past and future, was preordained by God:

By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestined to life or to death.⁴

As is the way with theologians, these doctrines were no mere abstract concepts without practical consequence in this world. On the contrary, Calvin had a definite political agenda consequent upon them. He argued that individuals

should always revere and obey their rulers, even if the latter were the most brutal and murderous tyrants, as it was God who put them there:

[I]n almost all ages we see that some princes, careless about all their duties on which they ought to have been intent, live, without solicitude, in luxurious sloth; others, bent on their own interest, venally prostitute all rights, privileges, judgments, and enactments; others pillage poor people of their money, and afterwards squander it in insane largesses; others act as mere robbers, pillaging houses, violating matrons, and slaying the innocent. ... And, undoubtedly, the natural feeling of the human mind has always been no less to assail tyrants with hatred and execration, than to look up to just kings with love and veneration. ... [T]hough the Lord declares that a ruler to maintain our safety is the highest gift of his beneficence, and prescribes to rulers themselves their proper sphere, he at the same time declares, that of whatever description they may be, they derive their power from none but him. Those, indeed, who rule for the public good, are true examples and specimens of his beneficence, while those who domineer unjustly and tyrannically are raised up by him to punish the people for their iniquity. Still all alike possess that sacred majesty with which he has invested lawful power. ... [E]ven an individual of the worst character, one most unworthy of all honour, if invested with public authority, receives that illustrious divine power which the Lord has by his word devolved on the ministers of his justice and judgment, and that, accordingly, in so far as public obedience is concerned, he is to be held in the same honour and reverence as the best of kings. ... This feeling of reverence, and even of piety, we owe to the utmost to all our rulers, be their characters what they may. ... Wherefore, if we are cruelly tormented by a savage, if we are rapaciously pillaged by an avaricious or luxurious, if we are neglected by a sluggish, if, in short, we are persecuted for righteousness' sake by an impious and sacrilegious prince, let us first call up the remembrance of our faults, which doubtless the Lord is chastising by such scourges. In this way humility will curb our impatience. And let us reflect that it belongs not to us to cure these evils, that all that remains for us is to implore the help of the Lord, in whose hands are the hearts of kings, and inclinations of kingdoms.⁵

Before he came to power in Geneva, Calvin's preaching of these doctrines was met with ridicule at a time when the Renaissance, the spread of learning — particularly from the Classical world — and the growing dissemination of printed books were opening up vast intellectual horizons for individuals throughout Europe. The absurdities of the doctrine of predestination, in particular, were subjected to such a roasting that some of Calvin's followers suggested that they should keep quiet about it. Calvin replied:

I admit that profane men lay hold of the subject of predestination to carp, or cavil, or snarl, or scoff. But if their petulance frightens us, it will be necessary to conceal all the principal articles of faith, because they and their fellows leave scarcely one of them unassailed with blasphemy. A rebellious spirit will display itself no less insolently when it hears that there are three persons in the divine essence, than when it hears that

God when he created man foresaw everything that was to happen to him. Nor will they abstain from their jeers when told that little more than five thousand years have elapsed since the creation of the world. For they will ask, Why did the power of God slumber so long in idleness? In short, nothing can be stated that they will not assail with derision. To quell their blasphemies, must we say nothing concerning the divinity of the Son and Spirit? Must the creation of the world be passed over in silence?⁶

CALVIN ANSWERS HIS CRITICS

When Calvin came to exercise the power of the state in Geneva, he soon discovered a highly effective way of dealing with his critics' arguments. In 1553, for example, the scholar Michael Servetus, author of *Christianismi Restitutio*, a book containing religious opinions which differed from Calvin's, visited Geneva. As soon as he heard that Servetus was in the city, Calvin had him arrested, tried for blasphemy, and put to death. In setting up his theocracy, Calvin drew up a statement of 21 articles summarising his religious doctrines. The entire adult citizenry were summoned in groups of 10 each, to profess and swear to these articles as the confession of their faith. A remarkable degree of unanimity was achieved in this process; one would hardly have imagined that before Calvin had achieved political power, many of these same people had been full of awkward questions about the doctrines they were now professing. Even then, however, the possibility remained that young people might grow up exposed to all sorts of misleading intellectual influences that might confuse them. Calvin's method of getting around this problem was an ingenious one.

The problem was how to thoroughly inculcate all young people with a truly Calvinist religious and political outlook, while at the same time overcoming the tendency of young people — operating under the influence of the devil, of course — to ask difficult questions about what they were being told. The degree of freedom of enquiry which existed at that time in the universities of western Europe, at several of which Calvin had studied, had to be avoided at all costs. Calvin believed that the study of predestination, for example, had to be kept within very narrow limits:

The subject of predestination, which is itself is attended with considerable difficulty, is rendered very perplexed, and hence perilous by human curiosity, which cannot be restrained from wandering into forbidden paths, and climbing to the clouds, determined if it can that none of the secret things of God shall remain unexplored. ... It is not right that man should with impunity pry into things which the Lord has been pleased to conceal within himself, and scan that sublime eternal wisdom which it is his pleasure that we should not apprehend but adore, that therein also his perfections may appear. ... If we give due weight to the consideration, that the word of the Lord is the only way which can conduct us to the investigation of whatever it is lawful for us to hold with regard to him, it will curb and restrain all presumption. For it will show us that the moment we go beyond the bounds of the word we are out of the course, in darkness, and must every now and then stumble, go astray, and fall. Let it, therefore, be our first principle that to desire any other

knowledge of predestination than that which is expounded by the word of God, is no less infatuated than to walk where there is no path, or to seek light in darkness. Let us not be ashamed to be ignorant in a matter in which ignorance is learning. Rather let us willingly abstain from the search after knowledge, to which it is both foolish as well as perilous, and even fatal to aspire.⁷

So Calvin established a system which reversed every principle and practice which had governed the Graeco-Roman and Western conception of education. He established a system of schools which were owned and operated by the state and its officials. The state drew up, in the finest detail, the subject-matter, both religious and secular, which was to be taught in these schools; no deviation along unapproved lines was to be tolerated. The state decreed that every young person within specified age limits in the city must attend full-time at one of these establishments for a specified period of years, on pain of punishments being inflicted on his or her parents. In today's Britain we can scarcely imagine such a monstrous regime of intellectual conformity. Nonetheless, Calvin knew that successful coercive authority always rests to some extent on assent by the coerced; if his compulsory schools taught only Calvinist religious doctrines, and nothing else, they might have caused resentment among both young people and their parents which might have had serious political consequences. So, although he personally despised all forms of secular learning, Calvin arranged that the schools would teach the inmates some secular instruction (the content of which was also specified by the state, of course), along with the religious catechism which they had to memorise and be examined on. Only those who passed their examinations on the catechism would be permitted to be taught the secular knowledge. This was the origin of the imposed curriculum, of the unidirectional nature of school learning, and of the weeding out of "failures" who did not "pass" the examinations in the instruction that had been forced upon them. The secular component of the curriculum was the bait that lured the pupils — and their parents — into the trap Calvin had set for them; when the jaws of the trap snapped shut, they were his to mould according to his religious and political values and on his terms. By monopolising the transmission of knowledge to young people in the compulsory schools, and by making progress in adult life increasingly dependent on the individual's performance in these schools, the system was able to gain the "sanction of the victim", to use the very appropriate phrase of Ayn Rand.

Many of Calvin's contemporaries were horrified at this inversion of educational values. Did not the human mind have an inherent love of truth and a desire to freely search for it? Was not the forcing of individuals into an institution where they were to be indoctrinated with a very restricted body of state-imposed "knowledge" the very negation of the nature of the human mind? Calvin justified his approach in the following words, which perhaps the government ought to print on the cover of the National Curriculum which it imposes on every young person in every state school in the country.

There is, therefore, now, in the human mind, discernment to this extent, that it is naturally influenced by the love of truth, the neglect of which in the lower animals is a proof of their gross and irrational nature.

Still it is true that this love of truth fails before it reaches the goal, forthwith falling away into vanity. As the human mind is unable, from dullness, to pursue the right path of investigation, and, after various wanderings, stumbling every now and then like one groping in darkness, at length gets completely bewildered, so its whole procedure proves how unfit it is to search the truth and find it. Then it labours under another grievous defect, in that it frequently fails to discern what the knowledge is which it should study to acquire. Hence, under the influence of a vain curiosity, it torments itself with superfluous and useless discussions, either not adverting at all to the things necessary to be known, or casting only a cursory and contemptuous glance at them. At all events, it scarcely ever studies them in sober earnest.⁸

Catastrophic though the institution he invented has been for the world, we should at least be grateful to Calvin for his lack of hypocrisy. His candour about his view of human nature, knowledge and politics is refreshing to read when compared with the countless 19th and 20th century claims that compulsory schooling has anything to do with “liberating the human mind” and similar hogwash.

THE PLAGUE SPREADS

The religious fanaticism of 16th-century Europe manifested itself in such phenomena as the Inquisition, the torture and burning to death of heretics, the witch-mania, religious wars of unparalleled atrocity and savagery, and in the mass kidnapping of young people to be indoctrinated in specially-built state prisons. However, as time went on, as people gradually learned more about themselves and the universe, and in consequence the value of the freedom of the mind and the right of the individual to exercise that freedom, the use of the rack, the thumbscrew, and other devices for control over the mind was increasingly abandoned. But the most terrible instrument to come out of that dark period of history remained lurking, slowly spreading across limited areas of the Western world, ready to be used again at a time when political rulers saw the gains to be had from the ultimate device for enslaving the human mind.

Under Calvinist influence, compulsory state schooling was introduced in Holland in the early 17th century. In 1647 Calvinist Puritans brought taxpayer-financed compulsory state schooling to Massachusetts, the first such system in the New World. Stephen Higginson, an influential merchant who was a prominent advocate of compulsory state schooling in Massachusetts, said, “the people must be *taught* to confide in and reverence their rulers”.⁹ After independence from Britain, other Calvinist-influenced New England states began to introduce enforced attendance at state schools, in contrast to other areas of the United States, where the education initially developed with neither compulsory attendance laws nor state ownership of educational facilities.

As states throughout the Western world become increasingly involved in education in the 19th century, it was the coercive and restrictive Calvinist model that became universally applied, rather than a consumer-driven market model, on similar lines to those developing at the same time in so many areas of life, in which the individual would be free to learn what he or she wanted, and from whom he or she wanted, when he or she wanted. Compulsory schooling began much more as a form of political and religious ritual

than as a means of transmitting knowledge, and this remains its essential function in the vastly extended period of forced attendance which characterises the school today.

It is worth comparing the nature of the school with the development of a spontaneous market-orientated institution: the stock exchange. With the appearance of developed capitalist economies in the Western world from the 17th century onwards, it became the practice that entrepreneurs seeking finance for their projects, and investors looking for good investments, would meet, say, one morning a week at a coffee house or similar establishment. As economies became more sophisticated, stock exchanges obtained their own premises, and specialised jobs, such as brokers and jobbers, appeared. Needless to say, it was not long before governments started to regulate such questions as who could issue shares, or offer services as a broker or jobber, and on what terms. But the point is that in its origin the stock exchange was genuine free-market institution: anybody was free to come along, see what was on offer, and make as many or as few deals as they wanted. If they didn’t find anything that attracted them, they were free to walk out the door without explaining anything to anyone. Compare this to the compulsory school, where the state not only establishes the institution and compels young people to attend full-time, but also dictates what they will be taught there, and by whom. Any young person who is dissatisfied with the services on offer and tries to walk out the door will be forced back by the power of the law. In contrast to the open structure of the original stock exchange, which brought together a potentially unlimited number of entrepreneurs and investors, the school deliberately confined the sources of information to the individual teachers within the individual school, each of whom first had to obtain a state licence before they were permitted to teach.

In 1717, Friedrich Wilhelm I, king in Prussia, who created the formidable Prussian army, established state schools with compulsory attendance as an integral part of the most highly militarised state in Europe. In France, ordinances of Louis XIV and Louis XV required regular school attendance, and after the revolution, the repressive regime of Napoleon introduced a system of state schools, which every young person was forced to attend, in 1806. In both cases, compulsory schooling was introduced quite openly as a means of imposing the habit of obedience to coercive authority, conformity to the state’s ideological values, and of suppressing ideas among the mass of the population which might compete with those values, just as in Calvinist Geneva. Following the Prussian and French examples, state schools systems, and laws enforcing attendance, gradually spread across Europe and North America in the course of the 19th century.

REFERENCES

1. Quoted in Murray N. Rothbard, “Historical Origins”, in William F. Rickenbacker, ed., *The Twelve Year Sentence*, Dell Publishing, New York, 1974, p. 12.
2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, translated by Henry Beveridge, first published 1536, James Clarke, London, 1962, volume I, pp. 217-8.
3. *Ibid*, pp. 223, 231, 233, 246.
4. *Ibid*, 1957, volume II, p. 206.
5. *Ibid*, pp. 670-1, 673-4.
6. *Ibid*, p. 205.
7. *Ibid*, pp. 203-4.
8. *Ibid*, volume I, p. 234.
9. Quoted in Rothbard, op. cit., p. 15. Italics in original.