

LECTURE II

European Influences – Columbus, Penitentes, Calvin

April 14, 2005

I begin with an Italian whose feast day is very much prized by some in Erie, especially by the Italian section and what describe as little Italy in Erie - **Columbus Day**. Though it is an official government holiday, you can't buy booze in Penna to celebrate old Chris but you can go to church. Let me describe what happens in St Paul's Roman Catholic Church during a Mass on Columbus Day. The Knights of Columbus dress up in gorgeous apparel including long swords and parade into church, standing down the main aisle. They are a very right-wing organization regarding religion and politics, and Pres Bush got a rousing welcome from them when he spoke at their annual convention. Anyway, during the Elevation of the Host, I witnessed one of the strangest liturgical actions ever seen. As the Host went up, the Knights pulled their swords and held them on high. When I asked what this meant, nobody knew or they wouldn't tell me!

What was Columbus up to? We remember school stories abounding about his search for trade routes to India and when he ran into the Western Hemisphere he thought he found it original quest, hence calling the natives 'Indians.' Indians they weren't and they had been here for a long time and we still aren't completely sure where they came from - whether through Alaska or across the oceans or maybe

they started here – who knows. In any case, Columbus claimed the land for Spain. He thought he had found a new Eden.

The Holy Scriptures record that our Lord made the earthly paradise, and planted the tree of life, and thence springs a fountain from which the four principle rivers in the world take their source.

But Columbus was up to much more than biblical literalism, finding trade routes, and making claims. He was a religious man and thought Europe was the true source of all civilization worth having.

I know respecting this voyage that God has miraculously shown his will, as may be seen from this journal, setting forth the numerous miracles that have been displayed in the voyage ... But I hope, in our Lord, that it will be a great benefit to Christianity, for so it has appeared.

His overarching goal was the conversion of the Great Khan, an alliance against Islam which would be the prelude to the re-conquest of Jerusalem.

Columbus viewed himself as the instrument of Divine Providence chosen to set in motion the events which would initiate the last age of the world's history, an epoch scheduled to be enacted before the Second Coming of Christ and the Last judgment. With St. Augustine and Pierre d'Ailly as his guides, he calculated that of the 6,000 years allowed for the world's duration, a mere 155 years remained for the conversion of mankind to the Christian faith, and the liberation of the holy places.¹

He was concerned about the spread of Islam. He prayed for their conversion starting with the Great Khan. He wanted to free Jerusalem from Islam and thus be re-conquered as in the Crusades. He sought the triumph of the West and its civilization and religion. It was obsessive. He wrote to the king of Spain:

Jerusalem and Mount Sion shall be rebuilt by Christian hands; whose they are to be is said by David in Psalm 14. Abbot Joachim said that this builder would come from Spain.

¹ D A Brading, *The First America*, Cambridge UP, 1991 p 13

He meets some tests of fundamentalism insofar as he uses inerrant Biblical texts without context and tries to arrest the erosion of Christianity and fortify the borders against Islam.

There are now many people in the US who either will not celebrate Columbus Day or actively speak out against it. Numbered among those would be many Native Americans, who felt betrayed and ill-used by the Europeans. Columbus did take back slaves, and his men treated the natives very harshly indeed. There were protests, among the most famous Bartelemo des las Casas, a monk who wrote to the King of Spain about their ill treatment. But he got short shrift from the administration.

Why is this important for American Fundamentalism? One of the hardest things for contemporary Europeans to understand is the notion of America's self-imposed mission. Well, the fundamentalists would say it is God's work of course. But you don't have to look far back in British history to be reminded of this, and I refer to the 19th century and Queen Victoria, and Prime Minister William Ewart Gladstone among others. QUOTES

Not only to evangelicals and fundamentalists want the world to be 'saved' and all turn to Christ as their 'personal savior', but there is a kind of fundamentalism of democracy as well. 'Freedom is God's gift to the world' the President keeps proclaiming. And he goes about doing just that, or so he thinks. The Iraq war seems to be a reverse 'domino effect' in that once Afghanistan and Iraq go

democratic; the other nations will eventually follow once they see how great free enterprise and elections really are. This is a cast iron dogma of the Administration started by intellectuals in the early 90's such as Paul Wolfowitz, Bernard Lewis, Samuel P. Huntington and others. 'Get tough or get out' is Lewis' dictum.

How much does the Administration believe that it is fighting a 'holy war' or that we are in a 'clash of civilizations'? Bush has made it very clear that he doesn't think this is the case, and invites Muslim leaders to Ramadan feasts each year in the White House. He keeps saying that it is not a war on Islam, but it is getting harder and harder to convince people in the Middle East that is not so.

Condoleezza Rice is on record claiming that it is not a 'clash of civilizations.'

They say it is a 'war on terrorism' but most commentators think they mean 'radical Islamists'. The term 'war on terrorism' is strange, and it would be similar to the WWII if one called that a 'war on blitzkrieg.' I think the truth is that it is against radical Islamists. After all Bush is not going after all terrorists. That would be a hopeless task. He is worried that they want to attack America and Americans overseas, as well as the British and other allies. So I think it is not a 'holy war' as were the Crusades, and of course we can differ on why those happened historically. When he did use the term 'crusade', he quickly apologized and said he didn't mean that. I believe him, on this matter at least. I think what this shows is that Bush is not a classic fundamentalist. They would want the defeat or conversion of Islam, and we aren't seeing that in this Administration. There is also no official line up behind the early 20th century American definition, but without a

doubt Karl Rove and the other advisors made sure that during the election the fundamentalist base was catered to with careful words that didn't say too much definitively but did so obliquely. That is the skill of political discourse.

The **Penitentes** are a very secretive group and they don't like snooping Anglos. They reside in the mountains of New Mexico and Arizona, and have been there since the 17th century. Originally from Spain they can still be observed during Holy Week by the fortunate few.

I got lucky in Santa Fe and was invited to their Holy Week services in the mountains of Rio Arriba County in a village at 10,000 feet. There are the Maundy Thursday rites of Communion with brothers doing the serving and the chanting. There is the Good Friday procession of the meeting of Jesus and Mary. There is the Tenebrae late at night in the church with the chains and their huge din, representing the descent of Christ into hell to free the prisoners from their chains. [Tenebrae and Exodus] There are some crucifixions, purely voluntary I was assured, where young men are tied to crosses in the hot sun for 3 hours as Jesus was. If they die, and that is rare I am told, their shoes are taken to their house and put on the doorsteps. [All these rites were told to me, and maybe somebody else might get another view at some other time and place.] **BOOKS AND PICTURES**

These people are not fundamentalists in the Protestant sense of dogma. Doubtless they believe in an inerrant Bible and to some extent in a dogmatic Pope, but they may not believe in substitutionary atonement, or all the rest of the

package that Protestant fundamentalists have, but there are certain characteristics of my first definition that I used, namely a discernible pattern of religious militance by which self-styled 'true believers' attempt to arrest the erosion of their Spanish religious identity, fortify the borders of the religious community and they do so with guns and dogs, and they create viable alternatives to secular institutions and behaviors. And they take the biblical texts and put them without change into their own contexts. They fit a criterion of fundamentalism in that they take on the sufferings of Christ exactly. They walk his walk, literally. Mel Gibson's *Passion* is the same sort of idea. Apparently he has made the sufferings of Christ so vivid and real that people feel that they are there. The film was a hit! Penitentes take it one step further and actually play the part even leading in rare cases to crucifixions.

Are there any parallels to other American fundamentalisms? The medieval notion of walking in the way of Christ as exemplified by Thomas a Kempis' [1380?-1471] book *The Imitation of Christ* whose circulation exceeded that of any in the Middle Ages. There are types of Catholic Fundamentalism listed in the *Encyclopedia of Fundamentalism*. Peter Hebblethwaite from Oxford wrote in 1988 about forms of Roman fundamentalism, and there is a considerable literature. They however are unlike Protestant forms in that they are not so much interested in prophecies about the end of the world, or in a literal interpretation of the Bible. But 'old time religion' is a biggie, certain ethical issues such as abortion and stem-cell research. There can be a resistance to modernity and some want to back to pre-Vatican II. Certain forms of Marian piety are there. In the 1950's, Our Lady of

Necedah, Wisconsin spoke against communism. She turns up in Georgia and Arizona to exhort people to prayer. She upholds traditional family values. The Blue Army of Mary is huge. There is a Latin Mass Society; Opus Dei has a reputation for secrecy, rigorous practices of mortification, and political intrigue. Some say it has an important influence at the Vatican. There are some antifeminist laywomen, though in America the nuns that I know are very pro-feminist and liberationists. Erie has the key monastery in the US for this.

Coming back to Protestant fundamentalists, ‘What would Jesus do?’ has become quite a catch phrase even among non-fundamentalists such as Al Gore. You never hear that from Jews – ‘what would Moses do?’ There are some Muslims who would like to do what Muhammad did, and yet this is not one of the 5 pillars of Islam. American fundamentalists want to walk His walk, and if they aren’t as re-creative as the Penitentes, they do have many little tests to see if they are cross-walking in the right way.

I notice a lot of literalists, but what I don’t see is much attempt to follow the literal reading of the Sermon on the Mount – turning the other cheek, giving up your cloak to one who doesn’t have one, selling all and giving it to the poor, etc. The texts are chosen rather selectively, and anything that might contradict with capitalism, individualism, family, and fighting the commies or the Muslim insurgents are not used very widely. So it does lead to the question of what is driving what. How much are capitalism etc really the big items that make the show go on? What is the chicken and what is the egg?

All of which leads on nicely to **Jean Calvin**. Many have cited America as a Calvinist country, or to put it more carefully, a nation whose major religious influence has been Calvin and the Calvinist tradition. It is true that today there are more Catholics than any other specific group, but when you add up the Protestants they are the majority. Out of that the Southern Baptists are the biggest. There are 14,000 ordinands in 6 conservative seminaries. But numbers don't necessarily mean influence, and the history of a religion and culture of a nation has to be more subtle than adding up figures. When it comes to the 17th century it was the English Congregationalists and Anglicans who made up the first waves of immigration. Scots Presbyterians to New Jersey, Baptists to Rhode Island, Dutch Reformed to New Amsterdam [now New York], Quakers to Pennsylvania, and Catholics to Maryland soon followed. Each had their college. Harvard and Yale were Congregationalists, Princeton was Presbyterian [and we shall hear much more about the as the lectures go on as the American brand of fundamentalism started there], University of Penna was a Quaker foundation but open to all as was Pennsylvania, New Amsterdam had Columbia eventually so called, Rhode Island's was Brown. All called the Ivy League, and expensive to get into without a scholarship. Legacies are still around however, as the Bush family continue to demonstrate at Yale.

Certainly the colleges have a major effect on the culture, and that is what they were intended for. It is not just for academic study that we have these places,

though that is what the professors like to think. They operate as little hot houses of **culture, religion, and breeding**, and we expect our leaders and their families to be formed there. Oxford claims most of the British Prime Ministers, and Harvard, Yale, and Princeton claim most of the Presidents.

But how does Calvinism influence the nation? Why not Anglicanism? Virginia was just as important as New England, and George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Patrick Henry, Light Horse Harry Lee [an ancestor of Robert E Lee] and so many others were crucial figures for the Founding. But for most of those people Anglicanism was a surface phenomenon. Mainly they were so-called Deists, which isn't a very helpful term. The usual definition for this is that there is some sort of a benevolent deity who winds up the universe like a clock and lets it run. Yet George Washington was invoking this deity to intervene – something that Deists would not agree to. Without going into the details, I would claim that they were believers in God who intervened, were Unitarians in outlook if not in membership, and elevated reason over faith when it came to making decisions about the government. They were people of the Enlightenment to use yet another term that begs much definition. These sat lightly to Calvinism as well, but not so New England. The story of the Puritans is for next time, but I want to paint that background with Calvin and his followers in Europe who moved to America.

Areas that are important for America at present as formulated by Calvin are:

the Bible, church & state, asceticism, family, justice, economics, and subjectivity.

Biblical Interpretation. There are important differences between Calvin and Luther on this. Luther had a principle of internal criticism that was justification by faith through grace. If parts of the Bible, such as the letter of James, and the Book of Revelation didn't conform to this – they were out. We censor the Bible in our churches by having lectionaries. Lots of the juicy sex and warlike stuff is never heard in church because of principles of interpretation that are imposed by the church authorities. Gosh, not to have sex and violence as part of our Sunday diet is maybe why the churches are in decline. In America we go to our pale churches on Sunday morning, but watch American football in the afternoon which is a really violent game, and we have cheerleaders that the camera men know how to treat well for angles and visions. And Janet Jackson even had a dress dysfunction at the Super Bowl last year which let to massive fines for the network. But it was well received by the Red States men, even if they didn't want to admit it. Anyway, Calvin had no such principles of interpretation. He picked out texts without contexts and applied them to whatever he thought necessary. Any part of the Bible was OK, and Reinhold Niebuhr, himself also from the German Reformed tradition, nonetheless calls this Bibliolatry.² Some say Calvin found most of his materials on law from the OT.

² Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Part II, the Gifford Lectures, 1941, p 202

Ernst Troeltsch claims that Calvin's conception of **church and state** was to form a 'Bibliocracy'³, a term that sums it up well. Geneva and later Scotland was a 'church-based civilization' and this was translated to New England later on.

Asceticism is well known in Catholic circles, and the Penitentes are part of this tradition, but it also exists in Protestantism, even though Luther was well known for his love of beer. [Calvin, poor fellow with a bad stomach, only could drink a glass of wine with a raw egg once a day]. [My visit to Noyon was a 'lot of fun.']. It is worth quoting Troeltsch at length"

... Reformed asceticism ... is active and aggressive, desires to re-shape the world to the glory of God, and make the reprobate bow submissively to the Divine law, and will with all diligence create and maintain a Christian commonwealth. ... It restricts more and more closely the range of the things left by Calvin as *adiaphora* for the uses of recreation, anathematizes as creature-worship every tendency to value earthly things as ends in themselves, but nevertheless demands the systematic use of all possibilities of action which are capable of contributing to the progress and well-being of the Christian commonwealth. It scorns all mere emotion and sentiment as idle and frivolous, but is inspired by a profound sense of working for the honor of God and his Church. Thus there arises, in addition to an unresting activity and strict severity, a systematic completeness and a Christian-social trend in the spirit of Calvinistic ethics. This is asceticism more in the older technical sense of the work, as a systematic disciplining of the natural man for the attainment of a goal of life which lies in the hereafter, having many points of contact

³ Ernst Troeltsch, *Protestantism & Progress – a historical study of the relation of Protestantism to the modern world*, Beacon, 1912, 1958, p 70

with Jesuit asceticism, as has often been pointed out. Lutheranism endures the world in suffering, pain, and martyrdom. Calvinism masters it for the honor of God by untiring work, for the sake of the self-discipline which work supplies, and the well-being of the Christian community which may be attained by means of it.⁴

‘Family values’ is one of the catch-phrases of the New Christian Right in America, Calvin had a lot to say which sounds like it was very influential.

Protestantism retained the old patriarchalism with the complete subordination of the wife and children, and its doctrine of original sin affixed to the sexual relation sin’s penalty of concupiscence, and to procreation the stigma of perpetuating original sin.⁵

Marriage remained, as it says in the 1662 Prayer Book, a prophylactic against lust. Sex is a means to an end, something firmly believed by the Fundamentalists.

With regard to **justice** we have some interesting backgrounds as well. It is a huge topic, and I can only point out the headlines. Geneva was not a democracy, but a theocracy, and it was strict. The rulers regarded themselves as having the right to exercise in patriarchal fashion the strictest ethico-religious discipline.⁶ Troeltsch writes that civil authority is the representative of the retributive justice of God. Vengeance is done by ‘the sword’ under the direction of the Divine providence, expressly testified to in the Old Testament. Witchcraft and sorcery were crimes that deserved death, and their punishment was opposed only by isolated mystics and spiritualists. Melancthon went so far as to identify the

⁴ *ibid*, p 83-5

⁵ *ibid*, p 94

⁶ *ibid*, p 116

Roman Law with the Decalogue as did the German theologians of the time. So too does Chief Justice Roy Moore today. Niebuhr criticizes Calvin for a ‘lack of pity’⁷ Law trumps love in his system. Carnal desire rather than self-love is the chief sin. These are big items in theology and they have an affect on the way a nation and church understand themselves. Niebuhr claims this leads to stuffy self-righteousness and reveals the weakness of Calvinism on this point. Calvin doesn’t fully understand the law of love as the final law, and we will see some consequences of this in Puritan America too. And perhaps this is why sex is such a terrible thing on American TV. Carnal desire is the big, bad devil and we can’t allow our children or even ourselves to look at such things as bare breasts. John Ashcroft famously had the breasts of a statue covered up in the place where he gave his press reports. Zowie!

Economics and its relation to Calvin have been on the scholarly agenda for a century. Max Weber famously linked the ‘spirit of Calvinism’ to the ‘spirit of capitalism.’ This has to be noted – the use of the word ‘spirit.’ He didn’t say that capitalism was derived from Calvinism, or vice-versa. He said the ‘spirit’ or the ‘geist’ was the key – there was a symbiotic relationship between them. What is the ‘capitalistic spirit’?

It displays an untiring activity, a boundlessness of grasp, quite contrary to the natural impulse to enjoyment and ease, and contentment with the mere necessities of existence; it makes work and gain an end in themselves, and makes men the slaves of work for work’s sake; it brings the whole of life and action within the sphere of an absolutely

⁷ op cite p 201

rationalized and systematic calculation, combines all means to its end, uses every minute to the full, employs every kind of force, and in alliance with scientific technology and the calculus which unites all these things together, gives to life a clear calculability and abstract exactness.⁸

Weber claims this spirit did not arise from banking houses of the late Middle Ages as one might think, but from Calvinistic soil which only sometimes were co-terminus. Calvin produced the necessary asceticism for it to flourish. Troeltsch claims that Calvinism remains the real nursing-father of the civic, industrial capitalism of the middle classes. Mortification of the flesh, in which the produce of the work serves, is not to be consumed in enjoyment, but the constant reproduction of the capital employed. [My grandfather]. It is the sanctification of work over people. It is also fundamental to fundamentalism in its social teachings. How did Calvinists know they were saved? Success demonstrates God's favor. This gave enormous drive to the Calvinist countries, and they became the richest.

There is one more area which must be mentioned, and that is the new **subjectivity of feeling** and conviction independent of rationality. Faith tells you by grace what to do with your life, after you have read the Bible and prayed about it. In Washington it was overheard: 'I know in my heart what is right – we invade Iraq.' What we have here is what Troeltsch calls 'iron', 'manly courageous faith.'⁹
Beware!

⁸ ibid., p 133-4

⁹ ibid, 199

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