CHAPTER ONE

AMERICA’S DESTINY AND CALVINISM

The “First New Nation” and European Calvinism

Calvinism operates as America’s social “destiny” in Tocqueville’s sense in virtue of being its destination, present, and future, or main legacy, just as its historical genesis or point of origin. This is consistently and clearly distinguished from its presumed theological “manifest destiny” and “Divinely ordained” mission in the world. Hence, America’s assumed social “destiny”, like its genesis, in Calvinism implies a sociological, scientific conception, and has strictly empirical relevance and meaning, by positing and demonstrating that it is a Calvinist nation or society. And, a “Calvinist nation” is distinguished from “God’s chosen people” as a theological construct or article of faith impossible, just as Calvinism’s doctrine of individual salvation and damnation as the “double decree” by Divinity (predestination), to validate or “falsify” by science.

Science, sociology in particular, cannot prove or disprove that America or, as early Dutch Calvinists and English Puritans claimed, Holland and England is the “new Israel” or “Jerusalem” and a “chosen nation”—simply, it does not and cannot “know”. It cannot provide a proof or disproof that the new or any nation is the “Divinely chosen” instrument for establishing God’s “Kingdom on Earth” and realizing “Providential design” (Bendix 1984), just as whether certain individuals have the “certainty” of salvation, so an “obligation to sanctification” (Frijhoff 2002).

In this connection, some US Puritan admirers (Dunn and Woodard 1996) claim that the American Puritans attributed their origins “not to England, but to Moses”, citing the Old Testament Israel as the “source of inspiration for the ‘New Jerusalem’ in Massachusetts.” This remark fails to mention that their predecessors, Dutch and other Calvinists had also defined 16th century Holland and any Calvinist nation as the “new Israel” or “new Jerusalem”. Consequently, this implies a sort of zero-sum game. If all Calvinist-Puritan societies, from Calvin’s France and Swiss Geneva through Holland, in part Prussia, England and Scotland, to America, claim to be the “New Jerusalem” and by implication
“One Nation Indivisible under God” (or some variation thereof), then none is or can be. By definition, the “New Jerusalem” or “One Nation Indivisible under [the Calvinist] God” in the strict sense is just one—is it Calvin’s France or Swiss Geneva, Holland, Prussia, England, Scotland, or America? And, within America itself, is it arch-Calvinist New England (in particular, Massachusetts) or the neo-Calvinist Southern and other “Bible Belt” and/or the “Wild West”? The claim to the “New Jerusalem” or “One Nation Indivisible under the God of Calvinism” is thus a Calvinist-Puritan variation on the perennial theme of God’s “chosen people” as a zero-sum game and eventually the source and rationale of the Hobbesian universal war of religion between societies making such mutually exclusive and irreconcilable claims.

And, virtually all societies and groups have made and make such claims to Divine choice, spanning from the smallest primitive tribes (as in anthropological accounts) to the largest ancient and modern civilizations and empires, including the Chinese, Indian, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, Ottoman, Spanish, Dutch, British, French, Russian, German-Austrian, and American (Giddens 1984; Steinmetz 2005). If all nations or peoples claim to be “One Nation Indivisible under God” or the Divinely “chosen people”, then none is, for the latter is precisely only one, a paradigmatic “impossibility theorem.” Presumably, this problem can be “solved” only via religious wars as what Simmel calls (collective) “ordeal by combat” as the mechanism of proving by “fighting and winning” mutually exclusive claims (“who is right”), thus making brute military might legal right. Hence, the problem is “solved” by means of a permanent crusade or jihad (Turner 2002) and the elimination of “ungodly” or “infidel” nations, a moment that US “reborn,” like Islamic, fundamentalists overlook or “forget” by continuing and expanding these old Puritan claims to Divine choice and “holy” wars on the “evil” world.

However, crucially social science cannot either adopt or reject Calvinism’s mix of dual collective and theological individual claims or arguments of predestination (Frijhoff 2002), but explores only whether and to what degree America, like Holland and England, is a Calvinist society or a “Puritan nation” in the sense of Tocqueville. In sum, while

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1 Simmel remarks that the German (Holy Roman) Emperor Otto the Great “decrees that a legal question must be decided through ordeal by combat [i.e.,] fighting and winning.”