
CALVINISM IN SIXTEENTH CENTURY HISTORIOGRAPHY*

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To most modern writers on the subject of historiography the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century exercised no beneficial influence on historical writing and research. To Harry Elmer Barnes, James Westphal Thompson and others, if it made any impact at all it was essentially bad, for it revived theological interests, thus turning its back upon the developing secularism of the Renaissance, and it emphasized history as a means of propaganda rather than as a road to the discovery of truth.¹ The winning of theological arguments against "the papists" they believe dominated the thinking and work of the Protestant historians, rather than that of increasing a valid knowledge of the past. In all of this, as usual, the Calvinists come in for the greatest amount of denegration, since they wrote more history and wrote it in a specific manner. Calvinism, therefore, to many was bad for the development of historical studies.

That such an idea should prevail among historians is strange to say the least since most now recognize that one's research and writing of history depends very largely on one's presuppositions. Sir Walter Raleigh recognized this in the early seventeenth century when he stated that "everyone is touched with that which most nearly seemeth to touch his own private interest, or otherwise best suiteth his apprehension."² And it would seem that other historians such as John Foxe felt the same way as they endeavoured to study the past from the Protestant, and particularly the Calvinistic, perspective.³ Therefore for the twentieth century relativistic historian to object to the Calvinistic historians' of the late sixteenth century writing, or rewriting, history from their own and not from the twentieth century sceptical point of view, seems a little strange. It would appear necessary, therefore, in order to understand their place in the development of historical scholarship to analyse their view of history and see how they applied it to their work.

The Calvinistic approach to history made a complete break with the medieval point of view, a break even more total than that of Lutheranism. The medieval historian imbued with the Thomistic idea of nature and grace as two separate entities thought of history as events in time and

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¹ H. E. Barnes, *The History of Historical Writing*, 2nd. rev.'d ed., New York, 1963, p. 110, 122 f; F. S. Fussner, *The Historical Revolution*, New York, 1962, pp. 19 ff.

² W. Raleigh, *History of the World*, Edinburg, 1920, I, vii.

³ W. Haller, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs and the Elect Nation*, London, 1962, pp. 130 ff.

space which related to God only when He intervened miraculously and through the Church; or as the expression of divine ideas in time. In neither case did human history have any particular significance. Thus recorded history became a collection of random facts concerning a country or a city chronicled from year to year and showing no particular unity or interpretation.⁴

Gradually this point of view began to change under the developing humanism of the fourteenth century. National states began to gain more significance on the historical scene, and with a growing knowledge of classical thought men began to adopt the attitude that after all history is man's affair. Attempting to look at history through the eyes of a Thucydides, a Plutarch or a Suetonius they held that the ultimate meaning for history lies in the decisions and actions of the individual. He determined the rise and the expansion of the city or state.⁵ To Machiavelli and Guicciardini the ruler's "raison d'état" formed the most fundamental explanation for historical movement and change. In this man's reason became the dominant factor, although "fortuna" might intervene to make matters go awry. God on the other hand had little or no place in their universe of historical discourse. Man was the master of history — at least as far as fortuna would permit.⁶

That the Reformation should bring about a rejection of both the medieval and the humanistic approach to historical studies is not strange, for by its very character it sought to give an interpretation of history different from that which prevailed at the time, and sought to indicate how the contemporary corruptions had arisen within the Church.⁷ The result was intensified research and vigorous historical controversy. Luther as early as the Leipzig debate had found it necessary to employ history in his attack upon papal pretensions.⁸ He never followed this practice up fully, however, for his interest lay in a Christo-centric interpretation of the Scriptures. Calvin and his followers, while agreeing with Luther's view of the Bible, also laid considerable emphasis upon the importance of the early church and at the same time developed a fully articulated "theology of history," that both stimulated historical study and writing and influenced the form which the historical works took.⁹ Thus Calvinism became an important factor in the development of historical studies.

⁴ T. F. Torrance, "The Influence of Reformed Theology on the Development of Scientific Method," *Dialogue: A Journal of Theology*, 1963, II, 41.

⁵ Barnes, *op. cit.*, pp. 99 ff.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 106; Fussner, *op. cit.*, pp. 5 f, 12 f.

⁷ Haller, *op. cit.*, p. 130; P. Polman, *L'élément historique dans le Controverse Religieuse du XVIe Siecle*, Gembloux, 1932, p. 539; Fussner, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁸ J. M. Headley, *Luther's View of Church History*, New Haven, 1963, pp. 21, 44 f, 52; F. Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, G. W. Kitchin, ed., London, 1915, pp. 23 f.

⁹ Polman, *op. cit.*, pp. 68 f, 256, 271, 543 f. Cf. also the views of Beza in *Histoire Ecclesiastique des Eglises Reforme au Royaume de France*, P. Vesson, ed., Toulouse, 1882, I, pp. v ff, of Foxe, *op. cit.*, p. 134; J. Foxe, *Acts and Monuments of the Christian Martyrs*, J. Pratt, London, 4th rev'd ed., I, xxv ff; and of Raleigh, *op. cit.*, I, v, xxvii f.

At this point it should be explained that owing to the volume of historical writings by Calvinists in this period it has been possible to consider only a few selected as samples. Some of those cited such as Beza, Knox, Buchanan, Morney were known in their own day as Calvinists. Others have not always been accepted as such. In this category in Sleidanus who was a friend of Calvin, worked with him in Strassburg, kept up a