

THE REFORMED DOCTRINE OF RESISTANCE AND REVOLUTION
SELECT REFORMED SOURCES

By TE David F. Coffin, Jr.

PRE-ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S DAY MASSACRE, *ordered by date of publication*

John Calvin (1509-1564). A treatise addressed to the French King in defense of the Scriptural religion of persecuted French Protestants.

1536, Basel: *Institutio Christianae Religionis*. Final edition, Geneva, 1559. English translation of 1559 ed., *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. 2 volumes. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated and indexed by Ford Lewis Battles. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960, IV.xx.31-32.

Calvin, explicitly rejects the private citizen's right to resist authority, while allowing for his famous "lesser magistrate" exception: "But we must . . . be very careful not to despise or violate that authority of magistrates . . . which God has established by the weightiest decrees, even though it may reside with the most unworthy men. . . . For, if the correction of unbridled despotism is the Lord's to avenge, let us not at once think that it is entrusted to us, to whom no command has been given except to obey and suffer. I am speaking all the while of private individuals. For if there are now any magistrates of the people, appointed to restrain the willfulness of kings . . . I am so far from forbidding them . . . that, if they wink at kings who violently fall upon and assault the lowly common folk, I declare that their dissimulation involves nefarious perfidy, because they dishonestly betray the freedom of the people, of which they know that they have been appointed protectors by God's ordinance." (1559, IV.xx.31.)

John Ponet, (1516?-1556) (Bishop of Winchester) chaplain to Archbishop Cranmer and Marian exile. Ponet was one of the "trailblazers" of resistance theory.

1556, Strasbourg. *A Shorte Treatise of politike power, and of the true Obedience which subjectes owe to kynges and other civile governours, with an Exhortacion to all true naturall Englishe men.*

Ponet argues from the law of nature and from Scriptural examples that an oppressed people have power to depose and to punish their oppressors. He takes up Calvin's view of the role of "popular magistrates" in leading such revolution, but with some hesitancy extends the right further to individual citizens (including the right to kill a tyrant), based upon both natural law & constitutional principles. Ponet was cited by the American John Adams as containing "all the essential principles of liberty which were afterwards dilated on by Sidney and Locke." (quoted in Hudson, p. 216)

Christopher Goodman, (1520?-1603) a colleague of John Knox in Geneva, an influential English Puritan, and another of the "trailblazers" of resistance theory.

1558, Printed at Geneva by John Crispin. *How Superior Powers Oght To Be Obeyd Of Their subiects: and Wherin they may lawfully by Gods Worde be disobeyed and resisted. Wherin also is declared the cause of all this present miserie in England, and the onely way to remedy the same.*

This is one of the most radical of Protestant attempts to justify the overthrow of Mary Tudor's regime by force. Goodman argues for the duty of the "lesser magistrates" to effect revolution in the case of a godless monarch. However, he goes further in urging tyrannicide by the common people. Probably an influence upon John Knox, particularly in his argument that evil rulers must be removed to prevent the pollution of the people.

John Knox (1505-1572).

1558, Geneva. *The first blast of the trumpet against the monstrous [unnatural] regiment [rule] of women.*

Dependent upon Ponet and Goodman, Knox not only defends the right of the nobility to resist in defense of the people, but, in opposition to Calvin and Beza, declares the right of the private individual to actively resist where the ruler fails to live up to his God-given responsibilities. The book, though published in Geneva was banned in that city. Possession of the book in England was punishable by death! (Gamble, *WTJ* (Spring 1984): 129).

1560 [Geneva Bible] *The Bible and Holy Scriptures Conteyned in the Olde and New Testament*, Geneva: Rovland Hall, 1560.

Translated and annotated by a group of exiles led by William Whittingham (who wrote the introduction to Goodman's *Superior Powers*), *The Geneva Bible*, was the most popular translation during the reign of Elizabeth and so remained among the Puritans, even after King James. The marginal notes, particularly in the Old Testament, brought attention to biblical proofs for elective kingship, a compact between ruler and ruled, the subjection of magistrates to law, and the right of active resistance and even of tyrannicide. Concludes Hudson, "There can be no doubt that, among generations of Englishmen, both in England and in America, these belligerent marginal notes served to make current coin of revolutionary political principles." (*John Ponet . . .*, p. 186).

POST-ST. BARTHOLOMEW'S DAY MASSACRE

Francis Hotman, 1524-1590, French Huguenot jurist, friend of Calvin; brilliant teacher and prolific scholar in the field of law.

1573, *Franco-Gallia*. English translation by Robert Molesworth, London, 1711.

Franco-Gallia, the bulk of which deals with the formation of the ancient French constitution, is a work of massive scholarship, citing extensively from documentary sources. Yet it caused an immediate sensation upon publication because its political implications were so radical. Hotman lays out a clear historical & legal justification for repudiating absolutism in favor of a mutual

contract between king and people and lays the groundwork for the doctrine of resistance to tyrants developed more fully by Beza & Mornay after the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre.

Théodore Beza (de Bèze), 1519-1606. Calvin's successor at Geneva and leader of the Protestant churches in France.

1574. English translation from the Latin edition of 1595, Henri-Louis Gonin, trans. *Concerning the Rights of Rulers over their Subjects and the Duty of Subjects Towards Their Rulers*. Capetown, Pretoria, 1956.

Very important work in Calvinist political theory, particularly with regard to the theory of resistance. Originally written in Latin, the work was disapproved for publication by the censors of the Geneva city council. First edition was published anonymously in French in the guise of a revised and expanded edition of the *Admonition of Magdeburg* (1550). Beza produced the work just after the St. Bartholomew's Day massacre, and after consulting with the learned Hotman, whose influence is manifest throughout. Beza defends the right of inferior magistrates to revolt against the government. "The theory of Calvinist politics . . . set forth with perfect clarity." Laski.

Junius Brutus (Philip du Plessis-Mornay, 1549-1623. Published in Basel pseudonymously under a false Edinburgh imprint; attributed to Philip Mornay, a second generation French Protestant leader.

1579. English translation, *Vindicae Contra Tyrannos: A Defence of Liberty Against Tyrants*. London: Printed for Richard Baldwin, 1689.

A most important pamphlet defending the right of resistance for the Huguenots in France, urging a that there is a threefold covenant between people, ruler & God.

George Buchanan, 1506-1582. Scottish humanist scholar and poet; layman and moderator of the General Assembly.

1579. *De jure Regni Apud Scotos*. 1579; English translation by Robert Macfarlan, *De jure Regni Apud Scotos; a Dialogue Concerning the Rights of the Crown in Scotland*. 1799; English translation by C. F. Arrowhead. Texas: University of Texas Press, 1949; reprint of the 1799 edition, Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1982.

Opposed to that absolute and passive obedience required from the subject to a royal prerogative. ". . . possibly . . . the most influential political essay of the century." Laski.

John Althusius, 1557-1638. A Geneva-trained German, professor of law at the Reformed Academy at Herbon.

1603, *Politica methodice digesta, atque exemplis sacris et profanis illustrata* (Politics Methodically Set Forth). 1603; abridged English translation of the Third Edition, including the Prefaces to the First and Third editions entitled *The Politics of Johannes Althusius*.

Translated with and introduction by Frederick S. Carney. Preface by Carl J. Friedrich.
Boston: Beacon Press, 1964.

This “weighty treatise” builds upon Calvin’s political insights, particularly in its advocacy of federalism. Althusius maintains that the lesser have the power to depose the chief magistrate in defense of the people’s liberties. Althusius represents the culmination of the work of such Calvinistic political theorists as de Mornay, Buchanan and Daneau, providing their ideas on the limits of the ruler’s power with a politically systematic basis previously lacking.

Samuel Rutherford, 1600-1661. Scottish Presbyterian, commissioner to the Westminster Assembly, statesman of the “Second Reformation.”

1644, *Lex Rex*. London.

In this his most famous scholarly work, he shows his ability as an opponent of Stuart absolutism and as an apologist of resistance. Rutherford follows Mornay in teaching three parties to the political covenant: God, the ruler and the people. If the king breaks the covenant with God, the political covenant is shattered, and the people have no king; however, Rutherford disallows popular rebellion, stressing the rightful leadership of inferior governors.

Algernon Sidney, 1622?-1683. English politician, political theorist and soldier. Ahlstrom calls him “Puritanism’s greatest political philosopher.” Namesake of Hampden/Sidney College.

1698, *Discourses concerning Government*. London.

For this work Sidney lost his life! He was a champion of constitutional liberties, his *Discourses* became a “textbook of revolution” in the American colonies. His opposition to absolutism & commitment to the right of resistance is reflected in his assertion, “This hand, unfriendly to tyrants, seeks with the sword placid repose under liberty,” which became the basis for the motto of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

John Witherspoon, 1723-1794. Scottish Presbyterian, President of Princeton University, signer of the Declaration of Independence.

Lectures on Moral Philosophy. In *The Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon*. 4 volumes. Edited by Ashbel Green. Philadelphia: William W. Woodward, 1800-1801; reprint, *An Annotated Edition of Lectures on Moral Philosophy by John Witherspoon*. Edited by Jack Scott. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1982.

Witherspoon refused to publish these lectures during his lifetime due to their rough and incomplete form; after his death they were put into print because “Many of his pupils whose eminence in literature and distinction in society give weight to their opinions have thought that these lectures . . . contain one of the best and most perspicuous exhibitions of the radical principles of the science on which they treat that has ever been made. . . .” (Green, 3:268). Witherspoon taught that only one circumstance could justify abrogation of the social

contract: a government “manifestly tyrannical.” In such a case citizens are permitted to “unsettle the government altogether” and start anew (Scott, p. 145).

SELECT POST-AMERICAN REVOLUTION, *arranged alphabetically*

Dabney, Robert L. “Chapter IV. Civic Ethics. 2. Particular Rights Common To All.” In *The Practical Philosophy. Being the Philosophy of the Feelings, of the Will, and of the Conscience, with the Ascertainment of Particular Rights and Duties*. 1897; reprint, Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1984, pp. 389-394.

1820-1898. Argues that immoral statutes must be disobeyed, but makes an important distinction between acts of obedience that require positive sin *per se* and acts that make me the subject of someone else's sin. The former justify disobedience, the latter do not. Dabney also discusses revolution and when it is justified.

———. “Lecture LXXIII. The Civil Magistrate.” In *Syllabus and Notes of the Course of Systematic and Polemic Theology Taught in Union Theological Seminary, Virginia*. 2nd edition. St. Louis: Presbyterian Publishing Company of St. Louis, 1878; reprint, *Systematic Theology*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985, pp. 862-872.

Hodge, Charles. “Civil Government.” *Princeton Review*. (January 1851):

1797-1878, professor at Princeton Theological Seminary.

———. *A Commentary on Romans*. New York, 1835; revised edition, Philadelphia, 1864; reprinted (*A Geneva Series Commentary*.) Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1975.

“There are cases . . . in which disobedience is a duty . . . [though] often a difficult question; and each case must be decided on its own merits. . . . The general principles . . . are sufficiently plain. . . . The right of deciding on all these points . . . must . . . rest with the subject, and not with the ruler.” (pp. 413-14)

———. “The General Assembly; Colonization and Theory of the Church.” *Princeton Review*. (1859): 607 ff; reprinted “Province of the Church.” In *The Church and Its Polity*. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1879, pp. 100-106.

Argues that the Church, “has nothing to do as a Church with secular affairs, with questions of politics or state policy. Her duty is to announce and enforce by moral means the law of God. If at any time . . . a given question assumed both a moral and political bearing . . . then the duty of the Church is limited to setting forth the law of God on the subject.” (p. 105)

———. “Chapter XIX. The Law. § 9. The Fifth Commandment.” In *Systematic Theology*. 3 volumes. New York: Charles Scribner & Co., 1873; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975, III:356-362.

“[T]he question, When the civil government may be, and ought to be disobeyed, is one which every man must decide for himself. . . . There is an obvious distinction to be made between disobedience and resistance. A man is bound to disobey a law, or a command, which requires him to sin, but it does not follow that he is at liberty to resist its execution. . . . The right of resistance is in the community.” (III:359-360)

———. “Chapter XIX. The Law. § 11. The Seventh Commandment.” In *Systematic Theology*. 3 volumes. New York: Charles Scribner & Co., 1873; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975, III:404-406.

“No act of any human legislature contrary to the moral law can bind any man, and no such act contrary to the law of Christ can bind any Christian. . . . As the Church and its officers are under the highest obligations to obey the law of Christ, it follows that where the actions of the state conflicts with that law, such action must be disregarded.” (III:404, 406)

———. “Relation of the Church and State.” *Princeton Review*. (1863): 679 ff; reprint in, *The Church and Its Polity*. London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1879; reprint in, *The Reformation of the Church*. Selected with Introductory Notes by Iain H. Murray. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965, pp. 107-119.

SELECT CONTEMPORARY STUDIES, *arranged alphabetically*

Breed, W. P. *Presbyterians and the Revolution*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1876.

Written and published during the Centennial Celebration the author, a Presbyterian pastor, attempts to demonstrate the pride of place Presbyterians ought to have in the American Revolution, both in the development of revolutionary theory, as well as in the rebellion itself.

Gamble, Richard. “The Christian and the Tyrant: Beza and Knox on Political Resistance Theory.” *Westminster Theological Journal*. XLVI/1 (Spring 1984): 125-139.

Former professor at Westminster Seminary, argues that in Beza and Knox we have a conflict of opinion within the Reformed camp regarding political theory: “. . . we have from the beginning of the Reformation a clear disagreement between Geneva and Scotland surrounding the nature of political resistance, which is at the heart of reformational thinking.” Includes a helpful summary of the roots of Calvinistic political resistance theory.

Greaves, Richard L. *Saints and Rebels. Seven Nonconformists in Stuart England*. U.S.A.: Mercer University Press, 1985.

Study of life and thought of selected “rebels” including Presbyterian Edmund Calamy.

_____. *Theology and Revolution in the Scottish Reformation: Studies in the Thought of John Knox*. Grand Rapids: Christian University Press, 1980.

Hunt, George L. and John T. McNeill, editors. *Calvinism and the Political Order*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1965.

Essays prepared for the Woodrow Wilson Lectureship of 1963-4, include treatments of Calvin, the Huguenots, Rutherford, Locke and Witherspoon.

Presbyterian Historical Society. "Presbyterians and the American Revolution: A Documentary Account." *Journal of Presbyterian History*. 52/4 (Winter 1974).

Entire issue of *Journal* devoted to a collection of relevant historical documents from 1706-1779.

_____. "Presbyterians and the American Revolution: An Interpretive Account." *Journal of Presbyterian History*. 54/1 (Spring 1976).

Entire issue of *Journal* devoted to a collection of essays exploring the theory and practice of Presbyterians in the Revolution.

Smylie, James H. "Madison and Witherspoon: Theological Roots of American Political Thought." *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* 22 (Spring 1961): 118-32.

Demonstrates the extent to which Madison's views were dependent on those of his teacher.

Walzer, Michael. *The Revolution of the Saints*. Cambridge: The University Press, 1965.

Study of the doctrine of resistance as it developed in the thought of Knox, Goodman, the Huguenots & the Puritans.