

**CALVINISM IS ONLY A HISTORICAL PHENEMENON: A DISCUSSION ON THE
IFLUENCE OF CALVINISM IN SHAPING THE AMERICAN MIND AND
CULTURE (An Exemplary Essay Writing Practice for Class-room Usage)**

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ABSTRACT

This article on the influence of a religious doctrine, called Calvinism¹ which has shaped the minds of American people in the early years of the English Colonies in North America, has been prepared to illustrate the basic components of an “Argumentative” essay writing.

In writing this essay, undergraduate students of English and American Studies programs, who take courses like “English Composition,” or “Rhetorical Writing” or other related courses under different titles have been targeted.

Key Words: *Calvinism, Enlightenment, Deism, Equitable, God’s Grace, Dogmatic Egalitarian*

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¹ Calvinism as a religious doctrine stemmed from Europe as a sect of Protestantism, and flourished in England during the 16th and 17th centuries. It gained footholds among the middle-class since the Anglican Church which was affiliated with the King and the aristocracy ostracized them as Separatists. Calvinism, on one hand, advocated work ethics of middle-class, on the other hand brought rigid concepts and rules such as the denial of the salvation of the soul; redemption is only possible for those, on one hand, advocated work ethics of middle-class, on the other hand brought rigid concepts and rules such as the denial of the salvation of the soul; redemption is only possible for those who are endowed with God’s Grace, which is known by God but never revealed. Their fanaticism was a threat to the throne as well as to the English liberalism which was to be flourished in a capitalist –colonist state of mind. Believers, in England, were encouraged to migrate to the North American Colonies to practice their religion freely.

KEYS TO READ AND TO EVALUATE THE ESSAY:

An attentive reader will easily recognize that the basic writing strategies in regard with the “Topic Sentence,” repetition of the “key” words and concepts, the use of “Transitions,” and the location of the “Thesis Statement,” the other technical components are underlined.

The “Introductory” paragraph indicates that the idea that “Calvinism” might have mentally and politically influenced the Americans in the early years of the nation has not been a long-lived assumption. To prove our hypothesis some well-known aspects of this religious doctrine have been discussed and refuted in regard to the historical and cultural facts, and the general characteristics of the nation, which have been developed through out the years.

The first paragraph questions the validity of the idea that there had been non-egalitarian tendencies in Calvinism. Depending on the historical events, especially the flourishing of the revolutionary ideas in 18th. century Europe and America, it has been proved that the last relics of the non-egalitarianism would have been dissolved as the American people proceeded towards independence from the main land— England.

The second paragraph is arranged to refute the possibility of a long-existing “oligarchic” political system on the American soil stemming from the application of Calvinist doctrine to daily lives. In the later years of its existence the English Colonies in North have gone through radical changes due to the emerging new ideas which re-shaped the religious believes; in other words, in the later years American mind was matured enough to think more liberally as to separate church and state affairs.

The third and the fourth paragraphs aim to answer some of the pre-established notions about the dogmatic Calvinism, which presents God as all punishing giving no sign of redemption to human beings because of the idea of Original Sin². Again, the intellectual thinking and the developments in science obliterated these fearful aspects of the original belief and made religious doctrines and attitudes adoptable to daily life.

² --“Original Sin” is the sin of Adam and Eve, who after eating the forbidden “apple” from the “Tree of Knowledge” have been expelled from the garden of “Eden

The “Concluding” paragraph re-states the idea implied in the “Introductory” paragraph that in spite of its curtailing aspects the Calvinistic doctrine, when it is viewed from sociological perspective, has fulfilled its ideological mission of uniting the early English settlers in North American Colonies to endure the hardship, but it gradually lost its grip on the minds of the people.

Historically, when stripped off some of its doctrines such as, its emphasis on "pre-destination," and "God's Grace," and its socio-political practices, Calvinism has not been a long-lived religious belief in shaping the minds of the English Colonists in North America. As a matter of fact, scientific and philosophical developments in early 18.century signaled radical changes in the religious dispositions of the new generation of colonist who were being oriented with the ideas of Enlightenment ³ and its theological component—“Deism”⁴ . The coming generations of Americans, at the threshold of founding a new nation with a premise of freedom of thought and action, ceased to follow their predecessor's hard-lined ideas on sin and redemption which had been inherent in Calvinism, and, thus, the old dreams of establishing a theocratic governing system faded away. To prove my thesis, I will try to refute some assumptions in regard with social and metaphysical aspects of Calvinism.

Firstly, I will refer at one of socio-political aspects of Calvinism, which was described by Parrington, who was the famous cultural historian of the development of American mind, and who called Calvinism as "being no friend of equitable usage."⁵ . If we consider that Puritanism--a generic name to cover all the dissenting beliefs from Anglican Church—was, at

³ Enlightenment was a movement which has been flourished in England in 19th .century as to promote science and scientific thinking, The establishment of the Royal Society encouraged the man science like Isaac Newton to announce his discoveries..

⁴ Deism inspired by the scientific thought of 17th century is the reformed form of Puritanism which considers the universe a complete entity with respect to its animated and inanimated objects working in harmony under God's ordinance.

⁵ Vernon L.Parrington.in his *Ma in Currents in Amercia n Thought* Harvest HBJ Book Carcourt and Brace (New York,1954) Vol. discusses the religious practices in the early years of Colonial life and finds Calvinism highly hierarchic where the clergy dominates the people from all walks of life.

the bottom, a frank challenge to the traditional social solidarity of English institutional life and its class system with emergent ideas on individualism, preparing the middle-class to re-organize the rights of equal citizenship, it is hard to believe the existence of non-egalitarian roots in that belief. Moreover, believers in Calvinism were the dissenting group of people who chose to go to North American Colonies to "build a city upon a hill" that is, to be exempt from the evils of the cast system they left behind in England being oriented with a promise of a dream for an egalitarian utopia. Then, even if we admit that at the very beginning there might have been non-egalitarian tendencies, we cannot deny that in the course of history these practices gradually dissolved among these diligent groups of people, who had taken an oath of comradeship on their way to Plymouth Colony which was their first settlement.

Also, many of the historians in speaking of the politics of this highly church-centered Puritan colonies, interpreted their system as "oligarchic," that is left to the hands of few religious leaders' whimsical interpretations and adaptations of Old Testament, where the emphasis lies on the old Hebraic, authoritarian, patriarchal ruling system. Yet, there is no doubt that in an explicitly individualistic, mostly a middle-class community, where personal gain had the utmost importance these hierarchical and mandatory principles would hardly gain momentum. Nevertheless, to the earlier formalist members of the church who feared free speculation, this totalitarian aspect of Calvinism might have been appealing until the radical minded intellectuals like Ann Hutchinson and Roger Williams, who saw that the individual freedom of belief was at a stake and consequently rebelled against the authorities, emerged to protest the organized Church. Their humanitarian ideas paved the way to the next generations' revolutionary disputes against any means of authority as the enemy of democratic liberalism, and a possible democratic state, which could only be realized by the separation of the church and the state.

As for the dogmas of Calvinism, they were basically shaped by the idea of cosmic absolutism that conceived God as the will sustaining universe and by the assumption that the workings of God's mind could be interpreted. Inspired by this dogma, doctrines like Pre-destination an idea that condemns man as heir to Adam's sin and "God's Grace" which ordains unknown people as "Saints" to plea God for the salvation of the so-called sinned souls, to come into prominence. The idea of being deprived of forgiveness and redemption had, however, a positive effect on Americans who called themselves as the children of Adam. It urged them to work hard to regain the lost Eden an earthly paradise which happened to be

America--the future America for their salvation. . The American mind under the pressure of the idea of original sin learned how to "work out " from depravation to success by applying ethics of work to their daily lives using the advises of Cotton Mather⁶ and later Benjamin Franklin⁷, which are the secularized versions of religious doctrines into every day morality, and which are suggestive of a dream to be fulfilled--American Success Dream.

Then, the human will to success would eventually obliterate another pre-established assumption about God's divine will, which earlier incapacitated the human mind to grasp the wisdom behind it. This was the idea of God's irresistible Grace. To comprehend this doctrine one should think in terms of an assumed knowledge of God's being selective of the souls worthy for salvation, with no coherent estimation of the rules for selection.. Inspired by the obscurity of this doctrine, certain Calvinist theologians earlier had tried to convince their congregations of their atonement to sainthood and the legality of their dynasty. This false notion derived from an absolute dogma would sooner be at odds with the workings of the minds of men of Enlightenment, who rejected mysticism of this sort and favored rationalism to explain civilian morality and everyday reality. That is, when the Deists, abiding with the scientific laws of Enlightenment, declared that civil and religious liberty is essential for a meaningful existence and pursuit of happiness and common welfare, the grip of irrational thinking in regard with God's ways was lessened in the minds of 18th. century Americans. Consequently, when the founders of American Republic denied any religious and civilian segregation among its citizens, this idea of sainthood was doomed to remain only in the dusty pages of history.

As a conclusion, thinking in terms of evolutionary history, Calvinism has done its role and function in the early history of a nation by causing a group of people to break up with the Church of England and consequently with the King; it united them in firm comradeship not to get lost in the wilderness in an unknown land. Despite its dogmas, which are hard to

⁶ Cotton Mather (1663-1728) is a religious thinker who tried to portray a model American citizen in his collection of essays called *Bonifacious:Essays to Do Good*.

⁷ Benjamin Franklin((1706-1790 famous American statesman. Philosopher. and inventor, who had been inspired by the teachings of Mather and wrote in his*Autobiograph*, a secularist approach to daily ethics, what is expected from a model American

understand today, and its non-egalitarian and oligarchic social mandates it valued knowledge and learning so that Enlightenment flourished in its grounds. As a natural outcome of historical process, Calvinist doctrine was to be challenged and re-visioned by the coming generations' as a new concept of divine order which worked for the benefit and the welfare of the humanity through the laws of nature, as expressed in the Deistic belief of a benevolent God rather than an unpredictable donor of privileges among his believers. •

• Notes:– Calvinism as a religious doctrine stemmed from Europe as a sect of Protestantism , and flourished in England during the 16th and 17th centuries..It gained footholds among the middle-class since the Anglican Church which was affiliated with the King and the aristocracy ostracized them as Separatists .Calvinism, on one hand, advocated work ethics of middle-class, on the other hand brought rigid concepts and rules such as the denial of the salvation of the soul; redemption is only possible for those who are endowed with God's Grace, which is known by God but never revealed. The believer should deny all the earthly pleasures and lead a very humble life. Their fanaticism was a threat to the throne as well as to the English liberalism which was to be flourished in a capitalist –colonist state of mind. Believers, in England, were encouraged to migrate to the North American Colonies by Charles II, where they would practice their church-centered life style.

“Original Sin” is the sin of Adam and Eve, who after eating the forbidden “apple” from the “Tree of Knowledge” have been expelled from the garden of “Eden.”

.Vernon L.Parrington.in his *Main Currents in American Thought* Harvest HBJ Book Court and Brace (New York,1954) Vol. discusses the religious practices in the early years of Colonial life and finds Calvinism highly hierarchic where the clergy dominates the people from all 166- Deism walks of life.

“Enlightenment” is name of an epoch in England, in 17th .century, when scientific thinking replaced religious dogmas. The beginning was Newton's discovery of the law of gravity; discoveries 1728) . Benjamin Franklin((1706-1790 famous American statesman. Philosopher. and inventor, who had inspired by the teachings of Mather and wrote in his *Autobiograph*, a secularist approach to daily ethics, what is expected from a model American