Open Thy Hand Wide: Moses and the Origins of American Liberalism

In the famous address titled “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy,” delivered in California in 1911, George Santayana said, “America is a young country with an old mentality: it has enjoyed the advantages of a child carefully brought up and thoroughly indoctrinated; it has been a wise child. But a wise child, an old head on young shoulders, always has a comic and an unpromising side. The wisdom is a little thin and verbal, not aware of its full meaning and grounds; and physical and emotional growth may be stunted by it, or even deranged.” This “old head” on America’s shoulders, he says, is Calvinism. Santayana does acknowledge that he is using this word in a special sense, one which allows him to find Calvinism in the Koran and in Cardinal Newman. He says,

Calvinism, taken in this sense, is an expression of the agonised conscience. It is a view of the world which agonised conscience readily embraces if it takes itself seriously, as, being agonised, of course it must. Calvinism, essentially, asserts three things: that sin exists, that sin is punished, and that it is beautiful that sin should exist to be punished. The heart of the Calvinist is therefore divided between tragic concern at his own miserable condition, and tragic exultation about the universe at large. He oscillates between a profound abasement and a paradoxical elation of the spirit. To be a Calvinist philosophically is to feel a fierce pleasure in the existence of misery, especially of one’s own, in that this misery seems to manifest the fact that the Absolute is irresponsible or infinite or holy.

And so on.

This kind of invective against Calvinism is characteristic of the period, to be found in D. H. Lawrence, John Dalberg Acton, H. L. Mencken, Hilaire Belloc, Jacques Maritain, and, in slightly muted form, Max Weber. I

quote at length—and I could quote at still greater length—because here Santayana's argument jumps the track. It is as if the mere word "Calvinism," redefined by him to mean a certain kind of unlikable excess wherever in the world it might be discovered or imagined, triggers an outpouring of stereotyped language. This denunciation is typical in that it offers no particulars about any teaching of Calvin's, and no example of Calvinistic philosophy. There is a certain poignant pleasure in learning that Americans were once faulted for an excess of gentility and even for a precocious wisdom, but there is nothing wise or philosophical, or, for that matter, genteel, about the mentality as he goes on to describe it. Still, I believe he is right in saying "the country was new, but the race was tried, chastened, and full of old memories," that it was "an old wine in new bottles." But the wine was older than Calvinism, than Christianity itself. It was what Jesus of Nazareth called the good old wine of Moses (Luke 5:39).

The status of the Old Testament in the Calvinist tradition has been used polemically against it, just as Calvinism has been used polemically against the Old Testament. Adolf Harnack wrote, in his *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*, that in the Calvinist churches,

> the Old Testament that was placed on a fully equal footing with the New Testament had an unhealthy effect on dogmatics, on piety, and on the practice of the Christian life. In some groups it even produced an Islamic zeal, while in others it called forth a new kind of Judaism and promoted everywhere a legalistic entity…If Marcion had reappeared in the time of the Huguenots and Cromwell, he would once again have encountered the warlike God of Israel whom he abhorred, right in the very middle of Christendom. A reaction was bound to come, and it arose in the very territories of that Christianity—Calvinist Christianity—in which the spirit of the Old Testament had so unthinkingly been granted room.

Of course Oliver Cromwell, whatever his faults, can hardly be said to compare badly with Philip II of Spain, or with any number of Christian enthusiasts who preceded him, and who took up a very New Testament sword of the Lord. That equivalencies of this kind are so available in Christian history is a somber truth by now acknowledged on every side, only slightly mitigated by the fact that they are equally available in pagan

history. Certainly World War I, just ended when Harnack's book appeared in 1920, exceeded the worst depredations of Cromwell, Philip II, or "the warlike God of Israel." But it is typical of modern disparagement of the Old Testament to assume a superior posture, as if we had put all thought of enormity far behind us.

Harnack's treatise on Marcion is in effect an appreciation of this first great Christian heretic, whom Harnack compares to Martin Luther. I am aware that Harnack's very confident account of Marcion and his heresy is written at a far greater remove from its subject than any Gospel account of Jesus, and that Harnack is inevitably as much or more my subject than the heretic himself. So whatever I say about Marcion should be understood as a paraphrase of Harnack. This only makes the book more germane as an instance of the modern life of an ancient polemic. Marcion's doctrine, according to Harnack, simply carried to a logical conclusion the opposition between grace and works, the spirit and the law, to be found in the letters of Paul. This meant the rejection by Marcion of the Old Testament and the purging of the New Testament of books and passages he took to have been compromised by Jewish influences and interpolations. When he was done rather little remained. To his purged canon he appended a book of his own called *Antitheses,* which placed teachings of the Old and the New Testaments in opposition in order to demonstrate their radical unlikeness.

It is unfortunate that this book has not survived, since the assumption behind it, that the Testaments are at best incompatible, is with us still, though no one seems to feel any need now to make the case. It is usual to see the Old Testament treated as a sort of dead weight on Christianity, if not a positive embarrassment to it, by scholars as well as clergy. For this reason the text is very little studied or taught, except to dismantle its narratives on what are claimed to be critical grounds or to loot it for those few verses that seem to endorse condemnations Jesus himself did not engage in. So the Marcionist view of it as a crude document profoundly at odds with the gospel of grace becomes more and more entrenched, even in the Reformed or Calvinist tradition for whose theology it was once central.

Be that as it may. According to Harnack, the reaction to the prominence of the Old Testament takes place "first of all in the English Enlightenment." He cites Thomas Morgan, an Anglican clergyman and author of *The Moral Philosopher: A Dialogue Between Philalethes a Christian Deist, and*

Theophanes a Christian Jew, published in 1737. In it, Harnack says, paraphrasing Morgan,

> The God of the Old Testament is pictured, approximately as Marcion had done, as a limited, petty, and contradictory national deity who also does immoral things; the Mosaic legislation is a wholly unsatisfactory, particularly limited and offensive work, a distortion of the *lex naturae*, very little different from the pagan religions. The nation of Israel, of bad character from the outset, runs aground on this law. Jesus brings the *lex naturae* that is clarified by means of revelation; Paul was his only true disciple; all the other disciples misunderstood Jesus and fell back into the Jewish way; along with them the church also fell, and thus…down to the present time it is halfway snared in Judaism.

This is a further polemical association, not a surprising one to find in a book written in early twentieth-century Europe, by a scholar so well respected even as Harnack. Then again, there is nothing except its expressed contempt for Judaism to distinguish this characterization of "the Old Testament God" from the commonplaces of recent scholarship and quasi-scholarship.

According to Harnack, Marcion's "alien god" or "unknown god" is a deity superior to the God of Moses, aloof from creation and from humankind through all the ages until his abrupt intervention in the rarefied person of Christ. The appeal of all this as a way of disburdening Christianity of its origins in Judaism is clear. This is a task some Christians have worked at since Marcion and no doubt before him, always with more than a little success. Though we live in an atmosphere of self-declared ecumenism, the polemic against the Hebrew Bible has become as if substance and settled truth.

Our modern Marcionism lacks the ancient metaphysical rigor. Still, moved by a dualist impulse that undermines the authority of the Hebrew Bible, we have conjured a sort of demiurge of our own, a being we call Yahweh. However sound the scholarship that lies behind this voicing of the divine name—a presumption in itself—it is associated with a reductionist and disparaging view of "the Old Testament God." The pious among us embrace a notion of Christ that sets him apart from, or against, this very improbable Father of his, adjusting to an inevitable loss of meaning of fine

old words such as “incarnation,” and to a contraction and impoverishment of our sense of the created order, which can hardly reflect the glory of a deity who is himself not especially glorious. This grim little perplex is often embraced as “liberalism” because it has an aura of learnedness about it, and modernity, though in essence it is very old indeed.

This success comes at a cost for all Christianity that Harnack and others never choose to acknowledge. This same hermeneutics has been brought to bear on the New Testament, predictably. More important from a Christian point of view, it has come at the cost of a model for true social justice and an ethos to support it. For the Calvinist or Reformed tradition, the effective exclusion of the Old Testament as a fully equal presence in the Christian canon has had profoundly disabling consequences. Contrary to entrenched assumption, contrary to the conventional associations made with the words “Calvinist” and “Puritan,” and despite the fact that certain fairly austere communities can claim a heritage in Reformed culture and history, Calvinism is uniquely the *fons et origo* of Christian liberalism in the modern period, that is, in the period since the Reformation, and this liberalism has had its origins largely in the Old Testament. This is a bold statement, very much against the grain of historical consensus. Though I acknowledge that it may be indefensible in any number of particulars, I will argue that in a general sense it is not only true but a clarification of history important to contemporary culture and to that shaken and diminishing community, liberal Protestantism.

I know I am stepping into a semantic quagmire. Harnack himself is called a “liberal” theologian and historian, in the very influential sense the word acquired when the project of dismantling the traditional canon was still relatively new and somewhat controversial. The fact that words have different meanings in different cultures, that “liberal” is itself a word with very different meanings in American and European contexts, for example, never seems to influence discussion as it ought to. It is surely significant that the word is used in American discourse from the seventeenth century with insistent reference to scriptural contexts in which it occurs, while in En gland it is adopted from nineteenth-century French and has first of all a political connotation associated with the French Revolution, at least according to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. But in Renaissance French, *liberal*, *liberalité* meant “generous,” “generosity,” and of course the word occurs in the English Puritan translations, the Matthew’s Bible and the

Geneva Bible, which were followed in their use of the term by the 1611 Authorized Version.

The word occurs in contexts that urge an ethics of nonjudgmental, nonexclusive generosity. Isaiah 32:6–8 in the 1560 Geneva Bible reads as follows: “The nigarde shal no more be called liberal, nor the churl riche. But the nigarde wil speake of nigardnes, and his heart wil worke iniquitie, and do wickedly, and speake falsely against the Lord, to make emptie the hungrie soule, and to cause the drinke of the thirstie to faile. For the weapons of the churl are wicked: he diviseth wicked counsels, to undo the poore with lying wordes: and to speake against the poor in judgement. But the liberal man wil divise of liberal things, and he wil continue his liberalitie.” The Wycliffe Bible, which was translated from the Latin Vulgate, renders the last verse this way: “Forsoothe a prince schal thenke tho thingis that ben worthi to a prince, and he shal stonde over duykis.” (Forsooth, a prince shall think those things that be worthy to a prince, and he shall stand over dukes.) The New Jerusalem Bible in English is closer to Wycliffe and Jerome: “the noble person plans only noble things, / noble his every move.” The New International Version has “the noble man makes noble plans, and by noble deeds he stands.” This tradition of translation conveys a sense that an aristocratic virtue and obligation is being praised here.

Calvin had important support among the French and European nobility, but he was no admirer of the institution. In his *Commentary on Genesis* he interprets verse 6:4, “There were giants in the earth in those days,” as describing the origins of aristocracy. He says, “[U]nder the magnificent title of heroes, they cruelly exercised dominion, and acquired power and fame for themselves, by injuring and oppressing their brethren. And this was the first nobility of the world. Lest any one should too greatly delight himself in a long and dingy line of ancestry, this, I repeat, was the nobility, which raised itself on high, by pouring contempt and disgrace on others.” It is no cause for wonder that Calvin chose to democratize a virtue that was so central to his piety and his teaching. He clearly did not consider “nobility” a synonym for “generosity.”

It is interesting to note certain differences between Jerome’s Latin and Calvin’s. Jerome’s *insipiens,* “foolish,” becomes Calvin’s *sordidus,* “base” or “vile.” *Fraudulentus,* “deceitful,” becomes *parcus,* “sparing” or “frugal”; *stultus,* “foolish,” becomes *sordidus,* “vile”; and *fraudulenti,* “deceitful,”

becomes *avari*, “covetous” or “greedy.” In Calvin’s reading the text is both harsher and more pointedly relevant to an ethic of generosity. The word *nigarde* in the English of the Geneva Bible has an unpleasant sound but only one meaning—it refers to stinginess. The interpretation offered in the Geneva Bible derives from Calvin’s Latin translation from the Hebrew and his gloss of it. In Calvin’s Latin, verse 32:8 reads: “*At liberalis liberalia agitabit, et liberaliter agendo progredietur*.” He says, “This relates…to the regenerate, over whom Christ reigns; for, although all are called by the voice of the gospel, yet there are few who suffer themselves to be placed under his yoke. The Lord makes them truly kind and bountiful, so that they no longer seek their own convenience, but are ready to give assistance to the poor, and not only do this once or oftener, but every day advance more and more in kindness and generosity.”

Contrary to popular opinion, Calvin says it is a misreading of the verse to think it means “that the liberal advance themselves, and become great by doing good; because God rewards them, and bestows on them greater blessings.” On the contrary, they advance in an increasing liberality: “[T]rue liberality is not momentary or of short duration. They who possess that virtue persevere steadily, and do not exhaust themselves in a sudden and feeble flame, of which they quickly afterwards repent.” As he does always, Calvin forbids any narrowing of the obligation of generosity. He says, “There are indeed many occurrences which retard the progress of our liberality. We find in men strange ingratitude, so that what we give appears to be ill bestowed. Many are too greedy, and, like horse-leeches, suck the blood of others. But let us remember this saying, and listen to Paul’s exhortation ‘not to be weary in well-doing;’ for the Lord exhorts us not to momentary liberality, but to that which shall endure during the whole course of our life.” Again, Calvin understands the passage to refer not to an aristocratic virtue but to a Christian imperative. In fact he sees the judgment of Christ present in the words of the Prophet: “In this passage, therefore, we are brought to the judgment-seat of Christ, who alone, by exposing hypocrisy, reveals whether we are covetous or bountiful.”

The Geneva Bible has this for Deuteronomy 15:13–14, a law that specifies the way in which a freed servant is to be dealt with: “And when thou sendest him out fre from thee, thou shalt not let him go away emptie, but shalt give him a liberal rewarde of thy shepe, & of thy corne, and of thy wines: thou shalt give him of that wherewith the Lord thy God hathe

blessed thee." There is a marginal note that explains this as justice to the worker: "In token that thou…acknowledge the benefite which God has given thee by his [the worker's] labours." In the Wycliffe Bible the verses read this way: "And thou shalt not suffre hym to go away voide, to whom thou hast givve fredom; but thou schalt give lijflode in the weye, of flocks, and of cornfloor." In the Douay-Rheims, "[Thou] shall give him his way out of thy flocks," and so on. Having no Hebrew, I look to the Jewish Publication Society translation to umpire these differences, and I find that their version is closer to Jerome and Wycliffe than to the Reformers. They have, "Furnish him out of the flock"—there is no mention of a "liberal reward." In a sermon on this text, Calvin says, "[A]ccording to your abilitie you be bound to recompense them that have travelled for you, & have bin the instruments of such blessings. For if we thank God with our mouthes, confessing that it is he which hath blessed us, & in the mean while make none account of such as he has sent to doe us service in the increase of our living, by taking paynes and toyle for us; all our thanking of him is but lip-labor & utter hypocrisy." For Calvin, every human encounter is of moment, the other in the encounter is always "sent" or "offered." So respect for every circumstance is reverence to God. Here is the Geneva version of Deuteronomy 15:11: "Because there shal be ever *some* poore in the land, therefore I commande thee, saying, Thou shalt open thy hand unto thy brother, to thy nedie, and to thy poore in thy land." This more or less agrees with other translations. There is, however, a note in the margin: "Thou shalt be liberal."

When all is said and done, the word "liberal" and its forms occur only a few times, even in the classic Protestant translations. Their five occurrences in the King James Version of the Old Testament translate three different Hebrew words, suggesting that the translators were moved rather than required to make use of them. "Blessing," "voluntary," "to fit out with supplies"—if my concordance can be trusted, these are alternative translations of the words translated as "liberal" or "liberally" or "liberality." Translation is always interpretation in some degree, and, for those who, like Calvin and the classic Calvinists, take the Old Testament to be a revelation of God, or, to use a word almost interchangeable for Calvin, of Christ, then the spirit of law and prophecy are faithfully rendered, whatever questions might arise as to the letter. All this is of interest because the verses I have

quoted, and the word “liberal” itself, supported by the meaning the verses give to it, are central to American social thought from its beginning.

Like old Israel, the United States is often said to be legalistic. And for some reason this is taken to be a criticism and to identify a failing. It might better be thought of as an acknowledgment of the human propensity to sin or error, in tension with an active solicitude for human vulnerability to the effects of sin and error, the two embraced by an unusual awareness, as self-created and intentional societies, of a calling to be “good” societies. When Americans launched on the project of national formation, there was still plenty of old wine in those new bottles.

In Old Testament monotheism uniquely it is humankind who introduce evil into the created order, that same humankind who are made in the image of God and whom God loves. This great paradox has the effect of centering the problem of evil in human nature and human choice. More precisely, the concept appears to arise not from any desire to escape or contain the complexities of the problem of evil but from a sense of the literally cosmic significance of humankind as a central actor in creation who is, in some important sense, free to depart from, even to defy, the will of God. Again paradoxically, the very magnitude of the problem of evil is the reflex of human centrality, because of the weight it gives to our presence in the world and because only we among creatures are capable of the concept. This vision of human nature and divine nature raises more questions than it answers, in part because it does not localize or personify evil. By the standards of other ancient myth, it yields a kind of realism, an attention to mingled lives and erring generations that grounds sacred meaning very solidly in this human world.

Israel’s extraordinarily high valuation of life in the world and in community led naturally to the centrality of law. “Law” is a word that has had a special place in Christian thought on the basis of certain understandings of Paul’s use of it. For Harnack, at least in his interpretation of Marcion, it means the opposite of grace. That is, it runs contrary to the will of God, incurring misapprehension of the kind that is not only erring but damnable. Like most Christian commentators, Harnack never pauses to sort through the varieties of teaching or instruction that are called “law,”

though for him they are for all purposes of one kind with the most precisian of the Levitical laws.

Many of the laws attributed to Moses pertaining to social order and social ethic have theological force because he, unlike Hammurabi, Lycurgus, and Solon, was a religious founder as well as a lawgiver in the usual sense. The eighteenth-century Englishman Thomas Morgan objects to the laws on the grounds that they pertain only to social order, which in his view precludes their having any higher meaning. In *The Moral Philosopher*, quoted above, he says, "[T]he reasons of this weakness and insufficiency of the moral law, as delivered by Moses, are very obvious. For, as this law was barely civil, political or national, so all its sanctions were merely temporal, relating only to men's outward practice and behaviour in society" and therefore "could not relate to the inward principles or motives of action, whether good or bad, and therefore could not purify the conscience, regulate the affections, or correct and restrain the vitious desires, inclinations and dispositions of the mind."

Only the tradition of Moses integrated civil law into the religious mythos, the sacred narrative. For this reason it has the singular inflection of an attentive, passionate—and singular—divine voice. In what other body of law could compliance be urged with the phrase "for you know the heart of the stranger"? This is not to minimize the ethical achievements of great pagans like Plato and Cicero, achievements revered by Christians for as long as the classics were read and there were still Christians of a mind to revere. But the extreme tension these pagans felt between the traditions of Hesiod and Homer and their own ethical systems is well known and very much to the point.

Some fragments of the Twelve Tablets of Roman Law survive. They are part of a social code, and might suggest something of the character of civil law in an earlier period, nearer to the time of Moses. Two laws respecting the treatment of debtors are of particular interest in light of the attention paid to this question in the Pentateuch. One says: "If they (creditor and debtor) do not come to another agreement, debtors are held in bonds for sixty days. During that time they are brought before court on three successive market days, and the amount for which they are liable shall be publicly announced." And the next says: "On the third market day [any multiple] creditors shall cut [the debtors] into pieces. If they shall cut more or less than their due, it shall be with impunity."

As with any ancient law, including those attributed to Moses, it is possible to say that this doesn't mean what it seems to mean, or it wasn't really enforced. And to make this kind of argument is perfectly respectable so long as it is made evenhandedly. That said, over against this language, it is striking to note how protective, even tender, comparable Old Testament laws are toward debtors. This is Deuteronomy 24:10—13: "When you make your neighbor a loan of any sort, you shall not go into his house to fetch his pledge. You shall stand outside, and the man to whom you make the loan shall bring the pledge out to you. And if he is a poor man, you shall not sleep in his pledge; when the sun goes down, you shall restore the pledge that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you; and it shall be righteousness to you before the Lord your God." The Geneva Bible has a note that makes the law gentler yet. It says, "As though ye wouldst appoint what to have, but shalt receive what he may spare." No one can read the books of Moses with any care without understanding that law can be a means of grace. Certainly this law is of one spirit with the Son of Man who says, "I was hungry and you fed me. I was naked and you clothed me." This kind of worldliness entails the conferring of material benefit over and above mere equity. It means a recognition of and respect for both the intimacy of God's compassion and the very tangible forms in which it finds expression. Cranky old Leviticus gave us—gave Christ—not only "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" but also the rather forgotten "Thou shalt love the stranger as thyself," two verses that appear to be merged in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Still, startlingly gentle laws like these fall under the general condemnation of Old Testament severity, and Calvin's refinements with them.

The tendency to hold certain practices in ancient Israel up to idealized modern Western norms is pervasive in much that passes for scholarship, though a glance at the treatment of the great class of debtors now being evicted from their homes in America and elsewhere should make it clear that, from the point of view of graciousness or severity, an honest comparison is not always in our favor. Morgan is right about the this-worldliness of the Torah, and wrong in suggesting that this must mean its teachings are therefore without transcendent meaning. "Do unto others" is a behest that, if acted on, can have very tangible, real-world consequences. The emperor Julian notes that no Jew is ever forced to beg. So this-worldly are God's interests that he cares whether some beleaguered soul can find

comfort in his sleep. He cares even to the point of overriding what are called by us, though never by Moses or Jesus, the rights of property.

Sir Thomas More, in his *Utopia,* published in Latin in 1516, mentions this in the context of the forced depopulations of the English countryside that were leading to mass destitution and therefore rampant theft, which was answered by hanging. His Raphael Hythlodaeus says, “Under the law of Moses—which was harsh enough in all conscience, being designed for slaves, and rebellious ones at that—thieves were not hanged, but merely fined. We can hardly suppose that the new dispensation, which expresses God’s fatherly kindness towards His children, allows us more scope than the old for being cruel to one another.” In the Christian Europe of the sixteenth century—or, for that matter, the nineteenth century—it would have been wholly appropriate to apply Origen’s test of direct comparison of the laws of Moses to prevailing law to determine which of them should be called harsh.

Consistent with the polemical treatment of Old Testament law is the equally polemical approach to American Puritan culture, which was indeed influenced in a remarkable degree by this law. A code published in 1641 called *The Massachusetts Body of Liberties* makes this clear. It is often compared to the Magna Carta, to which it in fact bears little resemblance. A notable feature of the code is a list of twelve infractions for which the punishment is death. In each of them, and for them only, the penalty is justified, or perhaps required, by citations from Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, or Deuteronomy. One may not worship another god, practice witchcraft, blaspheme, commit willful murder, murder in rage, poison, have relations with an animal, have relations with another man, commit adultery, steal someone, or bear false witness in a capital case. A twelfth, unbiblical law forbids any attempt to overthrow the commonwealth. By the standards of the period this code is remarkable in that it does not even mention property crime as a capital offense. The capital crimes are the kind of thing for which we would find any society of the period stern or intolerant. But these laws, like the laws of Moses, do not foresee that the poor will be made first beggars, then thieves, and then corpses, as Thomas More said of British law.

Where the *Liberties* depart from biblical example, they are compromised by habits of mind the colonists had not yet unlearned. Number 43 stipulates that “No man shall be beaten with above 40 stripes.”

Deuteronomy 25:3 says, “Forty strypes shal [the judge] cause him to have and not past, lest he shulde excede and beate him above that with manie stripes, thy brother shulde appeare despised in thy sight.” Again that haunting solicitude for the vulnerable, even one made vulnerable by his own transgression. And solicitude as well for one who risks the sin of despising his brother. The second clause of the colonists’ law reads “nor shall any true gentleman, nor any man equall to a gentleman be punished with whipping, unles his crime be very shamefull, and his course of life vitious and profligate.” This adaptation draws attention to the absence of such distinctions of class in Moses’s law. That said, it is instructive to compare the Massachusetts *Liberties* with the Grand Model for North Carolina, drawn up by John Locke at the request of the king and published in 1663, which would have established landed aristocracy and virtual feudalism in that colony.

According to the Massachusetts code,

Every person within this Jurisdiction, whether inhabitant or forreiner shall enjoy the same justice and law, that is general for the plantation…If any servants shall flee from the Tiranny and crueltie of their masters to the howse of any freeman of the same Towne, they shall be there protected and susteyned till due order be taken for their relife…If any man smite out the eye or tooth of his man-servant or maid servant, or otherwise mayme or much disfigure him, unlesse it be by meere casualtie, he shall let them goe free from his service…No man shall exercise any Tiranny or Crueltie towards any bruite Creature which are usuallie kept for man’s use…No man shall be put to death without the testimony of two or three witnesses or that which is equivalent thereunto…For bodilie punishments we allow amongst us none that are inhumane Barbarous or cruel.

These are all drawn from the laws of Moses, to be realized again in early Massachusetts. They were not by any means in effect universally in the thirteen colonies or the early United States. That the same reforms were emerging in contemporary British law is unsurprising, since Puritanism was on the rise there, reaching the point of revolution and an attempted social reordering. They were in some degree contravened in Massachusetts after

the Cromwell period, when British authority over the colony could be more effectively asserted.

That the teaching and example of Calvin were a great influence on Puritan culture and political thought is a commonplace, of course—the words "Puritan" and "Calvinist" are virtually interchangeable, and the harshness associated with both words is taken to be the predominant feature of the societies they created. In crowded, besieged, and turbulent Geneva, severity might be expected and perhaps even excused. Yet on the subject of beggars and how begging is to be eliminated, though Calvin says, like Thomas More, "To be shorte, of Roges, they become robbers, & in the end what must become of that?," his argument then takes a characteristic turn.

> But yet howsoever the case stand, let us see that the poore be mainteined. For if a man forbid begging, & therewithal doe no almes at all it is as much as if he did cut the throtes of those that are in necessitie. Nay, we must so provide for the poore, and redresse their want, that such as are stout beggers and apparently seeme not to be pitied, may be reformed. For they doe but eate up the others bread, & rob the needy of that which should be given unto them. That (say I) in effect, is the thing we have to marke here. But how may it be done? First, the Hospitals shoulde provide wel for such needs…[L]et not men play the good husbands in hording up the things that ought to be bestowed upon God & upon those whome he offreth unto us. Also as every man knoweth the particular needs of his neighbors, so let him indevour to succor them, and consider where wante or neede is, and helpe to remedie it. If this be done, then shal beggerie be taken away as it ought to be, and they shall not neede to make a simple forbidding of it; saying, let not men beg any more; & in the meane season the poore be left destitute, to die for hunger & thirst.

Calvin says, "[A]lthough a man cannot set downe a Lawe certeine in this behalfe; yet must every man be a rule to himselfe, to do according to his own abilitie and according to the need that he seeth in his neighbors." This is from a sermon on Deuteronomy delivered in French in 1555.

Like the New Englanders, Calvin shows the influence of his time and culture, tending in certain ways and degrees to modify the liberalism of Moses—for example, interpreting as respite from debt the laws that called

for outright forgiveness and release. Nevertheless there is a striking generosity in his approach to the problem of theft, by the standards of his time and of ours. The provisions for the poor which structure both land ownership and the sacred calendar in ancient Israel, the rights of gleaners and of those widows, orphans, and strangers who pass through the fields, and the cycles of freedom from debt and restoration of alienated persons and property, all work against the emergence of the poor as a class, as people marked by deprivation and hopelessness. There is no sense of fearful urgency, there are no special measures to suppress crime driven by need except, as Calvin clearly understands, the preemption of crime through the alleviation of need.

In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin establishes a profound theological basis for liberality, openhandedness. He says,

The Lord commands us to do “good unto all men,” universally, a great part of whom, estimated according to their own merits, are very undeserving; but here the Scripture assists us with an excellent rule, when it inculcates, that we must not regard the intrinsic merit of men, but must consider the image of God in them, to which we owe all possible honour and love; but that this image is most carefully to be observed in them “who are of the household of faith,” inasmuch as it is renewed and restored by the spirit of Christ. Whoever, therefore, is presented to you that needs your kind offices, you have no reason to refuse him your assistance. Say he is a stranger; yet the Lord has impressed on him a character which ought to be familiar to you; for which reason he forbids you to despise your own flesh. Say that he is contemptible and worthless; but the Lord shows him to be one whom he has deigned to grace with his own image. Say that you are obliged to him for no services; but God has made him, as it were, his substitute, to whom you acknowledge yourself to be under obligations for numerous and important benefits. Say that he is unworthy of your making the smallest exertion on his account; but the image of God, by which he is recommended to you, deserves your surrender of yourself and all that you possess. If he not only deserved no favour, but, on the contrary, has provoked you with injuries and insults,—even this is no just reason why you should cease to embrace him with your affection, and to perform to him the offices of love. He has deserved, you will say, very different treatment from me. But what has the Lord deserved? who, when he commands you to

forgive all men their offences against you, certainly intends that they should be charged to himself.

These are the consequences for Christians of the great teaching reiterated in Genesis, that every human being is an image of God, and it is another exploration of the unqualified requirement of generosity to be found in Deuteronomy 15. This more than reconciles Law and Gospel. It makes the two indistinguishable. And it makes trivial any attempted distinction between the this-worldly and the transcendent.

The early New Englanders, or those who defined and led the communities they established, are conventionally described as Calvinists. In fact their history and influence are almost always interpreted consistently with the popular characterization of Calvinism, almost always without significant reference to Calvin's theology, which does in fact pervade their thought. Though it is true that he is seldom referred to by them, they are Calvin's heirs in nothing more than in their refusal to argue from any authority but Scripture. Even Jonathan Edwards cites the great reformer only in a context in which he takes issue with him. The argument is made, when note is taken of the incompatibility of Calvin's own teaching with the kind of thinking ascribed to his influence, that there was an intervening "Calvinism," properly called so even though it departed radically from or was flatly contrary to his teaching. "Calvinism" in this second sense is the major term in Max Weber's unaccountably influential interpretation of the modern world, the same "Calvinism" Santayana found in the Koran, or perhaps I should say the "Koran," since, as both Santayana and Harnack demonstrate, this text and its culture also fall within the circle of things used polemically against each other.

In "A Modell of Christian Charity," his address aboard the *Arabella* to Puritans newly arrived in Massachusetts in 1630, John Winthrop makes an argument for liberality and bounteousness that follows the rhetorical strategy of objection and answer used by Calvin in the passage from the *Institutes* quoted above. A century before Winthrop spoke, William Tyndale's translation of the New Testament had replaced the word "charity" with the word "love," a change that was both valid as a correction and also full of ethical and theological implications. Winthrop's text in fact proceeds through a series of arguments in favor of charity as the word is ordinarily understood, to a celebration of the experience of love, which overrides all

the considerations of need and worthiness on the one hand and of cost or sacrifice on the other, considerations that make it painful to give and more painful to receive, that together have given charity a bad name, precisely because complacency or condescension or contempt seem so often to have displaced love altogether.

Winthrop begins his argument by granting that, indeed, through the providence of God, “in all times some must be rich, some poore.” This is true, he says, because God counts himself “more honoured in dispensing his gifts to man by man, than if he did it by his owne immediate hands.” In other words, God is to be honored in the sharing of his gifts. The existence of rich and poor may be ordained as the condition of mankind, but for Winthrop this does not mean, as it has often been interpreted to mean, that an order ordained by God must be preserved by human effort and determination, especially when these are so powerfully supported by what Scripture assures us are our baser motives. We are not required to bring in the tide or to send the moon through its phases—a good thing, since we would surely find a way to default. We can, however, increase and embitter poverty. The prophets inform us of the Lord’s views on that subject.

Like Calvin, Winthrop says that natural law “propounds one man to another, as the same flesh and Image of God.” He says, “The Lawe of nature would give no rules for dealing with enemies, for all are to be considered as friends in the state of innocency, but the Gospell commands love to an enemy.” He urges his hearers to accept that unlimited generosity might sometimes be required of them by particular “seasons and occasions.” He says “community of perils calls for extraordinary liberality” and we must sometimes help the distressed “beyond our ability rather than tempt God in putting him upon help by miraculous or extraordinary means.” Solomon offers arguments to “persuade to liberality.” Referring to Deuteronomy 15, he says that we must lend freely and forgive the debts of those who cannot repay them. “Observe againe that the Scripture gives no caussion to restrain any from being over liberall this way; but all men to the liberall and cherefull practise hereof by the sweeter promises.” And love, true charity, transcends all the considerations that make even liberality measured and conditional. “Shee [Love] setts noe boundes to her affections, nor hath any thought of reward. Shee findes recompense enough in the exercise of her love towardes [its object].” Like Calvin, Winthrop proposes a “modell of Christian Charity” based largely on the teaching of the Old

Testament, that urges a literally unconditional generosity or, to use his word, liberality. This address, which must be very little read, has nothing of the prophetic triumphalism our politicians have claimed to find in it. As "a city on a hill," Winthrop says, the colony's failures will be conspicuous and notorious. He says that if they "shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnall intentions, *seeking greate things for ourselves and our posterity* [emphasis mine] the Lord will surely breake out in wrathe against us." And "if our heartes shall turne away, soe that wee will not obey, but shall be seduced and worshipp and serve other Gods, *our pleasure and profitts*…it is propounded unto us this day, wee shall surely perishe out of the good land whither we passe over this vast sea to possesse it." That profit should be called a false god follows inevitably from this very Calvinist ethic of radical openhanded ness.

Another expression of this ethic is a sermon by Jonathan Edwards titled "Christian Charity; Or, The Duty of Charity to the Poor, Explained and Enforced." The title of this lecture comes from the text quoted and expounded on by Edwards, Deuteronomy 15:7—11, as it appears in the 1611 King James Version. "If there be among you a poor man of one of thy brethren within any of thy gates…thou shalt open thy hand wide unto him," and again, "Thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land." The word *wide* does not occur in other translations. It is very much to Edwards's point, however, which is that the obligation to charity has no limits. Like Calvin and Winthrop he argues that "the general state and nature of mankind…renders it most reasonable that we should love our neighbors as ourselves; for men are made in the image of our God, and on this account are worthy of our love." The proper objects of our liberality are not limited to "those of the same people and religion" because "our enemies, those that abuse us and injure us, are our neighbours, and therefore come under the rule of loving our neighbors as ourselves." Like Calvin and Winthrop, Edwards states and answers every objection, or excuse, that would make generosity selective, from the limits of the giver's means to the unworthiness of the potential receiver, including finally the fact that the poor were provided relief by the town. Of this he says, "[I]t doth not answer the rules of christian charity, to relieve only those who are reduced to extremity," and "[I]t is too obvious to be denied, that there are in fact persons so in want, that it would be a charitable act in us to help them,

notwithstanding all that is done by the town. A man must hide his mental eyes, to think otherwise."

At present, here in what is still sometimes called our Calvinist civilization, the controversies of liberalism and conservatism come down, as always, to economics. How exclusive is our claim to what we earn, own, inherit? Are the poor among us injured by the difficulties of their lives, or are the better among them braced and stimulated by the pinch of want? Is Edwards undermining morality when he says "it is better to give to several that are not objects of charity, than to send away empty one that is"? Would we be better friends of traditional values, therefore better Christians, if we exploited the coercive potential of need on the one hand and help on the other? There is clearly a feeling abroad that God smiled on our beginnings, and that we should return to them as we can. If we really did attempt to return to them, we would find Moses as well as Christ, Calvin, and his legions of intellectual heirs. And we would find a recurrent, passionate insistence on bounty or liberality, mercy and liberality, on being kind and liberal, liberal and bountiful, and enjoying the great blessings God has promised to liberality to the poor. These phrases are all Edwards's and there are many more like them.

Calvin says, in a sermon on Deuteronomy 15, "[A]s God bestoweth his benefites upon us, let us beware that wee acknowledge it towardes him, by doing good to our neighbors whome he offereth unto us, so as wee neither exempt ourselves from their want, nor seclude them from our abundance, but gently make them partakers with us, as folke that are linked togither in an inseparable bond."

From the depths of my heart, I say, Amen.

Notes

OPEN THY HAND WIDE: MOSES AND THE ORIGINS OF AMERICAN LIBERALISM

59 “America is a young country”: George Santayana, “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy,” in *Documents in the History of American Philosophy: From Jonathan Edwards to John Dewey*, 405.
59 “Calvinism, taken in this sense”: Ibid., 407.
60 “the country was new”: Ibid., 405.
61 “the Old Testament that was placed”: Adolf Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of the Alien God*, 136.
63 “The God of the Old Testament is pictured”: Ibid.
66 “There were giants in the earth in those days”: Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, 246.
67 “that the liberal advance themselves”: Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, vol. 1, 413.
67 “There are indeed many occurrences”: Ibid., 414.
67 “In this passage, therefore”: Ibid., 410.
76 “But yet howsoever the case stand”: Calvin, *Sermons on Deuteronomy*, 586—87.
76 “[A]lthough a man cannot set downe”: Ibid., 583.
77 “The Lord commands us”: Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 3, vii.

THE FATE OF IDEAS: MOSES

97 “this supposedly divine code” and “our churches are filled”: John Shelby Spong, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die: A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 153—54.