Vincent Cheung and 18th century English Hyper-Calvinism
by Daniel H. Chew

Introduction

I have been shifting in my attitude towards Vincent Cheung throughout the years. I had initially stumbled onto his stuff quite some time back and found them provocative. Note, I found them provocative, not that I found them necessarily orthodox.

My one main article dealing with Cheung's thoughts deals with perhaps the most egregious and outrageous position he holds to, that God is the author of sin.[1] This of course is just the surface of Cheung's many heresies. Cheung is a Rationalist (capital "R") sometimes, and a "biblicist" otherwise when it suits him. He utilizes philosophy as his first principles, despite any protestations to the contrary. After all, nowhere in Scripture is Occasionalism taught; you wouldn't find it. One could argue for Occasionalism, like Jonathan Edwards, but I doubt Edwards' Occasionalism is as bad as Cheung's. Starting from *a priori* "logical principles," Cheung utilizes Scripture propositions as proof-texts for his philosophy, instead of using Scripture as the beginning of knowledge (*principium cognoscendi*).

An example of Cheung's Rationalism is not hard to find. In his heretical book speaking about God being "the author of sin," Cheung writes about "metaphysical distanciation." Now, I seriously doubt *that* concept was being discussed in the Westminster Assembly at all. Is it something that Christians should think about? Yes, I think we should, which is why I had initial positive views of Cheung as an interlocutor. But note that this issue, while important, is an apologetic issue. It is something that we must think about in order to formulate a rational apologetic response. The concept of "metaphysical distanciation" itself should have no bearing at all on the biblical doctrine of God and theodicy. It should be discussed after the doctrine is established, not as something to establish doctrine. Scripture before reason, reason in service to the faith — that is how Christianity is to operate between the twin poles of Rationalism and Irrationalism. We reason AFTER faith, not before faith (which is one main reason why I am against natural theology).

Cheung establishes himself online as some sort of expert, formulating a position that is claimed to be the best of Van Tillian and Clarkian presuppositionalism, while rejecting anything in either that he thinks is false. Of course, who exactly is Vincent Cheung? Who knows? In which church is he a pastor, and who is he accountable to? I doubt many people know that. Unfortunately, the nature of the Internet is such that those who can make the most noise and appear knowledgeable have an influence that they probably will not have in real life. Unfortunately also, it is those who hunger for more of God's truth that will be attracted to his form of godliness. It is past time that Cheung is exposed, and I as someone who identifies with Clarkian apologetics want nothing to do whatsoever with this heretic. He does not speak for [G.H.] Clark and there is no "progression" from [G.H.] Clark

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[1] Daniel H. Chew, *God, Author of Sin and Metaphysical Distanciation: A Brief Rebuttal of Vincent Cheung's Theodicy.* Accessed at http://www.angelfire.com/falcon/ddd_chc82/theology/CheungAuthorSin.html

to him. I have read Clark, and I have read Van Til, and I read Cheung. To put it in perspective, if I were given the choice between Van Til and Cheung, I will choose Van Til. Even the "one-person" teaching of Van Til is more orthodox in comparison to Cheung's blasphemies.

After saying all that, why do I juxtapose Cheung with 18th century English Hyper-Calvinism? I put them together because Cheung's emergence is very similar to the emergence of English Hyper-Calvinism. The spiritual climates of the times were similar, the pressures on the faith were similar, and the "solutions" of Cheung and the Hyper-Calvinists were similar. Through looking at the history of the 18th century English Hyper-Calvinism, it is hoped that we can see the similarity in our times, and beware of people like Cheung, and not just Cheung, but also anyone like him.

Social Religious Contexts

> First, we may note that after the Restoration in 1660 orthodox Calvinism became, as it were, a cause under siege. The majority of Puritans who were orthodox Calvinists left the Church of England in 1662 to become Noncomformists. Thus the religious leadership of the nation was lodged firmly in the hands of men who were either Arminian or moderately Calvinistic in theology. The ejected ministers, being Noncomformists, were placed under harsh and cruel restrictions until 1688 and this severely curtailed their influence upon the religious thought of the nation. As the older men died their places were taken by younger men who had been educated under liberalizing influences in Holland and so a Moderated Calvinism gradually became popular, especially amongst the Presbyterian Dissenters. As the years passed by High Calvinism became more and more the sole preserve of the Independents and the Particular Baptists. The Antinomian controversy of the 1690s served to widen the gap between High Calvinism and Moderated Calvinism, and as the eighteenth century passed by, High Calvinism became in the main, the faith of the poorly-educated Independents and Baptists. These men who clung to the doctrines of High Calvinism saw themselves as a group preserved by God in an apostate age to defend "the faith once delivered to the saints". Their time was taken up by the defence of their faith and it was in this atmosphere of a cause under siege that Hyper-Calvinism was born and nurtured.[2]

England in the late 17th and early 18th century was a time of moderation of religion. It was the Augustan era, which was followed by the Victorian era. The Glorious Revolution in 1688 had deposed the last Roman Catholic Stuart Monarch James II. James II had presided over the continued persecution of Nonconformity and the killing fields of Scotland, where he tried to impose Prelacy upon the Scots. After all the inter-confessional strife, the terrible 30-years war (1619-1648) on the continent and both the English Civil war (1642-1651) and the ruthless persecution and bloodletting following the Restoration of 1660, European Christianity entered into the deconfessional and nascent Enlightenment era. People desired peace and toleration, even within the churches. What

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[2] Peter Toon, *The Emergence of Hyper-Calvinism in English Nonconformity, 1689-1765* (London, UK: The Olive Tree, 1967), 146

was the point of continued strife, as if killing everyone who disagreed with you was an answer to anything? In 1689, the Act of Toleration was signed into law allowing for the meeting of Protestant Dissenters, but not Roman Catholics, as long as they register with the government.

The times were changing. This was the period preceding the Industrial Revolution. Descartes had kick-started modern thought as he tried to come up with a third way (*tertia via*), as a reaction to the terrible massacres of the wars of religion. The turn to reason or empirical inquiry sought to ground knowledge on something more objective that can be argued for, instead of the confessional impasse between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Contrary to modern rationalism, non-French Enlightenment was **not** trying to supplant religion altogether. Rather, Enlightenment thought in its Anglo-American form desired to use reason to explicate the truths of religion. The Enlightenment in its three main forms (French, Anglo-American, German) can be seen as the bitter reaction against the Constantinian captivity of the Church in both its Roman and Protestant forms.

It is not surprising, though sad, that people were abandoning the Christian faith for the new teachings. Socinianism came into England where it was embraced by members within the Church of England, and it provoked controversy within the Anglican Communion.[3] Samuel Clarke, a rationalist and biblicist, published his *Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity* in 1712 which examined the doctrine of the Trinity and denied it as being taught in Scripture.[4] We must remember that Clarke was not denying the Trinity because of any denial of the authority of Scripture. Rather, he was claiming that precisely because He follows Scripture only (biblicistically), the doctrine of the Trinity should be denied. Within the establishment, the eruption of Socinianism and Arianism caused much controversy

Among the Calvinistic Dissenters, many were influenced by the "moderate Calvinism" of the school of Saumur (most famous for its "4-point Calvinism" or Amyraldism). Others followed Richard Baxter's Neonomian thought. "Moderate Calvinism" proved to be a Trojan Horse for many errors. In the continent, "moderate Calvinism" resulted in deconfessionalism and the toleration of errors in the days of Jean-Alphonse Turretin in the early 18th century. In England, "moderate Calvinism" became the vehicle for rationalism in religion resulting in many dissenters, particularly Presbyterians, denying the doctrine of the Trinity and becoming Arians.[5] In both establishment and dissenting circles, apostasy from the faith was rife. It was truly a sad time for orthodoxy.

The orthodox party among the dissenters consists mostly of less learned laymen, and increasingly, many of them were Baptists.[6] Faced with the assault upon orthodoxy, they felt obliged to defend the faith. Many of them were self-taught and sought to defend the Calvinistic faith as best as they could. Being less learned, there was a tendency to veer

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[3] *Ibid.*, 36-7
[4] *Ibid.*, 37
[5] *Ibid.*, 39
[6] *Ibid.*, 146

towards the opposite error of what they were opposing, and this led to the various controversies that would plague Noncomformity in the early 18th century.

The relevance this has for today can be seen in the similar environment we find ourselves. Mainstream Christianity, both mainline and evangelical, is riddled with all manner of errors, many of them serious. There is a need to defend the faith and affirm the truths taught in Scripture. More particularly, there is much soft-pedaling of Calvinism even within the so-called "New Calvinist" circles, in which their "Calvinism" has more in common with Amyraldism than true orthodox Calvinism.[7] The social religious contexts of both early 18th century England and our times are very similar. In both situations, there is a dire need for sound teaching, and in both situations, catastrophe struck even within orthodoxy.

The Rise of Heresies

> Secondly, between 1689 and 1765, High Calvinism was placed in an environment which emphasised the role of reason in religious faith. This meant that the High Calvinists were in danger either of absorbing the rationalism, or of rejecting it completely, or of doing both. It would seem Joseph Hussey fell prey to both temptations. He absorbed the rationalistic tendencies of his day and applied strict logic to Biblical doctrines so that from the doctrines of eternal election and irresistible grace he deduced that Christ should not be offered to all men. And also he deduced from the part which he believed that Christ played in the covenant of grace the doctrine that Christ's humanity was "standing in God" before the creation of the world. One of Hussey's followers, Samuel Stockell, abandoned the doctrine of eternal generation because he could not conceive how "the Begetter and the Begotten" could be of equal date. [Lewis] Wayman, [John] Gill and [John] Brine applied logic to the (hypothetical) covenant of works and deduced the doctrine that it is not the duty of hearers of the Gospel to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet all these men believed that they were not being rationalistic in a human sense but were simply applying "evangelical reason", or reason inspired by the Holy Spirit, to the Bible's teaching.[8]

In the 18th century, the orthodox (what Peter Toon called the "High Calvinists") were shocked at the growing apostasy within both Anglican but especially Nonconformist circles. They were appalled and "a group of influential laymen decided to sponsor a series of lectures in defence of what they considered to be the main doctrines of the Protestant faith."[9] The upshot was a strong reaffirmation of sound doctrine, yet at the same time danger lurks even within the camp.

The orthodox were not immune to the rationalist zeitgeist. They decided to use what they thought was "evangelical reason." Here, we already seen a problem with their

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[7] An example can be seen in the Neo-Amyraldian views of David Byrne, as I have refuted in Daniel H. Chew, *Interpretation of Bunyan's Quote and a Brief Response to Tony Byrne's Neo-Amyraldism.* Accessed at http://www.angelfire.com/falcon/ddd_chc82/theology/NeoAmyraldismRefutation1.pdf

[8] Toon, 147

[9] *Ibid.,* 42

hermeneutics. Reason according to sound orthodoxy is a reason that reasons after faith. *Fides quaerens intellectum* — Faith seeking understanding. Faith provides the premises and manner for the exercise of reason. In this so-called "evangelical reason" however, reason chose the manner of reasoning and faith provides the "premises" through proof-texting. The traditional view is that reason works only after faith has provided the framework for it to function. The new "evangelical" view is that reason provides the framework while faith provides only the premises. That is why we can have biblicists like Samuel Stockell abandoning the doctrine of eternal generation of the Son. His reasoning process is as follows: The premises derived from Scripture are "The Begetter is from eternity" and "The Begotten is from eternity." "By definition" the Begetter is temporally prior to the Begotten, so in conclusion, the eternal generation of the Son must be denied. Notice that Stockell's reasoning uses biblical truths as mere premises. Instead of understanding the form of reasoning behind the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son and evaluating it rationally, he uses a rationalistic form of argument with the input of biblical premises in his form of "evangelical reason."

This 18th century evangelical rationalism resulted in the emergence of two main errors within Noncomformity: Antinomianism and Hyper-Calvinism. Antinomianism is the denial of the third use of the Law, and had its main proponent in Tobias Crisp (d. 1642). It is noted that we are speaking of "Doctrinal Antinomianism" here, as there is no indication that those promoting these teachings were in any way deficient in Christian conduct. As a reaction to Richard Baxter's neonomism, Crisp denied that God's law performed any function at all for a Christian. As Toon wrote:

> The basic underlying difference of opinion in the Antinomian controversy concerned the nature of the law of God. Since his purpose was to extol Christ and free grace, Crisp had little to say about the moral law. ... he believed that God's justice is affronted by human transgression of His law, although he never seems to have explicitly stated that God's law is an eternal expression of His righteousness and justice.
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> He believed that the law served a useful purpose in convincing men of their need of a Saviour; nevertheless, he gave it little or no place in the life of a Christian since he held that "free grace is the teacher of good works."[10]

As it can be seen, Crisp's stance is reactionary and directly opposite Baxter's neonomian idea of a salvation that takes account of works in some sense.

Following upon the heels of the antinomian controversy was the hard-shelling of Calvinism into Hyper-Calvinism. First, the doctrine of eternal justification was promoted by Isaac Chauncy.[11] The embrace of Eternal Justification betrays the flatenning of the imminent and economical Trinity in the theologies of the Hyper-Calvinists as time and

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[10] *Ibid.*, 54
[11] *Ibid.*, 61

eternity began to be blurred. God's work in time was rationalistically seen to be a mirror portrayal of the imminent workings of the Trinity, and therefore justification must be eternal if it is to be actual for believers. The distinctions between God's being, God's decrees and God's works are burred in this rationalistic theory of eternal justification. Such blurring codified itself in Hyper-Calvinism, its logical conclusion. In 1706 and 1707, Joseph Hussy took this philosophical blurring of the imminent and economical Trinity to its logical conclusion in the denial of the offer of the Gospel.[12] Since God issues forth his irresistible grace only to the elect, this irresistible grace (of the economical Trinity) is a reflection of His call only to the elect (imminent Trinity). An offer to the non-elect (economical Trinity) has no reflection at all in God's eternal decree (imminent Trinity) and therefore such is to be rejected. As one of Hussey's 20 propositions states, "We must preach the Gospel as it is most fitted to the display of effectual grace. To offer God's grace is to steal: God saith, Thou shalt not steal."[13] From Joseph Hussey to Lewis Wayman, John Gill and John Brine, this rationalistic tendency follows through in their denials of the offer of the Gospel. To be sure, Hussey, Gill and other do not deny that the Gospel ought to be preached to all. Rather, they deny that the Gospel is to be *offered* to all.

We thus see that rationalism had caused the creation of two heresies within the supposed defenders of the faith. Reacting against Neonomism and Arminianism, they swung to the opposite errors of Antinomanism and Hyper-Calvinism. The rise of heresies oftentimes come out of good intentions, as the case of the devolution of 18th century Noncomformity shows.

The parallels with Vincent Cheung in the early 21st century is not hard to discern. Cheung reasons rationalistically as well, using biblical truths as mere proof-text premises to insert into *a priori* rationalistically formed syllogisms. The Hyper-Calvinists of the 18th century flattened the distinction between the imminent and the economic Trinity, which resulted in their promotion of Hyper-Calvinism. Cheung likewise flattens the distinction between primary and secondary causation, which results in his monstrous doctrine of God being the author of sin. The 18th century Hyper-Calvinists were reacting to Arminianism and Socinianism, so likewise Cheung reacts against the soft-peddling of Calvinism in the Neo-Amyraldian views of contemporary New [Evangelical] Calvinism. The parallels are striking. And just as the 18th century English Hyper-Calvinists are in error, so likewise Cheung is in error.

Conclusion: The Temptation to Overreact

> Fourthly, the Hyper-Calvinists were sincere men of average intelligence, but they lacked a prophetical and discerning spirit. They keenly desire to glorify God and mistakenly believed that God was more glorified in the exaltation of free grace in the pulpit and on the printed page, than in the evangelism and conversion of men. They became so obsessed with the defence of what they regarded as sound doctrine that the evangelistic note of Scripture as basically an overture by God towards sinners was muted. This lack of interest in evangelism (and a reference

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[12] *Ibid.*, 74-5
[13] *Ibid.*, 81

to evangelism in their books is virtually impossible to find) came, as we have seen, with the deduction of the duty of ministers in preaching from the secret will of the Lord, the will of His decrees. They did not realise what a baneful influence their doctrines would have upon those who followed in their footsteps.[14]

As we have seen, it was reactions within Nonconformity to Neonomism and Arminianism that resulted in the rise of Antinomianism and Hyper-Calvinism in the early 18th century. The Noncomformist pastors and theologians had good intentions, but good intentions alone is insufficient in the Christian life. Sadly, their efforts resulted in an arid church climate, such that God used the Evangelical Arminian John Wesley in the later half of the 18th century to chastise them for their lack of concern over evangelism, which was caused by their flawed theologies. Likewise, I am deeply concerned over the extreme views emanating from the online pen of Vincent Cheung, and the almost fanatical devotion his followers have for his views to the point of comparative neglect of many others.

My questions to Cheung and his followers are thus: Are you open to the possibility that you just might be wrong? Does it not bother you at all that no one else in the entire 20 centuries of church history held to your position? Can you see that you just might have overreacted to the errors of the modern contemporary American (and American-influenced) churches, in the same way as the 18th century Noncomfromists overreacted to the errors of their time?

When you read those whom you disagree with, do you try to read them to understand where they are coming from, instead of circling the wagons and pigeon-holing them into a particular category? I am no Vantillian, but I appreciate Van Til's writings even where I disagree with some of what he says. Can you say that about those whom you disagree with, and actually try to understand where they are coming from? Would you even consider the objections people have made, instead of imputing whatever meaning you please to the words they use, and see any critique of e.g. rationalism, as an attack on rationality?

I admire your zeal, but it is greatly misplaced. Your philosophy has clouded your thinking, instead of clarifying it. There is a reason why tradition (small "t") exists, not that we are held captive to it, but that it guides us in the path we should go in our theologizing. Christianity was not born yesterday, and true theology has not been lost until the dawning of Vincent Cheung, or anyone else for that matter. Shouldn't you be guided by the Reformed and Christian tradition, instead of thinking that everyone, every single one of you, is doing theology *de novo*? To raise some precedents, almost all biblicists have deviated in some way from the faith, from the Seventh-Day Adventists to the Jehovah's Witnesses to even Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell (founders of the Stone-Campbell movement). The fruit of biblicalism has been anything but biblical, so why do you insist on going down that path?

The temptation to over-react is always there. But overreactions almost invariably have potentially deadly consequences. For the sakes of your souls, please abandon

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[14] *Ibid.*, 148

Cheungism. Being "logical" (as opposed to being truly biblical and logical) is not a sufficient price for jeopardizing your salvation. Stop being so proud and certain of yourselves, and come and learn from the Reformed tradition. Not everything found in the Reformed tradition may be right, but at least you will be on the right track.

If you persist in Cheung's errors, be warned that it would lead you onto the path of death. For the sake of your souls, awake from your slumber and abandon it now. Do not be deceived, there is no life in that way, and only fools tread in that path.

> There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death. (Prov. 14:12)