THE AMERICAN FOUNDING
AND THE HARMONY OF REASON AND REVELATION:
A REDISCOVERY OF CALVINIST SOURCES

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Abstract: Scholars of religion and the American Founding often misunderstand the commitment of Calvinist Founding Fathers to natural law, philosophical inquiry and reason. There is little or no place for natural, “unassisted” reason in Reformed theology, these scholars claim, because scripture is presumed to be the exclusive source of moral duty and therefore the only authoritative source for direction on civil order and justice. Hence, reference to nature or reason supposedly evinces inconsistency or unprinciplled compromise between these Founders’ religious and political beliefs and practice. This article challenges this view of Reformed theology, correcting the widespread misunderstanding that taints much of the scholarship on the religious beliefs of the Founders and the significance of religion in the Founding. The evidence presented also challenges crucial premises used to build theories concerning colonial American political thought. Contrary to popular interpretations, the Reformed tradition affirms the natural law, the harmony of reason and revelation, and the legitimacy of rational inquiry. Discussions on the work of Founders John Witherspoon and James Wilson serve as case studies, demonstrating their consistency with the Reformed tradition.

Keywords: American founding, John Witherspoon, James Wilson, Calvinism, Reformed theology, American religion, founding fathers, natural law, law of nature, nature’s God, philosophy, political theology, political theory, puritans.

Introduction

Scholarship on the role of religion and theology in the American founding, while seemingly thorough and comprehensive, has failed to properly and extensively describe the nuances, distinctions and development in the Reformed theological tradition, particularly on the relationship between reason and revelation. Indeed, whole books that analyse reason and revelation in the Founding presume to understand this tradition when casting its American adherents and yet contain little or no explication of the Protestant, let alone Reformed Protestant, tradition on the matter.1 No work on the American Founding that I have encountered provides a detailed and precise account of the Reformed tradition on reason and revelation. Many analyse primary source material, 2

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2 The author is very grateful to Glenn Moots for his generous comments and suggestions and to the reviewers for their attentive and critical feedback.
3 Gregg Frazer has no discussion on the relationship between reason and revelation in the Protestant tradition in The Religious Beliefs of America’s Founders: Reason, Revelation, and Revolution (Lawrence, 2012). He has two paragraphs on Thomas Aquinas’ view of reason (pp. 14–15).

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such as the works of John Calvin and other Reformed authors, but typically provide poor or simplistic analyses of Reformed theology, rely on Calvin as the principal or sole codifier of Reformed theology, and fail to present crucial nuances, distinctions and doctrinal developments subsequent to Calvin.

Many of the important claims made about Reformed theology (or ‘Calvinism’) in this literature are false. It is false, for example, as one scholar claimed, that ‘the mere claim of harmony [of reason and revelation] is challenging to many versions of Protestant thought’.

It is false that Calvin and later Calvinists, including the Puritans, claimed that reason apart from revelation cannot discover moral truths and natural human ends.

It is false that Reformed Protestant theologians were ‘hostile to efforts to discover principles of moral and political life on the basis of reason’.

It is false that the doctrine of total depravity necessitates a rejection of the accessibility of the ‘truth about politics found in nature, via natural knowledge, the law of nature, and what concerns us “as men” by reason apart from revelation’.

In truth, Reformed political theorists never denied that civil government is a universal and natural institution for men as men, nor that the principles of civil order can be known by reason apart from revelation by both

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6 Ibid., p. 45. Ralph Hancock relies on this throughout his work, Calvin and the Foundations of Modern Politics (Ithaca, 1989), writing that Calvin had ‘hostility … to human rule according to the purposes of human reason’ (p. 166; cf. pp. 68, 110). Hancock here follows Michael Walzer’s influential book, The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics (Cambridge, 1965), which is problematic for similar reasons.

The Calvinists, Walzer claims, see the moral law of scripture as ‘beyond the limits of [fallen] human nature and human reason … a bridge entirely external’ (p. 36). It is a contentious divine law that corresponds with nature and reason only accidentally, if at all. To be sure, there are voices in the Reformed tradition that reject the separation of the ethics and theology disciplines, insisting, to put it simply, on the sole study of the Bible for moral duty. William Ames (1576–1633) and Cotton Mather (1663–1728) are representative of this view. It is not the dominant view, however. See Glenn Moots, Politics Reformed: The Anglo-American Legacy of Covenant Theology (Columbia, 2010), p. 119.


9 Contra Walzer, who claims that ‘society and state were not natural associations’ for Calvinists due to their view of the Fall. See Walzer, Revolution, p. 32.

10 Zuckert, for example, states that the ‘differences are so great between these two styles of political thinking. The first founders and their teachers look to revelation and base their political reasoning on principles taken from sacred texts. The second founders and their teachers look to reason; although reason may teach them of nature’s God and his law, they do not confuse this God with the God as known through revelation.’ See Zuckert, ‘A Restatement’, p. 273.


12 See, for example, Fauser, Religious Beliefs, p. 20.

13 John Fea argues that one should question whether John Witherspoon was truly a ‘Christian statesman’ because he taught that ‘virtue could stem from natural sources’. See J. Fea, Was America Founded as a Christian Nation? A Historical Introduction (Louisville, 2011), p. 233. For an excellent study of natural law and Reformed tradiution, see Stephen J. Grabill, Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics (Grand Rapids, 2006).

14 I do not discuss natural theology in detail. See Michael Sudduth, The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology (Abingdon, 2009), in which Sudduth shows that there was no ‘Reformed objection’ to natural theology prior to the twentieth century.

sources,16 and the legitimacy of philosophy.17 These errors are rife in the literature on the Founders and the Founding and preclude proper and complete analysis and theory formation.18

While it is questionable whether many of the scholars referenced even understand Calvin himself, their neglect of post-Reformation theological development is the evident cause of many egregious errors. The theological progeny of the first generation of Protestant Reformers continued to develop, codify and systematize Reformed doctrine, culminating in what theologians today call ‘Reformed orthodoxy’.19 Very few commentators on religion and the American Founding are aware of these essential developments after Calvin. When taken into account, Reformed orthodoxy refutes the popular attempts by scholars to reduce all or most of the Founders’ religious beliefs to monolithic labels, such as ‘theistic rationalism’, ‘rational Christianity’, ‘supernatural rationalism’ or ‘enlightened Christianity’.20 There certainly were Founders for whom those labels are suitable, but the label is too often misapplied.

I first present the nuances and distinctions of Reformed orthodoxy, particularly its view of the relationship of reason and revelation, to topple persistent barriers that preclude an accurate treatment of the role of religion and theology in the Founding. I then analyze the views of two important American Founding Fathers and demonstrate their consistency with the Reformed tradition.21


17 Noll, for example, states that by conducting philosophical inquiries John Witherspoon ‘in practice denied that original sin harmed the ability to understand and cultivate natural virtue'. See Mark A. Noll, Princeton and the Republic 1768–1822: The Search for a Christian Enlightenment in the Era of Samuel Stanhope Smith (Princeton, 1989), p. 43.


19 See PRRD, Vol. I, pp. 33–43. This is a technical term that refers to a specific historical development in Reformed theology.

20 See Frazer, Religious Beliefs, pp. 11–13.

21 My argument parallels, supports and builds upon John G. West's in The Politics of Revelation and Reason (Lawrence, 1996), pp. 11–78. He states, for example, that Founder James Wilson's 'framework' for the relationship of reason and revelation 'was thoroughly consistent with the historic Christian conception of natural law' (p. 43). But

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Reason and Revelation in Reformed Orthodoxy

The theologians who contributed to the development of Reformed theology, often called 'Reformed scholastics', subscribed to a rigorous and precise methodology for the formulation and codification of theological doctrine.22 The Reformed scholastics dealt with problems and objections to Reformed theology and sought to achieve a degree of 'catholicity' by bringing Reformed theology into the theological discussion from the patristics to the present.23 They formulated with precision the relationship between reason and revelation for the subsequent Reformed tradition,24 arguing that reason has an ancillary status in regard to the 'mysteries of faith' — the truths above nature deposited and revealed in scripture alone.25 Faith does not destroy reason. Faith, rather, assumes and completes reason. There is harmony, complementarity and even mutual subordination between reason and revelation. Further, they affirmed that reason apart from scriptural revelation, even for fallen man, was generally effective and useful when applied to the proper objects of reason, namely, natural truths, including political truths. Indeed, for these theologians natural truth (e.g. the existence of and obligations to God and one's moral duty to neighbours) is not even the proper object of faith, since natural truth is innately known in conscience and properly acquired by reason. Faith provides 'certainty' on natural truth — it is supplemental to it. The proper objects of faith are those truths above reason, truths exclusively revealed and contained in scripture. It is difficult to find a Reformed theologian during this period who declared reason apart from revelation to be useless or necessarily dangerous, natural law and natural theology to be inaccessible by reason alone or abrogated by special revelation, or philosophy to be only a pagan enterprise. Instead, we find nuanced and positive accounts of all of these.26


23 See ibid., p. 97.

24 The 'Reformed tradition' is a broad set of theologies whose limits are difficult to determine. The formulations of the Reformed scholastics are, however, a major strain in this tradition. Shifting these formulations places one in the Reformed tradition. But shifting them does not make one a Reformed scholastic theologian, for Reformed scholarship is more a method than a set of formulations. Witherspoon, for example, is not a theological scholar, but he shares and assumes many of their formulations.

25 Ancillary refers 'judging the truth of connections and so contradictions' in formulating supernatural doctrine without exalting reason above 'Christ and his Gospel'. IET, 10.7, 8.

These developers of Reformed theology argued that reason apart from special revelation was sufficient, prior to the fall of Adam, for humanity to achieve righteousness before God. Before the fall, God related to man solely as Creator, not as Redeemer; and the Creator established at creation the standard of righteousness — the natural law.27 Francis Turretin (1623–87), a well-known seventeenth-century Genevan Reformed theologian, wrote: "There is a natural law, not arising from a voluntary contract or law of society, but from a divine obligation being impressed by God upon the conscience of man in his very creation."28 Reason, not special revelation, was the original means by which man would acquire knowledge of moral and political truth, and such truth is natural, universal and immutable.29

The fall of Adam diminished humankind’s ability to reason properly, leaving humanity with no hope for achieving the true righteousness sufficient for eternal life. But God chose to republish the standard (at least in summary form) of righteousness (i.e. the natural law) in the Mosaic Law (called here the ‘moral law’ or ‘revealed law’) and to reveal himself as the Redeemer in the person and work of Christ. In order to redeem man from sin and eternal death there had to be an additional revelation and act of God, since the natural order lacks any inherent remedy for sin. The natural knowledge of God and the supernatural knowledge of God is together the ‘twofold knowledge’ of God — the duplex cognitio dei.30

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27 See John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, 1989), 1.5.1, 2.
29 IET, 1.1.9. ‘The moral law...ought to correspond with the eternal and archetypal law in God, since it is its copy and shadow, in which he has manifested his justice and holiness...’ [The moral law is the same as to substance with the natural, which is immutable and founded upon the rational nature; both because the sum of the law...is impressed upon man by nature and because all its precepts are derived from the light of nature and nothing is found in them which is not taught by sound reason; nothing which does not pertain to all nations in every age; nothing which it is not necessary for human nature to follow in order to attain its end.’] 11.2.16, 17. For a discussion on Calvin’s and Turretin’s views of natural law, see David VanDrunen, Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought (Grand Rapids, 2010), pp. 67–118 and 155–9; and Grabill, Rediscovering, pp. 70–97 and 151–74. Calvin affirmed the universality of the natural law. ‘Equity,’ he writes, ‘because it is natural, cannot but be the same for all.’ Institutes, 4.20.16.
30 Calvin writes: ‘[T]he Lord first appears, as well in the creation of the world as in the general doctrine of Scripture, simply as a Creator, and afterwards as a Redeemer in Christ — a twofold knowledge of him hence arises.’ Institutes, 1.2.1.

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31 As Calvin writes: ‘The written law is just an attestation of the law of nature, through means of which God recalls to our memory that which he has previously engraved on our hearts.’ Commentary on the Book of the Psalms, trans. James Anderson (5 vols., Grand Rapids, 2004), Vol. 4, p. 38.
32 IET, 1.3.10, emphasis added. Calvin states that the moral law is ‘nothing else than a testimony of the natural law’, Institutes, 4.20.15.
33 Turretin writes: ‘The mysteries of faith are beyond the sphere of reason to which the unregenerate man cannot rise.’ IET, 1.8.5.
34 Benedict Pecet (1655–1724), nephew of Turretin, stated: ‘Reason cannot and ought not to bring forth any mysteries, as it were, out of its own storehouse; for this is the prerogative of scripture only.’ Christian Theology, trans. Frederick Rovoux (Philadelphia, 1834), p. 59.
35 IET, 1.9.6.
36 Ibid., 1.9.11.
37 Turretin distinguishes between an ‘incomprehensible thing (which cannot be grasped)...[because] we have only an obscure and imperfect knowledge of them’ and an ‘incomprehensible thing (which cannot be conceived)’. Ibid., 1.9.9.
38 Turretin writes: ‘For although we do not deny that the mysteries of faith are above reason, still we do not think that they are contrary to it; so that if their truth cannot be
Turrein concludes that '[r]eason is perfected by faith and faith supposes reason, upon which to found the mysteries of grace'.

With the preservation of reason also came a high regard for philosophy. Far from declaring it a pagan enterprise, Reformed theologians affirmed philosophy's usefulness. The influential sixteenth-century theologian Zacharias Ursinus wrote, for example:

True philosophy, although it also differs very much from the doctrine of the church, yet, it does not array itself against it, nor is it a wicked fabrication, and device of Satan, as is true of the false doctrines of the Sects; but it contains truth, and is, as it were, a certain ray of the wisdom of God, impressed upon the mind of man in his creation. It is a doctrine that has respect to God and his creatures, and many other things that are good and profitable to mankind, and has been drawn out from the light of nature, and from principles in themselves clear and evident, and reduced to a system by wise and earnest men. It follows, therefore, that it is not only lawful, but also profitable, for Christians to devote themselves to the study of philosophy.

Turrein devotes most of his discussion to the proper bounds of philosophy, stating that though God is the 'author of philosophy and of natural reason . . . these should [not] be the interpreters of Scripture'. Philosophy is useful in 'convincing the Gentiles', testifying to the Israelites' conviction in things known by nature, by which (as from a twofold revelation) the truth and certainty of the things themselves may be better confirmed, and preparing the 'reception' of heavenly doctrine. His concern is not with philosophizing as such but that 'care . . . [is] taken that philosophical truths be not extended beyond their own sphere and ordinary powers of nature'. Philosophy is a 'measure' (or regula) of truth only for natural truth and functions only as a 'servant' (or ancilla) for supernatural truth. Insistence on the ancillary role was primarily to safeguard, not natural knowledge of God and his laws, but the objects properly known only by faith. Reformed theologians such as Turrein therefore ensured that neither reason, nor faith, were undermined, each having distinct roles in the discovery of natural and supernatural truth.

Many theologians even acknowledged that the unregenerate (or heathen) could know and act in accordance with the natural law — that they could possess outward virtue by natural instinct, natural sociability, and the application of reason. Nineteenth-century Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck emphasizes that: Reformed theologians 'have always fully acknowledged the existence and moral value of [pagan civil action]'. Bavinck goes on to argue:

Since after the fall people have remained human and continue to share in the blessings of God’s common grace, they can inwardly possess many virtues and outwardly do many good deeds that, viewed through human eyes and measured by human standards, are greatly to be appreciated and of great value for human life.

This praise for the outward virtue of the unregenerate is made possible by Reformed theological anthropology. Calvin, affirming a distinction that goes back at least to Lombard, distinguishes ‘earthly’ objects (‘matters of policy and economy, all mechanical arts, and liberal studies’) and ‘heavenly’ objects (‘true righteousness and future blessedness’). Though man lost all understanding on heavenly matters, he did not lose all understanding on earthly matters. Man can still be ‘very acute and clear-sighted in the investigation of inferior [earthly] things’, though not on heavenly matters. Political questions were not ‘heavenly matters’. Indeed, when man is focused on the ‘inferior things’ he can achieve ‘some result’, proving that ‘some principle of civil order is impressed on all. And this is ample proof that . . . no man is devoid of.

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42 Turrein even permits the philosopher . . . to begin with a doubt in order to conduct a safer investigation of natural things. Ibid., 1.13.14.
43 Ibid., 1.13.13.
45 John Calvin, Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, 2004), Ch. 44, v. 18.
46 Calvin, Institutes, 2.2.15.
the light of reason." Calvin's "supernatural" virtues — those which relate to heaven and the eschaton, such as 'the light of faith and righteousness' — were "withdrawn" in the fall, but the natural gifts were only "partly weakened and partly corrupted", ensuring that "nothing, indeed, is more common, than for man to be sufficiently instructed in a right course of conduct by natural law". Hence, within the Reformed theological framework there is at least the formal possibility for optimism concerning man's ability to reach sound conclusions on natural duties, including natural civil order and justice.

Reformed theologians, including Calvin, formulated these distinctions to affirm both fallen man's ability to know and perform natural duty and to declare man to be far below the righteousness God requires for heavenly life, reconciling the seeming inconsistency between his positive and negative statements of man's fallen state. Uprightness before one's fellow man cannot be confused with sufficient righteousness before God. But while fallen man lacks anything resembling true righteousness before God, he can achieve a considerable degree of civil uprightness. This explains how Reformed political theorist Johannes Althusius (1563–1638) could write: "But in political life even an infidel may be called just, innocent, and upright." Similarly, the Canons of Dort (1619), a major statement of Reformed theology, states that fallen man "shows some regard for virtue and for good outward behavior" (3/4.4).

What then of the doctrine of sola scriptura so often associated with the Reformation? Scripture is principally the exclusive and sufficient source for all supernatural truth. Bénédic Pictet (1655–1724) a Genevan theologian and nephew of Francis Turretin, stated: "This perfection [of scripture] is confined to those things which are necessary to salvation, for it was not God's design, in giving us the scripture, to make us philosophers." The doctrine of sola scriptura does not in principle mean that the Bible is the sufficient and exclusive source for all particular duties and knowledge (though it summarizes moral duty in the Decalogue), but only for particular knowledge of a certain type, namely, supernatural truth and natural truth most obscured by the fall.

Precisely distinguishing the principal objects of faith and reason, the well-known English Puritan John Charnock (1628–80), wrote:

"For God in regard of his existence is not only the discovery of faith, but of reason... it is a discovery to our reason, as shining in the creatures; and an object of our faith as breaking out upon us in the Scriptures: it is an article of our faith, and an article of our reason. Faith supposeth natural knowledge, as grace supposeth nature. Faith indeed is properly of things above reason, purely depending upon revelation. What can be demonstrated by natural light, is not so properly the object of faith; though in regard of the addition of a certainty by revelation it is so."

Since the principal object of faith is supernatural truth, not the truths discoverable by reason, faith's role vis-à-vis natural truth is supplemental and confirmatory. It provides the addition of certainty, but faith is not the proper epistemic ground for such knowledge. Faith can provide what one lacks in reason, but it need not. All truths contained in scripture, both the natural truths inscripturated and supernatural truths, can be objects of faith, for scriptural authority.

Johannes Althusius, *Politics: An Abridged Translation of Politics Methodically Set Forth and Illustrated with Sacred and Profane Examples*, ed. and trans. Frederick S. Carney (Indianapolis, 1964), p. 147. In another work, Althusius affirmed that all human kind were inclined towards the natural law. He writes: "Thus, there is a knowledge and natural inclination for this law in the human heart. Because of it, a person knows what is just and is urged by the hidden impulse of nature to do what is just and to not do what is unjust." Johannes Althusius, *On Law and Power*, trans. Jeffrey J. Veenstra (Grand Rapids, 2013), p. 9.

Quoted in Grabill, *Rediscovering*, p. 8. Turrettin argues for the existence of the natural law by citing the 'consent of the nations, among whom...same law of the primitive nations obtains, from which even without a teacher they have learned that God should be worshiped, parents honored, a virtuous life led and from which as a fountain have flowed so many laws concerning equity and virtue enacted by heathen legislatures, drawn from nature itself.' IET, 11.1.13.


Johann Heinrich Alsted (1588–1638), a Reformed polymath, wrote: "All political conclusions are revealed by these three principles: reason [ratio] dictates, experience confirms [confirmat], scripture convains [convincit]. My translation from *Tomes Quartus Encyclopaedia in Quo Philosophia Practica* (Herbonae Nassoviorum, 1630), p. 1389.
revelation is the immediate and perspicuous delivery of truth apart from reason. Reason is a mediate and less certain means of truth, for one must reason through nature to natural truth. Still, despite being less perspicuous, natural reason is so concreted with natural truth that it remains the proper means of acquiring such truth. The principal role of faith is to know, assent to and trust in truths above reason. Despite their mutually supporting roles, the principal roles of faith and reason are widely different.\textsuperscript{56}

This discussion has important implications for our study. In Reformed theology a redeemed man remains a man—a man obligated to fulfill the demands of God his Creator. He is a Christian human being.\textsuperscript{57} The content of natural theology and natural law after conversion remain part of man’s obligations to God and fellow man. Supernatural revelation does not supersede pre-conversion obligations. Hence, a distinctively Christian civil community does not transcend natural political principles, and therefore it does not transcend universally accessible political principles. The ground of political order and civil justice remains for all humankind the law of nature and nature’s God. The distinctively Christian elements of any Christian commonwealth are non-essential, though not inconsequential, to civil order, justice and discipline. Such elements strengthen, adorn and perfect the civil community, but do not constitute, nor serve as the ground for, political order and justice.\textsuperscript{58}

Moreover, since each individual, regardless of his or her salvific relationship to God, has access, by reason, to the principles of right conduct, there is considerable overlap in points of inquiry between the Christian and the non-Christian (or anyone considered heterodox). While Christians are held to additional duties adventitious to nature revealed in scripture, there remains significant common ground between Christians and non-Christians concerning right conduct and principles of political governance and civil order. Christians can, for this reason, praise non-Christians who make sound arguments for various truths and can appropriate their arguments.

When a Reformed Christian, then, appropriates or borrows ideas from so-called Enlightenment philosophers, he has not abandoned his tradition. Nor does he then hold to an admixture of Christianity and Enlightenment. It is precisely this Christian framework that permits agreement with these philosophers, and in agreeing Reformed Christians do not consent to Enlightenment but agree with another human’s argument or conclusion as co-participants within a universally accessible realm of truth. The most evident and readily correctable errors in most existing literature on religion and the American Founding arise from an imprecise juxtaposition of Christianity and Enlightenment. The latter is opposed to the former, however, only when it calls into question its theological framework for the relationship of reason and revelation, including either the denial of the possibility of theology or the demand that supernatural doctrine is proven by reason.

For this reason, the theological framework for reason and revelation in the Reformed tradition does not preclude many conclusions of Enlightenment philosophy, such as Locke’s social contract or his justification for revolution.\textsuperscript{59} Discovering Lockean notions of liberty and equality among the Founders therefore does not demonstrate abandonment of the Reformed tradition concerning reason and revelation, let alone a co-opting of that Reformed tradition by the Enlightenment. Similarly, Reformed theology would not preclude Hutcheson’s philosophy of moral sense or the conclusions of the contemporary natural theologians such as Samuel Clarke and Joseph Butler.\textsuperscript{60} The framework I have described establishes the formal limits of reason, but it does not itself determine the necessary content of its conclusions.

It must be emphasized that this tradition of Reformed orthodoxy had deep roots in the Christian tradition. Its synthesis was not cut from whole cloth. Anyone familiar with Thomistic strains of thought on reason and revelation will find Reformed orthodoxy to be largely consistent with Thomism on the relationship of faith and reason, grace and nature, and theology and philosophy. A leading scholar on medieval thought, John Patrick Donnelly, wrote: ‘The striking thing about the rise of Reformed scholasticism is that its roots in medieval scholasticism run heavily to Thomism, hardly at all to nominalism.’\textsuperscript{61} Turretin likewise claims that most Reformed theologians up to his time followed Aquinas, not Occam or Scotus, in their view of the ultimate ground of natural law, explicitly denying divine command theory.\textsuperscript{62} In addition, the seventeenth-

\textsuperscript{56} Calvin writes: ‘Faith, indeed, has also its eyes, but they are such as penetrate into the invisible kingdom of God, and are contented with the mirror of the Word; for it is the demonstration of invisible things.’ John Calvin, \textit{Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles}, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids, 2005), pp. 34–5.

\textsuperscript{57} Francisculus Junius (1554–1602) stated: ‘For to the extent that we may be Christians, we do not cease being humans, but we are Christian human beings. So also we must state that therefore we are bound by Christian laws, not that we are consequently released from human ones. For grace perfects nature; grace does not, however, abolish it.’ Junius, \textit{Mosaic Polity}, trans. Rester, p. 38.

\textsuperscript{58} VanDrummen, \textit{Natural Law}, p. 1.

\textsuperscript{59} Much of what came to be known as Lockean political philosophy did not originate with Locke but is discernable in authors before Locke, including some Reformed authors. See Moots, \textit{Politics Reformed}, pp. 118–29.

\textsuperscript{60} Witherspoon praises Clarke, for example. See John Witherspoon, \textit{Lectures on Moral Philosophy}, ed. Jack Scott (Newark, 1982) (hereafter LMP), p. 65.


\textsuperscript{62} See \textit{IET}, 11.2.11. See Grabill, \textit{Rediscovering}, pp. 15–17, for a discussion on ‘Thomist trajectories’ in Reformed Scholasticism.
century Reformed theologians sought 'catholicity' in their theology. As Muller states, 'the Protestant orthodox [after Calvin] were intent upon establishing systematically the normative, catholic character of institutionalized Protestantism'.

For this reason, there is significant theological continuity between 'Anglican' (e.g. Richard Hooker's) and Reformed, theology, especially on reason and revelation. A Reformed Christian affirming the 'eternal' and 'natural' laws, or that 'grace perfects nature', or that 'faith supposes reason', is appropriating the broader Christian tradition into his theological system to achieve catholicity. Even citing Hooker or Aquinas, for example, does not in itself indicate any opposition to Reformed theology. In many ways, the discussion of this section reflects not simply the Reformed tradition, but the Christian tradition in general, and it serves to show that Reformed theology is one expression of the broad Christian theological tradition.

II

Reason, Revelation and the American Founding Fathers

The works of John Witherspoon (1723–94) and James Wilson (1742–98) serve as our case studies of Reformed Founders mischaracterised in the literature. Both Witherspoon and Wilson were born and educated in Scotland in the early to mid-eighteenth century. The location of their education is important. Compared to England and continental Europe, Scottish universities were late in adopting and lecturing on the Reformed Scholastic theologians, such as Heronymous Zanchius, Gisbertus Voetius, Francis Turretin and Benedict Pictet. 'Ironically,' as James Moore puts it, 'at the moment that Reformed scholasticism was being established in the Church of Scotland and in the Scottish universities, it was losing ground in Europe'. Some of the disputes in Scotland at the time were centred on the works of minister and philosopher Francis Hutcheson and his objections to Reformed scholasticism. Witherspoon was engaged in this fight, writing a satirical work approvingly deploying both Turretin and Pictet against the 'Moderates' who aligned with Hutcheson. This proves that Witherspoon was aware of, and probably accepted, the basic theological formulations of the Reformed scholastics.

Wilson began his university education intent upon becoming a Presbyterian minister but then afterwards switched to law, making it likely that he encountered the same questions and disputes that Witherspoon did on the limits and role of reason in Reformed theology, especially at a time when the Enlightenment was gaining legitimacy.

II.1 John Witherspoon

Presbyterian minister and president of Princeton, John Witherspoon is known for his role in the education of many in the Founding generation, including James Madison. He was also a delegate to the Second Continental Congress, signer of the Declaration of Independence, signer of the Articles of Confederation, and an active supporter of the Constitution. Of particular interest for many scholars are his Lectures on Moral Philosophy which he gave to his students at Princeton and in which he conducts an 'inquiry into the nature and grounds of moral obligation by reason, as distinct from revelation'.

Witherspoon the Calvinist conducting rational inquiries has prompted some to wrongly claim that his actions are inconsistent with the Reformed tradition. Gregg Frazer, for example, asserts that Witherspoon's setting 'aside the Scriptures to do philosophy means that he has 'succumbed to the [Enlightenment] spirit of the age'. But Frazer, like many others, provides no theological framework to justify this assertion. Indeed, many scholars simply assume that since Witherspoon's moral thought has a 'naturalistic bias', he

68 Since it is a satirical work, Witherspoon's negative reference to Turretin and Pictet suggests that he approves of their work. 'Ecclesiastical Characteristics', in The Selected Writings of John Witherspoon, ed. Thomas Miller (Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1990), p. 101.


71 LMP, p. 64.

72 Not all studies of Witherspoon have claimed inconsistency. Neither Jeffry Morrison, John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic (Notre Dame, 2005), nor Varnum Lansing Collins, President Witherspoon (New York, 1969), raise the issue.

73 Frazer, Religious Beliefs, p. 46.
lacks a 'genuinely Christian approach to public life'. Thus they conclude that for Witherspoon '[t]he Christian God [does not] have a specific role to play in public life, where the rule of nature prevailed'.

It is Witherspoon's alleged naturalistic or rationalistic method that signals to scholars an inconsistency with the Reformed tradition. Frazer, for example, writes: 'Witherspoon's emphasis was on method or approach or how to think about religion and politics — and his approach was decidedly rationalistic and naturalistic.' Scott agrees: 'Throughout the Lectures Witherspoon employs reason with a confidence atypical of earlier Calvinism. He reflects a phenomenon of his time: rationalism had entered the house of Calvinism.' To Frazer, a certain irreconcilable division is evident between 'Witherspoon the Calvinist' and 'Witherspoon the rationalist and naturalist'. No Calvinist, he argues, would so look to natural law to discover moral truths. 'Unlike many Christian authors before him', Frazer writes, 'Witherspoon did not see the full employment of man's fallen reason as an inherently flawed path to knowledge or as a threat to revelation.' The crucial premise for these critiques of Witherspoon is that the natural law and natural reason have a limited role in Reformed Protestant ethics — a presumption that all duties for the good Calvinist must come exclusively from scripture; after all, scripture abrogates and supersedes the natural law, they claim or assume. As I demonstrated above, however, none of this is accurate.

Scholars also claim that since Witherspoon held positions in common with certain Unitarian and anti-Trinitarian writers of the eighteenth century, he must have adhered to a type of enlightened orthodoxy. Scott, for example, points out that Witherspoon agrees with Samuel Clarke (1675–1729) and William Wollaston (1659–1724) on reason as confirmatory of revelation. Frazer compares Witherspoon with the anti-Trinitarian minister Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), arguing that since 'reason was the source' to discern the 'Divine Being' in his Lectures on Moral Philosophy, Witherspoon's method is 'quite similar to that of other rationalists'. As I demonstrated, however, Reformed theologians understood basic theological truths to be discernable by reason.

[75] Ibid., p. 91.
[78] Frazer, Religious Beliefs, p. 42. One would like to know who these 'Christian authors' are. Frazer, unfortunately, provides no names.
[80] Frazer, Religious Beliefs, p. 42.

Benjamin Lynerd likewise takes aim at Witherspoon, arguing that Witherspoon's 'traditional Calvinism' conflicts with Witherspoon's republican principle of public moral virtue. In republican political theory, Lynerd writes, 'free citizens must be privately virtuous in order to maintain their republic'. This, he insists, conflicts with the Calvinist doctrines of sin and grace. Only the 'gospel of grace' brings about better public behaviour. All other 'attempts to behave better are futile and beside the point: what a sinner needs is restoration with God, available only through faith in Jesus'. Hence, republican theology (i.e. theology consistent with Republican political theory) requires the Calvinist to compromise his view on the effects of the fall. For this reason, Calvinism 'not only undermines the project of moral reform, it also undermines republicanism itself'. Lynerd assumes (like Frazer, he provides no analysis of the Reformed tradition) that traditional Calvinists view spiritually unregenerate persons as incapable of cherishing and preserving society, producing civil order and comprehending the principles of just law.

Witherspoon was, for this reason, according to Lynerd, an unprincipled compromiser of the Reformed tradition. Witherspoon's most popular work against the Moderates of Scotland was the satirical book, Ecclesiastical Characteristics, which Lynerd calls an 'evangelical manifesto' for its insistence that 'Christians cannot confess faith in the gospel and in the doctrine of moral sense'. In the pamphlet, Witherspoon rejects moral sense philosophy, claims Lynerd, because it requires Calvinists to compromise the doctrine of moral depravity. Lynerd writes: 'Moral sense theory stages too many departures from the gospel — on the presence of evil in the world, on its domination over the human heart, and on the need for divine redemption — for there to be any comfortable degree of compatibility.'

This explains, to Lynerd's mind, why Witherspoon, the uncompromising Calvinist, attacked Hutcheson and the Moderates during his Scottish career. Yet Witherspoon's rational inquiries, which he began shortly after landing in New England, says Lynerd, do nothing less than 'strike a deal with [Francis] Hutcheson ... The compromise goes like this: Witherspoon now accepts the essential capacity of the human to know the way of virtue'. In Lynerd's timeline, Witherspoon affirms in America what he spent his early career in Scotland attacking: natural knowledge concerning civic virtue has not been

[82] Ibid., p. 47.
[83] Ibid., p. 48.
[84] Ibid., p. 50.
[86] Lynerd, Republican Theology, p. 82.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid., p. 85.
entirely destroyed by the Fall and man is not devoid of the light of reason. ‘Traditional Calvinism’, Lynerd tells us, taught the opposite: man could not know civil virtue apart from special grace, yet alone have the ability to conduct himself in accordance with virtue.68 As I have demonstrated, however, quite the opposite is true in Reformed theology when it comes to such political and moral questions.

The crucial doctrine for Frazer, Lynerd, Scott and others — and perhaps the source of all their errors — is the Reformed doctrine, often referred to as ‘total depravity’, which precludes, so they claim, any trust in reason for questions of ethics or natural theology. Calvinists are prohibited from appealing to nature by reason, for they allegedly believe that depravity entails natura deleta, i.e. natural law has been destroyed by man’s falleness.69 Scott makes the sweeping and unsubstantiated claim that Calvinism prior to the Enlightenment did not place ‘confidence... in the reason of man’.70 Frazer asserts that Witherspoon, who ‘put great confidence in man’s reason and its power to understand God’, should have, as a good Calvinist, appealed to Genesis instead of ‘the clearest reason’ to support the belief in a ‘Divine being’.71 But, as I have demonstrated, Witherspoon could appeal to the clearest reason to prove or support conclusions on natural theology and moral and political duty without violating his Calvinist principles.

Frazer, Lynerd and Scott are not alone. Elizabeth Flower and Murray Murphy likewise claim that Witherspoon practically denied moral depravity. They write: ‘Witherspoon’s belief in the harmony of the moral order, God’s will, public interest, and private happiness... [assumes that] we are not deprived by original sin, but are competent to see and correct our own departures from original purity’.72 A certain harmony in the natural order — the ability for a community and individuals to have honesty, civility and correct behaviour — indicates that humans have an ‘original purity’. They conclude that ‘there is a question of consistency between [Witherspoon’s] ethical and theological views’.73 They offer no compelling presentation of the Reformed Protestant tradition that justifies any such claim of inconsistency. The Flower and Murphy commentary is just one more example of scholars seemingly oblivious to Reformed doctrines and the theological tradition that preceded the Founding.

A careful examination of Witherspoon’s thought actually provides a positive account of consistency. We should not, as Scott states, see the Calvinism of Witherspoon as inconsistent with ‘the Calvinism of Geneva’.74 Witherspoon begins his Lectures on Moral Philosophy, his capstone lecture series to his senior students, with a standard definition of moral philosophy: ‘it is an inquiry into the nature and grounds of moral obligation by reason, as distinct from revelation’.75 He then immediately mentions two objections to this type of inquiry in New England at the time: ‘Is it safe or useful to separate moral philosophy from religion? It will be said it is either the same or different from revealed truth; if the same, unnecessary — if different, false and dangerous.’76 There are two different and mutually exclusive objections here. The objection stating that scriptural ethics is ‘different’ assumes that scripture contradicts, abrogates or supersedes natural law — the assumption of the scholars so far discussed. The question is: why appeal to nature when it is no longer the reference for moral truth? The norms of creation, one could say, are part of the old dispensation, a time before true righteousness was revealed in Christ. Appealing to nature apart from revelation is not only unreliable but must produce error, even with sound reason. The other objection here, which assumes the opposite of the first, namely that there is harmony between reason and revelation, questions the use of appealing to nature when scripture already perspicuously delivers a system of moral truth. Even if scriptural law is the same in substance as natural law, why risk producing error with an unnecessary and often unreliable method?

Witherspoon attributes the first objection to ‘an author of New England’,77 probably Cotton Mather,78 who claimed, according to Witherspoon, that moral philosophy ‘reduces infidelity to a system’.79 Witherspoon responds: ‘If the Scripture is true, the discoveries of reason cannot be contrary to it; and therefore, it has nothing to fear from that quarter.’ Reason and revelation are harmonious and complementary, for there is a unity of knowledge in the two depositories of divine revelation, nature and scripture. One light, or mode of discovering truth, cannot contradict the other. Hence, sound reason cannot contradict scriptural revelation. Revelation has nothing to fear from (sound)

69 See Grabill, Rediscovering, p. 56, for a description and critique of this understanding of Calvinism.
71 Frazer, Religious Beliefs, p. 42.
73 Ibid., p. 234.
74 Ibid., p. 38–9.
75 LMP, p. 64.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
78 Scott identifies this ‘author’ as Mather, though others say it is Jonathan Edwards. See LMP, p. 68 n.1.
79 Mather condemned ‘ethics’ along with rhetoric, logic and metaphysics in Manuductio ad ministerium: directions for a candidate of the ministry (New York, 1938 [1726]), pp. 54–8. See fn 6 above.
80 LMP, p. 64.
reason, because any knowledge accessible by reason is part of the unified knowledge disclosed by God. As he says in the final lecture, 'nothing is certain or valuable in moral philosophy but what is perfectly coincident with scripture.' Implied here is that scripture, as a direct revelation concerning natural duties, is superior in clarity to natural law. Any conclusion from reason, therefore, that contradicts scripture cannot be sound reason. Witherspoon is not suggesting that human reason is infallible, as Frazer states. Indeed, Witherspoon mentions the 'corruption of our nature' as it relates to reasoning properly: it is 'difficult' due to depravity, and we must 'with our remaining power of natural conscience...endeavor to detect and oppose' errors.

When we understand the relationship between reason and revelation, reason in principle can do no evil. For this reason, 'there is a probability', concludes Witherspoon, that reason 'may do much good'. He has dismissed the first objection by appealing to a basic Reformed theological formulation and then he proceeds to take on the second.

The second objection asks: why gather moral truth from the natural law when the moral law is already sufficiently revealed in revelation? It is a fair question, given the view of scripture as sufficient. In reply, Witherspoon states: 'There may be an illustration and confirmation of the inspired writings, from reason and observation, which will greatly add to their beauty and force.' Reason confirms the Christian narrative of the unity of truth: God the Creator, who could have been known fully through natural reason, has further revealed himself in his word. This adds 'beauty and force' to revelation, and thereby confirms, through a different mode of inquiry, scripture’s claims for the world. In this sense, reason is confirmatory and supportive of revelation. In his Lectures on Divinity, he similarly writes: 'Moral philosophy...is a good handmaid to the Christian morality.' Witherspoon’s point is that confirming the coherence of the twofold self-disclosure of God is a good apologetic for the Christian faith, for it reveals the beauty of the Christian understanding of the world, human nature and history and gives a comprehensive and coherent account of the world.

Reason is also useful, according to Witherspoon, to show the fallacious thought of non-Christians. Nothing 'serves more for the support of religion than to see from the different and opposite systems of philosophers that there is nothing certain in their schemes but what is coincident with the word of God'. We should meet infidels 'on their own ground'. Sound reason demonstrates to 'infidels' that revelation is remarkably consistent with nature. This would, as Pictet said, show 'wonderful harmony between sound philosophy and divinity' that serves to 'convince' and 'prepare' non-Christians for the Christian faith. As we saw above, there is nothing inconsistent with meeting non-Christians on their own ground of reason apart from revelation. Turretin permits the use of philosophical argumentation to counter atheism. All humans qua humans, as a unified race from Adam, are on common ground.

Witherspoon is probably meeting his opponents halfway, softening his position on philosophy. For he could have, with justification from the Reformed tradition, stated that philosophical inquiry, while confirmatory of revelation, is useful on its own apart from any other project. He could even claim, as Wilson does, that revelation serves to support and confirm what is already adequately known in conscience and by reason. Even fallen humans, let alone regenerate ones, know the principles of morality, retain the ability to reason and are even inclined towards conformity with the natural law. Natural reason and natural truth are concreted: the former seeks the latter, even in fallen man. This would have justified Witherspoon’s project as well, but taking the softer position was prudent given the influence of ministers such as Mather.

Continuing his discussion, he writes: 'I am of the opinion that the whole Scripture is perfectly agreeable to sound philosophy; yet certain it was never intended to teach us everything.' There is nothing impossible (or incompossible), as Turretin stated in scripture, for nothing in scripture vio rates the first principles of reason. Truth from one mode of discovery cannot contradict that of another. Witherspoon may espouse here the belief that while Scripture contains the principles of morality, it does not detail all particulars. Or he may be following Pictet, who wrote that scripture was not intended 'to make us philosophers, mathematicians, or physicians'. The primary concern of Reformed orthodoxy is that scripture exclusively and sufficiently contains supernatual truth and duties (e.g. the means to salvation). For Witherspoon, consistent with the Reformed tradition, sola scriptura does not mean that scripture contains all truth.

Contrary to most commentators, Witherspoon has in these passages presented the basic Reformed orthodox position on reason and revelation. He has not drifted into an 'Enlightenment' framework, nor has he ceded ground to the theistic rationalists. To be sure, Witherspoon suggests an optimistic view of man’s ability to come to sound conclusions through reason, but he is not outside the bounds of the Reformed tradition. He affirms that scripture is infallible and that reason is fallible. His philosophical inquiry does not rationalize Christian truth, nor reduce true religion to natural religion. It is rather an attempt to confirm the claims of scripture concerning reality and thereby.

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101 Ibid., p. 187.
102 Frazer, Religious Beliefs, p. 42.
103 LMP, p. 66.
104 Ibid., p. 64.
105 Ibid.
107 LMP, p. 64.
108 Pictet, Christian Theology, p. 60.
109 IET, 1.9.23.
110 Pictet, Christian Theology, p. 51.
demonstrate the beauty found in the coherence of reason and scripture. In
other words, Witherspoon sought to show that both modes of discovering
truth — reason and faith — discover the same truth, indicating that a single
Being is the author of both. For Witherspoon, philosophical inquiry of this
nature is a type of apologetic, one that is consistent with Reformed orthodoxy.

Witherspoon also recognizes the natural sociability of man.111 He writes
with 'undoubted certainty' that 'in our nature, as it is the work of God, there is
a real goodwill and benevolence to others' and that the 'principles of our
nature lead to society'.112 By nature, we, as social creatures, innately know
that 'our happiness and the improvement of our powers are only to be had in
society'.113 As we saw above, the effect of the fall in Reformed theology was
total in regard to knowledge of our heavenly end, but not equally destructive
in every respect. Man, being an earthly creature, continues to cherish society
and flee from civil disorder. The spiritually dead are not naturally dead. A
Calvinist ought to expect social solidarity in one form or another.114

Witherspoon admits that reason has limitations, but these apply mainly to
questions of spiritual redemption. Reason produces only 'vague and general'115
knowledge of divine mercy, and although one can know many attributes of
God with more confidence apart from revelation, 'mercy can be learned from
Revelation only'.116 In his Lectures on Divinity, he similarly writes: 'Bene-
gnity and goodness to the innocent is part of the character of the Deity in
natural religion, but mercy to the guilty belongs wholly to revelation.'117 One
can know God’s mercy only by an additional revelation of God as Redeemer.
Setting limits on the natural knowledge of divine mercy is the type of theologi-
cal caution one would expect from a Reformed theologian. Witherspoon has
affirmed both that there are truths above reason (though not contradictory to
reason) and that such truths are exclusively contained in scripture. In addition,
he has affirmed that despite man’s positive capabilities vis-à-vis natural duty,
man still needs special grace to know divine mercy. Natural religion is insuf-
fi cient for salvation. Witherspoon’s view of mercy places him squarely within
the limits and principles of the Reformed tradition on reason and revelation.118

111 See Calvin, Institutes, 2.2.13.
112 LMP, p. 122.
113 Ibid.
114 This is consistent with James Madison’s (Witherspoon’s most famous student)
philosophical anthropology in Federalist 51 in which he grants human nature a ‘certain
portion of esteem and confidence’.
115 Turrettin calls it knowledge of a ‘general mercy’. This is not the special mercy
needed for salvation. See IET, 1.4.11.
116 LMP, p. 103.
117 Witherspoon, Works, 8.32.
118 Witherspoon’s lectures also contain extensive natural theology, which I do not
discuss here. But none of it exceeds the limits of reason, and Reformed theologians, such

Witherspoon’s use of reason apart from revelation, his appeal to the natural
law, and his positive account of fallen man’s inclination towards the natural
law are all within the bounds of the Reformed tradition. The confusion in
scholarship comes from an erroneous understanding of the Reformed
tradition, particularly on the doctrine of total depravity and how it relates
to reason and revelation. With Reformed doctrine clarified, it is evident that
Witherspoon the staunch Calvinist had every right to conduct his philoso-
phical inquiry.

II.2 James Wilson

A significant, though neglected, figure in the Founding era is James Wilson
(1742–98). He is one of the few Founders who did not sign the Declaration
of Independence but also attended the Constitutional Convention at
which he spoke one hundred and sixty-eight times, more than any other mem-
ber except Gouverneur Morris.119 He was appointed as an associate justice of
the Supreme Court in 1789. A contemporary, Major William Pierce, fellow
delegate with Wilson to the Constitutional Convention, said: ‘Mr. Wilson
ranks amongst the foremost in legal and political knowledge . . . He draws
attention . . . by the force of his reasoning.”120

The literature on Wilson has been summarized by Mark D. Hall.121 While
Hall’s treatment of Wilson is generally very good, demonstrating that ‘Wil-
son embraced a Christian conception of natural law’122 he erroneously claims
that ‘Wilson’s view of the Fall was more Catholic than Calvinist, [for] he did
not see anything contradictory in arguing that natural law could be known
through reflecting on one’s nature’. As we saw above, Calvinists did not con-
sider such reflecting contradictory at all. Frazer concludes that Wilson was a
‘theistic rationalist’ mainly on account of Wilson’s view of scripture as sup-
plemental to knowledge of moral truth. In Frazer’s estimation this reverses

as Turrettin, affirmed a similar natural theology. In his IET Turrettin states that non-
Christians have some sense that God ‘is just, wise, good; that the soul is immortal, etc.’
(1.6.1) and that God is one (3.3.7). The ‘consent of the nations’ is evidence for the
immortality of the soul (5.14.15), for divine providence over the world (6.1.4), and for
the law of God as natural and universal (11.1.15). See also Pickett, Christian Theology,
p. 22.
119 See Mark David Hall, The Political and Legal Philosophy of James Wilson:
1742–1798 (Columbia, 1997).
120 Major William Pierce, ‘Characters in the Convention of the States’, Accessed
121 Mark D. Hall, ‘James Wilson: Presbyterian, Anglican, Thomist, or Deist? Does It
Matter?’, in The Founders on God and Government, ed. Daniel L. Dreisbach, Mark D.
122 Ibid., p. 185.
the traditional relationship of reason and revelation by using revelation to confirm or expand upon what reason determined to be true.\textsuperscript{123} Wilson discusses the relationship between reason and revelation in his Lectures on Law, distinguishing various kinds of laws. The first is the 'law eternal', which 'we are neither able nor worthy' to know. God 'is a law to himself'.\textsuperscript{124} The idea of a hidden and unsearchable eternal law is found in Aquinas, Hooker, Turrein and many Reformed theologians who understood the natural law as a shadow and copy of this eternal (archetypal) law embedded in creation.\textsuperscript{125} As we saw above, there is theological continuity between Thomist, Anglican and Reformed theology, forming a 'catholic' tradition. Consistent with this tradition, Wilson states that the natural law is for man in 'his present state', which is communicated to man by 'reason and conscience' and by 'sacred oracles'. These 'oracles' refer to the 'revealed' law in scripture. Both the natural law and revealed laws flow 'from the same divine source: it is the law of God'. Both are the same as to substance, being two modes of delivering the same law of God. One is by 'divine monitors' within (reason and conscience) and the other is a monitor from without (scripture). For Wilson, there is a unity of truth converging from natural reason and special revelation, and both are divine.\textsuperscript{126}

On the power of natural reason, Wilson states that 'reason and conscience can do much' as a 'guide and director of our conduct'. Man has a 'moral faculty' called the 'moral sense'. Yet reason and conscience 'stand in need of support and assistance'. Wilson has a far less positive view of reason than some would grant him.\textsuperscript{127} Without revelation, the world would be 'dark and ignorant' and in a 'thick darkness' hiding 'great and sublime truths'. Reflecting a common position throughout Christian thought, including in the thought of Aquinas and Richard Baxter,\textsuperscript{128} Wilson states that only a 'few' acute people would have the 'sparks' to 'diffuse a glimmering light' to the 'mass of mankind'. The 'darkness' and 'imperfection of our internal powers', Wilson writes, declares a need for a perfect revelation whose truth is independent of human internal powers, a need that prepares the world for the acceptance of the 'immediate and direct' revelation or 'illumination' from the 'all-gracious Creator', namely, scriptural revelation. 'This revelation,' he writes, 'is contained in the holy scriptures. The moral precepts delivered in the sacred oracles form a part of the law of nature, are of the same origin, and of the same obligation, operating universally and perpetually.'

As immediate and direct, the truth of this revelation is not established through reflection on human nature. Discovering truth by reason comes meditately; that is, it comes through reasoning on human nature. One believes scriptural commands, however, solely on the basis of their having been revealed by God; they are direct commands — though the same in substance as in nature — communicated apart from reflection on human nature. Hence, they are communicated to man immediately. By recognizing the supremacy and immediacy of scriptural revelation, Wilson understood scripture to be both self-authenticating and more perspicuous than natural law, supplementing and correcting what fallen reason lacks. Scripture both republishes the immutable natural law and also 'greatly improves' our natural knowledge of providence and the future state. The result is that anyone with a 'common education, knows more, and with more certainty, than was known by the wisest of the ancient philosophers'. The most obscure elements of natural truth are clarified by scripture.

Since Wilson is giving lectures on law, there is no reason for him to mention that scripture contains two types of revelation: republication of natural truths and supernatural truth. His focus is on natural truth. Frazer misses this distinction and makes much of Wilson's use of the word 'contained' in the sentence '[t]his revelation is contained in the holy scriptures'. To Frazer this means that 'some of the Bible was God's revelation and some was not',\textsuperscript{129} an interpretation which is plainly false. Natural knowledge is contained in scripture, as any orthodox Reformed theologian would say. It also contains supernatural knowledge. If Wilson meant anything specific in his use of 'contain', it reflects his nuanced and correct understanding of the Reformed tradition on the content of scripture.

Moreover, Wilson implies that reason is not the standard, judge or rule of the precepts of revelation. He writes: 'Thus it is with regard to reason, conscience, and the holy scriptures. Where the latter give instructions, those instructions are supereminently authentick [sic].' Reason therefore cannot be the measure of scriptural revelation, for scripture has its legitimacy apart from reason. Hence, Wilson denies what is commonly called rationalism, namely, the demand that all truth, even all religious truth, be comprehensible and discoverable by reason.

Wilson continues by commenting on the relationship between scripture, reason and moral duty, he writes:

\textsuperscript{123} Frazer, Religious Beliefs, p. 20.
\textsuperscript{126} Both are, as West correctly interprets Wilson, 'authoritative routes to the divine mind'; see West, Politics, p. 43.
\textsuperscript{127} See Frazer, Religious Beliefs, pp. 186–7.
\textsuperscript{129} Frazer, Religious Beliefs, p. 186.
But whoever expects to find, in them [scripture], particular directions for every moral doubt which arises, expects more than he will find. They generally presuppose a knowledge of the principles of morality; and are employed not so much in teaching new rules on his subject, as in enforcing the practice of those already known, by a greater certainty, and by new sanctions... They are addressed to rational and moral agents, capable of previously knowing the rights of men, and the tendencies of actions; of approving what is good, and of disapproving what is evil.

Scripture is insufficient to instruct in every earthly duty. As documented above, Reformed theologians affirm that faith assumes reason. The moral imperatives of scripture assume, and are of the same substance as, the imperatives of nature, and they are addressed to rational beings. Since reason still operates in man towards its original objects, scripture indeed supplements that which is 'already known'; and the focus of scripture with regard to moral duty is on principles of morality; reason remains necessary to determine the particulars. Scripture provides a general clarity on the principles of natural duty, but does not exhaustively contain all particulars. Scripture is still, for Wilson, the exclusive and sufficient source for all supernatural truth. It also 'contains' rules for earthly life, but it is not primarily a rulebook. It is principally the depository of heavenly truth. These are the sort of distinctions that commentators have missed, leading to unfounded accusations of rationalism. Frazer might be correct to say that for Wilson 'revelation was not sufficient to discover the will of God but had to work with natural knowledge', but is wrong that this points to theistic rationalism. As demonstrated above, scripture was not presumed to contain knowledge about everything in creation. Indeed, Wilson's claim points to an understanding of the complexity and nuance of a major strain of thought in the Christian tradition.

Wilson continues with the following.

The scriptures support, confirm, and corroborate, but do not supercede the operations of reason and the moral sense. The information with regard to our duties and obligations, drawn from these different sources, ought not to run in unconnected and diminished channels: it should flow in one united stream, which, by its combined force and just direction, will impel us uniformly and effectually towards our greatest good.

Frazer contends that this is the 'quintessential theistic rationalist position' and is therefore the flying gun placing Wilson in the theistic rationalist camp. But Frazer misunderstands both Wilson's point and the tradition he is reflecting. Scripture does indeed support, confirm and corroborate reason on natural duty. As Christians from Aquinas to the Reformers (and many others)

have argued, all people know the principles of morality. Lacking knowledge of the demands of God the Creator eliminates the grounds to condemn and punish. Since all persons already know the principles of morality, scripture as a republication of natural law through an immediate mode, indeed supports, confirms and corroborates the knowledge of natural duty; and since Wilson's set of lectures is about earthly or natural truths, not mysteries of faith, this passage does not subject the mysteries of faith to the measure of reason. Wilson is certainly not saying that scripture contains no truths above reason, since his admission of an eternal and unapproachable law of God, far above humans, makes mysterious truths legitimate. Wilson's point is that God is the author of both the natural law and scripture, and for that reason they cannot be contrary or opposed. Further, reason, as a means of acquiring knowledge of human duty, is not abolished, abrogated or replaced by scripture; nor was it, being essential to humankind qua humankind, obliterated by the fall.

These passages do not support the conclusions of Wilson's recent interpreters. Wilson is consistent with the Reformed tradition and does not step into deism or theistic rationalism. He does not subject supernatural truth to the measure of reason. Fallen man is blind before the 'sublime truths' of heaven, but not before the truths related to our earthly existence. The Bible is principally the depository of truth for salvation, not for the particulars of civil duty; and when the Bible speaks of civil duty, it addresses rational creatures, reason being constitutive of man qua man. There is no evidence that Wilson exceeded the bounds of the Reformed tradition on reason and revelation.

Wilson serves an important role in this analysis, for his Lectures on Law contain statements concerning reason and revelation representative of those from other Founders that puzzle commentators of religion and the American Founding. If Wilson's view of reason is 'orthodox' vis-à-vis the Reformed tradition as I argue, then similar statements by other Founders likewise deserve the label, 'orthodox'. 'Rationalism' ought to be defined, not as 'unassisted' reason discovering natural truth, but reason as the sole measure of all possible truth. Certain misunderstood Founders such as Witherspoon or Wilson, by this measure, do not deserve the label 'rationalist' or any of its variants.

Conclusion

There is a clear need for re-evaluation of the religious beliefs of the Founders and the role of religion in the Founding. Much theorizing about early American political thought has assumed premises about Reformed theology that are simply not true, and this has been happening for decades. This essay, while not taking direct issue with the theories themselves, questions much of the reasoning that goes into them. For example, the claim that political theology and political philosophy are irreconcilable in Protestant theology is false, a view integral to, for example, Michael Zuckert’s take on the philosophical nature of the Founding and its fundamental differences with seventeenth-century Puritan political theology. Much nuance and interpretive possibilities have been lost in the typical pitting of nature’s God against the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This paper redirects scholarship back to the primary sources of the Reformed tradition, steering us away from reliance on outdated assumptions, and for that reason opens up new paths for analysis. Until scholars of religion and the American Founding become acquainted with the primary source material of the Reformed tradition, especially its post-reformation development, they cannot give a complete account of religion and the American Founding.

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HISTORY OF POLITICAL THOUGHT — STYLE SHEET

Contributions should be clearly typed in double spacing leaving a wide (c. 2 inch) margin at the left hand side of the page for editorial marking. Three copies should be submitted and contributors should retain a copy for proof-reading purposes. A short 100 word abstract should accompany each submission. Copies should not contain any information that identifies the author. In general authors should adhere to the usages and conventions in Fowler’s Modern English Usage (second revised edition, Oxford, 1965), which should be consulted for all questions not covered in these notes. Please note that manuscripts can only be returned if postage is prepaid.

TEXT

Quotations of more than six lines should be indented and double spaced. For shorter quotations use single inverted commas. All references should appear as footnotes. Use square brackets for interpolations; use three dots to indicate the omission of material within a quotation. Original spelling and punctuation should be retained unless otherwise stated.

Capitals should be used sparingly. Capitalize proper names and substantives where they refer to particular individuals. Thus, ‘the King fled to Dover’, but ‘kings do not habitually depart in haste’; ‘The Parliament refused to be threatened’ but ‘parliaments are maleable.’

Dates and Numbers should take the following form. For dates the form is, ‘14 July 1789’. Write ‘seventeenth century,’ not ‘C17th.’ Numbers under 1000 should be spelled out, apart from page numbers, dates and month, or where they occur as part of a series. The second or subsequent number of a pair or series should be abbreviated as appropriate, thus, 253–4, and 254–61.

Italics, abbreviations. Use italics for non-naturalised words of foreign origin. Thus Weltanschauung but elite. Omit full stops from common abbreviations and acronyms: MP, USA.

FOOTNOTES

Footnotes should be embedded in the text. Numbering should be consecutive throughout the article.

References to books should take the following form for the first reference:


and subsequently:

Sommerville, Politics and Ideology, p. 140.

Reference to articles should take the following form:


and subsequently:


Use ibid. only to refer to the preceding footnote and taking care to avoid any ambiguity. In all other cases use the name and short title; do not use op. cit.

MSS sources, Tracts, Ephemera. Where such material is quoted the standard catalogue number (e.g. Wing) should be given, or the source library’s accession or reference code, thus, The Afflicted Man’s out-cry (1653), British Library, E711 (7).

Once the article has been accepted for publication two copies of the manuscript (containing any requested amendments), together with a copy on floppy disk, should be sent to the editor. Please ensure that the above guidelines have been adhered to.

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136 This study is a call ad fontes — to the sources. A recent work that exemplifies ad fontes is Mood’s Politics Reformed.