

REVOLUTIONARY-ERA AMERICA :
WAS IT ENLIGHTENED OR PROTESTANT? DOES IT MATTER?

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One of the central questions of continuing interest to students of the American founding concerns the nature of the ideas and values that guided Americans into and out of their war of independence. Most political scientists contend that what was and "remains America 's deepest and so far most abiding commitment" is primarily an enlightened "natural-rights philosophy" and that it is this that shaped eighteenth-century Americans' understanding of things political.¹ [1] Other scholars, in the main historians, argue that a particular slice of pagan thought inherited from Greece and Rome and transformed by Renaissance thinkers, known as civic humanism or classical republicanism, shaped Americans' political and social views of the period. And still others, a minority by all accounts, hold that the central organizing principles of American social and political life were derived, either immediately or indirectly, from varying and changing forms of British Protestant Christianity.² [2]

Although republicanism enjoyed great influence among American historians for much of the last three decades, recently it has greatly waned in importance.³ [3] Accordingly, the debate regarding the nature of moral and political thought during the American Founding has become a binary one, with the traditionalist defenders of an Enlightened America on one side and those who give pride of place to Protestantism on the other. Of course, there is much to be found in the historical

1 [1] . Zuckert, Natural Rights Republic, p. 95, and see p. 175.

2 [2] . For their survey of these varying literatures, see Joseph P. Viteritti and Gerald J. Russello, "Community and American Federalism," pp. 691-96.

3 [3] . See Rodgers, "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept," and Shalhope, "Republicanism and Early American Historiography."

record that can offer encouragement to both sides, but what is most surprising, given its limited public visibility, is how powerful the evidence is supporting the Protestant (and British) reading of American foundational political culture. Yet, in spite of the comparative strength of the evidence marshaled by its defenders and its timely utility in explaining important differences between the cultural norms of much of Continental Western Europe and America, this perspective has heretofore been largely relegated to the margins of the nation's self-understanding.⁴ [4]

But if the evidence for a British-inspired Protestant America even comes close to approaching the power of that offered by those who argue for an Enlightened universalist America, then how can one explain the disparity in the national recognition that each perspective enjoys? But, however one views such concerns, shouldn't one ask, "why be concerned with such antiquarian interests?" These are, in truth, questions worth asking and answering. And, in response, I would like to: examine in brief the strengths of these competing ways of viewing America's foundational political culture and, in particular, consider evidence of America having been effectively founded as a British Protestant nation; consider whether the most important personal right, that of religion conscience, was in spirit Enlightened or Protestant; examine the enduring importance in America of the Christian dogma of original sin; then, pause to look at patterns of elite thought. Finally, I will consider why the Protestant-inclined historiography has not enjoyed comparable standing to that of secular accounts, and conclude by briefly highlighting the continuing importance of getting this history right.

Protestantism vs. Enlightenment Influences

⁴ [4] . See Shain, "One Nation, Under God," and Fish, "Why We Can't All Just Get Along."

In comparing the influence of the Enlightenment and Protestant minds on late eighteenth-century Americans, one must begin by recognizing that even among the most highly respected historians, there is little debate as to which of these, in a general sense, was dominant.⁵ [5] Thus, we find the preeminent historian of the Enlightenment in America, Henry May, observing that "many, probably most, people who lived in America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" did so outside the contours of Enlightened thought.⁶ [6] Almost all Americans, rather, were localist, parochial, and communal Christians whose world was shaped by the tenets of Reformed and Pietistic Christianity; by their provincial and local political experiences of sometimes over 150 years shaped by British constitutionalism and Common-law legal institutions; and by the demands and constraints of agricultural production. If this is the case, what, then, demands further consideration? It is, of course, the nature of the thought that guided those political actors who shaped state- and national-level politics, most particularly, those men who helped develop institutions of enduring importance. It is concerning the thought of this political class, not the Protestant family-farmer who made up 95% of the European-descended population, about which knowledgeable students of the period are likely to disagree.

⁵ [5] . Ironically, given the broad agreement concerning the Protestant character of Americans, this fact is often set aside and otherwise overlooked by students of the period. See Katz, "Legal and Religious Context of Natural Rights Theory: A Comment," pp. 36-7, who observes that "curiously, however, neither the 1920's nor the 1960's interpretations took religious ideas seriously as a component of American opposition ideology . . . in what was, after all, still an intensely religious society"; Novak, On Two Wings; Hutson, Religion and the Founding of the American Republic; and Hampson, Enlightenment, p. 131, who writes of the eighteenth century that "it is something of an historical impertinence to consider the century as the age of Enlightenment since religion exercised a far greater hold over most sections of every society than it does today."

⁶ [6] . May, Enlightenment in America, p. xiv, and see pp. 45-6, where he continues that "for most inhabitants of the American colonies in the eighteenth century, Calvinism was . . . in the position of laissez-faire in mid-nineteenth-century England or democracy in twentieth-century America ."

Yet, those whom we ordinarily view as cosmopolitan "founders" held to political and social commitments, even if not religiously orthodox in any simple sense,^{7 [7]} that stood a sizable distance from the leading lights of the British and French Enlightenments, and their emerging world of rationalism in law and politics. In support of this contention, let me ask you to consider a brief comparison of salient Enlightenment and American political and social commitments to gauge whether the positions endorsed by various Enlightenment authors correspond with those held by those "founders" most visible on the national and international stage. And although there are many areas we might examine in outline, let me suggest three broad categories that almost all will recognize as important areas of social and political thought: constitutional and legal design; the centrality of religion; and progressive perspectives on commercial life. Of course, such a comparison must, at best, be cursory, but still if the findings fit poorly with popular notions of an Enlightened eighteenth-century America, this exercise may yet prove instructive.

Let us begin. Concerning essential constitutional design and legal norms, most leading Enlightenment thinkers embraced unicameralism and deductively designed civil legal codes (beginning in 1794 with that of Prussia). In America, however, there were only two short-lived state experiments in unicameralism and no supportive for rationally designed legal systems. Even among the inter-colonial elite, Americans adhered to the necessity of the bicameralism and common-law jurisprudence with which they had grown to maturity under the British Crown. Conversely, American federalism, common-law inductive jurisprudence, and continued localism were ridiculed by the leading lights of the Enlightenment as they defended centralization, rationalization, and nationalization. Turgot, most famously, objected that "instead of collecting all authority into one center, that of the nation, they have established different bodies" and, thus, it is now necessary for

^{7 [7]} . See Bradford, Founding Fathers, who does claim that the majority were religiously orthodox.

them to strive "to unite them [the states] by bringing them to one uniform set of principles."⁸ [8] Similarly, reflecting their differing logic, Enlightened authors as different as Smith and Turgot defended a professional military while most Americans,⁹ [9] at least in public, defended militias. In short, Americans born and raised in a Reformed British Protestant culture of congregational autonomy, were incapable of embracing the centralizing and rationalistic theories of men born in a world dominated by Catholic theories of hierarchy and abstract reason.

On still more strictly religious issues, the differences between the leading lights of America and Europe are still starker. With the exception of Montesquieu and some English Unitarians, almost every eighteenth-century Enlightened author, from Voltaire to Beccaria, viewed Christianity as a central source of human evil and proposed its gradual or rapid eradication. Yet, almost no eighteenth-century American joined publicly in this secular crusade. The one exception was a nominal American, Tom Paine, and he paid severely in widespread condemnation for his boldly secular beliefs.¹⁰ [10] As well, the centrality of the concept of original sin as a theological and political organizing principle insured that Americans would continue to adhere to Augustinian Christianity until at least the end of the eighteenth century.¹¹ [11] Their European colleagues, like Condorcet, were well on their way to envisioning a benign human nature and even a perfectible one free of original sin.¹² [12] In short, Enlightened authors had embraced an anthropocentrism and anticlericalism in opposition to Americans' continuing theocentrism and broad public respect for pious religiosity; indeed, late eighteenth-century Americans were living between two religious

⁸ [8] . Turgot, "Letter to Richard Price [22 March 1778]," II: 13.

⁹ [9] . Turgot, *ibid.*, p. 17, and Smith, Wealth of Nations, II: 699-700.

¹⁰ [10] . See Fruchtman, Thomas Paine, pp. 393-435.

¹¹ [11] . See Niebuhr, "Idea of Original Sin in American Culture"; Shain, "Religious Conscience and Original Sin"; and Smith, Changing Conceptions of Original Sin.

¹² [12] . See Condorcet, Progress of the Human Mind, p. 184.

revivals moving America in an increasingly pietistic and heartfelt direction.¹³ [13] And, accordingly, one should not be surprised by the continued cultural, political, legal, institutional, and religious differences readily found in the contrasting norms of Continental Western Europe and America .

Next, consider that in France and Germany many Enlightened authors, though surely not all, enthusiastically defended the role of luxury and avaricious merchants as valuable in the positive transformation of society.¹⁴ [14] Indeed, the defense of commercialism was of importance to most Enlightened authors and, in most instances, was met with wholesale approbation. Americans, however, refused to defend in print or recorded speech the production and consumption of luxury goods. As well, they were generally unwilling to defend in public the beneficence of merchants and selfishness, if you will, the radically modern thought of Bernard Mandeville in which human passions are defended as necessary for the good life, rather than being viewed as hindrances that must be overcome.¹⁵ [15] It is far more likely to find simplicity and selflessness lauded by American editorialists and pamphleteers, that is, an economics congruent with the agrarian and self-overcoming tenets of Christianity and classical republicanism. And with the exception of the progressive thought of Publius and others in his immediate circle, one finds few American authors arguing that virtue and self-denying control over one's passions is unnecessary in the maintenance of republican government.¹⁶ [16]

13 [13] . See Hutson, Religion and the Founding of the American Republic .

14 [14] . For example, see Hume, "Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Science," in Political Essays, and Voltaire, Letters on England.

15 [15] . See Mandeville, "Inquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue," in Fable of the Bees.

16 [16] . See Shain, "Understanding the Confusing Role of Virtue in *The Federalist*."

Rather, what one finds in Revolutionary-era America, even among those we would today view as leading political figures, are political, religious, legal, and economic views that one would expect to find among a British Protestant people who wished to be guided not by the stark reason of the late Enlightenment, but by Revelation or inner illumination. Nor is this surprising for they were not Christians in name only in that "the majority of inhabitants continued to go to church . . . [and] the preaching colonists heard most of the time -- remained consistently otherworldly."¹⁷ [17] 12 Such differences, then, should be expected because Americans were not searching for a perfected society created by the hand of man, as counseled by late Enlightenment political and legal authors, but rather they continued to look for the intercession of Christ and the Holy Spirit in their private and public lives, for only through God's intercession could man become freed from sin -- above all his disfiguring selfishness, lusts and passions.¹⁸ [18]

America : A Protestant Nation

Importantly, such distinctly different aspirations -- contrary to the claims of those who would relegate Christianity to the sidelines of American life -- are readily discoverable not only in the sermons of the pastors and the private confessions of common folk, but as well in the legal codes and social practices publicly articulated by the cosmopolitan elite. For example, to the dismay of European Enlightened authors, only one of the thirteen states, Virginia , failed to require a religious test for those wishing to hold public office. All other states required that state office-holders, that is -- let me be clear -- Federal Senatorial electors, be Protestant (in Connecticut, Rhode Island, Georgia,

¹⁷ [17] . Stout, New England Mind, p. 6.

¹⁸ [18] . See Miller, New England Mind: From Colony to Province, p. 69, who follows Augustine's Confession where it is argued that "whenver God converts a sinner, and translates him into the state of grace, he freeth him from his natural bondage under sin, and by his grace alone inables him freely to will and to do that which is spiritually good"; and Augustine, "On Grace and Free Will," p. 771, and "On the Predestination of Saints," pp. 779-785, in Basic Writings.

Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, North and South Carolina, and Vermont), Trinitarian Christian (in Delaware), accepting of the truthfulness of Scripture (in Pennsylvania and Vermont), Christian (in Maryland), or non-Catholic (in New York). Moreover, Delaware 's constitution demanded of office holders that they "profess faith in God the Father, and in Jesus Christ His only Son, and in the Holy Ghost." Nonetheless, which state's code is the one re-printed and read most often by high school and college students? Of course, it is the anomalous constitution of Virginia . Most Americans might have surmised as much without reading the arresting research of Paul Vitz who has explored the anti-religious nature of contemporary high-school and college curricula.¹⁹ [19]

And, looking back only a few years from those surrounding the creation of a new American federal government, to the time of the Revolution, the situation we find was even less in accord with the Enlightenment standards regularly attributed to late-colonial Americans. During the era of the War for Independence , we discover "only three colonies allowed Catholics to vote. They were banned from holding public office in all New England colonies save Rhode Island . New Hampshire law called for the imprisonment of all persons who refused to repudiate the pope, the mass, and transubstantiation. New York held the death penalty over priests who entered the colony; Virginia boasted that it would only arrest them. Georgia did not permit Catholics to reside within its boundaries; [and] the Carolinas merely barred them from office."²⁰ [20] And yet, such a world, we are led to believe by leading American authors and public spokesmen, was one guided by Enlightenment sensibilities.

¹⁹ [19] . See Vitz, "Religion and Traditional Values in Public School Textbooks."

²⁰ [20] . Davis , Religion and the Continental Congress, p. 153.

More in keeping with the historical record, careful students of the period like James Hutson find that during the War for Independence the new elites, such as the Secretary of the Congress, Charles Thompson, "retired from public life to translate the Scriptures from Greek to English" and that the famous pamphleteer, John Dickinson, "also retired from public life to devote himself to religious scholarship." Much the same was true of three of the Congress's presidents: Elias Boudinot, Henry Laurens, and John Jay.²¹ [21] And under their leadership, one should not be surprised to learn that thirteen times Congress unapologetically, via proclamations for days of fasting and humiliation, sought on behalf of the young nation the intervention of Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost. Indeed, the Continental Congress on 14 March 1781 even appointed young James Madison, a favorite of the secularists, to serve on a committee of three "to prepare a recommendation to the states for setting apart a day of humiliation, fasting and prayer" that was delivered on 20 March 1781 for the second of May. Like Jefferson in Virginia in the 1770s and 1780s, as demonstrated by Daniel Dreisbach,²² [22] in the 1770s and early 1780s, Madison was involved in the close working together of church and state in Revolutionary America. Not surprisingly, then, this same Congress acted in support of Protestantism in its daily prayers, its appointment of military chaplaincies, its collective attendance at Protestant worship services, its ordering that an American Bible either be imported or published, and its persistent efforts to bring American Indians to Christ.²³ [23]

Yet, in still other ways the early national and state governments, led by a putatively enlightened American political elite, displayed an ample willingness to patronize Protestantism in ways that can only be described as unimaginable to the authentic men of the Enlightenment. Thus, "officials donated land and personalty for the building of churches, religious schools, and charities.

21 [21] . Hutson, Religion and the Founding of the American Republic , p. 49.

22 [22] . See Dreisbach, "Another Look at Jefferson 's Wall of Separation," p. 5.

23 [23] . See, for example, Journals of the Continental Congress, 11 November 1775 , III: 351.

They collected taxes and tithes to support ministers and missionaries. They exempted church property from taxation. They incorporated religious bodies. They outlawed blasphemy and sacrilege, [and] unnecessary labor on the Sabbath and on religious holidays."²⁴ [24] Well into the nineteenth century, states and localities were comfortable in "endorsing religious symbols and ceremonies," crosses were common on statehouse grounds, holy days were official holidays, chaplains continued to be "appointed to state legislatures, military groups, and state prisons," thanksgiving prayers were offered by governors, subsidies were given to Christian missionaries, the costs of Bibles were underwritten, tax exemptions were provided to Christian schools, "public schools and state universities had mandatory courses in the Bible and religion and compulsory attendance in daily chapel and Sunday worship services . . . [and] polygamy, prostitution, pornography, and other sexual offenses . . . were prohibited. Blasphemy and sacrilege were still prosecuted. . . . and other activities that depended on fate or magic were forbidden."²⁵ [25] Justice Story, thus, concluded that in America "it is impossible for those who believe in the truth of Christianity as a divine revelation to doubt that it is the special duty of government to foster and encourage it among all the citizens and subjects."²⁶ [26] In opposition to the most cherished hopes of Enlightened authors, through the nineteenth-century, a non-denominational Protestantism that approached a national quasi-establishment was simply an accepted and protected part of American life and law.

²⁴ [24] . Witte, Religion and the American Constitutional Experiment, p. 53.

²⁵ [25] . Witte, *ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

²⁶ [26] . Story, Commentaries on the Constitution of the United States , 2:603.

and see *ibid.*, 2:602-09 where Story writes that "the right of a society or government to interfere in matters of religion will hardly be contested" for "the great doctrines of religion . . . never can be a matter of indifference in any well-ordered community." Indeed, "the real object of the First Amendment was not to countenance, much less to advance, Mahometanism, Judaism, or infidelity, by prostrating Christianity; but to exclude rivalry among Christian sects." See also McClellan, Joseph Story, pp. 118-59 and Roeber, "Long Road to *Vidal*," p. 417.

The Right of Religion of Conscience: Enlightenment or Protestant?

There was, however, one freedom in America that was both natural and civil, and uniquely individual and, thus, the defenders of the Enlightenment might well claim it as evidence of the Enlightenment's pervasive influence -- the freedom of religious conscience. But it is useful to remember that at the beginning of the Revolutionary years, the protection awarded religious conscience was a manifestation of Americans' deep religiosity rather than a reflection of some form of Enlightenment theorizing. Not surprisingly, then, this hallowed right did little to limit the local community's exercise of corporate religious oversight. And by such, again wholly unenlightened, communities required attendance at the preaching of God's Word, that respect be paid to the Sabbath (even forbidding inappropriate travel and leisure activities) and God's revealed dictates and commandments, that the rights of political participation be limited, and that one be taxed, church member or not, to retain a teacher of the community's (frequently established) Protestant faith. Indeed, in many areas of life, communities encroached on matters of personal choice well beyond narrowly understood matters of conscience. Thus, for example, there were religiously motivated (or at least supported) laws forbidding theater attendance, balls, masques, dice playing, cock fighting, and horse racing.²⁷ [27] It should not be surprising, then, to remember how shocked the rather provincial Adams and Jefferson, among America's most "enlightened" citizens, were by the sophisticated and decadent lives of the Enlightened members of the *ancien regime* they observed

²⁷ [27] . See Withington, Toward a More Perfect Union, p. 184, who describes the Continental Congress' embrace of such prohibitions, and Roeber, *ibid.*, p. 435, who writes that even in 1794 Pennsylvania passed a bill that "assaulted gaming, violation of Sunday rest, profanity and blasphemy, and other affronts to the moral quality of society. The conviction that the common law of Pennsylvania should reflect broadly Christian patterns of behavior seemed quite clear."

while serving their young country as ambassadors in France. Only the cosmopolitan Franklin and Gouverneur Morris seemed unfazed.²⁸ [28]

It is, nonetheless, true that during the years surrounding America's War for Independence, freedom of religious conscience had become a well-accepted understanding of liberty.²⁹ [29] But it remained the only truly unalienable individual right (there were also corporate rights that were beginning to be viewed as unalienable).³⁰ [30] In comparison, there were many political rights that governments or communities could "ask" citizens to surrender on appropriate occasions.³¹ [31] Not surprisingly, then, excepting the right to religious conscience,³² [32] over two-thirds of the states made no mention of natural, often described as individual rights in their constitutions -- Virginia's, once again, was the exception.³³ [33] Delaware's "Declaration of Rights," for example, begins by

²⁸ [28] . For example, see Morris, Diary of the French Revolution, I: 5-61.

²⁹ [29] . See Shain, Myth of American Individualism, pp. 193-240.

³⁰ [30] . See *ibid.*, pp. 243-58, concerning the corporate right of self-government declared so boldly in America's Declaration of Independence.

³¹ [31] . See the Federal Farmer, "Letter VI," in Anti-Federalist, ed. Storing, p. 70, who writes that "of rights, some are natural and unalienable, of which even the people cannot deprive individuals: Some are constitutional or fundamental; these cannot be altered or abolished by the ordinary laws; but the people, by express acts, may alter or abolish them -- These, such as the trial by jury, the benefits of the writ of habeas corpus, etc. . . . and some are common or mere legal rights, that is, such as individuals claim under laws which the ordinary legislature may alter or abolish at pleasure."

³² [32] . Five of the original 13 state constitutions had no declaration of rights: Connecticut (1776), Georgia (1777), New York (1777), Rhode Island (1663), and South Carolina (1778). Four others, Delaware (1776), New Hampshire (1784), North Carolina (1776), and Maryland (1776), had declaration of rights, but failed to make any mention of individual natural rights.

³³ [33] . This is not true of the Declaration of Rights of Virginia (1776), Pennsylvania (1776), Vermont (1777), or Massachusetts (1780). That of Virginia famously begins that "all men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights, of which, when they enter into a state of society, they cannot by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity." Often overlooked, though, is that this formulation is a traditional usage of natural rights language in that it stipulates the just relationship between generations (one of four conditions under which natural law or rights rather than civil law was controlling) and not between an individual and the society at large. Only in regard to the right of religious conscience (section 16) is the relationship constrained between the individual and his or her society. Similarly, it is often ignored that the Pennsylvania "Declaration" privileges, except in regard to conscience (and even then atheists are excluded), the community's needs over those of the individual.

holding that "all government of right originates from the people, is founded by compact only, and [is] instituted solely for the good of the whole." Only the right of conscience is then described as a possession of "all men." The Maryland "Declaration" follows that of Delaware and begins with the exact same communal rather than individualistic rights language, and in its description of the right of conscience, is more restrictive still. In Maryland, only those "professing the Christian religion, are equally entitled to protection in their religious liberty." Not only are atheists excluded from enjoying this most basic Enlightenment right, but all non-Christian believers as well.

North Carolina's constitution also begins with a declaration of popular sovereignty and then claims, "that the people of this State ought to have the sole and exclusive right of regulating the internal government and police thereof." And, as one might expect, the only individual right that is described as natural and unalienable in this constitution is that of conscience (section 19). All other rights, taken as they are from English Common Law, are couched as recommendations and described in the language of "ought" and, thus, are wholly subject to the vagaries of popular democratic will. Finally, New Hampshire's late constitution of 1784, borrowing its language from those that preceded it in other states, reminds its citizens that when "men enter into a state of society, they surrender up some of their natural rights to that society, in order to insure the protection of others." However, "among the natural rights, some are in their very nature unalienable, because no equivalent can be given or received for them. Of this kind are the RIGHTS OF CONSCIENCE."³⁴ [34] Clearly, then, the right of religious conscience enjoyed an unparalleled status in the minds' of eighteenth-century Americans as the only individual right that could not be surrendered or transferred as one

³⁴ [34] . In Poore, ed. Federal and State Constitutions, 2:1280-1. New Hampshire then continues without any sense of tension in Article VI to sustain its taxation "for the support and maintenance of public protestant teachers of piety, religion and morality."

moved from a state of "nature" to one of civil society.³⁵ [35] One should not assume, therefore, that documents defending this right, such as Madison 's famous "Remonstrance," were couched in the language of the Enlightenment. It is far more likely, as is the case with Madison 's petition, that they were written in a language that appealed to America 's Protestant electorate. And all other natural rights, not easily confused with that of conscience but readily associated with the Enlightenment, were of lesser importance and, thus, were fungible and subject to corporate oversight and restrictions.³⁶ [36]

Original Sin: An Enduring Protestant Influence

The enduring influence of the hallowed status attached to the individual right of conscience is not the only Protestant presence that long shaped American culture and politics of the late-eighteenth century. For in any attempt to understand the American political and social thought and practices of the period, one must take note not only of the freedom of religious conscience, and those individual rights that followed in its religious train, but as well the American understanding of the controlling power over society and men of the Christian understanding of original sin. For as president of Princeton , long-serving member of Congress, and a man of the moderate Scottish Enlightenment, John Witherspoon held "nothing can be more absolutely necessary to true religion than a clear and full conviction of the sinfulness of our nature and state."³⁷ [37] Politically, this demanded that government help the individual to master his otherwise uncontrollable passions, lusts, and most particularly, his selfishness. In opposition, thus, to varying streams of Christian humanism

³⁵ [35] . See Shain, Myth of American Individualism, pp. 181-93, and "Rights Natural and Civil, and the Declaration of Independence ."

³⁶ [36] . In truth, though, it is not even clear that most Enlightenment authors forcefully defended natural rights. This, too, seems something of a retrospective invention of later historians.

³⁷ [37] . Witherspoon, Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men, pp. 7-8.

and their closely associated Enlightenment brethren, most Americans adhered to an understanding of human flourishing that rested on corporate oversight and, still more importantly, on rebirth in Christ.

This teaching, an Augustinian Christian perspective, particularly a Reformed Protestant or Calvinist one, holds that man's sinful condition makes it impossible without Grace for him to live a life of ordered freedom, one that he would have been able to enjoy eternally if not for his Fall. It was exactly this strong sense of limits derived initially from the Christian concept of original sin that largely determined, even if not quite as openly as it had in the seventeenth-century,³⁸ [38] the understanding of things both religious and political in eighteenth-century America. And according to Edmund Morgan, even as late as the years surrounding the Revolution "the intellectual center of the colonies was New England, and the intellectual leaders of New England were the clergy, who preached and wrote indefatigably of human depravity and divine perfection . . . and the purpose of government was to restrain the sinfulness of man, to prevent and punish offenses against God."³⁹ [39] Not unexpectedly, then, the case for the centrality of original sin is nearly as strong in early national American political culture as in its religious history.⁴⁰ [40]

Again, Witherspoon, gave voice to this in his rejection of late-Enlightenment faith in human goodness. He held that "the Enlightenment image of a virtuous society seemed extremely cloudy. `Others may, if they please, treat the corruption of our nature as a chimera: for my part,' . . . `I see it

³⁸ [38] . See Miller, "Religion and Society in the Early Literature of Virginia," in Errand into the Wilderness, pp. 129, 132, who writes that in both Virginia and Massachusetts, "political doctrine was founded on the premise of original sin" and that the authoritarian character of their governments was "the logical consequence of a theology of depravity and enslavement of the will."

³⁹ [39] . Morgan, "American Revolution Considered as an Intellectual Movement," p. 29.

⁴⁰ [40] . See Hatch, Sacred Cause of Liberty, p. 125, who writes that "the primary purpose of government" for the Standing Order of New England, "was to restrain the corruptions of human nature"; and Zuckerman, Peaceable Kingdoms, pp. 116-7.

everywhere, and I feel it every day."⁴¹ [41] Such relatively modest assertions concerning human depravity are best appreciated when compared both to bolder claims made concerning man's absolute depravity by America's still dominant orthodox Calvinist denominations -- Congregational, Presbyterian, and some Baptist -- and to the rare American Enlightenment figures like Elihu Palmer, Thomas Paine, and Ethan Allen,⁴² [42] and their plentiful European brethren, who by the end of the century were arguing in defense of human perfectibility.⁴³ [43]

The American humanistic elite, both republican and Christian, to say nothing of the more pious Protestant and conservative average American, rejected the optimistic sentiments of the late-Enlightenment and instead adhered to some version of the Protestant axiom of original sin.⁴⁴ [44] Even according to the celebrated liberal apologist Louis Hartz "Americans refused to join in the great Enlightenment enterprise of shattering the Christian concept of sin, [and] replacing it with an unlimited humanism."⁴⁵ [45] At the end of the century, when indeed the advocates of the French Revolution championed bold ideas of human perfectibility, the moderate pillars of American provincial society continued to distance themselves from any rejection of the concept of original sin. Thus, as late as 1798, Israel Woodward compared the world views of the French and the American elite, so different in their relationship to Christianity, and found that:

⁴¹ [41] . Wood, Creation of the American Republic , pp. 114-5.

⁴² [42] . To gauge better the moderate character of these stances, consider Greven's, Protestant Temperament, pp. 65-6, description of the centrality of "the doctrine of original sin and of innate depravity" to the thought of eighteenth-century American evangelical Christians; for them "human nature was corrupt, not in part but totally. Sinful men, said Jonathan Edwards, 'are totally corrupt, in every part, in all their faculties . . . There is nothing but sin, no good at all.'"

⁴³ [43] . See May, Enlightenment in America, p. 231, who discusses the few radical deists in America, like the blind preacher Elihu Palmer, who adhered to the belief that man was perfectible and that "this great truth, the new deists tirelessly explained, had been hidden from mankind by the sinister alliance of priests and kings, whose chief reliance had always been the absurd doctrine of original sin."

⁴⁴ [44] . See Shain, Myth of American Individualism, pp. 225-28, 231-33.

⁴⁵ [45] . Hartz, "American Political Thought and the American Revolution," p. 324.

The *liberties* of the American and French nations, are grounded upon totally different and opposite principles. In their matters of civil government, they adopt this general maxim, that mankind are virtuous enough to need no restraint; which idea is most justly reprobated by the more enlightened inhabitants of the United States, who denominate such liberty, licentiousness.⁴⁶ [46]

This rejection of secular optimism in human perfectibility in favor of Reformed Protestant pessimism was and would long continue to be part of American orthodoxy and, still today, does much to distinguish American non-elite culture from that so common in Western Europe.

Similarly, American antipathy toward political and ecclesiastic hierarchy, often taken to be native to certain strains of British "country" ideology, may in truth be derivative from Reformed Protestant thought. This, importantly, helps explain the centrality of localism in American political thought. It is too often forgotten that equally at the center of the Reformation, along with the theology of grace, was the ecclesiastic concern with localism and laity-based rather than episcopacy-based church governance. Indeed, in England, as Hooker emphasized with such clarity, it was preeminently ecclesiastical rather than theological concerns that deeply divided the English church.⁴⁷ [47] And Americans, reaching back to their Brownist roots in the Plymouth colony, had developed remarkably localist and congregational patterns of secular and church governance that continued in the eighteenth century to shape political as well as religious sensibilities. For Reformed Protestants, no sinful man, no matter how socially elevated, could be trusted with corrupting power and, thus, long chains of hierarchy, be it in church or state, had to be resisted.

46 [46] . Woodward, American Liberty and Independence : A Discourse, p. 8.

47 [47] . Hooker, "Preface," p. 24.

And as a result of their continued adherence to the Protestant dogma of original sin and their localist ecclesiology, eighteenth-century Americans, elite and common alike, believed that man was destined to live always under the restraints of government. For as the rather progressive James Madison had written, "if men were angels, no government would be necessary."⁴⁸ [48] The possibly still more progressive Jefferson believed that "the human character . . . requires in general constant and immediate control, to prevent its being biased from right by the seduction of self-love."⁴⁹ [49] Or, in the words of Andrew Eliot, "the necessity of government arises wholly from the disadvantages, which, in the present imperfect state of human nature [Fallen], would be the natural consequence of unlimited freedom."⁵⁰ [50]

The most important political implication of their Calvinist-inspired belief in the sinful nature of all men, however, might have been the Imperial crisis itself. By passing the Declaratory Act on March 18, 1766 and demanding from Americans "unlimited submission" in "all cases whatsoever," the British Parliament had created a situation that Americans as Congregationalists were obligated to resist.⁵¹ [51] For, as Calvin's teacher Butzer had written in his *Lectures on the Book of Judges*, "wherever absolute power is given to a prince, there the glory and the dominion of God is injured. The absolute power, which is God's alone, would be given to a man liable to sin."⁵² [52] By demanding unlimited submission, Parliament, an external body of sinful men, had effectively "set

⁴⁸ [48] . Hamilton , et al., Federalist, p. 337.

⁴⁹ [49] . Jefferson , "Letter of 24 April 1816 ," in Peterson, Writings, p. 1386.

⁵⁰ [50] . Eliot , Massachusetts Election Day Sermon, pp. 8-9.

⁵¹ [51] . See Weber, Protestant Ethic, pp. 255-6, who has written of the "sinfulness of the belief in authority, which is only permissible in the form of an impersonal authority, the Scriptures, as well as of an excessive devotion to even the most holy and virtuous of men, since that might interfere with obedience to God . . . It is also part of the historical background of that lack of respect of the American which is, as the case may be, so irritating or so refreshing"; and Zuckerman, Peaceable Kingdoms, pp. 248-9. Such political cultural inheritances are still readily observable in the differing legal traditions found in common-law and civil-law legal systems.

⁵² [52] . Cited by Baron, "Calvinist Republicanism and Its Historical Roots," p. 37.

itself alongside God's Word as a competing sovereign."⁵³ [53] Americans, as a Reformed Protestant people, were committed to submitting only to local self-control and through this medium to God and His word, "and only God's word -- in all aspects of life and faith" and, thus, their response to Britain 's challenge should have been predictable.⁵⁴ [54] The members of Parliament had framed the debate in such a way that most Americans immediately understood it in quasi-millennial terms as a struggle between eternal life and perpetual damnation.⁵⁵ [55] Accordingly, American pastors could effectively use the themes of freedom of religious conscience, human sinfulness, fear of an episcopacy, and more widespread civil law for wartime mobilization.⁵⁶ [56]

The Elite: How Exceptional?

Still, however, one must confront the exceptional thought of Publius in *The Federalist*. Here, one confronts a full-throated defense of May's moderate Enlightenment, though at the time when authored by Publius, even this text lagged far behind the leading edge of French and English Enlightened thought. That is, *The Federalist* embodied the liberal moral, political, and economic theory developed by Hume and Montesquieu fifty years earlier. And in this earlier phase of Enlightenment thought, these authors, in many ways seminal conservatives, had emphasized: a balance of power and the rule of law; a low but solid expectation for political life with little concern with corporate encouragement of virtue in either citizen or ruler; an acceptance and reliance on the avaricious and ambitious nature of man; and a willingness to make commercial development one of the featured goals of political life.

⁵³ [53] . Here, I am largely following Stout, New England Soul, p. 7.

⁵⁴ [54] . Ibid., p. 259.

⁵⁵ [55] . See Thomas, "Politics Recaptured," p. 28, who writes "Lutherans and Calvinists alike continued to represent resistance to unsatisfactory rulers as a religious duty rather than a political right."

⁵⁶ [56] . See Baldwin, New England Clergy and the American Revolution.

Indeed, Publius not only embraced and followed the teachings of Hume and Montesquieu but, in addition, made important contributions in his own right to what would become modern liberal political theory. That is, in his understanding of how to balance power between governmental branches, without the benefit of king or governmentally recognized class distinctions, Publius developed a new understanding of this matter in which the private passions of the individual would be tied to the public activities of governmental institutions.⁵⁷ [57] Publius, however, in creating this new theory with which to replace the traditional Whig conceptualization based on formal estates or on publicly inculcated virtue was rather unusual and comparable commitments to a moderate Enlightenment rejection of the necessity of self-less virtue are impossible to find earlier in American thought and remain rare in contemporaneous late-eighteenth century publications.⁵⁸ [58]

But, in considering Publius as an exception to the argument advanced above, two further considerations must be borne in mind. First, most of the soon-to-be liberal elite were still, during the years surrounding America 's War for Independence , as publicly committed to religion and the dogma of original sin as any of the pastors or publicists cited above.⁵⁹ [59] Although many of these men, particularly some of the handful described as "Founders," understood Christian religiosity in a wholly instrumental fashion, this does not vitiate the power of their commitment to it for wholly secular reasons.⁶⁰ [60] "Men like Jefferson and Madison," according to Tom Pangle who frequently ridicules defenders of America 's foundational Protestant character, "did honor religion" but, "not for

⁵⁷ [57] . See Morgan, "Safety in Numbers," p. 110, and Shain, "Reading The Federalist."

⁵⁸ [58] . See Kramer, " Madison 's Audience."

⁵⁹ [59] . The early-modern rationalists shared in common with their more religious brethren a belief in objective moral truth and rational ethical standards. They no more countenanced arbitrary, in effect, sinful behavior than the more religious members of the elite. See Wood, "Introduction," The Rising Glory of America , 1760-1820, p. 17, who writes that "although nature had been important to Revolutionary Americans, it was not the wilderness or landscape they had sought to celebrate, but the natural order of a Newtonian universe."

⁶⁰ [60] . See Hutson, "Great Doctrine of Retribution."

its theological richness or theoretical insight, but for its moral value."⁶¹ [61] Other students of the period, including "Miller, Levy, and Curry" have demonstrated that the Founders understood religion to be "an essential precondition of social order and a crucial prop for the novel sort of government they were creating." The elite forces supporting establishment in many of the new States, thus, commonly argued for the continuation of establishments in terms of bourgeois morality rather than godly ends.⁶² [62] But recognizing this does not imply that the vast majority of Americans, who most certainly were not privy to the private thoughts of the elite, would have understood that the "religion" that the "Founders" so vociferously supported was, in fact, strikingly different from that preached by their pastors and regularly asserted by themselves.⁶³ [63]

Second, most of the elite who were personally not religious were careful about keeping their personal views private and were not hesitant to advise others to do the same. For example, the English philosopher and Unitarian, Richard Price, in responding to a request from Dr. Benjamin Rush to keep his religious views private, refused and added "you observe that in writing to the citizens of America it would be necessary that I should be silent about the disputed doctrines of Christianity, and particularly the Trinity. I am afraid that were I to write again, I should find this a hard restraint . . . I hope your countrymen will learn not only to bear but to encourage such

⁶¹ [61] . Pangle, Spirit of Modern Republicanism, p. 81.

⁶² [62] . See May, Enlightenment in America, p. 257, who writes that "all the New England High Federalists [in the main Unitarians] believed morality essential . . . and religion essential to morality," and Dreisbach and Morrison, "George Washington and American Public Religion."

⁶³ [63] . See May, *ibid.*, p. 274, who writes that "it is almost impossible to find any Republican, from Jefferson down who defended or admitted the deist views of the Republican candidate"; and Mason, Voice of Warning to Christians on the Ensuing Election of a President, pp. 8-9, who, in great frustration, attempts to offset the propaganda efforts of the republicans so that the electorate would believe, what we now know to be true, that Jefferson's standing as a Christian is debatable. He draws attention to how well kept this secret was at the time. See also Hale, Liberty and Law, p. 23, who writing in 1837, could boldly emphasize without embarrassment how different the irreligiosity of men believed to be infidels like Paine was from the "true founders of our national independence [who] were religious men."

discussions."64 [64] Clearly, in the view of the well-placed Rush, most Americans did not welcome heterodox views on the truth of the Trinity. To most Americans, then, the elite's embrace of "religion," whatever they personally believed, must have seemed to be more of the same: a Protestant recognition of original sin and damnation that could only be overcome by faith in Christ, self-examination, and God's freely given and wholly undeserved grace.

It seems safe to conclude, therefore, that Christianity in America, which until the end of the eighteenth century meant Protestant, is a political and cultural resource that is central to a correct understanding of American historical political thought and institutions.65 [65] Moreover, it is wrong to confuse Christianity, even in its most humanistic or pietistic modes, with Enlightenment humanism and anti-clericalism. Such differences, in fact, are still of importance in helping to explain the continuing differences that separate contemporary American and much of Western-Europe.

The Social Production of American History

But if this is so, why then, in America's high schools and colleges, is the Protestant foundation of America's political institutions and culture so rarely taught?66 [66] I would suggest that there are two overlapping reasons that help explain this situation: one is a reflection of the tension-ridden standing that Christianity enjoys in contemporary American elite culture, and the second reflects the difficulty of studying eighteenth-century American political and social thought.

First, in spite of the anomalous religious character of American society among all contemporary advanced-industrial countries, our cultural and intellectual leaders (though not

64 [64] . Price, "Letter to Rush [30 September 1786]," p. 337.

65 [65] . See West, Politics of Revelation and Reason.

66 [66] . See Vitz, Censorship: Evidence of Bias in our Children's Textbooks.

political) little differ from their counterparts in Europe in their lack of religious belief. Accordingly, if one is to be accepted by the various standard bearers of elite culture, one must appropriately limit the sweep and scope of one's embrace of Christianity to an appropriately liberal range of social concerns in which the Second Table (that directing us to love our neighbors) of values overwhelms a forgotten First Table (that demands, above all, that we first love God with all our heart).⁶⁷ [67] Seemingly, however, it is not only concerning contemporary matters that the appropriate level of secularism must be observed but, because of the potent symbolism and juridical standing attached to American Founding "principles," the elite, even Christian ones, are encouraged to describe the American Founding in ways that underemphasize the centrality of Protestantism if they are to enjoy respectability and often funding. Thus, we find that elite Christian authors, when writing for national elite audiences, often ignore the lived religious and legal practices and values of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century Americans or, at least, they ask their readers to privilege the thought of progressive authors like Madison whose perspective is more in accord with the liberal sensibilities of these authors and their elite audiences.⁶⁸ [68] In short, elite Christian authors in particular often seem embarrassed by much of America 's authentic religious past as they write to provide an appropriately secular portrait of American history that speaks to the vitiated religious sensibilities of contemporary elite audience.⁶⁹ [69]

And, not surprisingly, much the same is true of most non-Christian intellectuals who are also committed to under-reporting the Protestant character of eighteenth-century American political thought and culture. Accurate accounts could, if widely accepted, potentially legitimate streams of

⁶⁷ [67] . See Fish, "Why We Can't All Just Get Along."

⁶⁸ [68] . See Madison, "Madison 's `Detached Memoranda,'" pp. 551-62, for his anti-clerical thought. Still, this essay was not published by Madison and was written sometime following Madison 's retirement from the Presidency in 1817.

⁶⁹ [69] . See Fish, "Why We Can't All Just Get Along," and Shain, "One Nation, Under God."

political thought that American intellectual and cultural elites find repugnant. Given our system of Constitutional jurisprudence, it is clearly "dangerous" to bring undue attention to potentially "destabilizing" historically accurate religiously dominated patterns of thought and behavior from our past because of their uncontrollable potential. It is far better to pretend as Rev. Falwell's remarks after September 11 blaming our nation's suffering on what he claimed was our religious and moral degeneracy were anomalous rather than confront the utter normalcy of them in the broad sweep of American history.

Of course, with a far weaker evidentiary foundation, no comparable qualms were experienced during the past several decades by scholars shaped by 1960s radicalism in their highlighting the influence of classical republicanism in eighteenth-century American thought. And, even when historians work hard to get the history right, as for example concerning the authentically communal rather than individualistic nature of the Bill of Rights,⁷⁰ [70] they seem to exercise a limited power in disseminating their understanding to the broader public whose knowledge of such matters is informed primarily through mass-media outlets. In short, the Protestant foundation of American political thought and culture is a story, because of its potential political and juridical power, that most who control the dissemination of such ideas in both secular and elite Christian outlets (most particularly Catholic) would prefer to see relegated to the sidelines of American intellectual life.⁷¹ [71] Indeed, as a celebrated Catholic intellectual at Princeton wrote some years

⁷⁰ [70] . See Amar, Bill of Rights.

⁷¹ [71] . This is most particularly true of followers of the late John Courtney Murray who, in the spirit of his We Hold These Truths, hope to move America in a Catholic direction by first showing that its foundations were secular rather than Protestant. For example, Murray writes of natural law in We Hold These Truths, p. 41, that it is a tradition that "has found, and still finds, its intellectual home within the Catholic Church. . . . There is also some paradox in the fact that a nation which has (rightly or wrongly) thought of its own genius in Protestant terms should have owed its origins and the stability of its political structure to a tradition whose genius is alien to current intellectualized versions of the Protestant religion

ago an understanding of the American Founding as some way or other fundamentally Protestant inspired must be viewed as the discredited rantings of Christian "Reconstructionists."⁷² [72]

Still, there is a second set of reasons that help explain the limited influence enjoyed by a history that emphasizes the Protestant nature of American political institutions and culture. This one is far from obvious and results from the nature of the evidence available and the training of, in particular, political theorists. That is, late eighteenth-century Americans produced no secular texts dedicated to an exploration of their understanding of the political good and no full-time moral or political theorists of note. Even their most renowned political work, *The Federalist*, only addressed questions of the good elliptically in a series of editorials with a joint authorship. Accordingly, those texts or documents in which light is likely to be shed on such matters often go unread and those that are read were written for more limited political ends.

Most political theorists have been trained to approach their subject by reading texts that have come to be viewed as canonical. It would not be surprising, then, that when they find little that passes as normative political theory and nothing at all of stature, that they would declare Americans bereft of a political theory of the good and, thus, by necessity secular and "liberal" by default. What is being overlooked is that in order to extract the normative teaching embedded in most eighteenth-century texts or documents, even in *The Federalist*, one must be prepared to hunt, uncover, reconstruct their theory of the good, and consider that much that was written was rhetorical in nature

. . . The point here is that Catholic participation in the American consensus has been full and free . . . because the contents of the consensus . . . approve themselves to the Catholic intelligence and conscience."

72 [72] . See George, "Letter to the Editors," who following the spirit of Murray (often described as the "Murray Project"), writes that "I do object . . . his attributing to me views I have never advanced or defended, do not hold and, in some cases, deeply deplore." And what are these views that he deeply deplores? He notes that they are being associated "*with the silly and obnoxious belief that the idea upon which America is founded is `Christianity`*" (p. 29, emphasis added). Novak, On Two Wings, is a far more nuanced defender of the same.

and often directed at multiple audiences with divergent expectations. This effectively is a different activity than the exegesis, even of esoteric texts, of focused works of political philosophy. The studying of American normative political theory, particularly when it is most likely to be buried in political sermons or hard to find documents, is more akin to archaeology than histology and because of the way the professions are structured is not an activity encouraged among those working today in political theory.⁷³ [73]

Not only is it true, however, that eighteenth-century Americans were more likely to discuss matters in print that are best described as political science or constitutional jurisprudence (rather than moral or political philosophy), but scholarly treatment has followed suit and has examined in detail only a limited number of pamphlets concerned with such matters. Indeed, the normative political theory of Revolutionary-era America as found in pamphlets and documents, surprisingly, is still an under-researched area. And, this situation has led to the conflating of highly visible secular theories about regimes and political institutions with much harder to uncover Protestant-inspired American views of the good.⁷⁴ [74] Americans' abundantly researched concerns about governmental abuse of power and how best to provide needed limits against it has been taken to be demonstrative of their embracing a secular liberal theory of the good. This seems natural enough, particularly given that the former materials are readily available and the latter rather inaccessible.

Nevertheless, such an association is likely mistaken in two ways. First, we are wrong to assume that their institutional visions are only correctly associated with liberal constitutionalism when, in fact, these same concerns are readily associated as well with ancient and medieval

⁷³ [73] . See Shain, "On Reading Eighteenth-Century American Political Theory," in Myth of American Individualism, pp. 14-18; and Lutz, Preface to American Political Thought.

⁷⁴ [74] . This is a theme also explored by Mitchell, Not By Reason Alone.

theorists.⁷⁵ [75] Indeed, the true essence of liberalism, according to many of its adherents, is not its strictures regarding institutional arrangements. Rather, it is its belief that reasonable people tend to differ and disagree about the nature of the good life, and that therefore, the public must play a limited role in determining the ends pursued by individuals. Such a view may be more readily associated with certain institutional designs, but it is not primarily institutionalist in its focus. Political institutions that have become commonplace under liberal regimes are, nonetheless, equally compatible with other political visions.

And second, assuming for the moment that the particular institutional arrangements embraced by Americans were uniquely liberal, we would be wrong in concluding that their theory of the good must likewise be secular and liberal. Americans could very well have adhered to what we now describe as secular and liberal theories on how to limit central governmental power vis-à-vis the people, while continuing to believe that the government, especially at the state and local levels, had been appropriately empowered by the people to protect and foster their communal and Protestant vision of human flourishing. Indeed, isn't that what federalism allows for? Thus, it is conceivable that both those who describe America's constitutional arrangements as liberal and those of us who find that their localist theory of the good was Protestant and communal, are correct.⁷⁶ [76] But if this proves true, theories of the good and those of regimes, Plato notwithstanding, may be less tightly linked than is often assumed by his contemporary admirers.

Moreover, this confusion between political theories of regimes and those of the good, I suspect, is not particular to America, but rather broadly descriptive of contemporary theorizing about the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although we have immediate access to typologies of

⁷⁵ [75] . See Evans, Theme Is Freedom.

⁷⁶ [76] . See Carey, The Federalist, pp. 159-60 and 165, who advances a version of this argument.

different regimes (for example, monarchies versus republics), we have no vocabulary for describing early modern social and political theories of the good that is comparable to classical republicanism, Catholic organicism, or modern liberalism. Is it, as suggested by Pocock, that Protestant thinkers produced no social and political theories to fill the void that existed between the efflorescence of Renaissance republicanism in the sixteenth century and the self-conscious emergence of individualism in the nineteenth century?⁷⁷ [77] I doubt it for it is clear that at least one Protestant nation in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did defend a communal and reformed Protestant theory of the good, that is, America. But this confusion points yet to one more reason why the Protestant foundations of American political thought are likely to go unrecognized.

Why Getting Foundational American History Right, Matters

Finally, such unreliable historical accounting is troubling not only because it has falsely reified Enlightenment secularism into America's chosen political ideology, but because a long, rich, and authentic tradition of American political thought has been rendered falsely illegitimate and "un-American." As noted above, for the good or bad, the history of the period with its norms and practices continues to exercise a remarkable hold on the American political and legal consciousness. Can one, for example, imagine an openly Evangelical Christian like George W. Bush being elected president or prime minister anywhere in Europe? Indeed, in America, foundational history matters and those who are its "keepers" control a potent set of symbols and icons. And what America's intellectuals have attempted to do, though clearly only with limited success, is to make illegitimate a normative theory of the good political life that is enduring, democratic, Christian, and communal, that is, Reformed Protestant. American history has been constantly revised so that it now appears

⁷⁷ [77] . See Pocock, Machiavellian Moment, p. 507.

that this earlier political vision, with its self-overcoming intentions, never existed, or in a more moderate version of this historical fable, we are a people that are gladly and willingly relinquished our Protestant inheritance for more acceptably secular and enlightened alternatives.

America 's democratic and localist Reformed Protestant inheritance, however, is its most enduring political tradition. To understand American politics and history well, one must explore its role in shaping and limiting the range of political options that were available to political actors throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and its continuing ability to produce political outcomes that continue to astound Western Europeans. Without such an understanding, so much in American history, from lynchings to referenda to commercial law and the moralism of our domestic and international policies, is incomprehensible. Admittedly, this tradition is not the humanistically self-satisfying secular past pursued some decades ago by many republican revisionists and it is not without moral features that many might find troubling. Neither, however, is it illusory. And this authentic and powerful inheritance still resonates with the religious and social beliefs of many Protestant Americans. Accordingly, this living communal tradition may contain within it modes of analysis and approaches to political and moral problems that might help solve some of America's most nagging social problems and, still more clearly, desperately-needed tools that might help Europeans better understand the ways of Christian America. And with an expansion of what is recognized as authentically American, our range of options with which to confront our public challenges must necessarily increase. For all but the most intolerant secularists, this should be viewed as a welcome change.

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