

Discussant Comments

"Civil Theology of the American Founding"

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Introduction

As organizer of the panel, I'd like to thank all the authors for joining us and contributing thoughtful and provocative papers. I hope that their research will be given broad attention. I'd also like to thank the Voegelin Society and Professor Sandoz for hosting us.

While much might be said about each of these papers, I'd like to confine my remarks to the way in which they demonstrate to us the challenge of religion and politics in the complicated milieu of the 18th century. Morrison's presentation of Washington subtly and ably provides a case study of these challenges. Shain's paper provides a helpful outline of points of difference between Enlightenment ideologues and those adhering to a more traditional political theology.

Mullins and Gamble are of special interest to me insofar as each presents us with a different paradigm for encountering this era. Gamble takes the route of Voegelin, sensitive to a common eschatological thread running from religious zealot to secularist zealot. Mullins takes the route now worn into a rut by 20th century intellectual historians, a route also taken to some degree by Strauss, relying on an implicit "reason/revelation" or "rationalism versus orthodoxy" dichotomy. While Mullins's paradigm continues to be more popular with scholars in both history and political theory, it creates an unrecognizable straw man of Reformed political theology and thus fails to demonstrate its progressive model. Of the two general models, Gamble's is much more potent theoretically, historically, and practically.

Morrison

I would like to take up Morrison's paper first as a preface to the other three.

Jeff Morrison has provided us with a concise overview of George Washington as both Christian and statesman. Washington's faith, by Morrison's account, does not fit a ready-to-hand mold. He is at once both intimate with the devotional (and scriptural) language of the *Book of Common Prayer* and also scolded by his Philadelphia rector for not taking communion.

As Morrison acknowledges, Washington is yet another battleground between those who want to assert a "Christian America" and those who want to co-opt the "Founders" as modern "rationalists." Neither of these categories will work. The battlefield is cluttered with flimsy logic, half-truths, poor scholarship, and overly generous inferences and implications. It is almost impossible to dissect the confusion. But Morrison, the first of our authors, provides some leadership on the question.

Many participants in this battle want to gain ground by debating the status of matters irrelevant to civil theology. Morrison succeeds because he understands that not every point of Washington's agreement with Christian metaphysics and doctrine is relevant to his civil theology. The "rationalism vs. orthodoxy" dichotomy won't work with Washington because not every detail of his personal creed has relevance for his civil theology.

What we learn from Morrison's study of Washington is that some points of doctrine are applicable to politics and others are not. A belief in human frailty, directly or indirectly informed by the dogma of Original Sin, is applicable to politics because it informs one's philosophical anthropology - a key foundation for the theory and practice of politics. Washington's attendance at communion, by contrast, is not. This is a point appreciated even by the most supposedly strident proponents of orthodoxy, such as Calvin.¹ [1] There are "heavenly things" (to be informed explicitly by the Bible) and "earthly things" which may be informed by earthly wisdom. While the Christian may be measured by his trips to the communion rail, the statesman is not. Contra the implications of some working in the tradition of Strauss, the contest here is not between those who believe in the supernatural and those who do not.

Washington is an able statesman on questions of religion because he at once understands the limits of politics and the humane value of religion (owed to his broad orthodoxy on matters of providence and morality) together with its divisive potential (as illustrated by his approach to the Henry legislation). (On this latter point, Washington demonstrates the difference between the general Protestant *ethos* of the 18th century versus that of the 16th, for example.) These broad points of philosophical anthropology are enough to inform Washington's civil theology, even if they are not enough to get him into the Evangelical Hall of Fame. These broad points also keep him from the messianic errors of the Enlightenment *philosophes*. What Washington believed on other points of doctrine, such as eschatology, would add very little to his civil theology and may even, as evidenced by Gamble's study of Dwight, derail it. (Ironically, it may be Mayhew's over-politicization of religion, particularly eschatology, which undermines his so-called rationalism and make him the more radical figure.)

What enables Washington's statesmanship is not that he personally is the "right kind" of Christian: either given to certain pious enthusiasms or reducing all metaphysical content (such as providence) to pious platitudes. Rather, Washington is keenly sensitive to what the biblical tradition (evidenced by his familiarity with the Bible and the scripture-saturated *Book of Common Prayer*) is revealing about the imperatives of a prudential politics. Hence we see Washington's emphasis on Providence, peace, moral character, and human frailty. The Bible becomes a handbook for politics not in its Dominion Mandate or its Great Commission (reserved to a covenant people) but in its faithful picture of a humanity which requires civil government. As with Lincoln, the Bible also provides a language of politics to reinforce the political ethos of the citizens.

¹ [1] See, for example, Calvin's distinction between the two and its relationship to politics in his *Institutes*, II.ii.13.

Before moving to the next paper, however, I would like to note a few complaints:

1. I do not understand Morrison's puzzled tone on page 20. Washington did not "Christianize" Micah 6:8, which Morrison describes as a "Hebraic verse," for a political purpose. As an Anglican, someone in the Christian tradition, Washington would have inherited a hermeneutic that understood the "Old Testament" prophets to be speaking of Christ. And while I respect Morrison's concern at the implications of imposing the Old Testament's political tone on what may seem to be an apolitical New Testament (something that should continue to engage both scholars and Christians), I think that this just won't wash if one is going to make any sense of historical or even much contemporary political theology.
2. On page 21, by distinguishing "Christian practice" from "Christian faith," I am presuming that Morrison's implied distinction is between Christianity as a moral system apart from its supernatural or mystical elements. This point requires clarity.
3. I'm not convinced that John Adams's quoted remarks fit what Morrison intends here. Adams' own religious opinions are certainly more explicit (and sometimes explicitly unorthodox) than Washington's, but I'm not sure that he serves as an adequate spokesman for the idea of a "modern" (and a-religious) American republic. In either case, the term "conservative" doesn't seem to fit the analysis and picking this quote from Pangle's discussion of religion in the Founding seems at odds with Morrison's own thesis.

Shain


Like Morrison, Barry Shain has prudently picked his battles: constitutional and legal design, the centrality of religion, and perspectives on commercial life. These are indeed key areas of disagreement in the 18th century. (One wishes that they were still differences today). And Shain has made his point well by going straight to the more radical representatives of the Enlightenment rather than casting it as a merry band of congenial and measured "rationalists" willing to re-approach the "embrace of reason" after many years of disappearance under the Church. If one uses radical representatives as the foil, the early republic is NOT an Enlightenment project. Shain emphasizes both the views of elites and those of the common person, a broad survey much more satisfying and representative of the era than the newspaper controversies Mullins cites.


Rather than re-hash everything that I like about this paper, let me list some things that I think require more attention.

The paper accomplishes its purposes in the broadest strokes. Given what Shain is trying to do, there is little to complain about. But this is a two mega pixel picture of the period. As a small picture, it looks fine. But when one enlarges the study, there is much more detail to be fleshed out. I'm confident that Shain already knows this, but some of this chips away at the success of the paper.

1. The paper is largely reactionary against an erroneous opponent, so one can accept a general picture of Reformed Protestantism as a counter to "Enlightenment America". But more needs to be done to distinguish the various political theologies within that Reformed tradition. In particular, too much emphasis is placed on the Independent or Congregational strain of Reformed thought. One wonders where the Presbyterians fit into this, particularly given their differences with the Independents both theologically and historically during the British Civil Wars. In short, the Reformed Protestant tradition, particularly in America, is not monolithic. (This even extends to the use of reason, a point in the debate.) Shain might refer the work of Maddox and Moore, who distinguish I-type from P-type Reformed thinkers, and to Steve Marini's comments on their paper. (This was an EVS panel in 2006: Panel 9: Covenant and Civil Religion and can be found here: <http://www.artsci.lsu.edu/voegelin/society/2006%20Papers/Maddox.htm> I also have projects in progress on this subject.) On that score, I also wonder if more needs to be acknowledged about Pennsylvania's unicameral legislature given the Presbyterian influence on the state assembly that drafted the 1776 constitution there. (See Marini's comments as noted above.)

2. Within this Reformed tradition, not only were there differences among the orthodox, but there is also a growing development wherein arguments from nature become more prevalent. Contrary to the implications of Mullins's chosen paradigm, there is a strong reliance on reason throughout the Reformed tradition, so I'm not trying to imply a radical shift in the 18th century.² [2] But the increasingly overt argumentation from reason does at least build something of a bridge with the Enlightenment.³ [3] These particulars deserve more attention to precisely discern the role of Enlightenment ideology. The use of reason is as much an internal discussion as an external discussion.

3. The role of revivals is problematic rather than helpful in casting revolutionary America as Reformed. Revivals undermined the coherent picture of the covenanted society as pietism and even enthusiasm came at the expense of institutional boundaries and responsibilities which enabled a covenanted society  at least as it was traditionally understood.⁴ [4] (And the

2 [2] It may perhaps be surprising to some that Calvin refers to the natural law every place that moral questions are treated in his theology. Testifying to Calvin's broad familiarity with and use of natural law, Hopfl writes, "References to natural law, then, are not confined to any one part of Calvin's life or work or to any one issue, nor are they peripheral or casual, even if deficient in precision. It can therefore hardly be denied that Calvin believed that there was a natural order of moral laws to be discerned, and that men did discern it, at least when it did not cross their interests."  See Hopfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin*, 179, 181

3 [3] For an example of the rising use of arguments from nature in church covenants (!) see, David Weir's *New England: A Covenanted Society* (2005), 198-199, 213-217

4 [4] Revivals were originally intended as an alternative to formal covenant renewal for rural churches to formal covenant renewal. See Stout, *The New England Soul* (1988), 175-176. But the cumulative effect was to undermine the covenant vision of society. See Noll's *America's God* (2005), 37-47 and Lambert's *Inventing the Great Awakening* (2001), for example

covenant was at the heart of Reformed theology and political theory.) Again, this demonstrates a greater disparity among Reformed Protestants than a "Protestant" vs. "Enlightenment" contrast will allow.

Mullins

Patrick Mullins's paper is a valuable contribution in reminding us that Mayhew, a bright light of the revolutionary pulpit, was motivated by ecclesiastical concerns. There is the seed of a very valuable study here, but its argumentation cannot sustain its ambitious claims. The argument that I can discern, which is to demonstrate the growing influence of "reason" (or rationalism) in American political theology, relies on a flawed premise from the beginning. And ironically, in light of Gamble's paper, Mayhew may turn out to be as much an enthusiast as a rationalist.

The argument wants to assert both confluence and dichotomy. By the time we reach the end of the paper, however, I've lost track of exactly what has been asserted about the role of various ideologies and theologies, what is secular and what is religious. This probably reveals the confusion of Mullins's own sources, who themselves are attempting to carry a burden they seem unwilling to lift.

The flawed premise is revealed clearly on page 5, when Mullins asks, "And how did he find such a natural right compatible with the revealed duty of a Christian people to obey 'the higher powers' as 'the ordinance of God'?" The answer, the paper tells us, is in something called "rational dissent" which relied on un-depraving (I made that word up) the reasoning powers of his Protestant audience. This allowed them to think for themselves and re-interpret Romans 13 in a way that allowed for dissent or resistance. This "rational dissent" was the supposed product of an alliance between latitudinarians, Whigs, and Presbyterians and Congregationalists willing to change their interpretation of Scripture. (page 7)

Mullins misreads Romans 13 (pages 20-27) and does not provide the historical background to Mayhew's interpretation. This problem, together with a larger argument about progressive history, taints a good portion of the paper. By the time we get to pages 25-26, and have dragged John Locke and others into it, the argument is a mess. Mayhew DID NOT turn the orthodox interpretation of Romans 13 "on its head" for the simple reason that the orthodox interpretation of Romans 13 did not command unconditional obedience nor deny dissent, let alone self-defense, and any good Reformed clergyman would have known this.

1. The Calvinist teaching of human depravity did not deny reason, particularly in matters of politics. Nor was God characterized as a "mysterious despot." (page 26) This argument has been made before by historians and political theorists, arguing that Romans 13 was somehow reinterpreted thanks to an Enlightenment-esque infusion of "reason." But Mullins's predecessors are often way off the mark because they haven't studied Reformed political theology with any degree of diligence. The intersection of reason and revelation to discern political ideas was active long before Mayhew, and was prominent 100 years prior in the British

Civil Wars.⁵ [5] Reformed theology never treated the Bible like a book of magic spells to be read without interpretation, and Christian theology in general has long treated reason an essential part of its hermeneutic tradition. This means that the supposed "confluence of British Enlightenment rationalism and English Protestant dissent" becomes a meaningless phrase unless one is willing to do some serious research into English Protestant political theology AND what is truly unique about British Enlightenment rationalism. This has not been adequately done by the "confluence" theorists.

2. On the specific point about Romans 13, the Enlightenment (and that term remains undefined in almost every study like this) was neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for enabling civil dissent. One could argue that the idea of personal political judgment receives a shot in the arm thanks to the latitudinarians, and I wouldn't disagree with that. But the possibility of private political judgment was clearly articulated by Reformer Christopher Goodman in 1558 in his *How Superior Powers Ought to be Obeyed*. And while Calvin, Knox, or Rutherford were less explicit than Goodman on the right of private individuals to resist, all of them opened the door for dissent particularly on the very religious grounds that Mayhew is relying on. My point is that when all of this is known, Mayhew is much less radical than is asserted in this paper.

Following are a few texts to demonstrate my point, particularly against is called "the orthodox interpretation of Romans 13 propounded by John Calvin in his *Institutes*" (page 21-25):

a. Calvin's *Institutes*, Book IV: Ch. 20, Sections 30-32 demonstrates that Calvin does not consider resistance to be inappropriate. Initially, Calvin argues that this is reserved to individuals called by God. That may include special (and vaguely defined) but is more explicitly applied to popular magistrates. In the context of Mullins's paper, is it clear that Mayhew is calling on private men, or is it implicit (by both precedent and what follows) that Mayhew is calling mainly on popular magistrates? If the latter is largely true, then Mayhew is not far from Calvin's more explicit pronouncements at all. But one should not be so quick to rule out individual action in Calvin.⁶ [6] And one should not be so quick to presume that Mayhew is deviating from the "lesser magistrates" position of previous clergy in the Reformed tradition.

5 [5] Wilson , writing on the sermons to the Long Parliament, argues, "The scriptures were held to be authoritative but also self-authenticating according to the wisdom of the world rooted in the informed experience of rational men. Like their spiritual father Calvin, and unlike many post-Enlightenment Protestants, the puritans experienced no gulf between natural and revealed truth. . . The 'doctrines' preceded the 'reasons,' but the latter made the former principles comprehensible and eminently rational." Wilson , *Pulpit in Parliament* (1969), 143

6 [6] Hancock, *Calvin and the Foundations of Modern Politics*, 73. Calvin seems to forbid private action in his *Institutes*, IV.xx.31, 675. But he also asserts that God sometimes calls persons to act against tyranny. *Institutes*, IV.xx.30, 674. In short, the conclusion of Calvin's prescription is not clear. But neither is it clear in Mayhew's argument. Is he really calling for individual action? As I asked in my discussant remarks, if John Adams truly saw Mayhew's political theology as his

Calvin concludes his discussion of civil government, which (again) included some exposition of Romans 13 and other key passages by arguing: "And, indeed, how preposterous were it, in pleasing men, to incur the offence of Him for whose sake you obey men! The Lord, therefore, is the King of kings. When he opens his sacred mouth, he alone is to be heard, instead of all and above all. We are subject to the men who rule over us, but subject only in the Lord. If they command anything against Him let us not pay the least regard to it, nor be moved at all by the dignity which they possess as magistrates ♦ a dignity to which no injury is done when it is subordinated to the special and truly supreme power of God. On this ground Daniel denies that he had sinned in any respect against the king when he refused to obey his impious decree (Dan. vi.22) because the king had exceeded his limits, and not only been injurious to men, but, by raising his horn against God, had virtually abrogated his own power. ♦7 [7] All of this is fairly well-known to students of Calvin and the Reformation. What gets less attention in Calvin, but is equally important is his specific treatment of conscience in Book IV, Chapter X. (Romans 13, for example, specifically calls attention to "conscience. ♦) This is before the section just quoted (Chapter XX) and a previous sections in which Calvin has addressed both conscience and Christian liberty. (III .xix, 130-142 and III .iv.5). In this section, Calvin defines "conscience, ♦ (the term translated in Romans 13:5) as, "The definition must be derived from the etymology of the term. As when men, with the mind and intellect, apprehend the knowledge of things, they are thereby said to know, and hence the name or science or knowledge is used. ♦8 [8] A bit later, Calvin writes, "Hence a law may be said to bind the conscience when it simply binds a man without referring to men, or taking them into account. ♦9 [9]

In reference to Mayhew's case at hand, the imposition of Anglicanism, Calvin seems quite clear two centuries before Mayhew. In the context of what Calvin has said about both conscience as intellect, and St. Paul's admonition to obey the civil magistrate *for the sake of conscience* (an offense against which Calvin argues would scandalize one before men and before God), Calvin writes, "Let us now return to human laws. If they are imposed for the sake of forming a religious obligation, as if the observance of them was in itself necessary, we say that the restraint thus laid on the conscience is unlawful. ♦ Explicitly referencing Romans 13, Calvin writes, "He does not at all teach that the laws enacted by them reach to the internal government of the soul, since he everywhere proclaims that the worship of God, and the spiritual rule of living righteously, are superior to all the decrees of men. ♦10 [10]

political catechism, and Mayhew was deviating from the "lesser magistrates ♦ tradition, then one would not have expected Adams to condemn the mob at Boston of March 5, 17 70 .

7 [7] *Institutes* (Beveridge tr.) IV.xx.32, 675

8 [8] *Ibid*, IV.x.3, 415

9 [9] *Ibid*, IV.x.3, 416

10 [10] *Ibid*, IV.x.5, 416-417

b. One hundred years before Mayhew, Samuel Rutherford (albeit a Presbyterian and not a Congregationalist like Mayhew ♦ but in the Reformed tradition nevertheless) takes up an extended exegesis of Romans 13 in Chapters XXIX and XXXIII of *Lex, Rex* (1644). Rutherford is fairly explicit on the right of private men to resist tyranny. But more than this, it becomes evident from Rutherford's example that not only was Romans 13 readily exegeted in a way that denied unconditional obedience before Mayhew and so-called "rationalism" ♦, but that Rutherford could look to reason before the so-called Enlightenment.¹¹ [11] The idea that a tyrant lost his title by virtue of his tyranny was traced by Rutherford to in secular sources to Justinian's *Digest*. In the tradition of the Church, of course, one can recall what St. Augustine says (later repeated by Augustine and Martin Luther King: "An unjust law is no law at all. ♦") The whole Christian tradition could look back to St. Peter's statement, "We must obey God rather than men. ♦"

c. One could go on with this, disputing both the originality of modern so-called "rationalism" ♦ in asserting revolution and in disputing the claim that orthodoxy mandated unlimited submission. One could look to Knox or to the *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos*, the latter containing many references to Roman law on questions of resistance as a demonstration of the testimony of reason.¹² [12]

In short, much more needs to be done to claim that the Enlightenment plays a necessary, let alone a sufficient role in enabling dissent among Reformed clergy.

3. In light of what was already said about civil disobedience, resistance, and even revolution in the previous two hundred years of Reformed political theology, was a right of resistance really a controversial idea for New Englanders in the mid 18th century? If so, how could Mayhew so successfully turn them in an opposite direction? Better yet, was the idea of resistance controversial for theological reasons or for other reasons? (It seems that this has not been demonstrated.) The paper is not clear here, and the existence of some letters to the newspaper

11 [11] For a discussion of Rutherford's sources that not only demonstrates Rutherford's own complexity, but also the complexity with which the intersection of reason and revelation took place in Reformed political theology, see Coffey, *Politics, Religion, and the British Revolutions*, 175-183.

12 [12] For Knox's discussion of Romans 13 as a qualified endorsement of civil authority, see his *Appellation to the Nobility and Estates* in Mason's *John Knox On Rebellion*, particularly 84-85. See also Knox's comments on Romans 13 in a debate at the General Assembly, contained in the Mason collection at pages 191-192. George Buchanan, another Scot Presbyterian, dismissed Romans 13 as being particular to the historical context in which Paul was writing. For a provocative debate on the use of secular sources in the *Vindiciae*, see McLaren, "Rethinking Republicanism: *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos* In Context, ♦ *The Historical Journal*. 49.1 (2006) 23-52, and Garnett, "Law in the *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos*: A Vindication. ♦ *The Historical Journal*. 49.3 (2006) 877-891

and protests from prominent Anglicans doesn't prove the point. More needs to be done to demonstrate that this was truly a broad and deep controversy.

4. There is no attempt to consider the source of Whig ideology in the first place. The implied progression is that the Whig ideology seems to have developed in secular isolation from any kind of dissenting political theology, then it informed the subsequent political theology. That, it seems to me, will not work given the role of both Presbyterians and Independents in waging war against the king and the Independents in trying him and separating head from shoulders. Furthermore, there is a proto-natural right evident in the Reformation together with a firm right of self-defense that is well-articulated. (Even the Lutherans acknowledged the right of self-defense against tyrants.)

5. Furthermore, I think one cannot argue that Mayhew demonstrates a keen rationalism which delivers revolutionary America from the constraining bonds of orthodoxy while at the same time overlooking Mayhew's own religious enthusiasms. If Mayhew is indeed bringing a sobering Enlightenment influence, why is it that he is so quick to see the French-Indian War as a struggle against Antichrist in 1759? In 1747, Mayhew argues that the struggle against American liberty involves a plot by Antichrist involving both the scepter and the *surplice*.¹³ [13] Is it not equally possible that Mayhew, though influenced by Whig ideology, was equally informed by his own religious enthusiasms such that he saw Anglicanism or Catholicism as the Antichrist? Throwing around the label of "Antichrist" doesn't seem the work of a rationalist in the Enlightenment mold, though Gamble's study ably points out how religious enthusiasts and millennialists such as Dwight found common cause with the Enlightenment.

Let me say quite clearly that I do not doubt that one can find affinity between Mayhew and Whigs, Arminians, or anti-Trinitarians. But one can find similar affinities for Locke or Sidney among more orthodox clergy as well.¹⁴ [14] It does not follow that Mayhew's unorthodox theology is the causal link with his Whig ideology or his interpretation of Romans 13. There is much more at work here.

At this point, I am out of time. I will close by saying that Gamble's paper, by relying on Voegelin does a superb job of demonstrating how scholars must re-approach the intersection of religion and politics, both in the 18th century and beyond. If there is any dichotomous design that is brought to this study, it is not a caricature of orthodoxy and reason but rather the difference between a politics of prudence and a politics of messianic faith. The contest of American politics now, as then, is not between some implicitly antiquated "revealed" (theological) politics and

13 [13] Jonathan Mayhew, *Two Discourses Delivered October 25th. 1759* (Boston , 1759) Cited in Nathan Hatch's "The Origins of Civil Millennialism in America : New England Clergymen, War with France , and the Revolution." *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Ser., Vol. 31, No. 3. (Jul., 1974), pp. 407-430.

14 [14] See Kuehne's *Massachusetts Congregationalist Political Thought 1760-1790: The Design of Heaven*. For a discussion of the middle states clergy, see Griffin , Keith L. *Revolution and Religion: American Revolutionary War and the Reformed Clergy*.

some inherently enlightened secular politics. It is between radicalism and prudence, informed by secular or religious sources.

All of these authors are to be commended in provoking us to that timely dialogue. Thank you.
