The Protestant Roots of American Civil Religion

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Not all civil religion is a threat to civil society, nor should civil religion be discouraged in all circumstances. But when civil religion invites a sense of national exceptionalism that undermines prudent Augustinian limits on state power, it threatens civil society and ordered liberty. This article presents historical and theological background of Reformed Protestantism or "Calvinism" in America and evaluates its virtues and vices in the development of Anglo-American political theology and civil religion. The great challenge of America can be summarized in terms of the covenant theology of Reformed Protestantism. Does America enjoy the same covenant relationship as the church, an everlasting and unconditional covenant? Or is America in a relationship with God governed only by general providence and a conditional covenant? These were theological questions that eventually came to form the dilemma of American civil religion and its growing sense of divine mission.

Introduction: Christian America?

Is America a "Christian nation"? Alexis de Tocqueville recognized the role of Christianity in America's dominant ethos and argued that it is the faithful spirit of Americans that keeps us from democratic despotism, withdrawn individualism, and materialism. G. K. Chesterton called America a nation with the soul of a

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church.[1] These kinds of observations reinforce what Henry Van Til[2] or Russell Kirk[3] argued concerning the close relationship of religion, culture, and political institutions. Indeed, one is hard pressed to deny that Christian character and thinking has had a salutary effect on the Anglo-American legacy of institutions and habits supporting ordered liberty.

But the insights of cultural observers and historians are not the same as the assertion that America is a "Christian nation." When one moves from merely descriptive observations of history and culture to something that sounds more exclusive and prescriptive—something that asserts America to be *essentially* Christian—embarrassing ideological arguments multiply. Proponents and opponents of "Christian America" trade salvos of cherry-picked quotations, statistics, and anecdotes. Partisans cite everything from polling numbers counting persons who "believe in God" (something that hardly can be called the equivalent of rich Christian orthodoxy) to disputes over the contents of eighteenth-century commonplace books owned by America's constitutional framers. Perhaps these debates about America's status as a "Christian nation" are providentially intended to reinforce Solomon's warning that "of the making of many books there is no end."[4]

American civil religion not Christianity.

Whatever the merit of the claim that America can be called a Christian nation, this much is for sure: Americans are fish swimming in a *civil religion* that is not the same as Christianity.[5] And most of the fish don't know they're wet. Given the prevalence of civil religion in America, it is worth inquiring into its origins and

[1] G. K. Chesterton, *What I saw in America* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1923). Chesterton also addressed the potential for tyranny and the fragility of the democratic ideal in America.

[2] "Culture is simply the service of God in our lives; it is religion externalized." Henry Van Til, *The Calvinistic Conception of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 200.

[3] Two prominent statements by Kirk on the subject are "All culture arises out of religion" in *Eliot and His Age* (New York: Random House, 1971) and "Political problems, at bottom, are religious and moral problems" in *The Conservative Mind* (Seventh Edition. Washington: Regnery Gateway, 2001), 8.

[4] Ecclesiastes 12:12.

[5] For the seminal study of American civil religion, see Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 96, No. 1 (Winter 1967), 1-21. For a contemporary survey, see Ronald Weed and John von Heyking, ed., *Civil Religion in Political Thought: Its Perennial Questions and Enduring Relevance in North America*. (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2010).

its potential to do good or ill to America, to the church, and to the church's partners in civil society.

Defining Civil Religion

I do not use this term coined by Robert Bellah, "civil religion," to mean simply that religious ideas and political ideas intersect in America, or to say that American political rhetoric is religious. That would be stating the obvious. Theological or ecclesiastical support has traditionally been used to preserve public order or meet similar needs of the *res publica*, but the kind of civil religion of which I am speaking deviates in two important ways. First, it risks advancing political goals imprudent for a sound commonwealth by discarding traditional Augustinian pessimism and thereby enabling limitless civil power.[6] Second, it suggests delegating to the state work previously delegated to the church and to other institutions of civil society.[7] These institutions are the "little platoons" of society that Edmund Burke praised as the root of our public affection—the kind of affection that effects the greatest public good.[8]

Civil religion provides ersatz theological justification for imprudent centralized power.

What I mean by "civil religion," therefore, is a set of moral imperatives expressed in religious language and intended to frame and motivate public policy. These moral imperatives are cast in religious (scriptural or theological) terms and implicitly or deliberately supplant the historical work of civil society with intervention by the civil magistrate—what Max Weber defined in *Politics as a Vocation* as the "monopoly of force." At its very worst, civil religion becomes the establishment of a competing and false religion providing an ersatz theological justification for imprudent centralized power or imperial ambitions. Modern civil religion attempts the kind of heresy sought by a Rousseau in order to boost the health of the limitless state, not an Augustinian state aspiring merely to keep the peace and preserve civil society. The civil religion of the *philosophe* or the vain and ambitious ruler aspires to define the moral teleology of human beings. Struggles over civil

[6] The most succinct statement of this challenge is found in the *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas, I-II, Q. 96 and in Book xxx of St. Augustine's *The City of God*.

[7] These are institutions that conservatives would also call "natural" or "traditional" and libertarians would emphasize as "voluntary" or "private." None of these labels is entirely accurate for all institutions of civil society, however.

[8] Edmund Burke, *Select Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1881) 2:55.

religion therefore reach down to the very basis of human nature and the limit of politics.

Civil religion threatens distinction between the state and civil society.

The definition of "civil religion" I am advocating makes an important distinction not only because civil society and the state are very different from one another in terms of their teleologies and foundations. My definition also recognizes that the state has the potential to crowd out vital humane elements of civil society. While scholars should study civil religion just as they should study other historical or social phenomena, there is an important normative question that they should also ask. What does a society lose when its civil religion has a deleterious effect on the unique and invaluable work of civil society, including the especially salutary work of the church? The faithful man or woman in particular must ask what happens when civil theology crowds out traditional theology and the mansions of heaven are traded for public housing.

It is not enough to study "civil religion" as intersecting phenomena ("politics and religion") or as another variety of public rhetoric. The scholar must also investigate its consequence for law and society. One should not define "civil religion" so broadly that it simply denotes the ideas that any group of citizens holds in common. Every nation then has a civil religion. When used in this way, civil religion becomes as common as any sociological or political component of society. Common sense suggests that citizens of every nation must have some common set of principles, especially those (such as in America) who do not have a particular uniform ethnicity or long historical heritage on which to draw. One might be tempted to get some mileage out of the term "religion" by comparing subscribing to such principles with subscribing to particular church dogmas. "Civil religion" would then mean the set of ideas that the nation, like the church, relies on for continuity and fellowship. But one could just as easily compare the nation with any other organization that has bylaws or common purposes. Religions require subscription to common beliefs and goals, but so do tree house clubs and Red Hat Societies. If, then, "civil religion" connotes nothing more specific than adherence to a broad set of beliefs, one might as usefully use terms such as "civil tree house club" or "Civil Red Hat Society," which for obvious reasons no one does.

Admittedly, a nation's civil "creed" (the broad and common ideas of the citizenry) may owe essential elements to particular re-

ligious dogmas or doctrines. Samuel Huntington argues that such a connection exists in America.[9] But current usages of the term "civil religion" are so broad that almost any category of political practice or belief can be tied to or equated with religious practice or belief. Consider an assertion, for example, that a broad public religious consensus sustains a broad "ism" such as republicanism, constitutionalism, federalism, or classical liberalism. Demonstrating that this relationship exists requires heavy lifting followed by juggling. One must first define the aforementioned "ism" (e.g., federalism, republicanism) and then the foundational creed (e.g., Christianity) and then try to connect the latter and the former. While it seems perfectly reasonable to argue (as many have) that Christianity supports many of the aforementioned "isms," how does one isolate one particular correlation and make it the effectual cause? And how does one establish that "Christianity" supports a particular "ism" when it is hard enough to determine what the faithful believe? After all, most Americans recently polled think that the phrase "God helps those who help themselves" can be found in the Bible.[10] This makes them adherents of *Poor Richard's Almanac*, and therefore adherents of a moralistic commercial republic. But this hardly constitutes a link between authentic Christianity and republicanism or commercialism.[11]

Given these aforementioned difficulties, the scholar attempting to link "Christianity" to various isms must undertake the unenviable task of defining at one and the same time the political idea (e.g., republicanism, federalism) and the foundational idea (e.g., Christianity). All of this explains why the notion of "Christian America" can be endlessly misleading. One must define "Christianity," "America," and the supposed attributes and "isms" of

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[9] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996) and *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).

[10] Bill McKibben, "The Christian paradox: How a faithful nation gets Jesus wrong," *Harpers Magazine*, August, 2005, 31-37.

[11] A more recent poll (and one that may shed even more light on this last point) found that American atheists may know more about religion than American Protestants or Catholics. "U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey" conducted by The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, September, 2010. PDF of full report is available at http://pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Belief_and_Practices/religious-knowledge-full-report.pdf. The poll is admittedly imperfect, and hardly a test of Christian theology. But the poor performance of self-identified Christians is nevertheless disturbing.

America (real or imagined) simultaneously. Historical cases and quotations seem to bolster all interpretations. Pitfalls are everywhere. However, if we can argue about whether particular religious rhetoric has *advanced particular policy goals* (e.g., the annexing of Hawaii or creation of progressive tax policy), we move from defining broad movements or ideas ("isms") to events into which we can sink our historical teeth.

How Religion Comes to Support Policy: The Root of Civil Religion

Here I shall discuss three ways that religious ideas become supports for public policy, though not all three necessarily produce the kind of civil religion with which this article is concerned. The first variety of civil religion arises when the collective obligations of individual consciences are so united by circumstance that they organically take on the force of law in the Thomistic sense. That is, custom and habit assume the force of law.[12] When there is a profusion of faithful people in a civil polity, as there is in America, such melding of custom and law is inevitable. So long as the state does not abuse power because it appears joined to a righteous cause and the teleologies of church and state are not entangled, the influence of this first kind of civil religion is the most tolerable and justifiable. Christians are citizens of two kingdoms, as Augustine said; vocations may overlap, and circumstances do not always permit contemplation or clarity as to how commitment to one is disentangled from commitment to the other. For example, a Christian man answers the call to arms during wartime. He goes off to fight not simply because he sees no conflict between his faith and the call to arms, but because he sees it as his Christian duty to protect the weak and innocent who are under attack at home. Provided that he has resolved the question of whether this is a just war, and is resolved in his conscience that he can give account to God for his actions, he has no dissonance to resolve. The important question pertaining to civil religion is whether the war itself is a common cause of persons such as the one described or whether it is advanced by political elites on questionable theological grounds. Has the populace been conned into war by an appealing religious rhetoric that relies on counterfeit theology?

The second type of civil religion, often prompted by expedi-

[12] *Summa Theologica* of St. Thomas Aquinas, I-II, Q. 97, Article 3.

ency, is established on a rhetorical level when a particular political idea or policy is endorsed as being better for Christians not just as citizens but *as* Christians. Like the first type of civil religion, this type is also an inevitable part of the human condition. It is not preferable, but it is tolerable. People naturally seek moral justification for their actions, and ecclesiastical voices inevitably take up the mantle of leadership in times of crisis. All of that notwithstanding, rhetorical excess and religious demagoguery can and must be avoided. So long as abuses of power are not committed in the name of righteousness and the first obligations of the Christian remain paramount after the crisis has passed, the worst legacy of this confusion is that questionable ideas generated in the heat of emotion subsequently become accepted as the basis of routine political action.

In most destructive form of civil religion, public policy becomes a means of redemption.

The third and most destructive variety of civil religion arises when religious and political objectives collapse into one another and come to resemble the kind of radical eschatology Eric Voegelin called gnosticism. The *Civitas Terrena* becomes confused with the *Civitas Dei*. Public policy becomes a means of redemption and replaces acts of charity. Law exhausts the pious desire for righteousness and replaces it with political ambition, abolishing the Augustinian distrust of both human nature and state action. The church becomes confused with the state, and the state threatens to overwhelm the church as the church—the *corpus mysticum*.

The Hebraic Roots of Reformed Protestantism and America

In order to understand the roots of civil religion in America, it is important to go beyond the "Founders" (e.g., Adams, Washington, Jefferson) whom Americans typically look to in order to understand their country. We must go beyond even the first colonists of New England or Virginia. We must take up the suggestion of Bruce Feiler's recent bestseller and consider that Moses and other Hebrew patriarchs may be viewed as America's true founding fathers.[13] It is American to recall an ancient Hebrew patriarch because it is also so very Protestant, particularly Reformed Protestant. In addition to their revived interest in Hebrew and the Old Testament, Reformed Protestants were not content to find their origins just in the Early Church or the Apostolic Age. They went

[13] Bruce Feiler, *America's Prophet: Moses and the American Story* (New York: William Morrow, 2009).

back even further—to the Hebrew Patriarchs.[14] Reformed Protestants claimed that the origins of the church were in the earliest foundations of the biblical covenants. This was the argument of three eminent founders of Reformed Protestant theology: Henry Bullinger in Zurich, John Calvin in Geneva, and Pietro Martire Vermigli (Peter Martyr), an influential Italian reformer who took up residence in Strasburg and Zurich but also held a post at Oxford under Edward VI.[15] Bullinger and Martyr were particularly influential with Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, a key English reformer.

Reformed Protestant accentuation of the Old Testament has had political consequences.

Early Americans, an essentially Protestant lot, much of it in the Reformed tradition, likewise looked back to the ancient Hebrew past. From the earliest New England settlers, through Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights movement, and even in the Bush Doctrine, Americans have cast themselves implicitly or explicitly as Children of Moses. That is, they have seen themselves as either leading or following an exodus of liberation and marching toward a promised land. This vision was famously summarized by Reverend Samuel Danforth in 1671 when he described migration to New England as an "Errand Into the Wilderness." Along these same lines, Americans have long seen themselves as the chosen people—or at least (in the words of Abraham Lincoln) the "almost chosen people."[16]

Americans have long seen themselves as the chosen people.

The connection between Reformed Protestantism and America in their recourse to the Hebrew Scriptures is not coincidental. To understand America, at least in its first two or three centuries, one must understand the "Reformed" tradition of Protestantism—a tradition that was known to the earliest generations of American colonists (many of them coming from Reformed Protestant traditions in England, Holland, Scotland, Germany, and France) and that continued to influence American political rhetoric well into the eighteenth century. Reformed Protestantism was distinguished not only by its rejection of both transubstantiation and consubstan-

[14] G. Sujon Pak, *The Judaizing Calvin: Sixteenth-Century Debates over the Messianic Psalms* (Oxford Studies in Historical Theology. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Jerome Friedman, *The Most Ancient Testimony: Sixteenth Century Christian-Hebraica in the Age of the Renaissance Nostalgia* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1983).

[15] Bullinger's *De testamento seu foedere dei unico & aeterno* (1534) was the earliest and boldest statement of this continuity with the Hebrew patriarchs.

[16] Abraham Lincoln, "Address to the Senate of New Jersey" on February 21, 1861.

tiation (the Roman and Lutheran interpretations of Christ's words "This is my body") but also by its emphasis on church-based social reform and its casting of the civil polity as a *Corpus Christianum*. This was Ulrich Zwingli's true legacy, carried forward after his death in 1531. And while his successor, Heinrich Bullinger, did not agree with the Wars of Kappel that took Zwingli's life, the legacy of this social partnership between the "two kingdoms" remained. Bullinger cast the partnership as a covenant, similar to the civil and soteriological covenants of the Old Testament. John Calvin and William Farel attempted a literal covenanting based on common doctrine in Geneva in the 1530s, and this led to their expulsion in 1538.[17]

Reformed tradition's emphasis on political theology on the Hebrew model a distinguishing characteristic.

This Reformed tradition's emphasis on political theology on the Hebrew model is one of its distinguishing characteristics when contrasted with Lutheran, Roman Catholic, or Anabaptist traditions. Roman Catholic theologians placed relatively less emphasis on the Old Testament patriarchs or covenants.[18] The Anabaptists considered politics a worldly and unholy calling.[19] Rooting oneself in the Hebraic past was also discouraged in the Lutheran tradition. Luther looked back to the Hebrew patriarchs to justify the Reformation, but his law-gospel dichotomy prevented his ever being at home in the Old Testament. Luther and the Lutherans also lacked the ambition and legal autonomy to experiment with a church-state partnership. The Peace of Augsburg in 1555 additionally kept them from developing a robust political theology. After Lutheranism had become secure in the German-speaking territories (it never was explicitly popular among English reformers), one does not find in it incendiary rhetoric such as was used against Queen Mary I by the Marian exiles (e.g., John Ponet, John Knox, and Christopher Goodman). Nor does one find among the Lutherans the French Protestant exploration of constitutional resistance, as in the work of Theodore Beza and Franz Hotman, or in Huguenot tracts such as *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos* and *Reveille-matin des François*.

How did the Reformed tradition pass from the continent (mainly the Swiss confederacy and Geneva) to America? It was strongly

[17] Calvin ultimately made concessions on this front and returned in 1541.

[18] John Von Rohr, *The Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986), 1. Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 29-57.

[19] J. Wayne Baker, "Church, State, and Dissent: The Crisis of the Swiss Reformation, 1531-1536," *Church History* 57 (1988):135-152.

influential in the first decades of the English reformation, seeing its greatest advances under Edward VI and then among members of the Marian exile who left for the continent. The first two generations of leadership in the English church of the sixteenth century were influenced by the Continental reformers such as Calvin, Bullinger, Martyr, and Martin Bucer.[20] Continental Reformed theology also took hold in Scotland in the 1550s, established by the Scots Confession of 1560 and Scottish adoption of the Second Helvetic Confession in 1566. But after the "Puritan" dissents against the Elizabethan Settlement, Puritanism became increasingly divisive. The strident nature of much British Protestantism from the reign of Elizabeth forward was largely the work of English and Scottish radicals out of step with their Continental mentors. Neither Calvin nor Bullinger supported the English dissenters who threatened to tear the Elizabethan church apart.

Notwithstanding the Puritan dissent, it is not accurate to say that the "Anglican" and Reformed traditions did not in any way overlap. Reformed theology, particularly its dissent on the sacraments, was to some extent in the DNA of Anglicanism. This is because both the Puritans and the Anglicans owed much to the close alliance of Continental and English Reformers that flourished in the 1540s and 1550s. Nevertheless, the Anglican tradition grew apart from the more radical elements of Puritanism, flowered in the early seventeenth century, and was cemented by the Act of Uniformity of 1662. Those who dissented from the Elizabethan settlement beginning in the 1560s did so because of disagreement concerning ritual and ceremony, liturgy, and church government. As groups of nonconforming and dissenting Reformed Protestants separated from the Church of England, they established congregations in England, Holland, and elsewhere. The Scottish Protestants, though not necessarily "Puritans" in the traditional sense of the word, resisted Anglicanism and episcopacy vigorously. Reformed theology continued to grow in German territories after the Thirty Years War and in France between 1598 and 1685.

The English, Scots-Irish, French, Germans, and Dutch who first came to America were likely most familiar with the Reformed

[20] Because of Henry VIII's opposition to Luther, Lutheran theology never gained much of a formal foothold in England. The fate of Lutheran theology was sealed by the English adoption of the more Reformed casting of communion in the 1552 *Book of Common Prayer*.

tradition and favored it over the Lutheran and Anabaptist Protestant traditions. This includes both Anglicans (who were hardly Lutheran or Anabaptist, but rather Reformed—followers of the Continental reformers in their sacramental theology) and Puritans. Sydney Ahlstrom's landmark work, *A Religious History of the American People*, makes a powerful case for American familiarity with Reformed Protestantism, arguing that "Puritanism" (which should more accurately be called Reformed Protestantism) provided the moral and religious background of three quarters of Americans by 1776.[21]

Reformed Politics as Virtue of American Politics

Because of the enduring influence of Reformed Protestantism on England, Scotland, France, Holland, and Germany and their religious minorities who fled to America, one can easily trace the rhetoric of being a covenanted people from the Continental Protestant Reformers to America. It is a strain of rhetoric that continues in American today. The covenant, the idea of a binding agreement between God and His people, is a classic example of the kind of symbol Voegelin calls a "leap in being." Though covenants are clearly a theme of scripture and an important part of Christian theology, their political use tempts the kind of "compact" interpretation that does not distinguish the transcendent from the mundane and practical.[22] Therein lies the potential for great virtue and great vice in American civil religion

Before turning to the vices of Americans' ready integration of religion and politics in the Reformed tradition, there are many virtues that can be traced to the salutary influence of Reformed Protestantism in American politics, including its assertion of Christians being covenanted children of God. To cite but a few examples, each of which has helped to deter the worst vices of civil religion:

First, Reformed Protestants historically were not "fundamentalists" in the most extreme sense. They were "humanists" in that, while creedal and confessional, they also appreciated the classical

[21] Ahlstrom suggests that this figure could even approach 90 percent, depending on how it is calculated. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 124.

[22] Eric Voegelin, *Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956); Ellis Sandoz, "Voegelin's Philosophy of History and Human Affairs: With Particular Attention to *Israel and Revelation* and Its Systematic Importance," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 31:1 (March 1998): 61-90.

tradition and secular learning and viewed reason and revelation as complementary. Though they have been accused of being "theocrats," they prescribed a jurisdictional separation of the two kingdoms.[23] This prescription had two variations. Calvin and Bullinger disagreed about the use and extent of church discipline and the autonomy of church leadership, but in neither case did church leaders become civil magistrates; church and state were separate. But if the church was only to be the trustee of the Word and sacraments and not to direct civil policy, then where else was one to go for political wisdom? The answer was found in natural law and secular sources. John Calvin explicitly made the point that politics, as an earthly pursuit, could be informed by earthly wisdom.[24] Covenanter Samuel Rutherford was an encyclopedia of political thought, drawing on over 700 authors both sacred and secular without prejudice.[25] The use of Roman and canon law in the French Huguenot *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos* is so rich (and integrated with covenant theology) that scholars continue to debate whether it is not better classified as a work of late (and largely secular) medieval political thinking.[26] The eventual lesson for America was that biblical, classical, and early modern traditions could get along in the service of liberty.

Second, it was from the Hebrews and church polities, by way of the Reformed Protestant traditions, that average Americans learned to decentralize and federalize authority. The biblical rhetoric of limited government was so familiar to Americans by 1776 that almost everyone on the continuum of theological orthodoxy utilized it during that era. This was not confined to orthodox Reformed Protestants such as Roger Sherman.[27] Biblical rhetoric was also used in the service of liberty by less orthodox figures

[23] David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010).

[24] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II.ii.13.

[25] John Coffey, *Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 70.

[26] Anne McLaren, "Rethinking Republicanism: Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos In Context," *Historical Journal* 49, no. 1 (2006): 23-52; George Garnett, "Law in the Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos: A Vindication" *Historical Journal* 49, no. 3 (2006): 877-91.

[27] See, for example, Sherman's reference to the period of the judges' ruling the Hebrews in his *Remarks on a Pamphlet Entitled 'A Dissertation on the Political Union and the Constitution of the Thirteen United States of North America by a Citizen of Philadelphia'* (New Haven: 1784), 25-26.

Covenantal politics meant decentralized power.

such as John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine.[28] Reformed Protestants generally read the Hebrew society as having been a federal polity.[29] Covenantal politics meant decentralized power with layers of consenting authority. If decentralization of power was good enough for covenanted persons, then it was good enough for covenanted persons now. The very word "federal" came from one of the Latin translations (*foedus*) of the Hebrew word for covenant (*berith*).[30] The Swiss reformers in particular were partisans of republicanism, or at least of a mixed regime.[31] Reformed Protestants were disinclined to kings not just because of the warnings they read, for example, in I Samuel 8. Reformed opponents of monarchy repaired to a hermeneutical tactic. The sixteenth-century Continental reformers and English and Scottish Reformed Protestants suggested, implicitly and explicitly, that the Old Testament monarchies be read more as a representation (or "type") that foreshadowed the kingship of Christ *rather* than as a prescribed political regime. Their critique of monarchy was also bolstered by a general distrust of power.[32] Because Calvin was French, his heart may have always been with the French monarchy. Nevertheless, his *Institutes* famously disseminated to Reformed Protestants the doctrine that lower magistrates should intervene to protect citizens from tyrants.[33]

Third, covenantal political theology emphasized community as more than the union of autonomous individuals in a "social contract." The Reformed theological tradition of rights implied an understanding of liberty that was both vertical (to God) and

[28] Ironically, Paine uses a biblical theme of chosenness to advance the more modern theme of "natural rights" and individualism.

[29] Of course, many Scottish Covenanters supported Charles I and Charles II against Cromwell and the New Model Army. But the politics of this dispute are so complicated (especially in light of the Solemn League and Covenant's promise not to harm the king's person) that one cannot draw from it any clear conclusions about their support for monarchy. Samuel Rutherford's *Lex, Rex* (1644) was hardly an unequivocal support for monarchy or centralized authority.

[30] The great work on federalism in the Reformed Protestant tradition was written in 1603: Johannes Althusius's *Politica Methodice Digesta, Atque Exemplis Sacris et Profanis Illustrata* or *Politics Methodically Digested, Illustrated with Sacred and Profane Examples*, ed. and trans. Frederick S. Carney, foreword by Daniel J. Elazar (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1995).

[31] Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xx.8; Henry Bullinger, *Decades*, II.vi.

[32] Glenn A. Moots, *Politics Reformed: The Anglo-American Legacy of Covenant Theology* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010), 51-68.

[33] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.xx.

horizontal (to others). As John Winthrop put it, there is a difference between *natural liberty* and *federal liberty*. Natural liberty is the lack of restraint, but federal liberty is the freedom to govern oneself according to law and conscience.[34] This theological approach to community preceded the social contract theorists and philosophers (i.e., Spinoza, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau) by a generation or more and avoided the "individualist" dilemma that characterized philosophical social contract thinking and its parallels in economic theory. The political philosophy that gets so much play in college classrooms as the root of American politics was not what *most* Americans had in mind, at least not without a substantial theological context. There is no reason to think that Americans read Spinoza or thought much of Hobbes. Locke's famous *Two Treatises*, although closer to the Reformed tradition than Spinoza, Hobbes, or Rousseau, didn't have an American edition until 1773.[35] Locke's traction in the American mind was owed largely to clergy, presuming that they were not working from Bishop Hoadly rather than Locke.[36] This is why John Adams, in his study of the sources of American liberty and the American constitution, mentioned not only Sidney and Locke but also the works of Reformed Protestants Ponet, Milton, and the *Vindicae, Contra Tyrannos*.[37] But American scholars and historians adore Locke, barely mention Sidney (ironically, the only martyr for the cause of resistance), and ignore the Reformed Protestants.

Winthrop's "federal liberty" the freedom to govern oneself according to law and conscience.

Perhaps the most important contribution of Reformed Protestantism was to seed (if not always water) a clear view of the rights of conscience, to define tyranny in terms both secular and sacred, and to articulate a prescription for resistance. This had the potential to inoculate their political theology from becoming the kind of civil religion that would displace civil society with the state. From Heinrich Bullinger in Zurich and the tradition articulated by British Protestants such as Ponet, Knox, and Samuel Rutherford,

[34] John Winthrop, *A Little Speech on Liberty (*1645).

[35] Americans were much more likely to have read Locke's famous *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

[36] For the clergy's use of Locke, see Steven M. Dworetz, *The Unvarnished Doctrine: Locke, Liberalism, and the American Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994).

[37] John Adams, *A Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America, Against the Attack of M. Turgot, in His Letter to Dr. Price, Dated the Twenty-Second Day of March, 1778*. Volume 3, Chapter I.

Americans learned that Romans 13 does not command unconditional obedience. They also learned the means of legal resistance by interposition. This meant that, if the Reformed Protestant tradition remembered its tradition, it would remain a political theology of liberty rather than a civil religion of statism.

The Enlightenment did not invent natural-rights language or the right of resistance. Social-contract theorists who asserted that property was a foundation for government, for example, were preceded by both the *Vindiciae* and by Samuel Rutherford's *Lex, Rex*. But unlike Rousseau, who saw property as the invention of an exploiting scoundrel, and Hobbes, who thought property inconsistent with human nature apart from positive law, the Reformed Protestants considered it an essential part of the foundations of good government.[38] All of this was bound up with the right of conscience as well. The author of the *Vindiciae* states, for example, "Whereby it plainly appears, that not for religion only, but even for our country and our possessions, we may fight and take arms against a tyrant."[39] Resisting tyrants was not an innovation. It was clearly prescribed by classical and medieval authors. But it was now joined to theological imperatives for liberty with which Protestants could identify. To many Americans, their Revolution was an "appeal to heaven."[40] This allusion to the biblical story of Jephthah was placed on the American battle standards. Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin sought to adopt as the motto of the United States the justification of John Bradshaw for the execution of Charles Stuart: "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God."

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[38] *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos*, (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1989 edition of 1689 English Translation), 76; Samuel Rutherford, *Lex, Rex* (Harrisonburg: Sprinkle Publications, 1982 Reprint of 1644 edition), 67-68; Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter XIII: "Where there is no common power, there is no law; where no law, no injustice. Force and fraud are in war the two cardinal virtues."

[39] *Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos*, 142-143. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xx.8; Bullinger, *Decades*, II.vi.

[40] Locke learned from his Reformed Protestant milieu and used this allusion himself, using it to refer to resistance by the people against tyrants. See his *Second Treatise*, §20, 168, 176, 241. He adds in §196 that throwing off a power with force but not right is "no offence before God" and in §241 that God will judge the merit of the decision to revolt.

The Background to America

Having articulated the virtues of American politics supported by (if not owed to) its Reformed or Hebraic roots, we must now turn to the vices encouraged by divergent readings of the biblical text. To better understand these vices, one must more carefully distinguish two strains of Old Testament political rhetoric. The covenant with Abraham is the foundation for the covenant with Moses,[41] and both are understood by Christian theology to be extended forever and unconditionally by the covenant with David.[42] But in political terms, when applied erroneously to nations other than the original Hebrew nations, these covenants do not have the same political meaning.

Confusion concerning God's covenants with Moses or Abraham politically dangerous.

To cast the difference between these covenants in terms of modern democratic politics, one can suggest this comparison. To be a Child of Moses is a great comfort during times of oppression. To be a Child of Moses is to be the party out of power. You can leave or you can try to regain what you have lost. You are resisting the oppressor. To be a Child of Abraham, however, is to be the party in power. You cannot just indict your oppressors, leave town, or displace the tyrant. You actually have to make things happen. Recall God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 22. Abraham is promised that his descendants will be as prolific as the sands of the seashore, that they will take possession of the gates of their enemies, and that they will be a blessing to all the nations of the earth.[43] If one reads this not as applying to the Church but as a form of civil religion, the political implications are powerful and dangerous. The promise to Abraham was traditionally understood by Christian theologians to apply to the work of Christ and the church. Could it be implicitly applied to the state? Such an idea was instrumental in forming Anglo-American civil religion, especially since the modern nation-state was coming into existence during the Reformation and the sixteenth century. It is this confusion—reading the covenants with Moses or Abraham not as with the people of God or the church, but with the state—that helped to engender a dangerous civil religion as part of the Anglo-American experience.

From Geneva, Reformed Protestants learned how to be Children of Moses. Calvin spent most of his life in tension with civil authori-

[41] Exodus 2:23-25.

[42] I Chronicles 16, 17

[43] Genesis 22:15-18.

ties. After he returned from exile to Geneva in 1541, the civil leaders consented only selectively to Calvin's desired reforms insofar as he was perceived as an overly pious and meddling French outsider. He did not receive citizenship or acceptance of many of his desired reforms until 1559, including independent ecclesiastical authority over church discipline. Arguably, it is therefore the legacy of Geneva (Beza and Calvin) that one finds in the dissenting English Protestants.[44] However, neither Calvin nor Beza can be precisely cast as endorsing the English or Scottish dissents, let alone the more radical innovations of late sixteenth-century English or Scottish Puritanism. The reactions from Geneva and Zurich to the initial English dissents were rarely supportive.

From Zurich, Reformed Protestants inferred how to be Children of Abraham. Ideally, this meant advancing the cause of the church in the world through concord and cooperation rather than discord and resistance. In Zurich, the church and state remained separate in jurisdiction and authority. But Zwingli and Bullinger viewed the society as more in the nature of a *Corpus Christianum* bound by the covenant of baptism. This emphasized a closer partnership (though not a confusion of jurisdiction) between church and state. And the Zurich church leadership was reticent to assert its ecclesiastical authority to exercise church discipline for fear of imitating what they perceived as Romanist intimidation of civil magistrates.

Dissent and resistance joined to conformity and cooperation.

Marian exiles therefore learned two lessons from their time in the Swiss confederacy. From Geneva, they learned about dissent and resistance. From Zurich, they learned about conformity and cooperation.[45] They learned how to be both Children of Abraham and Children of Moses. From Calvin, and from the Marian exiles who fled to Geneva, the English and Scottish Protestants learned the power of social reform as a Christian vocation largely autonomous from the magistrate; from Bullinger, they learned to think of reform as more of a seamless garment and a partnership between the church and the law.

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[44] The Marian exiles from Britain used their time in Geneva to craft texts that became tools of theological and political resistance after they returned: the Psalter, the Geneva Bible, and the *Book of Common Order* (as a substitute for the *Book of Common Prayer*).

[45] Bullinger did provide a strong argument for resistance against tyrants. But if the question was one concerning "things indifferent" (e.g., vestments), he advised the English dissenters to conform.

These ideas about how a broad social and political covenant would work saw many variations over three centuries. For the more radical Marian exiles such as Christopher Goodman or John Knox, those in the covenant who acquiesced to tyranny put their souls at risk. In the seventeenth century, such ideas came to a bloody fulfillment in the English Revolution and the "Wars of the Three Kingdoms." While it is certainly not a contradiction to be a friend of law and a foe to tyranny, the boundaries of law as liberty versus tyranny were not always clear in the minds of those who sought to remake England or Scotland as a holy commonwealth.

It took a little over 100 years for the experiment in Reformed political theology to catch fire and burn its way across Britain. The conflagration began with the polemics against Mary Tudor (written by exiles Ponet, Knox, and Goodman) and the successful Scottish political covenanting against Mary of Guise, and it concluded in the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Reformed Protestants experienced successes and also failures in their efforts to reform both church and state. The Scottish Reformation used political action to effect desired revisions in worship and liturgy, the eventual abolition of episcopacy, the creation of additional political covenants (1638, 1643), the creation of presbyteries, and elevated status for the presbyterian general assembly. English dissenters were less successful in effecting ecclesiastical change (at least until 1643 and the Westminster Assembly) but played an important role in the first English Civil War against Charles Stuart's forces as well as the prosecution and execution of Charles himself.

By the 1650s, Reformed political theology had burned itself out in Britain.

The wars against the royalists and between Reformed Scots and English, followed by Cromwell's Protectorate, were the closest that the British came to civil religion.[46] By the 1650s Reformed political theology and its dreams of a covenanted *Corpus Christianum*—now a vision far more ambitious than what was attempted in Zurich—had largely burned itself out in Britain. This can be read as a confirmation of the validity of Voegelin's warning against the appropriation of messianic symbols for pragmatic and political purposes. Cromwell's commonwealth was fraught with challenges and failures. Reformed Protestants in England and Scotland slaughtered each other in Britain's second and third civil wars (1648-1651) for reasons political and ecclesiastical. Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* is

[46] There was a variety of more radical English reformers, such as the Levelers and Fifth Monarchists, but their stories lie outside the scope of this article.

an indication of the cynicism that some of the English felt.[47] Sadly, the legacy of Hobbes's *realpolitik* alternative was a medicine arguably worse than the disease of civil religion. Hobbes traded a mixed bag of political theologies for absolutism robed in scientific materialism and skepticism. This represented the kind of false choice forced by the crucible of war.

The Reformed Protestant legacy is much more than Cromwell's failed Protectorate, however. Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy is right to argue that the Whigs and the Glorious Revolution owe a large debt to the Puritan revolution.[48] But the fact that the British parliamentarians and their constitutional arguments adopted a more secular and ecumenical approach reveals the exhaustion that many Britons likely felt after a century of politico-theological struggle. There was a Protestant hue to democratic resistance that persisted after 1662, and political theorists continued to ply the trade of biblical exegesis (e.g., John Locke's exegetical *First Treatise of Government* or his "appeal to heaven" in the *Second Treatise*). But much of what started out as the use of biblical exegesis as political theory had settled into a relatively (though not entirely) secular legal tradition of constitutionalism after the Glorious Revolution.

Britain has not seen modern revival of civil religion.

Britain's century-long wildfire of deeply religious and violent politics may explain why she has never seen a modern revival of civil religion. By all appearances, both England and Scotland were largely tired of civil religion by 1689. Reformed Protestant political theology had many salutary lessons for British politics, and one can credit it generally with furthering religious liberty, constitutionalism, and republicanism. But once it gained political power it was prone to excesses, especially millenarian excesses. While the war against Charles was arguably defensible on legal and constitutional grounds, the trial and execution—mostly driven by radical elements among the army and clergy—were partly motivated by the belief that executing Charles would usher in the Parousia and the earthly reign of Christ. Individual regeneration and sanctification, the mission of the Church, was displaced by the bloody social work of war. The Anglican Church (at least for much of its subsequent history) continued to show the theological

[47] Note Hobbes's remark in *Leviathan*, Chapter XV, Section 8, regarding those who use political covenants for revolution—no doubt a swipe at Presbyterians.

[48] The close connection between 1649 and 1688 is insightfully presented by Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy in *Out of Revolution: Autobiography of Modern Man* (Providence: Berg Publishers, 1969).

influence of the Continental reformers, particularly in the *Book of Common Prayer* and the *Thirty Nine Articles* and its differences with Roman Catholic doctrine. The Scottish church incorporated and maintained more of the Puritan innovations (such as Presbyterian government), but it, too, gave up political religion. In other words, civil religion proved not to be an integral part of Reformed Protestantism in Britain. But what did the Americans learn from this experience?

America's Attempt to Become a Covenanted Nation

Though pious English dissenters who immigrated to New England prided themselves on avoiding the entanglements of English church-state cooperation, they still hoped to achieve their own variation of the *Corpus Christianum* in America. Challenges to this hope were evident as early as the 1630s—not two decades after the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth. Thomas Hooker, though very much a Congregationalist in good standing, founded Connecticut in the hope of expanding suffrage and allowing slightly more toleration than had been enjoyed in Massachusetts Bay. Roger Williams, a Separatist among Separatists, rejected the identification of the Massachusetts (or Plymouth) colony with Israel and wanted the civil realm separated from the ecclesiastical. Williams judged his co-religionists to be hypocrites and founded the Rhode Island charter on the premise that piety would be stronger if divorced from civil authority. These developments undermined the hopes of the first settlers and demonstrated the ways in which Reformed Protestantism in America was never comfortable with a full church-state partnership.

The "Halfway Covenant."

Williams wasn't alone in his fear that hypocrisy was becoming more prevalent in New England. Hypocrisy was also on the minds of the clergymen who created the "Halfway Covenant" beginning in the 1660s. This compromise enabled children of baptized parents or even grandparents also to be baptized despite the absence of a conversion or regeneration experience, but did not let them enjoy full church membership or to participate in communion. This compromise maintained an implicit civil (or at least social) and ecclesiastical partnership and also preserved the Zurich model of citizenship by baptism. By the 1690s, three quarters of the Massachusetts churches were using the Halfway Covenant solution.

Though the dissents of Hooker and Williams were certainly

important events in the erosion of the American covenant, the seeds of its collapse were already planted in the theological soil of Congregationalism. Congregationalists, as the fullest inheritors of the "Puritan" dissenters, would not avail themselves of episcopacy and the parish system. According to the theology of Robert Browne, who articulated the principles of Brownism (later called Independency or Congregationalism), each church was to be a "gathered church" of truly converted Christians who could demonstrate their faith through a conversion narrative. Though Congregationalists remained paedobaptists, full membership after baptism required a conversion narrative, and satisfying narratives were increasingly rare. By the 1640s, Presbyterians in England and Scotland were complaining that American Congregational churches were making rather than converting heathen.

Solomon Stoddard, a pivotal figure in early American religion, led the theological vanguard with two solutions to this problem. The first solution, proposed and implemented after the Halfway Covenant, was an implicit rejection of the validity of conversion narratives and a more open approach to communion. This approach, which was akin to what the Congregationalists had rejected in the English church, enabled persons to attend communion so long as they remained free from moral scandal. Such an approach made the conversion narrative unnecessary for administration of communion and avoided the problem of the "Halfway Covenant." Stoddard's solution was essentially a return to the parish system in its rejection of the "gathered church" concept, making the church and the citizenry more-or-less coextensive. Though Stoddard's opponents remained concerned about whether this practice devalued the sacrament, Stoddard was thinking of the potential loss to civil society of having so many persons essentially outside the discipline of the church.

The second solution to the decline of piety and church membership was to counter spiritual lethargy with covenant renewals and revivals. Colonists were spurred to increased piety by jeremiads during King Philip's War or other crises. The Massachusetts Bay charter was revoked by Charles II in 1684, ending close ecclesiastical-civil partnership. The Massachusetts Bay Province Charter of 1691 extended the franchise from church members to property holders. Something had to be done to maintain the vision of a pious community. The justification for revival theology had already

been prepared by both the Puritan preparationists (e.g., William Perkins or Richard Sibbes) and by Scottish Reformed churches. Covenant renewals and corresponding revivals of piety began in the 1670s. Stoddard himself presided over five revivals between 1679 and 1733. Between roughly 1730 and 1750, the profusion of revivals spurred by itinerant preaching formed the so-called First Great Awakening, cast by transatlantic journals such as *Christian History* as an international movement by the Spirit of God.

Effect of Great Awakening salutary.

Though the Awakening had its opponents and critics, the effect on the piety of Americans was overwhelmingly salutary. Even Benjamin Franklin, a close friend of revivalist minister George Whitefield, remarked on the improvement in Philadelphia brought by revival.[49] Opponents, however, emphasized the Awakening's revolutionary impact on the social and ecclesiastical order. Field preaching in the Welsh style attracted tens of thousands. Proponents of theological dissent (which included many Congregationalist, Presbyterian, and Baptist clergy) celebrated the collapse of the status quo and could not have asked for a better friend than the revivals.

America's Transition to Civil Religion

By adjusting their sacramental theology and encouraging spiritual revival, Americans in New England struggled to maintain the kind of citizenship-by-baptism political community that they had inherited from the Continental reformers by way of Reformed Protestantism in Britain. Relatively speaking, the Middle Colonies were more interested in the gospel of commerce than the gospel of Christ, but Reformed Protestants there (largely Presbyterians) still wrestled with these questions. Although the Anglicans in Virginia and further south had a default partnership because of the parish model, they likewise struggled with the relationship of piety and church membership to the civil order. So when did civil religion begin? When did the vision of the nation as a holy cause come to be advanced by the state—which has a monopoly of force—rather than by the church and civil society?

Examples of embryonic American civil religion before the American Revolution stemmed from wars and religious controversies in North America that resonated all the way back to Britain

[49] A. S. Billingsley, *The Life of the Great Preacher Reverend George Whitefield* (1878), 152-152.

and Europe. Walter McDougall rightly argues that Americans were not dragged against their will into Britain's imperial wars.[50] They were itching for a fight with the French, whom they viewed as the agent of Rome.[51] New Englanders, more under the sway of the dissenting and Puritan tradition, viewed Anglicans as proxies for Rome even before France became an ally, and clergy needed a new Antichrist. The sending of hundreds of Anglican clergy to the colonies, together with the crown's brief consolidation of the New England colonies with New York and the Jerseys under Governor Edmund Andros from 1686–1689, only fueled the sense of biblical parallel and prophetic history for Americans. Wars against the Indians invited parallels with God's judgments on Israel and Judah.

Americans' messianic mission tied to world events.

Clergy became prophetic voices in the midst of these crises, mediating the prophetic history of New England. Cotton Mather announced during King William's War (1689-1697), "War with none but Hell and Rome!"[52] Americans' messianic sense of their national mission was tied to world events and the now-centuries-old struggle against Roman Catholicism.[53] George Whitefield, the famed Anglican/Methodist minister and revivalist, blessed the amateur army who set off for an expedition to Louisbourg in Nova Scotia during the War of Jenkins' Ear.[54] One captain in the expedition brought an axe to smash crucifixes and icons in the French Catholic chapel there.[55] Leading Boston clergyman Jonathan Mayhew (important in the development of America's political theology) gave thanks in 1759 for the campaign against the French Canadians, likening Quebec to a Pandora's Box of innumerable plagues.[56] Mayhew's first political discourse is titled,

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[50] Walter McDougall, *Freedom Just Around the Corner: A New American History 1585-1828*. (New York: HarperCollins Perennial, 2005), 105-106.

[51] Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

[52] Cotton Mather, *Things for a Distress'd People to Think Upon* (1696), 73. See also *A Pillar of Gratitude* (1700) and *The Wonderful Works of God* (1690).

[53] Thomas S. Kidd, "'Let Hell and Rome Do Their Worst': World News, Anti-Catholicism, and International Protestantism in Early-Eighteenth-Century Boston" *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 76, No. 2 (June 2003), 265-290.

[54] Americans subsequently provided a reciprocation of sorts for the English clergyman when they took Whitefield's collar and wristbands from his coffin prior to the expedition to Quebec in 1775, distributing the pieces to soldiers on the march. Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775-1783* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), 24.

[55] McDougall, *Freedom Just Around the Corner*, 172.

[56] Jonathan Mayhew, *Two Discourses Delivered October 25, 1759* (1759), 78.

"Of the Great Things Which God Hath Done for Us." The ambiguity of the "us," meaning both the civil polity and the Christians therein, illustrates that the cause of the nation and the cause of the church were assumed to be identical. In speaking to communities, ideally communities of the faithful, clergy were speaking both to individual believers and to the *ecclesia*.[57]

The colonial belief in America's divine mission not confined to New England.

The recurring theme of America's exceptional status during crises hearkened back over a century to sermons and books that explored covenantal themes of blessing and judgment for the people of God. Good examples include Peter Bulkeley's *Gospel Covenant Or the Covenant of Grace Opened* (1651) and Samuel Danforth's election sermon *A Brief Recognition of New-England's Errand Into the Wilderness* (1671).[58] Likewise in the mid-seventeenth century, Richard Mather, William Thompson, and Samuel Torrey spoke of New England's special role in battling the Antichrist.[59] Longer treatments of this theme included Edward Johnson's *Wonder-Working Providence 1628-1652* (1654) and Cotton Mather's more famous *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702). America's sense of uniqueness and importance was strengthened not only by her role in world affairs but also by the revivals. Jonathan Edwards suggested that the revivals were leading to the culmination of a redemption wherein the work of Christ would spread across the whole earth.[60] And though Reformed theology's emphasis on covenants as the means of divine providence encouraged a sense of chosenness, a belief in America's divine mission was not confined to New England or to Reformed Protestantism. William Penn believed that Pennsylvania's "holy experiment" in religious toleration was to be a divine example to the nations. Jesuit father Andrew White saw Providence as founding Maryland as a place to sow the seeds of

[57] This was certainly true in the many sermons preached on civil occasions, to the militia or to elected officials for example. But this was not an occasion to advance law or legislation; it was an echo of the prophetic voice in the Old Testament. The medieval tradition of the *Advocatus Ecclesiae* was to be heard in these sermons.

[58] Though frequently cited as marking the beginning of America's sense of her own exceptionalism, Winthrop's *A Model of Christian Charity* (1630) may not have been known to Americans until the twentieth century. See Richard Gamble's forthcoming *A Spectacle to the World: The Story of How America Became the City on a Hill* (ISI Books).

[59] Richard Mather and William Thompson, *An Heart-Melting Exhortation* (Delivered in 1645 but published in 1650 because of the overworked printing presses); Samuel Torrey, *An Exhortation Unto Reformation* (1674).

[60] Jonathan Edwards, *Union in Prayer* (1747) and *Thoughts on the Revival* (1744).

religion and piety. Anglican Virginia was cast by John Rolfe and Alexander Whitaker as providentially ordained and comparable to ancient Israel.[61]

The question was then, and still is now, whether Americans would see their sense of calling as tied to institutions encouraging virtue and piety or whether they would trade the politics of prudence for a self-righteous, more ambitious use of force. Would waning piety and morality be viewed as a shortcoming of law or as a spiritual problem to be addressed by the Word and sacraments?

Three temptations to indulge in civil religion.

Early American history presented Americans with three especially strong temptations to indulge in civil religion. The first was the execution of Charles I, when British radicalism threatened to infect Americans. The second was after the Glorious Revolution and the American reaction to it. The third was the American War for Independence. Each event tied the vocation of citizenship more closely to the vocation of faith, bringing Augustine's two cities into precarious proximity.

In the first case, Americans were tempted to think that some act of law or politics (the regicide) would advance the eschatological timetable. Americans such as John Cotton were supporters of Cromwell and hoped that the execution of Charles I would usher in the reign of Christ. In the second case, being an Englishman and being a Christian became almost indistinguishable as New England clergy struggled with how to approach the religious dimensions of the new charter. In the third case, the cause of the nation at war became almost indistinguishable from the cause of God's chosen people. But none of the three resulted in a robust and gnostic civil religion.

During the first period, many Congregationalists in America were prepared to join their English brethren in subverting law (and the promise of the Solemn League and Covenant) in order to execute Charles. This decision pitted law against divine revelation in an imprudent and dangerous way. In England, Congregationalists were prepared to let their prophecy undermine both law and traditional biblical hermeneutics, believing that the New Model Army was God's instrument against the Antichrist and that the

[61] Conrad Cherry, ed., *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 1-3; Alexander Whitaker, *Good News from Virginia* (1613).

millennium would come after the execution of Charles.[62] In the Wars of the Three Kingdoms, eschatology became civil religion.[63] In America, the prominent and influential clergyman John Cotton was just one of those who combined millenarianism with an interpretation of contemporary events.[64] Most important was his correspondence with Cromwell and his advocating the execution of Charles, which Cotton believed would have eschatological significance and would inaugurate the millennium. [65] He and others also believed that the exodus to America was a literal exodus from the judgment of God.[66] Prior to the American Revolution, Congregationalists gave new attention to the regicide and considered the cause of revolution to be the cause of God. In 1750, Jonathan Mayhew commemorated the centennial anniversary of the regicide as an event for his parishioners to celebrate.[67] John Adams called Mayhew's 1750 sermon *A Discourse concerning Unlimited Submission* a catechism of resistance and said of it in an 1816 letter to Hezekiah Niles, "It was read by everybody, celebrated by friends, and abused by enemies."

In the second period, some New Englanders reacted to the changes of the "Glorious Revolution" (including the grant of a new colonial charter for Massachusetts) by equating political

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[62] Thomas Hooker, *A Survey of the Summe of Church Discipline* (1648); Hugh Peters, *God's Doings and Man's Duty* (1646); Hugh Peters, *A Word for the Army and Two Words to the Kingdom* (1647); William Dell, *The City Ministers Unmasked* (1649); Peter Sterry, *The Comings Forth of Christ* (1650); John Owen, *The Shaking and Translating of Heaven and Earth* (1649); Goodwin, *A Glimpse of Zion's Glory* (1641), 79. Millenarianism was not unique to the Independents or Congregationalists, of course. G. P. Gooch goes so far as to say, "At the basis of the creed of every religious body of the time, except the Presbyterians, lay the Millenarian idea."

[63] Thomas Goodwin, *Zerubbabels Encouragement to Finish the Temple* (1642) and *A Glimpse of Sions Glory* (1641).

[64] John Cotton, *The Powring Out of the Seven Vials or an Exposition, of the 16 Chapter of the Revelation, with an Application of it to our times* (1642) and *An Exposition Upon the Thirteenth Chapter of Revelation* (1655).

[65] Francis J. Bremer, "In Defense of Regicide: John Cotton on the Execution of Charles I." *The William and Mary Quarterly* Third Series, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Jan., 1980), pp. 103-124.

[66] Avihu Zakai, *Exile and Kingdom: History and Apocalypse in the Puritan Migration to America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 63-65, and Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 237-262.

[67] Jonathan Mayhew, *A Discourse concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers: With some Reflections on the Resistance made to King Charles I And on the Anniversary of his Death* (1750).

faithfulness with religious faithfulness. By 1692, one's rights as an Englishman were already coming to be associated with membership in the covenant. Christian liberties were now considered identical with English liberties. So said Cotton Mather.[68] Mather began to move away from identifying with Israel and praised the English constitutional protection of life, liberty, property, and self-government. This was essentially a compromise to promote the new charter.

American independence identified with the cause of God's people.

During the third period, American clergy identified the cause of American independence and constitutional government with the cause of God's people in the Old Testament. The covenantal spirit is revived in the American Revolution, and not only in New England.[69] The law book of the chosen people, Deuteronomy, was the most cited source in revolutionary literature between 1765 and 1805.[70] Even before the Revolution, sermons comparing America to Israel proliferated.[71] Some of these revived the idea that America was at war with the Antichrist—either against Anglican bishops or even Rome herself in the guise of Canada. George Washington, for example, had to instruct his officers in the Quebec expedition to "protect and support the free Exercise of the Religion of the Country and the undisturbed Enjoyment of the rights of Conscience in religious Matters, with your utmost Influence and Authority."

The parallel between the American Revolution and the English Civil War was not lost on either the Americans or the English.

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[68] Cotton Mather, *Optanda, Good Men Described and Good Things Propounded* (1692).

[69] Of the twenty-nine sermons published by Massachusetts clergy from 1777 to 1783, twenty-two reminded the listeners of the covenant and called them to virtue and piety. See Dale S. Kuehne, *Massachusetts Congregationalist Political Thought, 1760-1790: The Design of Heaven* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1996). Clergy in the middle colonies were also conversant in the use of covenantal political theology. See Keith L. Griffin, *Revolution and Religion: American Revolutionary War and the Reformed Clergy* (New York: Paragon House, 1994).

[70] Donald S. Lutz, *A Preface to American Political Theory* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 136.

[71] Examples include: Samuel Cooper, *A Sermon on the Day of the Commencement of the Constitution* (1780); Joseph Sewall *Nineveh's Repentance and Deliverance* (1740); Samuel Dunbar, *The Presence of God With His People* (1760); Jacob Cushing, *Divine Judgments Upon Tyrants* (1778); Samuel Sherwood, *The Church's Flight Into the Wilderness: An Address on the Times* (1776); Abraham Keteltas's *God Arising and Pleading His People's Cause* (1777); Samuel Langdon, *The Republic of the Israelites an Example to the American States* (1788). All are contained in Ellis Sandoz, ed. *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1991).

James Otis, Jr., appealed to clergy by hearkening back to 1641, an appeal that Tory Peter Oliver ascribed to the "black regiment," a reference to the long black Geneva gown worn by many clergy. Fourth Earl of Orford Horace Walpole, himself no mourner of Charles Stuart, wrote a letter that indicated how many English nobility viewed the American situation, "One has griefs enough of one's own, without fretting because cousin America has eloped with a Presbyterian parson."[72] When the war ended and independent governance began, the sense of chosenness did not abate, as evidenced in Ezra Stiles's 1783 sermon, *The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor*.[73]

The embrace of civil religion entails discarding Augustinian realism.

As Americans in the Reformed Protestant tradition experienced periods of political upheaval, they were confronted with an important decision. In the American Revolution, one can argue, they were simply acting like Children of Moses. They were liberating themselves from oppressors. But once they crossed over the political Jordan and entered the political land they believed had been promised to their patriarchs, would Americans reject the general providence encompassing all nations and instead presume a special relationship with God for themselves? When Americans ended their own "errand into the wilderness" over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, would they confuse the conditional covenant of nations with the everlasting and unconditional covenant of the church—the one with Abraham or David? Would they presume that their nation would always be redeemed from its sin and always favored by God? Adopting this presumptuous civil religion would mean discarding Augustinian realism and the rich political thought of the Western tradition in exchange for the limitless ambitions of ideology.

It can be argued that the first two centuries of American Reformed Protestantism retained enough of that tradition's virtues to help stave off the more destructive varieties of civil religion. The American church leaders and theologians in centuries to follow—the social workers of the Second Great Awakening, the Social Gospel, Progressivism, and the Moral Majority—would revisit America's covenant with God in their own way. Because of

[72] Peter Cunningham, ed., *The Letters of Horace Walpole* (London: Bickers & Son, 1880), 6:234.

[73] Other examples include Samuel McClintock, *A Sermon on the Commencement of the New-Hampshire Constitution* (1784) and Joseph Lathrop, *A Sermon on a Day Appointed for Publick Thanksgiving* (1787). Also contained in Sandoz, *Political Sermons*.

theological liberalism and the proliferation of denominations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these religious movements would reconsider the question of covenant without the virtues of the Reformed Protestant theology or the rich tradition from which it drew. These subsequent generations would be the ones to decide if the cause of America could presume to have the favor of God and whether Weber's monopoly of force would be the lamp for their feet. They would decide if the church would trade the mansions of heaven for public housing.