

Providence and Prudence Together: John Witherspoon's View of Natural Law in the American Republic

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Athens had Epimenides of Crete, Rome had Numa Pompilius – and the Americans had their preachers. It is hard to imagine the American Revolution, the state conventions and the final ratification of the Constitution, without the teachings that Americans received from their spiritual leaders. Whether Baptists or Calvinists, educated divines or popular preachers, formal churches or revival camp meetings, all taught more or less the same lesson: that liberty rests only the hearts of individual persons, and that the surest way to maintain it is through the full receiving of Christian grace. It was important for defeating the British, but it was even more important for establishing an enduring form of self-government.

John Witherspoon (1723-1794) was the quintessential Founding Era minister, though his importance for the American regime went well beyond his religious role. He came to the colonies from Scotland in 1768 to be president of the College of New Jersey in Princeton. He aligned himself with the Revolutionaries and joined the Continental Congress where he served as an active committee member, becoming the only minister to sign the Declaration of Independence. He was also the teacher of the young James Madison, who was one among nine members of the Constitutional Convention who all studied under him.

Witherspoon's sermon, "The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men," was preached at Princeton in 1776. Like many sermons of its day, it had plenty to say about the Revolution, but not without a serious and careful meditation on the truths that lay beneath it. Witherspoon's teaching is about Providence, or the way the divine will extends to all of the cosmos – a concept "very full and complete in the sacred oracles" (533).¹ While others sovereigns

¹ All citations from *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805, Vol. I*, Second Edition, edited by Ellis Sandoz (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998), pp. 529-558.

who had limited knowledge and foresight of their kingdoms, God's Providence "extends not only to things which we may think of great moment," Witherspoon wrote, "but to things the most indifferent and inconsiderable," like falling sparrows (Matthew 10:29) and the hairs of one's head (Luke 12:7). Plainly, Providence included even the minutest aspects of human affairs – even the baser and uglier ones.

To show the extent of Providence, Witherspoon focused on Psalm 76:10: "Surely the wrath of man shall praise thee; the remainder of wrath shalt thou restrain." A true Calvinist, Witherspoon pointed to "total depravity" as the first principle of all human things – a point that James Madison most certainly received from his teacher, and applied to his construction of a government of internal checks and balances. It was only men of "lax and corrupt principles" who "take great delight in speaking to the praise of human nature, and extolling its dignity," Witherspoon wrote. But a more sober view of history and politics "will tell us what men have been in their practice, and from thence you may judge what they are by nature, while unrenewed." In truth, a more serious examination of the human condition "ought to humble us in the dust" (pp. 537-538).

So here were two Protestant principles, which Witherspoon sought to fit together: Providence and Total Depravity.

It was simple enough to say that God's provident will is greater than man's. But what about the rest of the soul? Witherspoon was too much a part of the Scottish Enlightenment to ignore the deeper and more wonderful complexities of human nature. He knew that there was certainly more to the human person than will alone: there was reason, both practical and theoretical – and most importantly, there were the passions. Similarly, he was too aware of our inclination to the good for our depravity to be "total." Indeed, if depravity was that complete, wouldn't that mean that there were parts of human nature that could obstruct God's provident goodness? Surely there was more to the passions than mere wickedness alone: a careful look at them shows how the

passions are equally monstrous and heroic and pathetic and strange, all churning and clashing with each other – but all crying out for reason to order and shape them. When we see this, we are compelled to admit that there is an aspect of Providence that is far more important than the mere course of historical events and the salvation of “the elect.” The divine nature also shapes human nature, and human nature gives every indication that it is meant to participate in the divine.

Examples of evil as instruments for good abound in Scripture – the most obvious being the death of Christ himself, which was plainly necessary for the redemption of mankind. But Witherspoon’s view of Providence is much greater than mere sequences of events. The possibility of defeat at the hands of the British was a case in point: “Can you have a clearer view of the sinfulness of your nature, than when the rod of the oppressor is lifted up, and when you see men putting on the habit of the warrior, and collecting on every hand the weapons of hostility and instruments of death?” he asked (545). Man’s sinfulness was the greatest indicator of how much he deserved tyranny. Accordingly, his willingness to flee it and seek virtue and to rely on God’s grace to lead him to liberty were all the factors that formed the condition of freedom. It as the “concern which every good man ought to take in the national character and manners, and the means which he ought to use for promoting public virtue, and bearing down impiety and vice.” Any band of hooligans, even those inspired by “the rights of man” and other appealing theoretical concepts, could fend off the British. But deserving that liberty was another matter entirely. “Nothing is more certain than that a general profligacy and corruption of manners make a people ripe for destruction,” he wrote. A republic, with its representation and rule of law, “may hold the rotten materials together for some time, but beyond a certain pitch, even the best constitution will be ineffectual, and slavery must ensue. On the other hand, when the manners of a nation are pure, when true religion and internal principles maintain their vigour, the attempts of the most powerful enemies to oppress them are commonly baffled and disappointed” (553-554). It was therefore the

duty of every American to constantly purify himself, and to depend very much on supernatural power to make him free personally, so he might be free politically as well. This would ensure that the cause of Revolution was just – and “if your cause is just, if your principles are pure, and if your conduct is prudent, you need not fear the multitude of opposing hosts,” he wrote (549).

This is, of course, very “God-on-our-side” rhetoric. It compels us to ask: what exactly was the goal of this sermon? Was it simply one more use of popular Christianity for political ends? Was Witherspoon seduced by political power, and the excitement of revolution? That suspicion comes easily. But Witherspoon anticipates it. “[W]hat it is that you are called to do for this purpose farther than your own personal duty?” a critic might ask. Witherspoon responds, saying that “its proper extent is not a little” (554). By nature, personal Christian duty extends quite beyond personal piety. It is not a question of whether or not faith makes contact with public life; Witherspoon insists that it is impossible for it to *not* have a role in politics.

Yet it does not have the same extent in every regime. There is an abundance of “Christian kings” in the world, but there is no reason that the faith of these men be anything other than an outward appearance, in royal ceremonies and holidays. For citizens of a republic, though, the Christian life touches upon reality, and requires a true transformation of each individual. “Freedom in Christ,” as the Apostle Paul saw it (Gal. 5:1), plainly stood on its own, as the end of the Christian life, redeemed and sanctified. But at the same time, that freedom was never without good political consequences.

This is most obvious, Witherspoon writes, in Christian community. “We contribute constantly, though insensibly, to form each others character and manners,” he wrote. “[T]he usefulness of a strictly holy and conscientious deportment is not confined to the possessor, but spreads its happy influence to all that are within its reach” (554-555). A republican form of government positively calls for those transformed by grace to make a prominent appearance in

politics – not because Christian revelation commands it (because the New Testament never issues such a command), but because of the condition of soul that one finds in a Christian necessarily form the moral groundwork of a republic.

The requirement of Romans 13 – “let every person be in subjection to the governing authorities,” since “there is no authority except from God” – is obvious enough with the sovereign is a king or an aristocracy. But it means something else entirely in a regime where the people themselves are sovereign – or, rather, when that true sovereign is finally set free from kings and aristocrats to govern itself with the rule of law. “There is a dignity in virtue which is entitled to authority, and ought to claim it,” he wrote – particularly when it came to those acts of charity known as “fraternal correction,” or the expectation of the best things from our fellow citizens. “How prone are many to represent reproof as flowing from ill nature and surliness of temper? The spirit of God, on the contrary, considers it as the effect of inward hatred, or want of genuine love, to forbear reproof, when it is necessary or may be useful.”

It is worth considering how the fight for independence did not need the aid of ministers like Witherspoon. It came well enough on his own at the hands of radicals like the Sons of Liberty and others inflamed by their hatred of monarchy. Witherspoon soberly distanced himself from that aspect of the Revolution. They might have provided the fuel for popular passions, but they were not the true intent or guiding force behind it. The political liberty he had in view was no mere happy coincidence for Witherspoon: it was in fact God’s providence guiding the new republic to a sort of social and political salvation – the attuning of the “City of Man” to the “City of God,” the end of estrangement of the two realms, where earth rises above its usual darkness and attunes itself as closely as possible to Heaven reaching down.