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SAMUEL WILLARD AND CONTINUITY IN EARLY AMERICAN POLITICAL THOUGHT

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One persistent problem with the scholarship on the America founding is the assumption that orthodox Protestantism rejects the classical Christian notion of natural law.¹ With this assumption, scholars stress the discontinuity between the 18th century American founding—with its talk of the “laws of nature and nature’s God”—and the 17th century settlements, particularly the Puritan founding in New England, which allegedly relied on a negative view of human nature that precluded any positive consideration of the law of nature and its false god. In the course of a century and a half, a people of grace, theology, and exclusively scriptural ethics became a people of nature, philosophy, and practical reason and experience, or so the claim goes. It seems then that views on the origin and ends of civil government, the source for the principles of governance and civil law, and the means by which one learns these principles had undergone a fundamental shift between the two foundings.

The question of continuity and discontinuity in early American political thought serves as the setting of my

1. For discussions on these problems, see my “Reformed Natural Law Theory and the American Founding: A Critique of Recent Scholarship” in *For Law and for Liberty: Essays on the Trans-Atlantic Legacy of Protestant Political Thought*, ed. W. Bradford Littlejohn (Moscow, ID: Davenant Press, 2016) and my forthcoming “The American Founding and the Harmony of Reason and Revelation: A Rediscovery of Calvinist Sources” in *The History of Political Thought*.

chief aim here—to introduce the political thought of Samuel Willard (1640-1707), a largely neglected congregationalist minister and prolific author in Boston. Contradicting many narratives of early American discontinuity, Willard not only subscribed to natural law (indeed, natural theology, natural law, and natural worship are essential to his theological system), he goes further than others in the Christian political tradition in grounding features of political life in the natural, pre-lapsarian order. Willard’s prominence in Puritan New England, his profound learning, and his strict orthodoxy make him a fitting representative of New England Puritan thought,² giving his political writing tremendous relevance for analyzing continuity and discontinuity in early American political thought.



SAMUEL WILLARD

SAMUEL WILLARD: LIFE AND TIMES

Willard was a second-generation colonial minister. Unlike the members the first-generation, he was both born in New England (in Concord, Massachusetts) and educated in New

2. See Seymour Van Dyken, *Samuel Willard, 1640-1707: Preacher of Orthodoxy in an Era of Change* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1972), 48. This is the only biography of Willard. See also, Ernest Benson Lowrie, *The Shape of the Puritan Mind: The Thought of Samuel Willard* (New Haven: Yale, 1974) for an explication of Willard’s theology.

England (at Harvard), making him inexperienced in the Old World religious turmoil that drove his father to emigrate and yet well-experienced in the burden laid upon him and his second-generation brothers and sisters to maintain their religious fervor and piety. In an era of change, Willard was a stalwart preacher of Reformed orthodoxy, but he was also a moderate on the most controversial ecclesiastical question in New England at the time: the qualifications for full church membership. The second-generation increasingly failed to meet the testimonial requirements for membership, and Willard was sympathetic to their situation, expanding his membership rolls with young people throughout his time in ministry. This reflects Willard's willingness to contend with how things are, not only how they were or ought to be. That is to say, for Willard, experience and present social, political and ecclesiastical realities have a say in policy; and as I show below, Willard provides a theoretical basis for consulting experience and reflecting on the possibilities of the present.

Willard's congregation at Third Church in Boston had many prominent members, including businessman such as Samuel Sewall and Thomas Brattle and political and military leaders such as Edward Rawson and Thomas Savage. Seymour Van Dyken, the only biographer of Willard, states that "South Church's constituency was proportionately more substantial and influential [than the other Boston churches]".³ Willard was certainly influential and even politically consequential in his lifetime, being second only to Increase Mather "in Boston and the whole province" in prominence.⁴ He gave celebrated monthly lectures on the Westminster Shorter Catechism beginning in 1688 until his death in 1707. Some of the most important statesmen, businessmen, professors, and clergymen in New England subscribed to the print copies of the lectures. The 250 lectures were compiled and published in 1726 by Thomas Prince and Joseph Sewall in part because, as they write in the preface, the interest in the lectures had "rather increased than declined for these eighteen years" after Willard's death. The tome, titled *A Complete Body of Divinity*,⁵ was the largest (at over 900 folio pages) and the most systematic treatment of Puritan Reformed theology produced in New England until after the War of Independence. There is no better representative complete work of New England Puritan thought.

WILLARD AND THE LAW OF NATURE

We must begin with Willard's affirmation of natural law, which serves as the ground in his thought for civil society, administration, and order. The view that classical Protestantism, and especially Puritanism, affirmed a sort of radical divine voluntarism, namely, that all of God's commands for man are super- and extra-natural and have no necessary correspondence to human nature (if man has a nature at all) and

3. Van Dyken, 37.

4. Ibid, 87.

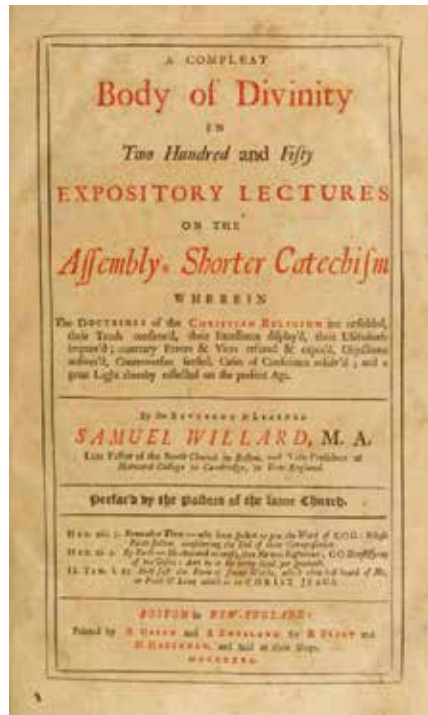
5. Samuel Willard, *A Complete Body of Divinity*, ed. Mike Christian, [kindle ebook] (2015). I cite the ebook location in this essay.

the created order, is a *myth*; and it is a stubborn one, having been refuted repeatedly in the last twenty years.⁶ Contrary to this narrative, Willard states that the "law to regulate [man's] life and action by....[is] natural" having been "imprinted on the heart of man in his creation, and he was able to read them by the light of nature, which was at first put into him...Some remains whereof there are still to be found in fallen man."⁷ He also writes that "the law of nature, or those rules imprinted on the natures of things, was most harmonious and agreeable to their natures." Their natures were "put into the things themselves by the God of nature."⁸ That is, the natural law is perfectly suitable to the nature of man and it remained so after the fall. This law of nature "set the whole bounds between right & wrong, and the rationality of it was subscribed to by man's conscience."⁹ As a *natural* law, known in conscience and acquired by right reason, this law is universal to reasonable creatures, given not only to the elect, but to the entire human race.

This law for Willard is more than universal in suitability; it is universally accessible. For even after the fall, which principally resulted in the loss of the image of God (and with it true holiness and righteousness before God), man retains "rationality" and even the "natural freedom of his will."¹⁰ Non-Christians can even learn about God "out of the book of nature."¹¹ They can also craft and enact, as Willard writes,

many, excellent laws, in respect of righteousness toward men, under which they have greatly flourished, and been a shame to such as had the word of God. And whence had they this but from the relics of the law of God in them, and the common gifts of the Spirit enabling men to improve the remaining light in them to high measures.¹²

But non-Christians cannot perform "theological good." They can act rightly outwardly ("the material part of their duties"), though not in a "right manner, from a right principle, or for a right end."¹³ As Willard says, "There may be a civil goodness, but there is no theological good."¹⁴ This is the classic *coram hominibus* / *coram deo* distinction: ultimate good is achieved by performing a good action (outward) and performing it in accordance with the proper manner and end (internal). The "manner" refers to the "heart with which it is done" (viz. "in the sight of the Lord") and the "end" refers to the glory of God.



6. The most influential work espousing this view is perhaps Michael Walzer's *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge, 1965). For a refutation of this view and related views, see Stephen Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

7. Samuel Willard, *A Complete Body of Divinity*, 12434.

8. Ibid, 9198-9.

9. Ibid, 37808.

10. Ibid, 12317.

11. Ibid, 3939.

12. Ibid, 30848.

13. Ibid, 12278.

14. Ibid, 1456.

Failing in either or both “is enough to spoil the action.”¹⁵ Still, for Willard, non-Christians can both know and act in conformity with the outward requirements of civil righteousness.

Willard argues moreover that “God’s image of him at first...was necessary not so much to enable [man] to do the matters of duty [i.e., actions good in substance], as to do it graciously; there must be holiness attending it.”¹⁶ Put differently, the divine image of God in man’s original state of integrity was not the feature enabling him to act in outward righteousness, which he could do by means of reason, something essential to man as man. The image rather was the feature enabling him to act with the proper ultimate end: the glory of God. This is important, because for Willard the fall of man resulted principally in the loss of this image. So the fall eliminated *not* the ability to perform right actions, but rather removed the additional feature of man that enabled him to perform them well. This explains why non-Christians for Willard retain the ability to act in accordance with outward, civil righteousness. The difference therefore between Christians and non-Christians with regard to civil ethics is not two different standards of righteousness, nor that the former has exclusive access to the standard, nor that only the former can know what is good and act in conformity with it. Rather the primary difference for Willard lies in the exclusive ability of Christians to perform good actions well – in conformity with the internal conditions of ultimate goodness.

Scripture, for Reformed Protestants, including Willard, is an additional and supernatural revelation containing both natural knowledge in written form and adventitious knowledge concerning the means of salvation (and for Willard the positive content of Christian worship). The former is an inscripturation of what could already be known by right reason (natural theology and moral duty) and the latter is knowledge known only by faith, for such truth is above natural reason. Willard writes, “There are but these two ways, in which men are capable of coming by the knowledge of anything, namely, by reason and revelation.”¹⁷ The Ten Commandments is a summary of the “moral law” and is nothing but “the law given to man in his creation, and was the rule of righteousness, and true holiness....And this was the same for substance with the law of nature, and is therefore of personal force, having mankind for the subject of it.”¹⁸ The moral law contained in Scripture is the *prior* natural law inscripturated. So, while Scripture can serve as an epistemic ground for the knowledge of moral truth (for it communicates moral truth), Scripture itself is not the ground for the morality of the action itself.

Scripture for Willard does not replace natural law; it clarifies through a more perspicuous means what man can know by reason. Whatever was natural and binding, remains natural and binding. The God of na-

ture and Scripture are the same. Furthermore, the appeal to Scripture for some moral truth or a system of moral truths does not itself deny the natural grounding of human morality, and likewise the appeal to “right reason” or the “light of nature” (phrases that Willard uses repeatedly) does not itself deny Scripture. Reason and revelation are two means by which man comes to know what God requires of him; and, being harmonious, using one does not undermine or destroy the other.

WILLARD AND CIVIL GOVERNMENT

The discussion on Willard’s view of natural law lays the groundwork for understanding his view of civil politics, for the origin, principles, and ends of human civil government in his thought are all natural. He provides his most detailed discussion of politics in his lectures on the Fifth Commandment (on Qs. 44 and 45 in the WSC) in his *Body of Divinity*, which I explicate below.

The Origin of Civil Government

Dissenting from the Augustinian tradition, and yet consistent with many Reformed thinkers influenced by Aristotle, Willard argues that civil society, hierarchical social/civil order, and civil government are part of the created order and therefore not consequences of the fall. They are not “purely positive or instituted; but are built on moral principles.”¹⁹ They have their origins in nature, not the sinfulness of man; and hence each, even in the post-lapsarian world, has *natural* ends, not

merely an instituted role in restraining sin. He gives four reasons that build upon each other to justify the natural origin of civil government.

Willard first argues that the nature of man draws him to civil society. He writes, “civil humane societies have their rise & reason from the nature of man.” Man is a “sociable creature” having a “natural disposition to hold converse with his own kind,” which secures their “temporal or secular concerns.” Man has “affection put into them towards their correlates,” which is evident to us by “instinct,” the “exercise of reason,” and considering the “relations which God at first constituted between mankind.” These affections drive man to “seek familiarity with such whom they have the least necessity for.” By design, humans seek one another in civil fellowship. The nature of man, as God created him, is naturally drawn to civil society, and this natural drive remains after the fall. Though Willard does not use the word, the civil fellowship he describes is not merely an association for mutual material benefit, but is a *consociation* – a community or *pactum unionis* in which each is bound to others—in a “compact”— to strive and communicate one’s gifts for the common good. But why isn’t this a society of equals? Is civil subjection or a *pactum subjectionis* to higher civil authority consistent with a state of integrity?

Willard responds by showing that the state of integrity does not preclude superiority and inferiority. The “order of superiority and inferi-

19. Unless otherwise noted, this and all the following quotes are from Lectures CLXXX and CLXXXI, located from 37635 to 37926 in the ebook.

MAN HAS “AFFECTION PUT INTO THEM TOWARDS THEIR CORRELATES,” WHICH IS EVIDENT TO US BY “INSTINCT,” THE “EXERCISE OF REASON,” AND CONSIDERING THE “RELATIONS WHICH GOD AT FIRST CONSTITUTED BETWEEN MANKIND.

15. Ibid, 12466.

16. Ibid, 12458.

17. Ibid, 33070.

18. Ibid, 37807.

ority is consistent,” he writes, with the state of integrity. At this point he only wants to say that there is nothing in principle inconsistent with hierarchical order in a state of integrity; he is not yet arguing for any particular type of order (e.g., civil order). His argument assumes the Ten Commandment’s relationship to the natural law. The Fifth Commandment, which concerns superior/inferior relations, is a “precept of the moral law” as are the other commandments, and hence it speaks of something natural. It is “not merely as a reserve, after relief against the misery of the fallen state.” Creation contains nothing in reserve intended to remedy a fallen creation. Willard’s reasoning is the following: Since the Fifth Commandment is grounded in nature (as are all the Commandments), this commandment and all its content cannot be inconsistent with the state of integrity, for anything grounded in nature cannot be inconsistent with the state of integrity. This reasoning also implies that all natural superior/inferior relations are goods in themselves and necessary to achieve the natural ends of human society.

Willard next gives a particular example of a natural superior/inferior relationship and its extended application in human society. Assuming the continued obligations of children to their father, Willard argues that if man had not fallen, then fathers would be the “head” of all their posterity, and so Adam would have been head over all. Willard is not arguing for a Robert Filmer-like patriarchal absolutism, though the relation between civil government and the patriarchal order is not clear in his account. But his point is that there would have been superior/inferior relations in the state of integrity had man not fallen. If familial relations require a “suitable subjection” in their pre-lapsarian state, subjection is not necessarily a positive duty or added remedy for the lapsarian state. There is no *prima facie* reason then, argues Willard, to reject civil subjection in the state of integrity.

So far Willard has shown that civil society is natural on account of human nature and that superior/inferior relations both are consistent with the state of integrity and would have existed if man had not fallen. But why ought there be *civil* superior/inferior relations? Willard is clear that it exists not from a need to “restrain men’s lusts,” but for two reasons: to display the glory of God and to meet the needs of man in this life. A “well-ordered government hath in it an adumbration of God’s governing the world...as an ornament of the universe” which serves as “a trial of our obedience” to the moral principle behind the Fifth Commandment. In this, “God’s glory might be celebrated by civil orders.” The second reason concerns the basic features and necessities of life in this world. Willard writes, “As the world began to be peopled there would of necessity have been a multiplying of civil societies, and these distinct for the upholding of civil commerce and amity.” Willard here affirms that in the state of integrity there would have been a diversity of nations that are geographically distinct, and each would have a civil government for the

coordination of collective action and to conduct amicable and useful international relations. *Distinct* and *separate* nations are, according to Willard, a *natural* and *good* consequence of life in this world, even in a state of integrity. Indeed, he goes to call it a “great error” for one to claim that a diversity of “kingdoms or commonwealths” is testimony of “divine displeasure.” This implies that nations have at their disposal sufficient means of self-preservation.

The natural diversity of nations is the only “rational” position, according to Willard. He doesn’t go into detail, but he likely is reflecting on three features of the human condition: sociability, localized socialization, and imperfect knowledge. As people spread throughout of the earth over great distances, conversing would primarily be local. Socialization in distinct ways of life (viz. those practices that, though indifferent in themselves, help us relate and understand one another) would occur locally. The geographic separation between peoples leads to distinct communities with different languages and cultures, each being different but each being good; and the diversity is itself a good. Furthermore, even in a state of integrity individuals would not have perfect insight into their neighbors’ interests, intentions, or even all their good, for man would have imperfect knowledge of the others’ situation. There was no hive-mind before the fall, and hence civil societies would require rules-based coordination, issued by an authority, to regulate activities for the common good. The obvious example of our time is traffic laws, without which there would be chaos even with a collection of perfectly well-intentioned and emotionally stable drivers. Liberty requires order, even in a state of integrity. For Willard then, the principal role of civil government, even before the fall, was to prevent chaos and ensure ordered liberty by complementing the natural limitedness of individuals with collective coordination.

The Principles and Laws of Civil Government

Willard insists that the principles of civil government are “moral principles,” as I briefly discussed above, by which he means that they are not “positive or instituted” in response to the sinful state of mankind. The sinful state of man “*augmented* the necessity” of government; it did not create the necessity for it. The principles of civil government originated and continue to operate for man’s natural civil ends, though man’s sinfulness has brought upon government a divine modification of restraint. God gave it an *adventitious* role as the chief instrument that restrains moral chaos.

Despite having this new role, Willard identifies no new political and moral principles; the ground of civil order and justice remains the immutable law of nature. The presence of sin requires different applications of principles, not new principles. This is clear in Willard’s view



ADAM, BY LUCAS CRANACH THE ELDER, C.1533-1537

of property rights, for example. Willard explicitly affirms property rights in the state of integrity in his discussion of the 8th Commandment. He follows the same reasoning described above:

If therefore this was a moral precept, and so perpetual, and founded in the law of nature, it must needs be from the beginning; and by a just and necessary consequence there must be distinguishing between *meum & tuum*, because on this, the very reason of the command is grounded.²⁰

The 8th Commandment was not “brought in” because of sin. All things would not have been “held in common.” For Willard, given the grounding of the Commandments, property rights are natural and so the division of property is not a consequence of sin. There is however “no particular direction in the law of nature, or the Word of God, about this or that way of dividing to every man his share,” he writes. Rather it is a matter of “prudence” and the “rule of justice.” While the civil government has a natural role in regulating property, there is no indication that property originates with government from which people are then granted the privileges of ownership. Rather it seems that civil government has the power to regulate and adjudicate the claims of ownership arising apart from government and to regulate its distribution for the common good. Property and government regulation of property are therefore natural for Willard, even in a state of integrity. The introduction of sin brought upon government an additional role of restraining the various injustices that arise from both covetousness and slothful mismanagement. So the principle of equitable property relations is modified, not created, by the introduction of sin.

What is striking about Willard’s account is how concerned he is to connect much of post-lapsarian social life with the created order. Willard wants us to view the social world not as merely adventitious divine constructs to restrain sin, but as corrupted or imperfect *natural* relations, institutions, and organizations. Even if one questions Willard’s reasoning in the case of property, one cannot accuse Willard of divine positivism. Indeed, he is, if anything, the extreme opposite. Not only must every governmental action and civil law conform to the natural law, the “light of right reason,” and prudence in light of circumstances (as we see below), the fundamental features of post-lapsarian civil and social life—much of which many regarded as instituted post-fall—are for Willard part of the original, created order. Sin *modifies*, but does not in consequence *institute*, these features.

As for civil law, Willard emphasizes that government must not “require” of subjects what violates the moral law, for all men are “firstly subjects to God.” Government must not enact anything which is “repugnant to the revealed will of God and directly opposeth a negative precept of the moral law” and no law ought to tolerate a “real wickedness.” The “body of laws” must have a “rational tendency in it to the advancement” of the ends of civil government. Nowhere does Willard

charge the government with the role of prescribing in law moral perfection to its people. Indeed, it seems that civil government’s primary purpose is problem-solving (both technical and moral problems) to ensure proper civil order, enacting laws only when necessary for the common good. It is a limited government, granting itself only the role of facilitating and regulating human converse and commerce.

The “body of laws” or civil law must be tailor-made for a particular people in light of their particular circumstances. Willard does not call for a rigid, universal system of laws. While insisting that civil law conforms to the natural and revealed law, Willard also permits flexibility with this critical distinction: laws must be both “righteous” and “good.” He acknowledges that the terms are related—every good law is a righteous law—but the distinction allows him to distinguish the *righteousness* of laws as they relate to the higher moral law and the *goodness* of laws in relation to their tendency to achieve good. Laws must conform both to the natural law and conduce to the good of the people, for as Willard affirms ‘*salus populi est suprema lex.*’ Laws are for the “publick good” and the “well-being of all.” The body of laws are a “medium,” not an end in itself; and means are subordinate

to their ends. With this distinction, Willard can recognize the crucial importance of prudence in light of circumstances. There are circumstances when laws that, though being righteous as to substance, are not conducive to good because, interacting with circumstances, they produce bad civil outcomes. Hence, Willard permits the formation of laws suitable for particular people in particular circumstances. All laws must be righteous and good. And though no law can be good when unrighteous, some righteous laws can produce evil in consequence.

The Ends of Civil Government

The “great end” of civil government is “the well-being of the whole,” which involves civil peace, harmony, and happiness. Even the establishment and protection of true religion, which I discuss below, is cast in terms of the civil happiness it provides. The end is not heaven on earth, but rather the achievement of the original end – order, harmony, and happiness. Since civil government for Willard is natural and therefore necessary for the attainment of civil society’s natural end, these objects of civil policy, particularly “peace,” concern more than the restraint of moral disorder. Sin has necessitated the modification of the means to achieve peace, but the end of civil government has not changed, though complete peace is unattainable in this world. The immutable end is amiable and orderly mutual communication of each other’s particular gifts to the well-being of all, which is made possible by means of civil law, without which social harmony is unattainable, even in a state of integrity.

Religion and Civil Government

Willard presents the classical Reformed view of the civil government’s role in the establishment and protection of the institutional church and proper worship. He explains the source for this power, describes the content of its role and the instruments to achieve it, and gives the

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20. Ibid, 41853.

reason for this role. The source of the power to regulate some matters of religion (a power that is “*circa sacra*”) is based on the magistrate’s “authority from God,” which they should use “for him.” The content is the suppression of blasphemy, material provision for ministers, enacting Sabbath laws, building church buildings, etc. The instrument is civil law and its accompanying civil sanctions. Most important for our purposes are the civil ends. Willard writes,

Whatsoever may truly serve to the peace and tranquility of the people comes within the [civil ruler’s] reach, agreeable to the rule of reason and the Word of God...Without [these laws], they cannot provide that their subjects may lead quiet and peaceable lives, in all godliness; but there must be endless schism, and distractions in the church of God.

While civil law cannot provide spiritual good, it can suppress civil distractions that prevent one from obtaining it; and civil government achieves this by providing the best possible civil conditions conducive to the attainment of spiritual good.

The most important condition is peace, which includes, for Willard, both civil and ecclesiastical peace. Civil action against heretics has, as its direct object, the elimination of a *civil* disturbance in the conditions conducive to the attainment of spiritual good. Though Willard, as with many others of his time and before, saw such actions as instrumental in divine retribution towards blasphemers, the action is also, and perhaps principally, a matter of ensuring civil peace. This means that the laws and their sanctions are justifiable only if they actually produce peace.

Experience taught many in Europe by Willard’s day that religious persecution often has the opposite effect intended: it produces sedition, tumult, and war. It often does not produce earthly peace and therefore it distracts from the very good that it sought to support—spiritual good.²¹ Many in Willard’s generation and those after him came to realize this as well.

Willard’s account of the magistrate’s role in religion is subject to Protestant experience, both as to the results of persecutions and the possibilities of peace shown in regimes with religious toleration. Once it could be shown, as it was shown in parts of Europe by Willard’s time, that religious toleration was more conducive to peace than persecution, Willard’s crucial premise fails,²² even if civil rulers have the power to regulate religion and are even justified in the right circumstances to suppress heresy.

21. Civil conflict affects spiritual good by disrupting the operations of the ecclesiastical administration.

22. viz. his minor premise, namely, that religious persecution generally produces civil peace and happiness.

CONTINUITY AND CONCLUSION

The fundamental ground of civil order, administration, and justice for Willard is the laws of nature and nature’s God. Distinct nations are natural and good. A civil order of superiors and inferiors is natural and good. All civil law must conform to the natural law, which is known from Scripture, in conscience, and by right reason; and the body of laws must be suitable to the state of the people. The principles of civil government are moral, not positive, and sin only modifies these principles. The immutable end of civil government is the well-being of

all, arising from civil peace, order, and harmony. But the means to achieve those ends are good only relative to the way they interact with circumstances; their goodness is subordinate to the achievement of their ends. The body of laws must have a “rational tendency” to these ends.

In light of this view of civil government, is it plausible that a Reformed Protestant in the 1780s could consistently help formulate, support, and participate in the founding of the United States after reflection upon

experience and considering the circumstances? Many orthodox Protestants seemed to affirm that consistency, such as John Witherspoon, John Jay, James Wilson, Roger Sherman, William Paterson, and Oliver Ellsworth. Perhaps, upon reflecting on the need for unity among a religiously diverse collection of people, they concluded that a religiously neutral and federal government was most appropriate, given the circumstances. Of course much more needs to be said.

Though it is unlikely that the founders studied Willard intensely, Willard’s work is a clear and systematic treatment of their theological forefathers’ thought, and this explication undermines many of the crucial premises (often assumed) used in modern-day theorizing on continuity and discontinuity, especially the view that Puritans rejected natural law, reason, and experience. And Willard’s work suggests that much of the reasoning and principles in the air among the founding generation in the mid to late 18th century were either explicitly affirmed by or latent possibilities in the thought of their forefathers.

Regardless of one’s view on continuity however Willard deserves more attention from theologians, political theorists, historians, and laypeople. His *Complete Body of Divinity* remains an untapped resource to answer for all sorts of questions— theological, ethical, political, and historical.

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SCENE AT THE SIGNING OF THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES, BY HOWARD CHANDLER CHRISTY, 1940

WHY LIBERALISM FAILED

BY PATRICK DENEEN, NEW HAVEN AND LONDON: YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS,

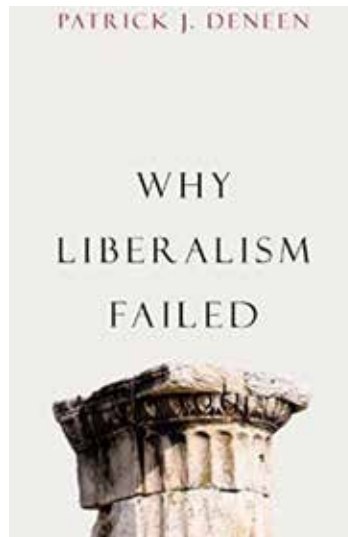
2018 | REVIEWED BY MILES SMITH

Liberalism has failed. Or so confidently declares Patrick Deneen in his obviously named *Why Liberalism Failed*. Deneen offers one of the more useful and concise attacks on the often vaporously defined liberalism that has, according to Deneen, plagued modern societies for the last several hundred years. Deneen's proof of liberalism's failure is not that it failed to change society, but that liberal societies became exactly what they were supposed to be. The liberal state increasingly worked towards removing cultural and social institutions responsible for governing society's consumer and sexual appetites. Few orthodox Christians dispute that these are woeful problems. And Deneen deserves praise for identifying the ills that plague modern society. The book's weaknesses are anachronism, and imprecise and lethargic taxonomy.

Deneen informs the reader that liberalism was launched to foster greater equity, defend a pluralist tapestry of different cultures and beliefs, and to expand liberty. The author indicts liberalism for subsequently creating inequality, enforcing uniformity and homogeneity, undermining freedom, and fostering material and spiritual degradation. He focuses on economics, education, as well as science and technology, as chief societal facets which hallmark liberalism's failures. The initial chapter explains the nefarious origins of liberalism. Much of the blame for liberalism's faults is placed at the feet of John Locke, although Thomas Hobbes is brought in for a customary drubbing as well. We are soon whisked to the French Revolution, leaving this particular reviewer—a historian by training—wondering: what happened to the Eighteenth Century? The Bourbon and Pombaline reforms in Iberia—liberal in their aims to perfect society, appear nowhere. Neither does the reformist anticlericalism of Hapsburg empress Maria Theresa or her son Joseph II. Rousseau, it should be noted, left Calvinist Geneva because it was backward and medieval and made his home in France during the *Ancien Regime* because it was more secular. Liberalism, it seems, influenced most of Europe, including regimes that latter day anti-liberals might identify as conservative or even integralist.

Skipping over the eighteenth (as well as much of the nineteenth) century presents a historical difficulty, but surely it helps establish the narrative Deneen wishes to create. His claim that liberalism's wish to liberate the individual from place, tradition, and culture is found in what the author terms classical and progressive liberalism. This liberal ambition motivated "thinkers ranging from John Locke to John Dewey, from Francis Bacon to Francis Bellamy, from Adam Smith to Richard Rorty." Liberalism, in this reading seems be coterminous with the English political and religious tradition. (Interestingly, he names Milton with Augustine, Aquinas, Dante, and Thomas as articulators of a Biblical and Christian pre-liberal tradition) Likewise, he ignores, with the exception of Smith, the great thinkers of the eighteenth Century.

Surely, Voltaire or Montesquieu must be considered liberals. After all, Voltaire proved an effective slanderer of the Roman Catholic Church and Montesquieu argued against absolutism and universal monarchy. Neither appear anywhere in the work.



The work is, to Deneen's credit, accessible to the layperson and scholar, and there is much to defend in the work especially regarding the destructive habits in modern western—and it is unclear if he means Anglo-American—society. A pronounced anti-culture built in the name of liberalism appears self-evident. This anti-culture rests on the *en-masse* conquest of nature by human societies; a new experience of time as a present with no past facing a foreign unknown future; and a socio-political order that renders place largely meaningless.

The dismissal of humanity's relationship to place is just one facet of a wider phenomenon. Deneen sees liberal societies plagued by a dismissal of natural human relations and the broader subordination of the natural order (and human life specifically) to technology. His cultural commentary in his chapter entitled "Technology and the Loss of Liberty" is not only relevant and timely. It is undoubtedly the most important part of the book. He seamlessly weaves modern film and television into a powerful lament and warning about unlimited human submission to technology for the sake of health, security and—more recently and more ominously—entertainment. Deneen takes seriously historic and contemporary concerns about artificial intelligence and robotics. Concerns about what the author terms "android humanity" are perhaps his most prescient. Automation, digitization, and the worldwide decreased need for skilled workers present a unique challenge to not just the West, but also to humanity in general. Nor are these changes merely external pressures to an unconditioned and idealized human vocational existence. Technology, he argues, seems to change humans ontologically: wants and desires, formerly conditioned by mediating institutions like the church and the family, now are driven by an almost omnipresent technological apparatus exemplified by telemedia, smartphones, and a host of other advancements what would have seemed fanciful even a generation previously.

The conversation on technology quickly moves to the US Constitution. Deneen displays a narrowness and naïve commitment to the philosophy of Leo Strauss when he declares the Constitution to be a vehicle for the actualization of liberalism. Deneen sees the Constitution as the embodiment of a set of modern principles that sought to overturn ancient teaching and shape a distinctly different modern mind. Nothing in the Constitution does anything of the sort, and it is precisely the non-revolutionary nature of the creation of American republic that made it so successful. Put simply, the American Revolution was a rebellion of North American Englishmen against imperial control from London.

Their solution was to bring the imperial government to North America, which they did through the American Revolution and Constitutional Convention between 1775 and 1789. American liberalism as Deneen construes it waited almost a century to materialize. And when it did it grew not out of the American constitutional order but instead out of romanticism and Hegelian nationalism.¹

Deneen mentions, almost off-handedly, that “a kind of Hegelian or Darwinian narrative seems to dominate our worldview.” It is in those movements, rather than in liberalism broadly construed, that many of the ills of modern society may be found. Romanticism and modern nationalism grew out of the European Enlightenment, which was by no means a liberal movement. After all, Napoleonic France fought that paragon of liberalism, the Protestant United Kingdom. The enlightenment and liberalism were separated by the latter’s reliance on idealization of the political and social order. Liberalism might not preserve the human order by the same formulation as pre-liberal states, but liberalism still preserved humanity and place. It was Enlightenment thinkers that rejected polities that Deneen implicates as liberal *and* pre-liberal. Rousseau (again) fled Calvinist Geneva, which he deemed backward—dare we say medieval?—for what the Swiss thinker believed was the more progressive and—liberal?—society of absolutist Roman Catholic France, a society that warred ideologically and physically against intrinsically Lockean and “liberal” Hanoverian Britain, and the Netherlands. Enlightenment infused Romanticism proved eventually to be an enemy of liberalism. Liberalism “failed” before, after the First World War, and integralist movements such as that in Falangist and Fascist Italy, to say nothing of Nazi Germany, replaced liberal regimes. A crisis of liberalism in the interwar period very quickly brought about a crisis of integralism. In many cases Marxism—an ideology whose taxonomy we will not explore too deeply, but which we will posit is not liberal—replaced both.

1. See Max. M. Edling, *A Revolution in Favor of Government: Origins of the U.S. Constitution and the Making of the American State* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Eric Nelson, *Royalist Revolution: Monarchy and the American Founding* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

A great chronological gap weakens Deneen’s argument. “Liberal” states in the 19th century were not by their very natures beholden to Romanticism or Hegel, nor were they even “liberal” in any sense of the word. The Kingdom of Italy, a liberal bogeyman if ever there was for modern European antiliberals, did not overturn the social or political order to dislodge humanity from tradition, culture, place, or even sacramental life. The Albertine Statute established Roman Catholicism, limited press freedoms, retained laws prosecuting blasphemy, gave the Roman Catholic sovereign the majority of executive and legal power, and gave the Roman Catholic church power over education, social institutions, and other facets of Italian society. The liberal Italian constitution enfranchised and liberated Jews and religious minorities from anti-Semitic legal provisions of pre-liberal Roman Catholic Italy.”

Why Liberalism Failed offers a disturbing and necessary look at a society in decay. Whether that decay was or is caused by liberalism remains to be seen. Liberalism’s sins are many, and Deneen is right to enumerate what he perceives them to be. But too often liberalism seems a stand in for modern American society, or something the author dislikes about that society. The differences between liberal and pre-liberal society are overstated. The Prince of Salina, protagonist of Tomasi di Lampedusa’s *Il Gattopardo*, famously tells his family and friends: “For everything to stay the same, everything must change.” He quietly supports replacing the pre-liberal Sicilian monarchy with the liberal Italian state. While the whole political order ostensibly changed, very little actually changed in the prince’s Sicily. Deneen clearly shows that liberalism has weaknesses; but fails to convince the reader that liberalism as defined has actually failed entirely or is even the source of western ills. By narrowly selecting only certain intellectual figures and events, *Why Liberalism Fails* never makes the case for what liberalism actually is or was, nor does the work provide an lexicon for determining what distinguished conservative societies from liberal ones. If liberalism is never properly distinguished from conservatism etc, how can we know it has failed?

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