

THE RELIGIOUS FOUNDATIONS OF CIVIC VIRTUE

A Dissertation

by

CHRISTIE LEANN MALOYED

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

August 2010

Major Subject: Political Science

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Approved by:

Chair of Committee,	Cary J. Nederman
Committee Members,	Elisabeth H. Ellis
	Judith A. Baer
	Jennifer R. Mercieca
Head of Department,	James R. Rogers

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ABSTRACT

The Religious Foundations of Civic Virtue.

(August 2010)

Christie LeAnn Maloyed, B.A., Emory & Henry College

Chair of Advisory Committee: Dr. Cary J. Nederman

Scholarly accounts of the history of civic virtue in the modern era have with few exceptions been wholly secular, discounting, ignoring, or even outright rejecting the role religious thought has played in shaping the civic tradition. In this dissertation, I focus on the influence of religion on the civic tradition, specifically in the eighteenth century in Scotland and America. I examine the ways in which the religious traditions of each nation shaped the debate surrounding the viability of civic virtue, the place of religious virtues among the civic tradition, and the tensions between using religion to promote civic virtue while protecting individual religious liberty. In the Scottish Enlightenment, I examine the influence of Francis Hutcheson's moral sense philosophy and Adam Ferguson's providential theology. In the American Founding, I contrast the New England religious tradition exemplified by John Witherspoon and John Adams with the public religious tradition advocated by Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, and Thomas Jefferson. This work demonstrates not only that religion influences the civic tradition, but also that this influence is neither monolithic nor self-evident. In order to understand how religion shaped this tradition, it is necessary to take into account that different

conceptions of religion produce different understandings of what it means to be a good citizen.

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This project would not have been possible without the assistance of many teachers, colleagues, and friends. The errors that remain are my own, but this work has been much improved due to their instruction and guidance. Though I cannot possibly give them all the credit they deserve, I would nevertheless like to offer my gratitude for their help.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: THE RELIGIOUS FOUNDATIONS OF CIVIC VIRTUE

When a task force for the American Political Science Association reported on the state of American democracy in 2002, its conclusions were sobering: “democracy is at risk” and that risk comes from “an erosion of the activities and capacities of citizenship.”¹ The same could be said of the majority of industrialized liberal democracies worldwide. Scholars have generally noted decreased civic engagement in both political activities and voluntary associations, most famously Robert Putnam, who argues that this decrease in engagement is undermining the role of civic virtue in society.² Some scholars, philosophers, and even politicians have expressed concern that excessive individualism is undermining the possibility of developing shared values or a sense of the public good. Fears abound that an uncompromising dedication to individual rights and the pursuit of the unencumbered self will ultimately eradicate a sense of responsibility towards our fellow citizens and community. In response to these concerns, a number of scholars have sought a historical and theoretical basis for developing a civic tradition that can confront these challenges, reviving interest in the politics of virtue and civic engagement. For instance, Benjamin Barber has argued for increased participation in order to strengthen our communities. Others, like Michael Sandel, have argued for a stronger, constitutive conception of community. Alasdair MacIntyre has suggested an

This dissertation follows the style of *Political Theory*.

¹ Stephen Macedo, *Democracy at Risk* (Washington, D.C.: Brooking Institution Press, 2005), 1.

² Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

even more transformative role for virtue by returning to Aristotelian principles of government and civic life.³

The project of inspiring a sense of common purpose and encouraging civic and political involvement is not a new one. As scholarship on the civic republican tradition has grown during the last several decades, the centerpiece of the republican tradition, civic virtue, has also received increased attention. Civic virtue is a broad term that has traditionally been associated with the civic humanist or republican traditions of thought. In this work, I use the term civic virtue to describe a political concept that refers to the relationship between individuals and their social and political communities. Civic virtue refers to a condition of moral excellence and defines what is required of an individual to be a good citizen. The scholarly accounts presented on the history of civic virtue in the modern era have with few exceptions been wholly secular. In fact, the role religious thought has played in shaping the civic tradition typically has been discounted, ignored, or overtly rejected. I argue that discounting the influence of religion on civic virtue has produced an incomplete and inaccurate view of this tradition.

To understand the ways in which religious thought has contributed to and shaped the language of the civic tradition, this dissertation has two primary aims. The first is to examine the civic tradition in the eighteenth century in Scotland and America, a time when the politics of virtue was vigorously debated, as was the role of religion in society generally and in the civic tradition particularly. Confronted with the rise of

³ See especially Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Michael Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); and Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

commercialism, the fact of pluralism, and natural rights theories, various efforts were made in the Scottish and American traditions to adapt classical republican concerns to a modern context. In doing so, political thinkers of this period attempted to blend together republican and liberal traditions. This dissertation supports the conclusions offered by scholars, including Paul Rahe, Vicky Sullivan, and Richard Dagger, who contend that republican and liberal concerns are not as diametrically opposed as is often thought, and in fact, many of the thinkers writing in this era share a concern for both individual liberty and the cultivation of virtue.

Second, I demonstrate that the role of religion in the civic tradition, especially in the eighteenth century, has often been ignored or rejected. The influence of religion on civic virtue has been discredited for at least three reasons. First, scholars have emphasized that in the modern era, the classical focus on philosophical and religious conceptions of virtue are replaced with a science of politics. As such, greater attention is given to the design of political institutions that can overcome the self-interested nature of humanity rather than efforts to cultivate virtue. Second, to the extent that the cultivation of civic virtue continues to receive attention, it falls largely within the social realm rather than the political. Hence, it is no longer assumed that it is the role of government to instill virtue in citizens; rather this falls under the purview of social, civil, or religious organizations. Third, even when religion is given serious scholarly treatment as a means to cultivate virtue, it is often reduced to broad categories of the Judeo-Christian tradition or civil religion. This overlooks the diversity of religious traditions in this period and the political implications of this diversity.

By bringing greater attention to the role of religion in the civic tradition in the eighteenth century, a more complete understanding of civic virtue can be developed. I argue that, in part, what allows those authors working within the civic tradition to unite their republican and liberal concerns is religion. While there is wide acceptance that individual liberty must be preserved, especially religious liberty, there is also an acceptance that religious belief should be encouraged in society because it helps to develop a common view of the public good and fosters virtuous behavior. I do not intend to suggest that all thinkers working within the civic tradition in this period believed that religion should be promoted as a way to foster civic virtue. Even among those who accepted the necessity of religion to a well-functioning republic, there is great debate about the type of religion that is necessary. Thus, the purpose of this dissertation is to examine how religion is expected to enrich the civic tradition, to understand the limitations of using religion to promote civic virtue while simultaneously protecting individual religious liberty, and to demonstrate that differing conceptions of religion promote different conceptions of what it means to be a good citizen.

To demonstrate the importance of religion to the civic tradition, I first begin with an overview of the literature on civic republicanism and civic virtue. In particular, I focus on the ways that the concept of civic virtue was transformed in the eighteenth century, the relationship between republicanism and liberalism, and why religion has largely been ignored in this literature. I then examine the civic traditions in the Scottish Enlightenment and the American Founding era. I explore the use of the civic tradition in

each of these contexts and the understanding of the relationship between religion and civic virtue in each.

The Civic Tradition

The debate surrounding the politics of virtue and the place of virtue in the eighteenth century has been driven by two concerns.⁴ The first is the tension that exists between wealth and virtue. As individuals have ever increasing responsibilities associated with work and family, they often sacrifice engagement in public life to meet the demands of their private lives. The challenges that wealth and commerce impose on society are not new, as the work of Gordon Wood and J.G.A. Pocock on the final generations of the republican tradition indicates. According to the classical republican thesis, industry, frugality, and moderation were seen as virtues that sustained a polity, whereas luxury - the love of refinement, ease, and elegance - left the populace weak and effeminate, incapable of the valor and honor needed to sustain the state.⁵ A people consumed by their personal interest for luxury lose their ability to be self reliant and independent. Whether wealth and virtue can be made compatible in the modern world is vigorously debated.

The second concern raised in this debate is the tension that exists between civic virtue and liberalism. Civic virtue in a classical sense requires the submission of self-interest to the public good, where selfless participation in government is the greatest

⁴ For a detailed overview of these debates, see Shelley Burt, *Virtue Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

⁵ Gordon Wood, *Creation of the American Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 52.

expression of one's virtue. In a liberal polity, however, there is no requirement to sacrifice personal interest for the public good, nor is there a duty to participate in government or accept the idea of a common morality. Is it possible to develop a sense of common purpose and public spirit without the state imposing on individuals a particular conception of the good life? Several scholars have expressed doubt that these political aims are compatible, arguing that liberalism and republicanism are distinct and competing political projects. Pocock and Wood have specifically argued that the liberal tradition supplants the republican tradition during the late eighteenth century, a transformation that culminates in the American founding.⁶

Recent scholarship has disputed the claim that liberalism and republicanism are wholly incompatible. Paul Rahe has argued that the republican and liberal traditions actually share many overlapping concerns. In particular, he challenges Pocock's thesis by arguing that modern republicanism was not adverse to capitalism or self-interest, and furthermore, that the influence of John Locke, who is completely discounted by Pocock, is important in shaping not only the liberal but also the republican tradition.⁷ Similarly, Vickie Sullivan's work on the influence of Machiavelli's republicanism and Hobbes' liberalism (though the degree to which Hobbes can rightly be considered a liberal is debatable) provides evidence of a synthesis of the republican and liberal traditions

⁶ J.G.A Pocock, "Virtue and Commerce in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 3 (1972): 119-34; J.G.A Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); J.G.A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Wood, *Creation*; and Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁷ Paul A. Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*, 3 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Paul A. Rahe, ed. *Machiavelli's Liberal Republican Legacy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

throughout the English commonwealth period.⁸ In a complementary vein, Maurizio Viroli has argued that liberalism is actually a derivation of, not an alternative to, republicanism.⁹ From a contemporary, normative stance, Richard Dagger has argued that the promotion of civic virtue is not hostile to the protection of individual rights, and that a theory of republican liberalism is both plausible and attractive.¹⁰ Whether a civic tradition can successfully cultivate a sense of community and bring renewed attention to the shared responsibilities of citizens without injury to personal liberties is a matter of scholarly debate, but the work of these scholars suggests that the two traditions are more compatible than has traditionally been assumed.

In this dissertation, I am less concerned with civic republicanism than I am with the broader civic tradition. Although the most common term in reference to the republican tradition is “civic virtue,” it is somewhat of an anachronism in regard to the eighteenth century. More frequently, civic virtue was spoken of in terms of public virtue, private virtue, the public spirit, or patriotism.¹¹ I purposefully choose the phrase “civic tradition” because it has a broader conceptual basis. As John Robertson argues, the civic tradition has an institutional basis in a regular constitution of balanced powers where citizens have the opportunity to participate in government. Furthermore, it requires a virtuous citizenry who are willing to forego their self-interest in order to fulfill their duty

⁸ Vickie B. Sullivan, *Machiavelli, Hobbes, and the Formation of a Liberal Republicanism in England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁹ Maurizio Viroli, *Republicanism*, trans. Antony Shugaar (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002).

¹⁰ Richard Dagger, *Civic Virtues: Rights, Citizenship, and Republican Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹¹ Burt, *Virtues Transformed*, 4.

to participate in government.¹² The civic tradition broadly construed allows for the possibility of a conception of civic virtue that does not eschew self-interest, as does the classical conception; rather, it offers the possibility that our understanding of virtue can be transformed such that self-interest and virtue are no longer seen to be fundamentally at odds with one another.

While the “republican revivalism” scholarship, as it has come to be known, has drawn significant attention to the place of civic virtue in the republican tradition, civic virtue is routinely treated as a secular form of virtue. In fact, the role of religion in this tradition has often been explicitly rejected. As such, civic humanism and the republican tradition are most often treated as a rejection of religious influence in the political sphere. In his seminal work on civic humanism in the political culture of Renaissance Florence, Hans Baron argues that civic republicanism was revived due to a crisis in Florentine thought.¹³ This crisis pitted the contemplative, philosophical, and religious life against the active, political life. For him, the Florentine republican tradition was a rediscovery and revival of classical political ideas of republicanism and active citizenship. This culminated, in Baron’s view, in the triumph of secular civic humanism over the religiously driven system of hierarchy and passivity associated with the Middle Ages.

Drawing directly from Baron’s work, Pocock charges that the eighteenth-century civic republican tradition is also rooted in a wholly secular language. The problem he

¹² John Robertson, “The Scottish Enlightenment at the Limits of the Civic Tradition,” in *Wealth and Virtue: The Shaping of Political Economy in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Istvan Hont and Michael Ignatieff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 137-178.

¹³ Hans Baron, *The Crisis of Early Italian Renaissance: Civic Humanism and Republican Liberty in an Age of Classicism and Tyranny*, rev. ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

identifies with the revival of civic humanism is its effort to balance an Aristotelian idea of man as *zoon politikon* with the Christian idea of man as *homo religiosus*. The conflict revolves around the historical understanding of time, in which the temporal, secular republic is in conflict with the universal and transcendent Christian time-scheme. In the eighteenth century, this debate was settled, according to Pocock, by the acceptance that civic virtue was secular:

Montesquieu could reiterate Machiavelli's acknowledgment that civic virtue was self-contained and secular, identical neither with the Christian communion nor with a social morality founded on purely Christian values. But as the citizen became less like the saint, his civic personality required a *virtù* less like his soul's capacity for redemption and more like the autonomy of Aristotle's megalopsychic man or – in the period that concerns us – the *amour de soi-même* of Rousseau; and this morality required a foundation less spiritual and more social and even material.¹⁴

In his most recent work, Pocock continues to explain the project of modern enlightened Europe as an effort to describe the triumph of commerce over classical virtue and religion.¹⁵ In so doing, he denies that religious thought played a role in shaping the republican tradition, especially the modern understanding of civic virtue, that emerged in the late eighteenth century.

Although many scholars of the civic tradition do not draw the sharp distinction between the secular, republican and Christian understandings of history, it is common

¹⁴ Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*, 463.

¹⁵ J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 1: 111-113.

for scholarship to discount the influence of religion more generally. For instance, in his seminal work Wood examines the role of virtue in the American revolutionary and constitutional eras, yet only dedicates a few paragraphs to the role of religion.¹⁶ Likewise, Richard Dagger's recent work on the place of civic virtue in modern society only briefly mentions the connection of civil religion to the idea of civic virtue, and only in regards to the work of Rousseau.¹⁷ Even Rahe and Sullivan, who explicitly recognize that there is far less tension between liberalism and republicanism than is often assumed, fail to appreciate that for many political authors, religion is what helps them to unite these two traditions.¹⁸ In fact, Rahe directly argues that the modern Enlightenment project "taught men to look down, not up" and reject the "'inhumane wisdom' of the ancients and their Christian successors."¹⁹ Despite numerous historical studies on the ways in which debates over religion influenced political thought and life in this period, scholars have generally maintained that religion did little to mold the debate over the politics of civic virtue and civic republicanism; rather, religion was seen to be important in shaping liberal political thought, especially regarding issues such as toleration, pluralism, and individual liberty.²⁰

Even when the role of religion in the civic tradition is given scholarly treatment, as Richard Vetterli and Gary Bryner do in their book *In Search of the Republic*, religion

¹⁶ Wood, *Creation*, 427-29.

¹⁷ Dagger, *Civic Virtues*, 94-95.

¹⁸ Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*; Sullivan, *Machiavelli*.

¹⁹ Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*, 207. While he concedes that the Americans were more accepting of religion on the whole than their European counterparts, he argues the American founders were "less wedded to Christianity," than is often accepted. See *Republics Ancient and Modern*, 209.

²⁰ See especially Michael P. Zuckert, *The Natural Rights Republic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996); and John Rawls, *Political Liberalism: Expanded Edition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

is reduced to the broad category of the Judeo-Christian tradition with little acknowledgement of differences between religious traditions.²¹ The differences among religious traditions are not without consequence. For example, it is reasonable to expect a different conception of what it means to be a good citizen from the Puritan tradition with its emphasis on industry, frugality, and original sin, than from a more universalistic or deistic tradition that emphasizes the wisdom, charity, and benevolence. By examining the influence of religion on the civic tradition, a more complete understanding can be developed as to why it continued to thrive in some areas and intellectual traditions and not in others. Furthermore, we can better account for variations in the civic tradition expressed by its proponents.

In the next two sections, I examine specifically the literature on the civic traditions in both the Scottish enlightenment and American founding periods. It is clear that the language of civic humanism was abundant and influential in each of these contexts. Moreover, in both periods the problems posed by both liberalism and the rise of commercial economies created practical and theoretical difficulties for those who questioned the appropriate relationship between the government and its citizens. Of course, discussions surrounding these tensions were evident throughout the Enlightenment period and occurred across Europe. I focus, in particular, on the Scottish and American examples because of the diversity they offer both in approaches to the civic tradition and the diversity of religious interpretation offered by those responding to

²¹ Richard Vetterli and Gary Bryner, *In Search of the Republic: Public Virtue and the Roots of American Government* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1987); see also Robert Bellah, whose work is discussed in greater detail below, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

civic concerns. Despite the intense civic and religious debates characteristic of both examples, religion has played a scant role in the research on the civic tradition in both of these localities. In both contexts, I focus on how the civic tradition was employed, how scholars have thus far viewed religion as fitting into that tradition, and the limitations in our current understanding of how religious thought shaped ideas of civic virtue.

The Scottish Enlightenment

The Scottish Enlightenment provided many philosophical contributions to the civic tradition, which can be attributed to the distinctive political, economic, and religious context of Scotland in the eighteenth century. The study of the Scottish Enlightenment has proven particularly fruitful because of the large number of philosophers who were writing during this period and who worked closely with one another, beginning most prominently with Francis Hutcheson and including quite famously David Hume and Adam Smith.²² Adam Ferguson enjoyed immense popularity among his contemporaries but has since held less academic interest than either Hume or Smith. Although the role of the civic tradition in the Scottish Enlightenment has received scholarly attention, this scholarship has been overwhelmingly concerned with the civic republican response to the economic development of Scotland. This focus on how economic factors shaped the civic tradition has underplayed the role of religion in

²² Other important Scottish Enlightenment figures include Lord Kames (1695-1782); Thomas Reid (1710-96); Hugh Blair (1718-1800); William Robertson (1721-1793); John Millar (1735-1801); and Duglad Stewart (1753-1828).

understanding how the problems associated with commercial advancement could be ameliorated.

Until its union with England in 1707, Scotland was a relatively weak state, both politically and economically. Even then, it continued to struggle to reach a level of development comparable to other states. In choosing to unite with England, Scotland consciously traded its own political power in order to advance its economic interest. Beginning as early as 1698, the government had been seriously engaged in developing foreign policies that would allow the country to participate in international commerce.²³ By developing a viable commercial economy, the country had the potential to reach a level of power, wealth, and comfort similar to that of other states. Consequently, it seems apparent that the government saw greater advantages for the country in commercialization than in maintaining small, local bases of economic and political power. In addition to the prominence of economics in Scottish political thought, the Scottish Enlightenment is also marked by its religious diversity. Although there was a strong Calvinist tradition within the country, a moderate party influenced by Enlightenment ideas also existed.²⁴ Both the economic and religious diversity of the country spurred Scot thinkers to address questions on how best to balance the fact of pluralism with their civic concerns.

In particular, it is in response to questions of economic progress that the Scot thinkers provide the richest treatment of and response to the civic tradition, especially

²³ John Robertson, "The Enlightenment above National Context," *The Historical Journal* 40 (1997): 667-97.

²⁴ Daniel Walker Howe, "Why the Scottish Enlightenment Was Useful to the Framers of the American Constitution," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31 (1989): 572-87.

regarding the tension that exists between wealth and virtue. The union of 1707 brought together Scotland and England for the purposes of both defense and commerce, but it was an unusual example of a state freely trading its sovereignty in order to achieve economic progress. Certainly, the transformation of Scottish culture began prior to the union, but as Nicholas Phillipson has argued, the national concern with economic development spearheaded the movement toward union and shaped the philosophical agenda of the Scottish *literati* thereafter.²⁵

The decision to seek union with England is often seen as a rejection of the civic republican tradition. The sacrifice of self-government made Scotland dependent on England, trading sovereignty for the promise of economic development. Nicholas Phillipson has argued that the Act of Union spurred “the Scots inquiry into the Science of Man as a critique of the classical language of civic morality.”²⁶ The intellectual project of many Scottish thinkers attempted to explain how this voluntary transfer of authority was not an abandonment of the civic tradition’s ideals, but in doing so, they modified the understanding of civic virtue. As John Robertson has described, this process focused on developing an understanding of political citizenship that could account for both the civic duties of individuals as well as provide for economic progress: “For the Scots, it was precisely this interdependence of the social and moral with the

²⁵ Nicholas Phillipson, “The Scottish Enlightenment,” in *The Enlightenment in National Context*, ed. Roy S. Porter and Mikulás Teich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 19-40.

²⁶ Phillipson, “Scottish Enlightenment,” 22. In contrast, Anand C. Chitnis has argued that Scottish preoccupation with civic morality can be traced back to the seventeenth century, not simply the Act of Union. Regardless, the language of the civic tradition did continue to shape the political debates into the eighteenth century. See Anand C. Chitnis, “The Eighteenth-Century Scottish Intellectual Inquiry: Context and Continuities versus Civic Virtue,” in *Aberdeen and the Enlightenment*, ed. Jennifer J. Carter and Joan H. Pittock (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987), 77-94.

institutional dimensions of citizenship in a political community that made the concepts of the civic tradition so applicable when they sought to relate the demands of material improvement to the continuing institutional requirements of government.”²⁷

Overwhelmingly, the Scots do move away from the classical civic ideal that treats civic participation in political life as the greatest expression of virtue. Instead, they emphasize social virtues, particularly the ways in which men of polite society could improve the manners, economy, and politics of the modern age. The intersection of political, social, and economic theory is what makes the Scottish contributions to the civic tradition so useful to later theorists who struggled to understand how a liberal concern for individual rights could be combined with a republican concern for virtue.

To understand the foundations and implications of the transformation of Scotland and of the rapid growth of commerce in the world, the Scottish intellectual tradition vigorously pursued a science of politics, and more broadly as Hume described it, the “science of man.” Inquiries about the origins of morality, religion, and society were key to understanding the social and political development of states. What became clear is that the classical civic tradition had placed so much emphasis on the way in which political life shapes individuals that it had obfuscated the ways in which cultural, economic, and religious factors influence the moral perceptions of individuals and the political arrangements of their societies.

What distinguished the Scottish Enlightenment, as Hugh Trevor-Roper has argued, is the attention given to the scientific study of “the social behavior of

²⁷ John Robertson, “Scottish Political Economy Beyond the Civic Tradition,” *History of Political Thought* 4 (1983), 453.

mankind.”²⁸ The scientific study of social relations moved away from the classical republican focus on politics and civic virtue. Perhaps because Scotland had freely traded sovereignty for economic progress, the Scottish study of politics rejected the classical argument that commercialization would lead to the corruption of society. Rather, as Oz-Salzberger has argued, the Scots instead focused on “accounting for non-virtuous, yet socially beneficial, behaviour.”²⁹ In this way, they aimed to explain how non-political activities could prevent corruption.

In developing scientific theories of social behavior, the Scots particularly used and developed ideas of spontaneous order and unintended consequences. Drawing especially from the work of Bernard Mandeville, they examined the ways that individual’s self-interest could promote collective goods. As Ronald Hamowy has succinctly summarized the Scots’ theory of spontaneous order, they argued that “society is not the product of calculation but arises spontaneously, and its institutions are not the result of intentional design but of men’s actions which have as their purpose an array of short-term private objectives.”³⁰ In this way, they had determined a way to overcome the classical dependence on the virtue of citizens as the bedrock of political success. Instead, they explained that viable social and political institutions arise from actions that are beyond human design. This did not suggest that individuals need not be virtuous, but rather, that virtue alone would not make nor undermine a society. By scientifically

²⁸ Hugh Trevor-Roper, “The Scottish Enlightenment,” *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century* 58 (1967): 1639.

²⁹ Fania Oz-Salzberger, “The Political Theory of the Scottish Enlightenment,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Alexander Broadie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 164.

³⁰ Ronald Hamowy, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Theory of Spontaneous Order* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 3.

studying the laws of human nature, the history of political societies and institutions, and the natural order of the world, the Scots aimed to move beyond the classical civic tradition and integrate an understanding of social and economic causes into their theories of politics.

Though the Scottish Enlightenment is marked by its scientific approach to the study of politics, there was disagreement over the purpose of doing this kind of work. For example, whereas Hume approaches the study of politics from a purely scientific perspective, Ferguson argues that the science of politics should serve to enrich the practice of politics. Drawing from the classical republican tradition, as Oz-Salzberger argues, Ferguson seeks to elevate the scientific study of politics to “the level of self-conscious and well-informed practice.”³¹

This difference between Hume and Ferguson over engaging the science of politics is also reflective more broadly of the place of the civic tradition in the Scottish Enlightenment. While concerns over the corrupting effects of commercialization and questions of self-government shaped Scottish thought, the work of some of the most notable Scottish philosophers, Hume and Smith included, lies beyond the scope of civic republican concerns. For instance, Hume’s social and political philosophy, as John Robertson describes it, lies at the “limits of the civic tradition.”³² Hume’s new science of politics may be largely shaped by the concerns of that tradition, but as James Moore has suggested, his claim that classical theories had ignored both the influence of society and economics on human behavior and political institutions represents the end of classical

³¹ Oz-Salzberger, “Political Theory,” 162.

³² John Robertson, “The Scottish Enlightenment,” 141.

republicanism.³³ Similarly, Edwin Harpham has persuasively argued that Smith's work does not fit within the language or assumptions of civic humanist discourse, especially given his unequivocal acceptance of the modern commercial order.³⁴ By contrast, Hutcheson and Ferguson work within the civic tradition adopting the language of virtue and corruption. Moreover, they assume a philosophy that emphasizes the scientific study of morality and politics so as to better understand how to prevent corruption, encourage civic engagement, and cultivate the virtue of the people through activity in both societal and political institutions.

The question facing advocates of the civic tradition like Hutcheson and Ferguson was how to make men moral. While they did accept theories of spontaneous order and the idea that self-interest was not necessarily in conflict with the common good, they also argued that virtue was necessary for both personal happiness and societal progress. They believed that all individuals have the capacity for virtue, and even a natural inclination toward virtuous behavior, but they contended moral education was necessary to ensure that those behaviors were properly cultivated. Moreover, this moral education has a distinctly religious foundation that is aimed at producing civic and political goods.

There is a general consensus that religion played an important role in the Scottish Enlightenment. While in some areas, such as France, Enlightenment philosophies grew out of an opposition to religious power and influence, as Richard Sher has argued, the "Enlightenment in Scotland... was largely an ecclesiastical and academic

³³ James Moore, "Hume's Political Science and the Classical Republican Tradition," *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 4 (1977): 809-39.

³⁴ Edwin J. Harpham, "Liberalism, Civic Humanism, and the Case of Adam Smith," *American Political Science Review* 78 (1984): 764-74.

phenomenon.”³⁵ In fact, there was tremendous overlap between the Scottish clerics and the university professors; hence, there is little surprise that the moral philosophy that developed in the Scottish universities was religiously driven.³⁶ This connection between religious and moral thought is particularly evident in the works of Hutcheson and Ferguson:

Hutcheson and Ferguson were both moral Newtonians of a sort, striving to discover nature’s secret laws about man and society in order to reveal the majesty of God’s handiwork...To be sure, [they] did not always agree on particular ethical and political issues, but they both believed that the primary purpose of instruction in moral philosophy was to prepare young men for practicing ‘virtue’ in all spheres of life, religious as well as secular, public as well as private.”³⁷

Although it is accepted that religion played an important role in the Scottish Enlightenment, that there was a close connection between religious and moral philosophy, and that moral philosophy could be used to promote virtuous behavior, surprisingly little work has been done to explain how religion influenced the civic tradition in particular. As Sher suggests, both Hutcheson and Ferguson believed religion could be used to instill virtue in individuals, but the connection between their views on virtue and their political thought is less clear. For instance, it is unclear from the literature whether religious belief is necessary to being a good citizen, if religious virtues

³⁵ Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 151.

³⁶ Even the moral philosophy that is developed by both Hume and Smith is driven by debates over religion.

³⁷ Sher, *Church and University*, 167.

like piety are important to an individual's civic activities, and whether certain political forms and institutions are more conducive than others to instilling virtue in citizens.

In the case of Hutcheson, most of the scholarship on his writings has focused on his moral philosophy, specifically his moral sense theory.³⁸ As Alasdair MacIntyre has correctly described, Hutcheson's philosophical project was so attractive to Scottish Enlightenment thinkers because he "provided a secular counterpart to the appeal to inward feelings" to ground his theory of justice.³⁹ In essence, Hutcheson argued that humanity is naturally inclined toward virtue and capable of moral knowledge, apart from religious knowledge or ability to reason about moral issues. From this theory, Hutcheson argued that the supreme virtue is benevolence, and though he began from purely secular grounds, he emphasizes humanity's duties to God and obligations to one another.

Nevertheless, scholars rarely or only cursorily connect Hutcheson's moral theory to his political thought, especially his discussion of the necessity of civic virtue in sustaining government. Although Caroline Robbins, Gary Wills, and T.D. Campbell have provided extensive treatments of Hutcheson's political thought, and especially his influence on the American Revolution, his work is most often treated as either derivative or as an unsuccessful project in terms of his attempt to synthesize multiple traditions of thought.⁴⁰ Though I agree that his political work is not especially innovative, he does

³⁸ See Knud Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy: From Grotius to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 65-84; V.M. Hope, *Virtue by Consensus: The Moral Philosophy of Hutcheson, Hume, and Adam Smith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 23-49; Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 260-80.

³⁹ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*, 278.

⁴⁰ On Hutcheson's political thought, see Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth Century Commonwealthman* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 185-196; Garry Wills, *Inventing America* (New York:

provide an interesting example of the struggle to synthesize liberal and republican concerns in his political thought. This is especially intriguing given Hutcheson's contention that civil authority should protect individual religious liberty while also promoting religious belief. Moreover, he goes so far as to argue that religious belief is necessary to be a good citizen and piety is as civic as well as private virtue.

In contrast, Ferguson shares much in common with Hutcheson's moral and theological perspective but reaches different conclusions concerning civic virtue. Ferguson agrees that the state should protect individual liberty as well as foster a dedication to the common good; however, he does not treat piety as a civic virtue. Rather, he insists that individuals must exhibit the virtues of honor and charity and must be actively engaged in civic and political life in order to be good citizens. While some work has been done specifically on the influence of religion on Ferguson's political thought, this scholarship does not address how his religious views shape his understanding of civic virtue.⁴¹ By examining the religious and political thought of Hutcheson and Ferguson, it is clear that they both argue for a form of liberal republicanism that will protect individual liberty and encourage civic virtue. They both emphasize the role of religion in inspiring individuals to exercise private and public

Vintage Books, 1979); and T.D. Campbell, "Francis Hutcheson: 'Father' of the Scottish Enlightenment," in *The Origins and Nature of the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. R.H. Campbell and Andrew S. Skinner (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers LTD, 1982), 167-85. On the inconsistencies in Hutcheson's moral philosophy, see especially William Scott, *Francis Hutcheson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1900); and MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*. In contrast, James Moore argues that Hutcheson's philosophy is far more coherent and systematic than is often acknowledged. See "The Two Systems of Francis Hutcheson," in *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. M.A. Stewart (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 37-60.

⁴¹ See Jeng-Guo S. Chen, "Providence and Progress: The Religious Dimension in Ferguson's Discussion of Civil Society," in *Adam Ferguson: History, Progress and Human Nature*, 171-86; and Lisa Hill, "Adam Ferguson and the Paradox of Progress and Decline," *History of Political Thought* 18 (1997): 677-706.

virtue, but they differ over which specific virtues are necessary to sustain republican government. Hence, their writings demonstrate that not only does religion influence republican ideas of civic virtue but also that different religious perspectives result in different conceptions of what is required of good citizens.

The American Founding Era

The role of religion in the American Founding era has been a subject of great scholarly interest, both in terms of the personal religious beliefs of individual Founders⁴² and the role of religion in the revolutionary period.⁴³ Many of America's Founders attended religious services, spoke of their religious faith, and openly discussed the ways in which their religious values influenced their political thinking.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, the most important works of scholarship on American republican thought, and especially on civic virtue, have largely ignored the role of religion in shaping this tradition. To some extent, this has been driven by the seemingly endless debate over the shape and character of republicanism in America, especially in defending it against liberalism. Scholars such as Louis Hartz, Thomas Pangle, John Diggins, and Michael Zuckert have stressed the influence of the Lockean tradition, with its emphasis on natural rights, self-interest, and

⁴² For recent examples, see Jon Meacham, *American Gospel* (New York: Random House, 2006); Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 2008); and Daniel L. Dreisbach, Mark David Hall, and Jeffry H. Morrison, eds., *The Founders on God and Government* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004).

⁴³ See especially Nathan Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Mark Noll, *Christians in the American Revolution* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian University Press, 1977).

⁴⁴ Daniel L. Dreisbach, Mark David Hall, and Jeffry H. Morrison, eds., *The Forgotten Founders on Religion and Public Life* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009); James H. Hutson, *Forgotten Features of the Founding: The Recovery of Religious Themes in the Early American Republic* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003).

property.⁴⁵ Others, such as Gordon Wood, J.G.A. Pocock, and Gary Wills, have emphasized the influence of the civic republican tradition especially as expressed in the American adoption of English opposition thought and the Scottish Enlightenment.⁴⁶ Too often, these have been treated as exclusive and competing paradigms of influence with little overlap. As Bernard Bailyn has persuasively argued, the American revolutionary period was influenced by many sources, including classical thought, Enlightenment rationalism, the common law tradition, and Puritanism. In fact, it was common for authors to draw from each of these traditions without reconciling the tensions that existed between them.⁴⁷

Recent scholarship has sought to provide a more nuanced view of the traditions of American political thought. In particular, Paul Rahe has made great strides to remedy this dichotomous approach, demonstrating that political thinkers in the American founding era did not view these two traditions as incompatible; rather, they embraced the theories of Sidney, Harrington, Trenchard and Gordon as well as Locke, viewing them as complimentary approaches.⁴⁸ In short, authors throughout the American founding era championed both the power of self-interest and civic virtue to sustain and enrich civil

⁴⁵ Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1955); Thomas Pangle, "The Federalist Papers' Vision of Civic Health and the Tradition Out of Which That Vision Emerges," *Western Political Quarterly* 39 (1986): 577-602; Thomas Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); John Diggins, *The Lost Soul of the American Republic*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1984); Michael Zuckert, *The Natural Rights Republic*.

⁴⁶ Wood, *Creation*; Pocock, "Virtue and Commerce in the Eighteenth Century;" Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*; Wills, *Inventing America*.

⁴⁷ Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution: Enlarged Edition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁴⁸ Paul A. Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*; Rahe, *Machiavelli's Liberal Republican Legacy*.

life and government. This produced a synthetic tradition, a liberal republicanism that emphasized both individual rights and the public good.

Rather than arguing for a synthesis of liberalism and republicanism, Rogers Smith has defended a multiple traditions approach, with political actors blending republican, liberal, democratic, and inegalitarian ascriptive elements to form civic ideologies.⁴⁹ For Smith, ascriptive inegalitarianism is based on the assignment of political identities according to natural or ascriptive characteristics, such as race, gender, religion, or national origin. More than simply evidence of past prejudices, Smith argues that this type of inegalitarianism is an intellectual tradition that existed alongside republican, liberal, and democratic traditions. The civic identities that were developed, along with the laws and political institutions that supported them, represented “none too coherent compromises among the distinct mixes of civic conceptions advanced by the more powerful actors in different eras.”⁵⁰

Part of the reason that these traditions have so often been blended, according to Smith, is that inegalitarianism is able to sustain the civic myth of exceptionalism where republicanism and liberalism cannot. In particular, liberalism asserts that all humans are of equal worth, making any exclusions suspect. Likewise, the classical republican emphasis on civic virtue requires a good citizen to prefer the good of the republic over his own personal or even familial interests.⁵¹ These ideologies place high demands on citizens, whereas inegalitarian ascriptive ideologies appeal to civic conceptions that treat

⁴⁹ Rogers Smith, *Civic Ideals* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 6.

⁵⁰ Smith, *Civic Ideals*, 6.

⁵¹ As Ruth Bloch has argued, the very idea of civic virtue is gendered, applying principally to men. See her article, “The Gendered Meanings of Virtue in Revolutionary America,” *Signs* 13 (1987): 37-58.

one group as the unique and special bearers of rights and responsibilities. Moreover, this civic vision is attractive because it resists radical changes in the social and political structure that are associated with the egalitarian demands of liberal and republican ideologies.⁵²

Smith successfully moves scholarship beyond the liberal-republican debate, and his focus on citizenship laws and judicial decisions makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the legal dimension of citizenship. Nevertheless, Smith's work misses some of the complexity of the republican and liberal traditions within the American tradition. For example, Smith is largely unconcerned with the role of civic virtue or religion in either the republican or liberal traditions. This dissertation aims to build on Smith's insights and explore how religion is used to reinforce inegalitarian ascriptive ideologies with both republican and liberal arguments, as well as to combat them. By examining how many American thinkers wanted to use religion to build community, cultivate virtue, and also – for some – protect individual liberty, we can better understand how religion helps to shape our understanding of what it means to be a good citizen, especially a virtuous citizen, in ways that are not captured by Smith's focus on the legal dimensions of citizenship.

Not only has the role of religion often been ignored in American republican thought, but one of the biggest points of scholarly contention is the degree to which civic virtue played a prominent role in the political thought of the American founding era. The language of civic virtue reached a zenith during and immediately following the

⁵² Smith, *Civic Ideals*, 37.

Revolution, but it continued to be a subject that shaped the debate surrounding the fate of the nation through the end of the eighteenth century. Despite expressing a commitment to the civic tradition, the myriad problems that plagued the nascent republic challenged the idea that a virtuous people could provide the foundation for a healthy government. The period of rule under the Articles of Confederation is often characterized by scholars as a time in which the politics of interest supplant the politics of virtue. Wood, Pocock, and Diggins, among others, have argued that the commitment to civic virtue had ended by 1787.⁵³ According to this reading of the American founding, a politics of virtue was never entirely repudiated; rather, as Wood has described it, the Constitutional Convention demonstrated an effort to establish a republican regime “which did not require a virtuous people for its sustenance.”⁵⁴ Although during the revolutionary period virtue was considered to be both a necessary and sufficient condition to establish a working republican government, the period following the end of the war proved that virtue alone was not sufficient.

Other scholars have contested this point, however, arguing that there was not a departure from virtue because Americans never actually held a classical conception of virtue. For example, Rahe contends that the civic humanistic tradition in America is only a “figment of the scholarly imagination.”⁵⁵ The classical concern for virtue, he argues, was replaced with modern concerns for commerce, wealth, and the science of politics. Although those writing during the constitutional era did reject notions of

⁵³ Wood, *Creation*; Pocock, *Machiavellian Moment*; Diggins, *Lost Soul*.

⁵⁴ Wood, *Creation*, 429

⁵⁵ Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*, 28.

classical virtue, this was by no means as radical a break with the civic tradition as it is often presented. Scholars including Lance Banning, Shelley Burt, Jean Yarbrough, and Richard Vetterli and Gary Bryner have all argued that the conception of civic virtue was transformed such that self-interest was no longer viewed as being fundamentally at odds with virtue.⁵⁶

Whereas the classical conception of civic virtue emphasized the sacrifice of self-interest for the common good, the modern republican conception of virtue taught that self-interest and the common good were not fundamentally opposed to one another. Dedication to the common good would require some sacrifice on the part of the individual, but as Banning has explained, “the sacrifice of self was to occur primarily in an individual’s submission to community decision or in taking time from personal enjoyments and pursuits in order to attend to public business.”⁵⁷ Serving the public good requires the sacrifice of personal time in order to participate in government, but individuals are expected to reflect their own interests when making political decisions. As such, virtue is expected to play an important role in civil society, and political leaders and decisions are evaluated in terms of their contribution to the public good. It is not considered necessary for individuals to abdicate their personal interests in order to ensure the foundation of republican government. Political institutions were constructed

⁵⁶ Lance Banning, “Some Second Thoughts on Virtue and the Course of Revolutionary Thinking,” in *Conceptual Change and the Constitution*, eds. Terence Ball and J.G.A. Pocock (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 194-212; Shelley Burt, “The Good Citizen’s Psyche: On the Psychology of Civic Virtue,” *Polity* 23 (1990): 23-38; Burt, *Virtue Transformed Political Argument in England*; Jean Yarbrough, “Republicanism Reconsidered: Some Thoughts on the Foundation and Preservation of the American Republic,” *Review of Politics* 41 (1979): 61-95; Vetterli and Bryner, *In Search of the Republic*.

⁵⁷ Banning, “Some Second Thoughts,” 200.

to account for the fact that individuals would not be entirely virtuous, but this did not indicate that virtue was considered irrelevant.

If civic virtue was still viewed as important, but the primary aim of government was no longer to make men virtuous, by what means would virtue be ensured? Religion, education, and, especially, religious education are the answers most often given, though the particulars are a matter of great debate. The influence of religion on republican thought in the American context especially regarding civic virtue has been largely overlooked and underemphasized for at least three reasons. First, advocates of the republican revisionist thesis have generally treated civic virtue as secular. Although it is acknowledged that religion was prevalent in American society, religion is seen as primarily playing a role in individuals' private lives. Second, even when it is acknowledged that religion influenced republican thought, distinctions in religious thought are overlooked. Third, the focus on the creation of the federal government has overlooked the role religion played at the state level. I briefly address each of these limitations below.

Since Wood penned *Creation of the American Republic*, virtue has been one of the primary concepts around which all studies of the American Revolution and Constitution revolve. Despite his lengthy examination of the role of virtue in the American founding era, Wood dedicates only a few pages to the issue of religion.⁵⁸ Though he acknowledges that some, especially the clergy, believed that religion could help thwart corruption, he argues that Americans ultimately favored a system in which

⁵⁸ Wood, *Creation*, 427-29.

republican institutions would not be dependent upon virtuous men, thus largely eliminating a public need for religion. Rather than trying to reform “men’s hearts,” Wood argues that the new form of republicanism “looked to mechanical devices and institutional contrivances as the only lasting solution for America’s ills.”⁵⁹ In contrast, Paul Rahe dedicates an entire chapter of his study of the American republic to the issues of religion and virtue in the founding era, concluding that religion did play an important role in shaping the American *politeia*, although it had its greatest influence outside of the legal realm. Nevertheless, Rahe largely supports Wood’s overall conclusion, arguing that the advocates of republican government were “intent on devising institutions which would neither presuppose any great virtue on the part of the citizens nor directly and systematically foster it in them.”⁶⁰ Hence, the political importance of virtue, at least in terms of the national political order, primarily became a matter addressed within the private sphere.

Even those who argue that the type of virtue adopted by the American Founders was inherently modern and even liberal often deny that religion played a great role in shaping the debates over virtue. Emphasizing the liberal character of the American republic, Sinopoli argues that the Founders adopted a less demanding view of civic virtue than classical republicans. In his view, the Founders, especially the Federalists, blended liberalism with a form of weak republicanism, whereby they understood virtue primarily in terms of duty and civic participation. Nevertheless, Sinopoli largely agrees with Wood that the influence of religion on virtue became a private matter. In this

⁵⁹ Wood, *Creation*, 428.

⁶⁰ Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*, 235.

Madisonian system, according to Sinopoli, religion is relegated to the private sphere, noting that Madison believed it “crude, even cynical” to use religion to direct civil policies.⁶¹

Similar to Sinopoli, Pangle has argued that the form of virtue advocated by the Founders is distinctly modern and secular in character when compared to classical republican virtue. In fact, Pangle goes so far as to argue that the Founders adopted a distinctly modern philosophical perspective which treats the classical approach to teaching civic virtue as dubious or even dangerous given its emphasis on “aristocratic pride, religious devotion, and an elevated or pious image of the philosophic life.”⁶² Hence, Pangle contends that the classical devotion to religious and philosophical conceptions of virtue was replaced with a new, scientific approach to politics.

Despite the general trend in this research, there are some scholars who have argued that religion played an important role not only in the private sphere but also in the public debates surrounding republican government and values. Even when the role of religion in the civic tradition is given scholarly treatment, religion is often reduced to the broad category of the Judeo-Christian tradition with little acknowledgement of differences between religious traditions. Most often, the points of consensus among religion are taken to represent an overarching civil religion that defines and shapes American political culture. Vetterli and Bryner have defended this position in their treatment of virtue in the American founding era. They argue that a general “Hebraic-

⁶¹ Richard Sinopoli, *The Foundations of American Citizenship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 97. Sinopoli treats Madison and Hamilton as the exemplars of the Federalist position and takes their views as representative of supporters of the Constitution.

⁶² Pangle, *Spirit*, 124.

Christian-Puritan ethic...was the primary ingredient in developing and sustaining that morality which promoted unity, harmony and cooperation in the American community.”⁶³ Non-political institutions, including family, schools, and churches, primarily support this form of civil religion. Although the authors are correct to note the role of the private sphere in supporting republican virtue, they completely ignore the religious divisions that existed within American colonies, instead asserting that a general Christian consensus existed concerning morality and virtue.

The concept of civil religion used by Vetterli and Bryner is drawn from the scholarship of Robert Bellah. Perhaps more forcefully than any scholar, Bellah has argued that the church serves at “the real school of republican virtue in America.”⁶⁴ The civil religion that Bellah identifies in the American founding is not an established religion, but rather “is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things.”⁶⁵ He argues that it is primarily through the blending of Montesquieu’s republicanism with Puritan covenant theology that the role of virtue in the new American political order was ensured. Though he correctly identifies the contributions of New England civil millennialism and Virginian republicanism, Bellah is guilty of ignoring the contentious points of dispute between religious sects over the best way to organize republican institutions and ensure morality among the masses. Although the Great Awakening did serve as a unifying factor in several regards, national agreement was not reached on several important issues, including the necessity of piety, the

⁶³ Vetterli and Bryner, *In Search of the Republic*, 102.

⁶⁴ Bellah, *Broken Covenant*, 180.

⁶⁵ Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96 (1967): 4.

inclusion of non-sectarians and non-religious individuals as citizens, and the type of public worship that was appropriate in a republic that embraced individual rights. These differences among religious traditions are not without theoretical and political consequence; unfortunately, the emphasis on an all-encompassing civil religion has obfuscated these important distinctions. Because Bellah does not distinguish between the differences among religious sects, he glosses over the issue of plurality, a driving force of tension but also innovation for liberalism. This causes him to overemphasize the influence of republican and biblical traditions on American political thought.

Though their scholarship overlooks distinctions between religious sects, Bellah as well as Vetterli and Bryner have drawn scholarly attention to the role of private institutions in supporting civic virtue. This is an important advance in studies on civic virtue and republican thought because so much of the scholarship on the American founding era has focused exclusively on national level politics. Since most of the national level debates concerning religion focused on the issue of religious liberty, scholars have taken the absence of any religious content in the Constitution and the general absence of religious discussion within the Constitutional Convention as evidence that religion did not play an important role in the political thought of the era.⁶⁶

This focus on the federal government overlooks the enormous role religion continued to play, and was expected to play, at the state and local levels. Historical scholarship has repeatedly emphasized the place of religion in the states, though few scholars of republicanism or the civic tradition have carefully integrated these findings

⁶⁶ See especially Isaac Kramnick and R. Laurence Moore, *The Godless Constitution* (New York: Norton, 1996).

into understanding the dynamics between federal and state institutions and politics.⁶⁷ In fact, most states maintained a state-sponsored church and religious tests for political office into the early nineteenth century. Even among more tolerant states, such as Pennsylvania and Virginia, religion played an important role in education and in the municipal governments. Although some scholars have suggested that the Founders assumed moral instruction in civil virtue would be addressed at the state and local levels, little evidence has been produced to support this assertion.⁶⁸ Because scholarship has focused primarily on religion at the national level rather than examining the state or local level, the role of religion in the civic tradition has generally been undervalued. Although it is clear that religion did have some role to play in shaping the civic tradition, even if the primary locus of influence was at the state and local levels and within the private sphere, it remains unclear precisely how religion influenced political leaders' views on republicanism and the civic tradition.

In undertaking an examination of the religious and political thought of the Founders, my primary interest is in examining the way in which these political figures thought religion could assist and support the civic tradition. A great deal of attention has been paid in recent years to the personal religious convictions of the Founders.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Stephen Botein, "Religious Dimensions of the Early American State," in *Beyond Confederation*, ed. Richard Beeman, Stephen Botein, and Edward C. Carter II (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 315-30; Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966); and Sidney E. Mead, *Nation with the Soul of a Church* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

⁶⁸ For one attempt to examine these issues at the state and local level, see Robert E. Calvert, ed. *The Constitution of the People: Reflections on Citizens and Civil Society* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1991).

⁶⁹ Alf J. Mapp, Jr. *The Faith of Our Fathers: What America's Founders Really Believed* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005); Meacham, *American Gospel*; and Waldman, *Founding Faith*.

Although this approach has provided useful insights, it is not my intention to discover the true beliefs of these individuals. The focus of this work is to concentrate on the role they saw religion playing in public life, not necessarily in their own. Incongruities do exist at times between the role religion plays in the personal lives of the founders and the role they thought religion should play at large. This has led some scholars to conclude that the founders were cynical or disingenuous when they advocated a role for religion in political life and civil society. I do not take this to be the case and argue instead that such tensions in their thought can be explained without assuming that they were devoid of any faith or that their inconsistencies make it impossible to understand their view of religion. By approaching the writings of these thinkers in this way, I demonstrate that each of these founders saw a political utility in encouraging religious belief and worship among the public, but the character of the religion and the implications for individual religious liberty vary widely.

Conclusion

Although the role of religion in shaping the civic tradition has generally been ignored, rejected, or reduced to the broad category of Judeo-Christian values, religion did in fact shape ideas of civic virtue and citizenship in both the Scottish Enlightenment and the American Founding. In the following chapters, I contend that religion influenced this tradition and also that different conceptions of religion produce different understandings of what it means to be a good citizen. Within the Scottish Enlightenment, I contrast the influence of moral sense philosophy with providential

theology. In Chapter II, I address the role of religion in the work of Francis Hutcheson, whose moral sense theory treats benevolence as central to a well-functioning society. He argues that piety is a civic virtue and that civil government should encourage religious belief as a means to producing virtuous citizens. In Chapter III, I explore Adam Ferguson's providential theology, which views societal progress as rooted in the virtue of the people. This virtue is given its greatest expression in the pursuit of the common good, which Ferguson believes is commensurate with service to God. Ferguson's approach emphasizes the classical virtues of courage and civic engagement as necessary for individuals to fulfill their civic and religious duties. Although their religious perspectives are complimentary, Hutcheson and Ferguson ultimately emphasize different civic virtues.

In the American Founding, I contrast two different religious approaches, the Puritan New England tradition and a public religious tradition. In Chapter IV, I focus on the political works of John Adams and John Witherspoon, who were both influenced by the Puritan religious tradition and advocate a strong role for civil government in promoting religion as a means to ensure virtue. They both argue that individuals must be pious in order to be good citizens. In Chapter V, I examine the works of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, and Thomas Jefferson, who each advocate a form of public religion that emphasizes the cultivation of virtue among the public, but focus especially on non-religious virtues including benevolence, industry, and justice. This work demonstrates the nuances of these competing, though at times complimentary, religious approaches. Although each chapter highlights a different understanding of civic virtue,

the role of religion in promoting that virtue, and conception of what it means to be a good citizen, it is clear that each of these thinkers believes religion can and should be used for political ends.

CHAPTER II

FRANCIS HUTCHESON: THE MORAL SENSE OF CIVIC VIRTUE

Often considered the “father of the Scottish Enlightenment,” Francis Hutcheson is best known for his moral philosophy. As the chair of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow, he influenced generations of students as well as the moral theories of David Hume and Adam Smith. Drawing upon the work of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson countered theories of egoism to argue that humanity is endowed with a moral sense, and consequently individuals are naturally inclined towards benevolent behavior. His moral sense theory had direct implications for political philosophy, both in terms of influencing his arguments on natural rights and the centrality of virtue to a well-functioning government.

While Hutcheson’s political thought on individual rights and the right to revolution has received primary attention, his republican thought has been generally underplayed.¹ Although his writings on republican government are not particularly novel, his effort to combine a concern for individual liberty with the necessity of cultivating civic virtue represents an early attempt in the eighteenth century to develop a theory of liberal republicanism. Religion plays a central role in Hutcheson’s political

¹ For a discussion Hutcheson’s theory of rights see Knud Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy: From Grotius to the Scottish Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 65-84; Garry Wills, *Inventing America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); and T.D. Campbell, “Francis Hutcheson: ‘Father’ of the Scottish Enlightenment,” in *The Origins and Nature of the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. R.H. Campbell and Andrew S. Skinner (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers LTD, 1982), 168. For the influence of the classical republican tradition on Hutcheson’s thought, see Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth Century Commonwealthman* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 185-96; and Thomas P. Miller, “Francis Hutcheson and the Civic Humanist Tradition,” in *The Glasgow Enlightenment*, ed. Andrew Hook and Richard B. Sher (East Linton: Scotland: Tuckwell Press, 1995), 40-55.

work, as it inspires individuals to behave virtuously, to be civically engaged, and to serve the public good. The protection of individual rights is essential to protecting the public interest and promoting public happiness, and religion serves the ends of government by encouraging individuals to respect the rights of others. Hutcheson believes that it is in the interest of the civil authority to promote religion and civic virtue, and more specifically, he argues that piety is the foremost civic virtue. In order to demonstrate the centrality of religion to Hutcheson's political thought, I begin with an examination of his moral sense theory. I then describe his efforts to combine liberal and republican concerns in his political thought. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of the role of religion in promoting civic virtue and the place of religious liberty within republican government. Overall, I argue that Hutcheson's moral theory demonstrates the connection between religious and civic virtue in supporting a government that is dedicated to the common good.

Moral Sense Theory

Before examining Hutcheson's moral sense theory, it is useful first briefly to describe the historical and philosophical context of his work. To this end, I first situate his political thought within the Scottish enlightenment tradition and then discuss his moral theory as a response to theories of psychological egoism. Born to an Irish Presbyterian family, Hutcheson studied at Glasgow, and was ordained in the Presbyterian Church before returning to Dublin to begin his academic career. Hutcheson's writings were driven by many of the philosophical, theological, and

political controversies that defined early eighteenth-century Scotland. Drawing from both conservative and moderate sources within the Presbyterian tradition, as well as from liberal and republican political thinkers, his work represents an amalgamation of several disparate and often competing traditions. William Scott has concluded that Hutcheson's thought as a whole is unsystematic and is characterized by four distinct phases that correspond to the composition of his major works: moral sense theory, naturalism, teleology, and stoicism.² In contrast, James Moore has argued that Hutcheson's thought is more systematic than is often accepted and can be divided into a public philosophy intended to engage fellow members of the Scottish literati, and an academic philosophy used specifically to orient his teachings at the University of Glasgow.³ Despite debates over whether Hutcheson's use of various sources produces an unsystematic philosophy, as Alasdair MacIntyre has described, on the whole this diversity strengthens his thought, even if it does pose some limitations:

It is part of Hutcheson's genuine greatness that when we understand his philosophy in this perspective, we also come to understand the extraordinary way in which he summoned up all the available resources relevant for his work. What has appeared to some commentators as mere eclecticism was in fact a remarkable, even if unsuccessful, project of synthesis.⁴

² William Scott, *Francis Hutcheson* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1900).

³ James Moore, "The Two Systems of Francis Hutcheson: On the Origins of the Scottish Enlightenment," in *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. M.A. Stewart (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990): 37-60.

⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 259.

Hutcheson's moral philosophy earned him international recognition during his own lifetime and remains the primary focus of contemporary scholarship on his work. In particular, scholars have focused on Hutcheson's influence on Scottish moral philosophy, especially on the works of Hume and Smith,⁵ as well as the relationship between his aesthetic and moral philosophy.⁶ Hutcheson's main philosophical project, first articulated in his *Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725), was to develop Shaftesbury's moral sense theory to provide a theory of justice that did not rely solely on individual interests.⁷ One of Hutcheson's primary motivations in developing his moral sense theory was to counter arguments made by Hobbes and Mandeville that humans are primarily motivated by self-love. Working from the theory that human nature is driven by passions and interests, Hobbes and especially Mandeville argued that humans are essentially selfish, working principally towards their own interests. Even when we perceive what appears to be altruistic behavior, this is actually a sophisticated form of egoism, whereby individuals help others only to further their own interests or satiate their own emotions. Individuals are able to cooperate, as they are able to form social contracts, but even such contracts involve a self-interested tradeoff which sacrifices immediate interests for the security of long-term stability.

⁵ See especially Luigi Turco, "Moral Sense and the Foundations of Morals," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Alexander Broadie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 136-56; and V.M. Hope, *Virtue by Consensus: The Moral Philosophy of Hutcheson, Hume, and Adam Smith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

⁶ Alexander Broadie, *A History of Scottish Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 123-43.

⁷ Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue in Two Treatises*, ed. Wolfgang Leidhold (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2004). It was this work which earned Hutcheson the chair of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow.

In contrast to theories of egoism, Hutcheson contends that individuals are capable of “the desire of, or delight in, the Good of others.”⁸ This pleasure is not simply a reflection of self-interest but is an independent and genuine response that humans have to one another. As T.D. Campbell rightly argues, Hutcheson’s main point of contrast with Hobbes is to demonstrate that public affection “cannot ultimately be for the pleasure the benevolent person gets from seeing others happy, since such pleasure presupposes a prior desire that they be happy.”⁹ In essence, Hutcheson argues that when we see others being happy, we experience pleasure from their happiness. This feeling of pleasure is often instantaneous, and as such, it is not derived from a calculation of how the other person’s happiness will benefit one’s own interest. As Broadie succinctly summarizes Hutcheson’s critique of both Hobbes and Mandeville, Hutcheson argues “to will the happiness of others and to do so for their sake is to be benevolent. If we can act benevolently then the doctrine of psychological egoism...must be false.”¹⁰

In rejecting arguments for self-love, Hutcheson also confronted competing theories that grounded humanity’s knowledge of morality on religion or reason. For instance, Hutcheson rejected the view of theologians, especially Archibald Campbell, who argued that moral knowledge is grounded in religion and that self-love, understood in terms of the promise of eternal happiness, is what propels Christians to obey God’s laws. Moreover, he also confronts the idea that reason alone can provide individuals with a clear understanding of moral behavior. In this light, the moral sense refers to an

⁸ Hutcheson, *Inquiry*, 77.

⁹ Campbell, “Francis Hutcheson,” 168.

¹⁰ Broadie, *A History of Scottish Philosophy*, 134.

individual's ability to perceive virtue and vice, both in one's own actions and in the actions of others. The moral sense exists alongside other external and internal senses and allows individuals to make judgments about aesthetics, to observe public happiness, and to recognize virtuous and vicious behavior. Most importantly, these internal senses, especially the moral sense, are not derived from reason alone, because, as Campbell explains, "reason can only tell us about the existence of causal relations between actions and can never establish their amiableness or odiousness."¹¹

Hence, the moral sense provides the foundation for knowledge of morality, and it enables individuals to make moral judgments without the assistance of revelation or reason. Hutcheson never suggests that the moral sense *alone* provides perfect moral knowledge; religion and reason provide moral guidance in this regard. Furthermore, the moral sense does not prevent all selfish behavior. Hutcheson never necessarily denies Mandeville's main point, that selfish behavior may result in public benefits, but he does deny that purely selfish behavior can be defined as virtuous. What matters are not the outcomes of our actions but rather the intentions underlying our actions. As Broadie explains, "It is precisely on the motive that the moral status of the act depends, and the only motive that can ground virtue is benevolence. Self-interest cannot serve as such a ground."¹² In fact, Broadie contends that Hutcheson's most substantial objection to theories of egoism is that "it leaves no room for virtue, since it leaves no room for benevolence, and for Hutcheson benevolence is *the* moral motive."¹³

¹¹ Campbell, "Francis Hutcheson," 170.

¹² Broadie, *History*, 135.

¹³ Broadie, *History*, 134.

Although Hutcheson believes that everyone is equipped with a moral sense, and is naturally inclined toward benevolence, he does not argue that the moral sense alone is enough to motivate individuals toward virtuous actions. Indeed, competing passions and emotions, including self-interest, influence the behavior of individuals. As such, the moral sense works alongside more selfish interests to produce public goods:

Tis made so certain from the divine government of the world, the state of mankind, who cannot subsist without society, from universal experience and consent, from inward consciousness of the pleasure of kind affections, and self-approbation, and of the torments of malice, or hatred, or envy, or anger, that no man who considers those things, can ever imagine he can have any possible interest in opposing the public good, or in checking his kind affections, nay if he had no kind affections, his very self-love and regard to his private good might excite him to publicly useful actions, and dissuade him from the contrary.¹⁴

Hence, the moral sense only provides a basis for individuals to discern virtuous and vicious behaviors; it does not ensure action based on those perceptions. Because he wants individuals to have the right motives and intentions, Hutcheson faces a problem of how to promote virtue. His answer to this problem receives its most thorough treatment in his posthumously published *A System of Moral Philosophy* (1755). Connecting his moral, religious, and political thought, Hutcheson examines ways in which virtue can be cultivated and what systems of government are most conducive to that end. In the next

¹⁴ Francis Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections with Illustrations on the Moral Sense*, 3rd ed., reprint ed. (Gainesville, FL: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1969), 282.

section, I examine the relationship between Hutcheson's moral sense theory and his political thought, especially his reflections on civic virtue.

Hutcheson's Political Thought

Although Hutcheson's fame as the father of the Scottish Enlightenment is mostly grounded in his moral theory, his political thought provides insight into efforts to combine liberal and republican concerns. Hutcheson's political work is particularly known for his theory of rights, especially the right to revolution. In fact, his work was widely discussed and cited within the American revolutionary movement and was used to justify the rebellion of the colonies.¹⁵ While natural rights theory, property rights, and social contract theory all play a fundamental role in Hutcheson's writings, he also draws from the civic republican tradition in emphasizing the necessity of representative and balanced government that treats the promotion of virtue and public happiness as its end. Drawing from the implications of his moral theory, it is clear that for Hutcheson virtue is necessary for individual and public happiness and that the state must play a role in cultivating the virtue of its citizens. To explain this balance of liberal and republican concerns, I first examine Hutcheson's use of the liberal tradition, especially regarding his exposition of the state of nature and theory of rights. I then follow with a discussion of the best form of government and the role of civic virtue in supporting government.

Beginning from his rather favorable view of human nature, Hutcheson expects that human interaction is generally inclined to be peaceable. Drawing a sharp distinction

¹⁵ See especially, Robbins, *The Eighteenth Century Commonwealthman*, 185-96; and Wills, *Inventing America*.

between himself and Hobbes, he believes that this benevolent nature exists not only within the realm of political life but in pre-political life as well:

The whole system of the mind, especially our moral faculty, shews that we are all under natural bonds of beneficence and humanity toward all, and under many more special ties to some of our fellows, binding us to many services of an higher kind, than what the rest can claim: nor need we other proofs here that this first state founded by nature is so far from being that of war and enmity, that it is a state where we are all obliged by the natural feelings of our hearts, and by many tender affections, to innocence and beneficences towards all.¹⁶

Despite these peaceable tendencies, individuals do have conflicts, and government is the mechanism used to solve these problems. Though Hutcheson does not have a well-developed social contract theory, he does argue that consent forms the only basis of legitimate government: “Violence can never provide a legitimate foundation for government. The only natural method of constituting civil power must arise from the consent and contract of a whole people.”¹⁷

One of the major functions of a legitimate government for Hutcheson is to protect individual’s natural rights, and moreover, to ensure that rights are equally protected. Though he recognizes that natural inequality does exist, Hutcheson is adamant that humans are equal regarding their rights: “Men differ from each other in wisdom, virtue, beauty, and strength,” but “all men have strong desires of liberty and property,

¹⁶ Francis Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy*, reprint ed. (New York: Augustus M. Kelley, 1968), 1: 281.

¹⁷ Hutcheson, *System*, 2: 226.

have notions of right, and strong impulses to marriage, families, offspring and earnest desires for their safety.”¹⁸ As T.D. Campbell rightly notes, Hutcheson’s moral theory produces a liberal political philosophy insofar as he staunchly defends natural rights, especially regarding the rights of the least powerful members of society.¹⁹ His endorsement of the equal protection of rights leads him to a number of progressive stances, including more expansive rights for women, children, and animals. In addition, he also opposed slavery on the grounds of equal rights, because the principal rights that must be protected are life and liberty, and slavery undermines both of these. He also “embraced a right to property” as fundamental, but as Gary Wills has explained, for Hutcheson “it was subordinate to life and liberty, not the foundation and model of all rights.”²⁰ Taken together, his defenses of the importance of consent to legitimating government and of the equal protection of individual rights demonstrate Hutcheson’s prominent use of liberal arguments in applying his moral philosophy to his political thought.

In addition to his use of liberal sources, Hutcheson also uses the republican language of civic virtue and the common good to enrich his political theory. Though it has been widely acknowledged that Hutcheson drew philosophical support from the civic humanist tradition, this aspect of his political philosophy is often underplayed in comparison to his liberal political thought. Even among scholars who emphasize his debt to the republican tradition, especially Robbins and Miller, there is a general consensus

¹⁸ Hutcheson, *System*, 1: 300.

¹⁹ Campbell, “Francis Hutcheson,” 177.

²⁰ Garry Wills, *Inventing America*, 217.

that Hutcheson modifies the classical tradition to fit modern political concerns. For instance, Miller argues that Hutcheson places less importance on direct political participation for the cultivation of civic virtue than on “developing a science of politics,” and encouraging active participation in “the republic of letters.”²¹ Although I agree that Hutcheson modifies the classical republican tradition, I contend that he seeks a balance between having government protect individual rights encourage civic virtue. Hutcheson’s use of the civic tradition is most evident in the way he defines the end of government and the role of civic virtue in supporting that end.

Appealing directly to the classical republican tradition, especially in his *System*, Hutcheson defines the ends of the state, as well as the ability of the state to meet those ends, in terms of the happiness of the people and their virtue: “As the end of all laws should be the general good and happiness of a people, which chiefly depends on their virtue: it must be the business of legislators to promote, by all just and effectual methods, true principles of virtue, such as shall lead men to piety to God, and all just, peaceable, and kind dispositions towards their fellows.”²² By defining the end of government in terms of the happiness of the people, and the role of government to promote the virtue of the people, it is clear that Hutcheson is not drawing exclusively from theories of liberalism.

In particular, Hutcheson’s views on civil authority, as Caroline Robbins has suggested, indicate that he “thought in republican terms.”²³ This is made especially clear

²¹ Miller, “Francis Hutcheson,” 51.

²² Hutcheson, *System*, 2: 310.

²³ Robbins, *Commonwealthman*, 192-93.

in his discussion of the best form of government as laid out in his *System*. Drawing especially from Harrington's *Oceana*, Hutcheson defends a legislative system that would balance a popularly elected assembly against a senate, both of which would be term limited. The senate would hold "the whole right of deliberating, concerting, and proposing laws or decrees to the popular assembly," while the latter would "have the chief power of enacting."²⁴ Both assemblies, he suggests, should be balanced by a regal power charged with the execution and enforcement of laws. This power could be bestowed upon either a hereditary monarch or to a small executive council elected by the senate. As Robbins duly notes, Hutcheson never suggests that the regal power should be popularly elected.²⁵ As such, he endorses a balanced form of constitutional monarchy as the best form of government because it is able to represent the interests of the people, ensure their happiness, and promote and cultivate virtue among citizens.

Obedience to government is highly contingent, however, on how well it is able to protect the interests of the citizens and ensure their overall well being. When the state fails to do this, individuals have a right to withdraw from the social contract and separate from their government. Hutcheson never treats obedience to government as trivial, but rather conditional: "The constituting of civil power is the most important transaction in worldly affairs, and hence the obligations to fidelity in it are very high and sacred. But this consideration shews rather more the high obligation on rulers to a faithful administration, than that on subjects to obedience."²⁶

²⁴ Hutcheson, *System*, 2: 260-61.

²⁵ Robinson, *Commonwealthman*, 192.

²⁶ Hutcheson, *System*, 2: 285.

So long as rulers further the interests and protect the rights of their citizens, then government is legitimate. It is up to the public to decide when the government is no longer acting for the public good. This argument had particularly important ramifications for the American Revolution, as Hutcheson specifically argued that it is the right of colonies to decide when their rights and liberties are no longer being sufficiently protected: “Large numbers of men cannot be bound to sacrifice their own and their posterity’s liberty and happiness, to the ambitious views of their mother-country, while it can enjoy all rational happiness without subjection to it.”²⁷

As Wills has noted, Thomas Jefferson especially drew from Hutcheson’s writings to provide support for the revolutionary cause on the grounds that the colonies had a right to determine when Britain was no longer acting in their best interest.²⁸ As such, Hutcheson earned a reputation for his revolutionary and liberal thought, but he was concerned that government should serve a dual function, both protecting rights and promoting virtue. Drawing from his moral sense theory, Hutcheson argues that benevolence is the most important virtue, not only in individuals’ private lives but also in public life, but he specifically extends the list of civic virtues that he believes are necessary to support a well-functioning government. First and foremost, citizens must be pious, a topic discussed in further detail in the next section, but “the virtues most necessary to a state next to piety, which excites to and confirms all the rest, are *sobriety, industry, justice, and fortitude*.”²⁹

²⁷ Hutcheson, *System*, 2: 309.

²⁸ Wills, *Inventing America*, 193-255.

²⁹ Hutcheson, *System*, 2: 317.

Hutcheson is careful in laying out these civic virtues to confront many of the contemporary arguments concerning the tensions that exist between virtue and self-interest. While he did reject Mandeville's argument that humans are exclusively driven by self-interest, he never denies that selfishness motivates many human behaviors. Nevertheless, he argues that virtue can be used to temper selfishness and even concedes that all selfish behavior is not necessarily inimical to the common good. For example, in his discussion of civic virtue, he insists that there is less of a tension than is often accepted between virtue and wealth. While the accumulation of wealth is frequently driven by self-interest, he argues that "it is plain there is no necessary vice in the consuming of the finest products, or the wearing of the dearest manufactures by persons whose fortunes can allow it consistently with all the duties of life."³⁰ Moreover, individual wealth can bolster the national economy and help support the common good by encouraging trade with other countries. Additionally, he offers that when tempered by virtue, individuals of wealth will have more opportunities to practice benevolence by being generous to those who are less fortunate.

Imperative to his argument is that citizens receive a proper education in civic virtue. As Knud Haakonssen correctly notes, for Hutcheson,

Civil society exists not just to maximize happiness but to inculcate the benevolent or beatific motivation of the citizenry. Thus morality and its extension in religion must be taught, partly by instruction, not least instruction of public-minded teachers and writers like Hutcheson himself, partly by the practice

³⁰ Hutcheson, *System*, 2: 320.

of participation by the citizens at large in the civil, the military, and the productive life on the commonwealth.³¹

Moreover, Hutcheson argues that in addition to ensuring proper instruction, virtue is best promoted when public teachers and representatives lead by an example of virtue. This is accomplished through the free election of virtuous men who will lead by example, and who will demonstrate the contemptibleness of vicious actions. He claims, “Virtue ever was and will be popular, where men can vote freely.”³² He does recognize that citizens will make errors of judgment at times when evaluating the character of representatives, but free and frequent elections will allow the opportunity to remove quickly those individuals from office. Hence, Hutcheson’s political thought draws from the republican tradition to emphasize the importance of the free election of representatives, the careful balance of power in institutions, and the cultivation of virtue in its citizens, so that they behave in the public interest and can accordingly judge the actions of their representatives.

Religion

Although Hutcheson believes that virtue can be promoted through government and a proper education, he does not believe that this alone is enough to ensure that citizens will be virtuous. He contends that religious belief is necessary to inspire individuals not only to practice private virtue but civic virtue as well. Religion provides motivation for good behavior in a way that self-interest or the moral sense alone cannot

³¹ Haakonssen, *Natural Law and Moral Philosophy*, 77.

³² Hutcheson, *System*, 2: 317.

accomplish. Unlike many Presbyterian preachers of his era, he never uses the fiery imagery and language of eternal damnation to explain why belief in God inspires individuals to virtuous behavior, but he does emphasize that a belief in an eternal state of rewards and punishments is necessary to inspire virtue. He claims, “This belief of a Deity, a Providence, and a *future state* are the only sure Supports to a good Mind.”³³

As James Moore has described, one of Hutcheson’s goals was to articulate a system of theodicy, “in which Divine Providence is shown to have made provision for the happiness of the human race. Such provision is evident... in the constitution of human nature, where the various appetites, affections, senses, and powers of human nature conspire and work together to promote human happiness.”³⁴ Although it is widely acknowledged that Hutcheson argues that individuals have moral obligations to God and to one another, and that God has provided for the happiness of humanity, there has been little scholarship that directly connects Hutcheson’s religious thought to his political work. While Moore does suggest that Hutcheson’s religious and political thought are connected, his primary focus is explaining the place of the *System* in Hutcheson’s overall corpus of work, not specifying how religion should be used to support the ends of civil government. I extend Moore’s insight and argue that religion plays a critical role in Hutcheson’s political thought because of the role of religion in promoting both private and civic virtue. To demonstrate the importance of religion to these ends, I begin with a discussion of the relationship between religion and virtue in Hutcheson’s political

³³ Hutcheson, *Essay*, 189.

³⁴ James Moore, “Hutcheson’s Theodicy: The Argument and the Contexts of *A System of Moral Philosophy*,” in *The Scottish Enlightenment: Essays in Reinterpretation*, ed. Paul Wood (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2000), 241.

thought and the importance of piety as a civic virtue. I then follow by examining Hutcheson's argument that government should protect religious liberty while promoting religious belief.

For Hutcheson, religion provides motivation to virtue, through a belief in a future state of rewards and punishments. He never argues, however, that virtue requires an external reward; quite the opposite, he contends that virtuous behavior is its own reward and will produce happiness regardless of the outcome of such behavior. Virtue depends on the intention and will of an individual. As described above, his moral sense theory dictates that it is the motivation behind an action that determines whether that act is virtuous, not the results of an action. For Hutcheson, good intentions matter more than good results. As Richard Sher has described, this effort to blend the internal value of virtue with a future state of rewards and punishments is best described as Christian Stoicism.³⁵ Hutcheson replaces the Stoic conception of fate with the Christian conception of God to explain that individuals have a duty to behave virtuously, even under the worst circumstances:

When we despair of glory, and even of executing all the good we intend, 'tis a sublime exercise to the soul to persist in acting the rational and social part as it can; discharging its duty well, and committing the rest to *God*.... Thus the most heroick excellence, and its consequent happiness and inward joy, may be attained

³⁵ Richard Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 177.

under the worst circumstances of fortune; nor is any station of life excluded from the enjoyment of the supreme good.³⁶

In his religious thought, Hutcheson always emphasizes the benevolent nature of humanity, the necessity of virtue, and the insistence that God will reward those who are virtuous, whether in this life or in a future state. The optimistic tone of his religious thought and moral sense theory contrasts deeply with the Calvinist tradition that was prevalent in Scotland in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. This brand of Calvinism places special emphasis on the Fall and subsequently the sinfulness of human nature. As Broadie notes, this focus on the depravity of humanity affects the image individuals have of one another. By focusing on their sinful nature, individuals are more likely to treat one another with skepticism and reservation.³⁷ Hutcheson feared that this would become a self-fulfilling prophecy where the assumption that humanity is wicked would lead people to behave in vicious ways. Hence, he was concerned that this theological perspective would do little to promote virtuous, benevolent behavior; rather, it would emphasize self-interest and disengagement.

In order to combat the tendencies towards self-interest and vicious behavior, Hutcheson offers a view of religion generally, and Christianity specifically, that focuses on the benevolent nature of humanity and the call to act lovingly towards others.³⁸ He believed that benevolence and religious belief were deeply intertwined, with piety being the foundation of individual happiness: “A pious disposition toward God, a firm

³⁶ Hutcheson, *System*, 2: 225-26.

³⁷ Broadie, *History*, 140.

³⁸ Hutcheson, *System*, 1: 228.

persuasion of his goodness, and of his providence governing the world, and administering justice in a future state...are the sources of the most sublime happiness.”³⁹

Piety is not only related to private happiness, it also produces public happiness by encouraging individuals to care for one another. Hutcheson does not think that virtue and self-interest are necessarily at odds, as classical republicans do, but he does believe that individuals must be willing to care for one another in order to ensure the common good. Pious individuals, he contends, are more likely to exercise both private and public virtues because of their belief that virtuous behavior will ensure their happiness, both in this life and in the next. Consequently, Hutcheson argues that it is in the state’s interest to promote religious belief through education: “The civil power should take care that the people be well instructed in these points, and have all arguments presented to their understandings...The magistrate should therefore provide proper instruction for all, especially for young minds, about the existence, goodness, and providence of God, and all the social duties of life, and the motives to them.”⁴⁰ By providing religious instruction, the civil authority is more likely to cultivate citizens who will support the common good, behave virtuously, and insist upon virtuous behavior from their elected representatives.

Interestingly, in addition to arguing that it is necessary for the state to promote religion as a way to cultivate civic virtue, Hutcheson is also one of the most adamant defenders of religious liberty. He lists liberty of conscience as “not only an essential but

³⁹ Hutcheson, *System*, 2: 310.

⁴⁰ Hutcheson, *System*, 2: 311.

an unalienable branch”⁴¹ of natural liberty which must be treated as a sacred right in order to ensure the happiness of the people. Not only does he defend religious liberty on the grounds of natural rights but he also argues that it is against the interest of the state to engage in religious persecution because it will punish productive members of society: “Such persecution is the most horrid iniquity and cruelty, and may often dispeople a country of its most useful hands, upon which its wealth and strength [depend].”⁴² As V.M. Hope has argued, Hutcheson is even willing to extend religious toleration beyond Christianity because religion generally inspires virtue in believers. Even “pagans can be good in spite of not being Christians and can even enjoy moral satisfaction,”⁴³ which is Hutcheson’s main concern regarding what is required to be a good citizen.

Although Hutcheson defends freedom of religion, he is unwilling to extend a right of religious liberty to atheists. While most forms of religion encourage virtue and emphasize the importance of individual’s obligations and duties to one another, in his view, atheists do not experience any obligations to behave virtuously:

As to direct Atheism, or denial of a moral providence, or of the obligations of the moral or social virtues, these indeed directly tend to hurt the state in its most important interests: and the persons who directly publish such tenets cannot well pretend any obligation in conscience to do so. The magistrate may therefore justly restrain them by force, as he might any deluded fool or enthusiasts who pretended conscience in invading the rights or properties of others.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ Hutcheson, *System*, 1: 257.

⁴² Hutcheson, *System*, 2: 315.

⁴³ Hope, *Virtue by Consensus*, 23.

⁴⁴ Hutcheson, *System*, 2: 313.

As MacIntyre argues, atheism is a problem for Hutcheson because it is a denial of conscience, and conscience is equated with the moral sense. The moral sense provides knowledge of the existence of God not through rational argument but through an understanding that as a perfect being God is morally venerable and worthy of worship. As a result, MacIntyre concludes that for Hutcheson “plain persons do not need to be skilled in rational argument in order to judge that they ought to venerate God.”⁴⁵ Hence, atheism is detrimental and should be restrained by civil authorities because it undermines obligations to act virtuously and has a corrupting effect on the religious faith of others by denying the existence of conscience or the moral sense.

Because of the threat atheism poses to the common good, Hutcheson is willing to impose limits on individual religious liberty. Moreover, his insistence that it is in the interest of the civil government to encourage and promote religious belief and instruction also demonstrates his willingness to place the common good over individual liberty. Although he is willing to defend a rather extensive view of religious toleration, religious belief is still required in order to be a good citizen. By encouraging religion, the civil authority promotes virtuous behavior and consequently ensures that the proper end of government, namely, public happiness, is protected.

Conclusion

In his writings, Hutcheson weaves together his moral, political, and religious thought to emphasize that public happiness is the proper end of government. Although

⁴⁵ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*, 274.

he is primarily known for his work on individual rights, especially the right to revolution, his political thought demonstrates an effort to blend liberal and republican concerns. For Hutcheson, the promotion of virtue outweighs competing concerns over liberty because virtue is necessary to ensure that government is dedicated to the public good. Only under representative government, where citizens have the ability to frequently and freely vote, is the public interest protected. Moreover, citizens must receive proper instruction in virtue in order to support the public good and correctly judge the efforts of their elected officials.

Religion plays a key element in Hutcheson's political thought as it provides an unrivaled motivation to be virtuous. Religious belief inspires not only private virtue but public virtue as well. Hutcheson counts piety among the civic virtues that are necessary to a well-functioning republican government and argues that individuals must have religious faith in order to be good citizens. Nevertheless, he insists that a plurality of religious beliefs should be tolerated and individual religious freedom protected by the state. Hutcheson's moral and political thought inspired the works of Scottish Enlightenment figures including David Hume, Adam Smith, and Adam Ferguson, but his thought also carried across the Atlantic and was particularly influential for both John Witherspoon and Thomas Jefferson. While almost everyone who drew upon Hutcheson's thought accepted the centrality of the virtue of benevolence, there is much less agreement about the place of piety in a republican form of government. Whereas Witherspoon endorses Hutcheson's religious and political scheme with very little modification, Jefferson rejects the necessity of the virtue of piety as central to supporting

the public good. Even Ferguson deemphasizes the importance of piety and instead insists that honor and civic engagement are more central to supporting republican government. Nevertheless, it will become clear that Hutcheson's insistence on the benevolent nature of humanity and the centrality of religion to promoting civic virtue influenced and shaped the political concerns of the Scottish Enlightenment and the American founding.

CHAPTER III

ADAM FERGUSON: PROVIDENTIAL ORDER AND THE CIVIC TRADITION

Though his work places him at the nexus between the republican and liberal traditions, Adam Ferguson is undoubtedly the figure most dedicated to the civic tradition within the Scottish Enlightenment. Widely popular during the late eighteenth century, his thought on civil society, economics, and liberty subsequently influenced prominent figures including Hegel, Marx, and J.S. Mill. Ferguson's contributions to the history of political thought, however, were largely overlooked until the latter half of the twentieth century, with no new English edition of his renowned *Essay on the History of Civil Society* appearing between 1814 and 1966.¹ The *Essay*, which draws directly upon the work of Montesquieu in an effort to provide a historical context for the rise of states in the modern era, appeals to the civic tradition while being sensitive to the challenges of modern commercial society. More so than any of his contemporaries, including Hume and Smith, Ferguson recognizes the dangers of commercialism, and fears it could lead to tyranny if left unchecked. To avoid such a decline, he wanted to reinvigorate the modern era with the public-spiritedness of antiquity.

In recent scholarship on the Scottish Enlightenment, Ferguson's political thought has received increased attention.² Most often, Ferguson's work is read as an attempt to

¹ Gary L. McDowell, "Commerce, Virtue, and Politics: Adam Ferguson's Constitutionalism," *The Review of Politics* 45 (1983): 539.

² For two excellent examples of recent work on the social and political thought of Adam Ferguson, see the following recent edited volumes: Eugene Heath and Vincenzo Merolle, eds., *Adam Ferguson: History, Progress and Human Nature* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2008); Eugene Heath and Vincenzo Merolle, eds., *Adam Ferguson: Philosophy, Politics and Society* (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009).

balance civic humanist concerns of public virtue with the fear of increased self-interest in the modern economic era. Although he recognized the dangers posed by commercialization, he also viewed the development of commercial societies as an opportunity to use institutions to cultivate both individual virtue and peace among states. In this chapter, I argue that Ferguson's religious thought informs and shapes his commitment to the civic tradition. I contend that Ferguson's commitment to civic virtue, specifically, the virtues of honor, courage, and active engagement, comes from his understanding of providential order. While Ferguson believes that providence guarantees progress in universal terms, he contends that national progress is contingent upon the virtue of the people. Religious faith is important for Ferguson, but in terms of the interest of the state, virtuous actions are more important than faith, though the two are mutually reinforcing. In order to thwart corruption and ensure progress, Ferguson argues that citizens must be active and vigilant and that they have a civic and religious duty to be engaged. In particular, he emphasizes the importance of recovering the virtues most associated with savage and barbaric nations as a way to ensure progress.

To demonstrate the role of providential theology in Ferguson's approach to civic virtue, I begin by surveying his work on the development of civil society and its meaning for his social and political thought. Next I discuss Ferguson's treatment of savage and barbaric nations, the virtues that associated with these stages of society, and the relationship between forms of government and societal progress. I conclude by demonstrating how his understanding of spontaneous order and providence drives his concern for recovering classical republican virtues in modern, polished societies.

Adam Ferguson

Renowned as a highland minister and scholar, a leading contributor to modern sociology, and a philosopher of history and constitutional theory, Ferguson's social and political thought is simultaneously transitional and modern. In one of the earliest treatments of Ferguson's work in American scholarship, David Kettler has noted that what makes Ferguson's work appealing is "the excitement it generated at the time of its publication among a few significant people, and the recurrent sense of timeliness which presents itself even to a modern reader if he should stumble on the books in a patiently receptive mood."³ Kettler argues that Ferguson must be read in the context of the works of both David Hume and Adam Smith to understand his efforts to bridge republican and liberal concerns. Whereas Hume and Smith emphasize the power of self-interest to sustain society, Ferguson expresses deep ambivalence. Instead, he focuses on the role of both individual liberty and virtue in government. Ferguson cannot, however, "be simply classed with civic humanist pessimists or with historical progressivists."⁴ Indeed, he attempts to bring both civic republican and liberal concerns to bear on the relationship between the modern state and its citizens. Although Ferguson embraces the progress that modern commercial society offers, as Kettler correctly notes, "Ferguson's concerns clearly foreshadow the problems of over-rationalization, dehumanization, atomization, alienation, and bureaucratization."⁵

³ David Kettler, *The Social and Political Thought of Adam Ferguson* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1965), 4; see also, David Kettler, "History and Theory in Ferguson's Essay on the History of Civil Society: A Reconsideration," *Political Theory* 5 (1977): 437-60.

⁴ Kettler, "History and Theory," 439.

⁵ Kettler, *Social and Political Thought*, 8.

Perhaps more than any other Scottish Enlightenment philosopher, Ferguson is deeply ambivalent about the rise of modern commercial societies, and particularly laments that the progress of polished societies lends itself to the demise of active citizenship. Fania Oz-Salzberger takes Ferguson's emphasis on the importance of active participation of citizens as evidence of his attachment to classical republicanism.⁶ Ferguson appears deeply skeptical that the modern commercial society can sustain itself without the interest and participation of its citizens, and he uses the *Essay* as "a bid to reclaim the idea of civic virtue on behalf of the modern commercial state."⁷ Furthermore, his interest in using institutions as a means of encouraging active citizenship also represents a strong theme of republicanism which runs throughout Ferguson's works. Given his emphasis on the importance of active citizenship, John Pocock has characterized Ferguson's *Essay* as "perhaps the most Machiavellian of the Scottish disquisitions," for its emphasis on ambition, passion, and civic virtue as the instruments of societal progress.⁸

Though active citizenship and civic virtue are critical to understanding Ferguson's thought, he was also a forerunner of modern liberal thought. As Andreas Kalyvas and Ira Katznelson have argued, Ferguson's attempt to wed together republican and liberal concerns provides a better understanding of the development of liberalism

⁶ Fania Oz-Salzberger, "Introduction," in *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* by Adam Ferguson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), xviii, xxii.

⁷ Fania Oz-Salzberger, "Introduction," xvii.

⁸ J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 499. In his later work Pocock notes that Ferguson's approach to understanding savage and barbarian life was "republican in the sense – and only the sense – that he thought the intense individuality occasionally released in the savage and the barbarian...needed to be preserved if the moral life was to be the individual's at all, and was in some ways threatened by the progress of society it had itself created," *Barbarism and Religion: Narratives of Civil Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 2:347.

itself.⁹ They argue that Ferguson offers several conceptual innovations to liberalism, including a broad understanding of pluralism, a distinction between friend and enemy, the importance of conflict, and the ability of institutions to mediate conflicts. These contributions are indicative of Ferguson's overall concern of joining together republican arguments for the importance of public virtue with liberal arguments for the diversity of interests in modern society. By emphasizing the utility of institutions as a way to cultivate virtue and mediate conflicts in a pluralistic society, Ferguson successfully draws upon and contributes to both republican and liberal traditions.

As much as Ferguson contributed to political theory, he also shaped the modern study of sociology. Among his most important contributions is his consideration of the benefits of both war and conflict. As Lisa Hill argues, Ferguson recognizes that both individual conflict and war are the result of outside influences and the human passions. The arousal of such passions plays an important role in strengthening social groups. Additionally, Ferguson recognizes the part that war and conflict play in inspiring productivity and creativity within a state.¹⁰ Certainly, he appreciates the damage wrought by war, but he also recognizes that conflict is a primary source of progress in the development of civil society.

Ferguson's sociological understanding of conflict is deeply wedded to his argument on societal progress. He contends that political conflicts spur progress, at least when conflict occurs within well-structured political institutions. Moreover, he argues

⁹ Andreas Kalyvas and Ira Katznelson, "Adam Ferguson Returns: Liberalism through a Glass, Darkly," *Political Theory* 26 (1998), 173-97.

¹⁰ Lisa Hill, "Eighteenth-Century Anticipations of the Sociology of Conflict: The Case of Adam Ferguson," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 62 (2001): 286-93.

that conflict promotes participation, which is the supreme civic virtue for Ferguson. To illustrate his arguments regarding the role of conflict in fomenting societal progress, I first focus on Ferguson's treatment of savage nations, which he considers to be the most rudimentary form of society. I then examine his arguments on societal progress in polished societies. Ferguson's emphasis on conflict reveals his dedication to the classical virtues of honor, courage, and active engagement in sustaining a well-functioning government.

History of Civil Society

Ferguson's interest in progress, both at the individual and societal levels, animated much of his social and political thought. Drawing upon theories of historical stages, which were prevalent during Scottish Enlightenment, Ferguson developed an account of how societies progress over time. Particularly in his influential *Essay*, Ferguson traces the development of civil society and the "species itself from rudeness to civilization."¹¹ Beginning with society's origins in human nature, through the establishment of "rude" nations, the rise of modern commercial societies, and the eventual decline of nations, Ferguson draws upon numerous sources, including classical examples of empire, the modern state, and accounts of the savage cultures found in America. He focuses primarily on how societies have historically advanced from small collections of individuals living communally to great powers. His analysis reveals corruption as the greatest danger to civil society. Once a society becomes corrupt,

¹¹ Adam Ferguson, *Essay*, 7.

political enslavement and despotism almost always follow. Nevertheless, nations are not left facing the inevitable threat of decline; rather, Ferguson argues that the cultivation of public virtue through active citizenship can save societies from failure.

Although Ferguson draws upon the theory of historical stages to support his ideas of progress, he significantly modifies this tradition. Whereas many Scots, including Adam Smith, Lord Kames, and John Millar, argued from a theory of four stages based on economic distinctions – hunting, pasturage, farming, and commerce - Ferguson instead develops a three-tiered classification of societies: rude, barbarous, and polished. Even though some have asserted that Ferguson either embraces or only slightly modifies the four-stage theory, John Brewer compellingly argues that Ferguson completely modifies this type of theorizing by basing the classifications on social structure rather than economic systems.¹² Essentially, Ferguson was interested in explaining the normative elements that create bonds among individuals. As Brewer rightly notes, Ferguson moves the republican discourse on virtue beyond “describing the type of personal character required for the virtuous person” towards a more complete understanding of “civic culture.”¹³ Ferguson intends for his analysis of the normative structures of society to be empirically and scientifically sound, and therefore he draws his conclusions from travel accounts that provide observations from a variety of societies. Such accounts are used to describe the development of society as well as explain the causal mechanisms that result in progress.

¹² For the former view, see Andrew Brewer, “Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith and the Concept of Economic Growth,” *History of Political Economy* 31 (1999): 238; Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion*, 2: 330-45.

¹³ John D. Brewer, “Putting Adam Ferguson in His Place,” *British Journal of Sociology* 58 (2007): 108.

In undertaking this type of study of societies, Ferguson closely follows the work of Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws* (1748). In fact, Ferguson was so impressed by Montesquieu's work that he referred to his own as simply imitation:

When I recollect what the President Montesquieu has written, I am at a loss to tell, why I should treat of human affairs; but I too am instigated by my reflections, and my sentiments; and I may utter them more to the comprehension of ordinary capacities, because I am more on the level of ordinary men....In his writings will be found, not only the original of what I am now, for the sake of order, to copy from him, but likewise probably the source of many observations, which, in different places, I may, under the belief of invention, have repeated, without quoting their author.¹⁴

But to accept his appraisal of Montesquieu's work would ignore the important innovations Ferguson offers to the study of societies. For instance, the three-stage scheme Ferguson uses to describe the categories of society, namely, savage, barbarian, and polished society, comes from Montesquieu's own consideration of the affects of climate, soil, and geography upon the development of constitutions.¹⁵ As Richard Sher has explained, however, "Montesquieu's emphasis...was indicative of an approach that

¹⁴ Ferguson, "Essay," 66.

¹⁵ Baron de Montesquieu, *Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Thomas Nugent (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1966), 221-91.

gave more attention to the spatial than to the temporal dimension in accounting for cultural diversity.”¹⁶

Ferguson’s analysis of savage and barbaric societies explores how social structures give rise to particular normative systems and how these systems progress over time. Following Montesquieu rather closely, Ferguson argues that differences in climates produce variations in manners among the inhabitants of the earth. These distinctions ultimately culminate in a variety of ways of living. It is important for Ferguson, however, not to confuse a simple means of living with dullness or indolence.¹⁷ A harsh climate may in fact require a simple life, but this does not indicate that those inhabitants are inferior in nature or in their capabilities.

An understanding of life in a “rude” state can be divided into two categories: “that of the savage, who is not yet acquainted with property; and that of the barbarian, to whom it is, although not ascertained by laws, a principal object of care and desire.”¹⁸ As societies develop a more complex concept of property, they demonstrate greater levels of progress. Progress is evidenced by advances in both mechanical and commercial arts.¹⁹ Savages held everything including labor and its spoils in common. This means that the community shares food and shelter, and women take a collective responsibility for child rearing.

¹⁶ Richard B. Sher, “From Troglodytes to Americans: Montesquieu and the Scottish Enlightenment on Liberty, Virtue, and Commerce,” in *Republicanism, Liberty, and Commercial Society, 1649-1776*, ed. David Wooton (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 392.

¹⁷ Ferguson, *Essay*, 81.

¹⁸ Ferguson, *Essay*, 81.

¹⁹ Ferguson, *Essay*, 81.

Ferguson has in mind primarily a hunter-gatherer society in the case of savages, and a society that cultivates at least some food in the instance of barbarians. His understanding of hunter-gather societies derives from accounts of the natives of both North and South America. Many of these accounts report findings that Ferguson believes are unusual but explicable. When property remains held in common by members of a society, Ferguson reports that divisions of rank among the men do not exist.²⁰ This arrangement is of particular interest because it affirms the equality of individuals within the savage society. As such, the members of the tribe share a fair level of equality because each member is able to contribute to the tribe's needs.

Although Ferguson accepts this account, it requires the reader to accept that warriors or those especially skilled in hunting hold no higher esteem than mediocre tribe members. Ferguson does note, however, that distinctions among individuals within a savage society also vary according to the climate of the region. In temperate regions that do not face as many challenges in obtaining food or shelter, for example, he expects that the differentiation of ranks is unnecessary. In harsh climates, however, he notes that these distinctions do exist. He offers natives of the Caribbean as an example of a society that is subjected to a warmer climate and therefore requires divisions of rank. Therefore these nations have an unequal distribution of property and power.²¹

While Ferguson notes it would be easy to assume that rude nations are inherently backward nations, necessarily focused on maintaining a subsistence-level existence, he concludes that the opposite is true:

²⁰ Ferguson, *Essay*, 83.

²¹ Ferguson, *Essay*, 84.

Directed in this particular by the desires of nature, men, in their simplest state, attend to the object of appetite no further than appetite requires; and their desires of fortune extend no further than the meal which gratifies their hunger: they apprehend no superiority of rank in the possession of wealth, such as might inspire any habitual principle of covetousness, vanity, or ambition: they can apply to no task that engages no immediate passion, and take pleasure in no occupation that affords no dangers to be braved, and no honours to be won.²²

A spirit of hazard animates the savage. Nevertheless, hazard should not be understood as sheer recklessness. In contrast with European soldiers who consider death on the battlefield honorable, the savage considers such a fate a disgrace.²³ Honor is measured instead by fortitude and cunning.

What is of particular interest is Ferguson's conclusion concerning the nature of savage life and his reverence for the virtues it breeds. In fact, he argues that within the rudest states one finds "the love of society, friendship, and public affection, penetration, eloquence, and courage."²⁴ The cultivation of virtue that occurs as societies progress is not the discovery of new virtues, for they have always existed even in the rudest states. Rather, virtue involves a mastery over the passions that exist within human nature, such as seeking out hazard. Ferguson lauds the virtues found in both the ancient republics and in rude societies, especially for the active and vigorous spirit they breed among citizens:

²² Ferguson, *Essay*, 91-92.

²³ Ferguson, *Essay*, 90.

²⁴ Ferguson, *Essay*, 93.

“To the benevolent, the satisfaction of others is a ground of enjoyment; and existence itself, in a world that is governed by the wisdom of God, is a blessing. The mind, freed from cares that lead to pusillanimity and meanness, becomes calm, active, fearless, and bold; capable of every enterprise, and vigorous in the exercise of every talent, by which the nature of man is adorned.”²⁵ Only in learning to overcome our passions do humans become virtuous.

The progress of societies hinges not only on technological and commercial developments, but also and most importantly on the advancement of public virtue. Not every government, however, can equally cultivate virtue among its citizens. Furthermore, whenever a society becomes corrupt, it will almost surely fall to despotism, which Ferguson considers the worst form of government.²⁶ Nevertheless, Ferguson must maintain some sense of relativism because he holds that not all locations are equally capable of establishing a form of government that can prevent corruption. Indeed, Ferguson argues that “forms of government must be varied, in order to suit the extent, the way of subsistence, the character, and the manners of different nations.”²⁷

Even so, Ferguson closely follows Montesquieu in the *Essay* by holding constitutional monarchy as the best government for developed societies. He argues that whereas other governments often become corrupt when the merit of citizens stems entirely from their wealth, constitutional monarchies have as part of their foundations “the reputation of courage, courtly manners, and a certain elevation of the mind.”²⁸

²⁵ Ferguson, *Essay*, 57.

²⁶ Ferguson, *Essay*, 247-57.

²⁷ Ferguson, *Essay*, 63.

²⁸ Ferguson, *Essay*, 238.

Consequently, even if wealth and self-interest are found within this form of government, these virtues help to prevent the government from descending into self-enslavement or despotism.

The problem of corruption is typically associated with a love of luxury and general intemperance, but Ferguson contends that this is less of a concern than is often asserted. Ferguson understands luxury as “the accumulation of wealth, and that refinement of the ways of enjoying it, which are the objects of industry, or the fruits of mechanic and commercial arts,” whereas he understands corruption as “a real weakness, or depravity of human character.”²⁹ Because corruption is not necessarily associated with wealth, it can occur under any system of government. Nevertheless, the accumulation of wealth is often treated as though it were the equivalent of the accumulation of merit. When this occurs, those individuals with poor characters can achieve individual success and perhaps even assume political power. For this reason, whenever a society has in place a system of merit distinct from wealth, such as respect for honor or courage, it is less likely that the accumulation of luxury will be mistaken for good character. Hence, nations can prevent both individual corruption as well as the risk of despotic government by encouraging the virtues of honor and courage.

In his later works, especially *Principles of Moral and Political Science* (1792),³⁰ Ferguson places more emphasis on the value of liberal government than constitutional monarchy. As Kalyvas and Katznelson have argued, Ferguson focuses on the “priority of a neutral, liberal state that protects private property, secures existing economic and

²⁹ Ferguson, *Essay*, 235-36.

³⁰ Adam Ferguson, *Principles of Moral and Political Science*, 2 vols. (New York: AMS Press, INC, 1973).

social inequalities, and limits democratic rights to political participation.”³¹ He distrusts democracy for its capricious nature. Because democracies do not have a tradition of public virtue and no way to inspire virtue in their citizens, Ferguson considers them to be as corrupt as tyrannies.

Although he never asserts that any particular form of government is best for all societies, Ferguson does offer tests for determining whether or not a government is good. Similar to Montesquieu, Ferguson argues that the growth of a national population indicates a general happiness on the part of the people.³² When individuals find it in their interest to have larger families, this can be interpreted as evidence that the people support their government. Additionally, he argues that national resources can be seen as an indicator of good government. However, he never specifies whether an abundance of resources directly causes the success of a government or if good governments are more successful in acquiring and utilizing their assets.

Ferguson also argues that the success of a government can be judged by the prosperity of a society. Although he never argues that wealth directly produces national felicity, he does claim wealth is a “symptom” of national happiness insofar as it demonstrates that citizens are dedicated to the virtues of industry and frugality.³³ Though Ferguson shares the classical republican sentiment that luxury has a corrupting effect on citizens, he argues that if individuals become affluent by practicing the moderating virtues of industry and frugality, financial prosperity will not have a deleterious effect on

³¹ Kalyvas and Katznelson, “Adam Ferguson,” 179.

³² Ferguson, *Essay*, 60.

³³ Ferguson, *Principles*, 2:500.

virtue. In this way, Ferguson maintains many of his civic republican concerns surrounding the cultivation of public virtue while at the same time emphasizing the need for liberal values, including the protection of property, and the development of a commercial economy.

Ferguson insists that commercial progress must be earned through the exercise of virtue in order to produce happiness. He warns that the acquisition of wealth through force and the expansion of empire is a contributing factor to the corruption of once successful societies. Ferguson even calls it foolish to consider the size of a nation's territory, the number of conquests it has undertaken, or its abundance of wealth as indicators of its advantages.³⁴ Although a nation may consider empire-building a way to gain strength and subsequently stability, this activity actually undermines any security the nation may gain.

Empire-building is dangerous because every instance of expansion creates enemies among those who are conquered. Given that a nation may mount a formidable defense in response, the potential gains do not outweigh the potential losses. Ferguson also strongly emphasizes the contingency of history. Even when assured of triumph, "the risk of misfortune" to a nation remains great.³⁵ As a result, the pursuit of any war other than one of self-defense is unwise. Furthermore, the pursuit of empire also corrupts citizens. Wars of aggression teach citizens that moderation holds little value and that wealth alone can ensure the success of the state.

³⁴ Ferguson, *Principles*, 2:501.

³⁵ Ferguson, *Principles*, 2:501.

This is not to suggest that Ferguson is dovish on war. He readily acknowledges the necessity of war when the security of the nation is at stake. Even so, the pursuit of military activity requires extreme caution. Wisdom, which he considers a virtue, always dictates peace whenever possible: “The wise do not recur to war as the means of acquisition, but as the means of preservation of safety.”³⁶ Although Ferguson recommends that disputes should be settled peaceably, he does not believe that war is necessarily at odds with virtue. In fact, his description of savage and barbaric societies reveals that he believes conflict provides an opportunity to cultivate virtue. Much as the classical republican tradition valued martial abilities, courage, and honor, in the *Essay*, Ferguson describes the martial prowess of the savages with great esteem. He argues that whereas modern societies glorify the death of soldiers, savages see greater value in the preservation of life. Additionally, savage nations see greater honor in acts of “patience more than valor.”³⁷ Savage nations avoid war, but they also consider honor in wars that are directed towards the maintenance of peace. For this reason, Ferguson considers one of the greatest expressions of both human nature and virtue demonstrated by savage nations and argues that these virtues should be reinvigorated in polished societies.

Providential Progress

Of particular interest to Ferguson is the issue of progress, namely, understanding how societies transition from one stage to another. He states that in each stage certain virtues are more prevalent than others, such as the virtue of courage in savage societies.

³⁶ Ferguson, *Principles*, 2:502.

³⁷ Ferguson, *Essay*, 90.

Ferguson wants polished societies to recover the virtues found in rude societies in order to help prevent corruption. Despite his focus on progress, Ferguson avoids many of the oversimplifications of his fellow Enlightenment writers. For him, the application of human reason and knowledge does not inevitably yield progress, nor are certain societies providentially designed to progress beyond others. In fact, he spends the last two sections of the *Essay* discussing the decline and corruption of nations. Societal progress hinges upon the virtue of the people, and to do good is to be in the service of God. The benevolence of God ultimately guarantees human progress, but progress also depends on the spirit of the people. Deeply influenced by Montesquieu, he accepts that commerce leads to wisdom and in turn produces good laws and liberty. Nevertheless, this is not enough to ensure progress because responsible, virtuous action and spirited activity among citizens are needed to ensure that society does not slip into decline. I argue that Ferguson's belief in providence and particularly in providential progress explains his emphasis on the virtues of honor, courage, and active engagement in preventing corruption and ensuring progress.

In spite of his theological training and early work as chaplain to the Highland Black Watch Regiment, scholars often treat Ferguson as a secular thinker. David Kettler in his noteworthy study of Ferguson's political thought characterizes him as "fundamentally secular – and certainly not Christian."³⁸ Kettler emphasizes that though Ferguson embraces a teleological view of history and knowledge, his teleology centers on humanity, not providence: "Ferguson's progressive teleology eventuates in a

³⁸ Kettler, *Social and Political Thought*, 131.

thorough-going anthropocentrism. Man, in short, is urged to govern his actions and judgments by the goal of realizing his own higher potentialities, and progress consists in giving ever greater play to his own faculties.”³⁹

In contrast with Kettler, Lisa Hill has argued that Ferguson’s teleology is driven by his belief in providence and therefore must be understood in religious terms. Hence, it is Ferguson’s belief in God and a divine order that drives his understanding of human progress. In her view, Ferguson develops a theology that entails “a vision of human affairs as harmonious, orderly, progressive, and perfectibilitist.”⁴⁰ Underlying this theology is Ferguson’s acceptance of a theory of a divinely constructed spontaneous order by which social and political institutions arise apart from conscious human effort.⁴¹ This is not to say that humans are incapable of instigating progress; rather, Ferguson insists that much of societal progress originates outside of the means of human design:

Like the winds, that come we know not whence, and blow whithersoever they list, the forms of society are derived from an obscure and distant origin; they arise, long before the date of philosophy, from the instincts, not from the speculations, of men.... Every step and every movement of the multitude, even in what are termed enlightened ages, are made with equal blindness to the future; and nations stumble upon establishments, which are indeed the result of human action, but not the execution of any human design.⁴²

³⁹ Kettler, *Social and Political Thought*, 130.

⁴⁰ Lisa Hill, “Adam Ferguson and the Paradox of Progress and Decline,” *History of Political Thought* 18 (1997): 243.

⁴¹ See Ronald Hamowy, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the Theory of Spontaneous Order* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press 1987).

⁴² Ferguson, *Essay*, 119.

As Richard Sher has argued, Ferguson shares with Francis Hutcheson a brand of Christian Stoicism, which emphasizes that individuals have a moral duty to obey God, that actions must be judged by the intentions that motivate them, and that the benevolence is the supreme religious and political virtue.⁴³ Hence, Ferguson argues that God has provided a providential plan for progress and that humanity has a duty to behave virtuously as part of their obligation to God.

Though Ferguson consistently argues that societies progress through his tri-stadial thesis, from savage, barbarous, and polished societies according to the will of Providence, he also gives great attention to the danger of decline. He specifically warns that progress is *not* inevitable:

Every thing human indeed is subject to perish, and in the same race of men, knowledge gives way to ignorance. The light of science is no more in corners where it formerly shone: but this is rather the removal than the extinction of light. It passes from one race of men to another, and, when it seemed to be extinguished, is perhaps about to be restored with additional force.⁴⁴

Ferguson's insistence on the progress guaranteed by the theory of spontaneous order seems at odds with his obsessive discussion of corruption and decline, as Lisa Hill has convincingly argued.⁴⁵ Whereas his theory of spontaneous order guarantees progress, he warns that all societies are in danger of being corrupted. Ferguson is particularly concerned with the potential retrogression of polished societies. He worries that if a

⁴³ Richard Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 177-80.

⁴⁴ Ferguson, *Principles of Morals*, 1:282.

⁴⁵ Hill, "Progress and Decline," 681.

polished nation gives in to the influence of power and wealth that comes with commercialism, its populace will become effeminate and unengaged and will succumb to despotism.

To explain how Ferguson reconciles his belief in progress with his incessant concern about corruption, Lisa Hill and Jeng-Guo S. Chen offer two different but complementary answers, both pointing to the role of providence in Ferguson's thought to solve this paradox. Hill argues that Ferguson's understanding of providence provides that humans are guaranteed to progress but also that there is room for human error due to free will: "Providence...provides an immutable framework (the three-stage schema and whatever is to come after it) which constrains and impels us to progress lineally and infinitely, and then endows the species with the raw materials of will, choice, judgment and the progressive instinct of 'ambition.'"⁴⁶ Chen broadens this argument, emphasizing that Ferguson makes a distinction between universal history and national history. While the Creator guarantees the progress of universal history, the progress of particular nations is contingent.⁴⁷ Certainly Ferguson accepts that God has a providential role to play in history, but as Chen has rightly noted, Ferguson's "understanding of providential order, as God's benevolent design for his rational creatures, should not be confused with either miracles or divine intervention in human history."⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Hill, "Progress and Decline," 695.

⁴⁷ Jeng-Guo S. Chen, "Providence and Progress: The Religious Dimension in Ferguson's Discussion of Civil Society," in *Adam Ferguson: History, Progress and Human Nature*, ed. Eugene Heath and Vincenzo Merolle (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2008), 172.

⁴⁸ Chen, "Providence and Progress," 176. For a contrasting view of providence influenced by the Scottish tradition, see the discussion in Chapter IV of John Witherspoon's religious thought. Witherspoon argues that God directly intervenes in human history based upon the virtue of the people and their active appeals to him through public worship and prayer.

Providence establishes a universal order that guides societal progress but is not involved in directing the daily affairs of human life. Even though Ferguson claims that the Creator does not dictate human affairs, he maintains that religion does and should play an important role in individuals' lives. For Ferguson,

Religion is the sentiment of the mind relating to God. The transaction of religion is its tendency to influence men's conduct. This tendency is of two kinds. The first is, to make men love wisdom and beneficence, as being the characteristics of the Supreme Being, whom they adore; and to make them love their situations and their duties, as being appointed by providence.⁴⁹

Religion connects individuals to an understanding of God and their earthly roles in his providential plan. To do good for Ferguson is to fulfill the duties given to us by our Creator, and to do otherwise is to act against our nature: "It is happy to have continually in view...that we are instruments in the hand of God for the good of his creatures; that if we are ill members of society, or unwilling instruments in the hand of God, we do our utmost to counteract our nature, to quit our station, and to undo ourselves."⁵⁰ Part of our duty to God is to serve our community. Ferguson posits that humans are naturally social creatures, that it is part of God's plan for humans to live and work together, and that we have an obligation, as part of God's providential order, to sacrifice our own self-interest for our community:

⁴⁹ Adam Ferguson, *Institutes of Moral Philosophy: For the Use of Students in the College of Edinburgh*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: A. Kincaid & W. Creech, and J. Bell, 1773), 215.

⁵⁰ Ferguson, *Institutes*, 158.

Man is, by nature, the member of a community; and when considered in this capacity, the individual appears to be no longer made for himself. He must forego his happiness and his freedom, where these interfere with the good of society. He is only part of a whole; and the praise we think due to virtue, is but a branch of that more general commendation we bestow on the member of a body, on the part of a fabric or engine, for being well fitted to occupy its place and to produce its effect.⁵¹

While Ferguson largely shares Hutcheson's conception of Christian Stoicism and insistence that it is the religious and political duty of individuals to support their community, Ferguson departs from Hutcheson's understanding of the virtue of piety. Whereas Hutcheson argues that piety is the foremost civic virtue following benevolence and the civil authority should encourage religious faith in order to encourage citizens to be pious, Ferguson places less emphasis on piety. In the *Principles*, he does argue, "Among the modifications of benevolence, *piety* to Almighty God, is justly entitled to the first, and the highest place."⁵² Nevertheless, he significantly modifies the meaning of piety. Rather than treating piety as an outward expression of reverence for God and evidence of religious faith, Ferguson instead contends: "Although piety in its proper acceptance is a sentiment of religion, the term is nevertheless...employed to signify any high measure of veneration or love which we pay any of our fellow creatures who are raised above the ordinary rank of men in our veneration or esteem."⁵³ Hence, Ferguson

⁵¹ Ferguson, *Essay*, 59.

⁵² Ferguson, *Principles*, 2: 359.

⁵³ Ferguson, *Principles*, 2: 360.

concludes that to be pious is to demonstrate respect for those who are worthy of admiration, which includes respect for magistrates and government generally. As such, Ferguson places less emphasis on religious faith and more on the consequences of faith, including respect for government, active engagement, and support for the community.

Although Ferguson fully accepts the classical republican ideal of the common good, and that civic virtue requires the citizen to place the community's interest before his own, he also recognizes that a diversity of interests exist in society. Identifying the common good may not always be easy or even possible. Ferguson takes seriously the issue of pluralism in modern society and acknowledges that it is natural to the human condition. His conception of pluralism extends beyond the scope of religious differences to include all modes of living. In this regard, he sees pluralism as a fact of modern society. These differences stem from our passions, according to Ferguson, and therefore cannot be resolved by any simple process of restraint or regulation. As we cannot be made to share the same interests or preferences, it is necessary to adapt the classical tradition to the modern, plural world.

Differences of means of living often result in conflict, but according to Ferguson, political conflict serves as the hallmark of civilized nations. The struggles that take place within a pluralistic society produce virtue and promote political innovation. Ferguson argues that in order to limit the destabilizing effects of political disagreement, the people must accept their political institutions as legitimate, which is accomplished through the establishment of a constitution and a legislative design that allows for debate and disagreement. Ferguson does not consider general consent a requirement; rather, the

process must produce a sense of fairness through establishing institutions that preserve order by protecting individual rights.⁵⁴ Participation in these societal debates provides the opportunity for the cultivation of virtue necessary to sustain the state. In essence, the political process is designed such that people can define the good life for themselves, rather than asserting that the civic life is the good life. Citizens promote civic virtue through the active work of debating the common good and conceptions of the good life.

Ferguson adamantly insisted upon the necessity of the political life, and as Oz-Salzberger has persuasively argued, he remained committed to the idea of classical political virtue throughout his life.⁵⁵ The essence of Ferguson's understanding of human nature rests on the idea "that man is not made for repose. In him, every amiable and respectable quality is an active power and every subject of commendation an effort. If his errors and his crimes are the movements of an active being, his virtues and his happiness consist likewise in the employment of his mind."⁵⁶ Our activity and our willingness to engage in conflict peacefully with one another allow us to progress and thwart corruption. Hence, the recovery of the virtues of honor and courage proves so important to recover within polished societies. Although modern man does not face the harsh circumstances of rude societies or the threat of war common to ancient republics, political conflict still demands an active spirit in order to protect against corruption.

While scholars widely agree that Ferguson emphasizes the importance of active engagement and is one of the last proponents of the classical virtues, this is most often

⁵⁴ Ferguson, *Essay*, 159. On this point, see Kettler, *Social and Political Thought*, 253-58; Kalyvas and Katznelson, "Adam Ferguson Returns," 187-90.

⁵⁵ Fania Oz-Salzberger, "Ferguson's Politics of Action," in *Adam Ferguson: History, Progress and Human Nature*, 153.

⁵⁶ Ferguson, *Essay*, 199.

attributed to his endorsement of the classical republican tradition. Although I agree that Ferguson upholds the model of antiquity, I argue that the reason he champions the classical virtues of active engagement, honor, and courage is rooted as much in his providential theology as in his classical republicanism. Because Ferguson believes that the Creator has provided a universal plan for history, and that nations progress by adhering to that natural order, it is of the utmost importance for individuals to fulfill their roles in God's plan in order to facilitate progress. Thus, Ferguson argues that Providence explicitly requires the exercise of the active virtues for individuals to fulfill their religious and civic duties:

Providence has fitted mankind for the higher engagements which they are sometimes obliged to fulfill; and it is in the midst of such engagements that they are most likely to acquire or to preserve their virtues. The habits of a vigorous mind are formed in contending with difficulties, not in enjoying the repose of a pacific state; penetration and wisdom are the fruits, not the gifts of reflection or knowledge.⁵⁷

Hence, Ferguson argues that Providence requires citizens to be actively engaged as part of their religious duty. In confronting difficulties, especially political conflicts, individuals cultivate the other virtues that are necessary to secure individual happiness and support a well-functioning government, including wisdom, justice, temperance, and fortitude.⁵⁸ While honor and courage were necessary in savage and barbaric societies to prepare citizens to engage in violent conflict, these virtues are still necessary to prepare

⁵⁷ Ferguson, *Essay*, 242.

⁵⁸ See Ferguson, *Principles*, 2: 332-406.

citizens in polished societies to engage in political conflicts that pit individual's interests and passions against one another. By emphasizing that Providence has ordered society to allow for peaceful conflict that is mediated by the practice and cultivation of civic virtue, Ferguson has two aims. First, he wants to nurture individuals' religious faith by educating them in the role of Providence in providing order to social and political life. Second, he encourages citizens to practice and cultivate the habit of civic virtue in order to fulfill their duties to God and to support their social and political communities. Although Ferguson clearly draws on the classical republican tradition to support his argument that the active political life is necessary to being a good citizen, his arguments equally derive from his providential theology. Only in the active life do individuals fulfill their duty to God, which is to support the common good and encourage societal progress.

Conclusion

The work of Adam Ferguson can best be viewed as an attempt to save modern society from corruption. In doing so, he attempts to join together liberal and republican arguments. As a result, his work focuses on both the issues of public virtue and the potential of modern economic society to promote classical and liberal values. Ferguson turns to savage and barbaric societies for examples of active citizenship, where citizens are valued for their honor, courage, and vigorous participation in society. His understanding of the relationship between virtue and conflict in these societies provides a model for the kind of participation necessary to ensure societal progress. Certainly,

Ferguson would not praise conflict, and especially not war, as intrinsically valuable, but he did believe it was important in promoting virtues such as honor, courage, and active engagement. Even more profitable is the ability of those virtues to moderate desires for wealth, empire, and glory. In this way, Ferguson argued that modern society could learn from savage nations important values that would thwart corruption and lead to the success of modern governments.

Ferguson's belief in providential theology drives his understanding of societal progress. He is not simply committed to the importance of active citizenship because of his attachment to classical republican thought. Though deeply influenced by this tradition, Ferguson emphasizes the necessity of the active political life, and the particular virtues of honor, temperance, and fortitude, because of his belief in Providence and societal progress. Because he accepts that the creator has guaranteed universal progress, and that individuals can further this progress by serving both God and their communities, Ferguson believes that an active political life is a civic, moral, and religious duty. As such, Ferguson's religious worldview shapes his commitment to the civic tradition, especially the importance of cultivating civic virtue. By establishing institutions that facilitate active engagement, and ensuring that the diversity of interests in society is protected through those institutions, Ferguson aimed to protect individual rights and to encourage a dedication to the common good. It is his faith in the providential ordering of the universe that makes his simultaneous dedication to these liberal and republican concerns possible.

CHAPTER IV
A PIOUS REPUBLIC?

“I do not know whether all Americans have a sincere faith in their religion – for who can search the human heart? – but I am certain that they hold it to be indispensable to the maintenance of republican institutions.” – Alexis de Tocqueville¹

Although much work has been recently done on the pervasiveness of religion in the American founding era, and on the personal beliefs of America’s founders, far less attention has been paid to the role religion was expected to play in supporting republican government.² As Tocqueville correctly noted, however, many of America’s foremost political thinkers viewed religion as essential to republican government, especially in cultivating virtue among the people and developing a sense of the common good. Despite general agreement that religion was necessary for the republic to flourish, differences did exist among the founders as to the appropriate role of religion in civil and political life and the character of that religion.

To understand how religion influenced the American understanding of civic virtue, I contrast two different religious approaches, the Puritan New England tradition and a public religious tradition. In this chapter I focus on the work of John Adams and John Witherspoon, and in the next I examine the work of Franklin, Paine, and Jefferson

¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: The Complete and Unabridged Volumes I and II*, trans. Henry Reeve (New York: Bantam, 2000), 353.

² For recent examples of work on religion in the American founding, and especially in the thought of the founders, see James Hutson, *Forgotten Features of the Founding: The Recovery of Religious Themes in the Early American Republic* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2003); Jon Meacham, *American Gospel* (New York: Random House, 2007); and Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 2008).

to demonstrate the nuances of these competing, though at times complimentary, religious approaches and their application to discussions surrounding civic virtue. Although each of these figures sought to balance both republican and liberal concerns, each offers a different understanding of how religion should be used to make individuals into better citizens, what type of religion is necessary, and which virtues are most important.

The work of Witherspoon and Adams demonstrates a commitment to values of the Puritan religious tradition, especially the values of industry, order, and moderation. Moreover, they are both clear that religion is necessary to sustain republican governments. In particular, they note the importance of religion in providing a moral foundation for the republic, one that helps them overcome personal vices and develop virtues that will support the common good. To this end, they stress the virtue of piety for its ability to encourage citizens to sacrifice their self-interest for the common good. Although both think liberty is essential to republican governments, especially religious liberty, they argue that the state should promote religion and that citizens should be religious. Their work offers insight into how the concerns of classical republicanism are translated into a system that is grappling with issues of individual liberty, the rapid expansion of commerce, and the role of virtue in a system that emphasizes religious toleration.

John Witherspoon

As one of America's notable statesmen, John Witherspoon played a unique role in the American founding, working at the nexus of politics, religion, and university life.

Despite playing a central role in the American founding era, especially in the revolutionary debates, the political thought of John Witherspoon has remained largely unexplored by scholars. Witherspoon is an especially notable figure for the American republican tradition because of the central role he believed religion could and should play in the nascent republic.

Witherspoon's political thought is useful in understanding the American founding because of his effort to bring together republican and liberal principles. His emphasis on the necessity of virtue for the maintenance of republican government, especially the virtue of piety, makes his dedication to civil liberty, particularly religious liberty, uneasy. Though he fails to reconcile this tension between emphasizing religious virtues and civil liberties, his work does offer important insights into the development of republican thought in the American founding era. Moreover, his work clearly demonstrates the importance of religious thought in shaping his understanding of what it means to be a good citizen. To understand Witherspoon's political thought, I focus specifically on three aspects of his work: his understanding of providence, the public interest of religion, and the importance of civil liberty. I demonstrate not only that religion influenced Witherspoon's approach to republicanism, but also how he believed religion could be used to cultivate the virtues necessary to support the public good.

Despite the increased attention to religion in the American founding era, America's preeminent political parson has received scant scholarly attention. Trained in Edinburgh as a Presbyterian minister, Witherspoon was recruited from Scotland to assume the presidency at the College of New Jersey (now Princeton University). Not

only did his presidency serve to ease disputes between the Old and New Lights, but he also restructured the curriculum of the college. In this role, he educated some of the colonies most formative political leaders, including mostly notably James Madison and Aaron Burr as well as twelve members of the Continental Congress, five delegates to the Constitutional Convention, and a host of U.S. Representatives, Senators, and federal justices.³ In his classroom, Witherspoon drew upon classical and modern texts, bringing together strands of republican, liberal, and Scottish Common Sense thought. His “Lectures on Moral Philosophy” was one of the most popular works on moral philosophy produced in the American colonies. In addition to his work as an educator, Witherspoon was also a clergyman, a pamphleteer writing in support of the cause of the American Revolution, and a delegate to the Second Continental Congress. He signed the Declaration of Independence and was also involved in the creation of the Articles of Confederation and the U.S. Constitution.

In spite of his accomplishments as a pastor, politician, and professor, few works have thoroughly addressed Witherspoon’s political thought. In fact, most of the attention paid to Witherspoon has focused on his theology, his contributions to the Presbyterian church in the late eighteenth century, or his influence on schools of rhetoric.⁴ One recent exception has been the work of Jeffrey Morrison, who has attempted to rescue

³ Jeffrey H. Morrison, *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2005), 2-4.

⁴ For works on Witherspoon’s religious thought, see especially James L. McAllister, Jr., “John Witherspoon: Academic Advocate for American Freedom,” in *A Miscellany of American Christianity*, ed. Stuart C. Henry (Durham: Duke University Press, 1963), 184-87; James L. McAllister, Jr., “Francis Alison and John Witherspoon: Political Philosophers and Revolutionaries,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 54 (1976): 33-60; L. Gordon Tait, *The Piety of John Witherspoon* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2001). For work on Witherspoon’s contributions to rhetoric, see especially Richard B. Sher and Jeffrey R. Smitten, eds. *Scotland and America in the Age of Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

Witherspoon from scholarly oblivion and place him alongside the ranks of America's more recognizable founders. Morrison's focus on Witherspoon's achievements leads him to overemphasize the consistency of Witherspoon's arguments and perhaps also his influence on other founders, including Madison. In particular, Morrison is interested in the political and religious overlap in Witherspoon's thought. He argues that for Witherspoon, the relationship between religion and republicanism was seamless: "no republic without liberty, no liberty without virtue, and no virtue without religion."⁵ Morrison argues that Witherspoon champions a public religion, one that supports republican government but that also emphasizes religious liberty. In this regard, I contend that Morrison overemphasizes Witherspoon's ability to reconcile republican and liberal principles. Nevertheless, Morrison has done a great service in drawing attention to the importance and influence of Witherspoon's religious and political thought.

Though Witherspoon had served as a clergyman in Scotland for twenty years before immigrating to America in 1768, it was not until he arrived in the colonies that he used his religious sermons to address explicitly political concerns.⁶ Witherspoon's observations and involvement with the American struggle for independence influenced not only his political thought but also his understanding of God's role in earthly affairs. As Gordon Tait has aptly described, Witherspoon's transition to America precipitated a shift in his understanding of providence: "[Witherspoon's] understanding about the divine presence and activity in the world shifted from an almost exclusive focus on God

⁵ Morrison, *Witherspoon*, 31.

⁶ Especially notable in this regard is his sermon, "Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men," 1776, which he specifically cites as his first instance of addressing political matters from the pulpit. The most readily available copy of this speech is available in *The Selected Writings of John Witherspoon*, ed. Thomas Miller (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 126-47.

as Redeemer to the same God as Creator, Sustainer, and Governor of all things, events, and persons. In America, Witherspoon's doctrine of God expanded to encompass a vital belief in God as Providence as well as Redeemer."⁷

Among the most important influences on Witherspoon's view of Providence was his understanding of covenant theology. Found most prominently within Puritan and Presbyterian theology, covenant theology emphasizes the agreement made between God and his people, whereby the people must obey God's law in order to receive God's favor. If they break the terms of the covenant, God is no longer obligated to ensure the security or blessings of the people.⁸ As his understanding of Providence evolved, Witherspoon believed that the blessings of Providence were evident in the American struggle for independence. In his sermon on the "Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men," he specifically outlines the blessings of Providence the colonies had received, including protection from British troops and the sparing of American soldiers' lives.⁹

Though God's favor had been granted in this struggle, Witherspoon believed it was necessary for the American people to acknowledge those blessings and to appeal to his grace in order to achieve continued success. Witherspoon was called upon by the Continental Congress to help draft a Thanksgiving proclamation directed towards these points. In fact, he assisted in writing three of these during his tenure in the Congress. The first of the three was issued early in the revolutionary struggle and directly implored the

⁷ Tait, *Piety*, 143.

⁸ McAllister, "John Witherspoon," 184-87.

⁹ Witherspoon, "Dominion of Providence," 138. See also, Edmund Morgan, *Puritan Political Ideas: 1558-1794* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1965), xx-xxv.

people to recognize the role of Providence in the success of the war: “That it be recommended to all the United States, as soon as possible, to appoint a day of solemn fasting and humiliation; to implore of Almighty God the forgiveness of the many sins prevailing among all ranks, and to beg the countenance and assistance of his Providence in the prosecution of the present just and necessary war.”¹⁰ It is clear from this proclamation that Witherspoon not only believed God was directly involved in the struggle for liberty, but also that it was incumbent on the American people to appeal to God’s grace through their personal actions, including fasting and prayer.

Although Witherspoon argued it was necessary to appeal to Providence in order to achieve success in the war, he maintained that religion served a much larger role in the foundations of government. In fact, Witherspoon went so far as to say that dedication to religion, and more particularly true religion, was necessary in order to ensure national prosperity and happiness. He argued it is necessary for the people “to testify their gratitude to God for his goodness, by a cheerful obedience to his laws, and by promoting, each in his station, and by his influence, the practice of true and undefiled religion, which is the great foundation of public prosperity and national happiness.”¹¹

True religion for Witherspoon is both a private and a public matter. In many ways, true religion serves the function of a civil religion, uniting individuals around a common set of beliefs and customs, aimed at fostering a dedication to the common good,

¹⁰ John Witherspoon, “Thanksgiving Proclamation, December 11, 1776,” in *The Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, vol. 6, *October 9, 1776 to December 31, 1776*, ed. Worthington C. Ford (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1906), 1022.

¹¹ John Witherspoon, “Thanksgiving Proclamation, October 11, 1782,” in *The Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, vol. 23, *August 12, 1782 to December 31, 1782*, ed. Gaillard Hunt (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1914), 647.

or national happiness. As Morrison has convincingly argued, however, this is not a civil religion in the way conceived by Rousseau, which requires implementation through a rigorous system of civic education dedicated to the dogmas of the civil religion; nor is it a political religion in the sense that is later developed by Abraham Lincoln, which requires unquestioning loyalty to and reverence of the laws of the nation.¹² Morrison prefers the term public religion when addressing Witherspoon's religion; however, it appears that Witherspoon had something more specific in mind when referring to true religion. There can be no mistaking that Witherspoon's true religion is Christianity, and it requires the acceptance of Christ and the repentance of sins: "There can be no true religion, till there be a discovery of your lost state by nature and practice, and an unfeigned acceptance of Christ Jesus, as he is offered in the gospel."¹³

There is nothing apparent in Witherspoon's writings, however, to suggest that his conception of true religion involves the acceptance of a particular set of doctrines or dogmas within Christianity. In fact, he goes so far in his sermon on the "Dominion of Providence" as to disavow the notion that he is interested in exacerbating conflicts between religious sects: "Do not suppose, my brethren, that I mean to recommend a furious and angry zeal for the circumstantial of religion, or the contentions of one sect with another about their peculiar distinctions. I do not wish you to oppose any body's religion, but every body's wickedness."¹⁴ Hence, Witherspoon's true religion is

¹² Morrison, *John Witherspoon*, 24.

¹³ Witherspoon, "Dominion of Providence," 137.

¹⁴ Witherspoon, "Dominion of Providence," 144.

Christian, but it is ecumenical insofar as it does not privilege certain doctrinal interpretations.

In order to understand Witherspoon's ideas on the public interest of religion, it is necessary to consider how he understood the relationship between religion and government. Though Witherspoon was not a political theorist proper, his writings do reflect a careful consideration of the best form of political institutions, the role of citizens in supporting those institutions, and the best means by which to cultivate virtue in citizens. For Witherspoon, "The public good and universal justice is the end of all government."¹⁵ The question for Witherspoon is how the public good can best be achieved.

In his political writings, Witherspoon works largely within traditional republican discourse, reflecting a concern for virtue, liberty, and the tensions that exist between the two. As with most classical republican theory, Witherspoon argues that the virtue of the people serves as the surest foundation for republican forms of government. For him, the source of individual virtue is found in the truth of religion: "and if we go the history of mankind, we shall find that knowledge in general, and more particularly the knowledge of divine truth, which certainly is the way to virtue, has been spread by liberty...."¹⁶ Religion instructs us in which virtues are necessary to be not only a good person, but also a good citizen.

He is quick to dismiss the idea that governments must be either wholly good or wholly corrupt; rather, he sees governments existing on a continuum based on their

¹⁵ John Witherspoon, "Dialogue on Civil Liberty," *Pennsylvania Magazine* 2 (1776): 165.

¹⁶ Witherspoon, "Dialogue on Civil Liberty," 165.

dedication to the public good. The maintenance of government, particularly of republican government, is absolutely dependent on the virtue of its citizens, especially the virtues revealed by true religion:

A good form of government 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.¹⁷

The internal principles that are most vital to achieving a just government dedicated to the public good are found in the principles of true religion. Most important among these principles, for Witherspoon, is the virtue of piety. Piety is not simply a personal, private matter that is necessary for individual salvation; it is an expressly political virtue as well: “so in times of difficulty and trial, it is in the man of piety and inward principle, that we may expect to find the uncorrupted patriot, the useful citizen, and the invincible soldier.”¹⁸

In some ways, Witherspoon seems to echo the concerns of more utilitarian thinkers like Franklin when suggesting that piety can be used to produce a “useful citizen.” In fact, Witherspoon’s understanding of the virtues necessary to support republican government resemble the laundry list of virtues most often associated with the puritan work ethic, but Witherspoon takes these virtues one step further insisting that

¹⁷ Witherspoon “Dominion of Providence,” 144.

¹⁸ Witherspoon, “Dominion of Providence,” 147.

they are necessary not only to secure individual happiness or salvation but also that they are indispensable to supporting the public good and just government:

Let us cherish a love of piety, order, industry, frugality. Let us check every disposition to luxury, effeminacy, and the pleasures of a dissipated life....that whatsoever State among us shall continue to make piety and virtue the standard of public honour, will enjoy the greatest inward peace, the greatest national happiness, and in every outward conflict will discover the greatest constitutional strength.¹⁹

The personal vices Witherspoon reacts against are also those vices most frequently cited by classical republican theorists: luxury and effeminacy. He moves beyond the classical republican tradition, however, in an attempt to blend together republican, liberal, and religious concerns. Most often, the virtues of industry and frugality are considered self-interested virtues that aim at increasing personal wealth and fortune. Yet Witherspoon lists them among the virtues that can be used to combat more vicious vices, including luxury. Piety, for Witherspoon, plays an important role in tempering the tension so often found in classical republican thought between self-interested behavior aimed at increasing personal wealth and more public-spirited behavior aimed at supporting the common good. Witherspoon posits that piety can serve as a cornerstone of republican government in that it tempers passions towards self-interest and encourages citizens to support the common good.

¹⁹ John Witherspoon, "Thanksgiving Sermon," in *The Works of John Witherspoon* (Edinburgh: Ogle and Aikman, 1804-5), 5: 269-70

Witherspoon fits comfortably within the classical republican tradition in terms of his emphasis on virtue, the common good, and his insistence on the necessity of piety to produce useful citizens; nevertheless, his emphasis on civil liberty underscores his attempt to bridge the republican and liberal traditions. For Witherspoon, liberty is vital to just governments: “By liberty I mean, and every body ought to mean, a completely ordered and well balanced plan of civil government, where justice and equal laws take place, and are well supported.”²⁰ He is quick to distinguish civil liberty from license or the unencumbered personal liberty he associates with savage nations. Though license provides the illusion of perfect individual freedom, the risks to one’s personal property and life are so great that liberty serves no benefit. Civil liberty, however, offers the opportunity for the improvement of the individual and society as a whole: “I take the essential benefit of civil liberty...to be, its tendency to put in motion and encourage the exertion of all the human powers. It must therefore evidently improve the human mind, and bring with it, in highest perfection, all the advantages of the social state. It is the parent or the nurse of industry, opulence, knowledge, virtue, and heroism.”²¹

The preservation of liberty, however, is absolutely dependent upon the virtue of the people. Without a virtuous and vigilant citizenry, a republic is destined to slip into a degraded form of government or into a state of revolution: “So true is this, that civil liberty cannot be long preserved without virtue. A monarchy may subsist for ages, and be better or worse under a good or bad prince; but a republic once equally poised, must either preserve its virtue or lose its liberty, and by some tumultuous revolution, either

²⁰ Witherspoon, “Dialogue on Civil Liberty,” 163.

²¹ Witherspoon, “Dialogue on Civil Liberty,” 167.

return to its first principles, or assume a more unhappy form.”²² Liberty does not depend so much on good laws or properly ordered institutions, for Witherspoon; rather, it is the virtue of the people that is of the utmost importance to securing civil liberty. To that end, virtue, and especially virtue founded on true religion, is the surest basis for government. This is especially true, Witherspoon believes, for America during the revolutionary conflict: “That he is the best friend to American liberty, who is most sincere and active in promoting true and undefiled religion, and who sets himself with the greatest firmness to bear down profanity and immorality of every kind.”²³ It is the duty of each citizen to exercise not only virtue but also to promote religion and fight against immorality.

Of course, the modern reader of Witherspoon will recognize something of a contradiction in his understanding of the relationship between civil liberty and virtue. A nation founded on the principle of civil liberty, especially religious liberty, must allow for religious dissent, but Witherspoon contends that it is the duty of the good citizen to promote religion. Witherspoon maintains, however, that he supports religious liberty and that civil liberty and religious liberty are inextricably linked: “There is not a single instance in history in which civil liberty was lost, and religious liberty preserved entire. If therefore we yield up our temporal property, we at the same time deliver the conscience into bondage.”²⁴ If the state impedes upon individual conscience, it appears that Witherspoon believes that civil liberty, broadly speaking, will suffer. It is less clear, however, what exactly would constitute a breach of conscience for Witherspoon.

²² Witherspoon, “Thanksgiving Sermon,” 266.

²³ Witherspoon, “Dominion of Providence,” 144.

²⁴ Witherspoon, “Dominion of Providence,” 141.

Although he does not support having an established church, Witherspoon certainly sees a public role for religion. Moreover, he believes that civil authorities have a role to play in supporting religion. In his sermon on the “Dominion of Providence,” Witherspoon expressly argues that for civil magistrates, “It is therefore your duty in this important and critical season to exert yourselves, every one in his proper sphere, to stem the tide of prevailing vice, to promote the knowledge of God, the reverence of his name and worship, and obedience to his laws.”²⁵ He maintains and repeats this position near the close of the war: “Those who are bested with civil authority ought also, with much care, to promote religion and good morals among all under their government.”²⁶ In fact, Witherspoon goes on to argue that it is the duty of civil magistrates to “reform or restrain that impiety towards God, which is the true and proper cause of every disorder among men.”²⁷

If it is the role of the civil magistrate to reform or restrain impiety, then is it possible for individuals to have the liberty to dissent from Witherspoon’s true religion? The answer is simply unclear from his writings. In closing his “Dominion of Providence” speech, he implores that “God grant that in America true religion and civil liberty may be inseparable, and that the unjust attempts to destroy the one, may in the issue tend to the support and establishment of both.”²⁸ To the extent that Witherspoon supports civil liberty, it is clear that he likely does not have a modern notion of religious liberty in mind. In a system in which civil magistrates are admonished to restrain

²⁵ Witherspoon, “Dominion of Providence,” 144.

²⁶ Witherspoon, “Thanksgiving Sermon,” 265.

²⁷ Witherspoon, “Thanksgiving Sermon,” 269.

²⁸ Witherspoon, “Dominion of Providence,” 147.

impiety, and where true religion and civil liberty are inseparable, it is difficult to see how a religious dissenter would be truly free to express his or her views without being treated as an enemy of liberty. Though it does appear true that Witherspoon is willing to support separation of church and state in terms of an established church, his theory of civil liberty is more problematic in terms of the free exercise of religion, or especially of non-religion. So long as piety is enforced by the magistrates, those who disagree with the particular form of piety that is required or with the very virtue of piety are likely to suffer encroachments on their own liberty of conscience. Witherspoon, however, does not address, nor even necessarily recognize, this tension within his own thought.

Ultimately, religious and republican concerns are of the greatest interest to Witherspoon. While he supports individual's civil liberties, he does not think those individual rights extend so far as to prevent the state from promoting religious belief and encouraging individuals to observe religious holidays. Although he never explicitly acknowledges the tension between his republican, religious, and liberal commitments, his willingness to call upon civil magistrates to enforce piety certainly puts him at odds with more liberal thinkers of his time, including Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, and even his own student, James Madison. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily render Witherspoon's thought useless or unintelligible; rather, it demonstrates the struggles to wed together the republican and liberal traditions in combining concerns for virtue with concerns for individual liberty. Overall, Witherspoon's thought clearly demonstrates that he viewed religion as vital to the maintenance of republican institutions and the development of good republican citizens.

John Adams

Similarly situated at the nexus of the republican and liberal traditions, John Adams seeks to join together a republican concern for the common good with a dedication to individual liberty. Whereas Witherspoon argued that liberty is dependent upon the virtue of the people, Adams contends that both virtue and liberty are dependent upon good laws and well-ordered constitutions. This drives Adams to focus the bulk of his political writings on the subject of constitutions, matters of institutional design, and understanding how laws can shape and promote the better side of human nature.

Strongly influenced by Puritan thought, Adams holds a much more dismal view of human nature than Witherspoon, or virtually any other of America's founders, but he does argue that cultivating the virtue of the people is the highest end of government. Although Adams rejects a classical understanding of virtue, he argues that virtue is necessary to secure the common good, the happiness of the people, and that religious belief provides the surest foundation for virtue. Adams looked to institutional mechanisms to thwart corruption, but also held that religion and virtue are necessary for republican governments to function well. In order to understand Adams's political thought and how he viewed the role of religion and virtue in republican government, I address Adams's rejection of classical republicanism, his understanding of the natural orders of society, and religion as the moral foundation of republics. I argue that Adams views virtue as an end of government, that religion is necessary to provide a moral foundation for government, and that piety is necessary to make citizens support the common good over their own self interest.

Adams is perhaps the most careful and thorough student of politics to emerge from the American founding era. Whereas the political thought of many of America's founding figures must be garnered from their political speeches, public addresses, or personal correspondence, Adams published several works in the tradition of political analysis. His three major works of political thought, *Thoughts on Government*, *A Defence of the Constitutions of the United States of America*, and *Discourses on Davila*, demonstrate his dedication to the scientific study of politics. Adams was not only interested in the theoretical study of political principles and constitutions, but also drafted the 1780 Massachusetts Constitution. Balancing both theoretical and practical political concerns, Adams's work demonstrates a mastery of classical and modern political thought, drawing from the republican, liberal, and religious traditions.

Despite the volumes of material he published, Adams has received relatively little scholarly attention in comparison to several of America's other leading founders, including James Madison and Thomas Jefferson. This can be explained, in part, by the tenor of Adam's later political writings. Although he was an ardent supporter and leading figure in the American revolutionary movement, Adam's political thought seems to have lost popular currency by the Constitutional Convention in 1787. His political reputation suffered particularly during the election of 1800, and his contemporary political critics charged him with being a monarchist.²⁹ Later critics have struggled to reconcile his commitment to liberal principles with his endorsement of classical republicanism.

²⁹ David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 374-80.

Adams is often described as an adherent to classical republican thought, and it is frequently argued that his attachment to this tradition led to his political demise. As J.G.A. Pocock has quite famously noted, Adams's *Defence* of the American constitutional order is "a defense of the republic upon principles which the republic itself had abandoned. Such was the ironic-but, given its author's personality, appropriate-fate of perhaps the last major work of political theory written within the unmodified tradition of classical republicanism."³⁰ Bruce Miroff has similarly appraised Adams as a thinker who "shares most, if not all, of the concerns of classical republicanism."³¹ This includes both an appraisal of classical political institutions as well as the desire to recruit members of the natural aristocracy into public service.

It was precisely because of his attachment to classical republicanism, according to Gordon Wood, that Adams was unable to understand the shifts in political thought that were occurring among the newly formed states, noting that "Adams never really comprehended what was happening to the fundamentals of political thought in the years after 1776."³² Adams's failure to understand the shifts that were occurring in the American understanding of sovereignty, and his continued insistence on the importance of both the democratic and aristocratic elements of American society, pointed to the "obsolescence of Adams's political theory."³³ Similarly, Lance Banning has claimed that Adams did not understand the democratic impulse that underlined the constitutional

³⁰ J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 526.

³¹ Bruce Miroff, "John Adams: Merit, Fame, and Political Leadership," *Journal of Politics* 48 (1986): 118.

³² Gordon Wood, *Creation of the American Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1969), 568.

³³ Wood, *Creation*, 587.

convention, noting that Adams “saw no difference worth fighting for between a commonwealth and a mixed monarchy.”³⁴

More recent treatments of Adams’s political thought, however, have deemphasized his classical republican roots. John Diggins, for instance, has emphasized the influence of Calvinism on Adams’s political thought, which he argues undermines his republican commitments, especially to classical virtue: “Adams’s three-volume work [the *Defence*] not only modified classical republicanism; it did much to undermine it by denying the validity of its central concept of ‘virtue.’”³⁵ In a similar vein, C. Bradley Thompson has rejected the argument that Adams is classical republican: “It is true that Adams defended a version of the classical theory of mixed government, but he was also the first major American theorist to reject classical republicanism explicitly. The distance that separates Adams from the classical-republican and civic-humanist traditions is most clearly seen in his devastating critique of their central organizing principle: the concept of virtue.”³⁶ Likewise, Paul Rahe has argued that Adams has little debt to the ancients, especially regarding his acceptance of the type of civic virtue that is necessary to sustain the public good. Rahe notes that Adams was deeply suspicious that many of the classical virtues, such as pride, strength, and courage, were actually inimical to the survival of republics.³⁷

³⁴ Lance Banning, *Jeffersonian Persuasion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 97.

³⁵ John Diggins, *The Lost Soul of American Politics* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1984), 70.

³⁶ C. Bradley Thompson, *John Adams and the Spirit of Liberty* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 192.

³⁷ Paul Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1994), 3:332, n. 20; see also, 202.

Despite this suspicion and even rejection of the classical virtues, Adams was still deeply interested in the role of virtue in supporting republican institutions. In fact, what makes Adams's thought difficult to characterize is that he drew freely from the republican, Calvinist, and liberal traditions. John Charles Evans has argued that this willingness to draw from multiple traditions actually contributes to the sophistication of Adams's thought. By combining a concern for individual liberty with a republican concern for the common good, Adams moves beyond the classical notion of virtue and pushes towards a distinctly modern understanding of republican government:

The liberal portrait of Adams correctly notes his repeated and forceful critique of the efficacy of virtue as an independent *means* to be relied upon by political and constitutional institutions. Yet, the liberal portrait fails to appreciate Adam's equally forceful emphasis on the continued centrality of virtue and the common good as *ends* to which the state and civil society must remain committed.³⁸

Evans provides the most nuanced and convincing appraisal of the role of virtue in Adams's political thought, treating it as a political end. In order to better understand Adams's view of virtue, and how religion can and should be used to encourage virtue, it is necessary to first examine Adams's understanding of republican government and institutions.

Adams is one of the most careful students of republican thought to emerge from the American founding generation. He thought the term "republic" was one of the most misused and poorly defined in political discourse. This was no trifling matter, as Adams

³⁸ John Charles Evans, "The Relevance of John Adams: Combining Liberal, Republican and Christian Ideals in Early American Political Thought" (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2006), 10.

was deeply interested in developing a science of politics that would contribute to a “regular course of progressive improvement,” in the “theory and practice of government.”³⁹ His *Defence of the Constitutions of the United States* is addressed to providing a clear definition of republics, comparing and contrasting different modes of republican government, and examining the degree to which the constitutions of the states establish a well-ordered republic.

Following Montesquieu, Adams took the essence of a republican government to be one in which sovereignty is located in more than one person or body. Accordingly, different forms of republics could exist, including democratic, aristocratic, and monarchical species, so long as sovereignty was not held by a single entity. This view differed, however, from the majority viewpoint held at the time of the American founding, which understood the people as entirely sovereign. In a rather notable exchange with his cousin Samuel, Adams articulated his views on sovereignty within a republic: “Whenever I use the word ‘republic’ with approbation, I mean a government in which the people have...an essential share in the sovereignty.”⁴⁰ The more democratically minded Samuel Adams responded with confusion and perhaps even admonishment: “Is not the *whole* sovereignty, my friend, essentially in the people?”⁴¹

Driving Adams’s idea of sovereignty was his understanding of society as being naturally ordered, a view for which he was widely criticized. Adams fully accepted that society was divided into three classes: the one, the few, and the many. Although these

³⁹ John Adams to Samuel Adams, 18 October 1790, in *The Political Writings of John Adams*, ed. George W. Carey (Washington D.C.: Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2000), 665.

⁴⁰ Adams, *Political Writings*, 108.

⁴¹ Samuel Adams to John Adams, 25 November 1790, in *The Writings of Samuel Adams*, ed. Harry Alonzo Cushing (New York: Putnam, 1904-1908), 4:344.

divisions were not officially established in American society, he argued these classes existed as natural orders. Moreover, he believed that the interests of each group are permanently in competition with one another. Balancing these competing interests requires a carefully crafted system in which the powers of government are divided among separate branches based on the natural orders.⁴²

Most important, in Adams's view, was ensuring that the supreme power of the legislature was balanced so that the interests of the few do not dominate the interests of the many. To this end, he thought a bicameral legislature, with an upper and lower house, was vital. Of particular concern was the threat represented by unicameral legislatures.⁴³ Specifically, Adams feared that in a unicameral system the natural aristocracy would be elected and would ultimately only represent its own interests. In having the power to appoint political positions, especially the judiciary, the rule of law would cave to the will of the minority, thus undermining the balance of interests and the republic itself: "Whether the assembly consists of a larger or a smaller number, of nobles or commons, of great people or little, of rich or poor, of substantial men or the rabble, the effects are all the same, -*No order, no safety, no liberty, because no government of law.*"⁴⁴ Adams sees bicameralism as necessary because it gives power to the naturally talented members of society, but offsets them with a democratic branch that represents the majority; hence, the interests of all orders receive balanced representation.

⁴² Adams, *Political Writings*, 112-13.

⁴³ The entire first volume of the *Defence* is generally written in response to French critics of American state constitutions, spearheaded by men like Turgot, who called for the centralization of power in government. In the American states, only Pennsylvania had adopted a unicameral legislature, but it enjoyed support from several acclaimed political figures, including Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine.

⁴⁴ John Adams, *The Works of John Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1850-56), 5:288-89.

Among the most important classifications that Adams was interested in was distinguishing between free and un-free republics, for it appeared to him that regardless of the particular form a republic took, there could be wide variations in the degree to which a republic is able to ensure the freedom of its citizens. As Thompson has argued, Adams adds two primary features that distinguish a free republic.⁴⁵ First, it had to obey the rule of law, not the rule of man, particularized interests, or the will of the majority. Second, it must be governed for the public good. This meant that all citizens must be treated as equals before the law, and specifically, they must share equal rights and liberties.

For Adams, the preservation of a free republic is dependent on the virtue of the citizens in that republic. Liberty and virtue are intimately and necessarily linked. Adams explained his understanding of the relationship between the two in a letter to Thomas Jefferson: “Have you ever found in history one single example of a Nation thoroughly Corrupted, that was afterwards resorted to Virtue, and without Virtue, there can be no political Liberty.”⁴⁶ Even though Adams believed that virtue is necessary for a well functioning republic, he was perpetually pessimistic about the probability that the American people could be made or kept virtuous. Although Adams was thoroughly convinced of and impressed by the virtue of the American colonists during the revolutionary period, he became much less sanguine about the prospects of virtue alone to sustain the republic in the years following the war. As Wood has noted, Adams

⁴⁵ Thompson, *John Adams*, 188-90.

⁴⁶ John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, 21 December 1819, in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, ed. Lester J. Cappon (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1959), 2:550.

thought that Americans were particularly challenged in terms of their ability to be virtuous precisely because of the widespread freedoms they enjoyed.⁴⁷ Adams argues that because Americans are free, they have the ability to advance their social standing. Driven by envy and avarice, and equipped with the means to advance their own fortunes, Adams thought that Americans were unlikely to feel the self-restraint of moderation, frugality, and temperance.

Adams's skepticism about the ability of American citizens to be virtuous does not indicate, however, that he thought virtue was unimportant or unattainable. It is clear from his writings that he was deeply skeptical of classical virtues, but not necessarily of the project of cultivating virtue generally. He opposed the classical virtues on two grounds. First, he argued that the classical virtues required a "celestial" spirit that was beyond the capacity of human nature.⁴⁸ He believed that individuals cannot be free from self-interest, and that our political institutions must be designed to accommodate for this fact. The classical conception of the common good, which insists that good citizens must transcend their self-interest, provides an unsatisfactory account of human nature and human abilities. Second, he argued that self-interest is not necessarily inimical to the interests of the republic, especially concerning broad commercial interests.⁴⁹ Classical republics were small and opposed commerce because of its tendency to promote wealth, effeminacy, and corruption. Adams thought commerce could enrich modern republics, by creating stability and healthy competition. Though he acknowledged that commerce

⁴⁷ Wood, *Creation*, 574.

⁴⁸ Adams, *Political Writings*, 302.

⁴⁹ Adams, *Works*, 6:95-99.

could increase avarice, he believed it could be tempered by a spirit of industry and moderation.

Despite his rejection of classical virtue, Adams did find that the classical republican tradition had much to offer in terms of understanding human nature. Fully accepting that the natural aristocracy needed to be in positions of political power, Miroff argues that Adams drew from the classical tradition an understanding of how to encourage elites into public service: “Adams’s republican vision...came to depend upon finding political means to encourage the love of fame, to provide it with ample gratifications, and to enlist it on behalf of the public good.”⁵⁰ Adams’s republicanism included not only a republican system of institutions, but also a system for recruiting the best and most talented citizens into public service. By appealing to their natural passions for fame, honor, and glory, Adams believed “the republic could both contain and exploit the passions” of the best citizens.⁵¹

In order to appeal to these passions, Adams made several proposals to that end, including bestowing titles, honors, and symbolic rewards. Diggins has argued that Adams’s appeal to the passions is one of the clearest indications of his movement away from the classical emphasis on virtue: “Thus did Adams devise a way to both exploit talent and control power through the Christian sin of pride, utilizing the love of praise as a surrogate for reason and virtue.”⁵²

⁵⁰ Miroff, “John Adams,” 121.

⁵¹ Miroff, “John Adams,” 122.

⁵² Diggins, *Lost Soul*, 71.

Adams's emphasis on utilizing the passions of men to recruit the most talented into public service, however, does not indicate that he thought virtue was irrelevant for republican governance. In fact, in his *Thoughts on Government*, he argues that the end of government must be the happiness of the people, and that their happiness depends on their virtue:

All sober inquirers after truth, ancient and modern, pagan and Christian, have declared that the happiness of man, as well as his dignity, consists in virtue....If there is a form of government, then whose principle and foundation is virtue, will not every sober man acknowledge it better calculated to promote the general happiness than any other form?⁵³

The question, for Adams, was how best to encourage and cultivate virtue among the people. The firmest foundation, he argued, was the formation of good laws that would constrain natural vices and encourage virtuous behavior: "The best republics will be virtuous, and have been so, but we may hazard a conjecture, that the virtues have been the effect of the well ordered constitution, rather than the cause."⁵⁴

A well-ordered constitution, for Adams, encourages virtue by balancing the natural orders of society, securing the liberties of the people, and ensuring that fundamental principles are observed. Drawing from both the liberal and republican traditions, Adams's constitutional thought combines an interest in natural rights with a dedication to the common good. Whereas contemporary critics see an obvious tension between these two, Adams treated rights and responsibilities as complimentary elements

⁵³ Adams, *Political Writings*, 483.

⁵⁴ Adams, *Political Writings*, 302.

that should be included in laws in order to establish and cultivate a moral foundation for republican government. Moreover, he believed that religion provided the necessary basis for developing that foundation.

Adams's ideal form of constitution is evident not only from his theoretical arguments in the *Defence*, but also from his involvement in drafting the Massachusetts constitution in 1780. Working as part of an elected body charged with writing a new constitution for the state, Adams was nominated by the committee to compose the initial draft. His draft of the constitution reveals his interest in promoting virtue, securing liberty, and especially emphasizing the role of religion in helping to secure both.

Similar to the Virginia and Pennsylvania constitutions, Adams's draft provides a frame of government as well as a declaration of rights. Drawing directly from Jefferson's language in the *Declaration of Independence*, Adams asserts that "all men are born free and independent, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights," which include life, liberty, and property.⁵⁵ Adams makes provisions for the protection of several individual liberties including religion, press, speech, as well as protections from excessive bail, quartering of troops, and unreasonable searches and seizures, among others.

In addition to guaranteed rights, however, Adams emphasizes the duties and responsibilities of citizens. For instance, in Article XVIII Adams charges citizens not only to adhere to fundamental principles in their own personal lives, but also to select and evaluate the performance of representatives on the basis of those principles: "A

⁵⁵ Adams, *Political Writings*, 500-01.

frequent recurrence to the fundamental principles of the constitution, and a constant adherence to those of piety, justice, moderation, temperance, industry, and frugality, are absolutely necessary to preserve the advantages of liberty, and to maintain a free government.”⁵⁶

Most notable among Adams’s list of fundamental principles is the virtue of piety. Whereas other state constitutions of the period included similar lists of virtues necessary for the preservation of good governance, Adams’s inclusion of piety is an unusual contribution.⁵⁷ Moreover, his draft of the constitution not only encourages pious behavior on the part of citizens, and proclaims in Article II, “It is the duty of all men in society, publicly, and at stated seasons, to worship the Supreme Being.”⁵⁸ In addition, Adams argues that it is the duty of all citizens to support religious instruction as religion provides the only foundation for morality. Accordingly, in Article III, he makes provisions for a state established religion:

Good morals being necessary to the preservation of civil society; and the knowledge and belief of the being of GOD, His providential government of the world, and of a future state of rewards and punishment, being the only true foundation of morality, the legislature hath, therefore, a right, and ought to provide...a suitable support for the public worship of God, and of the teachers of

⁵⁶ Adams, *Political Writings*, 508.

⁵⁷ For example, the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776 calls for “a firm adherence to justice, moderation, temperance, industry, and frugality.” Similarly, the Virginia Declaration of Rights of 1776 notes the necessity of “a firm adherence to justice, moderation, temperance, frugality, and virtue and by frequent recurrence to fundamental principles.” Though it is obvious that Adams borrowed from the language of these constitutions, the addition of the virtue of piety is clearly his own original contribution.

⁵⁸ Adams, *Political Writings*, 501.

religion and morals; and to enjoin upon all the subjects an attendance upon their instructions at stated times and seasons....⁵⁹

Despite his belief that religion was necessary to provide a moral foundation, Adams did often note his own skepticism towards that ability of religion to restrain the vicious behavior of humans. In a letter to Thomas Jefferson, he explains, “I have long been settled in my own opinion that neither Philosophy, nor religion, nor Morality nor Interest, will ever govern nations or Parties, against their Vanity, their Pride, their Resentment or Revenge, or the Avarice or Ambition. Nothing but Force and Power and Strength can restrain them.”⁶⁰ This does not indicate, as Diggins has argued, that Adams “doubted the vital importance of religion in preserving the Republic.”⁶¹ Rather, Adams was unwilling to entrust the foundation of the republic to virtue or religion alone: “Moral and Christian, and political virtue, cannot be too much beloved, practiced, or rewarded; but to place liberty on that foundation only would not be safe...and that form of government which unites all the virtue, honor, and fear of the citizens, in a reverence and obedience to the laws, is the only one in which liberty can be secure...”⁶²

It is clear that Adams believed that religion was necessary for a well-functioning republic, and he hoped that religious belief and virtuous behavior would be encouraged and taught in both public schools as well as church meetings. In fact, Adams believed that it is the responsibility of members of the clergy to address civil injustice and educate

⁵⁹ Adams, *Political Writings*, 501. The ratifying committee found Adams language unsatisfactory, and ultimately adopted a much lengthier and more stringent version of this article. See the explanatory comments from Charles Francis Adams, reprinted in their entirety in *Political Writings*, 501-04.

⁶⁰ Adams to Thomas Jefferson, October 9, 1787, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, 1: 202-03.

⁶¹ Diggins, *Lost Soul*, 79.

⁶² Adams, *Political Writings*, 296-97.

their congregants in matters of civic virtues: “It is the duty of the clergy to accommodate their discourses to the times, to preach against such sins as are most prevalent, and recommend such virtues as are most wanted.”⁶³ Adams expects religion to have a salubrious effect on citizens, and he deeply fears what the decline of religion would spell for the republic as a whole. He even concludes his *Discourses on Davila* with a stern warning against the dangers of atheism, proclaiming that any religion is better than no religion for the maintenance of republican institutions:

Is there a possibility that the government of nations may fall into the hands of men who teach the most disconsolate of all creeds, that men are but fireflies, and that this *all* is without a father? . . . If such a case should happen, would not one of these, the most credulous of all believers, have reason to pray to his eternal nature of his almighty chance. . . *give us again the gods of the Greeks; give us again the more intelligible as well as more comfortable systems of Athanasius and Calvin; nay, give us again our popes and hierarchies, Benedictines and Jesuits, with all their superstition and fanaticism, impostures and tyranny.*⁶⁴

A pagan religion, indeed even Catholicism, is preferable to atheism for Adams because of the treat disbelief poses to the moral foundations of republican government. Without religion to provide moral guidance, and inspire virtuous behavior, through the promise of a future state of rewards and punishment, Adams believes republican governments are doomed to failure.

⁶³ Adams, *Political Writings*, 56.

⁶⁴ Adams, *Political Writings*, 362.

Despite charges to the contrary, it is clear that Adams believes virtue plays an essential role in republican government. Virtue is a goal government should aim to achieve, not a means by which government should be solely supported. Republics must have a moral foundation, and Adams argues that religion alone can provide that foundation. In particular, he thinks it is necessary for citizens to hold religious beliefs, publicly observe religious holidays, and provide financial support for state supported religious education. For Adams, piety is required in order to be a good republican citizen. Adams does not see a conflict between this and the right to religious freedom, and offers no comment on how religious dissenters who do not wish to support the state established church should be managed. What is clear is that Adams believes religion is necessary to republican government, and that religious belief and religious virtues are necessary for being a good citizen.

Conclusion

Although Adams and Witherspoon attempt to blend together republican, liberal, and religious concerns in their political thought, it is apparent that their primary interest remains with preserving a republican form of government. Though they both emphasize the importance of individual liberty and religious freedom, they see no conflict in having the state promote religion and encouraging, or even requiring, citizens to support religion. Though Witherspoon does not go so far as Adams in supporting an established religion, he does argue that it is essential for the state to promote religious values. His emphasis on the necessity of virtue, particularly the virtues of piety, order, industry, and

frugality, demonstrates his understanding of the ways in which individuals come to a shared sense of the common good. For Witherspoon, the common good has a particularly religious orientation, focusing not only on the salvation of the soul but also the role of religion in uniting citizens around common political causes and encouraging individual sacrifice for the sake of national happiness and prosperity.

More institutionally minded than Witherspoon, Adams's political thought focuses primarily on the role of constitutions in ensuring the happiness of the people. Their happiness is entirely dependent on their virtue, however, and Adams believes that religion gives rise to virtue and provides the moral foundation for constitutional forms of government. Though Adams and Witherspoon assume that human nature is inclined towards self-interest and often towards vice, they both argue that religion can provide the necessary motivation to help individuals overcome their personal selfishness. In their view, piety encourages citizens to look beyond their own narrow and particularized interests to the common purpose provided by God. By encouraging religious belief and religious virtues, they expect to contribute to the development of both better individuals and better citizens.

CHAPTER V

PUBLIC RELIGION IN THE AMERICAN FOUNDING ERA

As was demonstrated in the works of Adams and Witherspoon, the language of the Protestant religious tradition was easily used to support the modern republican project. Despite the pervasiveness of this religious tradition, a number of America's founding figures drew upon a more public form of religion to describe the relationship between religion and the new republic. These Founders saw more promise in a religion that highlights a sense of providence, dedication to the rule of law and of natural rights derived from the creator, as well as service to one's nation, fellow citizens, and community. Among the most notable advocates of this type of public religion are Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, and Thomas Jefferson.

The role of religion in American public life and particularly in the thought of the founding generation has been the focus of much scholarship. Invigorating a new approach to the study of religion, Robert Bellah quite famously identified a "civil religion" among the thought of the American Founders. This religion features a God who champions "order, law and right," and who transcends sectarianism.¹ Although the existence of a widespread civil religion in the American founding period has been widely debated, Bellah is correct to note that a number of founders were interested in

¹ Robert Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96 (1967): 7-8; Bellah further expands on his analysis of civil religion in the American Revolution in "The Revolution and Civil Religion," in *Religion and the American Revolution*, ed. Jerald C. Brauer, Sidney Earl Mead, Robert Bellah (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 55-73.

developing a set of “beliefs, symbols, and rituals” that would unite the American people around a common purpose.²

When the thought of these Founders is closely examined, however, it is clear that their project differs from a civil religion in a number of important ways. I contend that the Founder’s project of developing a non-sectarian religion can be more properly referred to as a public religion, one that was designed to support a modern, commercial republic. Bellah notes his debt to Rousseau in his choice of the term civil religion, but distinguishes his use of the term from the one found in Rousseau’s *The Social Contract*.³ The founding generation was well acquainted with the work of Rousseau, including his views on civil religion, but his approach to republican religion was summarily rejected. Although a Rousseauian civil religion aims to develop a sense of the common good, the Founders believed that it requires imposing on people the same passions and opinions, a task that undermines individual liberty and is impossible to achieve.⁴ Likewise, the classical republican desire to develop a love of country and dedication to the common good through the use of a civil religion was summarily rejected. In a modern republic, the American Founders believed that religious liberty had to be protected even if that meant greater difficulty in developing a sense of common purpose.

Even though Bellah rightly departs from Rousseau’s conception of civil religion, his choice of that term still does not capture the political-religious ideas of the American

² Robert Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 8.

³ See Rousseau’s discussion of civil religion in Book IV, Ch 8, of *The Social Contract*, in *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Basic Political Writings*, trans. and ed. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 220-27.

⁴ This argument is given its best expression by James Madison in “Federalist 10,” in *The Federalist with Letters of “Brutus,”* ed. Terence Ball (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 40-46.

Founders.⁵ In addition to being a non-sectarian civil religion, Bellah contends that the God featured in the Founder's thought favors America above other nations.⁶ Though it is true that the Founders often invoke providence, they do not believe the American republic is unconditionally favored. Similar to Adam Ferguson, these Founders believe that providence aids human progress but progress is not inevitable. Progress is dependent on the virtue of the people, and when the common good is ignored or corrupted, God's favor will be lost. Moreover, the rights and virtues envisaged by the Founders were not exclusively held by Americans. Natural rights are derived from a universal Creator and thus are inherent to individuals everywhere, not just Americans. Likewise, the virtues necessary to sustain the public good were prescribed as an example for all people to follow, not because they were good for the American republic alone, but because they were considered universally laudable.

It is telling that although the term civil religion was available for the Founder's use, even the most religiously universalistic among the founders *never* choose to describe their own religious program in this language. This religious dimension is better referred to as a public religion – the term favored by Franklin - than as a civil religion, for providence's favor is contingent on the republic's dedication to the public good.⁷

⁵ Bellah's analysis of civil religion in the writings of the Founders focuses primarily on Franklin, Jefferson, and Washington. Although Washington could easily be categorized as an advocate of public religion, his writings are less focused on the role of religion in developing civic virtue. Consequently, I have omitted Washington from this analysis.

⁶ Bellah acknowledges the often used trope of envisioning America as the new Israel. He argues that the God depicted by the Founders has "a special concern for America. . . . Europe is Egypt; America, the promised land. God has led his people to establish a new sort of social order that shall be a light until all the nations," in "Civil Religion," 7-8.

⁷ Although civil religion is the generally accepted term, two previous works have departed from this norm and have instead chosen to use the term public religion to describe this conception of religion in the Founder's thought. Both draw upon Franklin to support their choice, although the primary focus of both

This public religion is used to support a new and distinctly modern republic, one that draws from both the classical republican tradition as well as the modern liberals. As we will see below in the thought of Franklin, Paine, and Jefferson, each expresses a dedication to this type of religion and is particularly drawn to its ability to transcend factionalism, cultivate a dedication to the common good, and also preserve individual liberty. Despite these commonalities, differences exist and are helpful in understanding the many variants of religious and political thought in this era. As their writings make clear, however, there is a shared commitment to the civic virtues they advocate, particularly concerning the importance of participation, liberty, and benevolence. Hence, a public religion is distinguished from conventional Protestant religious thought in that it emphasizes a different set of virtues and a different conception of what it means to be a good republican citizen.

Benjamin Franklin

Most prominent among the Founders who promoted the importance of both virtue and public religion is Benjamin Franklin. His writings in *Poor Richard's Almanack* serve as a guide for living a virtuous and industrious life, and his *Autobiography* offers his own life as a model for civic virtue that explicitly rejects the idea that self-interest and the public good are necessarily in conflict with one another. He spoke directly to the necessity of a “public religion,” rooted in a system of Christian

works is evaluating the continuity of this tradition in American culture through the present day. See James Wilson, *Public Religion in American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979); and Jon Meacham, *American Gospel* (New York: Random House, 2006).

morals such as industry and charity, but one that would transcend factionalism. Religious faith, he noted, had a salubrious effect on an individual's character, and he warned that most people would succumb to vice without the restraining effect of religion. Societal forces, especially education, were necessary to instill virtue and help develop a spirit of public service.

In his public and private writings, Franklin took as his life long mission the promotion of virtue. He had long planned to publish a book on *The Art of Virtue* to serve as a guide for all those wishing to live a good and happy life. It was intended to be a non-sectarian primer on the virtues and their applications in everyday life.

Unfortunately, Franklin's numerous other endeavors prevented him from completing the work. He included, however, a shortened version of the plan in his *Autobiography*, and it is perhaps the best-known section of the book. His "bold and arduous" plan for moral perfection was based on the simple premise that he knew the difference between right and wrong, he only needed to train himself to "do the one and avoid the other."⁸

In order to ensure success in this endeavor, a detailed program for moral perfection was developed. Initially, Franklin chose twelve virtues that he listed by name and provided a short precept for each. In order to master the virtues, he proposed to address each individually. His method included week long devotions to each virtue, which would be repeated four times per year, and keeping records of the faults he committed. In such a manner, Franklin believed he could cultivate the habit of virtue which would eventually lead to moral perfection. Although his plan was demanding, it

⁸ Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography*, in *Franklin: The Autobiography and Other Writings on Politics, Economics, and Virtue*, ed. Alan Houston (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 68.

has rarely been regarded for its moral rigidity.⁹ Indeed, some of his virtues allow for permissive behavior. For example, the virtue of Sincerity requires one to “use no hurtful deceit,” but does not forbid deceit outright. Likewise, Franklin famously adopts a rather liberal understanding of the virtue of *Chastity*: “Rarely use venery but for health or offspring, never to dullness, weakness, or the injury of your own or another’s peace or reputation.”¹⁰

The virtues he includes and the instructions he attaches to each reveal what some scholars have identified as Franklin’s utilitarianism or even his Machiavellian approach to virtue.¹¹ Here it is most clear that Franklin does not busy himself with traditional concerns about morality, but rather his virtues are tools to achieve greater ends. Conspicuously absent from his list are the classical virtues of liberality, magnanimity, and courage. Although Franklin drew upon many sources to develop his list of virtues, including Christian and classical thought, he did not make a distinction between moral and civic virtues. Just as temperance and industry are useful in one’s personal life, he also expects these virtues to improve citizens. Moral and civic virtues, for Franklin, are mutually reinforcing.

The habit of virtue, for Franklin, is not meant to be undertaken for its own sake. Indeed, his virtues are intended to “explain and enforce [a larger] doctrine, that vicious

⁹See especially, D. H. Lawrence, “Benjamin Franklin,” in his *Studies in Classic American Literature*, (London: Martin Secker, 1924), 15-27.

¹⁰ Franklin, *Autobiography*, 68-69. Franklin’s initial list of twelve virtues include in order: Temperance, Silence, Order, Resolution, Frugality, Industry, Sincerity, Justice, Moderation, Cleanliness, Tranquility, and Chastity. Humility was later added as the thirteenth virtue.

¹¹ For his utilitarianism, see Clinton Rossiter, “The Political Theory of Benjamin Franklin,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 76 (1952), 259-93. For his Machiavellianism, see Steven Forde, “Benjamin Franklin’s “Machiavellian” Civic Virtue,” in *Machiavelli’s Liberal Republican Legacy*, ed. Paul A. Rahe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 143-66.

actions are not hurtful because they are forbidden, but forbidden because they are hurtful....”¹² At its most basic level, being virtuous actually protects individuals from pain and suffering. But the benefits of the virtuous life are greater than simply avoiding pain:

That it was, therefore, every one’s interest to be virtuous who wished to be happy even in this world; and I should, from this circumstance...have endeavored to convince young persons that no qualities were so likely to make a poor man’s fortune as those of probity and integrity.¹³

The great benefit of living a virtuous life is happiness. Those who make no attempt to improve their morality are discontented and frustrated in their endeavors to improve their conditions; but those who make a habit of virtue will experience life’s abundance.

In constructing his list of virtues, Franklin had originally included only twelve, but at the urging of a friend who insisted that he was often thought to be proud, Franklin included a thirteenth virtue – *Humility*. He includes this as the last virtue, indicating he anticipated it to be the most difficult to master, and he gives it the shortest precept:

“Imitate Jesus and Socrates.”¹⁴ His suggestion that it is even possible to perfect himself to the extent that he can masterfully imitate two of the western world’s greatest figures is at minimum boastful, and is certainly far removed from the idea of humility.

Nevertheless, Franklin is serious in this endeavor. He acknowledges *Pride* as one of the most difficult natural vices to overcome and also as a personal weakness: “Even if I

¹² Franklin, *Autobiography*, 76.

¹³ Franklin, *Autobiography*, 76.

¹⁴ Franklin, *Autobiography*, 69.

could conceive that I had completely overcome [*Pride*], I should probably be proud of my humility.”¹⁵ In fact, he openly admits that he had little personal success in achieving *Humility*, but he did achieve the *appearance* of being humble. In fact, some degree of pride is important in using virtue to achieve what Franklin perceives as the greatest ends of his moral project.

The *Art of Virtue* is not meant simply to produce individual happiness; Franklin’s conception of virtue is intended to encourage a greater public spirit and willingness to engage in public service. The most prominent example Franklin provides of this larger project is his own life. The *Autobiography* is filled with examples of Franklin’s contributions to the common good. He demonstrates how his desire to improve his own happiness was also used to improve the lives of the public as well, noting the personal and public benefits of his many projects, including establishing the first subscription library, organizing the first volunteer fire department, and improving the streets of Philadelphia. Franklin’s appearance of *Humility* was, in many ways, the virtue that contributed the most to his success in these endeavors. Initially, Franklin approached others with his ideas for public services, but often found that he was met with reluctance. Given his difficulty in achieving success in these projects, he modified his approach of appealing to the community to support ideas. Rather than claiming an idea was his own, he would suggest that the proposal belonged to a group of friends, or some other *public spirited* gentlemen. Once his own attachment to the project was removed, he found others were more readily willing to support his projects.

¹⁵ Franklin, *Autobiography*, 77.

Two benefits followed from this approach. First, it was an effective means by which Franklin convinced people to join his causes. Second, it actually served to reward Franklin's own vanity. Though this approach required an initial sacrifice, he believed that it would be repaid: "If it remains a while uncertain to whom the merit belongs, someone more vain than yourself will be encouraged to claim it, and then even envy will be disposed to do you justice by plucking those assumed feathers, and restoring them to their rightful owner."¹⁶ The appearance of *Humility* actually serves to further one's own vanity, but as Steven Forde duly notes,¹⁷ Franklin believed some degree of vanity and pride would always be necessary to motivate capable leaders to serve the public.

Although Franklin's many projects serve his own interests, it is because they serve a larger common good that he finds value in them. It is not the size or extent of the project that matters as much as the project's ability to serve the community. Nevertheless, Franklin rejects the classical supposition that the public good is necessarily in conflict with one's self-interest. In fact, he holds up his own life as proof that a virtuous life dedicated to serving the public good can increase one's personal fortune. Even though Franklin would never deny the importance of gaining wealth, it is not monetary increases that matter as much as the small, daily successes: "Human felicity is produced not so much by great pieces of good fortune that seldom happen as by little advantages that occur every day."¹⁸ Virtue is consequently a means to produce

¹⁶ Franklin, *Autobiography*, 65.

¹⁷ Steven Forde, "Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* and the Education of America," *American Political Science Review* 86 (1992): 364-65.

¹⁸ Franklin, *Autobiography*, 107.

the ends of happiness, but happiness is also necessarily a function of one's dedication to the common good.

The promotion of the common good is Franklin's ultimate objective, and this is what causes him to pursue his writings on the *Art of Virtue*. For Franklin, human nature is such that individuals are inherently inclined to seek their own interests, which they often miscalculate. Franklin explains the need for his project of virtue in a letter to Lord Kames (1760): "Most people have naturally *some* Virtues, but none have naturally *all* the Virtues...To *acquire* those that are wanting, and *secure* what we acquire as well as those we have naturally, is the Subject of an Art."¹⁹ Even if one does have the inclination to further develop his or her virtue, failures will likely be met with frustration. It is not enough to proclaim a need for virtue, but a guide is necessary to teach people how to be successful in this art. Most importantly, Franklin believed people were naturally inclined toward virtue, but that circumstances and poor education often led them toward vicious behavior. Given a proper education, however, individuals would learn the advantages of pursuing a virtuous life.

One difficulty of the project is that many people may not associate the practice of virtue with temporal happiness. For many, the practice of virtue is only associated with religion. Franklin worries that when virtue is strictly tied to religion, it is the fear of worldly and eternal retribution for vices committed that promotes virtue, and any rewards for virtuous action are necessarily conceived in strictly individual terms, such as personal salvation. Franklin does not deny the utility of religion in promoting adherence

¹⁹ Benjamin Franklin to Lord Kames, 3 May 1760, *Autobiography and Other Writings*, 275.

to virtue; in fact, he sees religion as playing a vital role in society. For instance, when he was given a copy of a manuscript that argued against the existence of a God involved in human affairs, Franklin cautioned the author not to publish the article:

You yourself may find it easy to live a virtuous Life without the Assistance afforded by Religion; you having a clear Perception of the Advantages of Virtue and the Disadvantages of Vice, and possessing a Strength of Resolution sufficient to enable you to resist common Temptations. But think how great a Proportion of Mankind consists of weak and ignorant Men and Women, and of inexperience'd and inconsiderate Youth of both Sexes, who have need of the Motives of Religion to restrain them from Vice, to support their Virtue, and retain them in the Practice of it till it becomes *habitual*, which is the great Point for its Security....²⁰

Although Franklin thought that religion was important in encouraging virtuous behavior, he believed that many religious traditions focused only on faith; few focused on the importance of works inspired by faith. Faith, however, holds little value, according to Franklin, if it does not encourage good works: “Morality or Virtue is the End, Faith only a Means to obtain that End: And if the End be obtained, it is no matter by what Means.”²¹ This does not mean that Franklin was wholly indifferent toward religion, but rather that he wanted faith and works to be united in order to promote the common good.

²⁰ Franklin to _____, 13 December 1757, *Autobiography and Other Writings*, 272.

²¹ Benjamin Franklin, “Dialogue Between Two Presbyterians,” *Autobiography and Other Writings*, 168.

Even so, Franklin knew that even with the threat of eternal punishment, religion alone was not enough to inspire everyone to a virtuous life. Franklin notes there will always be those individuals who simply do not believe or who have a weak faith.²² The dangers of those who feel no restraint were well known to Franklin. During his first stay in England, he published a short metaphysical argument, *Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain*, which dismissed both the idea of an immortal soul and free will.²³ This argument was convincing to several of his friends, who in turn saw no need to practice moral restraint. Franklin quickly realized that his *Dissertation* supported immoral behavior, and he declared its publication one of his life's great "erratum." Consequently, he decided that even if his argument were correct, it was not useful. Except for the most remarkable individuals, Franklin feared that those who did not feel the restraint of religion would fall into the traps of vice unless properly instructed otherwise. This is not to say that Franklin wanted to restrict religious liberty in order to prevent atheism, only that he feared that for the average person, the effects of irreligion would be a neglect of the public spirit and a failure to supporting the common good.

Because most people were not naturally inclined toward the perfection of virtue, and religion alone could not ensure virtuous behavior, Franklin believed it was paramount to educate the public in the art of virtue. Religion played an important role in

²² Franklin to Lord Kames, 3 May 1760, *Autobiography and Other Writings*, 274-76.

²³ Benjamin Franklin, "Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain," *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree, Whitfield J. Bell, Helen C. Boatfield, and Helene H. Fineman (New Haven: Yale University Press 1959-), 1: 57-71. Jerry Weinberger has recently argued that the *Dissertation* actually represents the most accurate summary of Franklin's religious thought. He concludes that Franklin was a lifelong atheist who dismissed moral principles as irrational desires of the human psyche and was forced to use esoteric writing to protect his public reputation. Based on an impressive array of speculation and conjecture, Weinberger's imaginative analysis provides an alarmingly ahistorical reading of Franklin's writings. See *Benjamin Franklin Unmasked: On the Unity of His Moral, Religious, and Political Thought* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005).

his overall educational scheme, though an expansive, non-sectarian version of religion. In his proposal to establish an academy for the education of Pennsylvania's youth, Franklin specifically calls for the curriculum to include lessons in the matter of public religion: "*History* will also afford frequent Opportunities of showing the Necessity of a *Public Religion*, from its Usefulness to the Publick; the Advantage of a Religious Character among private Persons; the Mischiefs of Superstition, & c. and the Excellency of the Christian Religion above all others antient [sic.] or modern."²⁴ Franklin is typically given credit for the introducing the term public religion into the American lexicon, but he drew the term and much of his educational theory from the work of Scotland's George Turnbull. In his work on *Observations Upon Liberal Education*, Turnbull stressed the importance of instructing students in public religion, understood as a religion that was founded on the Christian principle of benevolence. By emphasizing love of God and love of one's neighbor, Turnbull believed individuals would find the necessary incitements to virtue.²⁵

Franklin embraced Turnbull's endorsement of a public religion as an important feature of an education in virtue and further emphasized the importance of the virtues of temperance, order, frugality, industry, and perseverance in building a foundation for public spirited behavior.²⁶ Of course, these virtues were championed by most of the advocates of republican government in the American founding. In fact, the list of virtues Franklin includes in his plan for education almost perfectly mirrors those virtues

²⁴ Benjamin Franklin, "Proposals Relating to the Education of Youth in Pennsylvania," *Autobiography and Other Writings* 210.

²⁵ George Turnbull, *Observations upon Liberal Education, in All its Branches*, ed. Terrence O. Moore, Jr. (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund Press, 2003), 354.

²⁶ Franklin, "Education of Youth," 210.

endorsed by Witherspoon, with one glaring exception: piety. What distinguishes Franklin's public religion from the Christian republicanism of Witherspoon and Adams is the way in which he envisions religion shaping individuals' lives, especially their civic capacity.

Compared to other Founders, Franklin's political thought has received remarkably little attention. In fact, Franklin has rarely been featured in the republican revisionist literature and is generally dismissed by the proponents of the liberal paradigm. As Alan Houston avers, this is likely due to the depiction of Franklin as the quintessential American thinker.²⁷ But even Houston, who places Franklin within the broader Atlantic context, acknowledges that his thought is unsystematic. Though it is true that Franklin was a pragmatic thinker, this does not indicate that his thought lacks either theory or rigor. Houston compellingly argues that Franklin espoused a "politics of improvement," by which he hoped to bring about change for the better by always asking what useful improvements could be made, by what means, and at what cost.²⁸ This ranged from the smallest of projects, such as hiring street sweepers and installing street lamps, to grander projects, including establishing public education and reforming political institutions.

²⁷ Alan Houston, *Benjamin Franklin and the Politics of Improvement* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 4-7. For recent work on Franklin as an American thinker, see H.W. Brands, *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Doubleday, 2000); Gordon S. Wood, *The Americanization of Benjamin Franklin and the Pursuit of Genius* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004); and Steven Forde, "Benjamin Franklin: A Model American and an American Model," in *History of American Political Thought*, ed. Bryan-Paul Frost and Jeffrey Sikkenga (New York: Lexington Books, 2003), 80-94.

²⁸ Houston, *Benjamin Franklin*, 12-18. Houston acknowledges that Franklin sees great utility in religion, but his views on religion receive only marginal treatment in Houston's overall analysis of Franklin's politics of improvement (38-40).

As is the case with Paine and Jefferson, Franklin was more interested in the character of citizens in a republic than the form of a republican government. Nevertheless, his proposal for a unified government, presented to the Continental Congress in July 1775, gives some indication as to his preferred system of government. His plan called for a division of power between the states and a strong central government. A unicameral Congress, based on each state's population, would have expansive legislative power. Rather than a single president or monarch, he proposed an executive council of twelve members that would be appointed by Congress and would serve three-year terms, whereby one third of the council would be replaced annually.²⁹ In fact, the scope of power he proposed for the central government was more expansive than he knew his fellow delegates would accept, so he never brought his plan to a vote. Though he was a man of ideals, and strongly advocated a responsive government that would preserve the liberty of the people, he was also a pragmatist, preferring an imperfect union to no union at all; hence, Franklin offered his endorsement of the Constitution near the end of the Convention in 1787, characteristically conceding his willingness to accept "this Constitution because I expect no better, and because I am not sure that it is not the best."³⁰

Even with this endorsement, however, Franklin cautioned that the ultimate security of the government resides not in the form of the institutions but in the character

²⁹ Benjamin Franklin, "Proposed Articles of Confederation," *Autobiography and Other Writings*, 313-316.

³⁰ Benjamin Franklin, "Speech in the Convention at the Conclusion of its Deliberations," *Autobiography and Other Writings*, 362.

of the people.³¹ Hence, it is little surprise that Franklin made the improvement of citizens a life long project. Working within the republican tradition, Franklin accepted that individuals needed to be moral in order to be good citizens, and he viewed the cultivation of virtue as part of his overall political project. As discussed above, education, and even religious education, was the primary means for instilling virtue in citizens, but Franklin differed from other republican thinkers of the era. Whereas a number of founding figures believed it was necessary to cultivate piety and at least publicly encourage, if not require, religious worship, Franklin believed that the religious establishment would only undermine the salutary effects of religion.

Although an unwavering proponent of religious toleration, Franklin did not ground his arguments in the language of natural rights. Characteristically, he defended religious toleration on pragmatic grounds. He contended that a true and good religion needed no assistance from a civil power, and that when a plurality of confessions are allowed to flourish, they are more likely to focus on persuading individuals to live good lives rather than simply encouraging them to ascribe to a particular set of doctrines.³² Lorraine Pangle has suggested that despite Franklin's expressed commitment to the "utility of religion, his actions at times seem to suggest a surprising indifference to it – indifference as to whether religion should thrive or wither away, indifference as to

³¹ "I believe farther that this [government] is likely to be well administered for a Course of Years, and can only end in Despotism as other Forms have done before it, when the People shall become so corrupted as to need Despotic Government, being incapable of any other." "Speech in the Convention," 362.

³² Franklin laments this trend toward doctrinal teachings in his *Autobiography* when he describes the sermons of one the Philadelphia ministers as "dry, uninteresting and unedifying, since not a single moral Principle was inculcated or enforce'd, their Aim seeming to be rather to make us Presbyterians than good Citizens." *Autobiography*, 67.

whether it was indeed true or false.”³³ It is true that in comparison to those who thought piety was necessary for the civic health of the republic, Franklin may appear indifferent to religion. Franklin, however, was deeply concerned with promoting a non-traditional approach to religion – a religion that is dedicated to works above faith and religious toleration, even including the toleration of non-religious individuals.

Although Franklin was opposed to the civil establishment of religion, he nevertheless believed that religion could and should play an important role in shaping good citizens. Religion offers incitements to virtue that, for most people, cannot be rivaled by political or societal influences alone. Franklin offers a vision of civic life that embraces religion but that is not exclusively dependent on religion to make individuals good citizens. Nor, for that matter, can political institutions be exclusively entrusted in the moral and political education of citizens. Through his own writings and works, Franklin developed a model for encouraging virtue, one that departed significantly from much of the religious rhetoric of the time. By removing piety and focusing on virtues like frugality, order, and industry, Franklin risks appearing as an advocate of unbridled self-interest devoid of the restraining effects of religion.³⁴ Nevertheless, Franklin always positions his discussions of these virtues within the larger context of developing a public spirit dedicated to the common good.

³³ Lorraine Pangle, *The Political Philosophy of Benjamin Franklin* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2007), 192.

³⁴ This critique of Franklin is most famously associated with Max Weber, who argued that Franklin embodied the spirit of capitalism, the endless and systematic pursuit of profit. Weber’s analysis of Franklin has been widely dismissed as relying on only a sparse selection of unrepresentative quotes from the *Autobiography*. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1958). For critiques of Weber’s analysis, see Thomas Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 16-21; Pangle, *Political Philosophy of Benjamin Franklin*, 16-18; and Houston, *Benjamin Franklin*, 225-29.

Following along the line of Ferguson, Franklin believes that to be virtuous is to serve the common good, and to serve the common good is to be in the service of God. Franklin is not concerned with encouraging piety, as piety emphasizes faith, and dedication to particular doctrines, but not necessarily dedication to good works. Franklin's public religion focuses not on the salvation of souls but rather on the production of good citizens. By rejecting the idea that individuals must choose between working for their own self-interest and the common good, he promotes a public spirit whereby public service is linked to individual happiness.

Thomas Paine

Franklin lamented the divisive nature of religious belief, and strongly preferred a more inclusive public religion, but acknowledged that organized religion could play a constructive role in society. In contrast, Paine was deeply skeptical of all manner of organized religion. Most famously in *Age of Reason*, Paine vehemently criticizes revealed religion, especially Christianity, which he argues breeds intolerance and persecution. The solution for Paine is religious liberty, which he viewed as a right that under no circumstances could be legitimately breached by political authority. Despite his uneasiness over religion, Paine maintains a concern for the moral health of society, especially as it relates to the preservation of the public good. This public spirit is drawn from the equality of individuals, their ability to be independent, and their ability to participate freely in their government. This requires a shared sense of purpose that can

be sustained by a public religion, though one that is decidedly even less akin to revealed religion than that proposed by Franklin.

Whereas the most notable critiques of revealed religion in the late eighteenth century were primarily academic and technical in character, Paine's attacks on revealed religion were sensational, inflammatory, and unapologetic.³⁵ Written in response to the growing trends of secularism and atheism that followed the French Revolution, Paine aims in *Age of Reason* to expose the dangers of revealed religion in corrupting true, natural theology. He considered all religious institutions dangerous, whether Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, and argued they were only used "to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit."³⁶ Although the first volume of *Age of Reason* is directed against revealed religions broadly, the second volume takes direct aim at the Judeo-Christian tradition. He described Christianity as the most ruinous of all religions:

Of all the systems of religion that ever were invented, there is none more derogatory to the Almighty, more unedifying to man, more repugnant to reason, and more contradictory in itself, than this thing called Christianity. Too absurd for belief, too impossible to convince, and too inconsistent for practice, it renders the heart torpid, or produces only atheists and fanatics.³⁷

Most of the arguments Paine leveled against Christianity had been previously articulated by authors such as Spinoza, Voltaire, Diderot, and Hume, but Paine's use of plain

³⁵ Paine undoubtedly had access to the religious criticism of Hume, Priestly, and Voltaire, among many others. For a broad discussion of influences on Paine's thought, see Caroline Robbins, "The Lifelong Education of Thomas Paine (1737-1809): Some Reflections upon His Acquaintance among Books," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 127 (1983): 135-42.

³⁶ Thomas Paine, "Age of Reason," in *Collected Works*, ed. Eric Foner (New York: Citadel Press, 1945), 1: 464.

³⁷ Paine, "Age of Reason," *Collected Works*, 1:600.

language and harsh tone earned him a wide readership as well as widespread condemnation.³⁸

Despite pervasive accusations to the contrary, Paine was not an atheist and goes to great lengths to endorse a natural, deistic religion. This religion carries with it a dedication to serving humanity; as Paine describes in *Rights of Man*, “my religion is to do good.”³⁹ In order to combat the spread of atheism, Paine offers his own confession as an alternative to revealed religion and as an expression of reasonable faith: “I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life. I believe in the equality of man, and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy.”⁴⁰ These are the major tenets of Deism for Paine, which he believes can lead individuals to a moral life uncorrupted by the schemes of religious institutions.⁴¹

Paine actively promoted the principles of Deism as a means to eliminate despotism in both its religious and political forms. Paine actually tried to put his principles and teachings into practice by working with the Society of Theophilantropists. Formed in 1797 as a Deistic society dedicated to the principles Paine espoused in *Age of Reason*, the group celebrated humanistic services that included hymns, lectures, and

³⁸ Over thirty replies were published in the 1790s attacking *Age of Reason*, and its publication lost Paine some of his close friends, including Benjamin Rush and Samuel Adams. See Franklyn K. Prochaska, “Thomas Paine’s *The Age of Reason* Revisited,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 33 (1972): 561-76.

³⁹ Thomas Paine, “Rights of Man,” *Collected Works*, 1: 414

⁴⁰ Paine, “Age of Reason,” *Collected Works*, 1: 464.

⁴¹ Paine refers to his own religious beliefs as either Deism or natural religion. Unlike many Deists of the time, though, Paine believes that God maintained a presence in the universe that is manifest in nature. For a discussion of Paine’s natural religion, see Jack Fruchtman, Jr., *Thomas Paine and the Religion of Nature* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 2-12.

discussions about moral, ethical, and religious issues.⁴² In an address before the society in 1801, Paine decried the creeping danger of the spread of atheism and especially the error of scientific education in contributing to that problem: “The evil that has resulted from the error of the schools, in teaching natural philosophy as an accomplishment only, has been that of generating in the pupils a species of Atheism. Instead of looking through the works of creation to the Creator himself, they stop short, and employ the knowledge they acquire to create doubts of His existence.”⁴³ This type of scientific instruction is problematic because it only supplies knowledge of the mechanical operations of the universe; it ignores the governing principles of the universe and their Creator. With this limited education in scientific principles, Paine fears that individuals will feel that to be reasonable they must abandon all religious faith.

Paine’s concern was not simply a matter of inspiring faith or ensuring the salvation of the soul, nor was his work with the Theophilanthropists simply an example of his own personal religious beliefs and positions. He and the other founding members hoped the society would have an educative effect, to “give scientific instruction to those who could not otherwise obtain it...[and] be led to see the hand of God in all these things.”⁴⁴ Thus, he expected his work with the society and the development of a properly developed scientific education to have a salubrious effect for both the individual and the public good in helping individuals to understand the principles by which God governs the universe. To understand Paine’s interest in the public good, it is necessary to place

⁴² See Thomas Paine, “Prosecution of *The Age of Reason*,” *Collected Works*, 2: 727-48.

⁴³ Thomas Paine, “The Existence of God,” *Collected Works*, 2: 750.

⁴⁴ Paine, “The Existence of God,” 2: 756.

his religious thought in context of his political thought. In this way, it become apparent that Paine's interest in providing a broad education is aimed toward developing a public spirit and strengthening political institutions by providing a surer foundation for the cultivation of virtue among citizens.

As suggested above, much of the scholarship on Paine's political thought has sought to classify him as either a republican or a liberal. Those searching for Paine's republican roots emphasize his explicit commitment to republican government, his arguments supporting representation of various interests, and his dedication to the public good and the cultivation of virtue.⁴⁵ Those interested in his liberal origins tend to focus on his separation of the public and private spheres and dedication to individual rights.⁴⁶ Paine's thought, however, is notoriously unsystematic, drawing upon numerous liberal and republican sources and hence defying easy classification. Recent work has attempted to provide a more nuanced reading of Paine treating him as a transitional figure between the republican and liberal traditions.⁴⁷ As Andreas Kalyvas and Ira Katznelson have argued, Paine's work rejected, adapted, and absorbed the republican tradition, drew upon the central elements of Locke's liberalism, and fundamentally modified both traditions

⁴⁵ Gordon Wood, *Creation of the American Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 47, 92, 100; and Eric Foner, *Tom Paine and Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 71-106.

⁴⁶ Joyce Appleby, "Republicanism and Ideology," *American Quarterly* 37 (1985), 470; Joyce Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Isaac Kramnick, "Republican Revisionism Revisited," *American Historical Review* 87 (1982): 637, 644, 649, 651; and Isaac Kramnick, "Editor's Introduction: The Life, Ideology, and Legacy of Thomas Paine," *The Thomas Paine Reader*, ed. Michael Foot and Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin Classics, 1987), 22-29.

⁴⁷ Andreas Kalyvas and Ira Katznelson, "The Republic of the Moderns: Paine's and Madison's Novel Liberalism," *Polity* 38 (2006): 447-77; and Gary Kates, "From Liberalism to Radicalism: Tom Paine's *Rights of Man*," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 50 (1989): 569-87.

to address the modern problems of rights, representation, and commercial society.⁴⁸ To understand the ways in which Paine blends these traditions, I examine his political thought, particularly his work on individual rights, social and political obligations, and religion.

The influence of liberal thought on Paine's approach to government is clearly demonstrated in his sharp division of the public and private spheres. As he forcefully argues in his opening to *Common Sense*, society and government are produced by different needs and serve different ends: "Society is produced by our wants, and government by our wickedness; the former promotes our happiness *positively* by uniting our affections, the latter *negatively* by restraining our vices."⁴⁹ Here Paine dismisses the classical republican argument that the role of government is to cultivate virtue. For him government only engages in the negative action of limiting behavior, whereas society is a positive force that can be used to promote virtue. As Joyce Appleby has noted, Paine essentially "reduced the virtues of classical republicanism to simple policing while elevating free association to a new moral plane."⁵⁰ This does not indicate that Paine believed government was unnecessary, as he explicitly acknowledged that the world cannot be governed by moral virtue alone. Even though he believed in the necessity of government, he did contend that the more simplistic government is in form, the less likely it is to become disordered.

⁴⁸ Kalyvas and Katznelson, "Republic of the Moderns," 476.

⁴⁹ Thomas Paine, "Common Sense," *Collected Works*, 1: 4.

⁵⁰ Appleby, "Republicanism and Ideology," 470.

Government should not only be simplistic, but also limited in its power over individuals. Paine was a fierce defender of individual rights, particularly the rights to property and religious liberty. For Paine the only legitimate government action against individual liberty is to prevent individuals from interfering with the rights of others: “The exercise of the natural rights of every individual has no limits save those that assure to other members of society the enjoyment of the same rights.”⁵¹ Whereas in *Common Sense* Paine defends these rights within the American context, in *Rights of Man* he argues for universal human rights. Written as a refutation of Edmund Burke’s arguments against the French Revolution, *Rights of Man* is directed towards a British audience and considers “the prospect of a general revolution in governments.”⁵² Aiming to achieve a political transformation of the British system of government, Paine also sets the stage for global political upheaval which he believes will ultimately culminate in “universal peace” and “a new era to the human race.”⁵³

Although political rights maintain primary importance in *Rights of Man*, Paine also is interested in fundamentally changing the social structure that has prevented progress in the past. Paine believes that a government founded on a moral theory entails not only individual rights, but also communal responsibilities.⁵⁴ He takes this further than most eighteenth-century thinkers, as he proposes an entire agenda to address

⁵¹ Thomas Paine, “Plan of a Declaration,” *Collected Works*, 2: 558.

⁵² Paine, “Rights of Man,” 1:447.

⁵³ Paine, “Rights of Man,” 1:356.

⁵⁴ Some scholars have argued that Paine moves away from a Lockean dedication to individual rights and instead embraces a Rousseauian idea of community, furthering the liberal-republican dichotomy. In fact, Paine argues for both rights and responsibilities and believes they work together to reinforce one another. For an example of the former view, see Jack Fruchtman, Jr., *Thomas Paine: Apostle of Freedom* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1994), 247-69.

problems of poverty and inequality. Among his several proposals are plans for the elimination of taxes on the poor, funding for public education, a social security program, an unemployment program, and monies to help families with the cost of marriage, childbirth, and funeral expenses.⁵⁵ This assistance is not a matter of “charity, but of right,”⁵⁶ and has the added benefit of decreasing the incidences of crime and riots that are often associated with poverty. Much as Rousseau argued, Paine believed poverty was the result of a bad government and caused a state of dependence among citizens. When the community recognizes and addresses the needs of its citizens, it not only preserves individual rights but also serves the public good. Similar to Franklin, Paine believed that the public good and individual liberty were less at tension with one another than was commonly supposed: “Public good is not a term opposed to the good of individuals; on the contrary, it is the good of every individual collected.”⁵⁷

Paine never published a formal treatise on government, nor did he ever seek to be a political philosopher proper. Nevertheless, his writings demonstrate that he was conversant with the work of liberal and republican thinkers and that he sought to apply these ideas to the particular dilemmas facing modern society. Although he has been labeled many things, Paine most often referred to himself as a republican, though he clearly broke from many of the classical republican traditions. As Eric Foner has argued, Paine took the term republicanism and “made it a utopian ideal of government.”⁵⁸

Bringing together strands of secular millennialism, democratic egalitarianism, and

⁵⁵ Paine, “Rights of Man,” 1:431-441.

⁵⁶ Paine, “Rights of Man,” 1:427.

⁵⁷ Thomas Paine, “Dissertations on Government; The Affairs of the Bank; and Paper Money,” *Collected Works*, 2:372.

⁵⁸ Foner, *Tom Paine*, 75.

commercial cosmopolitanism, Paine forged a new, modern understanding of republicanism.⁵⁹

The particular form of government was of less interest to Paine than the principles that government is founded upon. Nevertheless, Paine did provide a rough outline for a unified, republican government for the American colonies in *Common Sense*, which included a president who would hold an annual term, a continental legislature, unicameral state assemblies, frequent elections, expansive suffrage, and a constitution that would secure property and freedom of religion.⁶⁰ He was quick, however, to reject other major tenets of the republican tradition. He explicitly referred to the idea of checks and balances as “farcical,” described the English Constitution as “absurd and useless,” and claimed that any sense of English liberty was attributable to “the constitution of the people, and not to the constitution of the government.”⁶¹ Little was sacred in either the history or form of the English republican tradition; a new system had to be developed that would transcend the “rascally” origins of the English constitutional system.

For Paine, the spirit of a republic was rooted in its dedication to the public good. The form was only of secondary concern: “Republican government is no other than government established and conducted for the interest of the public, as well individually as collectively. It is not necessarily connected with any particular form, but it most

⁵⁹ Thomas C. Walker has argued that Paine is actually a cosmopolitan in his political thought, not only his economics, though his analysis is limited to Paine’s approach to foreign relations. “The Forgotten Prophet: Tom Paine’s Cosmopolitanism and International Relations,” *International Studies Quarterly* 44 (2000): 51-72.

⁶⁰ Paine, “Common Sense,” 1: 28-29.

⁶¹ Paine, “Common Sense,” 1: 7-9.

naturally associates itself with the representative form.”⁶² To the extent that Paine ever endorses a particular system of government, he holds up the newly crafted American constitution as an example to be followed. By combining democratic elements of egalitarian rights with representation, Paine believes the American system is a republic that is truly dedicated to *res publica* – the public good: “By engrafting representation upon democracy, we arrive at a system of government capable of embracing and confederating all the various interests and every extent of territory and population.”⁶³ The problem of large republics was overcome through the use of representation, and the system of representation allows diverse interests - agrarian, urban, and commercial - to all receive a fair hearing through the political process.

Paine marks a decisive shift from classical republican thinking, as he treats societal progress as an important component of ensuring a just political system.⁶⁴ In his arguments for universal rights in *Rights of Man*, Frutchman has noted a shift in Paine’s focus: “True transformation now shifted from politics to society... The focus was no longer on political rights and liberties as they affected the individual. It was, rather, on government’s responsibility to provide a minimum level of social benefits for citizens who were incapable of caring for themselves.”⁶⁵ Frutchman argues that this ultimately

⁶² Paine, “Rights of Man,” 1: 370

⁶³ Paine, “Rights of Man,” 1: 371

⁶⁴ Although it is unclear whether or not Paine had read Ferguson’s *History of Civil Society*, he shares Ferguson’s concern with societal progress, believes progress is dependent on human action, and that it is fundamentally tied to the society’s dedication to the public good.

⁶⁵ Frutchman, *Thomas Paine*, 259.

marks a shift in Paine's thinking from emphasizing Lockean natural rights to Rousseauian communal obligations.⁶⁶

Although it is true that the influence of Rousseau is present in *Rights of Man*, Paine differs from Rousseau's republican formulation in two fundamental ways. First, Paine unequivocally accepts the necessity and utility of representation, whereas Rousseau believes representation only leads to a loss of freedom.⁶⁷ Secondly, and more importantly for this discussion, Rousseau and Paine are at odds over the role religion should play in a republic. For Rousseau, a civil religion is necessary and serves to teach citizens to love their communal duties. Even though Rousseau argues that citizens are not restricted from holding other religious opinions, belief in the civil religion is a non-negotiable aspect of being a citizen: "While not having the ability to obligate anyone to believe them [the dogmas of the civil religion], the sovereign can banish from the state anyone who does not believe them. It can banish him not for being impious but for being unsociable, for being incapable of sincerely loving the laws and justice, and of sacrificing his life, if necessary, for his duty."⁶⁸ Civil religion, thus, not only encourages citizens to uphold their duties, but also discourages them from questioning the merit of those obligations.

As Kalyvas and Katznelson have argued, Paine rejected the idea of civil religion, as it was associated with the classical republican tradition, especially as outlined by

⁶⁶ In contrast to Fruchtman, Caroline Robinson has cautioned that Paine's debt to Rousseau is often exaggerated. Robbins, "Lifelong Education," 138.

⁶⁷ As Rousseau succinctly argues, "the moment a people gives itself representatives, it is no longer free; it no longer exists." Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 199.

⁶⁸ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, 226.

Rousseau, because it carried a threat of persecution.⁶⁹ Paine argued that only established religions engage in persecution, where the civil authority assumes the authority to punish individuals for heterodox beliefs or actions;⁷⁰ this type of persecution can occur with either revealed or civil religions that are established by law. Because Paine was uncompromising in his dedication to liberty of conscience and was so fiercely opposed to the influence of revealed religion, it is easy to assume that he would also be opposed to any type of pervasive religious influence on society at large.⁷¹ As discussed above, however, Paine not only wanted religion to play a role in society, but he personally worked to educate the public in a naturalist, deistic tradition of religion. Firmly rooted in the principles of nature, discoverable through scientific means, Paine believes his religion is perfectly compatible with religious liberty and also can support the public good. Furthermore, he believes this type of religion will help thwart corruption, in both society and political institutions, as well as to create a spirit of freedom that will relieve citizens from a state of dependence. Though it is appropriate to say that Paine rejected a dogmatic civil religion in the tradition of Rousseau, he was dedicated to the idea of a public religion that would preserve individual's liberty while also developing a sense of communal obligations.

The genius of Paine's writings was not necessarily in the novelty of his arguments, as many of his arguments favoring independence had been expressed prior to the publication of *Common Sense*. Likewise, most of the critiques of revealed religion in

⁶⁹ Kalyvas and Katznelson, "Republic of the Moderns," 467.

⁷⁰ Paine, "Rights of Man," 293.

⁷¹ Kalyvas and Katznelson seem to make this assumption as they discuss Paine's opposition to civil religion but never discuss the positive role Paine hoped a rational religion could play in shaping good citizens.

Age of Reason were simply restatements of previously published deistic polemics. What was truly novel in Paine's writing was his style. Although many tracts had previously been published both on the war for independence and deism, they were primarily written for and read by the learned class of society. Using plain language that related his arguments to the common experiences of individuals, Paine wrote for the masses in a language that was easy for the layman to understand: "As it is my design to make those that can scarcely read understand, I shall therefore avoid every literary ornament and put it in language as plain as the alphabet."⁷²

Paine's choice of audience and style of argument is important because it demonstrates his democratic interest in making high-minded political and theological arguments accessible to the masses. The fight for independence, the necessity of republican government, and the importance of fair representation were not matters for the elite statesman to decide – these were matters that concerned the populace and required its support and participation to succeed. Likewise, the reasonableness of the Christian religion was not merely a matter for priests and pastors to decide; every man and woman deserved to be able to understand and participate in the debates surrounding the role of religion in society.⁷³ It is this dedication to widespread education, whether formal education or simply education through writings and pamphlets, that demonstrates Paine's dedication to egalitarian principles. Even so, his educational projects were always placed within a republican context. Paine wanted greater equality in education,

⁷² Thomas Paine, "The Affair of Silas Deane," *Collected Works*, 2: 111.

⁷³ Importantly, and perhaps drawing from his Quaker background, Paine supported religious education for both men and women. As is discussed below, Jefferson also supported public education for women, but only at the primary level.

wealth, and representation so that individuals would have more opportunities to cultivate moral and civic virtue.

Paine's is a hopeful vision of human nature. Individuals are born with a natural inclination toward virtue, but due to circumstances and necessity, they often are forced into vice and corruption. Whereas the republican tradition had looked to government to cultivate virtue and limit vice among citizens, Paine sees republican institutions especially within the British context as part of the problem. Likewise, religion has similarly corrupted individuals by turning them into fanatics rather than instilling individuals with knowledge of the natural order of creation. True religion, Paine believes, can fill this gap by providing individuals with knowledge of the universe and its creator. This knowledge reveals the natural order of the world, the collective dependence of all of life, and the logical necessity of a public spirit that follows from our shared dependence. The solution is not a dogmatic, overbearing civil religion that is forced upon citizens by their government. Rather, Paine endorses a public religion, one that is nurtured through education, scientific inquiry, and a fierce dedication to liberty of conscience. It is a religion that allows uninhibited exploration of religious ideas and allows individuals the autonomy to understand the world, its natural order, and the virtues required to sustain it. This type of natural religion encourages a dedication to the public good that Paine believes is necessary and will ultimately help sustain a healthy society and a good, though small, government.

Thomas Jefferson

Among America's founding figures, Jefferson appears to be the most conflicted about religion, recognizing both its dangers and its necessity. He does believe religion can help cultivate virtue and provide a basis for the liberty of individuals and nations; nevertheless, he did not see a role for state support of religion. He often lamented that Christianity provided the best collection of moral teachings that had ever been so irredeemably corrupted by man. Even so, he considered some religious education necessary and implored that religious texts be read alongside Livy and Cicero. He claimed that even if an individual were left doubting the divine nature of religion, one would still find "incitements to virtue." Although he rarely expressed his personal convictions about religion, it is clear that he found religious study important, especially insofar as it sustained the virtue of individuals and thwarted corruption among nations. Jefferson saw the study of religion fostering the intellectual virtues such as wisdom but also traditional civic virtues such as liberty and participation in government. By subjecting religion to close intellectual scrutiny, he hoped to raise the level of inquiry to that of a public religion, which would cultivate leaders and citizens capable of sustaining their republic.

In many ways, Jefferson is one of the most elusive American thinkers in terms of understanding his views on religion. He notoriously kept his personal religious views private, which led to widespread accusations that he was an atheist.⁷⁴ Despite the debate

⁷⁴ Jefferson was most famously attacked for his religious beliefs during the election of 1800. For a concise summary of the debate over Jefferson's faith during the election, see Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 2008): 166-71.

over his personal beliefs, by focusing on his plans for public education and his private letters concerning matters on religion, morality, and politics, it is clear that Jefferson did believe that religion could play an important role in the development of a virtuous citizenry. Whereas both Franklin and Paine are forthright about their desire to see religion play some role in the moral and political education of citizens, albeit in different ways, Jefferson is more reticent to endorse religious instruction, especially for young students.

Jefferson, along with Franklin and Paine, was fiercely dedicated to the project of religious liberty. He believed that “difference of opinion is advantageous in religion,” and that to persecute individuals simply for matters of religious belief only succeeds in making “one half the world fools, and the other half hypocrites.”⁷⁵ Religious liberty, for Jefferson, not only protects an individual’s liberty of conscience, but also prohibits government endorsement of any religious establishment. Although he claims religious liberty is a natural right, he is also quick to note the many benefits that can be gained from religious toleration. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, he praises New York and Pennsylvania for their disestablishment of religion: “Their harmony is unparalleled, and can be ascribed to nothing but their unbounded tolerance, because there is no other circumstance in which they differ from every nation on earth. They have made the happy discovery, that the way to silence religious disputes, is to take no notice of them.”⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Thomas Jefferson, “Notes on the State of Virginia,” in *The Portable Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 212.

⁷⁶ Jefferson, “Notes,” 212.

Even though Jefferson was dedicated to religious liberty, he did not aim to eliminate religion altogether. In fact, he believed religion could play an important role in shaping individuals, though he advocated doing this through a carefully structured education that would introduce religion to students at a later age. Whereas many believed that instruction in virtue, both private and civic, was best taught through some form of religious education,⁷⁷ Jefferson argued that the study of history, at least to begin with, would provide adequate instruction in morality. More than most any other of America's founding figures, Jefferson advocated a comprehensive education plan, including primary through university education.⁷⁸ Every child, male and female, was to be guaranteed a free education for at least three years. By providing the people with at least a basic education, he hoped to create vigilant citizens who were knowledgeable of their rights and would be willing to defend them against encroachments from the government.

Jefferson's educational system had as its primary and explicit aim the molding of good citizens. He was particularly concerned that those students of the highest merit, regardless of their personal circumstances, receive an education at the public's expense that would prepare them for public service. He characteristically opens his proposed bill

⁷⁷ Notable advocates of this type of educational program included Benjamin Rush and Noah Webster. For an extensive discussion of the role of religion in educational theories during the founding era, see Lorraine Smith Pangle and Thomas L. Pangle, *The Learning of Liberty: The Educational Ideas of the American Founders* (Lawrence: KS, University Press of Kansas 1993), 30-31, 134-37, 187-201.

⁷⁸ Although the bill Jefferson introduced in the Virginia state legislature was not passed, a revised version was eventually adopted in 1796. Jefferson lauded its success: "I think by far the most important bill in our whole code is that for the diffusion of knowledge among the people. No other sure foundation can be devised for the preservation of freedom, and happiness." Jefferson to George Wythe, 13 August 1786, *Portable*, 399.

for public education with a preamble that recognizes the importance of this project in ensuring the safety and liberty of the citizens at large:

Whence it becomes expedient for promoting the publick happiness that those persons, whom nature hath endowed with genius and virtue, should be rendered by liberal education worthy to receive, and able to guard the sacred deposit of the rights and liberties of their fellow citizens, and that they should be called to that charge without regard to wealth, birth or other accidental condition or circumstance...it is better that such should be sought for and educated at the common expence of all, than that the happiness of all should be confided to the weak or the wicked.⁷⁹

Even though Jefferson hopes to educate the most talented students for public service, he does not believe that one class is intended to rule over the others. Rather, his educational system aims to produce public servants who are tempered by wisdom and moderation, and a populace that is always skeptical, vigilant, and that does not hesitate to check the power of its governors.⁸⁰

Though instruction in virtue was requisite in ensuring both the temperance of governors and the vigilance of citizens, Jefferson departed from most educational theorists of his time in insisting that young students refrain from reading the Bible as

⁷⁹ Thomas Jefferson, "A Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge," in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 365.

⁸⁰ Jefferson insists that "the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God." Jefferson to Roger C. Weigtman, 24 June 1826, *Portable*, 585. While he hopes those in government will exercise restraint, he always maintains that the people must be willing to safeguard their own liberty when necessary, see especially, Jefferson to Edward Carrington, 16 January 1787, *Portable*, 414-15; Jefferson to James Madison, 30 January 1787, *Portable*, 417.

part of this instruction in virtue. He described his aims for primary education at length in his *Notes*:

The first stage of this education being the schools of the hundreds, wherein the great mass of the people will receive their instruction, the principal foundations of future order will be laid here. Instead therefore of putting the Bible and Testament into the hands of children, at an age when their judgments are not sufficiently matured for religious inquiries, their memories may here be stored with the most useful facts from Grecian, Roman, European and America history. The first elements of morality too many be instilled into their minds; such as, when further developed as their judgments advance in strength, may teach them how to work out their own greatest happiness, by shewing them that it does not depend on the condition of life in which chance has placed them, but is always the result of good conscience, good health, occupation, and freedom in all just pursuits.⁸¹

Jefferson only wanted students to be delayed in their studies of religion, not prohibited from religious instruction and inquiry. When a student had reached an age of intellectual maturity and reasonableness, Jefferson believed that the study of religion would be most profitable.⁸² Whereas Paine actively sought to inform students of the absurdity of the Christian religion and of the reasonableness of natural religion, Jefferson

⁸¹ Jefferson, "Notes," 197.

⁸² Jean Yarbrough disputes this point, claiming that Jefferson wanted to replace religion with education, removing the study of the Bible and replacing it with only the study of history. Her point seems to be directly contradicted by the following discussion demonstrating Jefferson's preference for delaying religious study, not the rejection of it altogether. See "The Constitution and Republican Character: The Missing Critical Principle?" in *To Form a More Perfect Union*, ed. Herman Belz, Ronald Hoffman, and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia), 242 n52, 246-47.

wants students to make their own judgments. He explains his position in a letter to his seventeen-year-old nephew, Peter Carr. When Carr inquired of Jefferson as to whether and how he should approach the study of religion, Jefferson replied: “Your reason is now mature enough to receive this object...Question with boldness even the existence of a god; because, if there be one, he must more approve the homage of reason, than that of blindfold fear. You will naturally examine first the religion of your own country. Read the bible then, as you would read Livy or Tacitus.”⁸³

For Jefferson, it is not so much the particular form of moral instruction that religion provides that is useful; rather, it is the inquiry into the reasonableness and justice of the moral principles offered by religion that provides the greatest rewards. He cautioned Carr that the conclusions that he reaches are not as important as the inquiry itself:

Do not be frightened from this enquiry by any fear of its consequences. If it ends in a belief that there is no god, you will find incitement to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in it’s exercise, and the love of others which it will procure you. If you find reason to believe there is a god, a consciousness that you are acting under his eye, and that he approves you, will be a vast additional incitement.⁸⁴

If it is simply the exercise of studying religion that matters, and not the conclusions reached about religion, then why did Jefferson think the study of religion was necessary? One possibility, suggested by Thomas Pangle, is that Jefferson believed

⁸³ Jefferson to Peter Carr, 10 August 1787, *Portable*, 425.

⁸⁴ Jefferson to Peter Carr, 10 August 1787, 427.

that acceptance of an afterlife, and more particularly a day of final judgment, provides an incitement to virtue for most people that cannot be matched by the study of history alone. Pangle nevertheless contends that Jefferson does little to reconcile his views toward the afterlife with his rejection of the inerrancy of scripture, particularly the miraculous and supernatural aspects of the Bible.⁸⁵ Although it is true that Jefferson does not reconcile these beliefs, it is not necessary that he does. What he does advocate is the importance of free religious inquiry. Religious faith that is supported by free inquiry is unlikely to lead to fanaticism, persecution, or mob behavior, the true enemies of liberty and security according to Jefferson. But unlike many of his era, including even Paine, Jefferson does not think religious belief is necessary for a person to be virtuous; even an atheist can live a virtuous life.⁸⁶ Much as Franklin argued, Jefferson believes religion is an important aspect of the lives of many individuals, and it can help support both personal and civic virtue, but it is not necessary to ensuring morality.

Given that he considered religious zealotry and factionalism as threats to liberty and security, Jefferson was interested in supporting a more tempered and ecumenical version of religion. To that end, he produced a carefully constructed revision of the biblical gospels aimed at providing a more authentic version of Christianity.⁸⁷ Entitled the “Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth,” Jefferson extracted passages from the

⁸⁵ Thomas Pangle, *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 82-85. Pangle also briefly refers to Jefferson’s approach to religion as a “civil theology,” but he does not elaborate on what he means by that term.

⁸⁶ Jefferson to Thomas Law, 13 June 1814, *Portable*, 541.

⁸⁷ Thomas Jefferson, “The Life and Morals of Jesus,” in *Jefferson’s Extracts from the Gospels*, ed. Dickinson W. Adams (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 127-298. Jefferson had originally hoped that Joseph Priestly would undertake the task of writing this revisionist Bible, but he passed away before it was completed. See Jefferson to Joseph Priestly, 9 April 1803, in *Jefferson’s Extracts*, 327-29. Although Jefferson did complete the project he chose not to publish it, presumably due to concerns of political prudence.

gospels that included Jesus' moral teachings and actions. All references to miracles, supernatural interventions, and claims to divinity were omitted, including the Resurrection. Though not published in his lifetime, it gives a clear idea of the type of moral and religious instruction that Jefferson favored. He did, however, widely circulate among his friends a prospective syllabus for the study of Christ's life and teachings that shared many themes with his unpublished work on the gospels.⁸⁸

By emphasizing the moral teaching and eschewing the aspects of the gospels he considered unreasonable, Jefferson developed a plan for religious education that would unify its adherents around the common principles of mercy, benevolence, and justice. These virtues would form a foundation around which religious liberty could be preserved while also developing a sense of common purpose. By focusing on the moral teaching of the gospels, Jefferson aimed to provide an education that would transcend religious factionalism and unite individuals to the common goal of preserving liberty and security.

In order to understand how a concern for individual liberty is united with an interest in promoting the common good, it is necessary to examine Jefferson's political thought. It is clear that for Jefferson an education in virtue was necessary to support a republic and to protect individual liberty. In many ways, Jefferson has been depicted as one of the closest heirs to the classical republican tradition. Focusing on his praise for agrarian life, distrust of manufacturing, and belief that only a certain character of citizen is capable of self-government, many scholars have firmly placed Jefferson within the

⁸⁸ Thomas Jefferson, "Syllabus of an Estimate of the merit of the doctrines of Jesus, compared with those of others," in *Jefferson's Extracts*, 332-34.

republican tradition.⁸⁹ Not even Jefferson, however, has escaped the republican-liberal debate. Jefferson's particularly optimistic view of human nature, his acceptance of commercial agriculture, and his dedication to individual rights has also earned him the label of liberal.⁹⁰ To understand Jefferson's political thought it is important to note his use of both the liberal and republican traditions and the evolution of his thought over time.

Jefferson is most popularly known as a patron of agrarian republicanism. Often a point of contention in his political debates, most notably with Alexander Hamilton, Jefferson believed that agrarian life provided the firmest foundation for a virtuous government. As he explains in *Notes*, "I think our governments will remain virtuous for many centuries; as long as they are chiefly agricultural; and this will be as long as there shall be vacant lands in any part of America. When they get piled upon one another in large cities, as in Europe, they will become corrupt as in Europe."⁹¹ For Jefferson, as with most other republican thinkers of the eighteenth century, there was a deep tension between virtue and commerce. Commerce itself was not dangerous to government, but rather the tendency towards wealth and luxury that Jefferson associated with the commercial practice he had observed in Europe. Left unchecked, this commercial spirit would produce a weak and dependent society disposed toward corruption.

⁸⁹ See especially, J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 506-52; see also Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion: Evolution of a Party Ideology* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1980); and Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Williamsburg, VA: Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1980).

⁹⁰ See Appleby, "Republicanism and Ideology;" Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism*; and Kramnick, "Republicanism Revisionism." For a more nuanced analysis, which still places Jefferson in the Machiavellian republican tradition but also acknowledges his debt to Locke, see Paul A. Rahe, "Thomas Jefferson's Machiavellian Political Science," in *Machiavelli's Liberal Republican Legacy*, 208-28.

⁹¹ Jefferson to James Madison, 20 December 1787, in *Portable*, 432.

Jefferson goes one step further than many other republican thinkers of the period, including both Franklin and Paine, in his appraisal of agrarianism. The work associated with agrarian life produces a virtuous character among the people - one that is not found among manufacturers or artisans - and that serves as the foundation for liberty in a republic:

Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people, whose breast he had made his peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue....Dependence begets subservience and venality, suffocates the germ of virtue, and prepares fit tools for the designs of ambition....While we have land to labour then, let us never wish to see our citizens occupied at a work-bench, or twirling a distaff...let our workshops remain in Europe....It is the manners and spirit of a people which preserve a republic in vigour.⁹²

As Jean Yarbrough has rightly argued, Jefferson firmly held that the character of citizens was more important to a republic than was the form of political institutions, and the character of the self-reliant, independent yeoman farmer was celebrated above all others.⁹³ Jefferson was not interested in simply promoting autonomous, economically independent farmers who would merely spend their days in isolation and contemplation. Rather, he expected that citizens who were deeply invested in their property, and whose livelihood depended on their own labor, would be particularly vigilant against any governmental attempts to undermine their personal liberties.

⁹² Jefferson, "Notes," 217.

⁹³ Yarbrough, "The Constitution and Republican Character," 227-31; see also Jean Yarbrough, *American Virtues: Thomas Jefferson on the Character of a Free People* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

Despite emphasizing the virtue of agrarian life, Jefferson did maintain an interest in commerce. In fact, much of the debate over the categorization of Jefferson's thought has revolved around his understanding of commerce. Those who emphasize Jefferson's liberalism have taken the term commerce to mean free enterprise or trade, while those who focus on his republicanism have taken commerce to mean an opposition to a particular type of economic activity that leads to extravagance, dependence, and corruption.⁹⁴ On the whole, we can see that Jefferson actually evolves in his economic thought concerning the relationship of commerce to a well-functioning republic. In his early writings he seems deeply suspicious of the corrupting influence of commerce, deploring the state of manufacturing he saw in Europe and the sloth he associated with city life.⁹⁵ In his later years, however, Jefferson is undeniably open to the utility of commercial projects, particularly commercial farming.

In fact, Jefferson viewed the project of developing commercial and manufacturing opportunities as vital to the stability of the republic. To this end, his interest in extending the territory of the U.S. west of the Mississippi river was rooted in his desire to preserve the unity of the nation.⁹⁶ As Rahe rightly argues, the Louisiana Purchase was undertaken by Jefferson not as a means to secure abundant farm land for western expansion, but rather to secure the Mississippi river as an outlet for exports for

⁹⁴ Banning nicely summarizes the tension in the literature over Jefferson's definition of commerce in "Jeffersonian Ideology Revisited: Liberal and Classical Ideas in the New American Republic," *William and Mary Quarterly* 43 (1986): 7-10.

⁹⁵ He infamously referred to artisans as "the panders of vice," Jefferson to John Jay, 23 August 1785, in *Portable*, 384.

⁹⁶ Jefferson to James Madison, 30 January 1787, *Portable*, 417.

those living in the Ohio Valley.⁹⁷ Moreover, Jefferson later noted that the economic shifts in both America and Europe necessitated the growth of manufacturing in the states. In a letter to Benjamin Austin, Jefferson warns that anyone “who is now against domestic manufacture, must be for reducing us either to dependence on that foreign nation, or to be clothed in skins, and to live like wild beasts...I am not one of these; experience has taught me that manufactures are now as necessary to our independence as to our comfort.”⁹⁸ This is an important and often underemphasized shift for Jefferson, who several decades before had thought the entire spirit of American liberty was rooted in the character of the self-reliant yeoman farmer.

Even so, Jefferson never ceases to praise the virtues that he associated with agrarian life, particularly independence and self-reliance. Fueled by a Machiavellian distrust of those vested with power, Jefferson sought to ensure that individuals would be vigilantly prepared to defend their liberties against encroachments from the government. As Rahe has persuasively argued, Jefferson was “mindful of the Machiavellian dictum that a legislator must presume all men wicked” and “was persuaded that the only way to accomplish this end was to see to it that the American people were never in any fashion sheeplike at all.”⁹⁹ Though Jefferson himself had a particularly optimistic view of human nature, believing in humanity’s innate capacity for virtue and possession of a moral sense, he also acknowledged that individuals must be alerted to the corrupting influence of power.

⁹⁷ Paul A. Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 3: 192.

⁹⁸ Jefferson to Benjamin Austin, 9 January 1816, in *Portable*, 549.

⁹⁹ Rahe, “Jefferson’s Machiavellian Political Science,” 228.

Although Jefferson's thoughts on religion have been dismissed as unsystematic, inconclusive, or as generally unimportant to his political thought, it is clear that Jefferson believed that religion could play an important role in shaping a vigilant spirit of independence among the people. When religious study is delayed, and subjected to the scrutiny of reason, Jefferson believes it will create a spirit of charity and benevolence among the people, rather than the fanaticism and intolerance. Religion tempered by reason provides unrivaled incitements to virtue that can inspire both independence and vigilance. When religious liberty is preserved, Jefferson believes a rational religion can be developed that will still inspire virtue among the people but that will not carry the threats of dogma and persecution. In this way, Jefferson defends a public religion that is suited to developing the character necessary for a free people to defend their republican liberty.

Conclusion

Although dedication to individual liberty and religious toleration is often taken to mean that religious beliefs and discourse have no place in the public square, it is clear from this discussion that Franklin, Paine, and Jefferson share little with this position. Each believes that religious diversity poses no threat to republican liberty, and in fact, that diversity tends to have a moderating effect on religion overall. Each also acknowledges that religion plays an important role in individual's private and public lives, and though they prefer a form of religion tempered by reason, they were unwilling to limit religious liberty. They were primarily interested in finding a way to nurture

humanity's natural impulses toward religion while protecting individual rights and hoped to do this by promoting a mild, reasonable, public religion that celebrated the virtues of liberty and benevolence.

They knew that by preserving individual liberty, it would be more difficult to develop a shared conception of the common good and a spirit of public service, but this was universally considered a risk worth the price. Much as they believed religious coercion never produces true faith, only hypocrisy, so they also argued that coercing the public to accept a common good or general will was a futile endeavor. Though they fully acknowledged that individuals have different interests and passions, they did contend that humans have an innate capacity for virtue that allows them to develop a shared sense of the public good that respects individual liberty and self-interest. Moreover, they each acknowledged that religion can play a formative role in molding good citizens by providing incitements to virtue, particularly dedication to public service. Non-coercive and non-sectarian, this distinct form of public religion was aimed at developing citizens capable of supporting a modern republic, a republic that respects individual liberty but that is capable nonetheless of developing a shared sense of the public good. As Lance Banning has well argued, "Logically, it may be inconsistent to be simultaneously liberal and classical. Historically, it was not."¹⁰⁰ Neither Franklin, Paine, nor Jefferson believed he was being inconsistent in supporting both individual liberty, particularly religious liberty, and a dedication to the common good. They were quick to acknowledge that there were tensions, but they did not think they were incompatible. Insofar as tensions

¹⁰⁰ Banning, "Jeffersonian Ideology," 12.

existed, they believed that a public religion could serve as a unifying force that would rally citizens to the cause of defending republican liberty.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Our challenges may be new. The instruments with which we meet them may be new. But those values upon which our success depends -- hard work and honesty, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism -- these things are old. These things are true. They have been the quiet force of progress throughout our history. What is demanded then is a return to these truths. What is required of us now is a new era of responsibility -- a recognition, on the part of every American, that we have duties to ourselves, our nation and the world; duties that we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task. This is the price and the promise of citizenship. This is the source of our confidence -- the knowledge that God calls on us to shape an uncertain destiny. - Barack Obama, Inaugural Speech

Given contemporary concerns over decreases in civic engagement and political participation, there is little surprise that the civic tradition has received increased attention in recent decades. Even President Obama invoked the civic tradition in his Inaugural Speech, arguing that America's ability to meet the challenges facing modern democracy are dependent on the virtues of its citizens. Such calls for citizens to pay renewed attention to their communal duties and responsibilities are frequent among politicians and scholars alike. Nevertheless, these commentators face the difficult theoretical and practical task of balancing efforts to encourage collective responsibility against claims of individual rights.

The question of how to achieve this balance was at the center of the work of many advocates of the civic tradition in the eighteenth century, who aimed to promote virtuous behavior and encourage communal duties while protecting individual liberty. For these thinkers, religion played an important role in shaping their understanding of

both civic virtue and individual liberty, and it is often their emphasis on the role of religion in fostering virtue that allows them to unite their liberal and republican concerns. Nevertheless, the importance of religion to the civic tradition has often been underemphasized or outright rejected. Even when the importance of religion has been acknowledged, it has most often been reduced to a discussion of either the Judeo-Christian tradition or civil religion. In this dissertation, I have argued that religion did shape ideas of civic virtue and citizenship in the Scottish Enlightenment and the American Founding. Moreover, I have argued that the influence of religion is neither monolithic nor self-evident. In order to understand how religion shaped this tradition, it is necessary to take into account that different conceptions of religion produce different understandings of what it means to be a good citizen.

Among the Scottish and American thinkers I have surveyed, there is a great deal of consistency regarding the place of religion in the civic tradition. First, each of these thinkers agrees that religion can and should serve the political ends of the state by encouraging citizens to look beyond their own particularized interests to support the public good. Second, there is general agreement that religion provides an unrivaled motivation to virtuous behavior. The promise of an eternal state of rewards and punishments provides an incitement to virtue that is not matched by self-interest, or any other means of promoting virtuous behavior. Third, there is consensus that religion inspires not only private virtues that are related to personal salvation, but also public virtues that encourage individuals to support the common good, to be benevolent to members of their community, and to be active participants in their government.

One of the most distinctive features of the eighteenth-century civic tradition is the effort to develop a new understanding of civic virtue that is compatible with self-interest. Following J.G.A. Pocock, Gordon Wood, and Paul Rahe, among others, this research supports the conclusion that during this period the classical republican understanding of the relationship between virtue and self-interest was largely rejected. Rather than presuming that individuals are wholly or even predominately self-interested, the thinkers surveyed in this research build upon Francis Hutcheson's argument that benevolence forms the foundation for virtuous behavior. Benevolence causes individuals to support the common good, even when it conflicts with their own self-interest. Beginning from the position that self-interest is not necessarily inimical to the common good, each of these thinkers also emphasizes the importance of several virtues including industry, frugality, and temperance. While these particular virtues are often viewed as private virtues, they argued that these virtues encourage citizens to work hard and have the added benefit of contributing to individual wealth. The modern advocates of the civic tradition do not share the same inherent skepticism of affluence that marked the classical republican tradition. When tempered by these moderating virtues, these thinkers argue that wealth actually supports the common good by contributing to the national economy and also provides more opportunities for individuals to engage in charitable giving.

One of the biggest points of departure between the modern civic tradition and the classical republican tradition concerns which civic virtues are necessary to ensure that individuals place the common interest above their own self-interest. While the classical tradition emphasized the virtues of courage, honor, and martial prowess, the advocates of

the civic tradition in the eighteenth century are more focused on the virtues of benevolence, industry, and frugality. Among the thinkers surveyed in this work, Adam Ferguson alone continues to maintain the importance of the classical virtues of courage and honor. He contends that these virtues make individuals more willing to sacrifice and be actively engaged in their communities and government. Only John Adams comes close to Ferguson's acceptance of the classical republican tradition by championing the virtue of honor, but Adams emphasizes the importance of honor as a way to encourage the natural aristocracy into public service. Despite this movement away from the classical virtues, there is a consensus that the classical republican tradition correctly emphasized the importance of civic engagement as the only way to ensure that government functions properly and protects the liberty of the people.

Religion plays a critical role in the eighteenth-century civic tradition because it encourages citizens to look beyond their particular self-interest to the interest of their community. In short, religion serves as a link between private and public virtues so that to be a good person is to also be a good citizen and to serve one's community is to serve God. Hence, religion eases the tension between private, self-interest and the public interest. However, there is much debate over how religion should be used to further civic ends and the character of that religion. Easily the most disputed civic virtue is piety, as there is little agreement over whether individuals must be pious in order to be good citizens. For Hutcheson, Witherspoon, and Adams, piety encourages citizens to look beyond their own narrow and particularized interests to support the common good by fulfilling their duties to one another and to God. By encouraging religious belief and

religious virtues, they expect to cultivate better citizens who are more civically engaged. The virtue of piety is conspicuously absent, however, in the writings of Ferguson, Franklin, Paine, and Jefferson. Although each argues that religious belief can serve the ends of the state, they never suggest that piety, at least as understood as an outward profession of religious faith, is necessary to being a good citizen.

Nevertheless, there is overwhelming agreement among these thinkers that most people need religion in order to be properly motivated toward virtuous actions. Few are willing to go so far as to say that religious belief is irrelevant, and there is consensus that atheism generally has a pernicious effect on society. While Franklin and Jefferson are willing to entertain the possibility of a virtuous atheist, even they concede that such a person would be a rarity. On the whole, each of these thinkers argues that combating atheism and irreligion is in the state's interest because of the corrupting effect these beliefs may have on individuals' willingness to support the common good.

In order to promote civic virtue, each of the writers examined in this study agrees that a proper education is necessary and that religion must play a role in this instruction, but there is disagreement over exactly what form this education should take. Hutcheson, Witherspoon, and Adams argue that the state should support religious instruction and directly encourage religious belief as a matter of civil interest. Ferguson is less specific, but given his insistence that knowledge of providential order is essential for good citizens, it is reasonable to conclude that he would support some form of religious education. Franklin, Paine, and Jefferson all emphasize the importance of using religion

to teach good morals, but they all consciously stop short of arguing that the aim of this education is to promote religious faith.

One of struggles in which each of these thinkers engages is over how to promote civic virtue while protecting individual liberty. There is no dispute that religious liberty is important, and everyone emphasizes that liberty of conscience must be protected, but there is disagreement over the type of beliefs that deserve protection. As noted above, atheism does not necessarily fall under the category of protected beliefs for most of these thinkers. Moreover, they do not share contemporary concerns that freedom of religion means that religious beliefs and discourse have no place in the public square. For Hutcheson, Witherspoon, and Adams, individuals have a firm right to believe and worship as they please, but the government also has the right to encourage religious belief. They saw no tension between having the government promote religious faith while protecting individual religious liberty. In contrast, Ferguson, Franklin, Paine, and Jefferson never suggest that government should promote religious faith, only knowledge of religion and civic virtue generally.

In a clear break from the classical republican tradition, each of these authors knew that by protecting individual liberty, especially freedom of religion, it would be more difficult to develop a shared conception of the common good, but this was considered a price worth paying. Forcing individuals to hold a particular set of religious beliefs was regarded as counter-productive, and most feared that it might actually lead to vicious behavior and disrespect for the government and laws. Though they accepted that individuals have different passions and interests, they believed that all individuals have a

capacity for virtue that can be encouraged through government action. By promoting civic virtue, especially by providing a solid moral foundation in religious education, they argued that it is possible to develop a shared sense of the public good that respects individual interests and liberty. They believed that religion provides an unrivaled incitement to virtue that encourages individuals to be civically engaged, respect the rights of others, and support the common good.

Contemporary efforts to reinvigorate the civic tradition emphasize the importance of encouraging civic engagement, cultivating civic virtue, and promoting the common good, but the compatibility of the civic and liberal traditions remains a concern. Liberalism guarantees a right to pursue one's own conception of the good life, and this is often taken to mean that the government has no legitimate interest in the character of its citizens. Yet, this study suggests a strong historical justification for government promoting religion. In contrast, advocates of republican revivalism at times seem to privilege the importance of the political life so much that they may neglect the value of private life and associations. Nevertheless, the historical examples provided here demonstrate a dedication to balancing the state's political interest in promoting the public good with individual's private interests. The key debate then, as it often is in contemporary discussions, concerns finding ways to encourage communal responsibility while protecting individual liberty. To speak of a liberal republican government, one that protects individual rights and nurtures the character of its citizens, is not an oxymoron, but it is a balancing act.

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VITA

Name: Christie LeAnn Maloyed

Address: Texas A&M University, Department of Political Science, 2010 Allen Building, TAMU 4348, College Station, TX 77843

Email Address: clmaloyed@polisci.tamu.edu

Education: B.A., Political Science, Emory & Henry College, 2004
Ph.D., Political Science, Texas A&M University, 2010