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## John Witherspoon and Reformed Orthodoxy: Reason, Revelation, and the American Founding

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JOHN WITHERSPOON AND REFORMED ORTHODOXY:  
REASON, REVELATION, AND THE AMERICAN FOUNDING

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
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in

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by  
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## ABSTRACT

There has been a revival of interest in the last couple of decades on two intersecting topics—the political theory and importance of the “forgotten” American founder and Reformed minister, John Witherspoon, and the natural theology and natural law in the Reformed theological tradition. Witherspoon, as president of Princeton, had much to say about natural theology and natural law, and many scholars have attempted to understand his relationship to Enlightenment thought and Christian orthodoxy, yet there has been no attempt by scholars to bring recent scholarship on Reformed theology to bear on our understanding of his thought. The dominant view in the literature is that Witherspoon’s view and use of natural theology, natural law, reason and philosophy indicate a compromise or inconsistency with his otherwise theological Reformed Orthodoxy—a move towards a type of “enlightened orthodoxy” or “Christian rationalism.” After reviewing the primary and secondary sources, I contend that the literature is in need of significant correction. I provide here both a corrective and contribute to the literature by showing that Witherspoon’s thought on these subjects—which, broadly speaking, concerns the relationship of reason to revelation—is consistent with Reformed Orthodoxy. I further argue that Reformed Orthodoxy, when properly understood, permitted Witherspoon and the other orthodox Founders to participate in and give approval of the various founding events and documents of the Founding era without violating their theological principles.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been a revival of interest in the last couple of decades on two intersecting topics—the political theory and importance of the “forgotten” American founder and Reformed<sup>1</sup> minister, John Witherspoon (1723-1794), and the natural theology and natural law in the Reformed theological tradition.<sup>2</sup> Witherspoon, as president of Princeton,<sup>3</sup> had much to say about natural theology and natural law, and many scholars have attempted to understand his relationship to Enlightenment thought and Christian orthodoxy, yet there has no attempt by scholars to bring recent scholarship on Reformed theology to bear on our understanding of his thought.<sup>4</sup> The dominant view in the literature is that Witherspoon’s view and use of natural theology, natural law, reason and philosophy indicate a compromise or inconsistency with his otherwise theological Reformed Orthodoxy—a move towards a type of “enlightened orthodoxy” or “Christian rationalism.” After reviewing the primary and secondary sources, I contend that contemporary scholarship is in need of significant correction. I provide here both a corrective and contribute to the literature by showing that Witherspoon’s thought on these subjects—which,

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<sup>1</sup> I use the words “Reformed” and “Calvinist” interchangeably.

<sup>2</sup> For recent scholarship in natural law and natural theology in the Reformed tradition see Stephen J. Grabill *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006); David VanDrunen *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010); Richard Muller *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University press, 2003) and *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003) and John Patrick Donnelly *Calvinism and Scholasticism in Vermigli’s Doctrine of Man and Grace* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> Princeton University, originally named College of New Jersey in 1746, was renamed in 1896. I refer to the college as “Princeton” throughout the thesis.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey H. Morrison compares Witherspoon’s political with Calvinist political theory, but not in terms of reason and revelation. See *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 81.

broadly speaking, concerns the relationship of reason to revelation<sup>5</sup>—is consistent with Reformed Orthodoxy.

## I. Introduction and summary of the argument

Scholars have long considered Witherspoon to be an enigma. Setting aside the issue at hand, all recognize that he was theologically orthodox throughout his life.<sup>6</sup> He did not succumb to the popularity of Arminianism, nor does he show influence from the theology of the Socinians, Unitarians, and deists, all of which increased in legitimacy in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. He remained committed to the Reformed faith to the end. However, most scholars allege a certain inconsistency in his thought. Despite being a fierce critic of the so-called “Moderates” of Scotland during his career in Scotland for their elitism and cozy relationship with Enlightenment philosophers (such as David Hume), Witherspoon adopted, many say, an Enlightenment or naturalistic approach to morality and appropriated many popular ideas among the intellectual elite of his time soon after he arrived in America. His *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, the capstone lecture series for all his graduating students at Princeton (of which Witherspoon was the president throughout the Founding era), was an “inquiry into the nature and grounds of moral obligation *by reason, as distinct from revelation.*”<sup>7</sup> Contained in the *Lectures* are the ideas of Thomas Reid, Francis Hutcheson, John Locke and others; and his outline is likely borrowed from

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<sup>5</sup> In this essay, “reason” is any philosophical inquiry apart from revelation, such as natural law reasoning. Though admittedly not precise, by “revelation” I refer to *special* revelation i.e., scriptural revelation. Technically, in Reformed Orthodoxy reason is an inquiry concerning *natural* revelation, since God has revealed himself as Creator in nature. But I follow convention and Witherspoon’s terminology by using “revelation” for special/scriptural revelation.

<sup>6</sup> By “orthodox,” I refer to Reformed Orthodoxy, which includes the historic positions of Christianity as expressed by the Apostles, Nicene, and Caledonian creeds plus the distinctive Calvinist doctrines (covenantalism, the “five points” of Calvinism, sovereignty of God, etc.).

<sup>7</sup> John Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, Edited by Jack Scott (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1982), 64. I refer to these lectures as simply “*Lectures*” throughout the paper.

Hutcheson's *System of Moral Philosophy*.<sup>8</sup> In the final lecture, Witherspoon mentions a few "considerable authors," such as Gottfried Leibnitz, Samuel Clarke, David Hume, and the "deistical writers." To most scholars, Witherspoon's approach contradicts the traditional Calvinist doctrines of *sola scriptura* and total depravity, both which preclude, they claim, natural law reasoning, the development of a natural theology, the legitimacy of the use of reason apart from revelation, and the legitimacy of philosophy. For the good Calvinist, scriptural revelation<sup>9</sup> is the *exclusive* and *sufficient* source for Christian duty in both ethics and politics. Natural reason is, at best, superfluous and likely dangerous. Scholars conclude that Witherspoon is inconsistent, even "philosophically schizophrenic," as one recently put it.<sup>10</sup>

This paper shows that these scholars are mistaken. Witherspoon's approach or method of inquiry is consistent with the Reformed tradition. I have the following theses: 1. Witherspoon understands reason and philosophy to be *ancillary*, *confirmatory*, and *supportive* of special revelation, not above special revelation or the rule of revelation, and therefore he is consistent with the Reformed theological tradition. 2. Witherspoon's understanding of the limits of reason, namely, that reason is limited to inquiry concerning natural objects (not supernatural ones, such as the Trinity), is consistent with the Reformed tradition. 3. Witherspoon's construction of a system of natural theology, his use of natural law reasoning, and his offering proofs or evidence apart from special revelation for both the existence of God and certain doctrines of natural

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<sup>8</sup> Jack Scott, "Introduction," in *Lectures on Moral Philosophy (Lectures)*, 27-28. He notes, however, that "Witherspoon's ethical philosophy owes more to [Joseph] Butler [1692-1752] than to any other thinker," 37-38.

<sup>9</sup> "Scriptural revelation" is the in-scripturated word of God – God's message to man in the form of the written word. Most Protestants believe that the "deposit of faith" has been exclusively and sufficiently deposited in the form of the written word. There is no other equal authority, nor another deposit from which one can encounter or discover the doctrines of faith.

<sup>10</sup> Gregg Frazer, *The Religious Beliefs of America's Founders: Reason, Revelation, and Revolution* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 41.

religion (e.g., the immortality of the soul and that God desires and ought to be worshiped) do not violate the Reformed tradition. 4. Witherspoon intentionally safeguards supernatural truths from the standards of reason, sharing the primary concern of Reformed theologians that reason not be the standard by which supernatural truth is judged. 5. Witherspoon's Reformed framework for understanding reason and revelation makes possible, without any unprincipled compromise of this theological convictions, constructive participation with less-than-orthodox colleagues in the American founding

I support these positions below with a concise discussion on the Reformed theological development of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, often named "Reformed scholasticism," and an analysis of the theology of Genevan theologian Bénédict Pictet (1655–1724), a theologian Witherspoon studied while at the University of Edinburgh and whose principal text on theology, *Christian Theology*,<sup>11</sup> Witherspoon kept in his personal library throughout his life.<sup>12</sup> I then analyze the works of Witherspoon, focusing primarily on his *Lectures* and his *Lectures on Divinity*, showing that Witherspoon, far from being an adherent of "enlightened orthodoxy" or an unprincipled compromiser of his theological tradition, is consistent, at least formally, with the Reformed tradition on the relationship of reason and revelation. Understanding this consistency explains how he and other orthodox Founders could participate constructively in the Founding and it allows a unique and nuanced perspective on the issue of Christianity's relationship to the Founding.

Clearing up this confusion on Witherspoon's thought is important for a few reasons. This study is best viewed as a case study for a more general argument that one could equally and

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<sup>11</sup> Benedict Pictet, *Christian Theology*, Translated by Frederick Reyroux (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1834). From here on, I refer to this text as *CT*.

<sup>12</sup> See Scott, "Appendix 2," in *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, 201.

successfully apply to other key Founders, such as James Wilson, John Jay, Roger Sherman, and many others.<sup>13</sup> Given this lineup of orthodox Reformed and important participants in the American founding, the general argument, if successful, calls into question popular theses on the American founding, represented in recent works of Michael Zuckert,<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Lynerd,<sup>15</sup> Gregg Frazer,<sup>16</sup> and Matthew Stewart.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, if I am correct, then these works contain significant misunderstandings and poor interpretations of both the Reformed tradition and the religious beliefs of many Founders. This study of Witherspoon, then, is a case study pointing to the need for a substantial revision of much of the current scholarship on religion and the Founding. The set of problems in the scholarship on Witherspoon is a microcosm of a much broader misunderstanding.

Moreover, as a delegate to the Second Continental Congress, signer of the Declaration of Independence, signer of the Articles of Confederation, and an active supporter of the Constitution, Witherspoon's own participation in the Founding makes him an important Founder. He was also in a position to influence, perhaps better than anyone, many in the Founding era and beyond. Jeffry Morrison compiled a list of the government positions held by Witherspoon's former students:

The list of his Princeton graduates reads like a roll of early American notables. Among these were twelve members of the Continental Congress; five delegates to the Constitutional Convention; one U.S. president (Madison); a vice president (the notorious Aaron Burr); forty-nine U.S. representatives; twenty-eight U.S. senators; three Supreme

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<sup>13</sup> See Mark David Hall's list of Reformed or "Calvinist" founders in *Roger Sherman and the Creation of the American Republic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 9.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Zuckert, "Natural Rights and Protestant Politics," in *Protestantism and the American Founding* Edited by Thomas S. Engeman and Michael P. Zuckert. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin T. Lynerd, *Republican Theology: The Civil Religion of American Evangelicals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>16</sup> Frazer, *The Religious Beliefs of America's Founders*.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew Stewart, *Nature's God: The Heretical Origins of the American Republic* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014).

Court justices; eight U.S. district judges; one secretary of state; three attorneys general; and two foreign ministers.<sup>18</sup>

He had the respect of John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Rush, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington. Indeed, “Witherspoon’s contemporaries...ranked him high among that generation we call the founders.”<sup>19</sup> Highlighting Witherspoon’s influence on James Madison, Douglass Adair even claimed that “since James Madison became one of the chief architects of our political democracy...his sojourn at Nassau Hall under the tutelage of the learned Dr. John Witherspoon was of incalculable importance to the destiny of the United States.”<sup>20</sup> This is likely an exaggeration, since Madison never refers to Witherspoon as an influence on his political thought. Still, Witherspoon as a college president was in one of the best positions to directly and personally shape the thought of Madison and the Founding generation. If college professors influence their students, it is hard to deny that Witherspoon had some influence on his.

The nature and extent of that influence is hard to trace, and the point of this study is not to determine clear influence. The issue I directly address is whether Witherspoon’s capstone lecture series advocated an approach to questions of theology, morality, and politics that contradicts Reformed Orthodoxy. Do the arguments and content of *Lectures*, when properly understood, lead one necessarily to reject the Reformed Orthodox (and, generally speaking, Protestant orthodox) view of the relationship of reason and revelation? If *Lectures* does not lead to such a rejection, then those who heard them came to reject Reformed Orthodoxy followed their intellectual path for another reason. If my argument is correct, then rejecting Reformed

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<sup>18</sup> Morrison, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 13.

<sup>20</sup> See *Fame and the Founding Fathers*, Edited by Trevor Colbourn (New York: W. W. Norton, 1974), 124. Quoted in Morrison, 14.

Orthodoxy on the relationship of reason and revelation does not follow from hearing and studying *Lectures*.

When Reformed Orthodoxy is properly understood, it becomes clear that nothing that Witherspoon does in his lectures should lead one to reject orthodox faith. I show below that Calvinists can legitimately use reason and philosophy to construct a system of natural theology and a system of natural law and can affirm a universal moral sense and universal set of ethics for both the Christian and non-Christian—all apart from any appeal to revelation. Reformed Orthodox Christians both *can* and *did* such inquiry without violating theological principles. Far from advocating for a type of compromised faith, Witherspoon’s arguments in *Lectures* actually show how a Reformed Christian could consistently participate in the Founding using exclusively natural law arguments, could deliberate on these arguments with heterodox<sup>21</sup> colleagues, and could share positions on natural theology and natural law with the heterodox without accepting any *unprincipled* compromises.

## II. Literature Review

The scholarship on Witherspoon’s understanding of the relationship of reason and revelation has two tendencies: either scholars fail to address the relationship or they claim that Witherspoon’s appeal to reason apart from revelation is inconsistent with Reformed Orthodoxy. Morrison, despite producing a fine and useful treatment of Witherspoon’s political theory, does not address the issue. Nor does Varnum Collins, in his 20<sup>th</sup> century biography of Witherspoon,

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<sup>21</sup> By “heterodoxy” here and throughout this paper, I refer to deviations from historic Christian orthodoxy as codified by the various widely recognized and accepted creeds of the Christian theological tradition (e.g., the Apostles’, Nicene, and Chalcedonian creeds). Anti-trinitarianism and denying the deity of Christ (traditionally understood), then, are heterodox positions.

mention the problem.<sup>22</sup> The works that do raise the issue and claim inconsistency rarely provide any discussion on the Calvinist view of reason and revelation and rely largely on assumptions. In particular, they rely on this crucial assumption: that the Reformed tradition includes a rejection of reason and philosophy and requires a strictly biblicist<sup>23</sup> understanding of faith, ethics, and political theory. The Bible (or scriptural special revelation) exclusively contains the duties of man to God and to man. Frazer discusses at length the religious beliefs of certain, though not all, key Founders (including Witherspoon), and yet he fails to provide any discussion on the relationship of reason and revelation in the Reformed tradition. He assumes that Witherspoon's "set[ting] aside the Scriptures" to do philosophy means that he has "succumbed to the [Enlightenment] spirit of the age."<sup>24</sup> All but a few works that discuss Witherspoon's philosophy fail to provide sufficient justification for the claim that the Reformed tradition rejects reason, natural law, natural theology, philosophy, universal moral sense, etc.

One of the central claims of scholars is that Witherspoon's political and moral thought has "a frankly naturalistic bias" that lacks a "genuinely Christian approach to public life."<sup>25</sup> His attempt to develop a moral system from nature admitted, says Noll et al., that "the Christian God [did not] have a specific role to play in public life, where the rule of nature prevailed."<sup>26</sup> Looking to nature was the approach of the deist and the "theistic rationalist," to use Frazer's label. For

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<sup>22</sup> Varnum Lansing Collins, *President Witherspoon* (New York: Arno Press, 1969).

<sup>23</sup> Biblicism, simply put, is the view that the Bible is not only the principal and sufficient source of duty, but the exclusive source. This usually entails the rejection of any epistemic common ground between believer and non-believer. Though popular today among the Reformed Christian community, it is not the dominant position of the Reformed tradition.

<sup>24</sup> Frazer, 46. Frazer is the worst offended in this regard. His entire book, though filled with interesting details on the religious views of the founders and a useful corrective to those who would simplistically declare the Founding to be secular or Christian, purports to show that many of the Founders violated their Christian theological tradition, yet he provides no discussion on the relationship of reason and revelation in the Protestant tradition.

<sup>25</sup> Mark A. Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, and George M. Marsden, *The Search for Christian America* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1983), 90.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 91.

both Jack Scott and Frazer, it is his *approach* to moral thought that is inconsistent with his orthodoxy. As Frazer writes, “Witherspoon’s emphasis was on *method or approach or how* to think about religion and politics—and his approach was decidedly rationalistic and naturalistic.”<sup>27</sup> Scott agrees: “Throughout the *Lectures* Witherspoon employs reason with a confidence atypical of earlier Calvinism. He reflects a phenomenon of his time: rationalism had entered the house of Calvinism.”<sup>28</sup> To Frazer, this creates a certain irreconcilable division in his thought between “Witherspoon the Calvinist” and “Witherspoon the rationalist and naturalist.” No Calvinist, according to him, would look to nature, without the immediate lens of scripture, to discover moral truths. “Unlike many Christian authors before him,” Frazer writes, “Witherspoon did not see full employment of man’s fallen reason as an inherently flawed path to knowledge or as a threat to revelation.”<sup>29</sup> The crucial premise for these critiques of Witherspoon is that nature has little to no role in Reformed theological ethics. In order for the “Christian God” to have a role in public life, all duties must come exclusively from scripture; only in scripture does one find the Christian God. The god of nature is the god of the deists. The ethics of scripture abrogates, supersedes and, seemingly, destroys natural law. The law of God is not found in, nor accessible from, nature; and the moral law of scripture is not the same in substance as that found in nature. Nature is nothing but red in tooth and claw. These are the assumptions, at least, of Witherspoon’s recent interpreters.

Scholars also claim that since Witherspoon held positions in common with certain heterodox writers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, he must have adhered to a type of enlightened orthodoxy.

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<sup>27</sup> Frazer, 40.

<sup>28</sup> Scott, “Introduction,” 39-40.

<sup>29</sup> Frazer, 42. One would like to know who these “Christian authors” are. Frazer, unfortunately, provides no such discussion.

Scott, for example, points out that Witherspoon had similar positions as the heterodox writers Samuel Clarke and William Wollaston on reason as confirmatory of revelation.<sup>30</sup> Frazer compares Witherspoon with the heterodox minister Joseph Priestley (1733-1804), arguing that since “reason was the source” to understand the “Divine Being” in Witherspoon’s *Lectures*, it is “quite similar to that of other rationalists.”<sup>31</sup>

Another political theorist, Benjamin Lynerd, in his book titled *Republican Theology: The Civil Religion of American Evangelicals*, takes aim at Witherspoon, arguing that “traditional Calvinism” conflicts with the republican principle of public moral virtue that he came to accept.<sup>32</sup> In republican political theory, he writes, “free citizens must be privately virtuous in order to maintain their republic.”<sup>33</sup> But this conflicts with the Calvinist doctrines of sin and grace. The Fall made man, in the words of Calvin and quoted by Lynerd, “captive by the yoke of sin.” Only the “gospel of grace” brings about better public behavior. All other “[a]ttempts to behave better are futile and beside the point: what a sinner needs is restoration with God, available only through faith in Jesus.”<sup>34</sup> The development of a republican theology requires the Calvinist to compromise his view on the effects of the Fall. For this reason, Calvinism “not only undermines the project of moral reform, it also undermines republicanism itself.”<sup>35</sup> Lynerd assumes (since he does not provide an analysis of the Reformed tradition) that traditional Calvinists view sinners as incapable of cherishing and preserving society, producing civil order,

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<sup>30</sup> Scott, 39. Below I argue that this view, when reason is set within certain bound, is indeed the Reformed position. Revelation completes and assumes reason.

<sup>31</sup> Frazer, 42. Though Frazer does recognize that “Witherspoon, like Priestley and the theistic rationalists, did see a role for revelation in understanding God.”

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin T. Lynerd *Republican Theology: The Civil Religion of American Evangelicals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, 48.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

and comprehending the principles of just laws. A republican theology cannot include the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity.

Lynerd identifies John Witherspoon as a clear unprincipled compromiser. Witherspoon's most popular work against the Moderates was the satirical book, *Ecclesiastical Characteristics*,<sup>36</sup> which Lynerd calls an "evangelical manifesto" for its insistence that "Christians cannot confess faith in the gospel *and* in the doctrine of moral sense."<sup>37</sup> In the pamphlet, Witherspoon rejects moral sense philosophy, according to Lynerd, because it requires Calvinists to compromise the doctrine of moral depravity. Lynerd writes, "Moral sense theory stages too many departures from the gospel—on the presence of evil in the world, on its dominion over the human heart, and on the need for divine redemption—for there to be any comfortable degree of compatibility."<sup>38</sup> In other words, if one has knowledge of moral truth and can achieve a degree of it apart from special grace and scriptural revelation, then one cannot be utterly depraved. Since Calvinists reject the consequent, they must reject the antecedent. This explains, to Lynerd's mind, why Witherspoon the uncompromising Calvinist attacked Hutcheson and the Moderates during his Scotland career.<sup>39</sup>

Lynerd makes much of the apparent differences between Witherspoon's Scotland and American careers, aligning Witherspoon with traditional Calvinism in the former and compromised Calvinism in the latter. To Lynerd's mind, the contradictions in his two careers

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<sup>36</sup> John Witherspoon, *The Selected Writings of John Witherspoon*, ed. Thomas Miller (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> It is unlikely, however, that Witherspoon held to such a view of depravity; and his "Ecclesiastical Characteristics" does not argue for such a position. Daniel Howe, rightly states, "Significantly what Witherspoon most disliked about the Moderates was not their use of reason but their sentimentality and indulgent attitude toward human emotions and failing." Daniel W Howe. "John Witherspoon and the Transatlantic Enlightenment," in *The Atlantic Enlightenment*. Edited by Susan Manning and Francis D. Cogliano. (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008), 37.

demonstrate the type of conflict on public morality between Enlightenment thought and Reformed Orthodoxy that forced upon the orthodox unprincipled compromises necessary for the acceptance of “republican theology.” Shortly after arriving in America, Witherspoon makes an apparent shift from criticizing philosophers and ministers such as Hutcheson to appropriating and teaching their thought in America, perhaps in the interests of adopting “republican theology.” By doing so, Witherspoon changed his views on reason and philosophy, argues Lynerd. In *Lectures*, for example, Witherspoon writes, “the whole of Scripture is perfectly agreeable to sound philosophy.”<sup>40</sup> Lynerd declares this to be nothing less than “strik[ing] a deal with [Francis] Hutcheson....The compromise goes like this: Witherspoon now accepts the essential capacity of the human to know the way of virtue.”<sup>41</sup> Witherspoon seems to affirm what he spent his early career in Scotland attacking: He now believes that the accessibility of natural knowledge concerning civic virtue has not been entirely destroyed by the fall and that man is not devoid of the light of reason. “Traditional Calvinism,” Lynerd tells us, taught the opposite: man could not know virtue apart from special grace, let alone have the ability to conduct oneself in accordance with virtue. Witherspoon compromised his Reformed Orthodoxy.

As with Lynerd, the crucial issue with many scholars is the Reformed doctrine of total depravity, which precludes, they claim, any trust in reason, even for ethics (let alone a robust natural theology). Calvinists do not appeal to nature and the created order, for they believe in the doctrine of *natura deleta*; that is, nature has been destroyed by man’s fallenness.<sup>42</sup> Natural law is no longer accessible apart from revelation. Man can rely only on special, salvific grace, not nature to guide his steps. Scott argues that early Calvinism (that is, the Calvinism before it was

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<sup>40</sup> Witherspoon, *Lectures*, 65.

<sup>41</sup> Lynerd, 85.

<sup>42</sup> See Grabill, 56 for a description and critique of this understanding of Calvinism.

“modified” by the Enlightenment) did not place “confidence...in the reason of man.” He cites Cotton Mather, a *New Light* minister, who claimed that moral philosophy reduced “infidelity to a system.”<sup>43</sup> Frazer states that “Witherspoon put great confidence in man’s reason and its power to understand God. Rather than appealing to Genesis, his argument for the ‘belief of a Divine being’ is that it was ‘well supported by the clearest reason.’”<sup>44</sup> Frazer goes so far to say, though clearly false, that Witherspoon thought that the “discoveries of reason were infallible.” Since Witherspoon adopts the approach of Enlightenment thinkers—the use of “conscience enlightened by reason [and] experience”—he contradicted the alleged Reformed Orthodox position which rejects the use of reason and appeal to natural law as a means by which one confirms, supports, or discovers moral truths.

Elizabeth Flower and Murray Murphy even think that Witherspoon’s theological orthodoxy and philosophical approach are so far apart that he, when having his Enlightenment hat on, denied moral depravity:

The whole argument evidences Witherspoon’s belief in the harmony of the moral order, God’s will, public interest, and private happiness, as well as in the workings of our affections and sentiments of approbation to reinforce one another in right decision. Thus we are not depraved by original sin, but are competent to see and correct our own departures from original purity, and, by inference, to mold and remake our institutions by choice.<sup>45</sup>

A certain harmony in the natural order—the ability for a community and individuals to have honesty, civility, and correct behavior—indicates that humans have an “original purity.” They conclude that “there is a question of consistency between [Witherspoon’s] ethical and theological views.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Scott, “Introduction,” 39.

<sup>44</sup> Frazer, 42.

<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth Flower and Murray G. Murphy *A History of Philosophy in America* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, (1977), 235.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 234.

The Flower and Murphy commentary is just one example of how even the best of scholars are puzzled by Witherspoon's seemingly incoherent belief system. Even Noll et al., who are all conservative Christians, see a "background conflict between conservative theology and Enlightenment philosophy which the Princeton professor never synthesized...From the very beginning, he attempted to live in two different, but not unrelated camps: Federal theology and Enlightenment philosophy."<sup>47</sup> There is an absolute Enlightenment/Calvinist dichotomy presented in the literature: there is no kind of Venn diagram with overlapping objects of reason between the Christian and non-Christian. The two are diametrically opposed. Witherspoon had to have, according to the literature, two conflicting hats, wearing one or the other depending on what role in which he found himself.

Daniel Howe and John G. West are the only two scholars I have found who have attempted to resolve the seeming inconsistencies. Howe rightly recognizes that the Genevan Calvinist theologian Benedict Pictet, whose thought I describe in the next section, had a significant influence upon Witherspoon. "Pictet emphasized," Howe writes, "much as Witherspoon did later, the harmony between reason and revelation."<sup>48</sup> Though I dispute Howe's reading of Pictet as an early transitional theologian away from Reformed Orthodoxy, he is correct to link Witherspoon with Pictet. As I show below, Pictet taught, much like his Reformed predecessors, that there is harmony and complementarity between reason and revelation, permitting the type of inquiry Witherspoon conducted in *Lectures*. West's chapter on religion and the American Founding in *The Politics of Revelation and Reason* is generally consistent with my account.<sup>49</sup> He shows that a few of the

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<sup>47</sup> Noll, et al., 88-89. Quoted in Frazer, 41.

<sup>48</sup> Daniel W Howe. "John Witherspoon and the Transatlantic Enlightenment," in *The Atlantic Enlightenment*. Edited by Susan Manning and Francis D. Cogliano. (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008), 37.

<sup>49</sup> John G. West, Jr. *The Politics of Revelation and Reason: Religion and Civic Life in the New Nation* ((Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996).

Founders, including James Wilson and John Witherspoon, believed in a “framework” for the relationship of reason and revelation that “was thoroughly consistent with the historic Christian conception of natural law”.<sup>50</sup> West, however, does not go in any detail on this “historic Christian conception,” leaving the reader uninformed on whether the Reformed theological tradition is outside historic Christianity on this matter. I clarify the relationship of the Reformed tradition to this conception, showing consistency and continuity.

As mentioned above, many scholars think that Witherspoon had a conversion to an “enlightened orthodoxy” sometime around becoming president of Princeton. *Ecclesiastical Characteristics*, in which he sought satirically to “open the mystery of moderation”<sup>51</sup> to his readers, made him quite popular in Scotland, and he became one of the leading clergymen opposed to the Moderate movement. The Moderates were Scottish clergymen, influenced by Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Earl of Shaftesbury (1671 – 1713), who, among other things, thought that aesthetic education was essential to good morals. Hutcheson followed Shaftesbury’s thought and systematized it, arguing that aesthetics and morality led them, as Witherspoon characterized it, to “despise” the “inclinations of the common people.”<sup>52</sup> As Thomas Miller points out, Witherspoon “criticized the aestheticism and moralism of Hutcheson and Shaftesbury because he saw how it could lead educated leaders in practice to assume that they knew better than the public.”<sup>53</sup> His main accusation was that the Moderates were elitists and used this self-assumed status to justify certain authoritarian practices, such as denying local parishes the right

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, 43.

<sup>51</sup> Witherspoon, “Ecclesiastical Characteristics of, The Arcana of Church Policy,” *Selected Works*, Edited by Thomas Miller (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 57.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid*, 84.

<sup>53</sup> Miller, “Introduction,” to *Selected Works*, 13. He continues, “...and he spoke for the rights of the public not because he was a radical democrat but because he was a religious conservative concerned with practical public piety, which he was a essential to spiritual and economic prosperity.” Pg. 14.

to accept or deny ministers. The Moderates were also too accepting of the mechanistic philosophy of the “infidels.” In *Ecclesiastical Characteristics*, Witherspoon constructs an “Athenian Creed,” which attributes to the Moderates the belief that the “universe is a huge machine, wound up from everlasting by necessity.”<sup>54</sup> It is the world of the naturalistic and mechanistic philosophers, with whom the Moderates had, in the eyes of Witherspoon, a rather personal, supportive and friendly relationship.

Scholars regularly argue that Witherspoon opposed in Scotland not only the Moderates’ conclusions, but also their *approach* to moral theory. According to Flower and Murphy, since in his *Lectures* “he starts his ethics, not with premises guaranteed by religion or revelation, but from the construction of human nature as learned by observation,” he converted to the Athenian Creed.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, “Witherspoon’s *Lectures* builds on a naturalistic view of human nature that goes even further than Hutcheson’s in broadening the natural affections to include religious ones.”<sup>56</sup> This new “attitude toward moral philosophy” is opposed to his previous, more consistently Calvinist, take on reason and philosophy.<sup>57</sup> It is on this point that Frazer calls Witherspoon “philosophically schizophrenic.”<sup>58</sup> And Stephen Marini states that “Witherspoon...was an eclectic Enlightenment thinker whose Calvinism was less than completely orthodox and whose evangelicalism was not easy to detect. He insisted on the power of human reason to understand God.”<sup>59</sup>

But these scholars are mistaken, both for a faulty understanding of Reformed theology, which I discuss below, and on the facts. As Daniel Howe rightly states, “Significantly what

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<sup>54</sup> Witherspoon, *Selected Works*, 87.

<sup>55</sup> Flower and Murphy, 234.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> This view is repeated in Miller and Frazer.

<sup>58</sup> Frazer, 41.

<sup>59</sup> Stephen Marini, “Religion, Politics, Ratification,” in *Religion in a Revolutionary Age* Ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), 203.

Witherspoon most disliked about the Moderates was not their use of reason but their sentimentality and indulgent attitude toward human emotions and failing.”<sup>60</sup> Nowhere in *Ecclesiastical Characteristics* does Witherspoon question the use of reason. He questions the Moderate’s idea (so he alleges) that preaching must primarily use “rational considerations.” But the subject of this criticism is the *sermon*, not the civil magistrate’s approach to politics. Witherspoon’s concern is that by citing “heathen” writers and appealing to reason in sermons preachers would appear as above their parishioners, the common people. Church ministers are ministers of the Gospel and servants to *all* people, the educated and uneducated; and the duties of man in scripture are discernable to all. Reformed preaching is not a lecture on reason or the pagan classics, but a declaration of the kingdom of God established in Christ. Witherspoon also thought that these rational considerations placed too much focus on the “advantages in the present life without any regard to a future state.”<sup>61</sup> The minister should be concerned not only with public virtue, but with the state and ultimate destination of the individual soul; and the means of saving one’s soul is adventitious to rational considerations. So there is no indication that Witherspoon denounced the use of reason or philosophy per se; he criticized the Moderates for their authoritarian and elitist use of it. They would, according to him, set themselves up as superior and view the uneducated as “contemptible, vulgar, [and] ignorant.”<sup>62</sup> Moreover, as Howe rightly argues, Pictet in *Christian Theology* showed Witherspoon that “it was not necessary to adopt the laxity of the Moderates in order to take account of secular moral philosophy.”<sup>63</sup> Having some optimism for philosophical inquiry does not require moral laxity, elitism, or arrogance in sermons.

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<sup>60</sup> Howe, 70.

<sup>61</sup> Witherspoon, *Selected Works*, 71.

<sup>62</sup> Witherspoon, *Selected Works*, 72.

<sup>63</sup> Howe, 69-70.

The seeming inconsistency of Witherspoon's two careers is resolved when we understand precisely the problem Witherspoon had with the Moderates. There is no evidence that his concern was with reason and philosophy per se, but with the arrogance and elitism that such inquiry produced in some ministers in the Church of Scotland; and there is no indication that he believed that philosophical inquiry *must* lead to these ministerial character flaws. In the absence of the Moderates, Witherspoon could put his concerns to the side, permitting him the time to conduct philosophical inquiries and teach others to do the same. To be sure, none of this proves that Witherspoon did not at some point have some change of mind on reason and philosophy. I have simply claimed that the issue in the Moderate controversy was not, for Witherspoon, over reason and philosophy itself. This leaves open the question of whether Witherspoon "converted" to a more "enlightened" stance after crossing the Atlantic, but evidence for such a conversion cannot come from his encounters with the Moderates. And if I am correct that the Reformed tradition permits philosophical inquiry within certain limits (which Witherspoon did not exceed), then there is no reason to think that Witherspoon's trans-atlantic "conversion," if there was one, was anything but a shift of context and role. After all, Witherspoon read Pictet in Scotland. It is likely that Witherspoon's positions on reason and philosophy remained unchanged throughout his life.

But even if there was a shift in Witherspoon's views, the Reformed tradition on the matter of philosophy and confidence in reason is diverse, encompassing both positions. A Reformed Christian could argue for low confidence or relatively high confidence and remain consistently Reformed. Too often Reformed theology is presented as a rigidly narrow and unified theological tradition. It is better to say that there is a theological framework that sets the boundaries of orthodoxy while permitting all sorts of perspectives on reason and philosophy. In the next section, I describe this unity of framework and acceptable diversity in degree of confidence.

## CHAPTER 2 REASON AND REVELATION IN THE REFORMED TRADITION

Researchers on Witherspoon's philosophy have, understandably, focused on the philosophical sources of Witherspoon's moral philosophy. That is, they have searched for the sources of the *content* of his philosophy. However, scholars have neglected the sources that made it possible for a Calvinist such as Witherspoon to do philosophy, likely due to the common assumption that no such sources exist, and hence Witherspoon's philosophical approach is *prima facie* a compromised Calvinism – a type of enlightened Christianity.

This assumption has led interpreters of the American Founding Fathers' religious beliefs to persistently fail to make proper distinctions, particularly on matters related to the relationship of reason and revelation. There is significant misunderstanding of the Reformed theological tradition and an almost complete neglect in the literature on the post-Reformation theological development. In the 17th century, there was considerable development by Reformed theologians, particularly on the place and role of reason, culminating in what theologians call "Reformed Orthodoxy."<sup>64</sup> It is important to emphasize that "Reformed Orthodoxy" is the *culmination* of over 150 years of theological systematization and discourse since the beginning of the Reformation. It is *not* Calvin's theology, though all recognize Calvin as an essential *early* Reformed contributor to the development. Reformed Orthodoxy, then, is *not* whatever one finds in Calvin's *corpus*; it is the accomplishment of many theologians from many parts of Europe. It is precise and nuanced. And, unfortunately, it is widely unknown or misunderstood.

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<sup>64</sup> See Richard A. Muller *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*. 4 Volumes (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003) and William J. Van Asselt *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2011). For an excellent work on Reformed theology and natural law, see Stephen J. Grabill *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006).

Knowledge of this development among political theorists and commentators on religion and the American founding is no exception.<sup>65</sup> There is no discussion on the stages of development in Reformed Orthodoxy. There is little discussion on the *duplex cognitio dei* (the twofold knowledge of God); on the distinctions between God as Creator and God as Redeemer and between supernatural and natural duties; and on the complementarity of grace and nature in the Reformed tradition. Rather, what we typically find in much (though not all) of the scholarship on the Reformed theology's impact on the Founding is the sole use of John Calvin, and often poorly, as the chief codifier of the Reformed tradition, and we find the assumption that the New World Puritans (e.g., Winthrop) were the exemplars of Calvinism.<sup>66</sup> The Founding generation, who appealed to "nature and nature's God," is then compared and found to be less than Reformed. Reformed theology is presented as narrow and rigid, with little room for

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<sup>65</sup> For example, Michael P. Zuckert, writing on "Protestantism and the American Founding," discusses only Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John Winthrop in "Natural Rights and Protestant Politics," 21-76. None of the other contributors discuss the development and diversity of the Reformed tradition. Frazer relies almost entirely on assumptions about Reformed theology and orthodoxy. See my review of the book, "Reason, Revelation, and the American Founding," in *Anamnesis* (*Forthcoming*, April 2016). In an otherwise fine collection of recent essays, there is some discussion of Calvin and Calvinist political theory, but there is no mention of theological diversity and theological development: Dreisbach, Daniel L., Mark D. Hall, Jeffrey H. Morrison (eds.) *The Founder's on God and Government*. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004). The failure to make any effort to understand Protestant orthodoxy and heresy is exemplified in Matthew Stewart's *Nature's God: The Heretical Origins of the American Republic*.

<sup>66</sup> Zuckert fails to make distinctions on Calvin's thought, likely because he almost exclusively relies on Book I of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In Book II, Calvin describes a distinction between "earthly" and "heavenly" truths (*Institutes* 2.2.13). Zuckert states that "John Calvin [is] the fountainhead of Puritan ideology" and that "the early Puritans for the most part followed Calvin's lead" (pgs. 44-45). But the theological connection between Calvin and the more zealous Puritans has been forcefully challenged recently, as Bradford Littlejohn writes (though with a bit of exaggeration), "Contemporary scholarship on Calvin has thoroughly undermined many old stereotypes....Every new stride in contemporary scholarship seems to corroborate the...[view] that there exists a fairly wide gulf between Calvin and his most zealous English followers." Bradford Littlejohn "The Search for a Reformed Hooker: Some Modest Proposals," in *Reformation & Renaissance Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1, April, 2014), 68-82. See my essay, "Reformed Natural Law and the American Founding: A Critique of Recent Scholarship," in *The Trans-Atlantic Legacy of Protestant Political Thought* (*forthcoming* The Davenant Press, 2016) and Grabill, 70-97.

theological diversity and development. At times there is an alarming disinterest among political theorists to get Reformed theology right—its nuances, diversity, classical and medieval sources, catholicity, etc.<sup>67</sup> This must change. Where do scholars get the idea that appeals to “nature’s God,” natural theology, natural law, and moral sense, and the use of reason and philosophy during the Founding era must indicate a rejection of the Reformed tradition, betray an unprincipled compromise of that tradition, or a move towards a so-called “rationalistic” or “enlightened” Christianity?

Understanding the unity and diversity of Reformed Orthodoxy precludes the popular attempts of reducing all or most of the Founders’ religious beliefs to a single monolithic, simplistic and imprecise label, such as “theistic rationalism,” “rational Christianity,” “supernatural rationalism,” or “enlightened Christianity.”<sup>68</sup> There certainly were Founders to which those labels apply, but no label can capture the diversity of positions on revelation and reason in the Founding era, especially since many had views of reason and revelation consistent with Reformed Orthodoxy. And such generalizations quite often rely on a false and assumed premise, namely, that any use of reason or appeal to nature’s God is evident of a rejection of traditional, orthodox Protestantism—an indication, many say, of the triumph of rationalism over traditional religion.<sup>69</sup> But this is all wrong for various reasons, all of which I will discuss.

I present the Reformed Orthodox position on the relationship between reason and revelation and then highlight the thought of a Reformed theologian, Benedict Pictet, who likely influenced Witherspoon. I then compare the work of Witherspoon, showing that he was perfectly

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<sup>67</sup> For a recent work on the diversity in the Reformed tradition, see Oliver Crisp, *Deviant Calvinism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014). Henry May recognizes that “Protestantism [was] full of diversity,” but fails to realize that this diversity permits orthodox Protestants to hold positions characteristic of the Enlightenment. See *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), xv.

<sup>68</sup> See Frazer, 11-13.

<sup>69</sup> For example, Zuckert, 46 and 55.

consistent with Reformed Orthodoxy in terms of theological framework. Witherspoon was not a “rationalist” for appealing to natural law, natural theology, and reason apart from revelation.<sup>70</sup> To be clear, I do not attempt to show that all the *content* of Witherspoon’s moral philosophy (e.g., Scottish realism and common sense philosophy) is consistent with the Reformed tradition. I wish to show only that Witherspoon’s *framework* permits the use of reason and philosophical inquiry conducted in his *Lectures*.

Before directly discussing Reformed Orthodoxy, it is necessary to discuss Calvin’s relationship to the post-Reformation era. As mentioned above, it is very common for scholars to treat Calvin as the sole or chief source of the Reformed tradition. And in the areas of our present concern—natural law, natural theology and reason—Calvin does not rise to the level of sophistication found in some of the medieval and later Reformed scholastic systems. After all, Calvin was never trained as a theologian. Still, he does, as Grabill says, “not deny the formal possibility of developing subsidiary doctrines of natural theology and natural law on the basis of God’s reliable but obfuscated natural revelation within creation, design of the human body, and conscience.”<sup>71</sup> Calvin laid the groundwork for further development, and he is not *the* codifier of the Reformed position. He is not the final word or chief source for the Reformed view of natural theology and natural law, and he ought not to be treated as such. Calvinist theology developed significantly after Calvin. As Richard Muller writes,

The view of the twentieth century, which has selected Calvin as the chief early codifier, must be set aside, particularly in those instances when the formative influence toward the development of a specific doctrinal position came not from Calvin but from one of his contemporaries. Orthodoxy must be understood not as

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<sup>70</sup> My argument parallels John G. West’s chapter on “Religion and the American Founding,” in *The Politics of Revelation and Reason* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 11-78. He does not, however, discuss in any detail the Reformed theological tradition.

<sup>71</sup> Grabill, 96. Grabill says that in relation to contemporary and later Reformed thinkers Calvin exaggerates the effects of the fall. See pg. 81. The move to lessen the drastic effects does not affect at any fundamental level the soteriological system produced by Calvin.

a result of or a defection from the work of a single thinker but as a doctrinal development resting on a fairly diverse theological heritage.<sup>72</sup>

It is also important to keep in mind that Calvin made little attempt to systematize his doctrine. He did not write a systematic theology. Nor did he write in the scholastic method or care to address in detail many of the controversies and disputes found in medieval scholastics. This came later, as Muller argues:

Where the Reformers painted with a broad brush, their orthodox and scholastic successors strove to fill in the details of the picture. Whereas the Reformers were intent upon distancing themselves and their theology from problematic elements in medieval thought and, at the same time, remaining catholic in the broadest sense of that term, the Protestant orthodox were intent upon establishing systematically the normative, catholic character of institutionalized Protestantism, at times through the explicit use of those elements in patristic and medieval theology not at odds with the teachings of the Reformation.<sup>73</sup>

Scholars on the American founding seem unaware of the development of Calvinism by the later continental Reformers. They know perhaps Phillippe de Mornay, Samuel Rutherford, and, to a lesser extent, Theodore Beza and Johannes Althusius, but not the Reformed scholastic theologians such as Peter Martyr Vermigli, Franciscus Junius, Girolamo Zanchi, Gisbertus Voetius, Francis Turretin, and Pictet.<sup>74</sup> The curriculum in Scotland's universities at the time of Witherspoon's education included works by these Reformed scholastic theologians,<sup>75</sup> and

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<sup>72</sup> Muller, *PRRD*, 1.81.

<sup>73</sup> *PRRD*, 1.97.

<sup>74</sup> See Grabill, *Rediscovering*, for discussions on all these Reformed theologians and political theorists. Ignorance of these authors is understandable, since most of their works remain untranslated from the original Latin. There have been recent efforts by the Acton Institute and Davenant Trust to translate and publish these works. See, for example, the Sources in Early Modern Economics, Ethics, and Law series of books by published by CLP Academic, which includes Johannes Althusius, *On Law and Power*, Translated by Jeffrey J. Veenstra (Grand Rapids: CLP Academic, 2013); Franciscus Junius, *The Mosaic Polity*, Translated by Todd M Rester (Grand Rapids: CLP Academic, 2015); and Girolamo Zanchi, *On the Law in General*, Translated by Jeffrey J. Veenstra (Grand Rapids: CLP Academic, 2012).

<sup>75</sup> See James Moore, "The two systems of Francis Hutcheson: On the origins of the Scottish Enlightenment," *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Michael Alexander Stewart, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 39.

according to James Moore, Scotland and the rest of Europe were “dominated” by the “cast of mind” set by Reformed scholasticism.<sup>76</sup> Witherspoon was educated amidst this cast of mind.

Further, it is important to note that Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* was not the principal text of Witherspoon’s education. He most likely studied the work of Francis Turretin (1623 – 1687), one of the most important theologians of Reformed Orthodoxy, and he certainly studied the theology of Pictet (the evidence for which I present below), whose *CT* is largely a summary of the accomplishments of Turretin. The theology of these two represent the culmination of Reformed theological systematization, resulting in part a fairly robust and orthodox natural theology and view of natural law that sees the epistemological consequences of sin as less drastic than Calvin, though not to an extent that necessitates a departure from Calvin’s theological framework.<sup>77</sup> This theological development has receive no mention, so far as I can find, in the literature.

In my discussion on Reformed Orthodoxy, I rely heavily (though not exclusively) on Turretin, a Genevan theologian who has been called the “champion and grandmaster of Reformed polemics” and whose work is often considered “the apex of the development of [Reformed] scholastic theology in the post-Reformation era.”<sup>78</sup> He was trained in philosophy and theology at the Academy of Geneva and became one of its professors of theology. He is an immensely important theologian in the Reformed theological tradition. Here I will quote and cite

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Grabill says that in relation to contemporary and later Reformed thinkers Calvin exaggerates the effects of the fall. See pg. 81.

<sup>78</sup> Richard A. Muller, “Scholasticism Protestant and Catholic: Francis Turretin on the Object and Principles of Theology,” *Church History* 55, no. 2 (June 1986): 195. Quoted in Grabill, 151.

from sections of Turretin's magnum opus, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology (IET)*,<sup>79</sup> a three-volume work that was a standard theological text in Scotland in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

Though there is no direct evidence that I could find indicating that Witherspoon encountered Turretin's works, it is highly probable, however, that he studied Turretin's *IET* at some point while he was in Scotland. Universities throughout Scotland taught the work while Witherspoon was a student and clergyman,<sup>80</sup> and Reformed Scholasticism (of which Turretin was a leading figure) was established in Scotland universities at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and its dominance continued through the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>81</sup> In Witherspoon's satirical work, *Ecclesiastical Characteristics*, he mentions Pictet and Turretin as having "antiquated systems of divinity."<sup>82</sup> The book being satirical, Witherspoon is actually showing his praise for them, suggesting both that he respected Turretin and Pictet and that they were well-known and important in Scotland at the time.

## I. Reason and Revelation in Post-Reformation Orthodoxy

The theologians who contributed to the 17<sup>th</sup> century development of Reformed theology, often called "Reformed scholastics," subscribed to a rigorous and precise methodology for the formulation and codification of theological doctrine.<sup>83</sup> The purpose of Reformed scholasticism was to deal with problems and objections to Reformed theology and to achieve a degree of 'catholicity' by bringing Reformed theology into the broader theological discussion from the

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<sup>79</sup> From here on, I refer to this work as simply *IET* and I cite the text parenthetically. Citing a text as 1.1.1., for example, refers to Topic 1, Question 1, Paragraph 1 in *IET*.

<sup>80</sup> Michael Alexander Stewart *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment*, 43-44.

<sup>81</sup> Stewart, 39. Stewart include Benedict Pictet a list of Reformed scholastic theologians.

<sup>82</sup> Miller, 101. Of course, Witherspoon is criticizing the "learned" Moderates for rejecting these theologians.

<sup>83</sup> See Muller *PRRD*, 1.34-36.

patristics to the present. The post-Reformation theologians faced different opponents than their theological forefathers. Descartes, Spinoza, the Socinians, deists, and others challenged foundational principles of faith through the exaltation of reason beyond what even medieval schoolmen would have accepted. In response, the post-reformation theologians formulated and systematized with precision the relationship of reason to revelation. Their answer was, with minor variation between them, that reason is ancillary, confirmatory, and supportive of special revelation. Faith does not destroy reason, nor does grace destroy nature. Faith *completes* reason and grace *completes* nature. There is harmony, complementarity and mutual subordination. The post-Reformation theologians clearly acknowledged the legitimacy of reason, natural law, natural theology, and philosophy. Indeed, it is difficult to find a Reformed theologian during this period who declared reason apart from revelation to be useless or necessarily dangerous, natural law and natural theology to be inaccessible or abrogated by special revelation, or philosophy to be nothing but a pagan enterprise. Instead, we find highly nuanced and positive accounts of all of these.<sup>84</sup>

These theologians affirmed, with Calvin, that natural reason apart from special revelation was sufficient, prior to the Fall of Adam, for man to achieve righteousness before God. Reason, not special revelation, was the original means by which man would acquire moral, creational truths. God related to man solely as Creator, not additionally as Redeemer; and the Creator established at creation the standard of righteousness—the natural law.<sup>85</sup> As Francis Turretin, wrote, “There is a natural law, not arising from a voluntary contract or law of society, but from a divine obligation being impressed by God upon the conscience of man in his very creation....[S]o

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<sup>84</sup> See Muller, *PRRD*, 1.143, 365-405.

<sup>85</sup> See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Translated by Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), 1.5.1, 2.

many evidences of this are still left in our [fallen] nature...that there is no mortal who cannot feel its force either more or less.”<sup>86</sup> And the law of God is natural and immutable, since “it must be drawn from the right of nature itself, founded both on the nature of God, the Creator.”<sup>87</sup>

The Fall of Adam diminished (though did not obliterate) man’s ability to reason properly, leaving no hope for achieving righteousness and eternal life. But though God created no remedy for sin in the created order, God chose both to republish the standard of righteousness in the Mosaic Law (called here the “moral law” or “revealed law”) and to reveal himself as the Redeemer in the person and work of Christ. This is the “twofold knowledge” of God—the *duplex cognitio dei*: God revealed as both Creator *and* as Redeemer.<sup>88</sup> The former is creational knowledge and the latter is knowledge adventitious to creation. And the moral law in the Bible “supposes the general knowledge of nature.”<sup>89</sup> It is the same in substance as the natural, only it is delivered through a different and perspicuous mode, namely, inscripturation.<sup>90</sup> As Turretin writes, “it is not repugnant that one and same thing in a different relation should both be known by the light of nature and believed by the light of faith; as what is gathered from the one only obscurely, may be held more certainly from the other. Thus we know that God is, both from nature and from faith.”<sup>91</sup> The law of God is known in two ways: 1) from the natural law by

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<sup>86</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elentic Theology*, 4 volumes, Translated by George Musgrave Giger, Edited by James T. Dennison, Jr (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1992), 11.1.7

<sup>87</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 11.1.9. For a discussion on Calvin’s and Turretin’s view of natural law, see David VanDrunen *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2010), 67-118 and 155-159; and Grabill, 70-97 and 151-174.

<sup>88</sup> Calvin writes, “[T]he Lord first appears, as well in the creation of the world as in the general doctrine of Scripture, simply as a Creator, and afterwards as a Redeemer in Christ, –a twofold knowledge of him hence arises” (*Institutes* 1.2.1).

<sup>89</sup> Turretin, 1.3.10.

<sup>90</sup> As Calvin writes, "The written law is just an attestation of the law of nature, through means of which God recalls to our memory that which he has previously engraved on our hearts." *Commentary on the Book of the Psalms*, 5 vols., trans. James Anderson (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1949), 4 vol., 38 (Ps. 119:52).

<sup>91</sup> Turretin, 1.3.10.

reason and 2) from scripture by faith. Faith and reason are two means by which one can know the same God as Creator and his demands.

Knowledge of God as Redeemer, however, is much different. Knowledge of redemption, grace, the Trinity, incarnation, etc. are further, *added* knowledge that are above reason; and, as above reason, such knowledge is accessible through Scripture alone. Turretin writes, “The mysteries of faith are beyond the sphere of reason to which the unregenerate man cannot rise.”<sup>92</sup> Since this added knowledge is above reason, it follows that reason has limitations. Reason has its own set of objects—natural objects revealed by God as Creator and therefore “reason cannot and should not draw mysteries from its own treasury.”<sup>93</sup> Those doctrines revealed supernaturally, such as the doctrines of the Trinity and incarnation, are above reason and therefore inaccessible by it. Reason has a limited “storehouse”<sup>94</sup> of truths that is not exhaustive of all truth.

Still, the added revelation of God as Redeemer does not abrogate natural truths. Grace does not supersede or replace nature. Grace completes, complements, and perfects nature. For “light [does not] oppose light, nor truth oppose truth because God is the author of both.”<sup>95</sup> Natural and special revelation are coherent: although the knowledge of God the Redeemer is adventitious to nature and above reason, such special knowledge does not violate the first principles of reason, such as the law of non-contradiction. Put differently, *no proposed supernatural truth can violate* the basic principles of reason, but the doctrine itself *need not be comprehended by reason*, nor *discoverable* by reason alone. Turretin distinguishes between an “incomprehensible” thing

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.8.5.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.9.5.

<sup>94</sup> Benedict Pictet (1655-1724), Genevan theologian and nephew of Turretin stated, “[R]eason cannot and ought not to bring forth any mysteries, as it were, out of its own storehouse; for this is the prerogative of scripture only.” *Christian Theology*, Translated by Frederick Reyroux (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1834), 59.

<sup>95</sup> Turretin, 1.9.11.

(which cannot be grasped)... [because] we have only an obscure and imperfect knowledge of them” and an “impossible thing (which cannot be conceived).”<sup>96</sup> Hence, the first principles of reason are also principles in revelation: “For although we do not deny that the mysteries of faith are above reason, still we do not think that they are contrary to it; so that if their truth cannot be proved from reason, still their credibility may be sufficiently established by faith.”<sup>97</sup> The doctrine of the Trinity, for example, is obscure (and therefore incomprehensible), yet not impossible, according to Turretin. Still, no proposed mystery of faith can contradict the first principles of reason. Otherwise, faith destroys reason; grace destroys nature. Turretin concludes, then, that “Reason is perfected by faith and faith supposes reason, upon which to found the mysteries of grace.”<sup>98</sup>

The Reformed Scholastics, far from declaring philosophy to be merely a pagan enterprise, affirmed its use. The clearest praise for philosophy comes from the highly influential 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformed theologian Zacharias Ursinus:

True philosophy, although it also differs very much from the doctrine of the church, yet, it does not array itself against it, nor is it a wicked fabrication, and device of Satan, as is true of the false doctrines of the Sects; but it contains truth, and is, as it were, a certain ray of the wisdom of God, impressed upon the mind of man in his creation. It is a doctrine that has respect to God and his creatures, and many other things that are good and profitable to mankind, and has been drawn out from the light of nature, and from principles in themselves clear and evident, and reduced to a system by wise and earnest men. It follows, therefore, that it is

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, 1.9.9.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 19.27.7.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, 1.9.5. Many will see Thomism in this understanding of nature and grace. See *Summa Theologia* 1.1.8 r. 2. See Grabill, 15-17 for a discussion on “Thomist trajectories” in Reformed Scholasticism. Zuckert contends that Locke’s view on the “harmony of reason and revelation” resembles the view of Thomas Aquinas, though it is “challenging to many versions of Protestant thought” (pg. 44). Locke’s “official formula” on reason and revelation, as presented by Zuckert, is not challenging to the Reformed scholastic thought. Zuckert does not say which versions of Protestant thought the “official formula” challenges.

not only lawful, but also profitable, for Christians to devote themselves to the study of philosophy.<sup>99</sup>

And 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformed theologian, Peter Martyr Vermigli, in his commentary on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, wrote,

Since true philosophy derives from the knowledge of created things, and from these propositions reaches many conclusions about the justice and righteousness that God implanted naturally in human minds, it cannot therefore rightly be criticized: it is the work of God and could not be enjoyed by us without his special contribution.<sup>100</sup>

In Turretin's discussion on philosophy, he affirms its use and devotes most of his argument to keeping philosophy within its proper bounds. Though God is the "author of philosophy and of natural reason," this does not mean that "these should be the interpreters of Scripture."<sup>101</sup> Philosophy is useful in "convincing the Gentiles," testifying to the "consent in things known by nature, by which (as from a twofold revelation) the truth and certainty of the things themselves may be better confirmed," and preparing the "reception" of heavenly doctrine. Turretin even permits "the philosopher...to begin with a doubt in order to [conduct] a safer investigation of natural things."<sup>102</sup> His greatest concern is not with philosophizing but that "care...[is] taken that philosophical truths be not extended beyond their own sphere and ordinary powers of nature."<sup>103</sup> Reason and philosophy must stay within its limits, functioning as "servants" in relation to mysteries of faith. This function of reason is not rationalistic, as Muller

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<sup>99</sup> Zachariaias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zachariaias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* Translated by G. W. Williard (The Synod of the Reformed Church in the United States, 2004), 37. See also Turretin, 1.4.17 and 10.5.2, 6.

<sup>100</sup> *Commentary on Aristotle's Ethics* (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2006). Philip Melancthon wrote a commentary on Aristotle's NE as well.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid, 1.13.10.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 1.13.14.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid, 1.13.13.

writes, "The Protestant attempt to argue the ancillary status of reason ought no more to be called rationalism than the medieval attempt."<sup>104</sup>

It is crucial to recognize that the insistence on the ancillary, supportive and confirmatory status of reason was primarily to safeguard the mysteries, not natural knowledge. They wanted a reason/revelation schema that did not bring doctrines such as the Trinity under the measure of reason, while at the same time insisting that the schema not reject, destroy, or undermine reason, especially in relation to natural duty. There was much less concern over reason's ability to make proper conclusions on one's duties to fellow man, which explains why there was much commentary and praise of works on ethics by pagans, such as Aristotle, Cicero, and Seneca.<sup>105</sup>

Indeed, many Reformed theologians in this period even acknowledged the virtue of pagans and their ability to know the natural law as it relates to human social relations—even to the point of acknowledging a sort of natural sociability. Reformed theologians "have always fully acknowledged," writes 19<sup>th</sup> century Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck,

the existence and moral value of [the virtue of pagans.] Since after the fall people have remained human and continue to share in the blessings of God's common grace, they can inwardly possess many virtues and outwardly do many good deeds that, viewed through human eyes and measured by human standards, are greatly to be appreciated and of great value for human life. But this is not to say that they are good in the eyes of God and correspond to the full spiritual sense of his holy law.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> Muller, *PRRD*, 1.143. Muller distinguishes two types of "rationalism." See page, 139. Many Reformed theologians and philosophers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, such as Johann Heinrich Alsted, Johannes Cloppenburg, Benedict Pictet, Johann Heinrich Heidegger, and Perus van Mastricht offered proofs or support for natural theology. Between these writers there are differing levels of optimism on the potential success of reason. Alsted is more positive than Cloppenburg and Manstricht, but the framework of the *duplex cognition dei* permits these disagreements.

<sup>105</sup> See, for example, Calvin, *Institutes* (2.2.15).

<sup>106</sup> Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Holy Spirit, Church and New Creation* Translated by John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 256-7.

Calvin affirms a distinction between “earthly” objects (“matters of policy and economy, all mechanical arts, and liberal studies”) and “heavenly” objects (“true righteousness and future blessedness”), and when man is focused on the former he can achieve “some result,” proving that “some principle of civil order is impressed on all. And this is ample proof that...no man is devoid of the light of reason.”<sup>107</sup> Though man “lost all understanding”<sup>108</sup> on matters related to heaven,<sup>109</sup> not all was lost on earthly matters. Man can still be “very acute and sagacious” on earthly matters, but not on heavenly matters.<sup>110</sup> Man’s “supernatural” virtues—those which relate to heaven and the eschaton, such as “the light of faith and righteousness”—were “withdrawn,” but the natural gifts were only “corrupted,” ensuring that there is still “civil order impressed on all.”<sup>111</sup> Hence, within the Reformed framework there is potential great optimism concerning man’s ability to reach sound conclusions on natural duties. This is why the Reformed political theorist, Johannes Althusius can consistently state, “But in political life even an infidel may be called just, innocent, and upright.”<sup>112</sup> Turretin argues for the existence of the natural law by citing the “consent of the nations, among whom...”

some law of the primitive nations obtains, from which even without a teacher they have learned that God should be worshipped, parents honored, a virtuous life be led and from which *as a fountain have flowed so many laws concerning equity and virtue enacted by heathen legislators*, drawn from nature itself. And if certain laws are found among some repugnant to these principles, they were even with reluctance received and observed by a few, at length abrogated by contrary laws, and have fallen into desuetude.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.13.

<sup>108</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Isaiah* 44:18.

<sup>109</sup> See Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.13.

<sup>110</sup> Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Isaiah*, 44:18.

<sup>111</sup> See Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.2.12, 13.

<sup>112</sup> Johannes Althusius, *Politica: An Abridged Translation of Politics Methodically Set Forth and Illustrated with Sacred and Profane Examples*, ed. and Trans. Frederick S. Carney (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1964), 147. The Canons of Dordt (1619), a major statement of Reformed theology, states that fallen man “shows some regard for virtue and for good outward behavior” (3/4.4).

<sup>113</sup> Turretin, 11.1.13. Emphasis mine.

When Reformed theologians attack the “frigid speculation” of the medieval philosophers, it was not typically for their conclusions on natural duty, but for their extending reason beyond its bounds—their philosophizing about the divine essence, for example.<sup>114</sup>

In summary, the Reformed theological framework of reason and revelation supports and encourages the use of philosophy; has a positive account of the place and role of reason in theological matters; and affirms a universal natural law that remains accessible to all (including the unregenerate) apart from scripture and a relatively positive account of man’s ability to make sound judgments on natural duties.

It is important to notice that in Reformed theology a redeemed man remains a man—a man obligated to fulfill the demands of God his Creator. Natural law and natural theology, then, remain part of man’s obligations to God and fellow man. Grace has not replaced nature. The moral law in scripture has not replaced the natural law. The Christian remains just as human as before conversion (and perhaps more so). Furthermore, the post-Reformation theologians believed that natural revelation was extensive, covering far more than man’s duties to man, but also the divine attributes of God and vague principles of worship. The former duties include civil government and the latter a type of natural theology and natural religion. These are *universal* truths, not exclusive truths for the elect. And these universal truths are evident from “universal experience,” “consent of the nations,” and “heathen philosophers.”<sup>115</sup> For there remains “small light...in things civil and natural.”<sup>116</sup> Hence, the use of reason apart from revelation for inquiry into natural duties, natural rights, principles of governance, the development of constitutions, the

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<sup>114</sup> See Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.2.3.

<sup>115</sup> Turretin, 1.3.7-9.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*, 1.9.22.

relationship of natural religion to civic morality, and all sorts of questions relating to “earthly matters” is perfectly acceptable in Reformed Orthodoxy.

Since the objects of reason are natural objects – that is, universal truths common to all— one can legitimately and productively deliberate and reason with others who have unorthodox views of revelation or who reject revelation entirely. There is a type of Venn diagram in which there is an overlap on agreed objects of reason, namely, on matters pertaining to ethics and political philosophy (i.e., earthly matters and natural duties). For example, both Reformed Christians and Unitarians of the Founding era could cooperate on certain moral and political matters, since they had overlapping objects of reason.

Moreover, this framework does not *in principle* preclude many of the conclusions of Enlightenment philosophy, such as Locke’s view of religious tolerance, natural equality, and the social contract;<sup>117</sup> Hutcheson’s philosophy of moral sense; and the conclusion of the contemporary natural theology (such as Samuel Clarke and Joseph Butler).<sup>118</sup> The framework of Reformed Orthodoxy establishes the limits of reason, but it does not itself determine the necessary content of the conclusions of reason. It permits rational inquiry, but it does not prescribe the result of the inquiry. It is not enough, then, to simply find, for example, Lockean notions of liberty and equality and praise for contemporary natural theologians among the Founders and, on that basis alone, conclude that the otherwise orthodox Founders have undermined or abandoned their Reformed tradition on reason and revelation.

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<sup>117</sup> Much of what later came to be known as Lockean political philosophy was already in circulation before Locke, largely through *Reformed* authors. See Glenn Moots *Politics Reformed: The Anglo-American Legacy of Covenant Theology* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2010), 129. Theologian Richard Baxter had positions on property similar to Locke’s. See John Locke *Two Treatises of Government* Edited by Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1960), 102 fn and II. Sect. 27 fn.

<sup>118</sup> John Witherspoon praises Clarke, for example. See John Witherspoon. *An Annotated Edition of Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, Edited by Jack Scott (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1982), 65.

## II. Benedict Pictet

Benedict Pictet was Turretin's nephew and studied theology and philosophy under him. He was also Turretin's assistant in the theology department of the Academy of Geneva and later replaced Turretin as the chair of theology. His most important work, *Christian Theology (CT)* was a standard theological text used throughout Scotland in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Witherspoon studied Pictet as a student and, according to Howe, he "cherished" his French copy of *CT*,<sup>119</sup> maintaining a copy in his library at Princeton<sup>120</sup> and recommending it to his divinity students at Princeton.<sup>121</sup> The work is largely a summary, with some additions, of Turretin's *IET*.<sup>122</sup>

Pictet begins chapter II of *CT* with a discussion on a "system of natural theology." Humankind can construct such theology because "we can, by the power of nature, know God, and that God himself is the author of this knowledge, both by the notion of himself which he has engraven on the minds of all men, and by the excellent works he has done."<sup>123</sup> Pictet lists four purposes for natural theology. First, it instructs man that he "might render unto [God], when known, the tribute of love, praise, and thanksgiving, worship and obedience."<sup>124</sup> God required humankind to obey the "covenant of nature," which was "founded on the nature of man."<sup>125</sup> Second, natural theology forms a "bond of society, and prevents men from becoming a prey to each other."<sup>126</sup> From natural theology pagans form natural religion, which, however useless it is

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<sup>119</sup> Howe, 69.

<sup>120</sup> Scott, "Appendix 2," 201.

<sup>121</sup> Gordon L. Tait, *The Piety of John Witherspoon: Pew, Pulpit, and Public Forum* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001), 127.

<sup>122</sup> See *Christian Theology*, vii.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid*, 22.

<sup>125</sup> See *Ibid*, 142. They would also have to obey any positive law given by God, such as those given explicitly in Eden.

<sup>126</sup> This and the next few quotes, *Ibid* 22.

for proper and acceptable worship, is useful in ensuring civil peace. Third, natural theology, in its inadequacy due to the fall, points to the need for a “clearer revelation.” It is preparatory for the special revelation of the natural knowledge of God, obscured by the fall, and the knowledge of God as Redeemer, adventitious to nature. The inadequacies of natural theology point to a need for completeness, which only knowledge of God the Redeemer could satisfy. Finally, natural theology is “sufficient to leave every one, who abuses his natural light, without any excuse.”

Pictet continues by listing “how much knowledge the Gentiles were able to derive from the dictates of reason, and from the works of creation and providence.”<sup>127</sup> They can know that God exists; is one, eternal, incorruptible, superior to humans, happy, just, good, powerful, all-wise, to be worshiped and praised, and the creator of the world; and governs the world by providence. They know that God demands that we follow the Golden Rule and that “rectitude and honesty are to be practiced, parents are honored.” Finally, they know of “the immortality of the soul, [and] that men ought to “to endeavor to propitiate God’s favour,” and that there is a judgment to come.

The pagans also sensed that they needed supernatural revelation to know how to conduct proper worship. This explains why they “found it necessary to pretend that they had conferences with divinities.”<sup>128</sup> They were all “persuaded” that the “right mode of worshipping the Deity must be drawn from a revelation of him,” for their natural knowledge proved insufficient to “comfort the human mind against the fear of death” and they could not determine through nature the proper means of satisfying the wrath and justice of God. He concludes, “A second revelation, therefore, was necessary, in which God might not only cause to be known, in a clearer manner, his own perfection, which he had revealed in the first [i.e., natural knowledge], but also discover

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, 23.

new perfections, and especially reveal ‘the mystery of godliness’”.<sup>129</sup> The “new perfections” do not abrogate the previous or supersede them; they add to and *perfect* them. The new perfections (e.g., the Trinity, incarnation, etc.) presuppose the old perfections. For this reason, Pictet says, “although the two systems differ from each other in the mode of revelation, in the number of things revealed, in their perspicuity and effects, yet they are in *strict harmony*, and render each other *mutual service*.”<sup>130</sup> Pictet, consistent with Reformed Orthodoxy, has affirmed that reason and revelation have a harmonious and complementary relationship. Revelation completes and perfects reason. The knowledge of God the Redeemer completes and presupposes the knowledge of God the Creator.

Contrary to the Socinians, the deists and, later, the Unitarians and in agreement with Calvin and Turretin, Pictet did not consider natural religion to be sufficient for salvation. He writes in his work *Traite contre l’indifference*,

There are among those indifferent individuals, those who believe that it is sufficient to receive natural religion and thus all those who receive it are agreeable to God...I admit to our indifferent individuals that natural religion is a divine religion. All the light that we have proceeds from the father of lights; but I deny that it is sufficient to receive natural religion because God has revealed to us his will more clearly in the Holy Scriptures. If God had not revealed himself to us other than by his works of nature, and by his providence, or by the light that he has given us, then one would have to admit the truth of natural religion...If it is true that this Scripture is divine, as we believe, we should be persuaded that one must know these things in order to be saved. But natural religion does not at all teach us these truths.<sup>131</sup>

There is no evidence that Witherspoon encountered this book, but it does give us some indication of Pictet’s Reformed Orthodoxy. Notice that Pictet considers natural religion or, as he calls it in *CT*, a system of natural theology, to be legitimate religion. Natural religion apart from special revelation is potentially legitimate religion, but since God gave additional revelation in

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 24.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. Emphasis mine.

<sup>131</sup> Pictet, *Traite contre l’indifference*, 169-170. Quoted in Klauber, 103.

scripture, it is no longer sufficient for salvation. Pictet has recognized 1) that natural religion is divine religion (i.e., natural religion's God is God the Creator and the same God that later and further revealed himself as Redeemer),<sup>132</sup> 2) the original sufficiency of natural revelation for true religion, 3) that scripture contains knowledge that is both adventitious to nature and necessary for salvation, and 4) that natural religion is not abrogated, but made complete in revelation (i.e., one must believe and worship God in Christ in order to have true, complete and perfect religion).

In his discussion on the law of God, Pictet affirms in *CT*, in language reminiscent of Calvin and Turretin, that “the moral law is founded, at least in a very great measure, on the *natural* right of God; by which we mean that which rests upon the most pure and holy nature of God himself.” The law is “founded on the very nature of things.”<sup>133</sup> For this reason, sound reason would discover them. The moral law revealed in scripture is the same in substance as the natural law. They are different modes of revelation, and do not conflict in their content.

The most important section in Pictet for our purposes is his section on the relationship of faith and reason. He begins by stating the basic Reformed doctrine of *sola scriptura*: scripture is the “*true and only rule of faith and practice*” (58) and there cannot be another. Reason, then, cannot be a rule of faith and practice. A rule is the “standard by which [one] measures the objects proposed” (59). Reason cannot be a rule or the mysteries because the “the mysteries of faith are beyond its sphere” and “cannot comprehend them.” Reason is not suitable to analyze the mysteries of faith (e.g., the Trinity, the incarnation, predestination, etc.) and cannot serve as the standard by which one judges them. Despite this seeming dismissal of reason, Pictet affirms that

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<sup>132</sup> In *CT*, he does leave open the possibility that the heathens could worship the “one God,” though “there were far more who worshipped innumerable deities.” *CT*, 23.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid*, 228

“reason has many uses.” It can vindicate the truth against those who “deny revelation altogether....to convince men and to prepare their minds” to receive the Gospel. Reason is also useful as an instrument in examining the objects of faith in scripture, but “it is not the rule itself of these objects of faith.”<sup>134</sup>

Pictet provides the limitations of reason, using language that seems to be paraphrasing Turretin’s discussion in *IET* 1.9.6. First, “Reason cannot and ought not to bring forth any mysteries, as it were, out of its own storehouse; for this is the prerogative of scripture only” (59). Reason is neither a rule nor a source for the mysteries of faith. Second, one should not listen to the complaints of reason for “its incapacities to comprehend the mysteries of faith.” It is to “offend against reason” to “reject a mystery because it is incomprehensible” (59-60).

Furthermore, consistent with Turretin, Pictet affirms that “*reason* and *faith*, though of a different nature, are not opposed to each other” (59) and that “there is a wonderful harmony between sound philosophy and divinity; for truth is not contrary to truth, nor light to light.”<sup>135</sup> He cites the “heathens, and not without just grounds” because it shows “how consistent reason itself is with holy scripture.”<sup>136</sup> Given our discussion on the Reformed tradition, this is basic Reformed doctrine.<sup>137</sup> Special revelation adds, for the most part, only mysteries and the means of redemption to the natural knowledge of God. Scripture does not replace, supersede, or abrogate natural knowledge. Scripture presupposes it and completes it.

Pictet also writes, “we maintain that we must not admit any thing, even in religious matters, which is contrary to right reason. For although there is much darkness in the human mind, yet no one can deny that there remain some sparks of natural light, and that the mind has

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid, viii.

<sup>137</sup> See Turretin, *IET* 1.9.11.

in it those principles of undoubted truth.” To understand this passage, we should keep in mind 1) that Pictet claimed in the preface that he is largely *summarizing* Turretin’s much more rigorous work and 2) that he has already said that reason is not the standard or rule of the objects of faith. Pictet likely has in mind Turretin’s phrase, “faith supposes reason.” All propositions concerning “religious matters” cannot violate “those principles of undoubted truth” – the first principles of reason, such as the law of non-contradiction. Supernatural truth *presupposes* and is consistent with natural reason, though natural reason is not the source for supernatural truth.

Concerning philosophy, Pictet states that it is useful and permitted, “provided it assume not to itself the power of dictating in article of divinity.”<sup>138</sup> For “although here is much darkness in the human mind, yet no one can deny that there remain some sparks of natural light.”<sup>139</sup> The fall had serious epistemological consequences; and though God still speaks in nature as much as before the fall, man’s capacity to ‘hear’ it clearly has diminished. Still, reason has not been obliterated.

As with Turretin and the Reformed Orthodox theologians in general, the chief concern of Pictet was to safeguard the mysteries of faith from the rule of reason. Unaided and unregenerate reason with regard to natural objects had decent results among pagans. He states that “many excellent things, indeed, are recorded of the heathen,” such as that of Socrates, Aristides, Cato, and “many others.”<sup>140</sup> These “splendid actions,” however, are nothing but “virtues of glass,” because “their aim was not to please God.”<sup>141</sup> Still, the actions were good by external standards and proceeded from a true knowledge of natural duties. And Pictet, with the Reformed tradition, is far from denouncing the “virtues of glass” as no better than the external evil of others. He

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid, 60.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid, 59.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid, 331-332.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, 332.

writes, “We are far, however, from confounding the continence of Scipio with the monstrous depravity of Nero, or from confounding Fabricius with Catiline, not because the one was good, but less bad than the other, as Augustine observes.”<sup>142</sup>

We conclude that for the Pictet, with regard to the external, civil realm pagans can both regulate their own lives and their society in accordance with natural duties and even have a somewhat true, though ineffectual, natural religion. Neither are ultimately good in the eyes of God, but they are *civilly* good. This is not rationalism, for Pictet is not denying the necessity of supernatural truth for salvation, nor is he bringing supernatural truth under the standards of reason. He is simply following the nuance and distinctions found in the Reformed theological tradition. Due to the distinctions between natural and supernatural truths and God as Creator and as Redeemer there can be civilly virtuous pagans, yet none that are righteous by the standards of heaven.

In conclusion, I summarize the main points. (1) Pictet is consistent with Reformed Orthodoxy and even borrowed heavily from its chief systematician, namely, Turretin. (2) He affirms natural theology and has a fairly standard list of true knowledge possessed by pagans. (3) There is nothing improper with philosophical inquiry itself, but it must be kept within the proper bounds. (4) Reason and philosophy are useful to vindicate truth, to convince non-Christians and to prepare them for faith. (5) Reason and revelation have a harmonious relationship. Divine mysteries do not originate from reason, but cannot contradict reason. Hence, revelation completes, perfects, presupposes, and complements reason. (6) Pagans can be virtuous in an external and civil sense.

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

In light of this discussion on Reformed Orthodoxy and Pictet's contribution and representation of it, we are prepared to discuss Witherspoon's view of reason and revelation. As we will see, Witherspoon does not deviate from Pictet, which questions the popular belief that he held to a type of enlightened Christian rationalism.

### CHAPTER 3 WITHERSPOON ON REASON AND REVELATION

An examination of Witherspoon's thought in light of Reformed Orthodoxy reveals that Witherspoon has remarkable consistency in his formulation of the relationship of reason and revelation. His consistency directly contradicts Scott's claims that "the Calvinism of Witherspoon is not the Calvinism of Geneva."<sup>143</sup> There is, in fact, no conflict between Witherspoon's Calvinism and the Calvinist tradition, at least not in his use of reason and philosophy, his appeal to natural law, and his construction of a natural theology. To be sure, my argument is *not* that everything in Witherspoon's philosophy, in particular his conclusions from his philosophical inquiry, is consistent with traditional Reformed political theology and Reformed theological ethics. My argument is that his *framework* for inquiry is consistent. Most of Witherspoon's conclusions, I would argue, find advocates in the Reformed theological tradition (such his position on natural equality and moral sense), but I do not attempt to show that here.

Though Witherspoon's *Lectures on Divinity* contains some helpful comments on our topic, only in *Lectures* does Witherspoon go into any systematic detail on natural theology, the relationship of reason and revelation, ethics, and politics. *Lectures*, unfortunately, was haphazardly composed and Witherspoon never intended to publish it. Indeed, he went to great lengths trying to prevent its publishing.<sup>144</sup> Still, it is an important work not only for our purposes, but also for the study of the Founding era and beyond. Versions of it traveled throughout the United States, and colleges throughout the country used it for their lectures on philosophy. Witherspoon was one of the few academics who had done an extensive study of the

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<sup>143</sup> Scott, "Introduction," *Lectures*, 38-39.

<sup>144</sup> See *Ibid*, 29.

18<sup>th</sup> century moral theorists, such as Shaftsbury, Hutcheson, Reid, Hume, Clarke and others. Some historians credit these lectures as being the means by which moral sense and common sense theories spread throughout the United States.<sup>145</sup> The lectures also established the legacy of Princeton, which continued to teach moral sense philosophy well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including at the seminary.<sup>146</sup>

It is clear, then, that understanding the relationship of the *Lectures* to Reformed Orthodoxy is crucial to the study of religion and America from the Founding through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Did Witherspoon via his *Lectures* spread a framework for the relationship of reason to revelation that contradicts Reformed Protestant Orthodoxy?

## I. Reason and Revelation

Witherspoon begins his *Lectures* with a standard definition of moral philosophy: “it is an inquiry into the nature and grounds of moral obligation by reason, as distinct from revelation.”<sup>147</sup> He then immediately mentions two common objections to this type of inquiry in New England at the time: “Is it safe or useful to separate moral philosophy from religion? It will be said it is either the same or different from revealed truth; if the same, unnecessary—if different, false and dangerous.”<sup>148</sup> These are two different and mutually exclusive objections. The first objection is that scriptural revelation and the ethics contained therein contradict, abrogate, or supersede natural law. Hence, the question is: Why appeal to nature when it is no longer the reference for moral truth? The norms of creation, one could say, are part of the old dispensation, a time before

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<sup>145</sup> See *Ibid*, 52.

<sup>146</sup> Paul K. Helseth, *Right Reason and the Princeton Mind: An Unorthodox Proposal* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing Company, 2010).

<sup>147</sup> Witherspoon, *Lectures*, 64.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid*.

true righteousness was revealed in Christ. Appealing to nature apart from revelation is not only unreliable but *must* produce error, even with sound reason. The second objection while assuming a harmony between reason and revelation, still questions the use of appealing to nature when scripture, which contains the moral law, already has made natural duties clear. Why risk producing error when we know reason to be often unreliable and already have our natural duties republished perspicuously for us in scripture.

Witherspoon attributes the first objection to “an author of New England,”<sup>149</sup> likely Cotton Mather, whom Witherspoon identifies as having claimed that moral philosophy “reduces infidelity to a system.”<sup>150</sup> Witherspoon responds: “If the Scripture is true, the discoveries of reason cannot be contrary to it; and therefore, it has nothing to fear from that quarter.” We saw similar statements in our discussion of Reformed Orthodoxy. Witherspoon, with the Reformed tradition, holds that reason and revelation are harmonious and complementary, and there is a unity of knowledge in the twofold revelation of God as Creator and God as Redeemer. Hence, *sound* reason cannot contradict revelation. Implied here as well is the position that scripture, as a direct revelation concerning natural duties, is superior in perspicuity than natural law. Revelation has nothing to fear from (sound) reason, because any knowledge accessible by reason is part of the unified knowledge disclosed by God. The set of truths discoverable by reason do not and, indeed, cannot contradict the set of truths of special revelation. Any conclusion from reason that contradicts scripture *cannot* be a sound conclusion. Scripture is the principal source of knowledge of duties; reason is ancillary or supportive. Witherspoon is clearly not suggesting that human reason is infallible, as Frazer argues.<sup>151</sup> Indeed, Witherspoon later mentions the

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<sup>149</sup> Scott identifies this “author” as Mather, though others say it is Jonathan Edwards. See Scott, *Lectures*, 68n1.

<sup>150</sup> Witherspoon, *Lectures*, 64.

<sup>151</sup> Frazer, 42.

“corruption of our nature” as it relates to our ability to reason properly. Human reasoning is “difficult” due to depravity, and we must “with our remaining power of natural conscience...endeavor to detect and oppose” errors.<sup>152</sup>

Witherspoon continues by arguing that “as we are certain it [i.e., reason] can do no evil, so there is a probability that it may do much good.” (154). In other words, when we understand the relationship of reason and revelation—the latter, as a direct revelation, being superior in perspicuity than the former—then reason in principle can do no evil. For since sound reason cannot be contrary to scripture (because of a unity of knowledge in reason and revelation), sound reason cannot destroy (that is, can “do no evil” to) special revelation. And since sound reason cannot destroy revelation, it can only be either useless (as the second objection suggests) or “do much good.” So Witherspoon has dismissed the first objection, namely, that sound reason contradicts revelation.

What remains is to answer the second objection, which essentially asks: why gather moral truth from nature when God’s law, which admittedly is the same in substance with nature, is already sufficiently revealed in revelation? It is a fair question, given this view of scripture as sufficient. Witherspoon responds as Turretin and Pictet responded. He writes, “There may be an illustration and confirmation of the inspired writings, from reason and observation, which will greatly add to their beauty and force.”<sup>153</sup> Remember that Pictet said that reason is useful in “illustrating” revealed truth “to those who deny revelation altogether”<sup>154</sup> and Turretin said that philosophy can “confirm” the unity of the twofold revelation. Both argued that though God is clearly revealed in scripture, reason shows a certain unity of knowledge. Reason confirms the

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid, 66.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>154</sup> Pictet, *CT*, 59.

Christian *narrative* of the unity of truth: God the Creator, whom one could know fully through uncorrupted reason, has further revealed himself fully in his word. The purpose of Christian philosophical inquiry, Witherspoon argues, is to add “beauty and force” to special revelation. His project is supportive and confirmatory of scripture. In this sense, reason is *ancillary* to revelation. In his *Lectures on Divinity*, he similarly writes, “Moral philosophy...[is a] good handmaid to the Christian morality.”<sup>155</sup> Reason is not the epistemological foundation for special revelation. Witherspoon’s point is that confirming the coherence of the twofold self-disclosure of God is a good apologetic for the Christian faith. It reveals the beauty of the Christian understanding of the world, human nature, history, and truth. This apologetic gives a robust, comprehensive, and coherent account of the world.

Moreover, reason is useful, according to Witherspoon, to show the fallacious principles of infidels. Nothing, he writes, “serves more for the support of religion than to see from the different and opposite systems of philosophers that there is nothing certain in their schemes but what is coincident with the word of God.”<sup>156</sup> We should meet infidels “on their own ground.” Sound reason demonstrates to infidels that revelation is remarkably consistent with nature. This would, as Pictet said, show a “wonderful harmony” between reason and revelation to “convince” and “prepare” them for the Christian faith. As we saw in our discussion on the Reformed tradition, there is nothing inconsistent with meeting non-Christians “on their own ground” of reason apart from revelation. All humans *qua* humans, as a unified race from Adam, are on common ground. Furthermore, *sound* reason does nothing but confirm the scriptural narrative concerning the unity of truth in the twofold revelation of God. Only faulty reason conflicts with scripture. If a conclusion from reason contradicts scripture, then one’s reasoning is unsound, not

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<sup>155</sup> Witherspoon, *Works of John Witherspoon*, Volume 8, 25.

<sup>156</sup> Witherspoon, *Lectures*, 64.

scripture. As he says in the final lecture, “nothing is certain or valuable in moral philosophy but what is perfectly coincident with scripture.”<sup>157</sup> Scripture is the principal of knowledge on duty, not reason. And there is no tension between true reason and revelation. The fact that infidels, as Witherspoon said, “commonly proceed upon pretended principles of reason” gives no justification for the rejection of reason.

Witherspoon continues: “I am of the opinion that the whole Scripture is perfectly agreeable to sound philosophy; yet certain it was never intended to teach us everything.” He does not say here that all the truths of scripture are comprehensible by reason, but that there is nothing in scripture that contradicts sound reason (i.e., there is nothing “impossible,” as Turretin stated). Nothing in scripture violates the first principles of reason. Truth does not oppose truth; light does not oppose light.<sup>158</sup> Witherspoon’s comment that scripture “was never intended to teach us everything,” for which he provides no elaboration, could simply mean that scripture contains all the principles of morality, though not all particulars. Or he could mean, as Pictet wrote, that scripture was not intended “to make us philosophers, mathematicians, or physicians.”<sup>159</sup> I suspect that he intended this latter meaning, but either way Witherspoon is still within the Reformed tradition. The concern of Reformed Orthodoxy is that scripture exclusively and sufficiently contains *supernatural* truth and duties (e.g., the means to salvation, adventitious to nature), not all particular natural duties and the determinations derived therefrom.

Contrary to most commentators, Witherspoon has presented the basic Reformed Orthodox position on reason and revelation. He has not drifted to an “Enlightenment”

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid, 187.

<sup>158</sup> Though he does not connect Witherspoon’s view of reason and revelation beyond simple consistency with the “Christian” theological tradition, West’s analysis of Witherspoon has similarities with mine. See *The Politics of Revelation and Reason*, 26-36, esp. 30.

<sup>159</sup> Pictet, *CT*, 51.

framework, nor has he conceded ground to the “theistic rationalists” of Frazer’s analysis. To be sure, he has a somewhat optimistic view of man’s ability to come to sound conclusions through reason, but this is not outside the bounds of Reformed Orthodoxy. He clearly affirms that scripture is infallible, and that reason is not. And he affirms that through careful reasoning one can *support* and *confirm* the natural law republished in scripture, adding to its beauty and force. His philosophical inquiry is not an attempt to rationalize Christian truth or to show true religion to be nothing but natural religion. It was an attempt to confirm the general knowledge of God the Creator and his law found in scripture and thereby demonstrate the beauty found in the coherence of reason and revelation. For Witherspoon, philosophical inquiry is a type of apologetic, one that is consistent with Reformed Orthodoxy.<sup>160</sup>

## II. Limits of Reason

The lectures contain an extensive natural theology and principles of nature law. By reason alone, he argues, one could know that God exists; is one, wise, just, good, true, perfectly moral, spiritual, immense, powerful, perfect, and holy; has majesty, greatness and a perfect intellect; is the creator, preserver, righteous governor, benefactor, and supreme judge; rewards and punishes; and is merciful. In Lectures 8 and 9, Witherspoon discusses man’s “external” duties to God and to fellow men known by reason. These duties include an obligation to worship God, pray, love, fear, esteem, and honor him. Duties to fellow man are extensive: love, wishing good to body and soul, justice, parental authority, private property, charity, compassion, beneficence, public affection, instructing children in religion, sobriety, industry, marriage and

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<sup>160</sup> Turretin says that atheists can be converted through philosophical argumentation. See *IET* 1.9.23

public spirit. All of this, Witherspoon says, man can know by natural reason. Though extensive, there is nothing in this list that Reformed Orthodox theologians did not themselves affirm.

Witherspoon discusses the limits of reason in natural theology only once and indirectly, but his comments are enough to secure him firmly in the Reformed tradition. The possibility of knowledge of God's mercy apart from revelation is disputed, he claims; and arguments for such knowledge are both "vague and general."<sup>161</sup> He concludes that although one can know many other attributes of God with more confidence apart from revelation, "mercy can be learned from Revelation only."<sup>162</sup> In his *Lectures on Divinity*, he similarly writes, "Benignity and goodness to the innocent is a part of the character of the Deity in natural religion, but mercy to the guilty belongs wholly to revelation."<sup>163</sup> One can know God's mercy only by an *additional* revelation of God as Redeemer, and even the classical pagan philosophers "acknowledged" this necessity "in their writings."<sup>164</sup> The concern to set the limits of reason as falling short of knowledge of divine mercy is indicative of the type of theological caution one would expect from an orthodox theologian. Witherspoon has affirmed both that there are truths above reason (though not contradictory to reason) and that such truths are exclusively contained in scripture. Witherspoon recognized the proper distinction between reason and revelation, nature and grace, and philosophy and theology.

### III. Civil Society and Natural Religion

Witherspoon also recognizes the natural sociability of man and the usefulness of religion in the maintenance of civil order, both of which might seem to contradict the traditional account

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<sup>161</sup> Witherspoon, *Lectures*, 103.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> *Works*, 8.32.

<sup>164</sup> *Ibid.*

of man's depravity. But his philosophical anthropology is largely positive in *Lectures*, primarily because his concern is with *natural* duties associated with civil matters, not the ability to achieve sufficient merit to achieve eternal life. Though not sufficient for eternal life, man is generally sociable in the civil realm. Witherspoon writes with "undoubted certainty" that "in our nature, as it is the work of God, there is a real goodwill and benevolence to others" and that the "principles of our nature lead to society."<sup>165</sup> By nature, we, as social creatures, innately know that "our happiness and the improvement of our powers are only to be had in society."<sup>166</sup> Is this sociability consistent with Calvinism? Natural sociability is explicitly affirmed by Calvin.<sup>167</sup> And as we saw above, the effect of the fall was total but not equally destructive in every respect. Man, being an "earthly" creature, continues to "cherish" society and flee from civil disorder. Indeed, for the reasons given above a Calvinist ought to expect social solidarity in one form or another. Turretin permitted calling the actions of non-Christians "virtuous" that conformed externally to the natural law, and Althusius was willing to call non-Christians "innocent." We should understand Witherspoon's use of the phrase "real goodwill" as referring to a certain public affection—a will toward the public good. It is good, because the aim is rooted in the cherishing of society, not any interest in the glory of the true God and his spiritual kingdom.<sup>168</sup> There is no indication in the text that "good-will" refers to a good will toward the true God revealed as Redeemer in scripture.

On the role of religion in civil society, Witherspoon states that the "[l]ove to God and love to man is the substance of religion; when these prevail, civil laws will have little to do."<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>165</sup> Witherspoon, *Lectures*, 122.

<sup>166</sup> Scott, 122.

<sup>167</sup> See *Institutes* 2.2.13

<sup>168</sup> This is consistent with James Madison's (Witherspoon's most famous student) philosophical anthropology in *Federalist* 51 in which he grants human nature a "certain portion of esteem and confidence."

<sup>169</sup> Witherspoon, *Lectures*, 159.

For this reason, “virtue and piety are inseparably connected.”<sup>170</sup> True religion produces true virtue, and without the “proof of the being of God...moral sense would be weak and insufficient.”<sup>171</sup> Reformed Orthodox theologians affirmed a role for religion in civil society as well. Pictet said that natural religion produced a “bond” of society. Turretin argued that religion is “useful to men...as a bond of external discipline among men to prevent the world from becoming utterly corrupt.”<sup>172</sup> Hence, religion is essential, or at least important, to the preservation of civil society. Even the pagans recognized, according to Turretin, that the ground and author of the natural law is God himself. He cites Cicero: “In all times and nations this universal law must forever reign, eternal and imperishable. It is the sovereign master and emperor of all beings. God himself is its author, its promulgator, its enforcer.”<sup>173</sup> The duties of man are intimately connected with the divine. Natural law is not to be separated from natural religion. To disconnect piety with duty to fellow man is to separate the law from its author, ground and enforcer. To put it in Christian terms, to separate piety from civil righteousness is to break apart the law of God, being composed of two tables—duty to God and duty to man. There is, then, no necessary contradiction between Reformed theology and the promotion of public religion for the purpose of social solidarity and public virtue. The primary purpose is true worship, but there is a secondary effect of social solidarity. And for this reason there is no contradiction between Calvinism and the principles of republicanism, a contradiction asserted by Lynerd. Witherspoon’s (and other’s) promotion of public morality through religion is exactly what a Calvinist ought to advocate.

An implication from all of this is the following. Since each individual, regardless of his or her salvific relationship to God, has access, by reason, to the standard of right conduct, there is

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid, 95.

<sup>172</sup> *IET* 1.4.4

<sup>173</sup> Ibid, 11.1.17.

considerable overlap in potential knowledge between the Christian and the non-Christian. As Reformed theologian David VanDrunen said concerning the Reformed view of natural law, there is a “universally accessible standard.”<sup>174</sup> While Christians might be held to *additional* duties adventitious to nature revealed in scripture, there remains significant common ground between Christians and non-Christians concerning right conduct and principles of political governance and civil order. Further, Christians can praise non-Christians who make sound arguments for various truths and can appropriate or use their arguments. Turretin, for example, called some of Cicero’s philosophical arguments “weighty.”<sup>175</sup> This significant common ground disconnects any necessary connection between the soundness of one’s argument and their relationship to and knowledge of God the Redeemer. Of course, the object of inquiry must be within the bounds of reason, and the Socinians and Unitarians during the Founding era exceeded those bounds, insisting on proofs from reason on matters the orthodox would consider above reason. In this way, they were in error, according to Reformed Orthodoxy. But despite this error, when their inquiry concerns natural objects – for example, natural law and natural theology – Christians can meet them on common ground, accepting or rejecting their arguments as well as conducting deliberation with them. It is even possible for Christians to be allied with non-Christian against the thought of another group of Christians. When an orthodox Christian, then, appropriates or borrows ideas from Enlightenment philosophers, the Christian has not abandoned his orthodoxy. Nor does it make one’s thought some admixture of Christianity and Enlightenment. In large part, the problems in the literature on Witherspoon (such as the two-hats views described above) and the American Founding in general arise from an imprecise juxtaposition of Christianity and Enlightenment. The latter is opposed to the former only when it calls into question its theological

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<sup>174</sup> VanDrunen, 1.

<sup>175</sup> Turretin, 11.17.1.

framework for the relationship of reason and revelation, which would include both the denial of the possibility of theology and the demand for particular doctrines, traditionally thought supernatural, to be proven by reason. But this gives plenty of room for the orthodox Founders to accept all sorts of philosophical conclusions from the heterodox and not violate their orthodoxy.

Therefore, Witherspoon in his heavy borrowing from some of the Moderates (e.g., Reid and Hutcheson) and from some more heretical authors (John Locke, Samuel Clarke and Joseph Priestly) did not violate his orthodoxy. No position taken by Witherspoon from these Enlightenment thinkers exceeds the bounds of reason established by his theological tradition. For this reason, there is no evidence (and plenty of contrary evidence) justifying the claim that Witherspoon is an Enlightenment thinker. What the literature lacks in its commentary on Witherspoon, and other Founders, is a precise explanation on what counts as evidence of unorthodoxy. It is not enough to show influence on Witherspoon from his heterodox contemporaries and then question his orthodoxy. The issue is what *type* of influence. It does not follow from the fact that Witherspoon found compelling Samuel Clarke's and other anti-Trinitarians' arguments for the existence of God and other elements of natural theology that he also accepted their view of reason. The issue between orthodoxy and Enlightenment is the place, role, and limits of reason, not conclusions from reason. Nowhere does Witherspoon express a view of reason outside the bounds of reason and revelation in Reformed Orthodoxy.

My discussion has, to my mind, sufficiently demonstrated the five theses I proposed in the introduction. Witherspoon views reason as ancillary, confirmatory, and supportive of special revelation. It is not above, nor the rule, standard or measure, of special revelation. He affirms that only natural objects are proper objects of reason. His arguing for and from natural theology and natural law is consistent with the Reformed tradition. Witherspoon explicitly recognizes a

limit of reason consistent with Reformed Orthodoxy. Lastly, Witherspoon's theological framework for understanding the relationship of reason and revelation is both consistent with Reformed Orthodoxy and makes possible legitimate and constructive cooperation and deliberation with orthodox and heterodox on legitimate objects of reason, such as natural theology, natural law, principles of governance, political right and duties, and other matters related to humankind's "earthly" existence. We can conclude then that Witherspoon was not an Enlightenment thinker in opposition, wittingly or not, to his theological orthodoxy. Whatever one wants to call his philosophical method, it is consistent with Reformed Orthodoxy.

To be sure, one can argue, perhaps rightly, that Witherspoon's confidence in reason and the common-sense philosophy popular at the time and later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century led him to an optimism that proved to be damaging for religious belief, as George Marsden argued of common-sense philosophy's encounter with Darwinism in *Fundamentalism and American Culture*.<sup>176</sup> One could also argue that his *Lectures* might have sown seeds of doubt of religious faith, however unintentionally, in some of his students due to the nature of its project. And one could question the prudence of both his refusal to cite classical, medieval, and Reformed sources in the lectures and his failure to provide a more nuanced and precise defense justifying an orthodox Christian conducting such an inquiry. But none of these potential faults and lack of prudence sufficiently show an abandonment of Reformed Orthodoxy in support of "Enlightened" orthodoxy.

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<sup>176</sup> George Marsden *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

## CHAPTER 4 IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

My discussion of Witherspoon's consistency with the Reformed tradition is best viewed as a case study for a broader argument. A precise and nuanced presentation of Reformed Orthodoxy, as I tried to provide above, sheds light on the religious and philosophical thought of other Founders, such as John Jay, James Wilson, Roger Sherman, Oliver Ellsworth, and others, and could shape our understanding of the relationship of religion to the American Founding. In the literature, the Reformed tradition has been almost universally misunderstood, particularly the tradition's unity and diversity on matters such as reason, philosophy, natural law, and natural theology. Scholars also mistakenly see a significant divergence between medieval scholasticism and Reformed methodology. It is not the case that Reformed thinkers sought a complete reset of Christian theology by rejecting the relevance of the Christian theological tradition(s).

Michael Zuckert, a political theorist who has written extensively on the subject of religion and the American founding, is representative of those who have mischaracterized Calvinism. He argues that there is a significant and fundamental discontinuity between the 17<sup>th</sup> century American political thought, which came largely in the form of political theology, and 18<sup>th</sup> century American political thought, which was heavily influenced by the philosophy of Locke. The Mayflower Compact's (1620) Christian theological language is nowhere found in the Declaration of Independence, indicating a fundamental difference in starting points and purpose for civil government. He writes, "The appeal to the divine in the Declaration is altogether different, however: here it is 'Nature's God' and his 'Laws', a God who speaks to humanity through reason and acts in and through nature. His laws are none other than the laws of nature, as understood by human reason....The truths [of the Declaration] are both accessible to and valid

for all human beings; the principles of the Declaration are simply universal in character.”<sup>177</sup>

Given my evidence and discussion above, the problems here are fairly clear. There is nothing in the Declaration that is inconsistent with Reformed Orthodoxy, though the language is not exclusively from that tradition, nor points to it. So while I agree that there was discontinuity between 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century American political thought, this is not evident from the presence of natural law language in the Declaration. It is evident rather from the *absence* of anything exclusively Christian. We can consistently say that while the Declaration is not a Christian document, it is still consistent with Christianity, according to the Reformed tradition.<sup>178</sup> This distinction is possible because there is nothing exclusively Christian about civil government. As VanDrunen states in Reformed natural law there is a “universally accessible standard for the development of civil laws.”<sup>179</sup> The principles of government, justice, and civil decency are common: all are under the divine government of God the Creator.

Zuckert also overestimates Locke’s accomplishment. He did not “break with all the elements most characteristic of Protestant political thought,” as Zuckert claims, for not basing his political thought on scripture. Locke’s appeal to natural law is, formally speaking, consistent with Protestantism, even *Reformed* Protestantism. When scholars says the contrary, it is indicative of confusion. Protestants cited scripture in developing the duties and arrangements of political life only because the moral law in scripture is *grounded* in nature and is a surer means of understanding nature. Political life and its obligations ultimately come from God via nature.

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<sup>177</sup> Zuckert, “Natural Rights and Protestant Politics,” in *Protestantism and the American Founding*, 26.

<sup>178</sup> The point is not to dismiss any notion of discontinuity between the 17th century puritans and the 18th century ministers and founders. I have not address this directly, nor theorize about what was in the minds of the Pilgrims. What I am questioning is the monolithic understanding of Calvinism that pervades the literature. It is almost assumed, without support, that all Calvinists believed in a disharmony between nature and revelation

<sup>179</sup> VanDrunen, 1.

As Reformed humanist, George Buchanan once said, “The voice of God and of nature is the same.”<sup>180</sup> Scripture *presupposes* this truth and clarifies natural law, as almost all Reformed Orthodox theologians and political theorists up until Locke had said. (e.g., Calvin, Vermigli, Junius, Zanchi, Althusius, Turretin etc.).<sup>181</sup> Appealing to nature to theorize about human government and political life makes perfect sense to a Reformed Christian. Politics is in the realm of nature and nature’s God – God the Creator, *not* God the Redeemer.

This makes Harry Jaffa’s comment, cited by Zuckert, a false dichotomy: “the preamble to the Declaration of Independence invokes not the God of Israel or the persons of the Trinity, but the God of nature and is wholly a document of the rationalist tradition.”<sup>182</sup> The God of nature in Reformed theology is God the Creator, the same God who as creator revealed himself, by an additional set of revelation, as a Redeemer. God’s intention with this further set of revealed knowledge was to establish adventitious means to attain eternal life. And since human *earthly* government is knowledge taken from God the Creator, there is no requirement that founding documents mention the Trinity or Christ in the political documents, however ideal it might be, for Christians to support both the government and the founding of it.

Even the New England Puritan John Cotton makes this distinction explicit: God the Creator is the same God as the Triune God, yet God relates to man in different ways. He writes in his “Discourses about Civil government,”

Though both [ecclesiastical and civil administration] agree in this, that God *is the Efficient and Author of them both and that by Christ*, yet not *eadem ratione*. For, God as the Creator and Governor of the World, is the Author of Civil Order and Administrations: But God as in Covenant with his People in Christ, is the Author of Church-Administration. So likewise Christ, as the Essential Word and Wisdom of God creating and governing the World, is the Efficient and Fountain of Civil

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<sup>180</sup> *De Jure Regni Apud Scotus: A Dialogue*, translated by Robert MacFarlan (Colorado Springs: Portage Publications, 2000), 22. Buchanan (1506-82) was an influential Scottish Reformed humanist.

<sup>181</sup> See Grabill’s discussion of these theologians.

<sup>182</sup> Quoted by Zuckert, 273.

Order & Administration: But as Mediator of the New Covenant & Head of the Church, he established Ecclesiastical Order.<sup>183</sup>

Cotton affirms that civil order is governed by the Creator, not the Mediator. And the covenant of grace is with the Church, not with the civil government. The government is under the direction of the knowledge given by the Creator. The government advances the spiritual and invisible kingdom of Christ only extrinsically, as Turretin said.<sup>184</sup> The magistrate is to care for the Church, but he cannot advance the spiritual kingdom of God directly by his rule.

As Calvinist two-kingdom tradition has always said, the primary role of the civil magistrate is to keep the peace and maintain good order.<sup>185</sup> The chief end of government is *not* the advancement of the spiritual kingdom of God, though this *can* and *ideally should* be one of its accidental functions. But such advancement is proper only under certain circumstances. As Althusius said, “Whoever therefore wishes to have a peaceful realm should abstain from [religious] persecutions. He should not, however, permit the practice of a wicked religion lest what occurred to Solomon may happen to him. But if he cannot prohibit it without hazard to the commonwealth, he is to suffer it to exist in order that he not bring ruin to the commonwealth.”<sup>186</sup> Here we see the great principle of Protestant prudence. Reformed political thought is interested, principally, in peace and this is achieved through prudential civil action. Winthrop, Cotton, and signers of the Mayflower Compact were in positions to create and sustain a *Christian* commonwealth, so they did or at least attempt to. But in a more pluralistic or multi-

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<sup>183</sup> John Cotton, “A Discourse about Civil Government,” in *Sacred Rights of Conscience: Selected Readings on Religious Liberty and Church-State Relations in the American Founding*, Edited by Daniel L. Dreisbach and Marck David Hall (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2009), 133-145.

<sup>184</sup> *IET* 18.29.15

<sup>185</sup> See Calvin’s *Institutes* 4.20.1-3.

<sup>186</sup> Althusius *Politica*. An Abridged Translation of Politics Methodically Set Forth and Illustrated with Sacred and Profane Examples, ed. and Trans. Frederick S. Carney. Foreword by Daniel J. Elazar (Indianapolis: 1995 Liberty Fund). 6/8/2015. [http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/692#Althusius\\_0002\\_551](http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/692#Althusius_0002_551)

denominational situation (which includes people with positions traditionally considered heterodox), there is need to follow the type of prudence prescribed by Althusius. Since the civil government is a penultimate end for Reformed Christians (the ultimate being the celestial city, or the heavenly and eternal New Jerusalem), prudence is for them a central principle of political theory. The principle of prudence, informed by Protestant political theology, goes far in explaining what led to the Declaration and why Protestant compromises can be principled ones.

These points have important implications on the use of Lockean political ideas in 18<sup>th</sup> century colonial America and its founding era. Though the sudden adoption of Lockean political philosophy is fairly clear, there is nothing *prima facie* inconsistent with Calvinists using it. What I mean by *prima facie* is that there is nothing formally wrong with a Reformed Christian holding to a philosopher's answers to questions on earthly matters, and Locke's political philosophy of the Second Treatise deals with earthly matters. One could, formally speaking, consistently be both a Lockean political theorist and be Reformed Orthodox. It could be, upon examining the substance of the positions, that the positions are inconsistent with the Reformed political tradition, but this is a different issue than whether the positions are within the bounds of reason. Put differently, one is *formally* consistent with the Reformed theological framework of reason and revelation when one's beliefs do not violate the bounds of reason, even when those positions are *materially* inconsistent with the Reformed tradition.

It needs to be emphasized that the primary dispute between the Reformed Orthodox and other more "rationalist" groups on reason and revelation in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and beyond was not over the use of reason *per se*, but over the proper bounds of reason. Turretin's preoccupation with boundaries is clear in the First Topic in his *IET*. Since in his political writings, Locke does not exceed the bounds of reason, a Calvinist could adopt his philosophical conclusions without

formally violating Reformed Orthodoxy. Even materially, it is not clear that much of Locke's political philosophy is inconsistent with that tradition. Calvinists, such as Phillippe de Mornay and Samuel Rutherford, appealed to nature and reason, and used social contractarian arguments and affirmed a similar view of natural equality in their political works.<sup>187</sup> There is precedent, then, for the Calvinist use of what became Lockean liberalism.

Witherspoon and the rest of the Founding generation found themselves in what was already a religiously and denominationally pluralistic society. Though most people identified as Christian, it was not possible to maintain peace and order with an established national church. However ideal establishment might be, it was not conducive to peace, civil security, and tranquility. The members of the Founding generation, including Witherspoon, understood what was at stake and they applied prudence, informed through experience, to establish a viable system of government. To accomplish this, Founders of various religious backgrounds had to work together, which demanded some universal basis of deliberation. Calvinists, Anglicans, Arminians, Roman Catholics, Unitarians, and deists had to cooperate. What made Witherspoon's and the other Calvinists' cooperation possible and principled was their own tradition. Since it recognized the universality of the natural law, that civil society and government is natural, that reason is not wholly unreliable on civil matters, and that ecclesiastical establishment, however ideal, is not the ultimate end of civil government, they were able to constructively work well with their fellow patriots.

For this reason, we should understand Witherspoon's *Lectures* not only as a philosophical attempt to show the complementarity and completeness of reason and revelation for apologetic purposes. The lectures were also meant to shape the thinking of future statesmen. After all, he

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<sup>187</sup> See Rutherford's *Lex, Rex* and de Mornay's *Vindiciae contra tyranno*

envisioned Princeton as a school that primarily produced effective statesmen. In his "Address to the Inhabitants of Jamaica," he says that the primary benefit of education is the opportunity to use one's "talents to the service of the public and good of mankind...[and] to the benefit of society and in office of power or trust."<sup>188</sup> Since public leadership and serving the public in offices of power required having the right knowledge and methods necessary to converse and deliberate with a diverse populous, he taught the universal language of natural law and philosophy. He was responding to the times and being practical. Only statesmen who understand contemporary issues and arguments and understood the methodology behind them could effectively participate in intellectual society. His *Lectures*, while providing arguments supportive of revelation, also served to produce effective public leaders.

What does this tell us about America's Founding? What is the role of Reformed theology in the Founding? Despite the fact that the Founding did not institutionally, constitutionally, or officially establish an orthodox Reformed (let alone Protestant) nation, the Founding is still consistent with orthodox Reformed principles. It is possible for a country's founding principles, institutions, and constitution to be consistent with orthodox Reformed Protestantism, even when the founding does not establish an explicitly Protestant constitution, state, or government. Put differently, there need not be a reference to Christianity and the Bible in the founding documents for those documents to be consistent with Christianity and the Bible. Reformed Christians would ideally want to see some recognition of Christ as the ultimate sovereign and king, but such recognition is not absolutely necessary for a civil administration intent on establishing civil peace and tranquility.

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<sup>188</sup> "Address to the Inhabitant of Jamaica," in *Works* 8.309.

This is where a balance needs to be struck between the “Christian America” advocates, who see the Founding a Christian founding, and the secular or deistical understandings of the Founding. My argument here suggests that the Founding is not uniquely or exclusively a Christian founding, but at the same time it is not inconsistent with Christianity, including Reformed Christianity. In this way, the Founding was indeed a compromise by Reformed Christians, but it was not an *unprincipled* one.

The focus of this paper was narrow, yet it has huge implications. Witherspoon is just one of many of the Founders whose theological positions and philosophical methods can be brought to consistency with a clear understanding of the Reformed tradition on the relationship of reason and revelation. The nature of the Founding itself is clarified as well. What all this suggests is that while there was discontinuity between 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century American political thought in terms of religious establishment and the use of exclusively Christian language, there was, one could argue, an underlying and more fundamental continuity: the penultimacy of civil society and government and the principle of prudence aimed at the peace, tranquility, security of civil society. In this light, orthodox Founders, such as Witherspoon, took part in a fundamental continuity while engineering the necessary discontinuity.

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