

BOOK REVIEWS

***The Classical and Christian Origins of American Politics: Political Theology, Natural Law, and the American Founding*, by Kody W. Cooper and Justin Buckley Dyer**

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This excellent search for the sources of the American Founding hones in on the enduring politico-theological question famously associated with Spinoza—namely, whether religion is the basis of politics or politics the basis of religion. Its tack, however, is not Spinozistic. Rather, it offers an alternative account of the relationship between reason and revelation, an account pivoting on natural law as the mediating authority between the two. The work is at once an exposition of that thesis and a historical inquiry into the extent to which the founders relied upon it.

To accomplish the purpose envisioned the authors proceed to disentangle the ideas of many of the founders (they omit Samuel Adams for reasons inexplicable) from the ideas, mainly, of Enlightenment thinkers. For its principal premise is that, while Enlightenment theory played a significant role in developing political deliberations in the eighteenth century, that influence is exaggerated by scholarship which interprets the founders merely as epigones of a trending and radical modernism.

The evidence for the thesis is found in plentiful and consistent recourse to classical and Christian principles and modes of analysis. The argument goes well beyond a mere citation count (in which the book of Deuteronomy plays a leading role), and it focuses instead on the deductive principles which the founders surfaced through natural law analysis. In contrast, what they often termed Hobbit reduction to mere will is systematically rejected. Nor were the founders seduced, it seems, by Hobbes's clever secularization of biblical content such as the Ten Commandments. The authors do not undertake an analysis of the far more sophisticated Hobbesian appropriation of biblical texts for the first law of nature:

Let him eschew evil, and do good; let him seek peace, and ensue it. (1 Peter 3:11 KJV)

Which was interpolated, of course, from:

Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.
(Psalm 34:14 KJV)

That the isolated Hobbesian individual was phrased in terms of the biblical command to “do good” strips the social context of “do no evil, pursue peace (among men), and do good” to others, wrests the injunction from Micah 6:8 (“What does God ask of you, O man, but to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God”) from its foundation in divine authority (and thereby natural law), and poses it as a counsel of self-interest. In short, Hobbes treated things divine as projections of the most fundamental human propensity, which is to seek safety.

Hobbes’s argument, accordingly, was that what passes for divine command is only apotheosizing human inclination. Or, to phrase it differently, *De Homine*’s god is mankind’s deepest longing. It is on these grounds, accordingly, that radical modernity rejected all but positive authority (the will of the sovereign) and thereby rejected natural law, which, without God, no longer had a mediating role to play. That argument, in turn, displaced the Stoic alternative, which consisted in the conviction that—even if not instantiated in positive law—natural law possessed authority to command the understanding soul. If it is true that natural law cannot direct the conduct of the individual independently of the political law, then it will inevitably follow that natural law cannot mediate between reason and revelation. For it is only where natural law retains authority over the individual soul, and hence produces obligations to God above obligations to civil society (conscience), that a politico-theological crisis can arise.

The real burden of the analysis presented in this text, therefore, is to demonstrate not that the founders consulted natural law but that they recognized the authority of natural law above any political authority. Hence, structuring a political founding upon natural law evades the most important question, namely, the authority of natural law. And that question inescapably results in the affirmation of the authority of God. To state the matter differently, it does not suffice to show that exponents of radical modernity incorrectly assessed the intentions and understandings of the founders. One must also demonstrate that they proceeded on the basis of a rejection of radical modernity.

The authors have not undertaken so bold a construction. Yet, it is almost impossible to read this work without conceiving that exactly such a demonstration is the purpose they have in mind.

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