
Pro Rege

Volume 16 | Number 2

Article 2

December 1987

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Recommended Citation

Noll, Mark A. (1987) "James Madison: From Evangelical Princeton to the Constitutional Convention," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 16: No. 2, 2 - 14.

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James Madison: From Evangelical Princeton to the Constitutional Convention

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James Madison is widely, and even reverently, hailed as the Father of the American Constitution. Much less widely known is the significant contribution of Christian higher education to his thought. The bare fact that Madison graduated from Princeton College when it was a self-consciously Christian institution should be enough to stimulate modern believers to explore Madison's education and its possible effects on the Constitution. Such an exploration turns out to be a somewhat complicated exercise, since Madison's age, for good and for ill, was quite different from our own. Categories of thought, both religious and political, assumptions about relationships between personal convictions and social well-

being, expectations for local and national governments, and standards for higher learning are only some of the features of American life that have changed, sometimes beyond recognition, in the passage of time since the founding of the United States. Yet such an exploration of James Madison in relationship to his Christian higher education is nonetheless a most valuable exercise, not least in 1987 when believers join other American citizens in special efforts to understand, and perhaps by understanding to revivify, the Constitution that has served as our frame of government for two centuries.

For once filiopietism is on the mark. James Madison really was the father of the Constitution. To his friend and political colleague,

Thomas Jefferson, Madison deserved all the credit he was accorded. "I do not know in the world," said Jefferson, "a man of purer integrity, more dispassionate, disinterested, and devoted to genuine Republicanism; nor could I in the whole scope of America and Europe point out an abler head."¹ A sketch of Madison's Constitutional career reads almost like a history of that document itself. Madison was twenty-four years old in 1775, when war broke out with Great Britain. But because of poor health his active military service was limited to militia training in his native Orange County, Virginia. Instead of fighting, Madison contributed as a legislator to the cause of American Independence.

He began his first term of service as a Virginia representative in 1776 and immediately took part in framing the Constitution and Declaration of Rights by which that new state proposed to govern itself. In 1779 the Virginia legislature chose Madison to serve in the Continental Congress where he had first-hand experience with the Articles of Confederation. Madison, in fact, played a key role in getting Virginia to cede its western land claims, and this was one of the important steps in securing the ratification of the Articles. He pushed hard but unsuccessfully in the Continental Congress for amendments to the Articles that would allow the national Congress to raise its own revenues. Then as he became increasingly dissatisfied with both state and federal government under the Articles, he was a leader in the effort to fashion a new system. Madison was an active force at the Annapolis Convention in 1786 that called on the states to send delegations to Philadelphia to overhaul the Articles. He engineered Virginia's decision to participate in the convention. He helped persuade George Washington, the new country's most venerated figure, to join the Virginia delegation. In preparation for the convention, he wrote private memoranda on the "Vices of the Political System of the United States" and on "Ancient and Modern Confederacies." These in turn became sources for the Virginia Plan, which served, in effect, as the motion on the floor of the Philadelphia Convention. Eventual-

ly the Virginia Plan, with its proposal for a national legislature apportioned strictly on the basis of population came into conflict with a plan from the smaller states for representation that preserved the equal weights of the states in the national government. Although Madison was disappointed with the compromise that resulted—a bicameral legislature with apportionment according to population in the House and with state equality in the Senate—he nonetheless considered the increased national powers of the new Constitution a great advance over the Articles of Confederation. During the four months of the Convention he spoke over 200 times to the fifty or so delegates. Historians are deeply grateful that he also wore himself out keeping an extensive journal of the Convention's proceedings which became, when published after his death, the fullest and most reliable records of the Convention's actions.

After the Convention, Madison joined with the New York statesmen, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, to promote the ratification of the new document. Their essays became *The Federalist Papers*, to this day the definitive interpretation of the Constitution. They were published under the name of "Publius," for Publius Valerius Publicola, who, as Plutarch had reported, once saved the Roman republic in an hour of need. Madison was active in Virginia's nip-and-tuck battle to approve the Constitution. After the document was ratified and the government gathered for the first time under the Constitution, Madison both composed a good bit of George Washington's inaugural address and, as a member of Congress, wrote the official response of the House of Representatives to Washington's speech. Time would fail, in biblical idiom, to tell of Madison's service to the Constitution after 1789—as leader with Jefferson of the emerging Democratic-Republican party, as Secretary of State under President Jefferson, and as President himself from 1809 through 1817, a period of not only precarious international tension but also internal political and constitutional debate.

Madison's record on behalf of the Constitution, in short, is a marvel. That record makes all the more interesting for modern Christians

the lesser-known story of Madison's religious beliefs and his training at evangelical Princeton.

Of the major founding fathers—Washington, Jefferson, John Adams, Ben Franklin, and Madison—it is Madison who came closest to holding an orthodox faith. Although Madison was extremely reserved about his own beliefs, he was a thoughtful reader of theology into his early thirties and, it seems, of the Scriptures for his whole life. He never officially joined a church and did not kneel to pray, but he cultivated discussion on religious matters with several orthodox ministers and led his household in prayer. Madison did not like religious enthusiasm (we would say “revivalism” today), but he maintained far better personal relations with ardent pietists—back-country Baptists, and eventually Methodists—than with many proponents of respectable Episcopalianism.

As a young college graduate, Madison once spoke to a fellow Princeton alumnus in language that warms the heart of Calvinist educators. His friend, William Bradford, having set aside earlier thoughts about entering the ministry, was now wavering between medicine, business, and the law. Madison told him why the law might be best. (Bradford took that advice and eventually became Attorney General of the United States.²) But Madison also added the hope that Bradford would “always keep the Ministry obliquely in View whatever your profession be.” Madison felt it would be highly desirable for “men who occupy the most honorable and gainful departments and are rising in reputation and wealth, publicly to declare their unsatisfactoriness [sic] by becoming fervent Advocates in the cause of Christ, and I wish you may give in your Evidence in this way.”³

Later in life, Madison clearly drifted away from more orthodox forms of the faith toward deism and the religion of nature so popular with the Virginia elite of his day. Some of Madison's Christian friends worried that he was being infected by the views of his political mentor, Jefferson (a man of sincere, but decidedly unsupernatural religion), or his association with Tom Paine (a vigorous public

opponent from the early 1780s of miracles, the infallibility of the Bible, and all forms of traditional Christianity). But they had misjudged their man. Madison was never anybody's intellectual lackey. Rather, he followed the bent of his own character. The move toward deism, as a biographer put it, “was the logical result of his own predilections and studies. Madison's religious interest was metaphorical, not doctrinal or evangelical.”⁴ Still, Madison's God was always more than Jefferson's Moral Governor, Washington's Father of Nature, or Franklin's Benevolent Overseer. As another biographer and the most perceptive student of Madison's religion, Ralph Ketcham, once put it: “It seems probable that Madison had a deep personal attachment to some general aspects of Christian belief and morality.... [Madison's] reticence and lack of flippancy...is perhaps the clearest indication of his difference from Jefferson on the question of religion. Jefferson's skepticism and eager willingness to depart from orthodoxy are in considerable contrast to Madison's consistent reserve. Madison took notes on the meaning of the Scriptures, while Jefferson compiled his own condensation of the New Testament. The difference in method and pretension is significant and meaningful.”⁵

It was the combination of Madison's republicanism and his religion that brought him to Princeton College. In the 1760s the normal course for a young Virginian of Madison's station, the son of a moderately wealthy planter and vestryman of an Anglican parish, would be to attend the Anglican college in his own state, William and Mary. By the time the younger Madison prepared to leave for college, however, both he and his father were distressed by actions and attitudes of the authorities controlling William and Mary. Particularly offensive was the college's association with the Anglican establishment, and especially the support its officers gave to the persecution of Christians who were not members of the Episcopal Church of England. In Madison's Orange County, Presbyterian and Baptist dissenters had been active since the early 1760s, always in the face of opposition from the Church of England, which was Virginia's tax-

supported, legally established church. Both Madisons, father and son, were violently repelled by the scenes of religious persecution that they saw on their very doorstep. The intensity of Madison's feeling on the issue is suggested by another letter to William Bradford. Though it was written after Madison left Princeton, it speaks also for an earlier attitude as well. Madison reported to Bradford that over the winter of 1773-74, there were never fewer than five or six men in nearby jails for practicing dissenting forms of Christianity without permission from the Anglican establishment. The "sentiments" these dissenters promoted were, as Madison saw it,

Princeton had succeeded in wooing to the new world a distinguished Scottish divine with a reputation for both piety and learning.... Under John Witherspoon's leadership the college became probably the most dynamic center of higher education in the Revolutionary period and one of the most instructive advocates of Christian higher education in the history of North America.

"in the main very orthodox." And he was simply appalled at this situation: "that diabolical, hell-conceived principle of persecution rages among some and to their eternal infamy, the clergy can furnish their quota of imps for such business."⁶

Madison in fact made his first plunge into local politics by publicly protesting in 1774 the Virginia persecution of dissenters. There is some evidence that Baptists repayed the kindness by helping elect Madison to the new state legislature in 1776. He remained a determined foe of religious persecution, and of any form of religious establishment, for the rest of his life. With Jefferson he helped beat back Patrick Henry's proposal in the mid-1780s to establish a non-discriminatory establishment of religion in Virginia whereby each taxpayer would have designated the religious body that was to receive the church tax he payed. With the failure of that plan, Madison then convinced the Virginia legislature to accept Jefferson's sweeping "Statute for Religious Liberty." At the Constitutional Convention he made sure that

religious tests were prohibited for officers of the United States. And he was the major force behind the wording and the passage of the First Amendment.

Some have interpreted Madison's diligence for religious liberty as a mark of indifference to Christianity. The reverse is more nearly the case. While Madison did draw the tightest connection between religious and political liberty, he seems to have done so as much for the sake of religion as for the sake of politics. Madison's concern for religious vitality may have been tinged with utilitarianism, for he held that genuine religion was one of the strongest props for public wellbeing. Yet Madison's was a higher

sort of utilitarianism. It never descended to the cynicism of a Voltaire who, to keep them faithful, wanted his servant and his wife to believe the old faith even after he had left it behind.

All of this is relevant to Madison's college education because it was the reputation of Princeton as an institution promoting religious liberty that drew him out of Virginia into New Jersey. Madison learned about Princeton from Thomas Martin, a tutor hired by his father to prepare the younger Madison for college.⁷ Martin, though himself an Anglican minister, had graduated from Princeton, which was in fact, though not exactly in theory, an evangelical Presbyterian institution. To his young charge, Martin spoke glowingly of Princeton's staunch support for religious freedom. He also passed on the news that the new president from Scotland whom the college had acquired in 1768 was a fervent friend of liberty.

The Princeton to which Madison came in the fall of 1769 was a young, somewhat struggling, but determinedly Christian college. It had been

founded in 1746 by a group of ministers and merchants who wanted to do just about what Calvinist colleges in the twentieth century have sought to do. They sought to honor the Scriptures, inculcate true religion, pursue the liberal arts, and graduate men (women entered Princeton as students only in the 1960s) who would serve honorably in church and society.

Princeton's early presidents, including Jonathan Edwards in a very brief tenure, all promoted a lively evangelical faith in tandem with disciplined academic exertion. The training of ministers was a central goal, but not to the exclusion of preparation for Christian service in all areas of life. Early Princeton presidents championed free inquiry; on the model of Bacon's induction, and even took the first steps toward a more mature study of mathematics and natural science. Yet they did so while maintaining orthodox assumptions about the unity of truth under God. Instruction in natural philosophy proceeded piously to demonstrate the wonders of God in the physical world. Teaching in moral philosophy advanced scientifically to demonstrate the reasonableness of faith.

Princeton's most serious setback had been the discouraging propensity of its presidents to die after very short service to the college. Jonathan Edwards had had the shortest tenure, when he served less than a semester before passing away in 1758. But none of the early presidents had flourished in Princeton. At a time when the entire faculty might consist of the president, perhaps one other professor, and one or two graduate tutors, the successive loss of these leaders was a crippling blow. In 1766 Samuel Finley became the fifth president in only twenty years to succumb prematurely after coming to lead the college.

Now, however, as James Madison and his father looked around for an alternative to the College of William and Mary, Princeton's situation was taking a turn for the better. The college had succeeded in wooing to the new world a distinguished Scottish divine with a reputation for both piety and learning. Its prospects glowed more brightly, if only the new president could survive. In the event, the new president,

John Witherspoon, did survive to serve twenty-six years as the president of Princeton. Under his leadership the college became probably the most dynamic center of higher education in the Revolutionary period and one of the most instructive advocates of Christian higher education in the history of North America.⁸

John Witherspoon was an extraordinary individual of extraordinary abilities. He was born in Scotland in 1723 and served as a minister there for twenty-three years before accepting the call to Princeton in 1768. In America, he labored with distinction as a college president; he gained a reputation as a learned and forceful preacher; he devoted great energies to the Presbyterian church; and he also engaged in an unusual amount of political activity for a clergyman. He was a New Jersey delegate to the Continental Congress in July 1776, where he signed the Declaration of Independence, and he continued to serve in the national legislature or in the New Jersey assembly for more than a decade thereafter. His last major public responsibility was to vote for the Constitution as a member of the New Jersey ratifying convention in 1787, seven years before his death.

Under his leadership, Princeton became a dynamic leader of spiritual and ecclesiastical life. More than any other individual, he was responsible for reorganizing the Presbyterians into a cohesive and active General Assembly, and for pointing a steady stream of graduates toward service as ministers. In spiritual matters, Witherspoon was a warm and convincing evangelical, effective in personal counsel and compelling as a preacher. While he was nervous about the excesses of revival, he nonetheless oversaw a college awakening that reached its peak in Madison's last two years at Princeton. Witherspoon even seems to have accomplished the impossible with his pupils by making the early morning chapel service an acceptable experience. Princeton students met twice daily for prayers in the late eighteenth century. Few of them complained about the 5:00 p.m. gathering, but there was universal distress at the morning chapel which usually convened—in a drafty, unheated hall—at 6:00 a.m. Under Witherspoon, many students testified to an

appreciation even for that early service.

In education matters, Witherspoon pushed Princeton to the forefront of contemporary learning by emphasizing history, public speaking, natural science, Hebrew, and French, as well as the traditional classical curriculum. He was not himself a brilliant scholar, but he recognized the value of scholarship and devoted great energies, and healthy sum of his own money, toward hiring competent faculty and purchasing books for the library.

It was, however, as a teacher of statesmen that Witherspoon made his most notable mark. During his tenure, while the average size of graduating classes was only nineteen, the college trained one future president of the United States (Madison), one vice-president (Aaron Burr), twenty-three Congressmen, twenty Senators, several members of the cabinet, several supreme court judges, and holders of high office in states too numerous to mention.⁹ It is an indication of Princeton's role in American politics that the two main documents placed before the Constitutional Convention in 1787, the nationalistic Virginia Plan and the states-right New Jersey Plan, were both written by Princeton graduates, and that the committee which hammered out a compromise between the two, with one delegate from each of the thirteen states, numbered five graduates of the college. Princeton, in short, was, as its best historian has written, "the school for statesmen."¹⁰

The central role of evangelical Princeton in the politics of the early United States leads naturally to a question about the relationship of Christian faith to that of politics. Here, however, we run immediately into a puzzle. John Witherspoon's politics can be explained only by surveying his complicated theological and intellectual history. The greatest problem is that Witherspoon seems to have undergone an intellectual "conversion" when he crossed the Atlantic to take up his post at Princeton. In Scotland, he was a defender of orthodoxy and an acknowledged leader of the Evangelical party in the Presbyterian Church. In particular, Witherspoon insisted in sermons and printed treatises that God's saving grace and the

testimony of Scripture were essential for undergirding social well-being in this life and everlasting security in the world to come. Such views propelled Witherspoon into the leadership of an Evangelical party which struggled against the Scottish Moderates, a group that gave enthusiastic support to the Enlightenment. Witherspoon's attacks were especially strong against the skepticism of David Hume and the ethics of Francis Hutcheson, who saw no need for Scripture or God's grace in developing moral or political theory.

Yet a strange transformation took place when Witherspoon crossed the Atlantic. As Princeton's professor of moral philosophy, Witherspoon was required to lecture on the principles of politics. But to guide this effort Witherspoon turned instinctively to the approach of his erstwhile theological opponents, Hume, Hutcheson, and other philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment.

The results for Witherspoon's own politics were mixed. From a Christian perspective his positive goals were certainly commendable. Witherspoon desired protection from a tyranny which encouraged personal evil and discouraged personal virtue. In the early stages of the conflict he preached a memorable sermon on "The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men" (May 17, 1776), in which he proclaimed God's ability to bring good out of the activities of evil men. And throughout his service in the Continental Congress Witherspoon insisted that the United States act faithfully in meeting its obligations, graciously in treating defeated armies, and carefully in protecting the new liberty gained from Britain. Much of his activity, in short, reflected a desire for Christian principles to govern American public life.

But Witherspoon was also subject to the excesses of other Revolutionaries. So firmly did he believe that resistance to Britain was virtuous that he could only equate loyalty to the Crown with vice and immorality. Witherspoon gave unfortunate expression to these sentiments in 1778 and 1779 when he wrote two vicious "recantations" for printers who had done work for loyalists, Benjamin Towne of Philadelphia and James Rivington of New York. In these

"recantations," which the printers were forced to sign in order to stay in business, Witherspoon put words in their mouths proclaiming their own degeneracy in working for loyalists.¹¹ In his zeal for American rights Witherspoon was making the new American nation a supreme value in violation of the Christian's obligation to put first the Kingdom of God. He allowed self-righteousness to triumph over charity.

The most serious difficulty in Witherspoon's political thought, however, was not its momentary loss of balance. It was rather its frankly naturalistic basis. Witherspoon was required to

Princeton undergraduates, politics is rooted in "conscience enlightened by reason, experience, and every way by which we can be supposed to learn the will of our Maker, and his intentions in creating us such as we are." But when Witherspoon said this, he explicitly excluded the Bible from what we can learn about "the will of our Maker," at least as far as politics is concerned. In fact, he began the lectures from which this quotation comes by affirming that they were "an inquiry into the nature and grounds of moral obligation by reason, as distinct from revelation."¹² And in the same lectures he criticized the earlier American Puritan

Witherspoon's politics breathe a different spirit than his evangelical sermons. In politics he seems very much a spokesman for the Enlightenment. As he put it in his lectures to the Princeton undergraduates, politics is rooted in "conscience enlightened by reason, experience, and every way by which we can be supposed to learn the will of our Maker, and his intentions in creating us such as we are." But when Witherspoon said this, he explicitly excluded the Bible from what we can learn about "the will of our Maker," at least as far as politics is concerned.

lecture on politics, and so we possess written statements of his thought. They present a disturbing picture inasmuch as they lack essential elements of a genuinely Christian approach to public life. That is, Witherspoon's lectures on politics and his public statements at the Congress nowhere expressed the conviction that all humans, even those fighting against British tyranny, were crippled by sin and needed redemption. They also failed to affirm that it was God's gracious providence which undergirded political life of whatever kind rather than simply nature or human nature by itself.

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Cotton Mather for thinking that "moral philosophy," including politics, needed special insights from God's grace or his revelation. So Witherspoon was left to derive his politics from nature and from natural human conscience.

Modern students of Witherspoon are in fact surprised at his rejection of a biblical basis in his political thought, because they know of his reputation as an evangelical. James McAllister, author of one of the fullest recent essays on Witherspoon's role in the Revolution, asks the question, "How large a role did the biblical revelation play in his theory of civil law?" And McAllister concluded: "The answer to the question regarding the biblical contribution to Witherspoon's teaching about the law and liberty is: almost nothing...his theory of society and civil law was based not on revelation but

on the moral sense enlightened by reason and experience."¹³ Virtually the same conclusion appears in the best, and most recent, history of American philosophy: "It is clear that he had drunk more deeply of the Scottish Enlightenment than the [Princeton] trustees (and perhaps he himself) had supposed.... In further contrast to [Jonathan] Edwards, and it seems his own earlier position at Edinburgh, Witherspoon taught that questions of morality and virtue could be investigated as a branch of science and that our duties could be demonstrated by rational and empirical means. Thus he starts his ethics, not with premises guaranteed by religion or revelation, but from the construction of human nature as learned by observation."¹⁴

The primary difficulty at this point was not so much Witherspoon's conclusions as the means used to reach those conclusions. Christians today may regret the way in which allegiance to the Revolution became just as important as the faith itself to some Christian patriots. But they may also be pleased with the patriotic insistence upon the rule of law, upon the need for virtue in a population, and upon the dangers of unchecked power. On a different level, the Christian appeal to "The Author of Nature" as the source of political wisdom during the Revolution has severe limitations. Yet comparatively speaking, the Revolution's "Author of Nature" provided for considerable justice. And the patriots' respect for the "Author of Nature" allowed religious perspectives to function openly in public life.

The larger order of problems concerns the basis for political life. Witherspoon and like-minded Revolutionaries relied simply on nature. He did not act as if the God of the Scriptures had a role to play in defining the terms of justice in politics or the nature of the political sphere itself. Witherspoon's laudatory flight from a political life compromised by the intrusion of oppressive religious structures became a problematic drift to a political theory vitiated by the absence of underlying Christian principles. With Witherspoon as politician, though not necessarily as leader of the Presbyterians, nature is eating up grace. That is, the idea that political insight arises ultimately from an

analysis of society and human nature itself is driving out the conviction that revelation might provide orienting principles for political activity. Admittedly, Witherspoon and other founding fathers never had to face the fruits of what they had sown. He lived at a time when the assumption prevailed widely that some kind of God promoted something identifiable as traditional Christian morality. Yet compared to earlier Christian thinkers there is a striking absence of reflection on how divine revelation may shape thought on politics. Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, John Knox, and (after Witherspoon's day) Abraham Kuyper all tried to develop political theory that reflected the truths of Scripture as well as the natural constitution of humans and society. Witherspoon and his fellow patriots did not.

From another perspective, Witherspoon's approach to politics may be considered a step in the process of secularization. The advantage of this step was liberation from unjust entanglements between institutions of church and state. The disadvantage was captivity to naturalistic forms of reasoning. Witherspoon's approach reflected a segregation of religious and political reflection that is one of the key marks of modern secular life. The British sociologist David Martin has described well how such secularization begins: "The key word is differentiation, meaning the splitting off of sectors, so that religion becomes one specific sector, not the essence of the whole.... Above all the casing of thought ceases to be theological. Philosophy is naturalised and becomes natural philosophy and sub-divides yet again into moral philosophy and other branches. Law finds a justification in social necessity rather than divine edict. Morals seek a foundation in rules of reciprocity and a calculus of happiness. The state appeals to the voice of the people rather than the voice of God."¹⁵ This is precisely the process underway in the Revolutionary period. It describes exactly the ideas that Witherspoon communicated to his students at Princeton. Patriotic thought, even when expressed by sincere evangelicals like Witherspoon, was proceeding on its own. It was independent of the "casing" of Christian

doctrine, Christian tradition, or the Christian Scriptures.

If I have represented Witherspoon's thought correctly, it would be logical to expect that whatever help James Madison received for his political thought at Princeton, it had little to do with the Christian faith.¹⁶ That, however, was not exactly the case. It seems, rather, that Madison was able to exploit fully some of the potentially Christian aspects of Witherspoon's admittedly secular political theory while at the same time minimizing some of the potentially destructive features of that same secular outlook. In other words, Madison as the indifferently religious public servant seems to have done better than his explicitly evangelical teacher in promoting policies compatible with Christian faith.

Before entering into Madison's thought, however, I must enter a significant caveat. That caveat has to do with the difficulty in tracing Madison's convictions about the Constitution and other political matters back to foundational principles. Madison was both very widely read and very reticent about the source of his political views. It is therefore quite difficult to draw hard and fast connections between specific expressions in his public life and their theoretical underpinnings.

In spite of this reticence, however, enough is clear about the origins of Madison's thought to suggest both its complexity and its compatibility with Christian principles. This is particularly the case with two of his most striking affirmations: first, that a republican democracy afforded the best system of government for restraining innate human evil and liberating innate human potential; and second, that human experience, historical and contemporary, made possible a "science of politics." My argument is not necessarily that Madison derived these convictions from Christian foundations, but that they were related in important ways to his own religious convictions and influences from evangelical Princeton. In addition, although Madison developed something less than a fully Christian political theory, his thought still approximated a Christian perspective on government and public life.

Madison's famous *Tenth Federalist* is an especially revealing document to show the way he combined a sober-eyed realism about human nature with a confident trust in democracy. It was published on 23 November 1787 as part of the series co-authored with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay in support of the proposed Constitution. The *Tenth Federalist* sought to assuage fears that a popular government with the democratic elements contained in the new Constitution would lead to disaster—either when a dominant faction clawed its way to power through mob rule or when society dissolved into total anarchy. Madison conceded "the propensity of mankind, to fall into mutual animosities" and admitted that the "unfriendly passions" of humans, especially arising from "the various and unequal distribution of property," posed a serious threat to all democratic governments.¹⁷ He contended, however, that a large, far-flung republic, with democracy at work throughout the country in representative institutions, could overcome the corrosive power of faction precisely because its size and diversity would prevent a dangerous accumulation of power. This was, Madison urged, the very kind of government proposed by the new Constitution.

One of the perennial points of discussion concerning the *Tenth Federalist* is where Madison derived his view of human nature—as both corrupt yet capable of honorable activity, and of individuals as both sinners and potential servants of the good. A long-time student of religious-political issues in the founding era, James Smylie, has argued persuasively that Madison in the *Tenth Federalist* was reflecting a theological view of humanity derived from "the Calvinism" and "the 'common-sense' philosophy of his college mentor, John Witherspoon." Witherspoon, in turn, according to Smylie, derived "his view of man first from the Bible." In this reading, although Madison did not use the technical "theological terminology of his Princeton teacher," he was nonetheless expressing Witherspoon's perspective, especially when he contended that the "latent causes of faction are...sown in the nature of man." According to Smylie, Madison's *Tenth Federalist*

gave political shape to principles on human nature which, in their combination of realism concerning sin and confidence concerning God-given potential, anticipated some of the twentieth-century insights of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr.¹⁸

Some quite specific evidence backs up Smylie's argument that otherwise rests mostly on inference. On at least one occasion in the late 1770s, Madison and a college classmate, the Rev. Samuel Stanhope Smith, engaged in a lengthy exchange of letters on the question of human free will. Smith was a Presbyterian clergyman, yet he still advocated the Enlightenment view of human nature: humankind was hindered by errors and poor choices, more than by a fatal defect of character; if people would only follow the natural impulses of their hearts, they would find God and a more moral life. Madison was an enlightened public servant, yet he defended the Calvinistic view: evil is first a problem of character before it is a problem of actions; if people would live morally, they must be transformed. In the exchange with Smith, Madison revealed a sophisticated and largely Reformed understanding of human character and its capabilities.¹⁹ Just such an understanding seems also to be presupposed in the arguments of *Federalist No. Ten*.

Caution, however, is advisable at this point, for Madison's view of human nature appears to have been a river fed by many tributaries. In fact, a whole chorus of learned commentators is at hand to show that Madison's view of human nature is only coincidentally related to the pages of Scripture. Ralph Ketcham, the student of Madison's religion, nonetheless believes that Madison's carefully balanced tension between confidence in self-government and skepticism concerning human nature came from his reading in the classics. Ketcham thinks Thucydides' unblushing depiction of human cruelty and Aristotle's political realism were especially important.²⁰ Marvin Meyers, on the other hand, finds the key to Madison's thought in his general commitment to "the eighteenth-century liberal tradition...of natural rights and social compact, bills of rights and constitutional government," expressed specifically in a

lifetime devotion to "freedom of conscience under nature's distant God." Meyers feels that Madison owed little to "abstract models of natural virtue or original sin" but drew instead from his study of history and the practical needs of the American situation.²¹ Still other scholars return to Madison's formal training. Douglass Adair has argued that Madison took his description of human nature and his analysis of faction from the political writings of David Hume.²² And Roy Branson suggests that it was not just Hume but the entire Scottish Enlightenment that shaped Madison's view of human nature.²³

Like Smylie, Adair and Branson relate the search for Madison's most basic principles to the influence of John Witherspoon as the mediator of ideas from Scotland. Witherspoon's own tangled intellectual history makes it difficult to assess Madison's exactly, but it is at least possible that it was Witherspoon the evangelical Calvinist as much as Witherspoon the educator of the Enlightenment who encouraged the development in Madison of an opinion on human nature that, while not explicitly biblical, still reflected a generally Christian stance.

Reference to Hume and the Scottish Enlightenment brings us to a second conviction in Madison's politics that reflects a Christian orientation. For Madison, Hume was not important as a proponent of philosophical skepticism but as an analyst of society. In particular, Madison seems to have taken from Hume and other moral philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment the idea that political life can be studied systematically on the basis of human experience.

The Scottish philosophers of the eighteenth century were in fact leaders in the development of something like what we would today call "social science."²⁴ That is, they felt that the study of humanity in society could proceed along lines suggested by Sir Isaac Newton's study of the physical world. History and contemporary experience provided the empirical "data" for "laws" governing human experience. David Hume, as a historian, had shown how this might work in theory.²⁵ And the Scottish

moral philosopher Francis Hutcheson had made the sort of applications that eventually attracted attention in America. Hutcheson, for instance, had described a "law" of human societies that an imperial power could not manage fairly and successfully a distant colony if the colony became large and prosperous.²⁶

This type of thinking lay behind the moral philosophy that John Witherspoon taught his pupils at Princeton. And it was very important for James Madison. In *Federalist No. Forty-Seven*, for example, Madison showed how "the science of politics" demonstrated that "the preservation of liberty requires, that the three great departments of power [legislative, executive, judicial] should be separate and distinct."²⁷ Madison's study of ancient republics was also undertaken with the assumption that this would yield guiding principles for the formation of government in America.²⁸ Where Madison exploited the science of politics much

In America during the eighteenth century efforts to think empirically about society rested almost as securely on theistic assumptions as those directed to physical nature.³⁰ In both cases, empiricism provided some liberation from the shackles of deductive thinking. In both cases, as well, genuine advance occurred in understanding the objects of inquiry. In pre-modern science the meaning of a physical phenomenon was thought to be transparent once the scientist had brought the proper generalizations—hallowed by tradition and a reverence for authority—to bear on the phenomenon. In pre-scientific conceptions of society, a course of action was most often dictated by traditional conceptions of human order derived from a mixture of religious, ethnic, and national traditions. In both situations genuine knowledge could arise, but the method was unreliable for being tied so closely to the deductive principles that dominated it.

The sum of the matter is this: It appears as if evangelical Princeton did have a positive Christian influence on Madison. Put more exactly, Christian elements in the teaching of Witherspoon seem to have nurtured Madison's native religious sensitivity in such a way as to shape Madison's efforts on behalf of the Constitution.

more creatively than his mentor, Witherspoon, it was nonetheless Witherspoon who first introduced him to systematic study of this nature.

The importance for Christians of the social science that Witherspoon promoted and Madison practiced lies in its parallel to eighteenth-century natural science. To see why this is relevant to Christian thinking, however, we must remember that to Newton and most other pioneers of early modern science, the study of nature was a theistic, or at least deistic, exercise. In the late eighteenth century science was much more an ally of religion than the opponent it would become, at least in public perception, after Darwin. In Madison's day, scientists of all sorts had not yet forgotten that they were able to do their work only because of the providential grace of God.²⁹

Modern science and eighteenth-century social science, on the other hand, both moved a considerable distance away from the domination of deductive reasoning. They both maintained the deductivist's belief in the intelligibility of the universe, but they replaced confidence in deduction with belief in the contingency of events. Understanding depended more upon study of the event itself than upon the explanatory generalizations brought to it. Modern scientists and eighteenth-century social scientists both overstated by a large margin the degree to which they were freed from deductive presuppositions, but the effort to let intelligible contingencies dictate the result of scientific and social scientific inquiry brought advances in understanding, first for the physical world, and then for human society. Precisely this course of

study led to Madison's breakthrough concerning the check which a large republic could exert on the perils of democracy. There was, in other words, considerable value when advocates of a science of politics took Newton's dictum seriously—that an "analogy" existed "between the world natural and the world politic"³¹—and set about researching societies as Newton had researched the physical world.

Christians can only wish that social scientists late in the eighteenth century were as self-consciously religious as the early modern scientists. The generation of Newton acknowledged fulsomely that their activities depended upon a strong doctrine of creation and some conception of divine providence. Early modern scientists believed that confidence in the regularity and intelligibility of the world implied a regular and intelligent divine will; their commitment to empirical inquiry rested on the belief that God had created humans with the capacity for making sense of that world.³² So also did James Madison seem to proceed under the guidance of John Witherspoon who promoted science at Princeton in order to grasp the world that God had made.

Madison's employment of social science for constitutional theory was not infallible, but it did yield striking advances. If his confidence in a science of politics was not expressly and confessedly Christian, it nevertheless grew from the confidence of Witherspoon and the Scottish moral philosophers that the ability to study human society systematically was a gift from God.

The great difficulty with the sort of social science that Madison promoted, as also with his support of a republican democracy, was its non-reflective, intuitive character. So far as Madison's own writing reveals, it merely *seemed* to him proper to pursue a science of politics. An ungrounded, naive empiricism pointed his social science to the conclusion that a just republicanism required both democracy and a large, diverse population.

So long as the culture in which Madison's politics was imbedded was largely traditional in its religion, the absence of self-consciousness was not a major problem. Christian ideas of

justice, while never dominant in early America, were nonetheless an accepted part of the cultural landscape. The day would come, however, when the residual Christianity faded in American culture, when both science and democracy harkened to impulses alien to Christian faith. When that day arrived, the intuitive character of Madison's political science became a bane instead of the substantial blessing it had been in his own generation.

The sum of the matter is this: It appears as if evangelical Princeton did have a positive Christian influence on Madison. Put more exactly, Christian elements in the teaching of Witherspoon seem to have nurtured Madison's native religious sensitivity in such a way as to shape Madison's efforts on behalf of the Constitution. From Witherspoon, Madison heard a biblically-informed discussion of human nature that certainly came into play in the formation of his republicanism. From Witherspoon, Madison also received the assurance that pursuing a science of politics was possible because of the way God had made the world.

At the same time, the great flaw in Witherspoon's approach to culture was also a flaw in Madison. Why must a democracy balance human evil and human potential if it is to preserve justice? Why should we trust a science of politics? To both questions the implicit answer in the days of Witherspoon and Madison was that God had created both human nature and human society and had ordained the capacity for humans to govern themselves. But in their day these answers were never more than implicit. They remained at the level of unarticulated assumptions. For apologetical purposes, Witherspoon could even act as if they came from a bare nature itself. Because of this absence of grounding, this studied naiveté about the formation of theories, the Constitution, or at least James Madison's constitutionalism, remains an impressive approximation of Christian political values—nothing less, but also nothing more.³³

NOTES

³¹Quoted by James M. Banner, Jr., "James Madison, Jr.," in *Princetonians 1769-1775: A Biographical Dictionary*, ed.

Richard A. Harrison (Princeton, 1980), 164-65. The sources I have drawn on for an account of Madison's life and thought include Irving Brant, *James Madison*, 5 vols. (Indianapolis, 1941-); Marvin Meyers, ed. and intro., *The Mind of the Founder: Sources of the Political Thought of James Madison* (rev. ed., Hanover, NH, 1981); Merrill D. Peterson, ed., *James Madison: A Biography in His Own Words* (New York, 1974); and Lance Banning, "Madison, James (1751-1836)," *Encyclopedia of the American Constitution*, ed., Leonard W. Levy (New York, 1986), 3:1189-94.

²William Bradford, Jr., "Princetonians 1769-1775, 185-91.

³Madison to Bradford, Sept. 25, 1773, *The Papers of James Madison*, Vol. I: 1751-1779, eds. William T. Hutchinson and William M. E. Rachal (Chicago, 1962), 96.

⁴Brant, *James Madison*, 1:118.

⁵Ralph L. Ketcham, "James Madison and Religion—A New Hypothesis," *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society*, 38 (June 1960), 76, 86.

⁶Madison to Bradford, Jan. 24, 1774, *Papers of James Madison*, 106.

⁷Thomas Martin, in *Princetonians 1748-1768: A Biographical Dictionary*, ed., James McLachlan (Princeton, 1976), 394-95.

⁸Varnum Lansing Collins, *President Witherspoon*, 2 vols. (Princeton, 1925), is the fullest and most reliable biography.

⁹John Maclean, *History of the College of New Jersey, From its Origin in 1746 to the Commencement of 1854*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1877), 1:357-61.

¹⁰Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker, *Princeton 1746-1796* (Princeton, 1946), 80ff.

¹¹Timothy M. Barnes and Robert M. Calhoun, "Moral Allegiance: John Witherspoon and Loyalist Recantation," *American Presbyterians: Journal of Presbyterian History*, 63 (Fall 1985), 273-83.

¹²John Witherspoon, "Lectures on Moral Philosophy," in *Works*, 4 vols. (Philadelphia, 1802), 3:388, 367.

¹³James L. McAllister, "John Witherspoon: Academic Advocate for American Freedom," in *A Miscellany of American Christianity*, ed. Stuart C. Henry (Durham, NC, 1963), 217, 218.

¹⁴Elizabeth Flower and Murray G. Murphey, *A History of Philosophy in America*, 2 vols. (New York, 1977), 1:233, 234.

¹⁵David Martin, "General Tendencies and Historical Filters," *Annual Review of Social Science of Religion*, 3 (1979), 10.

¹⁶On his time at Princeton, see Banning, *Princetonians 1769-1775*, 160-62; and Ralph Ketcham, "James Madison at Princeton," *Princeton University Library Chronicle*, 28 (1966), 24-54.

¹⁷Contained in Michael Kammen, ed., *The Origins of the American Constitution: A Documentary History* (New York, 1986), 147.

¹⁸James Smylie, "Madison and Witherspoon: The Roots of American Political Theory," *Princeton University*

Library Chronicle, 22 (Spring 1961), 121, 126, 131. Quotation from Madison in Kammen, ed., *Origins of the American Constitution*, 131.

¹⁹Papers of James Madison, 194-211, 253-57. Madison's contributions to this exchange are, unfortunately, missing, but Smith's letters respond at length to Madison's arguments.

²⁰Ralph L. Ketcham, "James Madison and the Nature of Man," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 19 (Jan. 1958), 62-76.

²¹Meyers, *The Mind of the Founder*, xix, xxii.

²²Douglass Adair, "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science": David Hume, James Madison, and the Tenth Federalist," in *Fame and the Founding Fathers: Essays by Douglass Adair*, ed. Trevor Colbourn (New York, 1974).

²³Roy Branson, "James Madison and the Scottish Enlightenment," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 40 (1979), 235-50.

²⁴See especially Gladys Bryson, *Man and Society: The Scottish Inquiry of the Eighteenth Century* (Princeton, 1955).

²⁵Adair, "That Politics May Be Reduced to a Science"; and Adair, "Experience must Be Our Only Guide": History, Democratic Theory, and the United States Constitution," in *Fame and the Founding Fathers*.

²⁶Caroline Robbins, "When It Is That Colonies May Turn Independent: An Analysis of the Environment and Politics of Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746)," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 11 (1954), 214-51.

²⁷In Kammen, ed., *Origins of the American Constitution*, 187.

²⁸Madison, "Of Ancient and Modern Confederacies," in Meyers, *The Mind of the Founder*, 47-56.

²⁹Especially clear on this point is the essay by Frank E. Manuel, "Three Scientists [Galileo, Kepler, Newton] in Search of God," in *The Changing of the Gods* (Hanover, NH, 1983).

³⁰This and the next paragraph are modified from Mark A. Noll, "Scientific History in America: A Centennial Observation From A Christian Point of View," *Fides et Historia*, 14 (Fall-Winter 1981), 27-28.

³¹Sir Isaac Newton, as quoted in Margaret C. Jacob, *The Newtonians and the English Revolution 1689-1720* (Ithaca, NY, 1976), 15.

³²Michael B. Foster, "The Christian Doctrine of Creation and the Rise of Modern Science," *Mind*, 43 (1934), 446-48; Charles Webster, *The Great Instauration: Science, Medicine, and Reform 1626-1660* (New York, 1976); and Eugene M. Klaaren, *Religious Origins of Modern Science* (Grand Rapids, 1977), 185-91.

³³For this paper, I have adapted several paragraphs from two earlier, less extensive considerations of Madison and Witherspoon: "What Should Christians Think of the American Revolution?" in *The Search for Christian America*, by Mark A. Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, and George M. Marsden (Westchester, IL, 1983), 85-95 *passim*; and "The Bible in Revolutionary America," in *The Bible in American Law, Politics, and Political Rhetoric*, ed. James Turner Johnson (Philadelphia, 1985), 45-48 *passim*.