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Roger Sherman and the Creation of the American Republic (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

Hall, Mark David. *Roger Sherman and the Creation of the American Republic*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2013. 224 pages. ISBN 978-0199929849. Reviewed by Scott Culpepper, Associate Professor of History, Dordt College.

In the last forty years, the quest to define the faith of the American founding fathers has unleashed a veritable cottage industry within the worlds of both academic and popular publishing. Scholars from every end of the philosophical and ideological spectrum have tried to navigate the complex and often contradictory evidence with nuanced academic studies. Popular political polemicists, both Christian and secular, have provided some light, but more often they have muddied the waters with wildly partisan interpretations that skew the evidence to suit their political or social agendas. As Mark David Hall correctly observes at the beginning of *Roger Sherman and the Creation of the American Republic*, “Such concerns might be only of academic interest except that the views of the American founders carry significant weight in contemporary political and legal discourse” (6). Appealing to the founders to provide guidance in contemporary matters or even guidance in interpreting the Constitution is complicated by the reality that the founders did not speak with one voice. They were cosmopolitan men who were shaped by diverse influences and held to a number of contrasting views.

Mark David Hall, Herbert Hoover Distinguished Professor of Politics at George Fox University, has written *Roger Sherman and the Creation of the American Republic* with two primary goals in mind. First, Hall wishes to educate Americans about the life and contributions of a founding father whose importance has been overlooked. Sherman (1721-1793), who served in a number of judicial and legislative offices at the state and local levels, was elected a member of the First Continental Congress in 1774, served on the committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence in 1776, and was also a member of the committees that drafted the Articles of Confederation (1777) as well as the United States Constitution (1787). Hall informs the reader, “Roger Sherman was the only founder to help draft and sign the Declaration and Resolves (1774), the Articles of Association (1774), the Declaration of Independence (1776), the Articles of Confederation (1777, 1778), and the Constitution (1787)” (1). In addition, Sherman served as both a representative and senator in the fledgling United States Congress. His importance to the American founding is easily demonstrated, and the need for a comprehensive study of his contributions is easily justified.

In addition to informing his readers about the service of a forgotten founder, Hall seeks to reveal the influence, on many American founders, of an overlooked theological tradition. Students of the founding era have often pointed to the influence of enlightenment political theories, classical republicanism, natural law theory, and Scottish Common Sense philosophy on the founders and the formative institutions they produced. Mark David Hall joins many of his predecessors in arguing for a strong Christian influence in the American founding as well. However, he goes beyond them in arguing for the specific importance of one Christian theological tradition: the Reformed tradition. Founders like Roger Sherman, a dedicated Congregationalist, were heavily influenced by the tradition of resistance to arbitrary governmental authority that was nurtured in Europe during the late sixteenth century by Reformed theologians like Theodore Beza (1519-1605) and Philippe du Plessis Mornay (1549-1623). Hall argues that this Reformed theological influence on Roger Sherman, mediated through New England Puritanism and Congregationalism, was also present in the lives of many other founders. Roger Sherman’s biography and contributions are utilized by Hall as a single case study representing what he argues is a pervasive influence of Reformed theology on the political views of a significant body of founders.

Hall accomplishes these two goals very well. He begins his book with chapters introducing his thesis and describing the legacy of Reformed political theory before Sherman’s day. The chapters that follow discuss Sherman’s early political career in Connecticut, his contributions to the early documents declaring American separation from Great Britain, his participation in the Constitutional Convention, and his service to the early republic. Hall provides a concluding chapter entitled “Philosophy May Mislead You. Ask Experience,” in which he reiterates his central themes and supporting evidence.

Roger Sherman and the Creation of the American Republic is an excellent read that is worth the time invested. Hall is a gifted writer and careful researcher who frames his evidence well. His insistence that scholars should take the Reformed tradition seriously in their analysis of influences on the founders is supported by ample evidence of the existence of Reformed theology as a driving motivator for Sherman. His description of Roger Sherman’s political

activities is fascinating for anyone who is interested in political history. The reader is often impressed with the awareness that our government was born in the midst of conflict and compromise. Hall provides a glimpse of the moments when the cement of the American experiment was still wet and the impressions with which we are so familiar were far from set in stone. His detailed and honest presentation of Sherman's role in making those impressions gives the reader a strong sense of being present at the creation.

Hall's presentation of Roger Sherman's views on church and state is a good example of his willingness to give an honest appraisal of Sherman even when Sherman is not on the winning side of a debate. In fact, Hall works meticulously to demonstrate that there were important perspectives that mattered even if they did not ultimately triumph. In several ways, Sherman, like Samuel Adams and Patrick Henry, was more comfortable with religious influence in governmental matters than were other founders. Sherman was somewhat uncomfortable with the idea of not having a religious test for federal office. In addressing the issue of why the Constitution bears so little direct theological language, Hall asserts, "It is true that the Constitution says little about religion and morality, but this is because most founders believed that *to the extent to which* [emphasis Hall's] governments should promote these perceived goods, that it should be done at the state and local level" (111). Hall's recounting of the creative synergy of debate between Sherman and James Madison demonstrates that even when Sherman did not win, his opposition often helped sharpen and refine Madison's position.

One of the strengths of Hall's work is also a weakness for his overarching argument regarding the prevalent influence of Reformed theology among the founders. Hall's study is especially helpful because it is a detailed study of the life of a particular founder rather than a series of short vignettes. There have been a number of these works, such as David L. Holmes' *Faiths of the Founding Fathers* (Oxford 2006) and Stephen Waldman's *Founding Faith* (Random House 2011), that attempt to treat the religious views of the founders by offering a number of short sketches. These works provide a more comprehensive overview, but they also sometimes lack detailed nuance and can still be narrowly selective in the founders they choose to cover. Individual studies like Hall's study of Roger Sherman enable readers to appreciate the formative influences on one founding figure with the appropriate sense of nuance and contradiction that often attends issues of intellectual indebtedness. Unfortunately, what Hall achieves in terms of individual debt detracts from his goal of demonstrating the prevalence of Reformed theology. Since he focuses on one case study, Hall merely names other founders who shared Sherman's Reformed perspective, without being able to defend his categorization of them as strongly Reformed in any detail. The reader is simply left to trust that Hall is correct in his assessment. Such trust is difficult in a field

littered with contrasting interpretations of even the most transparent founding figures.

Another interpretive issue that surfaces is Hall's sometimes dismissive assessment of John Locke's influence and Hall's argument for the use of vague language to identify the deity by even traditional and orthodox Christians in the eighteenth century. In a subsection of chapter two titled "What about John Locke?" Hall provides a necessary corrective of the assumption that the entirety of eighteenth-century thought about political dissent and contractual government begins with Locke. His argument that political resistance theory has an older and more religious vintage than Locke's writing has great evidential support. He goes on to argue that even if one did posit a pervasive Lockean influence, that influence can only be separated from the Reformed tradition of political resistance in what he calls "secular" readings of Locke (21-22). Such an assertion fails to take into account the degree to which Locke's political thought was grounded on a view of human nature that was diametrically opposed to the Reformed theology of original sin with which he was raised. Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) delineated a conviction that human beings are essentially born as a *tabula rasa*, a blank slate on which anything can be written. Whereas Reformed thinkers argued for the importance of controls on government because human sinfulness must be restrained and righteousness promoted, Locke viewed the role of government as providing protection and opportunity for persons who could become good and responsible citizens through experience and education. Even with works such as Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695), it is clear that a reading of Locke that considers religious views must acknowledge that his political views were grounded in a more Arminian and rationalistic outlook than in a surviving echo of Reformed resistance theory.

While Hall provides good examples of cases in which many religious founders used vague language to describe God (58), the reader is still left with the essential question of why the name of Jesus Christ is not mentioned in the founding documents. A number of good reasons can be and have been given for this dynamic, including the wish to maintain a broad consensus between religious and enlightenment thinkers. Hall's point is that men like Sherman would have seen the "Creator" referenced in the Declaration of Independence as synonymous with the Christian God and therefore have seen no ambiguity in the Declaration's religious content. While Hall is probably correct in his assessment of Sherman's acceptance of the religious nature of the Declaration, the lack of more explicit references to Christ or a specifically Christian creator is a helpful reminder that our quest to recover neglected influences on the American founding should not result in the diminishing of those other intellectual and spiritual traditions that were present.

Mark David Hall provides an excellent biography of an important founding father in *Roger Sherman and the*

Creation of the American Republic. He also constructs an interesting and convincing defense of the important influence of the Reformed theological tradition in the

American founding. In these pluralistic times, Hall's work is a compelling reminder that our faith can still have a significant transformative influence in the public square.

Richard J. Mouw, *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship: Essays in the Line of Abraham Kuyper*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012. ISBN 9780802866981. Reviewed by Neal DeRoo, Professor of Philosophy, Dordt College.

As a long-time advocate of Kuyperian thought and Reformed principles, Richard Mouw needs no introduction to the readers of *Pro Rege*. *The Challenges of Cultural Discipleship*, a collection of essays that have previously appeared in various journals and edited collections between 1989 and 2010, deals with a variety of topics ranging from the finer points of the doctrines of regeneration and covenant (as applied to the question of infant baptism) to the nature of the church, the school, government, and other elements of civil society. Using explications of the thought of historical Reformed figures (including Dooyeweerd, Schilder and Kuyper) to engage with contemporary social, theological, and political issues, Mouw tries to articulate both the spirit of what it is to be Reformed and how that spirit might be able to interact with the spirits of our age. Those wanting to understand better what it means to be neo-Calvinist in today's social and cultural context should look no further.

This is a book on "public theology," not a book on engaging Christianly with popular culture. That is, the book's approach to the topic of cultural discipleship is philosophical and theological, and its interests are more socio-political than economic or entertainment-related: it deals with the theological and/or philosophical background of institutional relationships. Issues discussed are theoretical (sphere sovereignty, modal diversity, natural law, and creational ordinances) and most often suggest how the church ought to relate to something, be it its own people (for example, in the chapter on infant baptism or the one on "True Christians and the True Church") or other social institutions (e.g., day-schools, seminaries, "theological" schools, the academy). What makes this an issue of cultural discipleship is the book's dogged determination to clarify what Reformed theological and philosophical principles mean for public engagement. Because our cultural life is "animated by a spirit" (223) that is unflinchingly religious, we must use all the resources at our disposal to analyze the spirit that drives our lives—not just individually but also communally, culturally. If we do not do this, Mouw warns, we may "simply [find our] place in the larger cultural milieu—or ... [our] *many* places, if you wish" with no clear understanding of whether or how our place reflects God's will (231). Without trying to understand the spirit that lies at the root of our community, we risk becoming a community that is driven by a spirit that is not the one we explicitly acknowledge and may, in fact, be fundamentally at odds with that spirit. Against this outcome, Mouw tries

to clarify a distinctly Reformed approach to the topics at hand and so maintain a Reformed Christian spirit as an operative force in our cultural world.

Indeed, it is Mouw's ability to think "in the line of" Kuyper's thought—without remaining dogmatically tied to it—that is the most important element of this book. It clearly shows that Kuyperian thought is a living, rich tradition that has much to offer our contemporary world by giving us tools with which to make sense of our ever-changing world. One of the biggest merits of the book is Mouw's ability to explain how the theological and philosophical ideas of the neo-Calvinist movement pertain to particular historical and cultural settings. This explanation moves in both directions, as he examines not only how certain philosophical themes (e.g., sphere sovereignty) can help us navigate contemporary issues (say, the question of an educational voucher system), but also how certain doctrines and tenets emerge as a response to particular problems in a particular historical community and may, therefore, not apply equally well to us today (say, the notion of cultural "pillarization" in the sixth chapter). Indeed, Mouw's extensive knowledge of the history not just of Reformed thought but of Reformed communities is helpful in reminding us of the complex interweaving of theological disputes, strong personalities, and immigrant concerns that led to the vast array of different Reformed communities that exist today. (After getting married, I was somewhat surprised that my wife, who is not of Dutch or Reformed background, would keep getting these different communities confused. Was the difference between the Dutch Reformed, the Netherlands Reformed, the Free Reformed, the Christian Reformed, the Reformed, and the Canadian Reformed not obvious?).

One small addition to the book that proves to be very beneficial in this regard is the Appendix, which provides a quick reference point for the different Dutch and Dutch American church groups. I found myself quickly consulting that Appendix several times while reading the book—and I grew up in a Reformed Dutch immigrant community! I can only imagine how welcome it would be for those not raised from birth in the web of these disputes and divisions.

By showing the "clear pattern of interaction between philosophical ideas and cultural context" (230) at the heart of the intra-Reformed disputes, Mouw helps us better understand each other in the Reformed tradition (the chapters on Schilder, on the "Dutch Calvinist 'splits'" and on "Dutch Calvinist philosophical influences in North