

Book Review

Kody W. Cooper and Justin Buckley Dyer: *The Classical and Christian Origins of American Politics: Political Theology, Natural Law, and the American Founding*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022. Pp. xii, 238.)

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Scholars and statesmen regularly quote George Washington's famous admonition to the budding nation that "religion and morality" are "indispensable supports" to political prosperity. But how solidly were those supports constructed in the Founding era? As America becomes increasingly secular, scholars continually debate whether this trajectory towards a post-Christian America is a fulfillment of or a departure from the true principles of the Founding. In their outstanding contribution to this debate, *The Classical and Christian Origins of American Politics: Political Theology, Natural Law, and the American Founding*, Kody Cooper and Justin Dyer present one of the most comprehensive treatments of the classically informed Christian ideas that shaped the early republic. Without denying the unorthodox theology of Founders such as Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams, Cooper and Dyer highlight the many ways in which these and other Founding statesmen, as well as the American public, embraced a politics shaped by Christian theology and anthropology. In doing so, Cooper and Dyer provide invaluable insights on the interaction between ideas and politics.

An increasingly dominant narrative of the American Founding is that it entailed a dramatic break from the classical and medieval world, ushering in modern ideas such as the supremacy of reason over revelation, individual autonomy, and a morally neutral state. On this view, America's Founders and their philosophical forefather John Locke undermined Christian principles. In *Why Liberalism Failed* (Yale University Press, 2018), Patrick Deneen argues that the Founding era's dramatic break from classical and Christian anthropology has led to atomization and the demise of social structures that inculcate virtue. Some students of Leo Strauss go further in arguing that the Founders' rhetoric furthered a subversive theology. For example, Thomas Pangle suggests that the Founders sought to "exploit and transform Christianity in the direction of a liberal rationalism" (*The Spirit of Modern Republicanism* [University of Chicago Press, 1988], 21). According to both accounts, the Founding philosophy lacked a moralistic lawgiver, which would inevitably lead the nation into the distinctly modern principle of

Hobbiism: an unlimited sovereign, a state in which power is divorced from justice or goodness.

In response to these claims, Cooper and Dyer argue that key classical and Christian principles animated public life in America. These principles, which entailed coherent, orthodox claims about the nature of God and man, served as a common thread that united Americans from a variety of faith traditions. Cooper and Dyer argue that these “background theological and philosophical assumptions” were derived from and compatible with the natural-law tradition that arose from Scholastic Christianity’s engagement with classical political philosophy. The assumptions include, among others, that natural law has a divine lawgiver; that natural law is prescriptive; and that God guides human affairs not just through natural law but also through revelation and direct intervention. Not only were the American Founders shaped by these principles, but they also acted upon them (25). The Christian heritage was not a fading vestige from our European past; in word and deed, Americans from all ranks embraced it.

The argument made by Cooper and Dyer is modest but important. They do not claim that contemporary liberalism is *necessitated* by the principles of Christianity, nor do they disclaim the influence of ideas that are in tension with the Christian tradition. Rather, they contend that the classically informed Christian natural-law tradition “was a dominant force shaping the public philosophy of the American founding, and the evidence has been hiding in plain sight” (6). The evidence can be found not only in public writings such as the Declaration, the pamphlet debates that preceded it, and James Wilson’s *Lectures on Law*, but also in hundreds of private letters by prominent statesmen and other Revolutionary leaders. The letters serve as a key component in refuting the esoteric interpretations of the Founders as subversive atheists and deists who supported an amoral Hobbesian politics.

Cooper and Dyer provide extensive analysis of the Founding’s most familiar architects, such as Jefferson, Franklin, Adams, and Washington. But they also look beyond the leading statesmen in collecting their evidence. To demonstrate the ubiquity of belief in a moralistic, providential God, they assess wide-ranging sources, including the Continental Congress, the nation’s clergy, and even George Washington’s Culper spy ring during the Revolutionary War. Letters between Washington and his spies demonstrate a widespread belief in God’s intervention to ensure the revolutionaries’ victory. In looking to such figures, including those who were not well-educated or elite, Cooper and Dyer seem to suggest that Jefferson and the other statesmen did not act alone in founding the nation. To understand America’s origins, we must also look to the public. Indeed, Jefferson did just this when he articulated the theology of the Declaration: “The aim of the Declaration was to unite the colonists, and so we should expect any theological references to transverse the differences among major religious sects” (75). Thus, the motivation behind the Declaration’s nonsectarian theology is not subversion, but the prudential work of a statesman.

To be clear, Jefferson was not merely being strategic in his careful choice of words in the Declaration. One of the most notable chapters in the book examines the sage of Monticello's own theology. Jefferson, who is notorious for having excised references to miracles and the divinity of Christ from his Bible, is the classic example of a prominent Founder who rejected orthodox Christianity. And yet Cooper and Dyer argue persuasively that the natural theology he embraced was in some major respects formed by the classical and Christian tradition: "Jefferson understood Nature's God to be a creating, particularly providential, and moralistic being whose existence and causal relation to the world was essential to the foundations of natural-rights republicanism" (76). Yes, even the anticlerical Jefferson who espoused Cartesian rationalism was formed by the Christian tradition. As Alexis de Tocqueville argued in *Democracy in America*, "Jesus Christ had to come to earth in order to make it understood that all members of the human species were naturally similar and equal." Jefferson and the other Founders were indebted to Christianity for the self-evident truths of the Declaration.

In exploring the theological origins of America, the book offers key insights about both the development of republican societies and the intellectual formation of individuals. Nations are founded by a multiplicity of ideas and traditions, in part because their founders' minds are formed by such a multiplicity—some of which arise from the people themselves. Hence, Cooper and Dyer offer an alternative to Pangle's vision of founders as philosopher kings as well as Deneen's monocausal account.

Noting that the authors describe the classical and Christian tradition as "a dominant force" shaping the Founding, a reader may wonder about the other formative influences. The authors cite Jefferson's idea that constitutions expire with each generation as an outgrowth of his theologically inspired understanding of human equality, but this idea, which has adherents today, fits more squarely within Jefferson's rationalism. Thus, while Cooper and Dyer succeed in making their case that the classical and Christian roots of America run deep, one may wonder whether those roots were robust enough to withstand the forces that have threatened to uproot them. Nonetheless, Cooper and Dyer do tremendous justice to the nuance and complexity of the classical and Christian origins of America. In doing so, they play a meaningful role in fortifying those roots.

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