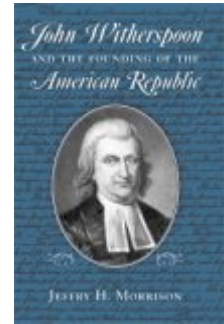


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jeffrey H. Morrison. *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005. xviii + 220 pp. \$22.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-268-03485-6.

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## The Forgotten Founding Father?

Americans love their “founding fathers.” As most academics continue to write books that address questions related to race, class, and gender in early America, popular historians and writers (and even a few rebellious academics such as Joseph Ellis or H.W. Brands) make their way onto bestseller lists with biographies of the dead white men who were major players in America’s revolutionary struggle. These include David McCullough on John Adams, Ronald Chernow on Alexander Hamilton, Ellis on George Washington, and a host of Benjamin Franklin biographies (recent works by Walter Isaacson, Edmund Morgan, Gordon Wood, Brands, and Stacy Schiff come to mind) written to coincide with the tercentenary of his birth.

One of the so-called founding fathers yet to receive a recent full-length biography is John Witherspoon, the president of the College of New Jersey at Princeton during the American Revolution and the only colonial clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence.[1] Witherspoon was a prominent evangelical Presbyterian minister in Scotland before becoming the sixth president of Princeton in 1768. Upon his arrival, he transformed a college designed predominantly to train clergymen into a school that would equip the leaders of a revolutionary generation. Witherspoon made fundamental changes to the moral philosophy curriculum, strengthened the college’s commitment to natural philosophy (science), and positioned Princeton in the larger transatlantic world of the republic of letters. His students, who included James Madison, Aaron Burr, Philip Freneau, and John Breckenridge, all played prominent roles in the development of

the new nation. Locally, Witherspoon was influential in leading the royal colony of New Jersey—a colony initially ambivalent about revolution—toward rebellion.

Jeffrey Morrison’s *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic* is not a biography of Witherspoon, but it does attempt to restore him to a prominent place in the pantheon of American founders. Morrison’s book offers the first sustained treatment of the way Witherspoon’s political philosophy informed his commitment to the revolutionary cause. He begins by considering why Witherspoon has received so little attention among historians of the American Revolution. Part of this neglect is the lack of available source material. For reasons that are unclear, Witherspoon had some of his papers burned shortly before his death. Other papers were lost during the British assault on Nassau Hall in the wake of the Battle of Princeton. But Morrison, in a more conspiratorial tone, goes beyond the problem of sources to suggest that Witherspoon has been “denied” his place in American history because he has been perceived to be an unoriginal thinker (p. 2). Scholars over the years have developed a “positive prejudice against Witherspoon’s intellectual ability,” he writes (p. 18). Morrison even goes so far as to suggest that historians have not given Witherspoon his due because he was a clergyman. He implies that secular historians, uninterested in the role that religion played in the American founding, have deliberately ignored Witherspoon.

Morrison clearly likes John Witherspoon. As a result, he tends to overstate the apparent neglect the Princeton

divine has suffered in interpretations of the American founding. Witherspoon was not an original thinker. He borrowed most of his ideas about politics and morality from the philosophers of the British Enlightenment. In this regard, as Morrison is well aware, he was not unlike the other Founding Fathers who sought to consistently apply longstanding British ideas in the context of America. It is thus difficult to accept the argument that Witherspoon has been ignored because he had little new to offer. Few of the American Founders were promoting original ideas and these men, despite their lack of originality, have not been neglected by historians.

The notion that Witherspoon has been pushed to the periphery of the American founding because he was a clergyman also seems unlikely. Even the most cursory glance at the historiography of the American Revolution suggests that religion is no longer a forgotten step-child of revolutionary-era studies. Works by scholars such as Ruth Bloch, Patricia Bonomi, Jon Butler, J. C. D. Clark, Nathan Hatch, Mark Noll, and Harry Stout—many of which appear in Morrison’s bibliography—demonstrate the important role religion played in the Revolution.[2] In the end, Witherspoon’s status as a “forgotten founder” probably has more to do with a lack of source material and less to do with historians who might be “uncomfortable” with his religious convictions(p.18).

Morrison is on more solid footing when he moves away from trying to carve out a place for Witherspoon in the American founding and starts analyzing his political and moral thought. In chapter 2, “The Public Interest of Religion,” Morrison argues convincingly that Witherspoon saw the promotion of orthodox Christianity as the best means of sustaining the virtue essential to the preservation of the republic. Chapter 3, “Plain Common Sense,” explains Witherspoon’s commitment to Scottish moral sense philosophy. Morrison suggests that despite his ideological borrowing from moral philosophers such as Francis Hutcheson and Thomas Reid, he was indeed one of early America’s premier ethical thinkers. While these two chapters provide a nice overview of the relationship between Witherspoon’s moral thought and political philosophy, the decision to separate his “public religion” and his commitment to “common sense” ethics into separate chapters seems a bit artificial. Morrison is correct when he writes that Witherspoon’s “public religion” was a “genuine or sincere religion—a kind of Christianity that was marked by genuine conversion and that changed a person inside and out” (p. 25). A born-again experience would produce a godly citizenry who could act virtuously in society and improve the moral quality of

the country. Such an approach to social morality was not unlike the one proposed by another Princeton president, Jonathan Edwards, when he argued that “true virtue” can only stem from a personal relationship with God through conversion.

Yet, as Morrison makes clear in chapter 3, Witherspoon’s common sense approach to morality was more influenced by the Enlightenment ethics of Hutcheson and Reid than the Christian virtue of Edwards. Witherspoon thus believed morality was a science. It could be cultivated or deduced through the development of the moral sense—an ethical compass instilled by God in all human beings and developed through education (Reid) or sociability (Hutcheson). Such an approach to morality owed more to the natural moral laws of the Enlightenment than traditional sources of Christian ethics. Thus, while “public religion” was an important source of social virtue, it was not the only source. Witherspoon, in accordance with the Scottish moral sense philosophy, believed all human beings—religious or otherwise—could be virtuous. In fact, it was often very difficult to distinguish which moral language (Christian or Scottish common sense) Revolutionary-era Presbyterians were employing at any given time.

After articulating Witherspoon’s political and moral thought, Morrison turns to Witherspoon’s response to the American Revolution and the United States Constitution. Morrison shows clearly how Witherspoon could move back and forth between providentialism (the idea that God orders all human events and activity) and Lockean liberalism. He even makes a strong argument that the political philosophy of John Locke was compatible with (and may have even been influenced by) older Calvinist ideas about the relationship between human beings and government. Both views, he argues, upheld the importance of individual liberty and informed the ideological commitments of the American revolutionaries.

But even as Witherspoon championed American liberty (he defended, for example, Thomas Paine’s radical libertarian tract *Common Sense*), he also championed more conservative ideals such as order and national unity. As a result, he was a strong defender of a national constitution. Morrison is at his best when he shows the possible influence of Witherspoon’s Calvinism on his student James Madison, one of the three authors of the *Federalist Papers*. Both Witherspoon and Madison were quite pessimistic about human nature. Humans, they believed, were prone to self-interest and passion-driven jealousies. Such imperfections led naturally to the sup-

port of a strong and centralized government that could control the passions and, as Madison argued in *Federalist* 10, make sure that no interest group would exercise tyranny over any other group. Such an approach to union also influenced Witherspoon's role in the creation of the Presbyterian General Assembly in 1787. (Witherspoon did not participate in the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia because he was busy on the other side of town crafting the constitution of the General Assembly).

Morrison's book provides a good introduction to Witherspoon's political thought, but early American historians may find it frustrating. Largely due to the lack of sources, we learn virtually nothing about Witherspoon's everyday life. There is also little in this monograph on Witherspoon's theology or views on eighteenth-century social and cultural life.[3] Morrison has also chosen to ignore much of Witherspoon's career in Scotland. He does not address, for example, how Witherspoon, as a member of the Church of Scotland's Popular Party, wrote scathing satires against the ethical views of his Moderate opponents, yet, upon arrival in America, came to embrace much of the same moral philosophy. Moreover, Morrison's treatment of Witherspoon's famous sermon, *Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men* does not engage Richard Sher's compelling suggestion that this sermon was rooted in Scottish political concerns.[4] Morrison's treatment of Witherspoon is simply too "Whig" in nature. It ignores recent historiography that attempts to understand the Revolution and men like Witherspoon in a broader transatlantic context.

Morrison, of course, should not be faulted for writing a book that focuses solely on Witherspoon's political thought as it relates to the American founding, but those looking for a thorough biography of this founding father will have to wait. The kind of restoration of Witherspoon's reputation that Morrison hopes to achieve with his work seems to be accomplished in today's publishing

culture by magisterial biographies written for general audiences. On the other hand, those looking for a short (and somewhat specialized and technical) introduction to this founding father's political philosophy will find much that is helpful in this monograph.

#### Notes

[1]. The last major biography of John Witherspoon was published in 1925. Varnum Lansing Collins, *President Witherspoon: A Biography* 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1925).

[2]. Ruth Bloch, *The Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756-1800* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Patricia Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990); J. C. D. Clark, *The Language of Liberty, 1660-1832: Political Discourse and Social Dynamics in the Anglo-American World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Harry S. Stout, "Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* 34 (1977), pp. 519-541.

[3]. The best treatment on Witherspoon as a religious thinker is L. Gordon Tait, *The Piety of John Witherspoon: Pew, Pulpit, and Public Forum* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001).

[4]. See Richard B. Sher and Jeffrey R. Smitten, eds., *Scotland and America in the Age of the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

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