

# The New Criterion

## Features

June 2006

### The forgotten founder: John Witherspoon

by [Roger Kimball](#)

On the most unfairly neglected framer.

*He is as high a Son of Liberty, as any man in America.*

—John Adams on John Witherspoon, 1774

Who is the most unfairly neglected American Founding Father? You might think that *none* can be unfairly neglected, so many books about that distinguished coterie have been published lately. John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, George Washington—whom have I left out? It has been a literary festival of Founders these last few years, and a good thing, too. But there is one figure, I believe, who has yet to get his due, and that is John Witherspoon (1723–1794). This Scotch Presbyterian divine came to America to preside over a distressed college in Princeton, New Jersey, and wound up transmitting to the colonies critical principles of the Scottish Enlightenment and helped to preside over the birth and consolidation of American independence.

Jeffrey Morrison's brief, excellent new book, *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic*,<sup>[1]</sup> both testifies to and partly redresses the neglect Witherspoon has suffered. Modern scholars, Morrison points out, "have not made much out of Witherspoon one way or another." For example, a standard text called *The Forgotten Leaders of the American Revolution* (1955) omits Witherspoon entirely. But during his lifetime Witherspoon enjoyed a very high reputation not only as a clergyman but also as a public intellectual and man of affairs. He commanded immense prestige both in his native Scotland and, even more, in America. Benjamin Rush spoke for many when, a few years after Witherspoon died, he eulogized him as "a man of great and luminous mind" and predicted that "his work will probably preserve his name to the end of time." He radiated what his contemporaries called "presence": a personal dignity and charisma that transcended ideological differences and commanded respect. The contemporary record is full of encomia and tokens of deference. John Adams was notoriously stingy with praise (Hamilton he called "the bastard son of a Scotch pedlar," Washington "old mutton-head"), but Witherspoon emerged in his estimation "an animated son of Liberty." Jefferson was always going on about the "irritable tribe of priests" and castigated Presbyterians as "the loudest most intolerant of sects," but he was cordiality itself when it came to the great Dr. Witherspoon. The fact that today his work goes unread and the name "Witherspoon" is more broadly associated with his direct descendant, the actress Reese Witherspoon, tells us something about the fragility of fame. No wonder Morrison calls his first chapter "Forgotten Founder."

In part, Morrison observes, the eclipse of Witherspoon's reputation was due to such accidents as a fire that destroyed his library and correspondence: having less to work with, posterity tends to work less. But John Witherspoon was a formidable intellectual and political leader whose role in the

affairs of colonial and early republican America deserves wider recognition. He was, as one modern scholar puts it, “Quite possibly the most influential religious and educational leader in Revolutionary America.” In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, his imprint was everywhere, from small things to large. It was Witherspoon, for example, who is thought to have introduced the Latin term “campus” to describe the grounds of a college. In one of his essays on language, he coined the term “Americanism.” According to Thomas Miller, who edited an edition of Witherspoon’s selected works in 1990, his *Lectures on Eloquence* count as the first treatise on rhetoric in America. More to the point, Witherspoon’s *Lectures on Moral Philosophy* introduced a generation of Princetonians to some leading Enlightenment themes, refracted through the prism of Calvinist anthropology.

Witherspoon was particularly important as a political activist, an advocate for and architect of American independence. As early as 1774, in an essay called “Thoughts on American Liberty,” he wrote that “We are firmly determined never to submit to, and do deliberately prefer war with all its horrors and even extermination itself, to slavery riveted upon us and our posterity.” He was a signer of the Declaration of Independence, the only clergyman among that group of fifty-six. In May 1776, when the colonies teetered on the edge of war with England, he preached a sermon titled “Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men.” The church historian William Warren Sweet called it “one of the most influential pulpit utterances during the whole course of the war.” Arguing that “There is not a single instance in history, in which civil liberty was lost, and religious liberty preserved entire,” Witherspoon articulated a link between spiritual and temporal liberty in a way that spoke vividly to the passions of the moment. In July 1776, when the question of succession was hotly debated and one delegate argued that the country was not yet “ripe” for independence, Witherspoon shot back: “In my judgement the country is not only ripe for the measure, but in danger of becoming rotten for the want of it.”

“Energy,” William Blake wrote, “is eternal delight.” Witherspoon was a prodigy of energy. Almost continuously from 1776 to 1782 he was a member of the Continental Congress. He served on over one hundred committees—more, it appears, than anyone else—including the critically important War Board and Committee on Finance. Only when the outcome of the war was certain did he return to his duties at Princeton. A good Scot, Witherspoon was blessed with keen fiscal intelligence. His *Essay on Money as a Medium of Commerce, with Remarks on the Advantages and Disadvantages of Paper Admitted into General Circulation* (1786) was not only a warning against adulterating the money supply but also an early brief for free market policies. When in 1768 he came to the College of New Jersey (as Princeton was then officially denominated), the young school was so nearly bankrupt that it could only afford to pay part of the travel expenses of its new president. Within two years, Witherspoon had turned the red ink to black, preaching and fund-raising indefatigably from Boston to South Carolina. In 1789, when he was sixty-six, Witherspoon lost his wife of forty-two years. Two years later, much to the consternation of his neighbors in Princeton, he married Anne Dill, a twenty-four-year-old widow, with whom he had two daughters.

Witherspoon transformed Princeton (the college was often called by the name of its town even before its rebaptism) from a creaky clerical institution into a vibrant bastion of Scotch empiricism and Presbyterian fervor. Harvard was older than Princeton, but under Witherspoon the New Jersey school became a political and intellectual powerhouse. In *The Political Philosophy of James Madison* (2001), Garrett Ward Sheldon describes the daily routine of the college under Witherspoon. The day began at 5 A.M. with the morning bell. At 6 A.M. there were chapel services. The next hour was reserved for study, followed by breakfast. At 9:00 there was recitation, then study until 1:00 P.M., when dinner was served. After the midday meal there was another period of recitation and study. At 5:00 P.M. there were prayers, followed by supper at 7:00 P.M. and bed at 9. “A regimen,” Sheldon wryly remarks, “I’m sure similar to that conducted by Princeton students today.” But it wasn’t so much discipline that distinguished Princeton: it was intellectual sophistication.

Witherspoon did not deviate much from Calvinist strictness on social or cultural matters. In 1757, for example, he published *Serious Inquiry into the Nature and Effects of the Stage*, which effects, as the title suggests, turned out to be bad. But in a larger sense Princeton under Witherspoon was an institution fired by intellectual curiosity and seriousness.

It was also an institution fired by a commitment to freedom of conscience. While Virginia debated whether Anglicanism should be recognized as the only established state religion (Witherspoon was vociferously against it), Presbyterians and Congregationalists argued for religious freedom. As Jack Scott, the editor of a modern edition of Witherspoon's *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, noted, what began as a theological debate evolved into a "broad-gauged, thoroughly secular protest movement." The role of Witherspoon and his brand of Presbyterian Calvinism in that protest movement cannot be overstated. When the Revolutionary War finally broke out, many—even George III—called it "The Presbyterian Rebellion." Ambrose Serle, a British clerk who accompanied the British army from 1776–1778, observed that "Presbyterianism is really at the Bottom of the whole Conspiracy." He wasn't wrong.

Princeton, the only Presbyterian institution in the colonies, was deeply implicated in the rebellion. Under Witherspoon's tutelage, the college produced one president (James Madison), one vice-president (Aaron Burr), ten cabinet ministers, sixty members of congress, twelve governors, fifty-six state legislators, and thirty judges, including three justices of the supreme court. Princeton almost got Alexander Hamilton, too. In 1773, the eighteen-year-old Hamilton, bursting with ambition, presented himself to Witherspoon and asked to be admitted to the college and be allowed to advance "with as much rapidity as his exertions would enable him to." Witherspoon was deeply impressed by the young man, but wrote denying his request because it was "contrary to the usage of the college." Hamilton, for his part, was impressed by Witherspoon. In 1789, he was one of a handful of people (Madison was another) to whom Hamilton turned for advice in preparing two of his landmark state papers on public credit.

Witherspoon's reputation soared during the run-up to and prosecution of the Revolutionary War. His was a voice of firm moderation: generally conciliatory in tone but unyielding about matters of principle. In fact, Witherspoon was already highly regarded as a formidable polemicist and spokesman for Calvinist orthodoxy in 1766 when the young Benjamin Rush was deputed to lure him across the ocean to the College of New Jersey. So highly did Rush esteem the fiery cleric that (so it is said) he proposed to his future wife partly because of her enthusiasm for Witherspoon. At first, the forty-five-year-old Witherspoon declined the post: his wife had no wish to uproot herself and their five children to decamp to a half-savage land thousands of miles from home. But Rush persisted. "Your talents have been in some measure buried," he wrote Witherspoon, "but at Princeton they will be called into action, and the evening of your life will be much more effulgent than your brightest meridian days have been." Eventually, Elizabeth Witherspoon relented, and in 1768 the seven Witherspoons made the journey to America, never to return.

Witherspoon's reputation in Scotland was due partly to his talents as a preacher, partly to the power of his pen. A son of the manse on both sides of his family, he was a potent rhetorician and controversialist, an important ally for those whose allegiance to conservative religious principles was fired by a commitment to individual liberty and freedom of conscience. In 1746, during the second Jacobite rising, Witherspoon was briefly imprisoned by rebel forces at the battle of Falkirk, an experience which his friend and first biographer, Ashbel Green, said dealt a "severe shock" to his nerves and had a permanent effect on his health.

Witherspoon deplored the gentrification of religion, its subordination to the genteel, humanistic, and worldly precepts fostered by self-declared Moderates and such pillars of the cultural establishment as Francis Hutcheson. In 1745, the year he was ordained, Witherspoon anonymously published *Ecclesiastical Characteristics, or the Arcana of Church Polity*. Alluding pointedly to Shaftesbury's

*Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711)—a specimen example of the sort of aestheticizing moral philosophy that Witherspoon rejected —*Ecclesiastical Characteristics* baldly satirized the capture of religious understanding by the forces of polite sentiment. “In fine,” Witherspoon writes in a section called the “Athenian Creed,” “I believe in the divinity of Lord S[haftebury], the saintship of Marcus A[urelius], the perspicacity and sublimity of A[ristotle], and the perpetual duration of Mr. H[utcheson]’s works, notwithstanding their present tendency to oblivion. Amen.”

*Ecclesiastical Characteristics* was a sensation, quickly plowing through five editions and earning its still-unknown author the abiding enmity of elite opinion. “A satire that does not bite,” Witherspoon observed, “is good for nothing.” In Witherspoon’s view, the Moderates cut the heart out of religion. For them, he said, religion will be perfected only “when we shall have driven away the whole common people ... and captivated the hearts of the gentry to a love of our solitary temples.”

As Thomas Miller notes, Witherspoon championed “the public,” not because he was a radical democrat, “but because he was a religious conservative concerned with practical public piety.” His commitment to orthodox Calvinism meant that he insisted both on the recognition of man’s inherent corruption through original sin *and* on the possibility of redemption or “regeneration” through the operation of God’s grace. This austere, Augustinian strain of Christianity put the temptation of pride at the center of its spiritual economy. “What is pride?” Augustine asks in *The City of God*. At bottom, he says, it is “a perverse kind of exaltation” in which one seeks to “abandon the basis on which the mind should be firmly fixed” and seeks instead to become self-created, to be like God.

*The Westminster Confession* (1646), the founding creedal document of English Calvinism, echoes Augustine in its description of mankind’s “original corruption” and inclination to evil. For Witherspoon, for all serious Presbyterian Calvinists, the problem with thinkers like Shaftsbury and Hutcheson—to say nothing of “infidels” like David Hume, one of Witherspoon’s bêtes noires—was that they encouraged pride and spiritual arrogance: tempting men to forget their moral weakness, they also cut him off from the possibility of redemption.

The great irony that attends Witherspoon’s rejection of Hutcheson and other secular pillars of the Scottish Enlightenment is the fact that his own work owes an immense amount to them. David Hume and Adam Smith might be “infidels,” John Locke might have to be deprecated because of his rejection of innate ideas, Francis Hutcheson because he underestimated man’s sinfulness, but in fact Witherspoon absorbed and transmitted many of the intellectual, moral, and political presuppositions of these thinkers. Indeed, Witherspoon’s *Lectures on Moral Philosophy* are heavily indebted to Hutcheson’s work, especially his two-volume *System of Moral Philosophy* (1755) and the “common sense” school epitomized by Thomas Reid (1710–1796).

Witherspoon was, as one commentator put it, less an original than a “representative” thinker. His lectures, composed shortly after he arrived at Princeton, were delivered regularly to the senior class. Ranging widely over ethics, epistemology, theology, and political theory, they form an eclectic digest that begins by considering individual virtue before moving on to ponder the common good, a tried and true format familiar since Aristotle. Some passages are virtual paraphrases of other thinkers. Others are virtual caricatures. Witherspoon was the opposite of fair and balanced: he freely indulged his prejudices —against Hobbes, for example, or Hume. There are some deep confusions, as when Witherspoon seems to conflate the views of Hume with those of Bishop Berkeley. Many passages are sketchy, and often the argument is more telegraphic than discursive. But this is hardly surprising. Witherspoon never intended to publish his lectures. On the contrary, he seems to have regarded them primarily as a pedagogical resource, more of a starting point or springboard for discussion than a polished lecture. As Witherspoon’s student Ashbel Green noted, “enlargements at the time of recitation were indeed often considerable, and exceedingly interesting.” What the lectures provide is a summary, a sort of literary tableau vivant, of the chief motivating ideas about

man and society that percolated through colonial and early republican America. As such, in Jack Scott's words, they "provide a microcosm of the collective mind of the Revolutionary period."

If in religion Witherspoon was an orthodox Calvinist, in epistemology and metaphysics he was a realist. One of his signal contributions at Princeton was to have steered the institution away from the misty if perfervid idealism of Jonathan Edwards, who had presided over the college a few years before. Within a year of coming to Princeton, Witherspoon had utterly reoriented the institution intellectually. One of the early beneficiaries of this union of religious seriousness with common-sense realism was James Madison. Madison went to Princeton from his home in Virginia in 1769 when he was eighteen. A delicate though studious youth, he tested out of the curriculum for the first two years and entered the college as in effect a junior. He graduated after two years but stayed in Princeton for another six months to study elementary Hebrew and theology with Witherspoon.

Madison is often called "the father of the Constitution." His contributions to *The Federalist*, especially his analysis of the danger of and remedy for "faction," is a masterpiece of political philosophy. The two great formative influences on Madison's outlook were his own Calvinist beliefs and Witherspoon's tutelage. Nietzsche observes that a pupil repays a teacher poorly if he remains nothing more than a pupil. And Madison certainly went beyond, or at least altered while absorbing, Witherspoon's teaching. But Jack Scott was right when he observed that no teacher was "so influential in shaping [Madison's] thought as Witherspoon." The influence was evident everywhere, from Madison's rhetorical style to the substance of his political thought. Famously taciturn, Madison took to heart (or perhaps it was just a matter of reinforcing his own temperament) this Witherspoonian injunction: "Ne'er do ye speak unless ye ha' something to say, and when ye are done, be sure and leave off."

Far more substantive, though, was Witherspoon's view of how society can best accommodate men whose natures were corrupt but redeemable. In a key passage of his essay "Of Civil Society," Witherspoon writes that the good society

must be complex, so that the one principle may check the other. It is of consequence to have as much virtue among the particular members of a community as possible; but it is folly to expect that a state should be upheld by integrity in all who have a share in managing it. They must be so balanced, that when everyone draws to his own interest or inclination there must be an even poise upon the whole.

Here we have *in ovo* Madison's famous prescription for controlling or neutralizing the effect of conflicting "factions" or interests in society by balancing them one against the other. Faction, Madison said in *Federalist* 10, was "sown in the nature of man": avarice and arrogance were simply inseparable coefficients of the natural corruption man was heir to. ("Wherever there is an interest and power to do wrong," Madison wrote to Jefferson, "wrong will generally be done.")

But if there is a "a degree of depravity in mankind" (*Federalist* 55), so, too, "there are other qualities in human nature which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence." Yet the way to nurture that esteem and confidence is not to rely upon the goodness of men (that, as Witherspoon put it, would be "folly"): "Enlightened statesmen," Madison observed, "will not always be at the helm." Rather, one should rely on man's energy, his ambition and self-interest. Ambition, Madison wrote in one of *The Federalist's* most famous passages, "must be made to counteract ambition."

If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place

oblige it to control itself. A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions.

This policy of supplying, by opposite and rival interests, the defect of better motives, might be traced through the whole system of human affairs, private as well as public. [Thus it is that] the private interest of every individual may be a sentinel over the public rights.

Man's redeemable nature makes self-government possible, but lingering depravity makes checks and balances a prudent indemnity. This piece of homely political wisdom is not just consonant with, it is a direct product of Madison's Calvinist background, a background that was formed and articulated in large part by Witherspoon's teaching. As the historian James H. Smylie put it, "Without preaching a sermon and yet relying upon his theological orientation, Madison translated the views of Witherspoon and the nature of man into a political instrument."

For us looking back on the generation of the Founders, it is easy to deprecate the religious inheritance that, for many of them, formed the ground of their commitment to political liberty. Theological skeptics and even atheists there were aplenty in late eighteenth-century America. But for every Jefferson who re-wrote the Bible excising every mention of miracles, there was a platoon of men like Madison who wrote commentaries on the Bible. Witherspoon believed that religion was "absolutely essential to the existence and welfare of every political combination of men in society." Madison agreed. As did even the more skeptical Washington, who in his Farewell Address observed that "of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. . . . And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion." For many, perhaps most, of the Founders, Morrison observes, the chain of reasoning ran thus: "no republic without liberty, no liberty without virtue, and no virtue without religion." John Witherspoon did as much as anyone to nurture that understanding. Which is perhaps yet another reason he is less known today than other figures from the period. Whether that is a sign of our maturity and sophistication or only, as Witherspoon might put it, our pride and natural depravity is a question we might do well ponder.

## Notes

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1. *John Witherspoon and the Founding of the American Republic*, by Jeffrey H. Morrison; University of Notre Dame Press, 220 pages, \$22.50. [Go back to the text.](#)

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This article originally appeared in *The New Criterion*, Volume 24 June 2006, on page 4

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