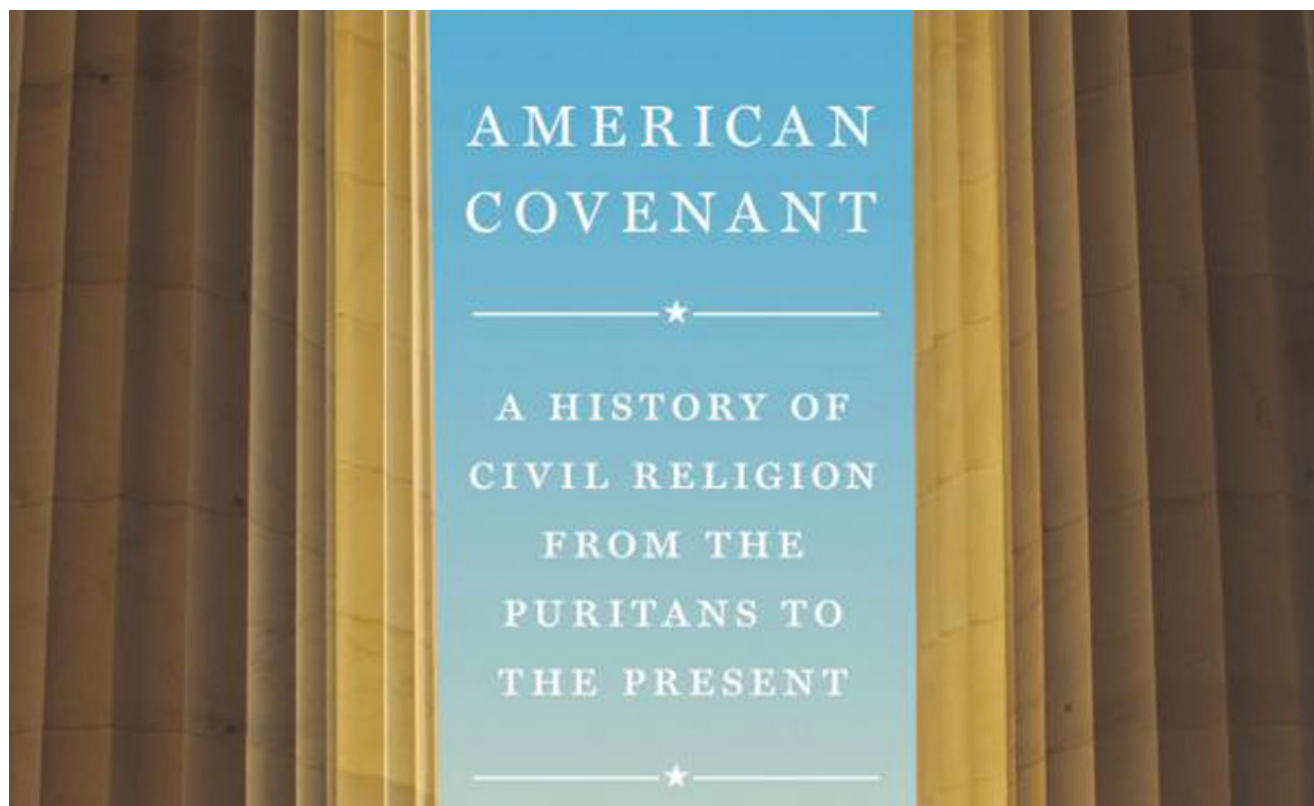


The Illusory Quest for a Vital American Center

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Observation

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The quest for the “vital center” of American politics is admirable. It is also a quixotic endeavor, and one vulnerable to slipping into just another form of partisanship. Proceeding from a sound conviction—that underlying the contentious wrangling of day-to-day politics are deeper, unifying commitments—it goes astray by encouraging its adepts to identify their partisan preferences with the sturdy foundations of the American constitutional tradition, and to dismiss those who think differently as knaves, fools, or thugs.

Both the merits and the deficiencies of this enterprise are typified in a 1949 book, aptly named *The Vital Center*, by the Harvard historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. Aiming to counter, on the one hand, proponents of an unregulated market and, on the other hand, the baleful

influence being exercised on the Democratic party by Henry Wallace and other sympathizers with Soviet Communism, Schlesinger proposed New Deal-style liberalism as the best source of principles around which Americans could and should come together.

But did New Deal liberalism really embody the “vital center”? In his 1955 mission statement introducing the premier issue of *National Review*, William F. Buckley, Jr. ridiculed Schlesinger’s conceit that FDR’s aggressively regulatory and redistributionist form of governance was the only game in town. The “liberal intellectual imagination,” Buckley maintained, which ascribed to itself an openness to everything just and reasonable, was in actuality afflicted by arrogance, intransigence, and a dazzling lack of self-knowledge. Far from open and accommodating, the political establishment of which Schlesinger himself was a prominent representative would do everything in its power to deny the possibility of “a responsible dissent from the liberal orthodoxy.”

In his new book, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present*, Philip Gorski aims to carry forward Schlesinger’s quest. A professor at Yale, Gorski displays an impressive intellectual range, encompassing history and political theory in addition to his own specialties of sociology and religion. In today’s narrow and politicized professoriate, moreover, which tends to ignore or vilify religion, particularly in the form of Christianity, and the classics, Gorski refreshingly strives to illuminate the ideas rooted in the Bible and in classical political philosophy—as well as the secular and modern ideas nourished by both—that inspired not only the founding of America but many of America’s most influential figures and multitudes of ordinary Americans.

This, too, is an admirable endeavor. The question is to what extent Gorski succeeds in it—and whether, like Schlesinger before him, he mistakes his particular version of liberal democracy for the heart of America’s great experiment in freedom and democratic self-government.

Gorski addresses his book to “the natural constituents of the vital center.” These Americans, he asserts, to be found among both Democrats and Republicans, embody the ideals of balance and judiciousness. Both their secular and their religious attachments are moderate, and their nationalism is bound up with a commitment to freedom and equality. They distinguish between church and state while appreciating that religion and politics are intertwined. They understand that ethics and politics differ, but insist that self-government is also a moral enterprise. And they cherish America while facing up to its imperfections and seeking, in the light of the nation’s best traditions, to realize more fully its loftiest promises.

To fortify this vital center, “in a time when the best are denounced for lacking all conviction,” Gorski undertakes to recover the “civil religious tradition” in America: a tradition that for him stretches back to our Puritan forebears, that incorporates both the sacred and secular sources out of which America emerged, and that provides a framework within which left and right can constructively debate today’s political challenges.

In what, then, does the civil-religious tradition consist? For Gorski, it represents a fruitful amalgam of two other traditions: the “prophetic” or “Hebraic” tradition within Protestant Christianity, and the “civic republican” tradition in political thought.

The religious component, according to Gorski, attaches central importance to such biblical prophets as Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, who inspired the Puritans fleeing England in search of religious freedom in the New World. Likening themselves to the biblical children of Israel, they built communities in colonial America devoted to charity and collective self-government based on a covenantal relation with God. Rejecting at once the total fusion and the total separation of religion and politics, early-American Puritans set flexible limits on the intermingling of the two realms. The most enduring Puritan legacy, asserts Gorski, was “the Exodus narrative itself,” whose themes of “oppression, flight, and freedom” he connects with the contemporary quest for social justice.

As for the political or “civic-republican” component of America’s civil religion, in Gorski’s telling it derives much from the thought of Aristotle, Cicero, and Machiavelli. It was from their republican political philosophy—and not, as many wrongly believe, from the classically liberal ideas of John Locke—that the American founders drew their chief inspiration. Although liberalism did play a role at the founding, to Gorski it was a small one: Revolutionary-era political ideology, he writes, “*was about three-quarters republican and one-quarter liberal*” (his emphasis).

And that was good, in Gorski’s eyes, because civic republicanism, he believes, was decisively superior to classical liberalism. Whereas the latter posits that human beings are in essence atomized individuals who associate “solely for the purpose of economic exchange,” the former assumes that human beings are by nature social beings. For civic republicans, according to Gorski, freedom is complex, encompassing not only the classical liberal view of freedom from the arbitrary will of another person or group but also the emancipation from unruly passions and the liberty to participate actively in government. And whereas for classical liberals the “institutional design [of government] is everything and civic virtue and sociological balance are nothing,” civic republicans seek a fair distribution of power among the major groups in society and teach that free institutions depend on citizens’ virtues—including upright moral conduct, effective civic skills, and, not least, the willingness to sacrifice for the common good.

Gorski follows the unfolding of the American civil-religious tradition over time through a diverse cast of characters. Exemplary figures include, in the 17th century, Puritans like John Winthrop, a founder of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and the theologians Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson; in the Revolutionary era, the minister Jonathan Mayhew, Dr. Benjamin Rush, and the Yale College president Timothy Dwight; in the 19th century, President Abraham Lincoln and the one-time slave, abolitionist, and reformer Frederick Douglass; in the Progressive era, the philosophy professor John Dewey, the social activist Jane Addams, the professor and civil-rights activist W.E.B. Dubois, and the theologian

Reinhold Niebuhr; and, in the decades following World War II, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Catholic priest and theologian John Courtney Murray, and the political theorist Hannah Arendt.

Yet all is not roses. Unfortunately, Gorski writes, the admirable model represented by the civil-religious tradition, with its proportionate and morally serious mixing of the teachings of the Hebrew prophets and the political ideas of civic republicanism, has been buffeted constantly in American history by two extreme “political theologies” that continue to compete for citizens’ hearts and minds. On the right stands “religious nationalism.” Defined by Gorski as “a toxic blend of apocalyptic religion and imperial zeal,” it first arose in pre-Revolutionary America and has undergone many incarnations. Aiming to fuse religion and politics, it “envision[s] the United States as a righteous nation charged with a divine commission to rid the world of evil and usher in the Second Coming.” It defines, for Gorski, much of American conservatism.

Largely on the left today lies the other, “equally noxious” political theology: namely, “radical secularism.” Coming into its own in the late-19th century, this “blend of cultural elitism and militant atheism . . . envision[s] the United States as part of an Enlightenment project threatened by the ignorant rubes who still cling to religion.” Although Gorski does not elaborate, contemporary adherents to radical secularism are generally elite denizens of blue America, and their brand of secularism pervades higher education.

Indeed, as he turns his attention to recent history and contemporary events, Gorski’s narrative becomes highly selective and falls prey to rank partisanship. At the forefront of quintessential religious nationalists he locates and lambastes Presidents Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. These two men “corrupted” America’s civil-religious tradition, the former by equating Christian faith with capitalism and (with the help of Jerry Falwell) by laying the groundwork for a “crusader nationalism,” the latter by taking the nation—“the long arm of divine justice in a godless world”—to war in order to make the world safe for Christianity.

By contrast, Gorski uncritically glorifies Barack Obama. True, as a presidential contender in 2008 Obama had given expression to radical secularism’s hubris by explaining that Rustbelt Americans cling to religion out of resentment and fear. But, overlooking that, Gorski praises candidate and President Obama for rescuing the “orthodox” civil-religious tradition after the depredations wrought upon it by Reagan and Bush. If, admittedly, Obama failed to transform the nation, that was mostly owing to his inability to accommodate his manifest excellences to the weaknesses of the American people, the strength of the conservative opposition, and the obduracy of the system.

And so, Gorski sums up, American politics post-Obama presents us with bleak alternative visions. “On the religious nationalist account, we are a fearsome clan defending its sacred homeland, knit together by blood and soil.” Meanwhile, “on the radical secularist account, we are just so many individuals sharing a space for a time, like passengers on a train, a bus, or a

plane.” Only by recovering the civil-religious tradition, he concludes on a wistful note, can we hold out any hope for a decent future and the possibility of pursuing our worthiest goals as “part of a collective, multigenerational project, an ongoing effort to realize a set of universal political ideals . . . from within the confines of a particular historical trajectory.”

This peroration brings us to the larger flaws in Gorski’s construction of his vital center, revealed not only in his animadversions against two conservative presidents but, more centrally, in his denigration of the liberal tradition in the American constitutional makeup.

At one point in his discussion, Gorski warns against “overdraw[ing] the contrast between civic republicanism and liberalism.” On the basis of this warning, one would have expected him to explore the *interplay* of civic-republican and classically liberal elements in America’s founding. Instead, he systematically exalts the former and belittles the latter. In order to do so, however, he must skip a serious discussion of America’s founding documents and leap over the political theory proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence and embodied in the making of the Constitution. A glaring omission in any account of American political thinking, this is an astounding one in a book purporting to restore America’s vital center.

As it happens, those founding documents and that political theory belie Gorski’s insistence on the primacy both of the Bible and of civic republicanism in the American political tradition. No political principles were more widespread during the drafting, debates over, and ratification of the Constitution than those proclaimed in the Declaration: that human beings are by nature free and equal; that they are endowed with certain natural and unalienable rights; that the purpose of government is to secure these rights; that the just powers of government derive from the consent of the governed.

Bitter and contentious as were the disputes in 1787 and 1788 over the Constitution’s ability to respect these principles, both Federalists and Antifederalists readily concurred in the classically liberal view that government must be limited in order to protect individual rights. Almost 230 years later, the founders’ handiwork continues to provide a structure of government in and through which a citizenry of uncommon size and diversity debates which policies are more consistent with the requirements of individual freedom and human equality.

Gorski’s impoverished understanding of classical liberalism prevents him from seeing this. Operating with a threadbare, hand-me-down account of the liberal tradition that derives from Marx’s 19th-century polemics and the writings of contemporary communitarians, he misses the crucial significance of the fundamental liberal premise that human beings are by nature free and equal, and neglects liberalism’s shift of government’s task from the perfecting of souls to the protecting of rights. This in turn leads him to invert the relationship in the American founding between classical liberalism and “prophetic republicanism.”

The premise of natural freedom and equality, which forms the foundation of the American constitutional order, is *not* an essential feature of the civic-republican tradition; it is not affirmed by Aristotle, Cicero, or Machiavelli. Nor does the notion of limited government, devoted to maintaining the conditions under which individual freedom can flourish, belong to the prophetic tradition of Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. In America, *contra* Gorski, liberal principles do not play a subordinate role within a tradition made up of classical political philosophy and the Bible. Rather, biblical teachings and classical political ideas nurture, develop within, and are liberalized by America's classically liberal constitutional tradition.

Is this a disaster for the higher forms of freedom and loftier notions of virtue that Gorski believes to be the special province of prophetic republicanism? Hardly. To Gorski, the limits imposed by the liberal tradition on government's role in the shaping of souls reflect a shallow view of human beings. On the contrary: James Madison observes in *Federalist* No. 55 that, more than any other form of government, free and democratic government depends on virtue—an observation that fits right in with Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, J.S. Mill's *Considerations on Representative Government*, and Friedrich Hayek's *The Constitution of Liberty*. It is precisely out of respect for the diversity and depth of human souls that the liberal tradition shifts from government to families and to the institutions of civil society, religious and non-religious alike, the delicate and arduous work of character formation and civic education.

Finally, although Gorski seems unaware of it, this classically liberal insight has played an enormous role in modern American conservatism, which over the last 60 years has led the effort to retrieve an historically accurate and philosophically sophisticated understanding of the nation's founding principles. The sarcastic asides about conservatism that mar his book bespeak an ignorance of the movement's elaboration of many of the same moral and political beliefs, practices, and associations that he attributes to civic republicanism and believes are generally absent from contemporary political discourse.

The distortions and omissions in Gorski's book are, in turn, foreseeable results of the debasement of liberal education. Where else but from today's academy, largely purged of dissenting knowledge, would a scholar of his intelligence, breadth, and humane sensibilities get the idea that classical liberalism is little more than a thinly disguised rationale for acquisitive man, and that American conservatism amounts to an unholy mix of rapacious capitalism and religious bigotry? Regrettably, the same debased education that accounts for the book's major lapses will also thwart Gorski's colleagues from appreciating what is right and urgent in his reconstruction of the supports of liberal democracy in America.

For Philip Gorski, as for Arthur Schlesinger, America's vital center leans, and ought to lean, decidedly left. In the quest to bridge the partisan divide, they exacerbate it. Instead of the illusory quest for a vital center, Americans of all convictions would be better served by striving to conserve the nation's constitutional order, which rests on the classically liberal

belief that human beings are by nature free and equal, secures through limited government the rights shared equally by all, and depends on a citizenry educated in virtues nourished by both religious tradition and classical political philosophy.