



## TO COVENANT AND COMBINE OURSELVES INTO A CIVIL BODY POLITIC": THE MAYFLOW COMPACT @ 400 YEARS

*In this edition of Liberty Matters, Sarah Morgan Smith, an [Ashbrook Center Fellow](#), General Editor of Ashbrook's [Core Documents Collections](#), and co-director of the Center's [Religion in American History and Politics](#) project, helps the Online Library of Liberty to mark the 400th anniversary of the [Mayflower Compact](#) by considering its significance —and that of related documents from the same year— in the history of republican self-government and American religious tolerance. Morgan Smith argues that the Mayflower Compact was not just a natural outgrowth of the Separatists' religious beliefs. Instead it contains the seeds of some of America's most important political principles.*

### TO COVENANT AND COMBINE OURSELVES INTO A CIVIL BODY POLITIC": THE MAYFLOW COMPACT @ 400 YEARS

by Sarah Morgan Smith

The *New York Times*' best efforts to convince us to the contrary, not everything in America can be traced to 1619. Nor, in fact, was everything about early America backward or barbaric. Perhaps now that the calendar has turned to 2020, we can focus our collective attention on a much more positive historical anniversary: the signing of the Plymouth Combination, more familiarly known as [the Mayflower Compact](#), in 1620. This brief text represents not only the first experiment in genuine republican self-government on American shores,<sup>[1]</sup> but also the first application of the principle of religious toleration in America. Perhaps the most surprising fact to modern ears will be that both are a logical consequence of the religious convictions of the majority of the Plymouth colonists.

The preponderance of the Mayflower's passengers came from a single congregation of English dissenters that had been meeting in exile in Holland due to their public objections to what they viewed as the still-partial reformation of the Church of England. Their story which, as Stephen Tomkins admirably reminds us, began decades before the English Separatists set foot on Plymouth Rock draws together both political and religious resistance.<sup>[2]</sup>



***Plymouth Rock***

As a matter of principle, Separatists objected to the parish system of church membership, adopting as their model instead the idea of a "covenanted" congregation of believers.<sup>[3]</sup>

In these churches, membership depended upon an individual's ability to offer credible profession of faith. Membership also entailed a commitment to enter into a specific rather than a general community with other believers, one that would offer both certain rights (access to the sacraments, regular public instruction in the Scriptures, the support of the congregation in times of trial) and responsibilities (a willingness to support the work of the church financially and to submit to its 'discipline' should one wander from the path of grace). Most interestingly, because these churches were congregational and not presbyterian or episcopal in their church government, membership also conferred a level of what might be called political agency on individual believers. This was at the same time a right and a responsibility: within these congregations, ordinary laymen asserted their freedom in Christ not only to worship according to their own consciences, but to govern the institution of the church in all things themselves.



In 1581, the earliest known covenanted congregation, Robert Browne's church in Norwich, England, asserted in writing not only their right to choose their own ministers and teachers, but also their right to refuse to obedience to said authorities should they fail to live up to the conditions of the church covenant. One might dismiss this as merely a matter of rhetoric, but the sincerity of the assertion seems to be supported by the fact that the covenant also asserted the right of individual congregants to question the preacher even during the course of public worship services. Brown's followers

combined their commitment to Christian freedom, in the sense of liberty of conscience, with a commitment to political freedom that led them to reject both the structures of the English established church and, on some level, the very legitimacy of any such hierarchical institution. Separatist churches elsewhere adopted similar covenants and their members' practice in self-governance within the confines of their congregations would allow them to serve as proving grounds for what became the Anglo-American social contract tradition.

Faced with imprisonment or execution for their unwillingness to submit to the authority of the Church of England, Separatists were forced into exile. Many of them fled to religiously-tolerant and notably Reformed Holland, where they were able to worship freely. Once there, however, they found themselves disappointed by what they perceived as the moral laxity of their coreligionists. Indeed, among the motives that William Bradford lists for his Leiden congregation's decision to leave Holland despite their relative safety and comfort is the corrupting influence that Dutch culture had upon their young people.<sup>[4]</sup>

When the English government began to encourage colonial investments by private individuals, to some Separatists it seemed like an ideal way to realize their most profound desire: to be culturally, but not religiously, English. Although many of the congregation in Leiden were reluctant to hazard the trip and arduous nature of colonization, Bradford reports "it was answered, that all great and honorable actions accompanied with great difficulties, and must be both enterprized and overcome with answerable courages."<sup>[5]</sup>

Accordingly, the decision was made that those who were willing to serve as a sort of advance guard would travel to the New World in 1620; the rest of the congregation (including their senior pastor, John Robinson) would remain behind, providing financial and spiritual support.

To round out their company on the voyage, the group we now refer to as the Pilgrims added a number of so-called 'strangers' to those coming from the covenanted church. Several of these men appear as signatories to the Compact—including the most famous Mayflower

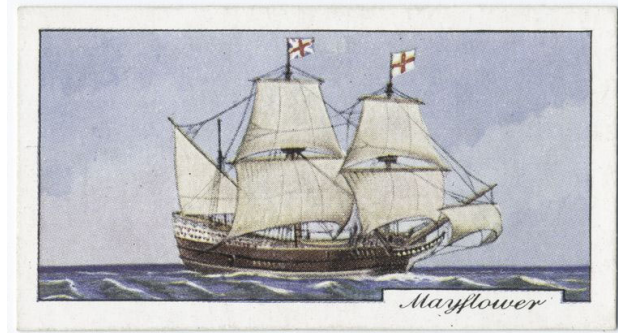
passengers, Miles Standish, John Alden, and William Mullins, father to Patricia. Why, when they had come so far and fought so long with such tremendous cost, would the Separatists invite members of what they viewed as the corrupted Church of England to join their fledgling community?

John Robinson's *Farewell* to the pilgrims may shed some light on the puzzle. In his last address to his flock before their departure from Holland, Robinson exhorted them to spiritual humility. They were to remember, he insisted, that "though they were precious shining lights in their times, yet God had not revealed his whole will to them." There was, in other words, "further light" to be received in studying the Scripture, and Robinson admonished his congregants to neglect neither the study of the same, nor to close their hearts and minds to new truths as they might be revealed. Likewise, he encouraged them to "endeavor to close with the godly party of the Kingdom of England, and rather to study union than division." Although Robinson did not shy away from controversy when he believed genuine error was afoot (see his public disputes with the Arminians), it is evident that he also had a keen awareness of the limitations of theological certainty and preferred to err on the side of toleration, allowing individual believers to act according to their own consciences, rather than to insist upon narrow or coercive measures of unity.

Thus, when his congregants found themselves off the coast of Massachusetts, having been blown off course from their intended destination of northern bounds of Virginia, they responded to the "discontented and mutinous speeches" of the "strangers" not with condemnation but grace. According to William Bradford's *Of Plimoth Plantation*, the colonists not part of the separatist congregation were arguing that since "the patent they had being for Virginia and not for New England," they were no longer bound to it.<sup>[6]</sup>

To quell such talk, Bradford's contemporary and the presumptive author of *Mourt's Relation* Edward Winslow reports "it was thought good there should be an association and agreement, that we should combine together in one body, and to submit to such government

and governors as we should by common consent agree to make and choose."<sup>[7]</sup>



Thus, before making landfall, the men of the Mayflower gathered to "solemnly and mutually, in the presence of God and one another, Covenant and Combine ourselves together into a Civil Body Politick." Compelled by their circumstances to seek freedom in an unknown land an ocean away from all their traditions and supports, the Plymouth pilgrims were willing—for prudential, surely, but also for principled reasons—to bind themselves together with those outside their religious community with solemn ties, adopting the same language of covenant commitment they had previously reserved for their churches. They did not restrict membership in their new civil society to those inside of the church covenant: they were willing to separate religious conviction from political conviction in a way that their contemporaries in England found unimaginable.

This covenant having been "done by them" (that is, the men of the colony themselves) Bradford observed meant that the it "might be as firm as any patent, and in some respects more sure." Although the early days of the colony were fully occupied with the practical matters of attempting to establish the necessities of life, as time went on, all the signatories of the compact would meet together to establish "laws and orders, both for their civil and military government, as the necessity of their condition did require."<sup>[8]</sup>

Church membership did not factor into either the conferral or exercise of civil rights in the Plymouth Colony during its independent existence: the Pilgrims were perfectly willing not only to abide "strangers" in their midst, but also to accept that all of those signing the

compact—saints and strangers alike—could be unified in understanding their colonial endeavor as aimed at "the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian Faith, and the Honour of our K[i]ng and Country" without necessarily agreeing on the particulars of how to exercise that faith.<sup>[9]</sup>



### *Mayflower Compact*

If the Mayflower Compact was a logical consequence of the Separatists' religious doctrine, it is also the logical predecessor for later American experiments with contractual self-government and religious liberty. Indeed, the twin concepts of a consensual political community and of religious toleration form the conceptual heart of the Mayflower Compact, even if neither is stated explicitly in the text. In admitting the "strangers" amongst them to the position of freeman, the Pilgrims were being true to their own most deeply held desire. From the beginning of their estrangement from the Church of England, the Separatists longed to see a distinction made between membership in a religious community and membership in the broader civil community. While this might not be quite the robust image of religious toleration modern liberals hope to see, the disaggregation of citizenship rights from church membership is nevertheless a significant step in the direction of genuine religious freedom. Likewise, although the Compact itself lacks the mechanisms or institutional structures of a constitution, in its brevity, it captures the essence of republican self-government. Those who are about to form the civil society bind themselves together for certain express purposes, and agree to "order" their affairs under "just and equal" laws of their own making.

Earlier generations of Americans well understood the Compact's claim to be the "first fruits" of the American impulse toward self-government.<sup>[10]</sup>

As early as 1702, in his *Magnalia Christia Americana* Cotton Mather wrote approvingly of the signers' decision to take matters into their own hands and create a government based on compact, observing that "they did as the light of nature itself directed them" in establishing themselves as a body politic. Mather's assessment is noteworthy precisely for its offhand character. He presumes that his readers will accept as given the notion that ordinary men with no extraordinary abilities or hereditary "right to power" might assert their ability to govern themselves. Mather had in the previous decade served as one of the not-so-behind the scenes organizers of the Massachusetts colony's armed rebellion against their royal governor, Edmund Andros. In the wake of Andros' ouster, he delivered multiple sermons deriving the people's right to rebellion not from some Lockean "state of nature" but from the historical evidence of their forefathers having done so. Although Mather was certainly familiar with Locke, it required no abstract theory to understand that the governments in New England were based on an intuited right to consent.<sup>[11]</sup>

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That the "strangers" could sign on to such a document despite their theological differences with the Pilgrims was possible because the Compact as written contained, in Choate's words, both "the securities of conservatism and the germs of progress."

There already [was]... just so much of the written and unwritten reason of England as might fitly compose the jurisprudence of liberty. By a happy accident, or instinct, there already was the legalized and organized town, that seminary and central point, and exemplification of elementary democracy. Silently adopted, everywhere and in all things assumed, penetrating and tingeing everything. — the church, the government, law, education, the very structure of the mind itself, — was the grand doctrine, that all men are born equal and born free...that every child...of right ought to be, equally [able] to strive for the happiest life, the largest future, the most conspicuous virtue, the fullest mind, the brightest wreath.<sup>[14]</sup>

Or, in other words, as the more taciturn Calvin Coolidge said, the compact offered a "miniature, but nonetheless complete, charter of democracy."<sup>[15]</sup>

Compelled by their circumstances to seek freedom in an unknown land an ocean away, the Plymouth pilgrims planted the seeds for a model of republican self-government that in its very simplicity offers lessons to those of us coping with the impulse of both the late 20th century administrative state's and social media towards conformity. Why do we push towards ever-more-minutely standardized unity in both procedural and moral questions? Is it truly necessary for us to strive for ideological union at the national level on questions such as abortion, or even educational standards? Might we not be better off with a reinvigorated toleration for social experiments rooted in a least-common-denominator of a shared commitment to equality and liberty in things indifferent? Might we not yet find that when people are

free to pursue their convictions in small communities, they plant the seeds of flowers of yet unimaginable beauty? Perhaps if we can remind ourselves and our children to think of the Pilgrims in this way, we will appreciate them more throughout the year, and not only at Thanksgiving. As the document opens: "In the Name of God, Amen."

#### Endnotes

<sup>[1.]</sup> Virginia's shift from martial law to a legislative assembly in 1619, being limited by the governor's veto, does not deserve the honor.

<sup>[2.]</sup> See his recent *The Journey to the Mayflower: God's Outlaws and the Invention of Freedom*.

<sup>[3.]</sup> The first known covenanted congregation in the historical record was Robert Browne's church in Norwich, 1581.

<sup>[4.]</sup> William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620--1647*, Samuel Eliot Morison, ed. (New York: Random House, 1952) 24-25.

<sup>[5.]</sup> Bradford, 27.

<sup>[6.]</sup> Bradford, 75

<sup>[7.]</sup> Mourt's Relation, (Boston: 1865 reprint), 6. <https://archive.org/details/mourtsrelationo00dextgo/page/n66/mode/2up/search/compact>

<sup>[8.]</sup> Bradford, 76

<sup>[9.]</sup> George D. Langdon, "The Franchise and Political Democracy in Plymouth Colony." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (1963): 513-26.

<sup>[10.]</sup> For a more complete account than I am able to provide below, see Mark L. Sargent, "The Conservative Covenant: The Rise of the Mayflower Compact in American Myth." *The New England Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (1988): 233-51.

<sup>[11.]</sup> Cotton Mather, Vol. 1, Chapter 1, Section 8.

<sup>[12.]</sup> See the headnotes for the reprint of Daniel Webster's speech, "First Settlement of New England," 22 December 1820, <https://archive.org/details/greatspeechesorat00w/ebs/page/24/mode/2up>

[13.] James Wilson, *Collected Works of James Wilson*, edited by Kermit L. Hall and Mark David Hall, with an Introduction by Kermit L. Hall, and a Bibliographical Essay by Mark David Hall, collected by Maynard Garrison (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2007). Vol. 2. 3/31/2020.

[14.] Rufus Choate, *THE AGE OF THE PILGRIMS THE HEROIC PERIOD OF OUR HISTORY: AN ADDRESS DELIVERED IN NEW YORK BEFORE THE NEW-ENGLAND ASSOCIATION, DECEMBER, 1813* in *Address and Orations* (Boston: 1878), 94.

[15.] CALVIN COOLIDGE Calvin Coolidge, "The Path of America," Speech given at Johns Hopkins University, 22 February 1922, reprinted in *Advocate of Peace through Justice* Vol. 84, No. 3 (MARCH, 1922), 90.

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## THE MAYFLOWER COMPACT LANDED ON US?

by Richard Samuelson

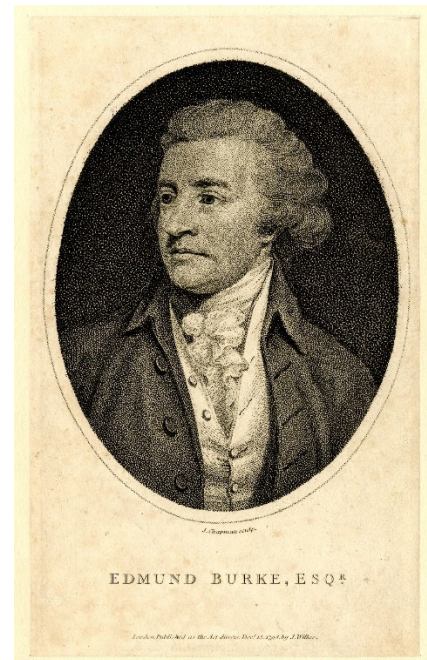
Sarah Morgan Smith's fine essay is a great way to begin celebrating the 400th anniversary of the Mayflower Compact. Coming as it did a year after the first meeting of what, in time, would become Virginia's "House of Burgesses" it reminds us of the colonial roots of American republicanism. It is neither slavery nor aristocracy that set colonial English America apart. The prevalence of republican practices and politics made the colonies, particularly those in the North, different from England and the other nations of Europe, and probably different from most nations on earth at the time.

What set the colonial North apart from the colonial South was the importance of dissenting Protestantism. As Edmund Burke put it in his [Speech on Conciliation](#):

All protestantism, even the most cold and passive, is a sort of dissent. But the religion most prevalent in our Northern Colonies is a refinement on the principle of resistance; it is the dissidence of dissent, and the protestantism of

the protestant religion. This religion, under a variety of denominations agreeing in nothing but in the communion of the spirit of liberty, is predominant in most of the Northern provinces; where the Church of England, notwithstanding its legal rights, is in reality no more than a sort of private sect, not composing most probably the tenth of the people.

Burke probably recognized what Smith calls "a logical consequence of the religious convictions of the majority of the Plymouth colonists." The doctrines of sola scriptura, with the attendant focus on the responsibility of each individual to read and seek to understand the Bible for himself, especially in the Calvinist version set men and women on a republican path. It is probably no coincidence that the *Oxford English Dictionary* lists a 1640 reference to "some . . . can be content to admit of an orderly subordination of several parishes to presbyteries, and those again to synods; others are all parochial absoluteness and independence" as its first entry for "independence," and "[each congregation is] an entire and independent body-politic, endued with power immediately under and from Christ" as its first entry for "independent."



*Edmund Burke*

Historically speaking, or perhaps sociologically speaking, the political and religious doctrines one finds in any given community tend to be congruent with each other, else the society will be fraught with tension. Hence it should not surprise us that when the Mayflower found itself so far North that its passengers were outside the Virginia Company's reach, they turned to compact to form themselves into a political community, a reflection of how a separatist congregation forms itself. The journey from 1620 to 1776, and thence to 1865 is not all that long. And that congregational independence was the germ, perhaps one should say a germ, of the independence of the colonies from Britain.



***Roger Williams***

But dissenting Protestantism is not all the same, and it's worth noting some of its variations and some of the nuances. Roger Williams, after all, tried living in both Massachusetts and Plymouth before he (after being exiled)

founded Rhode Island and embraced religious liberty. I'm not sure it's quite correct to say that "membership depended upon an individual's ability to offer credible profession of faith." It would be better to say that it was dependent upon what was taken as credible testimony that one was of the elect. From a certain perspective, I suppose, that's the same thing—only the elect have true faith, but in modern ears we don't hear the difference. Similarly, the epistemic humility that Smith notes was probably narrower in practice than her essay suggests, as the case of William reminds us. If one is stuck in a world of sinners, and if one is oneself a sinner, the result is a certain humility. But that humility itself is born of a doctrine that is not to be questioned in public.

Of more importance for the questions of toleration and liberty is the question of who was part of the Plymouth political community. The *William and Mary Quarterly* article Smith cites notes that "some free adult males were by then being denied the opportunity to participate in the political life of the plantation." William Bradford was elected governor in 1621 by "the free adult males who were stockholders in the company." When free men who did not own stock in the company arrived, they had to consent to obey the laws of the colony, including paying taxes, but "they were apparently not, however, admitted to political citizenship." In time Plymouth would allow others to vote, but not everyone: "Plymouth had never admitted to citizenship Quakers or others who rejected the need for a trained ministry, and in fact the colony promptly disfranchised any persons who showed sympathy for the Quaker religion." It might very well be, and probably is true that the tendency in dissenting Calvinism is toward religious liberty and citizenship for adults, but Plymouth, however far it went, did limit the doctrines.

And that point reminds us that "Liberty" can apply to two things. It can belong to individuals and/ or peoples or communities. Some of the tensions in the ideas of the New England Puritans are in the tension between those two ideas of liberty. The principle the Plymouth Separatists embraced, that each Congregation was independent, a spiritual island to itself as it were (in

contrast to the ecclesiology that dominated in Massachusetts, usually called "Congregationalist," as opposed to "Separatist," which held that each Congregation had the right to gather itself and appoint its minister, but which was, nonetheless, part of a larger English communion), was, in the first instance, about the liberty of the Congregation. In Plymouth, unlike in England, they were free legally to form church communities that way. But that doctrine itself was, as Smith suggests, an outgrowth of the spiritual individualism of dissenting Protestantism. Hence the Plymouth settlers, unlike so many other colonizers, turned to Compact to create political society, and, hence what they took to be religious liberty would, in time, help to produce a land which respected a larger liberty of conscience.

All that, finally, raises a perhaps disturbing question, if American Protestantism is fading, must our liberalism go with it?

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## INDEPENDENCE VS. LIBERTY

by Sarah Morgan Smith

I am grateful to Richard Samuelson for drafting a response to my essay so full of interesting observations: I would love to get into the weeds of who voted vs. who was legally eligible to vote in Plymouth, as I suspect that much [like in the Massachusetts Bay Colony](#), any prohibitions against non-church members voting would have been honored largely in the breach, at least on the town level. Similarly, I have many thoughts about Roger Williams and religious toleration (but I suspect I will have ample opportunity to air these in response to other forum participants). It seems to me, however, that the most trenchant of the questions raised by Samuelson is not about the historical context of the Compact, but rather, about its enduring present-day resonances: his essay concludes with the provocative question: "if American Protestantism is fading, must our liberalism go with it?"

This is a serious question, and the fact that the decline in affiliation that used to impact mostly mainline denominations now seems to have spread to conservative denominations only exacerbates the problem. American Protestantism is fading, clearly, but perhaps what is worse, irreligion, or, [the category of religious "nones" is growing](#). While I argued there is a distinct complementarity between Protestantism (especially in its Reformed variants) and republican government, this connection pales in comparison to the broader necessity of a belief in anything transcendent at all.



As Samuelson observes, "the political and religious doctrines one finds in any given community tend to be congruent with each other, else the society will be fraught with tension." If our national political institutions are based on the dual principles of human equality and liberty but our culture is untethered from any grounding in the type of existential humility I see embodied in the Mayflower Compact, we ought not to be surprised when the tension between those ideals becomes increasingly evident. In the logic undergirding the Mayflower Compact, we are free to govern ourselves *because* we are equal in our status as beings bearing the image of God. Equality is the prior condition of liberty, yet it does not trump liberty. We cannot, in the name of equality, deny individuals the ability to determine for themselves the course most likely to secure their "better ordering and preservation" without trespassing against the religious necessity that the consciences of men be free in order that they may worship God truly. Limitations on the use of coercive power—in either religious or political matters—are ultimately a mark of our respect for the higher



authority of a transcendent being to whom all persons individually and communally are subject.

As Samuelson also points out, this logic has some major internal tensions common to all Protestants, namely the problem of where one draws the line between heterodoxy and legitimate differences of opinion and insight on theological or political matters. This is the perennial puzzle of Protestantism (and, one might add, of American-style republicanism). When the line drawn in the sand depends so much upon the convincement of the individual soul, it is difficult to prevent said line from being washed away by the waves of enthusiasm of secondary (and tertiary, and so on, ad infinitum) reformers. As a nation, we have all but allowed the line to disappear, accommodating greater and greater levels of religious skepticism and outright disbelief in our public discourse—but thereby effectively eliminating the principled restraints that kept equality and liberty in balance. Now, as we find ourselves in the midst of a pandemic and confronted with the sometimes brutal realities of social and economic inequality in our nation, is it any wonder that we hear policies that would elevate equality over liberty being touted as the solution to our political woes?



*John Winthrop*

I am neither a policy wonk nor a political commentator, however, and before going too far down that path, and without pretending to offer any practical insights about the problem, I shall turn back to the seventeenth century once again. What does Plymouth have to teach us about how a revitalization of the theological underpinnings of republicanism might help us constructively encourage liberty while restraining the sort of intellectual license that ultimately undermines it?

On a Sunday in October 1632, John Winthrop happened to be visiting the Plymouth colony, and he recorded this about the order of worship in his *Journal*:

*On the Lord's day there was a sacrament which they did partake in, and in the afternoon, Mr. Roger Williams (according to their custom) propounded a question, to which the pastor, Mr. Smith, spake briefly. Then Mr. Williams prophesied; and after, the Governor of Plymouth spake to the questions; and after him the elder, then some 2 or 3 more of the congregation. Then the elder desired the governor of Massachusetts and Mr. Wilson to speak to it, which they did. When this was ended, the deacon Mr. Fuller put the congregation in mind of their duty of contribution; whereupon the governor and all the rest went down to the deacon's seat and put it into the box, and then returned.*

Note that unspecified question brought before the Congregation in the afternoon order of service is answered by multiple expositors of scripture. Winthrop observes that this was not some unusual proceeding, but rather "according to their custom," and makes no further comment. His silent acceptance of the afternoon service's structure is telling in and of itself: he was not shy of remarking on things he found surprising nor in critiquing those with whom he disagreed, so his silence here indicates that this order of worship was neither exceptional in his experience nor objectionable in his judgement. Roger Williams, as a respected theologian, both poses the question for consideration, and speaks to it, (but not first, that honor going to the church's pastor, Ralph Smith—Williams, although ordained, was not covenanted to the local congregation as a shepherd). His remarks are followed by the governor of the colony,

another elder in the congregation, a handful of laymen, and finally, the two guests from Massachusetts Bay. All told, the congregation in attendance would have heard between eight and nine men offer their thoughts on the topic of the day. This is practical republicanism. Can anyone who has ever attended a religious service in America in the last fifty years imagine a pastor sharing his pulpit with so many other speakers as a matter of course? But (short of a Liberty Fund style seminar, of course!) what better way for the gathered community to see that the work of understanding a text is enhanced in conversation and consultation with one another?

“RATHER THAN A MODEL OF RIGIDLY AUTHORITATIVE MINISTERIAL LEADERSHIP CROWDING OUT DISSENTING VOICES, THE MIXED PROPHECYING SEEN IN THIS ONE PRESERVED MOMENT SUGGESTS A MORE FLUID STRUCTURE, WHERE THE CONGREGATION (OR AT LEAST, CERTAIN MEMBERS OF IT) MIGHT CONTRIBUTE TO A DIALOGUE ABOUT THE MEANING OF COMMUNITY NORMS AND COMMITMENTS.”

This was not, to be sure, a prevalent or uncontested practice even among dissenters: William Bradford devotes almost three pages to defending it in his *Dialogue*, an imagined conversation between a 'young' man representing New England and an 'ancient' man representing England, largely, it seems against perceptions that such a practice must be inherently disorderly. That it does not appear to have been so from Winthrop's account, and that the practice was in place for well over a decade (perhaps more: it is unclear from the *Dialogue* whether the practice was still ongoing at the time of its composition in the 1640s) suggests that there was more than nominal space for congregational discourse. Rather than a model of rigidly authoritative ministerial leadership crowding out dissenting voices, the

mixed prophesying seen in this one preserved moment suggests a more fluid structure, where the congregation (or at least, certain members of it) might contribute to a dialogue about the meaning of community norms and commitments. This does not mean all comers were ultimately tolerated: Williams himself will go from leading such group expositions to establishing his own colony in Rhode Island as a result. It must have been difficult for him, to be sure, to undergo such a transformation in circumstances and as moderns, we long to be sympathetic to the minority view, to champion the underdog, as it were.

But the practice of regular, public examination of ideas as exemplified in this order of worship led by Williams may have helped the community to solidify the limits of its commitments to liberty and equality in a way that honored their transcendental grounding and ultimately protected the tension between them as something productive rather than destructive. If so, this anecdote not only reaffirms that the answer to Samuelson's question is an unfortunate "yes," it also offers a potential course of reform. Americans need more opportunities to gain practice in public discourse, disagreement, and discernment within a framework that is itself authoritative while ensuring that the people themselves (through consensual self-government) retain ultimate authority in both church and state. It is the practice of ruling/being ruled in turn that Americans are lacking: we are now used to either ruling (in the sense of insisting on the absence of any transcendent standard to which we ought to consider ourselves, our institutions, and our cultural mores subject) or being ruled (whether in churches with singular or "senior pastors" who provide the substantive voice of truth, or by the relatively few individuals who take into their hands the opportunity to exercise power in local, state, and national governments), but not to doing those things in tandem and within a transcendental perspective. In the absence of such regular practice is it any wonder that both church and self-government has faltered?

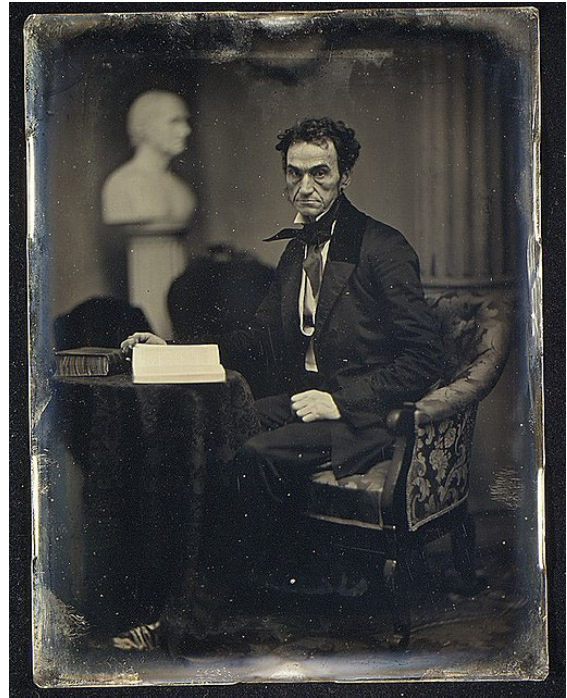
## THE 1612 PROJECT

by Teresa M. Bejan

When telling a story, the beginning matters quite a lot. As Sarah Morgan Smith notes in her excellent essay, the *New York Times*' choice to begin its '1619 Project' with the arrival of the first African men and women in Virginia as slaves determines the American tale to follow: Original Sin breeds injustice, betrayal, and unsparing critique. Smith prefers a 'more positive' beginning. She points to the signing of the Mayflower Compact in 1620 by a company of Puritan 'saints' and non-Puritan 'strangers,' blown off course on their way to Virginia, as the start of something better: the arrival of 'genuine republican self-government' and 'the principle of religious toleration' in America.<sup>[1]</sup>

Smith's celebratory story has its own historical roots. In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville claimed to 'see the entire destiny of America embodied in the first Puritan to land on its shores, just as the entire human race was embodied in the first man.'<sup>[2]</sup>

In crediting the Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony as the 'Founders' of American democracy, Tocqueville repurposed a popular domestic trope for an international audience.<sup>[3]</sup>



*Rufus Choate*

Smith quotes the 19th-century jurist and politician Rufus Choate, for whom the Mayflower Compact 'silently adopted... the grand doctrine that all men are born equal and born free.'<sup>[4]</sup>

A story that starts here is a happy one, in which an act of affirmative consent underwrites America's unfolding promise of liberty and justice, for all.

Of course, Smith—like Tocqueville—is well aware that the Pilgrims, who accidentally landed 500 miles north of their intended destination, were not the first English colonists in North America.<sup>[5]</sup>

While the ill-fated Roanoke colony had disappeared by 1590, Jamestown limped along from 1607, even as the contemporary Popham Colony in Maine packed up after only a year. Nor were the Pilgrims the first English settlers to be blown off course. The 1609 shipwreck that inspired Shakespeare's *Tempest* led to the settlement of Bermuda or 'Somers Isles' by English sailors. In 1612, the Bermudans even signed a 'Compact' of their own, before the third and final Virginia Charter brought the islands formally under Company control.<sup>[6]</sup>

No one celebrates the 'Bermuda Compact' today, nor has 1612 inspired any Pulitzer prize-winning projects from

the *New York Times*. Still, what happens if one starts the story here? The agreement published as a postscript to *A Plaine Description of the Bermudas* (1613) shares many striking features with that recorded later by William Bradford.<sup>[7]</sup>

Its 'subscribers' were also individual male colonists and 'natural Subjects' of King James who thereby 'promise[d] and b[ou]nd' themselves to respect 'the true worship of God', obey local governors, and 'use all diligence of the good of the Plantation.'<sup>[8]</sup>

These similarities—as well as the fact that the Bermuda agreement was publicized in London several years prior to the Pilgrims' departure—has led one leading scholar to downgrade the Mayflower Compact's significance: 'What distinguished the New Englanders from previous Anglo-American settlements was *not their beginnings* but rather their subsequent movements toward de facto independence.'<sup>[9]</sup>

While this conclusion underplays important differences between the two compacts, the prior and public existence of a voluntary agreement of English settlers in Bermuda certainly troubles the too-ready assertions of the Mayflower Compact's originality cited by Smith, or its status as 'the beginning' of consensual government and republican ideals in America.<sup>[10]</sup>

The idea that English colonies should be seen as 'Commonwealths' unto themselves informed early colonization efforts in Virginia, too.<sup>[11]</sup>

The term 'commonwealth' was the early modern English equivalent of the Latin *res publica*, yet it did not initially entail any corollary commitment to self-government, let alone opposition to monarchical rule.<sup>[12]</sup>

Nor, for that matter, did government by 'consent'. In Bermuda, colonists pledged their obedience to the King, as well as 'to all such Governour or Governours, or their...Deputies' as should be sent by the Virginia Company. <sup>[13]</sup>

The issue of 'self-government' is similarly vexed. While the Bermudans (we don't know who or how many) consented to be governed by the Company, the

subscribers to the Mayflower Compact promised 'all due Submission and Obedience' to 'such just and equal Laws...and Officers' as they made themselves.<sup>[14]</sup>

This is, indeed, a crucial difference. And yet only 41 of the 102 passengers aboard the Mayflower (50 of whom were adult men) signed the document. When these individuals did thereby 'covenant and combine [them]selves into a civil Body Politick', the consent of this minority was taken to bind the whole.<sup>[15]</sup>

The exclusion of women, children, and 'servants' or bonded laborers was hardly exceptional, and Smith and others are right to point out that political membership at Plymouth was strikingly inclusive compared with other colonies.<sup>[16]</sup>

Indeed, news of this quickly got back to 'Old' England, at which point Bradford wrote to concerned investors to reassure them that 'you are mistaken if you think we admit women and children to have to do in [our government], for they are excluded, as both reason and nature teacheth they should be.' Moreover, Bradford insisted, 'neither do we admit any [men] but such as are above the age of 21 years, and they also but only in some weighty matters, when we think good.'<sup>[17]</sup>

In fact, even men over 21 who were not servants or apprentices were excluded from participation in Plymouth if they still lived in their father's home, or if they were 'Particulars'—i.e. non-members of the original joint stock company.<sup>[18]</sup>

And when Quakers came to New England in the 1650s, Plymouth took direct advantage of its original device of consensual *inclusion*—namely, covenantal 'oath[s] of fidelitie' like the Mayflower Compact—as devices of *exclusion* against the Quakers, who conscientiously refused to swear.<sup>[19]</sup>

Finally, while Plymouth may not have been implicated in the early trade in enslaved Africans, the colony was an enthusiastic participant in the enslavement of Native American men and women, even before King Philip's War led to the mass export of indigenous captives to the Caribbean. These 'Indian servants,' too, were naturally excluded.<sup>[20]</sup>



*The Pilgrims*

My point in rehearsing these forgotten facts is not to debunk Smith's celebratory narrative in favor of a tragic one, à la the *New York Times*. It's simply to remind us that early modern practice—in this case, the efflorescence of political innovation and institution-building in 17th-century 'New' England—sits uneasily beneath the grand ideals and abstractions imposed upon it by successive generations. This is as true of the Pilgrims as of the so-called 'Levellers' and other radicals active during the English Civil War subsequently embraced by modern Leftists and libertarians. Many of these groups were, indeed, committed to the idea that 'men' (including American Indians and women!) were 'equal' by nature. But *pace* Choate and Smith, neither drew from this theoretical principle the practical consequences that modern democrats or egalitarians expect.

The history of 'equality before egalitarianism' remains to be written.<sup>[21]</sup>

In the meantime, I agree with Smith that the most significant and innovative feature of the Mayflower Compact was its separation of membership in the 'civil body politic' from that of a particular Church. The scale of this achievement becomes clearer if we start the story in 1612. The Bermuda Compact began by declaring subscribers' fidelity to the Church of England and hostility to its enemies: 'all Atheists Papists, Anabaptists, Brownists'—i.e. separatist congregationalists like the Pilgrims themselves—and other Heretiques and Sectaries whatsoever, dissenting from the [Anglican] Word and Faith'.<sup>[22]</sup>

This is in stark contrast to the willingness of Plymouth 'Saints' to 'covenant and combine' with the 'Strangers' in their midst. That willingness may have been dictated by the exigencies of circumstance; still, as I have argued at length elsewhere, the theory of 'mere civility' that inspired this colonial practice has much to teach tolerant societies today.<sup>[23]</sup>

Contextualizing the Mayflower Compact can help us to appreciate the creativity and practical achievement of a parsimonious agreement signed by a minority of desperate migrants lost at sea. What it can't do, however, is sustain Smith's closing suggestion that 'the *principle* of toleration' (let alone that of equality) was already present therein, such that it was necessarily normative, let alone determinative, for what came after. <sup>[24]</sup>

Starting in 1612 reminds us rather that nothing was fated or determined for the waves of English settlers who made their way West in the 17th century. The very circumstances that constrained them gave them the freedom to do things differently, too.

#### Endnotes

<sup>[1.]</sup> Sarah Morgan Smith, "'To Covenant and Combine Ourselves into a Civil Body Politics': The Mayflower Compact @ 400" (May 2020).

<sup>[2.]</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Library of America, 2004), vol. I.2.9.

<sup>[3.]</sup> Sanford Kessler, "Tocqueville's Puritans: Christianity and the American Founding," *Journal of Politics* 54 (1992): 776-792.

<sup>[4.]</sup> Smith, "To Covenant and Combine Ourselves." The reference comes from Choate's 1813 address, "The Age of the Pilgrims: The Heroic Period of our History," to the New England Association.

<sup>[5.]</sup> The Spanish, of course, had been at it in the South for a century. The English competed directly with the French, the Dutch, and later the Swedes to establish permanent settlements in the North.

<sup>[6.]</sup> J.S. Maloy, *The Colonial American Origins of Modern Democratic Thought* (Cambridge, 2008), 90.

[7.] Silvester Jourdain, *A Plaine Description of the Bermudas, now called Sommer Ilands* (London, 1613). I have modernized the spelling throughout. Jourdain, a merchant, was among the sailors shipwrecked in 1609. This pamphlet reprinted his earlier narrative, *A Discovery of the Bermudas*, along with supplementary material (including the text of the Bermuda Agreement as an appendix), the authorship of which is uncertain.

[8.] Jourdain, G2-3.

[9.] Maloy, 91. My emphasis. In particular, Maloy points to Bradford's successful maneuvering in assuming individual colonists' debts so as to pay them off collectively, thus securing independence for the colony from its London stock-holders.

[10.] Smith cites James Wilson, along with Choate and Calvin Coolidge.

[11.] See Maloy, ch. 3.

[12.] Patrick Collinson famously argued for the prevalence of the commonwealth ideal in Elizabethan England, which contemporaries classified as a "monarchical commonwealth" or republic. The ideological, anti-monarchical sense of the word triumphed with the declaration that England was a "Commonwealth" after the Regicide in 1649, leaving the term in somewhat bad odor for the next 200 years after the Restoration.

[13.] Jourdain, G3. Locke's argument that 'express consent' was the only basis of legitimate subjection in the *Two Treatises of Government* (1689) reflects this early modern mania for oaths of allegiance, which grew worse over the course of the seventeenth century.

[14.] [https://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th\\_century/mayflower.asp](https://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/mayflower.asp).

[15.] <https://www.history.com/topics/colonial-america/mayflower-compact>.

[16.] Cf. George D. Langdon, Jr., "The Franchise and Political Democracy in Plymouth Colony," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 20 (1963): 513-26.

[17.] R.G. Marsden, "A Letter of William Bradford and Isaac Allerton, 1623," *American Historical Review* 8 (1903), 299. I have modernized the spelling.

[18.] Langdon, "The Franchise and Political Democracy in Plymouth Colony," 515.

[19.] *Ibid*, 522-3.

[20.] Jillian Gale, "Servants and Masters in Plymouth Colony," <http://www.histarch.illinois.edu/plymouth/Galle1.html>. By beginning in 1619 and focusing on African slavery, the *Times* perpetuates the neglect of 'Indian' slavery as the primary form of bonded labor in America by the end of the 17th c. For more, see Linford Fisher's forthcoming book, *America Enslaved: The Rise and Fall of Indian Slavery in the English Atlantic and the United States*.

[21.] I tackle this problem in *First Among Equals: the Practice and Theory of Early Modern Equality*, is forthcoming with Harvard University Press.

[22.] G1. The second article pledged to keep the Sabbath holy, only the 3rd turned to political matters as emphatically secondary to spiritual. They pledged to 'live together in doing that which is iust, both towards God and Man...and to avoide all things that stand not with the good estate of a Christian Chruch and well governed Commonwealth'.

[23.] See Teresa M. Bejan, *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration* (Harvard University Press, 2017).

[24.] Smith, "To Covenant and Combine Ourselves."

## THE SPIRIT OF RELIGION AND THE SPIRIT OF FREEDOM

by Ralph Hancock

All history is also rhetoric. Even the flattest narration of accepted facts involves selecting, prioritizing, ordering – in a word, a point of view. To tell a story about the past is always to some degree and in some way a moral-political act, an effort to shape the future.

The *New York Times* "1619 Project" is obviously a case in which the ratio of rhetorical and political action to sober historical narration is very high, outrageously high. Any observer moderately informed regarding the more or less established facts of American history, both the edifying and the disappointing, can easily see that the project of re-imagining the history of the United States of America in the sole perspective of the original sin of slavery is instrumental to the moral-political project of the identity politics of victimhood. Above and beyond the important discussion concerning the factual probity of the 1619 Project, the fundamental question citizens as well as scholars must learn to answer is whether we can ground our public discourse in an ideology whose putative shared "ideal" of equality is understood to be radically opposed to our actual historical inheritance. What good can come of the claim that up until now our country has been - - *we* have been (with the exception of the ontologically innocent victim categories, of course) -- fundamentally bad?

Sarah A. Morgan Smith proposes another perspective in which to understand our shared identity as a people and a more wholesome project for moving forward as a "body politic." What if we looked to the Mayflower Compact of 1620 as embodying, surely not the whole truth or the only truth, but a significant truth of our past that it makes sense to privilege in our deliberations about the future we are building together? The suggestion is unquestionably more than plausible historically and largely salutary as a moral-political proposition. Let us consider its meaning and its practical implications for us today.

A paradox immediately confronts us as we consider Dr. Smith's proposed framework for articulating American's meaning: Smith insists upon the religious origin of our foundational principles, but not, it seems, upon their religious meaning for us today. The Mayflower Compact is at once the "logical predecessor for later American experiments with contractual self-government and religious liberty," expressing "the essence of republican self-government, and "a logical consequence of the Separatists' religious doctrine." Thus the cash value for us today of a document rooted in a certain rigorous interpretation of Christianity, is nothing notably Christian, it seems, but, in Calvin Coolidge's inspiring words, "the grand doctrine, that all men are born equal and born free." Further on, as Smith concludes, it appears that the main contemporary take-away from our radical Protestant heritage is a resistance to "conformity," or a "toleration for social experiments" that would allow us to set aside "things indifferent" such as national educational standards or abortion policy, thus leaving people "free to pursue their convictions in small communities."



*Calvin Coolidge*

In her only rhetorical concession to something like religious enthusiasm, Dr. Smith speculates that such a diverse localism might "plant the seeds of flowers of yet unimaginable beauty." For my part, without necessarily conceiving the beauty of which the author speaks, I am

more than ready to believe that reversing our polity's deep-seated centralizing momentum and devolving more decisions to "the convictions [of] small communities" would represent a significant improvement -- although, I would add, there is no guarantee that these localized decisions would always conform to some "shared commitment to equality and liberty in things indifferent." What counts as "indifferent" from the standpoint of justice understood as "equality and liberty" is precisely the question that so often divides us, it would seem; and one could say, moreover, that it is a certain egalitarian and libertarian idea of justice that drives the nationalizing conformity that Smith opposes.

This question of how a "shared [moral] commitment" can yield a polity of localized diversity returns us to the central paradox of Dr. Smith's essay, that of the religious source of a non-religious political ethic. Any quarrel I might have with the author on this point is not historical -- in fact I think secular modernity in general is infused with a spirit inherited from radical Christian transcendence. (See my *Calvin and the Foundations of Modern Politics*, just for example.) The question, instead, is whether the Christian inspiration of modern secular notions of "equality" and "liberty" is good news. I think the news is, well, mixed.

Let us consider more closely Dr. Smith's understanding of the link between the Pilgrims and us. Smith proposes tracing our politics of liberty and equality to the dissenting congregationalism expressed in the Mayflower Compact. The individualism of "conscience" and the anti-hierarchical contractarian politics of the Separatists is held to be the "proving grounds for what became the Anglo-American social contract tradition." The transferability of the ethic of a religious community to a political doctrine of social contract was apparent from the beginning, Smith convincingly argues, in the original congregation's willingness to expand or blur its borders by "bind[ing] themselves together with those outside their religious community," in fact "adopting the same [religious] language of covenant commitment" in a non-religious compact. Thus the Pilgrims "were willing to separate religious conviction from political conviction in

a way that their contemporaries in England found unimaginable."

“ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE WAS VERY ALERT TO BOTH THESE READINGS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PROTESTANTISM AND AMERICAN EQUALITY. IN THE SECOND CHAPTER OF *DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA* (FIRST VOLUME, 1835)<sup>[1]</sup>, THIS FRIEND OF CATHOLICISM AND OF AMERICA, NEITHER AMERICAN NOR QUITE CATHOLIC, SUBTLY PROBES AMERICA'S NEW ENGLAND ORIGINS.”

Again, the paradox: the religious founding of a political ethic separated from religious conviction. The implication can be read in either direction. Either the pilgrims were secular or secularizing, and didn't know it, or we, in our commitment to libertarian equality or egalitarian liberty, are Protestant, and don't know it.

Alexis de Tocqueville was very alert to both these readings of the relationship between Protestantism and American equality. In the second chapter of *Democracy in America* (first volume, 1835)<sup>[1]</sup>, this friend of Catholicism and of America, neither American nor quite Catholic, subtly probes America's New England origins. Our French friend in many ways anticipates Smith's argument: "in America, it is religion that leads to enlightenment; it is the observance of divine laws that guides man to freedom." (42) "Puritanism"<sup>[2]</sup>... was almost as much a political theory as a religious doctrine": it produced "a body of political laws which, drafted two hundred years ago, still seems to anticipate from very far the spirit of freedom in our age." (35, 39) According to Tocqueville, then, the radicalism of New England theology opens up a vast area of political freedom and innovation, "a field left by the Creator to the efforts of intelligence." (43)

Tocqueville, however, does not give the Puritans the final word in interpreting their First Founding (any more than



he gives such a final word to our political Founders' vocabulary of social contract). The solidity of the "Puritan" founding (as well as certain of its excesses in the repression of personal vices) depended as much upon what the Puritans could not see and could not say as upon their inspiring political and religious rhetoric. The success of their bold innovation within the political domain, which their theology allowed them to see as "a field without a horizon," depended rigorously on the traditional and religious boundaries on this field that they accepted without question: "when [the Puritan] mind arrives at the limit of the political world, it halts....; it bows with respect before truths that it accepts without discussion." (43)

Tocqueville, like Dr. Smith, takes a very positive view of America's combination of "the *spirit of religion* and the *spirit of freedom*." But, unlike Smith, he views this combination as "marvelous" – that is, as something that is not automatic but that history and Providence somehow put together and that must be held together, in part by moral truths accepted without discussion. And our French visitor seems less sanguine than Smith concerning an American Democracy in which the ideas of liberty and equality, fueled by a radical imagination that can be seen equally as religious or secular, might one day expand far beyond their practical religious origins.

Sarah A. Morgan Smith does well to remind us what we owe the religious founders of 1620. Now it is up to us fully to appreciate, not so much their explicit radical theology of congregational covenant and individual conscience, as the more complete implicit principles of their actual practice, biblical, traditional and natural. The Pilgrims built better than they knew.

#### Endnotes

[1.] I cite the University of Chicago edition, Mansfield & Winthrop translation.

[2.] Tocqueville does not distinguish between the non-separating "Puritans" and the "Pilgrim" Separatists.

## RESPONDING TO BEJAN AND HANCOCK

by Sarah Morgan Smith

As always, I am delighted by any opportunity to "converse" with Teresa Bejan about the early Anglo-American world. Bejan quotes from one of my favorite Bradford letters in her discussion of the exclusion of women, children, and servants from the polity, and she is right to remind us that we ought not read back into the 17th century our standards of what 'counts' as equality and consent-based politics. Obviously believing in what I would call the moral equality of human persons as beings created in the image of God does not involve a concomitant understanding of practical or what one might deem 'applied' equality. Reformed thinkers were (and in some branches of reformed theology, remain) able to think of women as equal to men in honor, dignity, or worth as image-bearers, but as essentially different from men in role (that is, in the ways in which their image-bearing works itself out in home and church life). For many of us living in the 21st century for whom equality almost by default means sameness, this insistence on sexual difference appears as anything but *equal*.



Bejan's stated purpose in drawing out this historical truth is "to remind us that early modern practice...sits uneasily beneath the grand ideals and abstractions imposed upon

it by successive generations." Fair enough: I'd not only agree with this, I'd go so far as to say that then or now or in any time period, practice rarely lives up to the ideals. But I would dispute that the ideals themselves are an imposition on the past: the applications of ideals are historically and contextually dependent, but the ideals *per se* are not. Moral equality, in the sense I have sketched above (which is the sense I believe to have been more or less that of the pilgrims as Reformed Christians) is an ideal that does carry within itself certain logical consequences, whether or not they are always and immediately apparent. (As with most everything from Bejan's pen, I look forward to reading her history of "equality before egalitarianism" as I imagine it will shed further light on these differences in our approach to the period.)



*John Adams*

Thus, while Bejan is correct on an important level to say that "nothing was fated or determined" in the development of British North America, I'm not sure it is quite correct to assume that the internal logic of ideas is entirely escapable over the long haul. Absolutely, things could have gone differently in the course of history. Perhaps, for example, the rigors of the sea voyage might have caused the Pilgrims and others to abandon their commitment to moral equality and the kind of rough

toleration of those outside their religious circle that I believe makes their Compact worthy of commemoration, and they might never have written the document at all. Or the psychological toll of their first death-filled winter might have led Bradford and others to seize power and impose a regime of martial law (as happened, as we all know, at Jamestown between 1609-1612). But they *did* write the Compact and unlike their Virginia counterparts, they did *not* abandon its animating principles. And as long as they honored those, I would suggest that while there may have been multiple twists and turns that might have led to an earlier or later or more or less robust development of what we see in the Compact in seed form, those seeds *were* fated to bloom. Equality and toleration themselves are subject to interpretation, absolutely, and to the whims of human caprice, so there is still room in my understanding of logical consequence for variations in the metaphorical flower garden. However, insofar as the Pilgrims and their political descendants remained committed to the principles of the Compact, and to their theology of dissent, I would argue (as [John Adams did](#)) that these were bound to bear fruit in the more overtly liberal theories of individual rights and liberties that motivated many of the patriots during the American Revolution.

Lest Bejan chide me a second time for infusing a later understanding into the Pilgrims' use of the term commonwealth, let me hasten to point out that to say the early modern understanding of a commonwealth was compatible with monarchy does not negate the fact that said compatibility depends in a meaningful way upon an understanding that even the monarch is limited in his authority. The king's authority is limited both by his own obligation to God, and by his obligation to the good of the people. This is not quite self-government, but nor is it simply divine right monarchy. Pace Bejan, I'd question whether any of the English colonists (even the non-dissenting ones) who swore fealty to the king in their charters did so with the idea that they were foreswearing an allegiance to a higher law of self-preservation. The king may be king over a commonwealth, but he cannot ignore the common good and remain so. This is the point of John of Salisbury's **Policraticus**, and as I develop at

greater length in an article co-written with Mark Hall, this way of thinking animates a tradition of [Reformed resistance theory](#) stretching from Vermigli, to Calvin to Ponet, Knox, Goodman and Buchanan all prior to 1600. Certainly it cannot be ahistorical for me to attribute a similar sense of limited monarchy to those who settled Plymouth in 1620 (and whose co-religionists would very shortly become regicides).

And this allows me to connect Bejan's essay to Ralph Hancock's equally thoughtful and provocative one. Hancock raises the intriguing question, "whether the Christian inspiration of modern secular notions of equality and liberty is good news." In his estimation, "the news is... mixed," and this is more than likely true, if we assume a notion of the secular that denies things like a fixed human nature. There certainly seems to be a strain of contemporary political thought that veers in this direction of radicalism. It is also more than likely true if we assume that the religious ideas that animated the American commitment to equality and liberty are essentially a dead letter.

This, I think, is the subtext at least, of Alexis De Tocqueville's supposed 'praise' of America's combination of religion and freedom. Although Tocqueville praised religion in America, his study continually points toward the conclusion that democracy is primarily an activity of faith, not a philosophy.<sup>[1]</sup>

As Hancock puts it, Tocqueville sees the American experiment as "something that is not automatic but that history and Providence somehow put together and that must be held together, in part by moral truths accepted without discussion." To the extent that this is so, the Tocquevillian position is simultaneously ahistorical and nostalgic for the past as the past. It thus leaves us without any way to apply whatever principles might be discerned by our study with any creativity or vitality in the present. The major danger of Tocquevillian nostalgia is that its treatment of foundations (religious or secular) has the potential to elevate history, rather than lived religion, as the arbiter of right. It veers then, towards the formulaic and traditionalist for the sake of tradition—and little wonder that it becomes difficult to sustain.



*Alexis de Tocqueville*

This is not the view the Pilgrims had: they were radical religious dissenters, willing to suffer imprisonment for the sake of a fresh reading of Scripture and the principles they derived therefrom. To view the accomplishments that sprang forth from those as somehow entirely "marvelous" (à la Tocqueville) is to deny that we ourselves might accomplish similar things. We would honor them best (and perhaps also overcome the tension between religion and freedom) were we instead to follow the example of someone like Martin Luther King, Jr. In confronting the racial prejudice (personal and institutional) of America in the mid-twentieth century, King accused the majority of Americans of essentially this kind of nostalgia: Americans were "more devoted to 'order' than to justice" which is, I fear, where a too-Tocquevillian understanding of the Pilgrims leads us.<sup>[2]</sup>

Yet King encouraged his own movement not to despair: "[We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.](#)" We ought, in other words, be less concerned about strict adherence to the doctrines of the founders and instead think of their legacy as the first bend in what King described as the 'arc of the moral universe': although they might not have realized the full implications of their ideals, we can see ourselves legitimately as their descendants and as continuing the curve on its path.

## Endnotes

[1.] Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 47; 705.

[2.] King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in *I Have A Dream*, 91, 93, 98.

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## A BRIEF RESPONSE

by Ralph Hancock

Let me venture an all-too-brief reply to Sarah Morgan Smith's insightful response to my more Tocquevillean take on the religious sources of American ideals of liberty and equality. Sarah believes in an "arc of justice" whose center is an open-ended faith in freedom and equality as abstract – and I would say bottomless -- principles, a faith that I do not share. She believes Tocqueville's insight into the non-democratic foundations of democracy -- and the consequent imperative to hold together goods such as religion and freedom that do not fall together all by themselves -- is a mere prejudice, a stultifying "traditionalism." I think it is the height of sober political and moral reasoning. So, that's what I make of the difference between Sarah (and Progressivism in general) and me (and Tocqueville).

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Sarah Morgan Smith](#) is an Ashbrook Center Fellow, General Editor of Ashbrook's Core Documents Collections, and co-director of the Center's Religion in American History and Politics project. Prior to this, she was the 2016-17 James Madison Program Thomas W. Smith Postdoctoral Research Associate at Princeton University. Her teaching and research focus on the intersection of religion and politics in American history, with an emphasis on questions of civic formation in sustaining political commitments. Drawing on her years in the field of public history and civic education, she is also deeply interested in the use of material culture and visual culture as sources for understanding the development of American political thought. Prior to

beginning her doctoral work, she served as an education coordinator for the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History where she supervised the institute's Teaching American History grant partnerships. Professor Smith has taught courses on political thought at Rutgers University and Montclair State University. She received her B.A. in History from Grove City College in 2001, her M.A. in American History and Government from Ashland University in 2009, and her Ph.D. in Political Science from Rutgers University in 2016.

[Richard Samuelson](#) is associate professor of history at California State University, San Bernardino where he teaches Colonial, Revolutionary, and Early Republican US history. His published work focuses on the founding era and U.S. politics and political history. Dr. Samuelson received his PhD in U.S. history from University of Virginia, and has taught and/ or held fellowships at The University of Glasgow, Liberty Fund, Princeton University, Claremont McKenna College. He is a frequent contributor to Liberty Fund's Law and Liberty.

Before coming to Oxford, [Dr Teresa M. Bejan](#) taught at the University of Toronto and as a Mellon Research Fellow in the Society of Fellows at Columbia University. She received her Ph.D. with distinction from Yale University in 2013. She is the recipient of the American Political Science Association's 2015 Leo Strauss Award for the best doctoral dissertation in political philosophy. In 2016, she was elected as the final Balzan-Skinner Fellow in Modern Intellectual History at the University of Cambridge. Her book, *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration* (Harvard University Press) examines contemporary calls for civility in light of seventeenth-century debates about religious toleration.

[Ralph Hancock](#) teaches the tradition of political philosophy as well as contemporary political theory. His research and writing focus on the meaning and limits of modern rationalism in relation to religious and ethical-political traditions. He has twice taught as a Visiting Professor at the University of Rennes, France, and was a Visiting Scholar at Liberty Fund in Indianapolis. He is the author of *Calvin and the Foundations of Modern Politics* (Saint Augustine's Press, 2011; Cornell University Press,

1989) as well as *The Responsibility of Reason: Theory and Practice in a Liberal-Democratic Age* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2011). He is also the editor of *America, the West, and Liberal Education* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1999) and (with Gary Lambert) of *The Legacy of the French Revolution* (Rowman & Littlefield 1996)

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