



Abstract from Article

THEOLOGICALLY UNITED AND DIVIDED: THE POLITICAL COVENANTALISM OF SAMUEL RUTHERFORD AND JOHN MILTON

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Abstract

Puritanism in England and America (and Pietism, its counterpart on the European continent), was the last great movement within the institutional church to influence the development of Western law (and politics) in any fundamental sense. Also, English Puritanism was the third great intellectual-social movement of the Reformation federalists, after Huldreich Zwingli and Heinrich Bullinger in Zurich, and John Calvin in Geneva. Despite its ultimate failure as a movement, Puritanism had a profound and lasting impact on the constitutional tradition in England, on the "new political science" of the political compact, and on the constitutional development of the United States. In certain respects it was the greatest of the three, particularly with regard to the political thought and the political ideas and movements to which it gave birth, of which the covenant was a central teaching. The sixteenth-century Zurich and Geneva Reformations each provided a different emphasis regarding the covenant and the Christian community. It was especially the political theologico-covenantalism emanating from the Zurich Reformation that received attention in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Puritanism. Samuel Rutherford and John Milton represent the apex of Puritan political thought, which commenced towards the middle of the sixteenth century, reached its peak in the middle of the seventeenth century, and receded after the Glorious Revolution. Rutherford's *Lex, Rex* is one of the most comprehensive expressions of Calvinistic political theory, and is also one of the keystones in the development of modern political theory. Central to Rutherford's political theory was the Biblical covenant; the pact between God and the community, as well as the contract between the ruler and the ruled. This was in agreement with the Zurich postulation of the covenant, which expresses the relationship between God and his people in terms of a personal bond. The Zurich concept of the covenant has two important elements: on the one hand, the covenant expresses God's universality and his involvement in human affairs; on the other hand, it provides the form for man's communal involvement in, and response to, God's promises and blessings, with the focus on man's obedience to God. Different from Calvin's conception of the covenant (related to his views on predestination; in terms of which the covenant consists mainly of the relationship between an austere deity and his elect), the Zurich view of the covenant reflects man's dynamic partnership in the covenant: God promises what He will do for his confederates; man undertakes to "be upright", which "uprightness is gotten by faith, hope and charity; in which three are contained all the offices of saints, which are the friends and confederates of the Lord." This covenant is based on the oaths of the parties involved. In his work *The Decades*, Bullinger refers to Matthew 5:33-34, stating that oath-taking involves the calling or taking to witness of God's name to confirm the truth of what we say, thereby placing man in danger of God's wrath and vengeance, "unless we do truly and indeed both speak and do the thing that we promised." At almost the same time as the publication of *Lex, Rex* (1644), Milton's expressions on Puritan political theory

were published. Within the complex developments of Puritanism, this author, in his polemic prose and pamphlets, played a significant role in furthering the cause of republican federalism. Shifting from one mode of discourse to another, more congenial one, Milton, in his anti-prelatical tracts, revealed some of the most deeply held political convictions of the Puritan movement in his defense of the republican ideal. Like Rutherford, Milton concentrated his energy at this time of national crisis on questions which are still of fundamental importance today. Milton was one of the more influential political thinkers of the mid-seventeenth century, soon becoming a potent spokesman for the ideal of the political covenant as the basis for theo-republicanism. In the midst of the conflicts preceding the English Civil War, Milton advanced federal republicanism as the ideal for establishing a free commonwealth, as regards liberty of thought and speech. In particular, Milton looked to the Mosaic polity of the Hebrew Scriptures for ideal forms of political governance. Working in Cambridge, the center of Puritan political thought, Milton promoted the ideal of the covenant as the basis of the free commonwealth. Gough states that contract theory became what may almost be called the official theory of the Commonwealth party. This theory was expounded by Milton in his *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, written as an express justification of resistance against unjust political power. Milton's political theory, according to Gough, was largely borrowed from continental writers and he was one of the earliest English publicists to expound a thoroughgoing contract theory. In certain areas he carried it some distance ahead of the theories of most of his contemporaries. The Reformation brought about a renewed interest in the Scriptural application of theology to social issues, eventually leading, among other things, to the inheritance of Reformation Zurich's covenantal theory in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Britain. In this regard, Rutherford played an integral part in the development of Bullinger's covenantal political theory. It was during this development that a divergence from Reformed covenantal political theory occurred, and in which Milton played a central role. This investigation brings to light not only the theoretical commonality between two of the final bastions of Puritan political theory, but also exposes a fundamental divergence in seventeenth-century Puritan constitutional theory, reminiscent of the divergence between George Buchanan's Neostoic influences and Knox's theologico-political covenantalism, approximately half a century earlier: where one stream followed the theologico-political covenantalism that emanated from Zurich, the other exhibited a tendency towards a more enlightened Christian understanding regarding theology and political theory. This split not only raises new questions as to the true roots of enlightened Christian political covenantalism, but also provides more depth concerning the potential influence of pre-modern humanistic thought on Western constitutional theory. Lurking beneath the unified surface lies a plethora of divergent insights related to a comparative analysis of Rutherford's and Milton's theologies and political theories. This also calls for a cautious approach to be taken when perceiving Puritan political theory as united in essential theologico-political issues, especially those pertaining to the covenant.