

**OBLIGATION AND AUTHORITY:
SAMUEL WEST AND THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION
OF RESISTANCE TO TYRANNY**

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Introduction

The Christian theological justifications for resisting tyranny occupy an interesting space in the study of politics. They are often deeply historical since the arguments are usually made within a context of political exigency, and yet they are also human attempts to understand Christian political obligations and connect those obligations to Christian duty as outlined in the Biblical text and the hermeneutic tradition surrounding that text. Such was certainly the case in the public debates over the right of Christians in colonial America to resist the authority of the British Parliament and the British Crown.

Congregationalist Minister Samuel West delivered his 1776 election sermon in Boston to the Massachusetts Council and the Massachusetts House of Representatives amidst the cauldron of political turmoil that engulfed the era. West's sermon gives a rich example of the arguments made by clergy on behalf of armed resistance. Samuel West was a leading clergyman in Massachusetts during the Revolutionary period; he was educated at Harvard and was a contemporary schoolmate of both John Hancock and John Adams. One description of West states, "Persistent in study, West was widely regarded to be one of the most learned men of this time, and because of his reputation, he was repeatedly sought out for advice on political matters."¹ After the American War for Independence West actively served on the 1780 Massachusetts Constitutional convention and was invited to serve on the state delegation to the national Constitutional Convention in 1787 in Philadelphia—a privilege that he declined. West however did support the new Federal Constitution and played an instrumental role at the Massachusetts ratifying convention of 1788.² West's sermon entitled, *On the Right to Rebel Against Governors* was delivered to the Massachusetts Council and House of Representatives on the anniversary of those members elections to serve on those respective bodies.

West also represents a much larger intellectual and theological tradition in western and Christian thought about resistance to tyranny. Overall, West argues that not only is there a Christian *right* to resist but there is, even more, a Christian *duty* to forcibly resist tyrannical governments. Indeed, for West, the very term *unjust government* is, in a certain sense, is an oxymoron; not because so called governments never act unjustly but because the very term "government" demands that the use of power must be ordered to the common good to deserve the term. As Augustine argued long ago, "an unjust law is no law at all"; thus governments who use their power unjustly slowly remove themselves from God's appointed authority and thus leave themselves open to a restoration of justice by the larger community. These determinations as always, are subject to the political virtue of prudence. As we will see, West grounds these traditional Christian arguments in both reason and the biblical text, which he views as mutually re-enforcing sources of authority. Furthermore, these sources of authority that are accessible and applicable to a democratic people.

In the midst of political exigency during the American War for Independence it is hard to overstate the importance of the so called "black robed regiments" of clergy and their impact on the movement towards armed resistance, for it was clear that, "Ministers were...a significant force for

¹ Samuel West, "On the Right to Rebel Against Governors" in *American Political Writing during the Founding Era 1760-1805, Volume I*, ed. Charles S. Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983), 410.

² Ibid.

articulating justifications for the American Revolution.”³ This paper will examine one such minister and his arguments in the context of resistance theology.

Do Christians have a right to rebel against their government?

At first glance the biblical text seems to clearly prohibit a right to rebel. Texts such as Romans 13 seem clear that “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established.”⁴ A slightly fuller examination of the textual evidence suggests that permissible Christian action is limited to civil disobedience only when faced with government prohibitions against clear biblical mandates, such as worship or preaching the gospel.⁵ For West the Biblical text clearly does not support *unlimited* submission to government for the very term government implies a certain level of justice and legitimacy. Thus when a government consistently acts unjustly or illegitimately it departs from the true nature and purpose of a government that was ordained by God and it loses its authority. To be clear, legitimate governments are not perfect and they act unbecoming of a government from time to time, and yet they do not and should not lose all of their legitimacy. However, at some point a so called government so departs from its essential character and purpose that its fundamental legitimacy is undermined. As we will see, West grounds his arguments in both reason and the biblical text, which he views as mutually re-enforcing sources of authority.

Reason and Resistance

The key to West’s argument for a Christian right to rebel, is his reliance on a discernable “law of nature” that is not only consistent with God’s will but founded upon the very “nature of the Deity.” As such this natural law is unchangeable and a “transcript of God’s moral perfections.”⁶ Prior to the fall “[t]he law of nature is a perfect standard and measure of action”, yet after the fall it still provides a basis upon which to judge the efficacy of the rulers.⁷ This natural law is so rooted in, and reflective of, God’s nature that even, “A revelation, pretending to be from God, that contradicts any part of natural law, ought immediately to be rejected as an imposture; for the Deity cannot make a law contrary to the law of nature without acting contrary to himself,” for “that which implies contradiction is not an object of the divine power.”⁸ Thus, natural law provides a basis by which to assess claims about revelation. This grounding in natural law is key, for it is the fulcrum upon which West’s entire argument turns. The leverage it provides allows Samuel West to reverse the claims of unlimited submission to government one-hundred and eighty degrees into a duty to resist. Put another way, it is this clear discernable *law of nature* that ultimately provides the basis for West’s right to rebel for it alone allows every man of common sense to distinguish liberty from licentiousness and tyranny from magistracy. For West, “no man can have a right to act contrary

³ Glenn A. Moots, “Just Revolution: Protestant Precedents for Resistance and Rebellion” in *Justifying Revolution Law Virtue and Violence in the American War for Independence*. 52.

⁴ NIV

⁵ See Acts 5: 27-32, Daniel 3 NIV

⁶ Samuel West, “On the Right to Rebel Against Governors” in *American Political Writing during the Founding Era 1760-1805, Volume I*, ed. Charles S. Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983), 410.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 415

⁸ *Ibid.*, 414

to the law of nature” nor can a multitude of men confer a right of the rulers to act contrary to that law.⁹

For West the *law of nature* requires that a government restrain licentiousness and promote liberty. Liberty is at its fullest when expressed within its divinely and rationally sanctioned purposes, “the highest state of liberty subjects us to the law of nature and the government of God. The most perfect freedom consists in obeying the dictates of right reason, and submitting to natural law.”¹⁰ Thus, for West acting as one *wants* is not an adequate definition of freedom indeed it is slavery, rather freedom is acting as one *ought*, “For when a man goes beyond or contrary to the law of nature and reason, he becomes the slave of base passions and vile lusts; he introduces confusion and disorder into society, and brings misery and destruction upon himself.”¹¹ Since a state of licentiousness is actually a “state of vilest slavery” and “dreadful bondage”, then “we conclude that where licentiousness begins, liberty ends.”¹² The primary role of Government is to promote liberty by restraining licentiousness. Put another way, government restraint of wickedness is *by definition* the promotion of liberty for West. Licentiousness is arbitrary action that is in bondage to mankind’s passions and lusts rather than mankind’s right reason. West’s argument here runs contrary to current libertarian impulses in American society, for he locates man’s highest state of liberty in obedience; obedience to the laws of nature and the government of God which are one in the same. If the whole purpose or end of government then is to promote human liberty *by* restraining the wicked and licentious then it logically follows that a government that acts wickedly and promotes licentiousness is not by definition a government in any true sense.

Reason then dictates a duty to submit to the natural law, which is God’s law, and that duty compels one to submit to government only when that government is acting in accordance to the natural law. West puts it this way, “we are bound to obey magistrates...because they are the ministers of God for good unto the people” and it is the “duty of all to submit” while they “rule in fear of God” and “while they promote the welfare” of the people; but there is an “indispensable duty...to oppose a turbulent, factious, and libertine spirit, whenever and wherever it discovers itself.”¹³ Ultimately then, submission is to the natural law not to the government. One is to submit to government only in so far as the government is acting in accordance with the natural law and one is to oppose that government when it acts against the natural law.

West’s grounding of civil obedience in natural law simultaneously provides the basis for obedience, stability, and ultimately resistance. For West, this grounding in natural law as a basis for stability strikes the perfect balance between complacency and anarchy. This natural law standard demands ultimate obedience to lawful governments and equally demands disobedience to unlawful or unjust tyrannies.

⁹ Ibid., 416

¹⁰ Ibid., 415; Here West clearly contradicts contemporary American expressions of liberty such as Justice O’Connor’s infamous statement in the *Casey* decision that, “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life. Beliefs about these matters could not define the attributes of personhood were they formed under compulsion of the State.” O’Connor’s version of liberty places few if any real constraints on human action. As the *Casey* decision shows, liberty can even extend to the destruction of a human fetus if that fits with one’s one definition of “existence and the meaning of life.”

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 417

First, obedience to government is compelled by the natural law demands of justice and as such it provides a sound basis for stability and social order for, “he that opposes lawful authority does really oppose the safety and happiness of his fellow-creatures. A factious, seditious person, that opposes good government, is a monster in nature; for he is an enemy to his own species, and destitute of the sentiments of humanity.”¹⁴ Citizens are also compelled to obey their government, “for conscience sake, out of regard to the divine authority, and out of obedience to the will of God.” Furthermore, individual or minority groups of citizens are not empowered to disregard laws that they think unreasonable for, “if any number of men should take it upon themselves to oppose authority for acts, which may be really necessary for the public safety, only because they do not see the reasonableness of them, the direct consequence will be introducing confusion and anarchy into the state.”¹⁵

Second, while grounding *obedience* to government in the natural law promotes *stability* in just governments, it also provides the basis to *resist* unjust regimes for, “the same principles that oblige us to submit to civil government do also equally oblige us, where we have power and ability, to resist and oppose tyranny; and that where tyranny begins government ends.”¹⁶ How can this be? The citizen’s deeper duty is to “promote the general good” and thus their support for the government is contingent on its willingness and ability to promote that good. Our natural human motivation is our “love and regard” for the “welfare of the public” and it is this same “love and regard” that “will inspire us with as strong a zeal to oppose tyranny as we have to obey magistracy”.¹⁷ Therefore, if the citizen supports the state because of its promotion of the public good, the citizen must then resist the state based upon this same criteria should it fail in its charge; “Our obligation to promote the public good extends as much to the opposing every exertion of arbitrary power that is injurious to the state as it does to the submitting to good and wholesome laws.”¹⁸ Indeed one cannot be a “good member” of the political community unless one is “as zealous to oppose tyranny as he is to obey magistracy”.¹⁹ Anything less is simply “slavish submission to tyranny” and, for West, such slavishness is certainly, “proof of a very sordid and base mind.”²⁰

It is important to underscore West’s intention that this right to rebellion against tyranny grounded in reason and the natural law is also motivated by “generous human sentiments” and “tender regard for mankind”.²¹ That is to say, West’s right to resistance is not merely a selfish inward regard for individual rights, but also a noble outward regard for one’s fellow man and the natural justice of the community. This grounding in “sentiments” and “tender regard” suggest that humans do have a natural desire that extends beyond themselves toward their fellow man. It

¹⁴ Ibid., 417

¹⁵ Ibid., 418; West in more detail argues that the minority must submit to the majority unless it is asked to engage in “sin” or if it must do so for reasons of self-preservation.

¹⁶ Ibid., 420-421

¹⁷ Ibid. 421-422

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 421-422

suggests that one's individual rights and the pursuit of one's safety and happiness are inexorably bound together with the rights, safety, and happiness of the community.²²

What West's logic implies is that the state is not an end but merely a means. The state is not an unqualified good; rather it is only considered a good as a means to higher ends. This teleological argument that imbues the very nature of government with a *universal* purpose which provides a firm basis of support for governments that adequately strive towards those ends, but it also weakens support for *particular* governments who willingly undermine or fall short of those universal ends.

Natural Duty to God

Not only is one required to resist unjust regimes for the sake of the community but, according to West, one must also resist because obedience to the natural law is the same as obedience to God. For West "magistrates are ministers of God" and as such they deserve obedience; but as God's ministers, governments' have a duty to obey the "law of God and reason".²³ West is very clear that in their divine ministerial capacity, Governments are not unqualified goods in and of themselves. As such, they do not represent humankind's highest end, rather governments are only borne of "necessity".²⁴ Thus, as ministers of God, governments merely play an instrumental role and where that instrumentality ends, so does their divine mandate, "whenever they pursue measures directly destructive of the public good they cease being God's ministers".²⁵ Upon ceasing to be ministers of God, governments, "forfeit their right to obedience from the subject, they become the pests of society" and the citizen's duty to obey is severed from the regime, yet the citizen's duty to God remains. In fact, the citizen's remaining duty to God puts it in direct odds with the regime and creates a corresponding duty to oppose the regime, "the community is under the strongest obligation of duty, both to God and to its own members, to resist and oppose them". Thus, while the regime remains within God's law of nature it enjoys the loyalty of its citizens but only in a derivative form. The citizen's loyalty to the state is derivative of their duty to God—manifested as duty to obey the law of nature—thus once the state removes itself from the law of nature it destroys its own claim to loyalty by the citizen. It is in this way that when the community resists the government it "will be so far from resisting the ordinance of God" rather it will "be strictly obeying his commands".²⁶

For West reason does not allow for an alternative perspective. The common sense of the matter is clear. Reason points to the existence of a law of nature, it points to the existence of a creator, and it allows humans to understand a good deal of the content of that natural law. Furthermore, reason is clear that humans have duties to obey the natural law, which is God's law, and that obedience to the natural law must define, bound, and supersede one's obedience to the

²² This point may have implications for whether or not Lockeanism in America does not indeed draw upon the classical and medieval traditions that are more communally oriented than modern natural right of a more Hobbesian nature.

²³ *Ibid.*, 422

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

state, “To suppose otherwise will imply that the Deity requires of us an obedience that is self-contradictory and absurd, and that one part of his law is directly contrary to the other”. Here West invokes the self-evident *first principle of non-contradiction*. This move is warranted according to West because it is contradictory and absurd to believe that, “while he [God] commands us to pursue virtue and the general good, he does at the same time require us to persecute virtue, and betray the general good, by enjoining us obedience to the wicked commands of tyrannical oppressors. Can anyone not lost to the principles of humanity undertake to defend such absurd sentiments as these?”²⁷ Put another way, God simply cannot, without violating the laws of logic, command his followers to pursue virtue and goodness and then command them to pledge unlimited support for the perpetrators of vice and wickedness.

The Christian Tradition of Resistance Theology

It is important to note that Samuel West's arguments are not simply unique developments born of the exigency and the narrow interests in the American colonial context and the Imperial Crisis. Scholars such as Daniel Driesbach, Mark Hall, Robert Reilly, and Glen Moots, have traced the development of resistance arguments among both Protestants and Catholics that provide a theological and biblical textual basis to support resistance to tyranny.²⁸ This scholarship clearly shows that Samuel West's arguments represent an application of a long standing Christian tradition of what has been termed “resistance theology”.²⁹ This tradition offers an alternative interpretation to Romans 13 that creates a *duty* to resist tyranny. While much of West's sermon draws on a strong protestant tradition of resistance to tyrants, one can find Catholic authors who make very similar if not identical arguments, showing that the logic of resistance theology has grounds within the larger Christian tradition and they were not merely born out of protestant exigency or obstinacy.

Perhaps, one could point back to Augustine and his principle that an “unjust law is no law at all” to see the core principle at play here. Namely, that positive law, created by governing authorities must conform to some higher standard rooted in nature, or God's divine authority, to be legitimate. This principle seems to be the core of all resistance arguments, namely that rulers'

²⁷ Ibid., 422; Here is the quote in full, “If magistrates are ministers of God only because the law of God and reason points out the necessity of such an institution for the good of mankind, it follows, that whenever they pursue measures directly destructive of the public good they cease being God's ministers, they forfeit their right to obedience from the subject, they become the pests of society, and the community is under the strongest obligation of duty, both to God and to its own members, to resist and oppose them, which will be so far from resisting the ordinance of God that it will be strictly obeying his commands. To suppose otherwise will imply that the Deity requires of us an obedience that is self-contradictory and absurd, and that one part of his law is directly contrary to the other; i.e., while he commands us to pursue virtue and the general good, he does at the same time require us to persecute virtue, and betray the general good, by enjoining us obedience to the wicked commands of tyrannical oppressors. Can anyone not lost to the principles of humanity undertake to defend such absurd sentiments as these?”

²⁸ See Daniel L. Driesbach, *Reading the Bible with the Founding Fathers* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2017), Mark Hall, *Did America Have a Christian Founding? Separating Modern Myth From Historical Truth*. (Thomas Nelson, 2020). in Robert Reilly, *America on Trial: A Defense of the Founding* (Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2020), Glenn A. Moots, “Just Revolution: Protestant Precedents for Resistance and Rebellion” in *Justifying Revolution Law Virtue and Violence in the American War for Independence*. and Glenn Moots, *Politics Reformed: The Anglo-American Legacy of Covenant Theology*, (University of Missouri Press, 2010).

²⁹ Daniel L. Driesbach, *Reading the Bible with the Founding Fathers*.

authority is bounded by God's natural law. While careful not to unleash anarchy, early Reformer's laid a foundation for resistance theology. For example, John Calvin, puts it thus, "Earthly princes lay aside all their power when they rise up against God, and are unworthy of being reckoned in the number of mankind. We ought rather utterly to defy than to obey them whenever they are so restive and wish to spoil God of his rights."³⁰ Similarly, Henry Bullinger writing to John Knox "the Lord will in his own time destroy unjust governments by his own people, to whom he will supply proper qualifications for this purpose, as he formerly did to Jerubbaal, and the Maccabees, and Jehoiada."³¹ Bullinger, did not teach "an almost unqualified doctrine of submission." and "Christians 'ought not to obey the wicked commandments of godless magistrates, because it is not permitted to magistrates to ordain or appoint anything contrary to God's law, or the law of nature."³² Calvin again, God would "open avengers from among his servants" and armed them "with his command to punish the wicked government and deliver his people." According to one scholar, for Calvin, "Such men were not violating the divinely-implanted majesty in kings, but...were obeying a higher sovereignty."³³ Extending the premises of Bullinger and Calvin, John Knox concluded that the people had a duty to resist tyrannical rule in certain contexts and circumstances,

Consider, my lords, that you are powers ordained by God (as before is declared), and therefore does the reformation of religion, and the defense of such as unjustly are oppressed, appertain to your charge and care, which thing shall the law of God, universally given to be kept of all men, most evidently declare; which is my last and most assured reason, why, I say, you ought to remove from honours and punish with death such as God has condemned by his own mouth."³⁴

As the Reformation continued, resistance theology was developed and refined. Whether Dutch Reformers resisting the power of Phillip II, or French Huguenots resisting tyrannical acts such as the St. Bartholomew Day massacre, Protestant theological and political thought argued for the duty to resist tyrannical princes. In the classic Protestant tract on resistance, *Vindicae Contra Tyrannos*, we find that Christians may lawfully oppose tyrants,

Now as the Law of Nature, of Nations, and the civill commands us to take Armes against such Tyrants: so is there not any manner of reason that should perswade us to the contrary; neither is there any oath, covenant, or obligation, publike or private, of power justly to

³⁰Richard L. Greaves, "John Knox, the Reformed Tradition, and the Development of Resistance Theory" *The Journal of Modern History*, Sep., 1976, Vol. 48, No. 3, pp. 1-36

³¹ Greaves, "John Knox, the Reformed Tradition"

³² Greaves, "John Knox, the Reformed Tradition"

³³ Greaves, "John Knox, the Reformed Tradition"

³⁴ John Knox "The Appellation" in <https://thegenevanfoundation.com/john-knox-on-the-responsibilities-of-the-lesser-magistrate/>

restraine us: therefore the meanest private man may resist and lawfully oppose such an intruding tyrant [sic].³⁵

Even later, Dutch protestant legal theorist, Hugo Grotius handles the question similarly:

Whether the law of not resisting superiors binds us in a most grievous and most certain danger,” and his determination is that “This law of not resisting superiors seems to depend upon the will of those men who at first joined themselves in a civil society, from whom the right of government does come to them that govern. If those had been at first asked if their will were to impose this burden upon all, that they should choose rather to die, than in any case by arms to repel the force of superiors, I know not whether they would answer that it was their will, unless perhaps with this addition: if resistance cannot be made but with great disturbance of the commonwealth, and destruction of many innocents.³⁶

Lest one think this line of theological and political argument was unique to Protestants, born of reformation necessity, the foundation for such thinking had been laid long before the reformation. For example, here is Thomas Aquinas on whether sedition is always a sin:

A tyrannical government is not just, because it is directed, not to the common good, but to the private good of the ruler, as the Philosopher states (Polit. iii, 5; Ethic. viii, 10). Consequently there is no sedition in disturbing a government of this kind, unless indeed the tyrant's rule be disturbed so inordinately, that his subjects suffer greater harm from the consequent disturbance than from the tyrant's government. Indeed it is the tyrant rather that is guilty of sedition, since he encourages discord and sedition among his subjects, that he may lord over them more securely; for this is tyranny, being conducive to the private good of the ruler, and to the injury of the multitude.³⁷

Thus, we see that the seditious party is actually the tyrant who is abusing his power for his private interest rather than the common good. So according to the Natural Law, all who violate it stand judged by it. We also see prudence as the guiding virtue as to whether resistance to tyranny is warranted in particular instances. Later Catholic thinkers picked up on the logic of Aquinas. Three hundred years later we see similar arguments from the Spanish Catholic scholar Francisco Suarez:

If, then, a lawful king is ruling in tyrannical fashion, and if the state finds at hand no other means of self-defence [sic] than the expulsion and deposition of this king, the said state, acting as a whole, and in accordance with the public and general deliberations of its communities and leading men, may depose him.³⁸

³⁵ *Vindicae Contra Tyrannos*, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo2/A88696.0001.001/1:3.3?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>

³⁶ As quoted by Filmer In *Patriarchia*

³⁷ See Thomas Aquinas, *ST II-II, Question 42 On Sedition*, *Summa Theologica* (Benziger Bros. edition, 1947)

Translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province.

<https://dhspriority.org/thomas/summa/SS/SS042.html#SSQ42A1THEP1>

³⁸ Francisco Suárez, *Selections from Three Works: A Treatise on Laws and God the Lawgiver; A Defence of the Catholic and Apostolic Faith; A Work on the Three Theological Virtues: Faith, Hope, and Charity*. Edited and with

Not only did Suarez impart these ideas but similarly in another highly regarded Catholic source, Cardinal Robert Bellarmine addressed these issues this way,

‘Secular or civil power’ (says he) “is instituted by men; it is in the people unless they bestow it on a Prince. This power is immediately in the whole multitude, as in the subject of it; for this power is by the Divine law, but the Divine law has given this power to no particular man. If the positive law be taken away, there is left no reason why amongst a multitude (who are equal) one rather than another should bear rule over the rest. Power is given by the multitude to one man, or to more by the same law of nature; for the commonwealth of itself cannot exercise this power, therefore it is bound to bestow it upon some one man, or some few. It depends upon the consent of the multitude to ordain over themselves a King, or consul, or other magistrate; and if there be a lawful cause, the multitude may change the kingdom into an aristocracy or democracy.”³⁹

Thus in all of these Catholic sources an appeal to a standard rule of natural law standing above the tyrant, the illegitimacy of the tyrant, and the need to remove the tyrant and restore true law. Now surely there are nuances to explore here since arguments by Bellarmine were made in the context of arguing against the power of Protestant Princes such as James I. But even here their arguments would dovetail with the Puritan resistance to monarchical temporal authority.

In the end, while there is certainly more that can be said and more work to be done, what is clear is that West’s arguments are similar to, and consistent with, a strain of the Christian tradition that interpreted the biblical text and proper theological reflection as not only allowing for resistance to tyranny but calling for a duty to resist such tyranny. Such thought led Jefferson and others to embrace the phrase, “Resistance to Tyrants is Obedience to God.”⁴⁰ Here again is Samuel West:

It is as plain, I think, as words can make it, that, according to this text, no tyrant can be a ruler; for the apostle's definition of a ruler is, that he is not a terror to good works, but to the evil; and that he is one who is to praise and encourage those that do well. Whenever, then, the ruler encourages them that do evil, and is a terror to those that do well,--i.e., as soon as he becomes a tyrant,--he forfeits his authority to govern, and becomes the minister of Satan, and, as such, ought to be opposed.⁴¹

Conclusion

So, what is one to make of West’s sermon? Some scholars have questioned West’s case against Great Britain’s status as a tyrannical power as being overly beholden to Revolutionary Era theological trends towards post-millennialism.⁴² However, even if one acknowledges that aspects

an Introduction by Thomas Pink (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2015), 820.

8/29/2019. <<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/2740>>

³⁹ Bellarmine as quoted by Robert Filmer in *Patriarcha*,

<https://pages.uoregon.edu/dluebke/301ModernEurope/FilmerPatriarcha1680.pdf>

⁴⁰ Moots and Morkevicius, “Just Revolution”, 41.

⁴¹ Samuel West, “On the Right to Rebel Against Governors” in *American Political Writing during the Founding Era 1760-1805, Volume I*, ed. Charles S. Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983), 410.

⁴² George Marsden, “The American Revolution” in *The Wars of America: Christian Views*. 29

of West's sermon may be reflective of contemporary conventional theology or even anachronistic modes of expression; West's arguments still transcend the historical limits of his day. Indeed, unless one is to fall into the trap of historicism, all historical ideas are worth examining for their universal principles that may still provide guidance today. Thus, despite some anachronisms in his presentation, West constructs a fairly strong theoretical and theological foundation for a duty to resist tyranny. At a minimum, He builds a case that is not easily dismissed.

The strength of his case rests on his intertwining of both reason and revelation as authorities on this issue. Perhaps one might believe that West makes reason bear too much of the intellectual burden in his interpretation of Romans and I Peter. However, it is hard to imagine not having reason play such a prominent role in untangling the political dilemma presented by these verses. For example, West's use of the law of non-contradiction is particularly effective in providing keen insights into the reading of Romans and I Peter. Is it reasonable for God to require Christians to promote goodness in their private life but not in their public life? If one is personally charged with defending the weak in private, should one not defend the weak in public and resist those, even the state, should they promote evil at the expense of goodness? In this sense, doesn't unlimited submission require the believer to accept a directly contradictory command from God? These are respectable and forceful challenges to the doctrine of unlimited submission that are grounded in both reason and revelation working as one.⁴³

Another strength of West's argument grounded in reason and natural law is the manner in which it moderates the right of resistance. Resistance does not rise abruptly out of a violent and frenzied exertion of collective will, rather, it appears in West's sermon as a calm firm duty directed by, and limited by, the natural law. Rebellion then for West is a reluctant duty that falls to the people when government abrogates its ministerial duties to the natural law. In this way West's approach to resisting government strikes a moderate balance. Again, the basis for this moderation is the use of reason and the existence of a divinely sanctioned natural law that exists prior to, and outside of, but always consistent with, holy scripture.

In this way, West's argument does challenge contemporary Evangelicals to continually reassess the role of reason in their reading of scripture especially as scripture applies to politics. Indeed, Christians cannot run away from the fact that they must rely on reason as the medium through which they understand and interpret scripture. If reason plays such a reliable and key role in merely accessing and digesting scripture, it seems worthwhile to contemplate ways in which reason can provide sound guidance in sorting out apparent confusions in the scriptural text even if such guidance comes from reasonable insights gleaned from the natural world. Ultimately West reminds present day Evangelicals of the rich heritage of deep rational argument that characterized much of the Founding Era political theology.

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