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Comments

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Review of Benjamin T. Lynerd, *Republican Theology:*

The Civil Religion of American Evangelicals

John W. Compton

Benjamin Lynerd argues that scholars of political thought have given short shrift to American evangelicals. Indeed, he makes the provocative claim that evangelical political thought – or what he terms evangelical “political theology” – had by the late colonial period emerged as a distinct, “observable tradition within American political thought” (15). What is more, he contends that the modern-day Christian Right – a voting bloc often chided for its anti-intellectualism – is in fact very much in the mainstream of this venerable tradition.

Although I find Lynerd’s characterization of the Christian Right unpersuasive (for reasons explained below), *Republican Theology* nonetheless performs a valuable service in highlighting the reciprocal influence of religious and political ideas, particularly in the early years of the republic. The book’s early chapters focus on the eighteenth-century clergy’s struggle to reconcile the Calvinist vision of the covenanted polity with the Lockean social contract. From this effort emerged a body of political thought organized around the twin goals of cultivating private virtue and limiting official power. To the modern reader, these goals may seem contradictory. But Lynerd makes a strong case that American evangelicals, while aware of the potential for tension, viewed each commitment as indispensable to the formation of a Godly republic.

Lynerd is not the first scholar to cover this ground, but his discussion is admirably clear and accessible, and covers a surprisingly wide range of thinkers. The central figures in his account are John Witherspoon and Benjamin Rush. Witherspoon successfully “merged Christian piety” with the Lockean “philosophy of limited government,” thus laying the groundwork for

“the revolutionary project” (79). Rush, in turn, worked to develop a coherent account of the relationship between Christian virtue and republican citizenship. He believed that true Christianity could flourish only in republics that protected individual liberty; but he also believed that no republic could long endure without a “religiously grounded civil society” (94). Thus, while the American republic would recognize a significant sphere of individual liberty, it could not be indifferent to what occurred in that sphere. It was Rush, then, who gave early American evangelicalism its reformist thrust. He urged Americans to use their newfound freedom to organize on behalf of virtuous causes ranging from abolition, to liquor prohibition, to public education, thus laying a firm moral foundation for the new nation (89-90).

Lynerd’s claim that the religiously infused political ideas of Witherspoon, Rush and other early evangelicals were coherent, distinctive and influential – and therefore deserving of greater attention from scholars – is, on the whole, persuasive. (He adopts the sensible label “republican theology” to describe this complex of ideas.) Problems arise, however, when he attempts to establish a clear line of descent from Witherspoon and Rush to the modern Christian Right. In contrast to most recent historians of American religion, he rejects the view that the twentieth-century melding of evangelical religion and libertarian conservatism was driven by political expediency (5-6, 17-18). Reagan-era evangelicals did not embrace the economic philosophy of Milton Friedman and Ayn Rand in a bid for political power, he argues. Nor did wily right-wing politicians exploit evangelical fears of communism and cultural decay, drawing evangelicals into a political marriage of convenience with economic libertarians. Rather, those twentieth-century evangelicals who embraced the religion of the free market – from Harold Ockenga, to Francis Schaeffer, to Ralph Reed – were faithfully applying the political convictions of Rush and Witherspoon to the very different social and economic problems of twentieth-century America.

In sum, American evangelicals' dual commitment to "libertarian" economic principles and "restrictive public moralism" predates "whatever political alliances were forged in the late twentieth century" (4, 6). It was the Reagan-era Republican party that eventually came around to the *evangelical* understanding of political economy, not the other way around (183).

The most serious problem with this line of argument is that it stretches the meaning of terms such as "liberty" and "limited government" beyond anything Rush, Witherspoon and their contemporaries would have recognized. In particular, Lynerd repeatedly and wrongly equates early evangelical support for the idea of "limited government" with support for "free-market values" (e.g., 5, 9, 32, 35, 41, 183). In reality, the early republican definition of a "free" or "limited" government had little to do with the presence or absence of economic regulation. A limited government was simply one that protected freedom of conscience, guaranteed basic civil liberties to the criminally accused, did not seize property without due process, and provided for some form of white male suffrage (often with property qualifications). On the critical question of the beneficence of the market, early evangelicals were deeply ambivalent. Although most evangelicals professed an abstract belief in the sanctity of property rights, they were also acutely aware of the emerging market economy's impact on traditional mores and social structures (including the family). And when push came to shove, they almost invariably subordinated private economic rights to the protection of public morals.

Consider Lyman Beecher, the most prominent evangelical of the antebellum period and a central figure in Lynerd's narrative (103-7). Clearly a proponent of "republican theology," Beecher believed that America had been chosen by God to carry the twin blessings of political liberty and Protestant Christianity to a benighted world. But Beecher was no cheerleader for unbridled capitalism. Indeed, his Lockean respect for property rights was tempered – if not

overshadowed – by his covenantal understanding of the American nation. As he argued in his widely publicized *Six Sermons on Intemperance*, God demanded careful stewardship over “the reservoir of [America’s] national wealth.” Precisely because the nation’s abundant economic resources were a gift from God, particular uses of capital and labor were to be regarded as legitimate only to the extent that they furthered the coming of His Kingdom.

The liquor industry, which “employ[ed] a multitude of men, and a vast amount of capital, to no useful purpose,” was Beecher’s principal target. But he and other early evangelicals used the same logic to attack a range of seemingly benign economic activities and forms of property – from lottery tickets, to fireworks, to stock speculation, to private transportation companies that did business on Sundays. Rejecting both the logic of the invisible hand and the idea of an inviolable sphere of economic liberty, Beecher believed that no divinely sanctioned republic could long endure in which “large portions of time and capital and labor” were expended “without reference to public utility.” It was therefore every Christian’s duty to engage in private civic action aimed at curbing immoral economic activity. And where private action had proved ineffective, Beecher regularly demanded that “the suffrage of the community” be mobilized against the agents of evil.

It would be wrong, of course, to cast Beecher as a prophet of the modern welfare state. He did not live to witness the full impact of industrialization, and it is impossible to say with certainty how he would have responded to the struggles of organized labor or calls for economic redistribution. (And as Lynerd rightly points out, Beecher’s son, Henry Ward, landed squarely on the side of big business.) Still, the evangelical response to industrialization poses serious problems for Lynerd’s historical argument. It is well established that evangelicals played leading roles in the major Progressive-era regulatory crusades – crusades that significantly curtailed

economic liberty by, among other things, breaking up the trusts, mandating humane working conditions, and abolishing child labor. Lynerd acknowledges this fact, but chalks it up to the work of rogue factions within the evangelical community. He notes that some working-class evangelicals found solace in laborite and socialist theologies, but he insists that most “bourgeois congregations” gravitated to the “free market theology” preached by the country’s “foremost pastors,” including H.W. Beecher and Newman Smyth (152). In any event, he argues, the rift was short-lived. By the middle of the twentieth century evangelicals were again marching in lockstep under the familiar banner of “free market capitalism” (162).

This account is misleading, however, in that it ignores the vast middle of the ideological spectrum. The evangelical bourgeoisie may well have been horrified by the specter of socialism and labor unrest; but it was equally horrified by the very real abuses that more radical reformers brought to light. That virtually all of the major Protestant denominations formally endorsed government action to ameliorate the effects of industrialization goes unmentioned in Lynerd’s account. More to the point, he has little to say about the dozens of ecumenical organizations that led the charge for government intervention on behalf of the downtrodden. The Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), arguably the most important ecumenical organization of the late nineteenth century, receives only a single, brief mention (132). And yet the WCTU’s ranks were filled with hundreds of thousands of middle-class evangelical women who, if they did not follow their beloved president Frances Willard to the promised land of Christian Socialism, nonetheless endorsed a range of state and federal policy proposals aimed at improving the lot of the urban poor. Lynerd might also have discussed the powerful Anti-Saloon League, an organization staffed and funded almost entirely by small-town evangelical ministers and laymen, most of them Methodists. Widely regarded as the most influential interest group of the early

twentieth century, the ASL not only led the charge for national prohibition but also played a critical role in enacting the 16th amendment, which authorized the federal income tax. All of which is simply to say that most nineteenth- and early twentieth-century evangelicals seem to have viewed property rights and economic liberty as instrumental goods: they were generally deserving of respect, but only in circumstances where – and to the extent that – they fostered the development of a religious and morally virtuous citizenry.

Near the end of *Republican Theology*, Lynerd acknowledges that the leading lights of the modern Christian Right seem largely unaware of their debts to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century evangelicals. He is not troubled by this fact, however. That “republican theology” lives on, even as early evangelical celebrities like Lyman Beecher and Charles Grandison Finney have been forgotten, only underscores in Lynerd’s view “how deeply embedded [republican theology] is in the worldview of American evangelicals” (186). But it is surely more plausible to conclude that the reason why the voluminous writings of Beecher and Finney are so rarely cited is because they offer little direct support for the “anti-welfare, pro-market” policy prescriptions of today’s Christian Right (194).

Rejoinder

In his review of my book, Benjamin Lynerd rightly points out that twentieth-century evangelicals wasted little time in turning against the very constitutional changes that (I argue) nineteenth-century evangelicals helped bring about. Lynerd also notes that the resulting irony can be explained, in part, by the fact that the “evangelical” label had by the 1940s “migrated”

from (typically progressive) Northern mainline Protestants to a group of politically and theologically conservative believers, many of whom were deeply suspicious of the federal government, and of the newly created welfare state in particular.

But what explains this realignment of theology and politics? Lynerd suggests that twentieth-century evangelicals' premillennial eschatology may have something to do with their distaste for economic regulation and redistribution. And, at first glance, this seems like a plausible explanation: if human effort plays no part in ushering in the Millennium, then why would believers bother to reform their (damned) earthly societies?

And yet, on second thought, I wonder whether the political implications of eschatology are really so significant. Premillennial believers are, after all, deeply concerned with the salvation of individual souls. And so long as it is acknowledged that souls are shaped at least in part by their worldly environments, it follows that evangelicals of the premillennial persuasion can never be completely indifferent to conditions here on Earth. One need only consult the "Home Protection" agenda of the nineteenth-century Women's Christian Temperance Union – a decidedly *postmillennial* organization – to see that incompatible eschatologies can sometimes point in the same general direction with respect to policy. The WCTU waged war against a range of "satanic" influences, including obscenity and drink, believing that their efforts would cultivate Godly families, save souls, *and* prepare the way for Christ's return. Clearly, modern-day evangelicals have severed the link between earthly reform and the Second Coming. But they have hardly abandoned the goal of protecting the family unit from the corrupting influence of mainstream music, films, and television – all of which are understood to undermine the traditional moral values that provide the surest path to individual salvation.

If I am right that modern-day, conservative evangelicals and their progressive forebears are linked by a deep concern for the moral health of the family unit, then we are led, yet again, to a pair of more fundamental questions. First, how did evangelicals come to view the comparatively weak American state, not as a tool to be enlisted in the service of cultivating strong families (and souls), but as a diabolical force to be opposed at all costs? And, second, how did evangelicals lose sight of the market's often destructive impact on families (and souls)?

Lynerd is rightly suspicious of explanations that cast twentieth-century evangelicals as dupes of political operatives, or else as knee-jerk reactionaries, fearful of social change in all its manifestations. And yet I remain unconvinced that the politics of today's evangelicals are best understood as the inevitable outgrowth of core theological convictions, viewed through the lens of modern social and economic conditions. The problem, as I have explained above, is that the tenets of the evangelical faith are simply too abstract to connect to concrete policy proposals in any straightforward way. This explains why evangelical responses to industrialization ran the gamut from Christian Socialism to laissez-faire and the Prosperity Gospel.

In the end, if we are to make sense of the evangelical embrace of the market, I think we must shift our gaze from grand principles to the more mundane stuff of historical contingency. The onset of the Cold War, for example, almost certainly helped to push the Social Gospel tradition from the mainstream of evangelical public discourse to the margins. Shortly thereafter, the civil rights movement and the resulting realignment of American politics vaulted white Southern evangelicals – with their longstanding distrust of federal power – into the national spotlight. Finally, as Theda Skocpol has shown, the postwar period witnessed a broader transformation of American civil society, in which the federally structured membership organizations that had long formed the backbone of Protestant social activism gave way to top-

down, single-issue interest groups. As a result, millions of Americans were for the first time cut off from serious, practical engagement with major social problems. Whether this last development should be characterized as a cause or effect of evangelicals' rightward drift is an open question. Either way, it created a vacuum within the evangelical community – one that was quickly filled by the more extreme prophets of market fundamentalism.

In sum, it may be that the merger of evangelicalism and economic libertarianism is best understood as one facet of a broader, historically contingent conservative turn in American politics. Whether one applauds or condemns the resulting admixture will, of course, depend on one's politics. Viewed at the level of ideas, however, there can be no denying that these developments have reduced a once vibrant intellectual tradition to a shadow of its former self.