

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 20th century, the Anti-Saloon League 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 19th- and early 20th-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 18th- and 19th-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).

## Reply to John Compton

doi:10.1017/S1755048315000693

Benjamin T. Lynerd  
*Chapman University*

In his appraisal of *Republican Theology*, Compton highlights the challenge inherent to any work of intellectual history that bridges multiple centuries, namely, the problem of conceptual discontinuity. As Compton rightly notes, ideas like “limited government,” “pro-market,” and even “republican” carry different connotations today than they did to Americans living

in the eighteenth century. Comparing political rhetoric over such a span, particularly in light of religious beliefs, requires attention to context. In defending the cautions taken on this front in *Republican Theology*, I will offer some broader reflections on the methodological challenge.

First, a clarification: *Republican Theology* never denies the importance of politics and coalition-building behind the formation of the Christian Right in the 1970s, to which the detail on these maneuvers in Chapter 7 attest (see pages 182–190). Rather, it observes that pro-market, anti-Communist, and Christian moralist factions in this period were able to draw upon a way of thinking that tied these causes together — and which already had currency in evangelical pulpits. Apart from this conceptual framework the coalition would have been difficult to sustain.

More to Compton's underlying point: While the book does trace a vector from the political theology of the founding era to that of the current century, this line is anything but straight and narrow. Indeed, internal struggles and doctrinal manipulations are as much a part of the story as the existence of a tradition. In the antebellum period, for instance, leaders of almost every cause — antislavery, temperance, even pro-slavery — bent the doctrines of republican theology to their own purposes. Later in the century evangelicals battled each other over the meaning of progress. Still, evident constants remain: In every period of American history renowned preachers have predicated the health of a free republic (whatever precisely that might mean) on the moral virtue of its people (whatever precisely *that* might mean). Even as the content has morphed, the framework has prevailed.

Such warp and woof reflects the unique demands of writing intellectual history. This particular narrative tracks a phenomenon — the interplay of evangelical theology and American politics — that is dynamic on almost every level: Both entities have evolved, as has their influence on each other. Beneath the dynamism, however, are vital points of continuity. As emphasized in Compton's own work, American evangelicals have achieved a remarkable degree of influence within a non-sectarian regime. They have done so, in the first place, by attuning their religious ideals to those of the country, thereby justifying their own activism *and* drawing non-evangelical allies into their political orbit. It is this cognitive harmonizing — the creation of an actionable political theology in sermons and other religious rhetoric — that intrigues me.

This creative process has traded on concepts — “liberty,” “democracy,” and “virtue,” to name a few — whose meanings have changed substantially since 1776. Any history of this discourse must account for these

changes. Such an account should not, however, obscure a resilient intellectual tradition. The long reach of certain ideas, the recurrence of certain debates, and the repetition of vocabulary and patterns of logic are noteworthy facts of human history. The art of writing this history is to properly sort through the continuities and discontinuities of meaning. Thus, of course, Lyman Beecher was not offering some preemptive blessing to the “unbridled capitalism” of the industrial age way back in 1826. Nevertheless, his celebration of the righteous, rugged, independent farmer helped to fashion a trope that would later resonate among evangelicals even in a post-agrarian era, lending credence to those who opposed all kinds of economic interventions in the late 19th and 20th centuries.

What is striking is precisely the durability of this trope not only in the face of economic change but also in the face of countervailing facets of evangelical theology, such as its emphasis on the basic weakness of the human condition and the need for grace — facets which have been a fixture of the evangelical conversion narrative for centuries but conspicuously disappear whenever the theology turns to politics. Only sensitivity to the dynamic *and static* nature of ideas can bring such ironies to light.