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The Republican Character of Antebellum American Religion

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The young scholars who proposed a dialogue between John Modern and myself, and who then contributed sparkling insights of their own to that dialogue, deserve hearty thanks. They have taken seriously the main arguments, along with many of the details, in Modern's *Secularism in Antebellum America* and my *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. In so doing, they spotlighted lacunae, advanced new perspectives, and proposed the best kind of questions for probing the complicated religious-political-personal-social-economic relationships in antebellum America. I am particularly indebted to them for pointing out aspects of my work that require clarification and for helping me see more clearly what John Modern's work accomplished.

To introduce my appreciative responses to their interventions, it may help to rehearse what I thought I was trying to do in my book. Two questions drove the inquiry: first, what changed over time in the relationship between articulated theology and broader political and intellectual developments? Put specifically, why did the widely accepted Calvinism of Jonathan Edwards' era, though of course manifest with considerable variation, become widely rejected within less than a century? Dana Logan has put it exactly by saying that I was trying to tell an "origin story." The second question can also be stated in terms provided by Dana Logan: Why did what came to feel so natural for questions of theology or conceptions relating religion to society not feel at all natural in an earlier period? For example, why by the 1820s or 1830s (and perhaps to the present) did an appeal to self-consciousness so decisively refute the sophisticated arguments of a previous generation, based on both biblical interpretation and careful philosophical reasoning, that had shown the modern notion of a human free will was impossible?

In trying to answer these questions, "power," or the effort to enforce opinions on others, was only a secondary concern. Instead, I was impressed with how strongly contingent events or circumstances influenced what came to be felt as natural for theological questions. Those contingent events included what I call the collapse in New England of a "Puritan canopy" that had organized life under the dominant theological principles of late-sixteenth and seventeenth-century English reforming Calvinism. The spread in the thirteen colonies of Real Whig political convictions among traditional Christian

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groups, where those principles were mostly the preserve of heterodox thinkers in Britain, was a second circumstance. Another was the success of the American War of Independence. A quick glance north of the border shows that continuing loyalty to the British crown supported forms of theological and social reasoning quite different from what republicanism encouraged in the new United States. Still a further contingency was the effective use of common-sense moral reasoning to justify the War of Independence and to promote voluntary organization as a means for achieving virtue in a new country without a formal ecclesiastical establishment. A final contingency was the success, against most European predictions, of this voluntary pattern in creating a dynamic, if also somewhat chaotic, national civilization. Careful attention to these contingencies, the book tried to suggest, can explain why the synthesis of popular evangelical religion, common-sense moral reasoning, and republican political principles came to seem so natural—so simply given—for thinkers, both elite and non-elite, in the new American Republic.

Originally I had hoped that *America's God* could present a fully comparative account of these American developments. I thought that parallel narratives for English-Protestant Canada, French-Catholic Canada, England, and Scotland could reveal even more clearly why the synthesis of evangelicalism, common sense, and republicanism came to be accepted in the United States, when in the very same years it did not take hold for the likes of Egerton Ryerson or John Strachan in Upper Canada, Bishop Ignace Bourget in Lower Canada, Methodists under the leadership of Jabez Bunting in England, and Scotland's Calvinist evangelicals who followed where Thomas Chalmers led. If I could have fulfilled that intention, it might have engendered the best kind of comparisons with the excellent scholarship already at hand from J. C. D. Clark, Boyd Hilton, Stewart Brown, Michael Gauvreau, and other distinguished historians.[1] But the book was already too long, and I did not want to be working on just this one project until the day I died.

I. The Questions

Sonia Hazard raises perceptive queries about my fairly off-hand comments about "agency." Her suspicion that I evoked this word mostly to show that I had read a few books published after 1870 may be correct. But as she

[1]J.C.D. Clark, *English Society, 1660–1832: Religion, Ideology, and Politics During the Ancien Regime* (New York: Cambridge University, 2000): Boyd Hilton, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1795–1865* (New York: Oxford University, 1988); Stewart J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth in Scotland* (New York: Oxford University, 1982); Michael Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century: College and Creed in English Canada from the Great Revival to the Great Depression* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University, 1991).

approached "agency" as a serious matter, the result was a serious question: "Are humans *actually* free, unfettered agents? Can we really fully know the world? Do I [does Noll] really embrace a liberal view of human nature and human capacities?"

An example may help to respond. Charles Grandison Finney in the mid-1830s undertook to preach, and then publish, a series of sermons that came to be called *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*. Several things about this effort are demonstrable: Finney undertook it at least in part to rescue his publisher who was facing financial embarrassment. In the lectures he proclaimed that Christian conversion resulted from human self-exertion rather than the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit. In the course of the lectures he also displayed great faith in human ability, famously claiming that if the nation's believers would only make the attempt, they could eliminate the sin of slavery in two or three years.

My assessment is that Finney's purposive action did rescue his publisher; he was, thus, an effective agent in the nation's literal marketplace of ideas. His proclamations about human self-transformation and the ease with which society could be transformed deserve a different assessment. I happen to think he was wrong for reasons having to do with my own theological convictions and my own understanding of how religious beliefs relate to social circumstances. But as a historian, I was much more interested in answering the question, "Why did he assert these things?" The answer seemed (and seems) pretty clear: Finney had accepted a notion of "liberty" spilling over from the nation's political ideals. In addition, he accepted a widespread belief, also a product of influential assumptions about the ability to understand causes and effects in the political sphere, that humans could see clearly the whys and wherefores propelling the course of civilizations, particularly how the character of individuals directly affected the moral shape of the societies in which they lived.

Although I believe Finney was wrong in these convictions, I felt it was necessary to treat his decidedly liberal reasoning empathetically. For one thing, I might not be as clear-sighted now as Finney was then. For another, I have been struck by the resonance of his *Lectures on Revivals* for individuals far, far away from American circumstances, for instance V.S. Azariah in India, who translated this work into Tamil in the early twentieth century, and Simeon Nsibambi and Joe Church, who read Finney's book out loud to each other as they itinerated by car during the East African Revival of the 1930s.[2]

[2]See Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, *Clouds of Witnesses: Christian Voices from Africa and Asia* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2011), 145 (Azariah); Mark A. Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2009), 183–184 (Nsibambi and Church).

So am I myself a "liberal"? As someone who thinks of himself as an Augustinian Christian, I hope not. But more important to me as a historian is the effort to understand why Finney's liberal rendering of Christianity made sense for so many people in his particular circumstances and to a good many others at other times and in other places.

Alexandra Kaloyanides queries my focus on a "protestant consensus . . . reigning supreme" in antebellum America. She wants to know, "Is there a space to be explored in which plurality *and* protestantism operate, interact, and co-constitute?" This perceptive query might be translated into a broader question: should historical narratives feature centers, however defined, at the expense of margins, however defined? My response is to hope there can be much room and much encouragement for both. It has been, for example, a very good thing for scholars in recent years to reorient perspectives on early U.S. history by publishing significant scholarship on Roman Catholics in antebellum society, on African American figures like Henry Highland Garnett, Henry McNeal Turner, and Harriet Jacobs who paid scant attention to the intellectual-theological synthesis that I highlight, and on the dialogical relationship that developed between Christian missionaries and Buddhists in Asia. It is also a fruitful exercise to think self-consciously about why some narratives might be considered "central" and others "marginal."

My attention to what I thought of (and still think of) as an intellectual-social-religious synthesis at the center of antebellum America involved not a moral judgment, but an empirical claim. Evidence for the centrality of that synthesis rested on the popularly of works like Finney's *Lectures on Revivals* or Henry Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the choice by the South and North of well-known ministers to represent their interests in Europe (respectively, James Henry Thornwell and Henry Ward Beecher), and the leading role that the journals from the nation's largest theological seminaries played in the era's most extensive discussions of science, hermeneutics, European scholarship, and world political affairs. Using such evidence to chart a "center" for American cultural history is not a claim that this center is more important ontologically than anything happening at the so-called "margins." It represents rather an effort to relate one of the many possible historical narratives for this period in American history.

Dana Logan summarizes succinctly what John Modern and I both suggest when she writes that "republicanism . . . became indistinguishable from the aims of religion in the United States." That summary leads her to a telling question: "When is republicanism a political structure versus an epistemic first principle in American religious history? And does the dominant theology of the early nineteenth century interact differently when republicanism is in the background or the foreground?"

In my view, republicanism became an epistemic first principle *because* American actors threw over older political convictions in the American Revolution in favor of new convictions. These new convictions were republican in so far as they stressed virtue in relationship to power in relationship to freedom in relationship to societal corruption or wellbeing. Comparisons again are crucial. Republican political ideology came to predominate in the United States because of a successful War of Independence that had been justified by republican political reasoning. (As a parenthesis, this reality makes the War of 1812 more important than is usually considered, since that conflict not only reaffirmed the nation's political independence but also confirmed its reliance on the ideology that had fueled the drive for independence.) The language of republican ideology—freedom, virtue, corruption, luxury, tyranny—became epistemic as it bled from political spheres of life into the intellectual, social, and religious.

But, crucially, these republican terms were always contested. Federalists differed with anti-Federalists, Jeffersonians battled Federalists, New England feared the South, Democrats castigated Whigs and vice versa, while slave states and free states engaged in constant strife. Because of these internal disputes, "republicanism" could actually mean quite different things. The Federalist and then Whig versions of republicanism that have been explored so well in works by Daniel Walker Howe, Allen Guelzo, Richard Carwardine, and Jonathan Den Hartog represented something quite different from the populist republicanism explored in the works of Nathan Hatch, Amanda Porterfield, Eric Schlereth, and Sam Haselby.[3]

Yet republicanism remained something like an epistemic first principle because political, economic, and religious debates took place in a narrow range. Voices that appealed to monarchy, socialism, communism, popery, or the Mormon apostolate gained little traction. *America's God* suggests as one of its main arguments that because for political, practical, and economic reasons republicanism remained mostly taken for granted, it was *therefore* crucially important for theology.

[3]Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979); Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America* (New York: Oxford University, 2007); Allen C. Guelzo, *Abraham Lincoln as a Man of Ideas* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 2009); Richard Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1993); Jonathan J. Den Hartog, *Patriotism and Piety: Federalist Politics and Religious Struggle in the New American Nation* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2014); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1989); Amanda Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2012); Eric R. Schlereth, *An Age of Infidels: The Politics of Religious Controversy in the Early United States* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2013); Sam Haselby, *The Origins of American Religious Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University, 2015).

Finally, Caleb Maskell is concerned about evangelical self-conceptions, particularly the way that evangelicals "felt their religious choices were real, American, and *above all* free." This is another useful question, though I note in passing that when Caleb accentuates "above all" he is appealing to a judgment that can be made only after careful empirical canvassing, not on the basis of preconceived understandings of what American liberal republicanism must entail. His concerns lead him to ask, was there a time, say in 1834, when "the fallen evangelical hegemonists of the Benevolent Empire" could have taken another path?

Counterfactuals are risky but fun. So, yes, what I wrote as a narrative ending in "tragedy"—broadly for the nation, specifically for the integrity of theological reasoning by Americans at the center of national influence—could have developed differently. If Virginia and other southern states had not cracked down on slave literacy after 1831. If there had been a national revulsion against the virulent anti-Catholicism of Lyman Beecher's *Plea for the West* and Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures*. If more Americans had read Alexis de Tocqueville's account in *Democracy in America* about the "tyranny of the majority" as a real possibility. If the arguments of John W. Nevin and foreign observers like the editors of *La civiltà cattolica* had persuaded more Americans that biblical interpretation could never be as straightforward and self-evident as so they seemed to believe.[4]

But because these events did not take place, I am left to conclude that since it required a momentous political crisis to create the conditions under which a synthesis of common sense, republicanism, and evangelicalism came to seem so natural, there would need to be a crisis of comparable magnitude—that is, the Civil War—before the assumptions underlying that antebellum intellectual synthesis even began to be shaken.

II. A Final Word

The lively public discussion that concluded our session in New York City helped me see more clearly the difference between what Modern's *Secularism* and my *America's God* tried to accomplish. Even as his book rested on intense source research, it also gave self-conscious prominence to a set of modern convictions—drawn from Weber, Foucault, and other noteworthy savants—about how social and intellectual relationships characteristically function. By contrast, although my book was doubtless shaped by many modern notions, including some of my own, about how

[4]See Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2007), 91, 145-155.

such relationships function, it sought above all to understand what the individuals I examined thought about the way the world worked. If that perception touches on a difference between "cultural studies" and "history," keeping it in mind may help all who work on this important era in American religious history to benefit from the labors of all others, from whatever approach, who make the same effort.

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