Church History 84:3 (September 2015), 616–620.

doi:10.1017/S0009640715000542

# *Secularism, Synthesis, and Antebellum Evangelical Self-Understanding*

Caleb J.D. Maskell

In *Secularism In Antebellum America,* John Modern extensively and directly engages with what he calls Mark Noll's "magisterial treatment of evangelicalism" in *America's God.*[1] In light of this, I have been surprised at what a challenge it has been to bring these books into conversation with one another on the subject of evangelicals and evangelicalism. The central reason for the difficulty, I think, is that Modern's treatment of antebellum evangelical print culture—his chapter entitled "Evangelical Secularism and the Measure of Leviathan"—is not actually *about* evangelicals. It is about *secularism*. And that, in a nutshell, is Modern's point. Throughout his book, he works hard to bring what he sees as the background into the foreground, rendering the emergent atmosphere of secularism as the *protagonist* in his story of evangelical media practices.

If there is one thing Modern wants his account of "evangelical secularism" to accomplish, it is to dethrone the evangelical agent as protagonist in narratives of antebellum protestant history, disrupting all historiographical imagination of the self-conscious prime mover who acts *first* to shape the norms of "American culture" in his own image. This is no easy task, given that it cuts against a broad scholarly consensus about the nature of evangelical agency (distilled for Modern by Noll's *America's God*) as well as against important elements of the republican *self*-understanding of Modern's evangelical subjects.[2] Modern does not want to talk about the agency of circuit riders but the mystic, emergent effects of the circuits they ride. He argues that secularism—a ghostly atmosphere that (brace yourselves, historians!) "did not *exist* . . . at the level of empirical reality"—both *constitutes* the background and

[1]Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*, 76.

[2]I agree with Dana Logan's observation that, while Mark Noll's *America's God* certainly puts more emphasis on evangelical agency than John Modern wants to, Noll's narrative is highly attuned to the unintended consequences of the actions of his evangelical agents. For Noll, all evangelical agency in the antebellum period is fundamentally conditioned by the way that "the spheres of secular and religious discourse were connected," and that as such, "the key moves in the creation of evangelical America were also the key moves that created secular America" (*America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* [New York: Oxford University, 2002], 439, 443). Thus, Noll's evangelical "surge" is always already a Pyrrhic victory, ambivalent and tragic. For more on this point, see the comments about the contrast between Noll and Modern's treatments of historical agency in the other essays in this Forum.

*Caleb J. D. Maskell is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Religion at Princeton University.*

*determines* the possible outcomes of antebellum evangelical discursive practice.[3] Whereas Noll famously argues that the evangelical surge between in the first half of the nineteenth century was a result of a "synthesis" of common-sense epistemology, republican political virtue, and evangelical piety, deliberately constructed for the sake of missionizing the nation, Modern gives credit to the invisible influence of secularism.[4]

As Modern narrates it, the atmosphere of secularism shaped antebellum evangelical consciousness in two major ways: first, with a demand for a persistent sense that the religious self that was oriented around commonsense epistemology and republican political identity—i.e., the "*American real*"—and, second, with a related demand for mediating technologies to underwrite that sensory account, to urge the account of reality upon its subjects. The first demand clearly has crucial affinity with Noll's synthesis, but the second, concerning mediating technologies, is one that Modern says Noll ignores altogether, assigning agency to individual evangelical actors alone.[5] Modern calls these technologies of "non-mediating mediation," designed to allow individuals to feel a sense of patriotic, free religious choice—each one individually straining toward a collective divine desire for national millennial perfection.[6]

The systematizing efforts of evangelical media networks like the American Tract Society (ATS), manifested in everything from fully mechanized stereotype presses to fastidiously inoffensive colporteurs, were, Modern tells us, deeply attuned to this resonant secular desire for the sense of "non-mediated mediation." As such, these systems were "baptized in the spirit [if not] the name of secularism."[7] The networked presses themselves, said ATS Secretary R. S. Cook, "preached Flavel's sermons [more times] in a week than he did in a lifetime—dreaming Bunyan's dream over a thousand times a day."[8] Effecting "unmediated mediation," the evangelistic networks enabled by the endless mechanical dreams of steam-powered presses made no decisive demands of those who consumed their media. They settled instead for the passive, soul-shaping effects of invisible ubiquity.

There can be no denying the critical importance of understanding these evangelical media networks as spiritual technologies, enspirited machines that complicate and challenge some of the prior historiography of evangelical agency. But *how* should their significance be understood? Advocates of the ATS commonly narrated their work by analogy to the biblical account of Pentecost, the electrifying supervenience of the Holy

[3]Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*, 55.
[4]Noll, *America's God*, 9.
[5]Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*, 73–74.
[6]Ibid., 60, 61, 64, 84.
[7]Ibid., 54.
[8]Ibid.

Spirit upon the gathered followers of Jesus Christ that gave them the power they needed to fulfill an otherwise impossible mission. Reports of ATS Anniversary meetings often portray its votaries as being gathered "with one accord, in one place," "full of the Holy Spirit," with tears "in the presence of the Holy Spirit" and so on.[9] In step with the metaphor, the presses which they designed and operated were regularly described as "the modern gift of tongues."[10] ATS agents themselves imagined the presses as vehicles of divine efficacy, mechanized extensions of the tongues of their millennial body politic, and when empowered by the Holy Spirit, would accomplish evangelistic wonders that were literally beyond the collective cognitive capacity and linguistic skill of their administrators.

Herein lies my first question. Considering these antebellum evangelical phenomena historically, is it *necessary* that we should see this imaginative self-understanding of a continuum of participation between divine/human/machine as being undermined—or radically ironized—by the presence of the mechanical network? Or is it possible that it is precisely in the context of these networks that the presence of what Modern calls secularism and Noll calls evangelical agency are *bound together* in a kind of mutual reinforcement? The mysterious combinatory effects of the machines seem to be *precisely* what were intended by the evangelicals who constructed them. Representatives of the ATS were quite attuned to the fact of mediation, the "modern gift of tongues." They just believed that God was involved in their act of thoroughly mediated agency. Can historiographical tension be held between this rather complex nineteenth-century understanding of human/divine agency *and* the effects of an atmosphere of secularism? Or are these perspectives incommensurable?

My second question, on a rather different note, is about the place of race in these accounts of evangelicalism. Neither Noll's book nor Modern's chapter feature many non-white evangelicals. The relative absence of African Americans is particularly interesting, given that both of these books are periodized in relation to the Civil War. Behind both narratives, racial conflict looms. Rather than making the obvious (though not necessarily unwarranted) point that this may indicate some historiographical absence or theoretical lacuna, it is more interesting to consider the possibility that whiteness may have been an essential condition of the forms of antebellum consensus that both Modern and Noll describe.

[9]For example, American Tract Society, *Eighth Annual Report of the American Tract Society* (New York: D. Fanshaw, 1833), 8; American Tract Society, *Seventh Annual Report of the American Tract Society* (New York: D. Fanshaw, 1832), 6.

[10]*Twelfth Annual Report of the American Tract Society* (New York: D. Fanshaw, 1837), 47; American Tract Society, *Ninth Annual Report of the American Tract Society* (New York, by D. Fanshaw., 1834), 41; American Tract Society, *ATS Seventh Annual Report*, 6.

Noll writes powerfully in the final section of *America's God* about the way that his white public theological protagonists met an antagonist of their own making in the 1860s, when they tried to deploy the American synthesis to face the profound theological questions raised by slavery.[11] Over three decades, their synthesis had so thoroughly colonized national imagination that "secular" (Noll's term) American culture had absorbed and normalized the political logics of evangelicalism, rendering them an ideological underpinning for all of its public practices, *including* slavery. Thus, as the racist theological anthropology of slave economics became increasingly intolerable to enough Americans that war loomed, the public arbiters of Noll's synthesis had nothing meaningful or prophetic to say about it. They could only reaffirm "plain-sense" hermeneutics and the right to private religious judgment, which Noll calls, in a damning wrap-up, a "thin, simple, view of God's providence and a morally juvenile view of the nation and its fate."[12] At the conclusion of *America's God*, the American evangelical synthesizers have produced the American secular, and the practices of that *secular* have become their tragic antagonists.

But this secularizing effect that Noll finds stalling evangelical theological speech in 1860 had been present in the heart of antebellum evangelicalism for decades. It was not an effect of the coming war. Rather it was a *condition* of Noll's consensus, consubstantial with Modern's secularism. Consider, for example, the dynamics that emerged during New York's Anniversary Week in 1834, when the American Anti-Slavery Society unsuccessfully attempted to, as Charles Foster put it, "displace the American Colonization Society as the Evangelical answer to the race problem."[13] Since the mid-1820s, Anniversary Week in New York had been an annual convention during which many of the most influential evangelical benevolent organizations, including the ATS, came together to conduct their business meetings and to celebrate their existence. The whole event was a *tableau vivant* of evangelical ambition, a performance of unity and purpose foreshadowing millennial days to come. The 1834 convention was, according to Noll, the "high point of the visible demonstration of [formalist] evangelical social construction".[14]

During that week of evangelical celebration and self-representation, the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS) held its first official New York meetings, involving hundreds of white abolitionists and numerous African Americans. The meetings were a transparent attempt to align abolitionism with other major organizations of national evangelical mass culture, and in

[11]Noll, *America's God*, 365–445.
[12]Ibid., 434.
[13]Charles I. Foster, *An Errand Of Mercy: The Evangelical United Front, 1790–1837* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1960), 150–151.
[14]Noll, *America's God*, 198.

the process expose the latent racism of the American Colonization Society, which was also hosting an anniversary celebration that week. Speaker after speaker from the AASS attacked "the Colonization incubus" over the course of three separate meetings, all widely reported in the press. Demanding immediate repentance for evangelical equivocation about the sin of slavery, it became very clear that with the emergence of the AASS, the structure and purpose of evangelical consensus was being deeply challenged.[15] "How is this enslaved and languid church, defiled as she is with guilt . . . how is she to go forth to millennial triumph?" thundered Rev. S.S. Jocelyn of New Haven in a representative declamation against the devotees of evangelical benevolence. "We may boast of our benevolent institutions and of our revivals in vain, in vain till we are washed of this blood," he inveighed, "We are holding back the latter-day glory."[16]

While this is not the place to fully describe the scene that followed that year, suffice it to say that the Anti-Slavery lobby were not warmly received by their evangelical brethren. But, rather than outright attack the arguments made by the representatives of the AASS, the leaders of the nation's largest evangelical media organizations chose to simply mute their challenge. When Arthur Tappan, one of the leading supporters of the AASS, offered the Annual Meeting of the American Bible Society a large sum designated for the publication and distribution of Bibles among slaves in the South, they refused the money and failed to renew his membership on their Executive Committee.[17] In the Annual Meeting of the American Tract Society, while discussing a vote to approve tract distribution in the South, the speaker tiptoed around questions of tension over "a certain delicate subject" – expressing desire above all things to see "continued cooperation" and "blessed union preserved."[18] Even thirty years before the war, slavery had already become the elephant in the room, but in the name of the integrity of evangelical unity it passed unmentioned.

In light of these dynamics, my second question for both Noll and Modern can be framed simply: To what extent is whiteness a constitutive part of the "American synthesis"? Of the "evangelical secular"? Historiographically, would the increased presence of black evangelical bodies in these narratives, free or enslaved, cause the conceptual frameworks of "American synthesis" and "evangelical secularism" to fail?

[15]*First Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society* (New York: Dorr and Butterfield, 1834), 12; "The Anti-Slavery Society," *Commercial Advertiser*, May 10, 1834; "Anti-Slavery and Colonization," *Boston Recorder*, May 24, 1834.

[16]*First Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society*, 19.

[17]Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Lewis Tappan and the Evangelical War Against Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Lousiana State University, 1997), 115.

[18]"American Tract Society," *New York Evangelist*, May 10, 1834.