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Republicanism: Religious Studies and Church History meet Political History

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Republicanism, both of these authors teach us, by the mid-nineteenth century became indistinguishable from the aims of religion in the United States. A broad array of protestants agreed that the aims of religion cohered with the political principle of republicanism—or the principle that men could only achieve freedom through self-rule. Noll usefully shows that this concept of republicanism underwent a series of changes from the late eighteenth century to the mid-nineteenth. Beginning in the late eighteenth century republicanism referenced liberty from tyranny, man as citizen, and virtue as a kind of constraint on individual interests. Noll, however, argues that two versions of republicanism competed in this earlier period: communitarian republicanism, based in "the reciprocity of personal morality and social-well being," and liberal republicanism, which valued the independence of the individual.[1] Noll and Modern argue that by the mid-nineteenth century, the liberal version won out. Citizens imagined their freedom to be enabled by a market-based society more than by a community of virtue. For political historians these definitions are not new or controversial, but for historians of American religious history republicanism is an unlikely category of analysis because we see it as "political theory" rather than theology.[2] But as both Noll and Modern argue, republicanism became the very substance of theology in the United States.

So what happens when scholars of American religion engage the concept of republicanism? It turns out we have quite a bit to contribute to the study of republicanism—because religion (if you are Modern) or religious people (if you are Noll) made an important innovation in republicanism by mixing it with "common sense" philosophy in an evangelical register. This synthesis feels elusive because it is so natural to American sensibilities, but the gist is: *how* we know secures our ability to be free. By knowing in an unmediated way, one can become a virtuous person and then one can secure a good unmediated government. Evangelicals played the critical role in promoting this synthesis because they performed this relationship in the process of

[1]Noll, *America's God,* 57.

[2]Noll's own appendix on republicanism is an excellent place to start for this historiography: ibid., 447–451; also see Andy Doolen, "Rehistoricizing the Power of Republicanism," *American Literary History* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 120–140; and Daniel T. Rodgers, "Republicanism: The Career of a Concept," *The Journal of American History* 79, no. 1 (June 1992): 11–38.

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knowing God without mediation and having that model of knowing result in a kind of self-rule.[3] Evangelicals, as Modern demonstrates so well, developed a whole aesthetic of unmediated mediation that pervaded American life.

I read Modern's book as an elaboration of what the world looks like when evangelicals have successfully intertwined a theory of freedom and a theory of knowing: distance is radically eliminated between personal actions and their political ramifications, one sees systems everywhere, one can move around in those systems tracking back and forth between all kinds of categories using strategies like counting.[4] And most importantly, the very act of knowing and moving around in these systems confirms one's virtue as a citizen. Modern reveals that the synthesis of common sense and republicanism is a *closed* system, and one has to be already in it in order to see the beauty of freedom emerging from unmediated reasoning, just as unmediated reasoning comes from freedom.[5] In an endless loop of knowing and freedom the synthesis confirms itself. This reciprocity between knowing you are free and becoming free explains why both of these books are mostly about white elites. Modern and Noll show how white elite people make religious-political epistemologies that affirm their own power.

Noll, however, has a different image of the effects of this ideological synthesis because he has a story of how the synthesis came to be in the first place. In *America's God* we get an origin story: American protestantism and republicanism became linked in King George's War with France in 1760, unified through anti-Catholicism, and then redeployed against the British in the revolution.[6] For all the distinctions that could be drawn between Noll's focus on agents and Modern's on agentless historical forces, I think that this origin story presupposes a very strong historical force that did not have that much to do with agents choosing or not choosing. But as the story progresses these major "social" forces fade away, and the link between protestantism and republicanism persists.[7]

In Modern's book, the link between protestantism and republicanism cannot be disentangled; rather, protestantism and republicanism form a natural alliance. There is no moment of conversion because they exist in Modern's snapshot of mid-century America as always already reliant on one another. If Modern's book had a prequel, say 1760–1840, I think he would describe protestantism and republicanism emerging not in tandem and meeting up at certain points, but as the same ideology, espoused by a broad array of powerful white protestant people.

[3]Noll, *America's God*, 215; Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America,* 51.
[4]Modern, *Secularism*, 91, 109, 167, 184, 235.
[5]Ibid., 114.
[6]Noll, *America's God*, 81.
[7]Ibid., 214.

The conflict here is between Noll's description of ideological affiliation changing over time and Modern's description of an atmospheric ideology, which necessarily covers more spatial than temporal territory. But Noll rejects this kind of atmospheric description of the synthesis because he wants to attend to the ironic difference between the colonial and antebellum moods. In a move that borrows more from Foucault than he might admit, what feels natural now was not always so.[8] It is interesting to think about whether Modern would see any kind of ironic differentiation between the before and after of the synthesis. Modern's mid-century focus thus makes these two books difficult to reconcile because Modern describes a post-communitarian republicanism, in which the more liberal version of republicanism had already won out. In *America's God* we are studying the conflict on the way to consensus and in *Secularism* we are studying the elision of conflict.

Noll wants to keep both republicanism and protestantism as moving targets that both undergo changes even as they become linked. But he argues that there is one major stabilizing moment in the history of the two categories when evangelicalism solved the problem of communitarian republicanisms' tension with liberal republicanism. Evangelicals, Noll argues, modeled a synthesis of liberal and communitarian republicanism in their own evangelical community. In evangelicalism a community that maintains a standard of virtue and mutual responsibility grounds the evangelical individual, un-mediated and un-dominated by church authority. The liberal individual thus came into a collaborative tension with a communitarian set of limits and created a workable republican framework for American society.[9]

The problem with Noll's argument is that it ignores a body of historical research on the contested meaning of republicanism in social history. Historians like Sean Wilentz and Paul Gilje have shown how different groups—often in attempts to claim a space for the working class—used the mantel of republicanism and the revolution in order to legitimate mobs or more direct access to democratic power.[10] Sometimes, as in the case of Tammany, middle-class and elite men

[8]See Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

[9]Noll, *America's God*, 215.

[10]See Paul A. Gilje, *The Road to Mobocracy: Popular Disorder in New York City, 1763–1834* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1987); Paul A. Gilje and Howard B. Rock, *Keepers of the Revolution: New Yorkers at Work in the Early Republic* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University, 1992). Gilje and Howard Rock show how the working classes understood republicanism as the basis for strikes and mobs. Sean Wilentz also famously argued that artisans felt a special claim to republicanism that manifested in the first American labor movement. See Sean Wilentz, *Chants Democratic: New York City & the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788–1850* (New York: Oxford University, 1984).

played with the idea of republicanism as a kind of savage nativism.[11] And many of these groups claimed this version of republicanism far into the nineteenth century making republicanism a never fully stable signifier, constantly contested and claimed for different purposes. Republicanism could mean acting like a Southern gentlemen or it could mean participating in the Working men's parties of the Jacksonian period.[12] Republicanism, in short, inspired very different American classes and groups—a variety of significations that Noll's intellectual history leaves unattended.

In Modern's book there is also an insinuation that when people said "self-rule" and "good government" they knew what they meant and other people knew what they meant. And I am not just asking whether Spiritualists were Democrats or Whigs when they espoused republicanism. Rather, I am asking what vision of democracy Spiritualists actually saw when they communed with ghosts?[13] Did it involve a strong federal state or mobs? Who should provide economic relief during a recession and who exactly should vote? When we open up the history of American religion to political theory, as both these books effectively force us to do, we have to ask questions about the specific political theories and practices of our religious subjects.

I want to pose these questions to Professor Modern and Professor Noll: when is republicanism a political structure or an epistemic first principle in American religious history? And does the dominant theology of the early nineteenth century interact with republicanism differently when republicanism is in the background or the foreground? By which I mean, when can we merely assume republicanism's presence rather than reckon with its direct force or influence in the shape of religion?

[11]See Philip Joseph Deloria, *Playing Indian* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University, 1998), 63.

[12]Rodgers explains that this consensus (that republicanism extended all the way into the Jacksonian period) emerged in the 1985 issue of *American Quarterly*. After labor historians, historians of women, and southern historians also claimed the term. Rodgers, "Republicanism," 30.

[13]Modern, *Secularism*, 17–18.