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FORUM:
Forum on Antebellum American Protestantism

At the 2015 Winter Meeting of the American Society of Church History, the panel "Futures of the American Religious Past" examined two of the most provocative and influential recent analyses of antebellum American protestantism—Mark A. Noll's America's God *and John Lardas Modern's* Secularism in Antebellum America.[1] *In one sense, the pairing is odd. The two books appear drastically different, stylistically and methodologically. Modern's highly original monograph constructs a genealogy of antebellum American secularism, illuminating ways in which this cultural force haunted the historicity of American protestantism. His analysis interweaves the theoretical and discursive approaches of cultural studies and religious studies. Noll's book, on the other hand, constructs a more traditional, though deeply creative, history of protestant religious ideas, attentive to the agency of individual thinkers and institutions. Both books are brilliant, yet they exist at two opposite disciplinary poles in the study of American religions. Their juxtaposition embodies what Laurie Maffly-Kipp in her 2013 American Society of Church History Presidential Address called our "transitional moment" in American religious history, as theoretical developments of religious studies confront traditional church history paradigms.*

For all this talk of difference, however, the four panelists of "Futures of the American Religious Past" articulated and interrogated several points of fundamental convergence. Modern and Noll both argue that theology cannot be held apart from cultural and political forces, and that the dominant antebellum protestant theology was an amalgam of common sense epistemology, republicanism, and evangelical self-consciousness. The two scholars insist on the permeation of this theology in all realms of antebellum life. They subsume the flowering of denominations within the pervasive protestant synthesis. Even stylistically, the two are not as far apart as they seem at first blush. A melancholy tone inflects both assessments of the protestant synthesis and its comfortable inhabitation of nineteenth-century

[1]This discussion began in an informal seminar in New York City in 2013 that brought together young scholars of American religions. The forum authors want to recognize the intellectual labor of Elizabeth Dolfi, M. Cooper Harriss, Andrew Jungclaus, and Tyler Zoanni in this conversation.

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capitalism, politics, and subjectivity. By reading these authors together, this panel argued, we gain insight into the startlingly normative dimensions of phenomena as powerful as "America's God" or America's secularism.

Nevertheless, the differences between their arguments must also be addressed. As valuable as the panelists found it to put these books in conversation, they recognized that some of the differences prove incommensurable. Still, this forum demonstrates that instead of merely picking sides between "church history" and "religious studies," scholars of American religions can identify shared inquiries even as they respond to those inquiries with different methodologies informed by diverse intellectual genealogies. After articulating common questions, American religious historians can—and should—consider the stakes of our divergences in generative ways.

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