Response to Benjamin Lynerd

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In his review of my book, Benjamin Lynerd rightly points out that 20th-century evangelicals wasted little time in turning against the very constitutional changes that (I argue) 19th-century evangelicals helped bring about. Lynerd also notes that the resulting irony can be explained, in part, by the fact that the "evangelical" label had by the 1940s "migrated" from (typically progressive) Northern mainline Protestants to a group of politically and theologically conservative believers, many of whom were deeply suspicious of the federal government, and of the newly created welfare state in particular.

But what explains this realignment of theology and politics? Lynerd suggests that 20th-century evangelicals' premillennial eschatology may have something to do with their distaste for economic regulation and redistribution. And, at first glance, this seems like a plausible explanation: if human effort plays no part in ushering in the Millennium, then why would believers bother to reform their (damned) earthly societies?

And yet, on second thought, I wonder whether the political implications of eschatology are really so significant. Premillennial believers are, after all, deeply concerned with the salvation of individual souls. And so long as it is acknowledged that souls are shaped at least in part by their worldly environments, it follows that evangelicals of the premillennial persuasion can never be completely indifferent to conditions here on Earth. One need only consult the "Home Protection" agenda of the 19th-century WCTU — a decidedly *post*millennial organization — to see that incompatible eschatologies can sometimes point in the same general direction with respect to policy. The WCTU waged war against a range of "satanic" influences, including obscenity and drink, believing that their efforts would cultivate Godly families, save souls, *and* prepare the way for Christ's return. Clearly, modern-day evangelicals have severed the link between earthly reform and the Second Coming. But they have hardly abandoned the goal of protecting the family unit from the corrupting influence of mainstream music, films, and television —

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all of which are understood to undermine the traditional moral values that provide the surest path to individual salvation.

If I am right that modern-day, conservative evangelicals and their progressive forebears are linked by a deep concern for the moral health of the family unit, then we are led, yet again, to a pair of more fundamental questions. First, how did evangelicals come to view the comparatively weak American state, not as a tool to be enlisted in the service of cultivating strong families (and souls), but as a diabolical force to be opposed at all costs? And, second, how did evangelicals lose sight of the market's often destructive impact on families (and souls)?

Lynerd is rightly suspicious of explanations that cast 20th-century evangelicals as dupes of political operatives, or else as knee-jerk reactionaries, fearful of social change in all its manifestations. And yet I remain unconvinced that the politics of today's evangelicals are best understood as the inevitable outgrowth of core theological convictions, viewed through the lens of modern social and economic conditions. The problem, as I have explained above, is that the tenets of the evangelical faith are simply too abstract to connect to concrete policy proposals in any straightforward way. This explains why evangelical responses to industrialization ran the gamut from Christian Socialism to laissez-faire and the Prosperity Gospel.

In the end, if we are to make sense of the evangelical embrace of the market, I think we must shift our gaze from grand principles to the more mundane stuff of historical contingency. The onset of the Cold War, for example, almost certainly helped to push the Social Gospel tradition from the mainstream of evangelical public discourse to the margins. Shortly thereafter, the civil rights movement and the resulting realignment of American politics vaulted white Southern evangelicals — with their longstanding distrust of federal power — into the national spotlight. Finally, as Theda Skocpol has shown, the postwar period witnessed a broader transformation of American civil society, in which the federally structured membership organizations that had long formed the backbone of Protestant social activism gave way to top-down, single-issue interest groups. As a result, millions of Americans were for the first time cut-off from serious, practical engagement with major social problems. Whether this last development should be characterized as a cause or effect of evangelicals' rightward drift is an open question. Either way, it created a vacuum within the evangelical community — one that was quickly filled by the more extreme prophets of market fundamentalism.

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In sum, it may be that the merger of evangelicalism and economic libertarianism is best understood as one facet of a broader, historically contingent conservative turn in American politics. Whether one applauds or condemns the resulting admixture will, of course, depend on one's politics. Viewed at the level of ideas, however, there can be no denying that these developments have reduced a once vibrant intellectual tradition to a shadow of its former self.

Republican Theology: The Civil Religion of American Evangelicals. Benjamin T. Lynerd New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014. 264 pp. $105.00 cloth, $29.95 Paper

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Benjamin Lynerd argues that scholars of political thought have given short shrift to American evangelicals. Indeed, he makes the provocative claim that evangelical political thought — or what he terms evangelical "political theology" — had by the late colonial period emerged as a distinct, "observable tradition within American political thought" (15). What is more, he contends that the modern-day Christian Right — a voting bloc often chided for its anti-intellectualism — is very much in the mainstream of this venerable tradition.

Although I find Lynerd's characterization of the Christian Right unpersuasive (for reasons explained below), *Republican Theology* nonetheless performs a valuable service in highlighting the reciprocal influence of religious and political ideas, particularly in the early years of the republic. The book's early chapters focus on the 18th-century clergy's struggle to reconcile the Calvinist vision of the covenanted polity with the Lockean social contract. From this effort emerged a body of political thought organized around the twin goals of cultivating private virtue and limiting official power. To the modern reader, these goals may seem contradictory. But Lynerd makes a strong case that American evangelicals, while aware of the potential for tension, viewed each commitment as indispensable to the formation of a Godly republic.

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