Church History 84:3 (September 2015), 630–636.
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doi:10.1017/S0009640715000578

Did Someone Say "Evangelical Surge"?

John Lardas Modern

Let me start by thanking Professor Mark Noll, and while the topic of non-human agents is in the air, I would like to declare my thanks to *America's God* for inciting me and inspiring me to narrate my own version of events. Talk about objective conditions! I would also like to thank Sonia Hazard, Dana Logan, Caleb Maskell, and Alex Kaloyanides for their meticulous attention to *America's God* and *Secularism in Antebellum America* and their place within larger debates. There is an incredible rush that happens—excitement mixed with dread—in those moments that you realize that somebody else might know your book better than you do.

Allow me to begin (again) by saying that I agree with Mark Noll when he writes, "If the evangelical surge in the new republic was precipitated by a democratic revolution, religious impulses were also at work to inspire the democratic impulse. Charting a more complex sequence of causes and effects is necessary for understanding the depth of connections among the religious, social, and national trajectories. Such a sequence highlights several 'knots' of causation."[1] Although I prefer swirl over knot as the image that best privileges notions of feedback and resonance over complex causalities, my argument builds upon Professor Noll's—namely, that the "extensive participation by Protestants in the affairs of the new United States precipitated a decisive shift in theological reasoning."[2] I, too, track the synthesis of republicanism and common sense moral reasoning. And I, too, dwell upon the remarkable confidence that resulted and the accompanying visions of human nature, human relationships, and the proper functioning of society. This synthesis, as Noll rightly suggests, "was never monolithic, complete, or even irreversible, but it did take place."[3]

Given its genealogical concern,[4] my argument differs from Noll's in at least three respects—(1) my understanding of public protestantism is more expansive (less invested in liturgical metaphors) than is found in *America's God*; (2) I emphasize the intensification of this "synthesis" across a range of ostensibly religious and secular sites. Rather than pursue an investigation of

[1]Noll, *America's God,* 192.
[2]Ibid., 209.
[3]Ibid., 210.
[4]See Modern, "Confessions of a Genealogist," Religion in American History (blog), November 19, 2012, http://usreligion.blogspot.com/2013/06/modern-summer-of-love-on-secularism-in_17.html.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640715000578 Published online by Cambridge University Press

origins or change over time, I approached this synthesis as a matter of resonance and discovered that it added up to more than a sum of its parts, and finally, (3) I ascribe to a different model of the human subject in history (which is to say my book revolves around moments when the self becomes the self through its exposure *to the* world rather than *through* a process of self-awareness and choice.)

Firstly, my book is not only about evangelicals. Indeed, this is a central point about the synthesis that I make using the analytic of secularism. My book is chock full of folks who were critics or even antagonists of the evangelicals that Noll describes—spiritualists, free-thinkers, Unitarians, mesmerists, and self-proclaimed infidels. Yet they shared something in common. Moreover, I argue that denominational identity or personal belief and/or doctrinal directive are not the primary measures of whatever is religious about nineteenth-century America. So I agree about this pull of the political and perhaps could have developed more of this kind of analysis in my book (see, for example, the diversity of republicanisms articulated within the orbit of séance spiritualism). Having approached an archive without assumptions of strict denominational distinctions, nor any exclusive definition of religion, for that matter, I noticed different registers in which and different lines through which the so-called evangelical surge took effect. So the republicanism in *Secularism* did, indeed, cut toward the epistemological, toward moments of the data-driven life, of statistical imagination, of phrenology charts and accounts of the population, etc. My book marks a naturalization of this kinship between epistemology and politics.

The public protestantism that I documented was incredibly white—the pursuit of normative subjectivity along with normative belief was a project that necessarily operated against an unwieldy, populous, and pluralistic outside. More often than not, the humanity of this outside was not even recognized. (Lingering questions that undergird *Secularism* include: how did such unrecognition take place? How did it sustain itself? Why was its blindness so convincing?). All manner of racial hierarchies were authorized as true religion became conflated with whiteness. As Tracy Fessenden has reminded us, those who argued that blackness, for example, was a refuge from and not a threat to the legacy of protestant individualism still failed, in large part, "to authorize the possibility of legal redress of racial discrimination on any but individual terms."[5]

Although I would argue that whatever pluralism signifies—either then or now—it cannot be fully separated from the secular imaginary of the nineteenth century; more attention to the margins of the benevolent empire

[5]Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 2007), 135.

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would provide much insight as to how bodies experienced the othering agenda of this hegemony. But I wonder how such attention would have changed my diagnosis of the raw power of the synthesis. There is no doubt that common sense reasoning and/or republican desire could fuel projects of liberation—think, for example, of Jarena Lee's appropriation of "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" for her critique of Richard Allen's version of Methodism.[6] Of course, public protestantism was neither a totality nor utterly self-sufficient nor purely absorptive. But it happened and was remarkable in its power and reach. I am struck, for example, by the language ascribed to the elderly Burmese woman's response to Reverend Edward Stevens: "She finally told [him that] her mind is deliberately made up."[7] Of course, we may never know whether the conflation of deliberation with cognition with belief was her own or absorbed by her in the act of critique or projected on her after the fact. My sense, is, however, that whatever critique of Stevens's secularism was going on in this encounter, it was wholly immanent.[8]

This brings me to my second point of difference. If historians focus on change over time, genealogists seek to name continuity—or family resemblances—through comparative analysis of documents pertaining to a common theme. Genealogy is a kind of grey documentation, an effort to disabuse oneself of particular presumptions through examining how presumptions come to be. Genealogy, then, is a mode of analysis that addresses concepts that have become naturalized.[9] Because I was not invested in the naturalness of many taken-for-granted categories, I discovered something shared—beyond the human capacity for freely determined reason—among various groups.

My book is full of moments in which figures experience intensity in relation to media, machines, and regimes of calculability. The excitement, erotic charges, and soft touches that I chronicled—those evidentiary moments *of* secularism—are not pitched as mere dispossession. Rather, they are moments when neither the self nor the world is in charge, when particular ways of knowing and experiencing the world became convincing *beyond belief*.

[6]See *The Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, Giving An Account of Her Call to Preach the Gospel*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia, 1849).

[7]Reverend Edward Stevens, "Maulmain.—Journal of Rev. Mr. Stevens. Tour to Yay—Amherst," *Baptist Missionary Magazine*, November 1849.

[8]On the complexity of dissent/assent in the missionary encounter, see Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*, 99n150, 103–104.

[9]I am reminded here of Cathy Albanese's provocative point in her presidential address to the AAR over two decades ago—the problem with historians, she suggested, and I paraphrase, is that they have not confronted their own mortality in any meaningful fashion—and so they attempt to secure an image of the past as a substitute for securing their identity in the present. See Catherine L. Albanese, "Refusing the Wild Pomegranate Seed: America, Religious History, and the Life of the Academy," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 205–229.

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For I would like to think that my book *is* about mediation. On one hand, mediation is about the institutions of influence, pathways of transference, and the messages contained within. My chapter on evangelical media, for example, traces the series of relays between institution and reader and back again. Here was "a systematicity that included the publishing agenda of the national organization, the distribution of tracts through the network of colportage, colporteurs gathering data and measuring the effects of reading, the auxiliary societies then measuring the results of these measurements, national officials receiving and translating this knowledge into further matters of decidability surrounding what tracts would be produced and when, where to distribute them, how to measure their effects, what to tell colporteurs and why. And so on and so forth."[10]

But there is another layer to mediation, something that Durkheim taught me about the fact that mediation is not a wholly material process. For me (and Emile) language is key—words and their categorical force connect humans with other humans and the natural world. To be clear, I am not invested in Durkheim's argument that secular forms and representations are the functional equivalent of religious ones. I am, however, indebted to his insight that whatever modernity is, it is marked by a reluctance to think about the social vitality of language.[11] What constitutes effervescence within an increasingly mediated and differentiated society at mid-century? Does effervescence mutate when both the imaginations and the representations of society are generated in and through circulation rather than the visceral responses to the body of the other? What, in other words, happens when signs themselves become the primary vehicle by which effervescence is achieved?

Rather than suggest any singular cause for these effervescent moments, I looked for patterns in how they were reported and how these reports suggested that words, themselves, were biological—in the imagination of readers, but also in colporteur persuasions, séances, phrenology exams, corporeal punishments, new motive relations, and spirit communiqués imprinted on root vegetables. Rather than suggest any singular cause for these strangely effervescent moments, I considered how new deployments of systematicity affected the individuals in whose name systematicity was imagined and advanced.

[10]Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America*, 104.

[11]On the viscerality of words, see Karen Fields's brilliant and lush translation of Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Karen Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995); on the virality of words, see William S. Burroughs, "By Far The Most Efficient and Precise Language We Possess is the Common Cold," The Burroughs Academy Bulletin 6, *Mayfair* 3, no. 3 (March 1968): 54–56.

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This ties into the third point of difference that I would like to highlight—the question of human agency and how to represent it. There is agency in the traditional sense in my book—real people doing real things: the power of print, for example, is always bound to particular purposes, labors, structures, projects, etc. *and poised against* other structures, labors, projects, etc.

To claim that agency is not an either/or proposition is a rather easy thing to do (I just did) but it is a rather difficult thing to depict at the level of narrative—particularly in light of the storied pressures that we now experience. How to resist the telos of progress, of the categorical momentum of belief as a matter of cognitive choice (often imperfect but ever hard-won)? I am reminded here of anthropologist Mary Douglas who in 1982 wrote,

> The strangest conceit of all is that modernization has endowed us with greater freedom of choice than our parents . . . [for] if the choices we have are mostly of the bazaar kind, small, similar items purveyed at similar prices—like the choice between numerous highly standardized programs on cable television—the case for our enjoying increased options is not made. Quite the contrary, it has to be reconciled with a daily lament against the dull uniformity of our lives—the same menus, the same clothes, the same sports, and the same homes. Where is free choice? Our Viking ancestors had much more of it, free to spend a few years in Greenland, nip back to Scandinavia to help a political ally, or join a raid on Britain.[12]

With the help of others (admittedly outside the purview of church history traditionally understood but nonetheless speaking to fundamental issues of scholarly approach) I seek to displace the centrality of this conceit, this chipper view of the human within the precincts of American religious history. It is my contention that whatever things we choose, intentions we have, beliefs we possess, demands we make—they are not and can never be solely our own. On first blush, this may be a rather banal point, a truth known to science studies and school children in equal measure. But what happens when one begins to write—in words on the screen and often later on the page—agency as a distributive phenomenon?

This is what lies behind the last few pages of my book, the lovingly-held telescopes and the inquiry into what constitutes freedom of choice—both then and now. I end with an image of John Murray Spear fucking a machine—the "new motive power"—a situation that, for better or for worse, sums up what I take to be a central predicament of modernity.[13] On one hand, it was Spear

[12]Mary Douglas, "The Effects of Modernization on Religious Change," *Daedalus* 111, no. 3 (Winter 1982): 1–19.

[13]John Murray Spear, *The Educator: Being Suggestions, Theoretical and Practical, Designed to Promote Man-Culture and Integral Reform with a View to the Ultimate Establishment of a Divine Social State on Earth*, ed. A. E. Newton (Boston: Office of Practical Spiritualists, 1857).

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who initiated contact with the spirit of Benjamin Franklin, who transcribed the assembly instructions, who built the machine, who suffused it with story, who ritually prepared himself and his community for the inauguration of perpetual motion. On the other hand, the machine, in its promise to perpetuate motion becomes an agent in its own right, a partner in a ménage-à-trois with human and spirit world. The human, with all of its pomp and circumstance, comes face-to-face with the impossibility of its own sovereignty.[14]

Now this is a contradiction of immense proportions and one that I chose not to resolve because I do not believe it can be resolved. This is my evangelical conviction.[15]

When John Murray Spear fucks the new motive power, his is not a mere act of submission. Nor is his an act *already* mediated through and through by a culture that is determinative. There is, however, a before that is present. And there is an erotics involved, a will to domination to be sure, but also the vicissitudes of machine love and the fact that Spear will go on to fight for marriage equality, free love, abolitionism, women's rights, native American sovereignty, the reform of prisons and asylums—a strange, creative madness out of joint with his time.

In conclusion, the conceptual environment of secularism that I locate in 1851 is not simply a local phenomenon. To be sure, it no longer exists, in the same way that the ATS Headquarters on Nassau Street here in New York City no longer exists, in the same way that Melville is dead and Captain Ahab never existed in the first place. But they are real and they do haunt our dreams and actions.

What I am trying to say, I guess, is that the people and the moments I encountered in the archive were present in a different kind of way.[16] They existed in registers not accounted for by the epistemic or political registers of evangelicalism. "Men make their own history," Marx reminds us, "but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living."[17]

[14]My book begins with a footnote on Derrida's specific understanding of mediation and ends in the blurred space of struggle—representative of a world in which the agentive and cognitive dimensions of technological systems are such that whatever creativity that we express, whatever techniques of self-production that we initiate, those processes are intimately bound to the unknowability of those systems that surround.

[15]See Modern, "My Evangelical Conviction," *Religion* 42, no. 3 (July 2102): 439–457.

[16]On the archive as a contingent site of vast mediation, listen to Hayden White's "Foucault Historian?," (lecture, University of California, Santa Cruz, March 2008), http://humweb.ucsc.edu/foucaultacrossthedisciplines/10_White.mp3.

[17]Karl Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Rockville, Md.: Wildside Press, 2008), 15.

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I am neither an evangelical nor, on most days, a historian of evangelicalism. But I do have nightmares of this Marxian variety. So in my analysis of evangelical media, I restrained myself from using religion or the religious as *sui generis* analytical terms. I restrained myself for the precise reason that I was interested in how people in the past convinced themselves that they were, in fact, religious. Now I am aware that one could pursue this reflexive mode of genealogy with a range of terms we have come to believe in, for better or for worse. I make no claim to being immune from a relentless interrogation of the categories that I, myself, assume. And, indeed, I welcome such critical interventions.

I end with my question to Professor Mark Noll—if my chapter on "Evangelical Secularism" claims to have historicized your narrative, to have gotten underneath the power of your story by situating it in relationship to the very surge you so deftly chronicle, I am intensely curious as to how you would historicize mine. What am I protecting? Why is my book so obsessed with Melville? What to make of its thematics of haunting and enchantment? What kind of metaphysics do you see my work affirming? Where would *you* situate *my* work—its content, form, and/or effect—in the history of American religions?

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