

**“REPUBLICAN THEOLOGY:  
THE CIVIL RELIGION OF AMERICAN EVANGELICALS”****Oxford University Press, 2014.**  
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In *Republican Theology: The Civil Religion of American Evangelicals*, Benjamin Lynerd employs history, theology, and political theory in order to understand the seemingly contradictory demands for both Lockean limited government as well as a state that actively promotes virtue through law. Tracing the developments of this tradition from the early years of the Protestant Reformation and through the American Revolution, Lynerd advances the concept of republican theology, a civil religion with roots in Calvinism, social contract theory, and the “city on a hill” notion that America will redeem the world through its national virtue. By the late eighteenth century, these principles had coalesced into a form that has been present in American political thought in some capacity since the Founding. In the first three chapters, Lynerd delves into the internal logic of republican theology by explaining how these ostensibly contradictory principles cohere when stitched together. As a civil religion, republican theology presents a paradigm for how to reconcile the necessity of limited government to protect liberty and individual conscience, the role of the state in cultivating and promoting private virtue by acting on matters of public virtue, and the eschatological possibility that the world might be redeemed through such a republic. By subjecting the first two principles to a higher purpose, republican theology posits that true liberty and virtue are dialectical and through faith they can be reconciled together in a pattern where public and private virtue restrain license while liberty promotes virtue when one’s actions are performed in service to God.

After establishing the framework for what constitutes this particular brand of civil religion, Lynerd looks back to the Protestant Reformation to explain how Calvinistic covenant theology was translated into republican theology’s emphasis on contract theology and social contract political theory. Protestant thinkers such as John Calvin and Martin Luther split from the Catholic Church partially due to the belief that the covenant of promise between an individual and God had been significantly downplayed by the Vatican’s self-serving overemphasis on the covenant of law based on human obedience to God and the Church. The model reformer in this tradition was the

theologian Johannes Althusius who in the early-1600s explained that God's relationship with man took the form of a covenant that established a people's sovereignty and their ability to self-govern as a *means* to serving God. Pushing back against the congregation-centric form of covenant theology that developed around this thought, social contract theorists such as John Locke and Thomas Hobbes downgraded the importance of the autonomous congregation in order to promote a more society-oriented style of self-governance. In this vein, Hobbes stressed that God communicates to man through the state and Locke highlighted God's gift of reason that could lead human beings to self-govern according to divine will without the need of revelation. In addition to these modifications, Calvinists grafted the nascent Scottish Enlightenment concept of "moral sense" onto the Lockean minimalist state as a means of underlining the divine-oriented task of government to promote public virtue.

Upon establishing the foundations of republican theology, Lynerd then shifts to the American context to locate the practice and development of these principles especially in the First and Second Great Awakenings. Regarding the first of these two movements, the famed preacher John Witherspoon and his lesser-known student Benjamin Rush exemplify the adoption of the social contract and republican virtue bases for this new religiously-informed political style. Witherspoon, a once ardent critic of the Scottish Enlightenment, was instrumental in transforming Locke and the Scottish thinkers' philosophies by emphasizing public virtue as tool by which government might cultivate the private virtue of the individual, which he saw as the proper focus of civil religion. Rush expanded on this idea by encouraging morality laws as a means by which private virtue and education of the soul might be nurtured by the state. By the 1810s, the Second Great Awakening had begun and these principles of republican theology were at their apex. Fearing that society had backslid into the sins of hard drinking, Sabbath breaking, and chattel slavery, these reformers sought to reform their country through morality policies such as temperance laws and the abolition of slavery. In an example of the persistence of this distinctive mode of thinking, Lynerd draws a striking parallel here between those who eventually saw the Civil War as punishment for these national sins and contemporary evangelicals such as Jerry Falwell's and Pat Robertson's indictments of American immorality as the cause of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

Whereas the antebellum development and practice of republican theology provide some of the strongest evidence for Lynerd's thesis, evangelicals' responses to industrialization, Darwinism, and the Progressive Era more generally pose the most significant challenge to the assertion of one enduring evangelical civil religion throughout American history. This period was one of grand diversity in evangelical thought—and political thought more generally—ranging from those who adhered to William Graham Sumner's libertarian Darwinist

position on social and welfare reforms as antithetical to limited government and divine order to Walter Rauschenbusch's Social Gospel message, which was a novel blend of Christianity and socialism. During this point in time, it appears that there existed a multitude of republican theologies, each using elements of the republican theological tradition to make the case for how the principles of liberty and virtue ought to be interpreted and applied in a rapidly changing social-historical context. Only in the fervor of mainstream anti-communist sentiments post-World War II and the accompanying rise of evangelical coalitions such as the National Association of Evangelicals to combat more left-leaning ones such as the Federal Council of Churches do we see the emergence of the contemporary conservative form of republican theology that appears to have revived its earlier antebellum form. Lynerd does an excellent job at detailing the mechanics of this dialectical relationship between these conservative evangelicals and the Republican Party and how this "1980s-style republican theology" has arisen from the successes of the New Right and has retained a broad and powerful constituency into the current moment.

While this book is an excellent addition to the literature on American religious political thought and the development of the Religious Right, Lynerd overextends his argument in challenging Corey Robin's (2011) claim in *The Reactionary Mind: Conservatism from Edmund Burke to Sarah Palin* that conservatism is defined by "the felt experience of having power" and losing it as well as the articulation of a counterrevolutionary imperative that entails not so much as a desire to return to the past but to radically refashion the world according to reactionary principles (p. 4-5). If we can understand the Progressive Era as a moment of splintering and fracture among evangelicals and their political thought, then the conservative shape that evangelical republican theology took post-World War II can be understood as a counterrevolutionary reaction to the New Deal and the threat of communism that drew from an older tradition of republican theology in order to recreate society in a fundamentally new form.

This feeling of lost social power then can be seen vividly in the New Right's contemporary politics that has resulted in such radical transformations of federal government such as charitable choice policies by which the neoliberal logic of transferring public functions to the private sector has taken a distinctively republican theological form. This is not to say that republican theology is inherently conservative; it is feasible that under different historical conditions, the more progressive forms of this civil religion might have eclipsed the conservative versions; however, by reading Lynerd's argument about the enduring tradition of republican theology in light of its current attachment and co-development with the fundamentally conservative New Right, it is clear to see that Robin's (2011) theory aids rather than opposes Lynerd's project in explaining the contemporary form of republican theology. Still, Lynerd appears

correct in his assertion and his evidence that republican theology as an evangelical civil religion is a tradition with deep roots and one which will most likely remain influential in some capacity in America for the foreseeable future. Read in this light, *Republican Theology* ought to aid scholars of diverse disciplines immensely in incorporating Lynerd's fascinating study of these centuries-old principles into their own works on conservatism, American evangelicalism, and the history of political thought.

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