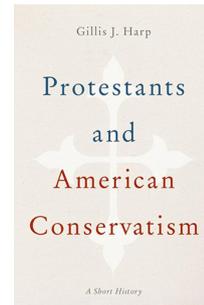


## Book Review

Giles J. Harp.  
*Protestants and American Conservatism: A Short History*  
New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019.

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There is no doubt that there is a close association between Evangelicals and political Conservatism in contemporary America. Given the depth and public nature of this alliance, scholars have attempted to trace its roots, primarily to the Religious Right in the 1980's or slightly further back into the post-war evangelical resurgence. Rather than starting with recent history, Gillis J. Harp's book traces this relationship between Protestantism and Conservatism from colonial times to the present. Through this survey he demonstrates how both groups have been modified by their relationship and, despite a theology which emphasized an organic conception of society and an emphasis on duties rather than rights, Protestants since the early twentieth century have shirked the hard work of political theology, instead opting for an uncritical acceptance of modern libertarian principles.

Before delving into the history between the two groups, Harp offers the central questions his work is attempting to address. The first is how Protestantism has shaped conservative thought, secondly what elements of both ideologies have encouraged their alliance, and finally how both have been changed over time by their interactions, focusing particularly on manner

in which conservatism became unmoored from explicitly Christian presuppositions and reasoning (3). After explaining the aims of his work, Harp goes in to define terms.

In speaking of Protestantism, Harp limits his definition to White Evangelicalism as defined by Bebbington's quadrilateral of conversionism, crucicentrism, biblicism, and activism (4). What becomes somewhat problematic with this stated focus on evangelicals is that a number of the figures and movements which Harp refers to are not entirely evangelical. The Anglican Loyalists in chapter 2 do not fit the evangelical definition set forth and figures such as John Adams do not fit the definition of Christian orthodoxy. While not a major issue with the book, as the focus tends to be on Evangelicals, nonetheless some readers may find themselves confused as to what some groups or individuals actually believed.

As for conservatism, Harp acknowledges the nebulous nature of the term 'conservatism' and seeks to anchor it in several impulse and ideas derived from the work of historian Jerry Z. Mueller. These impulses/ideas include, a view of human nature as imperfect, a rejection of social contract theory, protection of established institutions, social utility of religion, importance of family and cultural norms, and suspicion of economic trends which may harm traditional values (6). Having established these parameters, Harp moves onto the task at hand of chronicling these two movements' relationship.

The first chapter deals primarily with the views of New England Puritans. The Puritans adopted a medieval conception of society in which Church and State were linked and society was naturally stratified. Puritans held that the differing abilities and ranks among people, far from being restrictive or oppressive, was conducive to social unity as each member/block of society was forced to rely upon the others (19). In this arrangement, the state was not simply the guarantor of minimalist protections, but an active agent seeking the common good of the society (20). In this regard, the community had a claim to its individual members to sacrifice and cooperate with one another for the good of the whole, with government existing to facilitate and enforce these standards.

Chapter 2 delves into the conservative reaction to the American Revolution by both Loyalists and Patriots. In general, the Loyalist clergy sought to defend the aforementioned Christian view of society, opposing the Enlightenment liberalism of the revolutionaries, and the disruption of order on solidly theological grounds. Even while disagreeing on the substance of independence, Patriots also embraced an organic notion of society more in line with the Puritans than the Enlightenment. What stands out in this chapter is that those who perhaps were most consistent in their application of theological and biblical ideas to the notion of independence were the Loyalists. If this is the case, one wonders how contemporary Protestant conservatives should evaluate their views of America as a nation with an explicitly Christian founding.

In the chapters 3-4, Harp examines the beliefs of Christian conservatives in the Antebellum and Civil War period. In summary, these conservatives, like their forbearers disavowed social contractualism, emphasized duties over rights, and a strong alliance between Church and

State in the promotion of virtue and a Christian society. The Civil War would bring these views into great popularity, but ultimately they would begin to recede. This recession is chronicled in chapter four. Here Harp shows how, with the rapid industrialization of America, traditional Christian conservatism gave way to a secular libertarianism which stressed unrestricted capitalism as the great engine of societal advance. Christian traditionalists were opposed to the individualism and cut-throat nature of corporate competition. Unfortunately this group was marginalized as society secularized and some of their critiques began to be associated with Progressivism.

Chapter 5-7 bring us into more familiar territory in the history of Evangelicals and Conservatism. Tracing out this history from WWI to the present, Harp emphasizes the unreflective embrace of libertarian principles and arguments by evangelicals. With the ascendancy of this libertarian brand of conservatism, coupled with sidelining of traditional Christian thought, conservatism was essentially secularized. The joining of evangelicals to this brand of conservatism was due to the influence of pietistic individualism on the movement and a guilt-by-association rejection of any policies or ideas associated with the theological liberalism of the Social Gospel. This created the perfect storm which caused evangelicals to wholeheartedly embrace the libertarianism of the newly secularized conservatism (137-38).

Harp concludes his book by reiterating that until the 1900's Christians had built their conservatism on theological grounds. He concludes that modern evangelicals are less distinctively Christian in their political outlook and less conservative vis a vis their forbearer's traditionalism (231)

The greatest practical import of this book is its demonstration of the lack of theological and biblical reasoning that went into the new libertarian consensus of Evangelicalism. Rather than grappling with the difficult issues such as the nature of society, the morality of capitalism, etc. Evangelicals simply baptized the secular views of libertarian conservatives. Given that this is the case, that question arises, what reasons exist for Christians to adopt these views. Particularly given the historical and biblical arguments against rampant individualism and the deleterious effects of unfettered markets, libertarianism begins to seem less and less like a legitimate option for Christians.

The anti-Lockean elements of conservative theologians may offer a historical precedent for some recent developments in American conservatism. With the publication of Patrick J. Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed*, a number of intellectuals, many explicitly Christian, have begun to question the central ideas of liberalism such as social contract theory and the deleterious effects transnational capitalism can have on social mores and local institutions. Perhaps these "National Conservatives" will be able to re-source the past to offer a theologically informed and historically grounded alternative to the *de facto* libertarianism of most American evangelicals.

Harp's chronicle of Protestantism and Conservatism could equally be viewed as the history of the decline of American political theology. In light of current political trends within Evangelicalism it is hoped this history will provoke greater reflection upon our political loyalties and what, if any, theological rationale they have.

