



W&M ScholarWorks

Arts & Sciences Articles

Arts and Sciences

2014

Church-State Relations in the Early American Republic, 1787-1846.

Mark D. McGarvie
College of William and Mary

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/aspubs>

Recommended Citation

McGarvie, M. D. (2014). James S. Kabala. Church-State Relations in the Early American Republic, 1787–1846.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Arts and Sciences at W&M ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Arts & Sciences Articles by an authorized administrator of W&M ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@wm.edu.

variety of sources: “manuscript church records, ministers’ sermons, newspapers, religious periodicals, census data, philosophical writings, theological treatises, child-rearing books, devotional manuals, . . . conversion narratives and diaries” (p. xi). These wider discussions contextualize Osborn’s struggles and achievements in terms of the larger histories of slavery, capitalism, the Enlightenment, attitudes toward women, and much else. This is a hugely effective strategy for a historical biography. The quotations (and Brekus’s own descriptive writing) take the reader into the heated emotionalism and momentum of Osborn’s spiritual language (devoid of punctuation), while the ensuing analyses allow the reader to approach Osborn’s unique personality in the context of both eighteenth-century culture and modern, born-again religion.

Of particular interest to this reviewer is Brekus’s discussion of feminist scholarship on Osborn and religious women in general. Brekus quotes two scholars who seem unable to perceive religious women as anything but hysterical and frustrated; typically, they view Osborn’s religious vocation merely as an effort to validate her life of female drudgery and self-sacrifice. Brekus’s own approach puts religion at the center, and this not only allows her to analyze Osborn in her own terms; it allows her a broader understanding of the evangelical movement as a whole. Thus Brekus remarks that “most books about evangelicalism focus on male leaders like Jonathan Edwards or George Whitefield, but historical change takes place from the bottom up as well as the top down” (p. 7).

Brekus does more than insist on the centrality of religion in the study of women like Osborn; she also stresses the importance of the Enlightenment in creating a new kind of evangelicalism based on the evidence of experience, certainty, and sensation. Brekus asserts, “Unlike earlier Protestants, who had been hesitant to appear too confident about their salvation . . . the new evangelicals of the eighteenth century claimed that they could empirically feel and know whether they had been spiritually reborn” (p. 9). While male evangelical leaders were theological conservatives who insisted on women’s inferiority, they also affirmed the importance of individual experience in shaping the religious life, which in turn allowed women to claim spiritual authority based on their own perceptions. As Brekus points out, “Not only did the Enlightenment have a much stronger impact on eighteenth-century Protestantism than we have realized, but it also gave women a powerful new vocabulary to justify their religious authority” (p. 173).

Brekus breaks new ground in the stress she puts on the notion that Enlightenment ideas influenced all evangelicals, including women like Osborn. Women had traditionally emphasized experience rather than rationality in justifying their authority, but the Enlightenment introduced something new in its stress on empirical proofs: because firsthand experience was the only valid source of knowledge, the religious seeker’s own experience had added weight. Evangelicals may

have occasionally sounded like Puritans in expressing their spiritual anxieties, but their stress on the individual’s own perception as a reliable source of knowledge was new. Osborn used the empirical language of the Enlightenment to address religious questions and saw her own willingness to suffer affliction and desire to do good works as hard evidence of her salvation. Brekus asserts, “By combining the Christian language of human sinfulness and divine glory with a new Enlightenment vocabulary of benevolence, happiness, rationality, and empiricism, Sarah Osborn crafted a narrative that was both uniquely her own and distinctly evangelical” (p. 133).

PHYLLIS MACK
Rutgers University

JAMES S. KABALA. *Church-State Relations in the Early American Republic, 1787–1846*. London: Pickering and Chatto Publishers. 2013. Pp. ix, 264. \$99.00.

James S. Kabala has written a very informative, well-researched, and interesting book on the relationship between religion and government during the first fifty-some years of U.S. history. Yet, after reading his text, one significant question remains: What here is new? Perhaps each generation of scholars needs its own voices. Perhaps, too, performing a wealth of primary research that results in an interesting text is enough to justify scholarly publication and readership. Kabala delivers on both of these points; yet, he does not contextualize his ideas in current historiography and leaves the reader confused regarding the contributions this book makes.

Certainly, old arguments need to be re-examined and elucidated in light of further historical awareness. But, in providing these services, the new author should recognize the scholars who contributed those “old arguments” and, perhaps more importantly, briefly express how the new work adds to, clarifies, or modifies the existing scholarship. This task is especially important when the “old arguments” being revisited are not that old.

Kabala’s thesis is expressed on page two of his book: “Yet, by the 1840s, both the advocacy of formal establishment and the advocacy of a secular nation had become marginalized . . . religion had not been purged from public life, but had become organized around a non-denominational Protestant Christianity that had pushed aside both belief in a confessional Christian state and open infidelity” (p. 2). This thesis is not so different from arguments recently asserted by Noah Feldman’s *Divided by God: America’s Church-State Problem—and What We Should Do about It* (2005) and David Sehat’s *The Myth of Religious Freedom* (2011) as to justify Kabala’s complete omission of these works from his text and bibliography. Informed readers want to know if Kabala intends to build on the arguments of these predecessors or to distinguish his work from them. Kabala’s tone appears somewhat more celebratory of the historical actors who helped to create the

non-denominational Protestant society than that of either Feldman or Sehat, but readers are otherwise left to guess at the author's academic reaction to these recent books that form so large a part of the historiography he wishes to join.

The book suffers further from a problem that perplexes many historians, that of periodization. Life is not lived in historical periods; periods are imposed upon the past by historians in order to help us understand and explain it. Yet, clumsy periodization can obscure or confuse more than aid understanding. Kabala wants to present the years 1787 to 1846 as a single period. However, he acknowledges tremendous tension, change, and confusion among American beliefs, attitudes, and policies during these years. When did non-denominational Protestantism assert itself as a dominant cultural force? Kabala writes: "By the 1840s . . . the non-sectarian Protestant consensus had become the dominant view on church-state relations" (p. 46). However, he later writes that "[t]he 1810s and 1820s were also a high-point of the non-sectarian consensus" (p. 62). Rather than seeing the secular victories of the first thirty years of nationhood as undone by the successes of the Second Awakening and its pragmatic expression in the social reform of the Benevolent Empire, Kabala asserts the development of a single perspective in one long period covering nearly sixty years. In order to do so, he notes early on that his focus is not on the traditional founders, but on "a later generation . . . those who fought for or against the creation of the Protestant non-sectarian consensus that came into being in the decades after [the creation of the Constitution]" (p. 3). Kabala's early chapters, which attempt to locate the roots of a consensus in the late 1700s, are somewhat forced and limit the success of the argument he builds later in the text.

Despite these problems, there is much to like in Kabala's book. Chapter three, addressing religious tests, contributes important accounts of states' use of religion as a determinant of granting full rights of citizenship. Similarly, the discussion of witness competency in the courts offers an interesting and significant synopsis of a topic too often ignored. The author has provided a strong factual record of the development of a liberal Christian worldview; Kabala just needs to contextualize his conclusions from that record in a broader historiographic and historical framework.

MARK D. MCGARVIE
*Marshall-Wythe School of Law
 College of William & Mary*

BRIAN STEELE. *Thomas Jefferson and American Nationhood*. (Cambridge Studies on the American South.) New York: Cambridge University Press. 2012. Pp. xiii, 321. \$99.00.

Brian Steele concludes the introduction to his book by noting that although "the world may not need another book about Thomas Jefferson," he hopes this one "may offer a way of envisioning [Jefferson] anew, of questioning our shibboleths not only about him but also

about ourselves" (p. 10). Steele's effort succeeds brilliantly. By focusing on Jefferson's understanding of the meaning of nationhood and national identity, Steele brings to light continuities that help resolve some of the apparent inconsistencies in Jefferson's political thought and career.

Steele's premise is that we should understand Jefferson's intellectual thought in terms of a nationalist story or narrative: an evolving tale that Jefferson told himself and others about the sources of American identity, the nature of the American character, the relationship between the American people and their government, and the place of the United States in the world. As Steele sees it, Jefferson made a fundamental distinction between what he calls the American "nation" and the American "state." Whereas the American state was the particular form of government that Americans had created after the American Revolution, the nation, in Jefferson's view, was far more important. Possessing an almost mythic quality, the nation had first emerged during the revolution and embodied the people's wisdom and virtue. It was the source of the government's legitimacy and the basis of all consent. As a result, educating the public, consulting public opinion, and making sure that the government reflected the nation's true will should be, in Jefferson's view, the state's highest priorities.

Steele argues that Jefferson believed that the American people who made up "the nation" were exceptional, distinctive, and unique: unlike any other people in any other country in the world. Americans' particular history—including the circumstances of their emigration from Great Britain, the unique environment in which they found themselves, and the existence of a broad range of economic opportunities—contributed to creating this distinctive American character or "spirit" (p. 95). Such distinctiveness, according to Jefferson, enabled Americans to resist oppression, reject artificial hierarchies, preserve order, and take on the burdens of self-government in a way that no other people could. Thus, despite his commitment to universal rights, Jefferson was not particularly optimistic about the prospects for representative governments in places outside the United States. Even with regard to France, he believed that the people there had lived for so long under despotic rule that they did not possess the necessary character to govern themselves.

According to Steele, Jefferson's commitment to American exceptionalism helps explain a wide range of apparent contradictions in his political thought and career. For example, despite his support for Shays' Rebellion, Jefferson did not believe in a continual state of revolution or rebellion for its own sake. The American people, he thought, had the capacity to resist unjust policies, but just as quickly would work to restore order and promote fair laws. To take another case, during the 1790s Jefferson consistently claimed he was not creating a new political party or fomenting factionalism. Whereas his opponents, the Federalists, had violated the true spirit of the nation by disdainful popular opin-