

## **An Age of Infidels: The Politics of Religious Controversy in the Early United States**

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In *An Age of Infidels: The Politics of Religious Controversy in the Early United States*, Eric R. Schlereth traces connections between arguments over belief and the new American nation's partisanship, print culture, and civil society. He explores deists and free enquirers whose full-throated criticisms of organized Christianity and its power within the nascent American polity – a power also explored in Amanda Porterfield's *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation* (1) – fascinate and surprise. Schlereth's work should provoke us to ponder not only the consequences of the way early Americans wrote about religion, but also the consequences of the way contemporary scholars do.

Schlereth argues that in the early republic, 'the context in which people expressed religious opinions and the implications of these expressions became more controversial than the beliefs themselves' (p. 2). Rather than attacking the content of each other's faith, Americans criticized the social and political effects of faith. By doing so, Schlereth argues, Americans achieved a peaceful pluralism without needing to achieve religious consensus. Schlereth is particularly interested in arguments over 'infidelity'. By attacking infidelity, he explains, Americans implicitly defended varieties of organized Christianity and deism that might otherwise have been suspect. Attacks against infidelity could also serve blatantly political ends. Members of a faltering political party, the Federalists, used accusations of infidelity to discredit Republicanism. Such a strategy had consequences for religion as well as for partisanship. Federalist attacks achieved some minor political success but further 'advanced the notion that religious truth consisted of opinions that were open to rational inquiry and public debate' (p. 140). In Schlereth's view, religion's power was tamed by social and political expectations, even as religious rhetoric could be summoned to try to change those expectations.

One of Schlereth's most useful discussions is his account of anxiety over the federal government's – and increasingly the state governments' – ability to regulate religion. The shift from toleration, in which the state permitted the limited expression of religious dissent, to religious liberty, which Schlereth summarizes as 'broad natural rights, both to freedom of conscience and to public expression the free exercise of belief' (p. 19) left many Americans uneasy. Critics of the Constitution regularly summoned a 'menagerie of religious outsiders,' including Jews, 'Mahometans', deists, and Catholics, in order to suggest the dangers of religious liberty. At times, attacks on infidelity were efforts to restrict 'the privileges of full civil membership'; at

other times, they were efforts to ‘articulate a set of practical or vernacular limits to legally established religious freedoms’ (p. 28). Early on, ‘infidels’ were more often imagined than real. But by the 1790s, deists such as Elihu Palmer made clear that individuals would indeed claim the liberties afforded them in the new nation. Schlereth cogently traces the way in which Palmer’s insistence on advertising public lectures, rather than offering his controversial views only within the constraints of a debating society, disturbed some Americans. The ‘crowd mobilization and direct personal coercion’ that Palmer prompted, ‘were essentially efforts to compel community order over free inquiry, to uphold popular notions of piety rather than formal protections of belief lodged in the federal Constitution’ (p. 42). Schlereth places such moments within a decades-long creation of a ‘framework ... useful for establishing cultural boundaries to police religious expression without using direct state power’ (p. 44).

Schlereth unearths a panoply of intriguing people and disputes. In Philadelphia and Baltimore he finds Theophilanthropic Societies determined to nurture ‘deserters from errors and superstition’ prepared to ‘rally round the same standard of Reason’ (p. 70). Critics of such societies, Schlerer explains, rightly saw them as possessing some of the same goals as organized religion: the teaching of beliefs and their transmission from generation to generation. Thus disputes over deism and infidelity were entwined with arguments over ‘how to ensure the long-term viability of republican institutions and how best to create a moral citizenry’ (p. 75). In such passages, and in his extended, illuminating discussion of the reception of Thomas Paine’s *Rights of Man*, Schlereth shows that Americans’ thinking about the nature of God and the purposes of religion, affected and were affected by earthly affairs. And although he does not provide estimates of the number of citizens who were, for lack of a better term, practicing deists or Theophilanthropists, Schlereth convincingly shows that their existence and arguments influenced public debate.

Politicized memories of the 1790s shape the other period in which Schlereth is most interested, the 1830s. Founders of that era’s tract societies and religious newspapers depicted the 1790s as a time in which the forces of irreligion threatened the nation. They insisted that lest those dark days return, Protestants must display both individual piety and collective determination. It is not surprising that evangelicals summoned the specter of infidels in order to rouse the faithful, but Schlerer documents the interdependence of believers and unbelievers in fascinating detail. Although the deists of the 1790s were no longer active, defenders of ‘free enquiry’ existed and were energized by evangelicals’ attacks on their predecessors. Editors of journals such as the *Correspondent* and the *Free Enquirer* criticized what they deemed the superstitious dogma of Christianity and cheekily published tales of ‘conversion’ to free inquiry. Evangelical publications began to tell similar tales, but with a reverse moral: converts to free inquiry learned their error when they found themselves in hell. As ‘disbelief reached deeper into American society’, Schlerer argues, these arguments between evangelicals and free enquirers ‘became part of ... the political development of civil society’ (p. 201). As in the 1790s, religion and politics were entwined, notwithstanding church and state’s separation. ‘Controversies between free enquirers and their evangelical opponents over questions about citizenship, civil society, and the limits of public religious expression’, Schlerer contends, ‘provided the foundation for a partisan discourse that cast Democrats as the stalking horse of infidelity and put the Whigs at the vanguard of efforts to rehabilitate state religion’ (p. 236).

Schlereth’s book is shaped, even more than is commonly the case, by what he excludes as well as by what he includes. His decision ‘not to address early national controversies surrounding Catholicism and Mormonism in any sustained way’ is understandable but costly. Allowed into the book, such controversies might have threatened to crowd out the philotheosophists and free enquirers who roam so intriguingly through these pages. But excluding from consideration Mormonism, the largest religion the United States produced and one that not only grew with remarkable speed but that challenged other Americans’ understandings of marriage, revelation, and Protestantism itself, means that this cannot really be considered a book about ‘the politics of religious controversy in the United States’. Had Schlerer attended more to anti-Catholicism, moreover, he would have seen that in both England and the British colonies, conflict between Catholics and Protestants generated a twisty language of tolerance – ‘Catholics are intolerant, so Protestants should not be, and restricting Catholicism is itself defending religious liberty’ – directly relevant to the story he wants to tell. Catholics in Britain, the colonies, and the United States were also driven by their minority status to

accept and even champion precisely the kind of tolerance Schlerer discusses, and they did so not by equating political and religious worldviews, but by insisting on their distinctiveness.

That brings us to two other flaws in this fine book: Schlerer's focus on similarities between religion and politics to the exclusion of differences, and his focus on the immediate American context to the exclusion of larger historical trends. To see how the first problem takes its toll, let's turn to Schlerer's conclusion. 'The story of religious controversy in the early republic,' he writes, 'describes the origins of cultural politics in the United States' (p. 241). It is a useful suggestion, more true than false. But to get there, Schlerer must set aside a fundamental proposition of his book. That proposition, expressed in his opening pages, is that Americans displayed 'a growing acceptance that notions of religious truth were ultimately matters of opinion' (p. 3). After insisting on the congruence of religious and political knowledge throughout the book, Schlerer in his closing pages asserts their difference: 'cultural politics ... are ... highly effective, in part because they rely on appeals to supposedly timeless, absolute religious truths' (p. 241). Which is it? Was being a Baptist rather than a deist more like preferring blue to yellow, or more like believing one knew something essential about the universe that other people did not? My guess is it was more like the latter – and that being a deist rather than a Baptist worked the same way. When Schlerer goes on, in his conclusion, to argue that "religious truths" were invented and redefined through religious controversies in the public sphere, his doubt quotes and scholarly language of 'invention' do not obscure the fact that once again he is suggesting that religion and committed irreligion make claims politics does not. Unfortunately, that crucial point is lost – even actively obscured – throughout much of the book.

It is not hard to locate the source of the trouble. Schlerer argues that he is focusing on something he calls 'religious knowledge', which he defines 'in broad terms to include historical definitions of religious truth; the standards by which individuals determined what was or was not a true religious belief; and the means by which individuals expressed and circulated, thus communicated, the religious beliefs they held as true' (p. 2). He does not much attend to the first part of his definition, which would seem to have to include beliefs about the nature of God and the afterlife. His attention to the second part of the definition, 'the standards' of determining true religious belief, is also attenuated. Schlerer simply sets aside the things many believers would have pointed to as their proof of a religious belief's truth – an internal conviction, an experience of God's love or wrath, golden tablets dug from New York mud – in favor of standards of truth that could be met through reasoned argument in a public forum. And that brings us to the most problematic part of the book, Schlerer's eccentric narrowing of 'the means by which individuals expressed and circulated, thus communicated, the religious beliefs they held as true'. Although he is writing about religion, Schlerer declines to look at such things as sermons, devotional works, or Bible commentaries. We should be sceptical, just as we would be sceptical of arguments about American political culture from an author who did not explore political platforms, campaign speeches, political parades, or partisan newspapers. Schlerer is surely right that 'the history of religious knowledge in the early national United States is, in important respects, a political history' (p. 2). But his conclusion would be more persuasive had his choice of sources not predetermined it. His findings would also, I think, be more important. As his own conclusion hints, Schlerer's choice of sources reduces his ability to study a crucial part of religion's political power: the distinctiveness of its claims, threats, and rewards.

If Schlerer seems eager to avoid much of what constitutes religion, he also seems eager not to make use of much of what constitutes religious history. This is not through ignorance; his notes, filled with references to authors such as Benjamin Kaplan and Alexandra Walsham, reveal the makings of what could have been a first-class exploration of American religion and irreligion within a broader world context. Schlerer clearly knows that what he deems 'the changing public authority of religious knowledge in the decades following the American and French Revolution' is the continuation of a story that began centuries earlier, indeed that had many beginnings in many places. Similarly, when Schlerer writes, 'As general knowledge claims became products of public debate and spectacle, so too did religious beliefs' (p. 13), he must know he risks seeming unaware that religious beliefs were the subject and product of 'public debate and spectacle' in many other times and places, too. Schlerer is not alone; even as historians labor to put almost everything in a

transnational context, religion is still often pressed into an aging mold of distinctive American democratization. It may be that religion, like literature, can attract historians' attention only if it is attached to a political narrative. And politics does always matter. But must we remove Americans' arguments over such things as evil, an afterlife, free will, and clericalism from the vast human history of agonizing over such matters? Schlerer's own insightful and worthy book suggests otherwise in its ambitions, if not always in its execution. It is a useful contribution to our understanding of the early republic, and to our efforts to understand the nature and limits of belief in its many manifestations.

## Notes

1. Amanda Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation* (Chicago, IL, 2013). [Back to \(1\)](#)

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