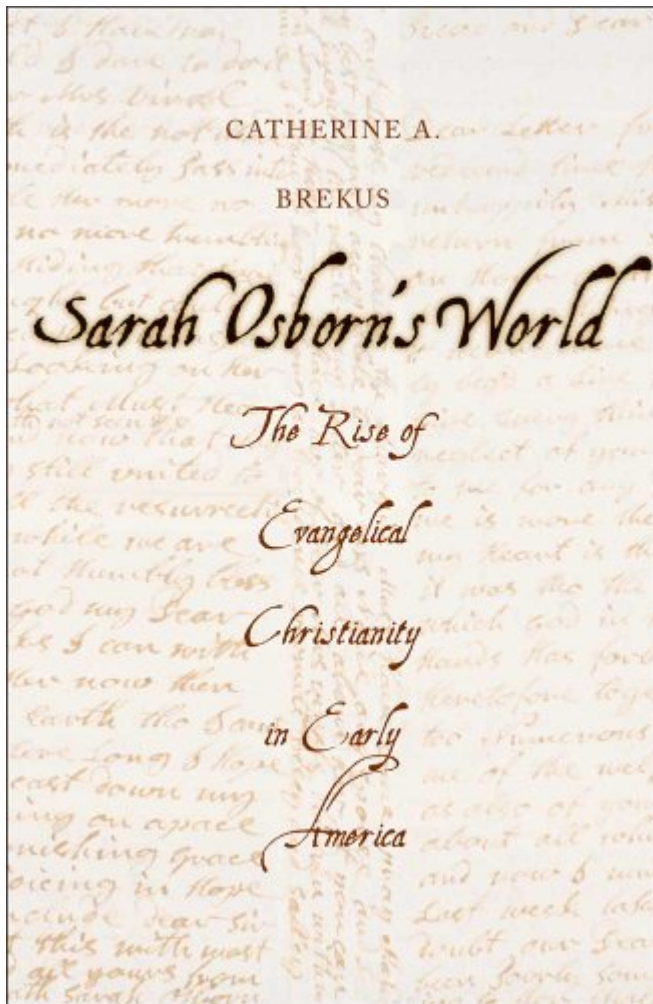


# One Pilgrim's Progress



Over the course of a life that covered the better part of the eighteenth century, Rhode Island schoolteacher Sarah Osborn sought assurance of her salvation amidst spiritual doubt, unrelenting poverty, proliferating temptation, and, at times, withering criticism. More Christiana than Christian, Osborn was always ready to bring others along with her on the journey to the Heavenly City, ranging from her beloved (and by all signs unconverted) dying son to scores of enslaved and free blacks who gathered at her Newport home for revivalist prayer meetings. In so doing, Osborn did more than attempt to secure her own salvation; she helped give birth to evangelicalism, the eighteenth century's most important religious movement.



Catherine A. Brekus, *Sarah Osborn's World: The Rise of Evangelical Christianity in Early America*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013. 448 pp., \$35.

Day in and day out, Osborn wrote compulsively about her faith and her experience. Only a fraction of the fifty diaries and hundreds of letters that

she composed during her lifetime survive, but those that do more than amply provide the primary materials for University of Chicago historian Catherine Brekus's *Sarah Osborn's World*, a rich exploration of Osborn's life and the first published full-length treatment of this important and overlooked spiritual figure. The result is, alongside Jon Sensbach's biography of Rebecca Protten, the best and most comprehensive study we have yet of a female first-generation Atlantic World evangelical. But this book is more than that. *Sarah Osborn's World* is a skillful meditation on the ways in which eighteenth-century evangelicalism combined with contemporary intellectual, political, economic, and social currents to help create the modern world.

*Sarah Osborn's World* builds upon, and refines, Brekus's important 2007 essay, "Sarah Osborn's Enlightenment" in Brekus, ed. *Reimagining the Past: The Religious History of American Women*. There, Brekus asked whether evangelicals embraced the Enlightenment and if women, in particular, played a role in constructing Enlightenment ideas. Following David Bebbington's lead, she examined how evangelicalism might be understood as an "enlightened" version of Protestantism. Osborn's embrace of a language of assurance, certainty, experience, and proof undoubtedly bore testimony to this influence. Yet even more striking was Osborn's compulsive journaling—evidence, Brekus argues, of her acceptance of the Enlightenment's emphasis on experiential knowledge. Writing became a compulsion and an obsession for Osborn, a means of helping "her make sense of changes in everyday life that did not yet have a name" (7). Not only did Osborn devotedly document her experience, she also frequently went back and scrutinized her writings for signs of God's favor. In moving from Osborn's "Enlightenment" to her *World*, Brekus expands her study into the various ways evangelicals absorbed and incorporated new ideas about progress, humanitarianism, and individualism into older Protestant understandings of self, community, and world. Always, as Brekus is quick to note, these borrowings bore their own distinctive stamp.

Osborn's 1743 spiritual memoir, written at the height of the Great Awakening, structures the first part of the book. Brekus uses the memoir to unpack Osborn's life as it had been, but also to examine how she wanted it to be. When writing her narrative, Osborn quickly dispensed with her childhood, a period she associated with original and actual sin, as an unfortunate (if inevitable) prelude to her awakening during revival. Osborn's description of her afflictions during this period are skillfully decoded to reveal the ways in which contemporary context, conflicted feelings about her parents, and the loss of a beloved spouse came to be understood as necessary preparation. Caught between Puritan and Evangelical notions of conversion, Osborn struggled to square her narrative with prevailing expectations by "combining the Christian language of human sinfulness and divine glory with a new Enlightenment vocabulary of benevolence, happiness, rationality and empiricism" (133).

Evangelicals knew that conversion marked the beginning, not the end, of the spiritual journey. With this in mind, Brekus arranges the second part of the book around various themes that concerned Osborn in the half century (1743-96)

following her conversion. These chapters explore how the converted understood the death of the unconverted (chapter five); the ways in which evangelical embrace of the Enlightenment language of experience paved the way for women's authorship (chapter six); the struggle over the meaning of poverty in a world of consumer abundance (chapter seven); and how evangelical conceptions of benevolence for the suffering soul surpassed humanitarian calls to aid the suffering body (chapter eight). Blindness and infirmity silenced Osborn's pen over the last few decades of her life, but Brekus draws on the writings of friends and contemporaries to show how Osborn's fervent millennial faith combined with a patriotic sensibility to sustain her during the difficult years of the American Revolution. The political wrangling, economic hardship, and social unrest that followed the war seemed only to confirm the coming of the millennium, even if she ultimately had to reconcile herself with not seeing it come to fruition. Brekus's final chapter places Osborn on the threshold of the Heavenly City at the end of her journey, explaining changing conceptions of heaven and the afterlife.

Brekus's exploration of Osborn's understanding of Calvinist theology provides a valuable bridge between seventeenth-century Puritanism and nineteenth-century evangelicalism. For Osborn, evangelicalism was inflected through the lens of Calvinism. Methodist Arminianism only began its ascendancy in New England in the last decade of Osborn's life. What emerges instead is a remarkably productive tension between Enlightenment ideals and Calvinist traditions. Long before free will became a hallmark of American evangelicalism, Osborn held an unflinching belief in human depravity, embraced suffering as a positive good, and feared loving her family and friends too much. Such a worldview is foreign to many of us today, but Brekus's analysis of Osborn's words and thought process reveals the logic behind her steadfast belief.

For many readers, the most eye-opening revelation of this book will be Osborn's evolving position on slavery. Given the participation of evangelicals in the late eighteenth-century antislavery movement and the prominent place of enslaved and free blacks in the revivals that Osborn ran at her house in the mid-1760s, her best-remembered accomplishment, the assumption that she opposed slavery is an easy one. But as Brekus argues, "there was nothing about evangelicalism (or Christianity more generally) that inevitably led to abolitionism" (286-7). Osborn, like most other mid-eighteenth-century evangelicals, saw slavery as a natural, biblically sanctioned condition. In the early 1760s, an uncharacteristically obtuse Osborn almost fell out with a dear friend over the issue of selling that friend's enslaved son, whom Osborn owned, in a particularly wrenching scene poignantly reconstructed by Brekus. Only with the arrival of fierce antislavery advocate Samuel Hopkins as the new minister of Osborn's church, an appointment that she was instrumental in securing, did she begin to see slaveholding as a sin. Unfortunately, little evidence in Osborn's own words, other than a poem dictated to a friend, documents her evolution on this important issue.

There is much to praise about this work, but one final contribution is worthy

of note. Sarah Osborn's world was one of momentous political, economic, and social—as well as intellectual and religious—change. Throughout the book, Brekus rightly insists that Osborn needs to be understood within the context of the currents of the eighteenth century. Rejecting interpretations of evangelicalism as a backwards-looking response to a period of upheaval, Brekus argues that, like the Enlightenment, evangelicalism represents “a vector of modernity, a creative response to the transformations that were reshaping everyday life” (8). Over the course of her long life, Sarah Osborn witnessed the expansion of the market economy and a consumer revolution; the emergence of a more representative form of government that substituted the sovereignty of the people for the sovereignty of the monarch; the growth of heterogeneous and religiously plural urban communities; the expansion of chattel slavery; and, in the last decade of her life, a movement to abolish it. More than anything, Osborn crucially experienced the proliferation of *choice*, the impact of which Brekus deftly weaves through her discussion of every aspect of Osborn's life. Living in the urbanized seaport of Newport amplified these political, economic, and social developments. As Sarah Osborn made her way toward the world to come, the material conditions of this world played a pivotal role in shaping her spiritual experience, a crucial point that we all too often forget.

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