

Skepticism and Faith



The early republic

“Skepticism and American Faith: From the Revolution to the Civil War,” I say, responding with the title of my book-in-progress. It’s my answer to a question as common at academic cocktail parties as chardonnay: “So ... what are you working on now?” Two responses to my book’s topic have been memorable. The first, by an American studies scholar, was earnest appreciation: “Good! We need a book like that now!” Behind that affirmation was a deep frustration with the cultural politics of the Bush era, with its successful exploitation of a particular narrative of American religion and patriotism—to which my book, he imagined, would be a historian’s reply. The second response was from a historian who, raising a quizzical eyebrow, asked, “Religious skepticism? What religious skepticism?”

Alas, my own dissatisfactions with Mr. Bush cannot be mitigated by the notion that at least he inspired my research project. I’m reminded of a colleague who recently published a book on warfare and American history from the colonial period to the late twentieth century. Reviews discussed the study as if it had been inspired by the Iraq war. The author certainly did not claim to live in a cultural vacuum, unaffected by the current state of affairs; still, his project began two decades ago and is based on exhaustive research. Histories, though written in a particular time and place and from a particular point of view, may

inspire op-ed pieces but shouldn't be confused with them.

My own project was initially sparked by reading the Ezra Stiles Papers at Yale in the late 1980s. Stiles (1727-1795), a Congregationalist minister in Rhode Island and then president of Yale College, struggled with doubts about the truth of Christianity when he was a young man and wandered for a few years in what he later called the "darksome valley" of deism and skepticism. I was especially struck by the extent to which Stiles's doubts were his secret shame, concealed even from his family and closest friends as he shivered with fever on what he thought was his deathbed. After the American Revolution, the Reverend Stiles watched with grave concern as other doubters and deists came out of the closet and started to achieve positions of social prestige and political power. This was especially worrying at a time when states were rewriting their constitutions and reframing the relationship of church and state. There were few outspoken critics of Christianity like Ethan Allen, the Revolutionary War hero from Vermont who published *Reason, the Only Oracle of Man* in 1785. But Stiles saw dangerous trends in voters who were indifferent to a candidate's religious opinions and in public sentiments that seemed to oppose not only government establishing a particular Protestant sect but even the state merely patronizing and privileging Christianity in general. Stiles, therefore, understood religious skepticism first as a personal psychological struggle, later as a matter of intellectual debate (safely confined to the republic of letters), and finally as an ideological and political problem threatening the new American republic.

At the time I wondered to what degree Stiles's concerns could represent much more than his own religious and intellectual development. He was, after all, a clergyman's son in a region famous for the lingering habits of Puritanism, so dabbling in deism and skepticism might have seemed particularly radical and dangerous. He was also a revealing but not necessarily a representative thinker, and perhaps he was just projecting his own experience onto the nation. But reading and research in the years that followed have convinced me that from the creation of the first American republic in the Revolution to its dissolution in the Civil War, the relation of skepticism and faith would be played out again and again in similar terms but in different contexts.

For most people in this period, skepticism was more than the anxious uncertainty of doubt; it was doubt elaborated as a tool of inquiry and critique. In late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century America, too, the term "skeptic" primarily and popularly referred to religious skeptics—that is, those who questioned or criticized the truth claims of what was considered to be true religion—Christianity—and not to the rare epistemologist using classical arguments or Cartesian methods to deny certainty in all forms of knowledge. There had long been plenty of sermons and tracts written for doubting Christians, who usually had doubts about the state of their souls or the pertinence of this or that Christian doctrine to their own lives. The skeptic, however, stepped outside the whole belief system, examining it from a critical distance and finding it wanting.

Faith, on the other hand, meant more than intellectual assent to a set of doctrines. It was a commitment of the whole self, a hope and trust that, if genuine, ought to be the foundation of an entire way of life and vision of the world. Beliefs, we might say, are linguistic formulations that try to give expression to and elaborate the cognitive content of faith as a lived experience; skepticism is the systematic critique of those beliefs and therefore of the rational dimensions of the faithful way of life.

For spiritual power and authority, Protestants looked up to God through his word, they looked alongside themselves to fellow followers of Christ as they built Christian communities, and they looked within themselves for the work of the Holy Spirit. Skepticism attacked the authenticity of the scriptures, challenged the idea that either the sociability of religious affections or the historical success of the church attested to the truth of doctrine, and contested the notion that subjective experience could evidence contact with things supernatural and divine. Skepticism and faith were in a dynamic tension that was critically important to understanding the development of a dominant Protestantism.

By retracing my steps to my encounter with Ezra Stiles in the library, I don't mean to suggest that the project was incubated entirely in the archives. No research is completely unconnected to personal experience. That doesn't mean religious history, any more than other kinds of history, entails one of those confessional prefaces in which the author discloses his or her personal relationship to the faith tradition being examined. Perry Miller's atheism and George Marsden's evangelicalism no doubt influenced each man's studies of the Protestant theologian Jonathan Edwards, but the evaluation of their books should aim at the cogency of their interpretive arguments in relation to the available evidence rather than at the scholars' biographies. The historian's own religious belief or doubt is one of many factors shaping his or her particular perspective, a point of view that provides moments of both blindness and insight when trying to imagine the past. My own perspective as this project developed has been at least as powerfully shaped by my understanding of the disciplinary field I entered and the communities in which I learned and taught.

In graduate school I became convinced that the history I had learned previously had too blithely ignored the religious issues and experiences that were so vital to so many people in the American past. I imagined myself going off to teach in a public university, and in my own courses and scholarship, at least, doing something to rectify that imbalance. Instead, my first teaching job was at a small midwestern college that was committed at once to the liberal arts, a global and multicultural perspective, and to being "a school of the Church." Faculty didn't have to sign a confession of faith but were asked on job interviews about their view of the school's religious mission; faculty meetings began with a prayer and teachers were encouraged (though not required) to attend daily chapel. The most ardent supporters of the college's religious identity manifested an ecumenical tolerance toward diverse religious points of view but a subtle—and at times not so subtle—unfriendliness to secular

humanism. Just as working with religiously committed scholars in graduate school had deepened my appreciation for the intellectual depth of perspectives rooted in faith, my experience at that Christian college helped me more easily imagine the closeted lives of skeptics in the early republic. I hope these experiences help me to write sympathetically and critically about religious skeptics and people of faith.

The historical imagination, of course, has to be disciplined by the accepted rules of interpretation and by the traces left behind by past lives, just as tennis involves lines, a net, and a fuzzy yellow ball to be whacked back and forth—it is not just the artful swooshing of a shiny racket. The second cocktail-party response to my project—"What religious skepticism?"—was asking if, in fact, there was even a ball to be put in play here.

Readers of the standard religious histories will ask the same question. The eminently quotable Alexis de Tocqueville said, after all, that Americans were skeptical about everything but religion. Our own America—where churches thrive, supernaturalism sells, spirituality can trump other issues at the ballot box, and God consistently gets great poll numbers—has long been considered the Western world's exception to the secularization and disenchantment that was expected to attend modernity. Whereas previous historical explanations of this state of affairs looked to our supposed Puritan heritage, more recent interpretations have focused on precisely the period of my study. In the decades immediately following 1776, according to one prominent account, American Christianity was democratized, its surge of religious revivals revealing a religious movement that absorbed and directed the radical, egalitarian, populist, individualistic energies of the Revolution. In the early nineteenth century, according to another, as proselytizers and promoters vigorously competed for adherents in a denominational free market, a higher proportion of Americans formed closer associations with Christian institutions, ideas, and practices than ever before. Between the Revolution and the Civil War, according to a third, Americans created a powerful intellectual synthesis fusing republican political ideology, common-sense moral reasoning, and evangelical Protestantism. A rich and deep historiography shows us how the evangelicalism that emerged from what's called the Second Great Awakening shaped the politics of the second party system; how activist Protestantism fueled the great movements for social reform; how religious faith and scriptural argument provided the foundations for proslavery, antislavery, and every conceivable moral argument; how Christian views of Providence and creation dictated understandings of nature, history, and progress; and how pious sentimentalism was the beating heart of family life. Christianity refined and polished the genteel, rocked the cradle of the middle class, and provided both comfort and a language of resistance for the poor, the oppressed, and the enslaved.

So where were the skeptics? Some of the Founding Fathers—Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson most notably—were deists who believed in a creator and in morals derived from nature but not in the divinity of either the Bible or

Jesus. While these gentlemen kept—or tried to keep—their heterodox views to themselves, small groups of other deists, inspired by Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason* (1794) and the lectures of former Presbyterian minister Elihu Palmer, organized a few deistical societies and published newspapers in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The socioeconomic transformations wrought by new markets and new modes of industrial production after 1815 launched a new generation of social and religious radicalism. From the mid-1820s to about 1840, reformers like Robert Owen, Frances Wright, and Abner Kneeland identified themselves as religious skeptics and freethinkers—or “free enquirers”—who doubted or denied most or all of Christianity's claims about God, man, and salvation. Their point of view was aptly summarized by a loyal reader's testimonial in one of their free-thought newspapers in 1829. “I am now a sceptic ... I live for this world, because I know nothing of any other. I doubt all revelations from heaven, because they appear to me improbable and inconsistent ... I desire to see men's wishes bounded by what they can see and know; for I am convinced that they would thus become more contented, more practically benevolent, and more permanently happy, than any dreams of futurity can make them.” As with the deists, the free enquirers' energies were divided between criticizing traditional (supernatural) religion and trying to offer an alternate vision for life in the world.

Christians called the deists and free enquirers “infidels,” a pejorative term that some of the latter would defiantly adopt as their own, the way that some activist homosexuals in the twentieth century adopted “queer.” They are understudied: the standard works on deism and organized free thought in the period were published in the 1930s and 1940s; the first half of a short study by Martin E. Marty titled *The Infidel: Freethought in American Religion*, published in 1961, has nearly been the last word on the subject. Certainly the efforts of these small groups of infidels were dwarfed by the legions conducting religious revivals, creating missions and moral reform societies, distributing Bibles and Christian tracts, and building churches across the land. Just as certainly, though, the experiences of people labeled infidels and the ideas branded as “infidelity” have remained hidden because of the stories we have chosen to tell about the nation's religious past. Even if few Americans publicly challenged Christian truth claims, Christianity's hegemonic triumph remains to be accounted for, and the reasons why and how the skeptical critique continued to haunt American Christianity need to be explained.

Seasoning the narrative of American religious history with the stories of a few vocal freethinkers is not enough—just as adding female or African American voices is not the same as analyzing the construction of gender or race. Many observers in the early republic looked beyond the strident infidels to note the sociopsychological entanglement of skepticism and faith as a central issue in American religion. In 1840, Orestes Brownson, sounding like Ezra Stiles in the 1780s, argued that “there is not much open scepticism, not much avowed infidelity, but there is a vast amount” that was “concealed” and “untold.” Other commentators agreed with Brownson. One in 1829 believed that “the number of decided infidels, is probably much more limited than that of a sort of

skeptics who are content to remain suspended in doubt whether the Christian revelation is true or false," but who for the time being continued to respect Christianity as the custom of the country and an amiable superstition. A decade later, the *Christian Secretary* prepared a series of articles attacking skepticism and infidelity because the editors had come to the same conclusion. Calvinist biblical scholar Moses Stuart suspected that there was not a small number among the upper classes who would abandon the Bible if doing so became socially respectable; Catholic convert Gardner Jones claimed that at least a third of the professing Protestants in New York City in the mid-1830s had followed the logic of Protestantism to its conclusion and were privately "decided infidels." A twenty-four page essay in *The Spirit of the Pilgrims* focused not on outspoken freethinkers or closeted skeptics but the way that doubt could hollow out Christianity from within. New-fangled ideas encouraged Christians to doubt one traditional doctrine, qualify a second, and throw out a third, until believers "have been gradually and unconsciously drawn away from their old belief ... They begin with doubting; they next give up, and are finally in danger of ending in the disbelief of almost everything but that they are themselves very exemplary believers."

Self-proclaimed deists, skeptics, and freethinkers were so threatening because they gave voice to the doubts Christians had about their own faith or about the fidelity of the fellow in the next pew. Putting skepticism back into the story of American religious history in this period, therefore, involves attending to—and explaining—both the "not much" skepticism that was open and avowed and the "vast amount" that Brownson and others insisted was hidden and silenced. It is possible, of course, that the specter of the dangerous infidel, threatening the religious foundations of society, was conjured out of nearly nothing by paranoid Christians and by cynical politicians. Some did anxiously exaggerate the threat, like the Calvinist apologists, who blamed Universalists for destroying the foundations of faith, and the Universalists, who blamed Calvinists for the same; others exploited popular fears of anti-Christian subversives, like the Federalists, who tried to link Jefferson's deism and the horrors of the French Revolution to Republicanism, or the Whigs, who later tried to tar working-class Jacksonianism with religious infidelity. But the story of the relation of skepticism and faith is more than the tale of a few marginalized freethinkers and artificially induced moral panics. Religious skepticism touched—and in some cases transformed—more lives than we might expect in the early American republic.

Examining the personal, social, and political dimensions of the relation between skepticism and faith does involve recovering the experiences of some of the small vocal minority who came out of the closet—Paineite radicals like Elihu Palmer or socialist freethinkers like the Scottish-born reformer Fanny Wright, for example. But it also involves looking at the skeptical phases in the spiritual biographies of people known for other commitments—like Orestes Brownson (who ended up as a Catholic), William Miller (eventually a founder of Adventism), Horace Mann (the liberal education reformer), William Alcott (the prolific writer on health and education reform), or Abraham Lincoln. It entails

rescuing the obscure and forgotten from the archives, with, for example, the rich stories of the Methodist preacher-turned-skeptic John R. Kelso and the skeptic-turned-Methodist preacher John Scarlett, or the skeptical-scientist-turned-spiritualist-medium Robert Hare, or the story of a young woman's struggles with religious skepticism in an autobiographical novel by Alice Hayes Mellen. Historical biography can also illuminate larger social relations and the workings of politics. To cite another example, consider the case of Dr. Thomas Cooper, the polymathic scholar and strident religious skeptic who was the president of South Carolina College in the tumultuous decades before and during South Carolina's nullification controversy.

But sometimes communities, public events, or institutions themselves need to take center stage to illuminate the ways that religious practices and identities were both constructed and challenged—how some became the commonsensical norm and others were pushed beyond the boundaries of respectability. The deistical society in the village of Newburgh, New York, which became infamous for satirizing Christianity by giving communion to a dog and baptizing a cat in 1799 and which was linked to the Clintonian faction of the state's Republican party, speaks to how Americans were trying to come to terms with the relation of religion and politics both nationally and locally. The Massachusetts blasphemy trials of the freethinker Abner Kneeland in the 1830s, set in the context of lesser-known trials and disputes over religious oaths in courts and legislatures, show how law and politics helped shape Americans lives in relation to what Christians believed was God's word, Christ's church, and the work of the Holy Spirit.

To study skepticism and faith in this way is to go beyond familiar treatments of the topic, which have tended to stay within the confines of intellectual history as traditionally conceived. Richard H. Popkin's half century of scholarship—most recently *The History of Scepticism from Savonarola to Bayle* (2003)—is an essential philosophical foundation. Helpful, too, is Franklin L. Baumer's *Religion and the Rise of Scepticism* (1960), though it also deals with European intellectuals and not America or “nonintellectual groups,” despite Baumer's thinking the latter was “of immense importance” and “a whole story in itself.” James Turner's *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (1985) “offers us intellectual history in something like the grand manner” of Perry Miller, as a blurb on the back cover notes. Though a fascinating study, the first half of the book oddly functions as a kind of extended prologue to the emergence after 1865 of “unbelief” in God as a viable alternative for a small group of thinkers. Turner's is not a study about the struggle with doubts about God, the Bible, and the church. It is a story of how Christians, especially clergymen, hitched Christian beliefs to Enlightenment rationality and empiricism—an arrangement that for some collapsed rather dramatically in the later nineteenth century. If there were unrecognized weaknesses in the reasonable Christianity fashioned in the earlier decades, there were also more obvious tensions between skepticism and faith, tensions that were experienced and recognized long before the Gilded Age and by more than just intellectuals.

These tensions can be found even where we might least expect them. William Smyth Babcock, for example, was a Freewill Baptist preacher in Vermont during the first decade of the nineteenth century. Because he severed his connection to his church's Monthly Meeting in 1809 to preach free from any denominational control, he has been used to illustrate the "individualization of conscience" in Nathan Hatch's acclaimed *Democratization of American Christianity* (1989). But there is more to Babcock than this. For him, skepticism about the truth of Christianity was both a personal problem and a threat to his community. He had converted to Christianity about a month before his thirty-fifth birthday in 1799. He had been a deist and had begun reading the Bible in earnest earlier that year to sharpen his arguments against it. Instead, he made a public "Declaration of the Christian Revelation" in January 1800 and argued that, while deism could only lead to "one boundless dream of Doubt," the Bible really was a genuine offer of eternal salvation by God Almighty. Not everyone was convinced. In the journal begun after his conversion he mentions two neighbors—an unnamed man and a Mrs. Durge—who still clung to the "Error of Deism." And even Babcock had his lapses. Two days after a "lovely" conference and covenant renewal with his Baptist brethren, Babcock woke up to hear a friend singing a hymn. Suddenly the idea that God had walked the earth as Christ "appeared trifling & absurd," and "for a few minutes I disbelieved the whole Christian System" and felt drawn back toward the "Deistic temptation." Two weeks later, bemoaning a journey that would take him away from his flock, he again felt his faith wobble. "[W]hat a strange Medley of faith & unbelief I am ... And if it were intelligible I should say; I had been believingly disbelieving; or unbelievingly Believing." That he could at once feel such a deep commitment to Christian fellowship and yet doubt its very basis made the experience all the more baffling—and important.

William Alcott was a prolific writer, focusing on education and health reform. Robert H. Abzug features him as one of the "body reformers" in *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (1994), describing the evangelical Alcott as offering a sort of supplemental Christian redemption through control of the body, promoting rigid dietary practices and physical regimens that became almost like a new Mosaic law. But among the many books that Alcott published under his own name is an anonymous one that scholars have overlooked: *My Progress in Error, and Recovery to Truth* (1842), an autobiographical account of his decade-long struggle with religious skepticism in the 1820s. As a young man he modeled himself on Benjamin Franklin. Although he regularly attended church and even taught Sunday school, "passing" as a Christian, he doubted or disbelieved the doctrines he heard and taught. He cultivated the habit of critically examining anything he was supposed to trust according to tradition or current public opinion; he enjoyed pondering paradoxes and debating religious and philosophical issues in taverns. Keeping his true sentiments hidden from his neighbors, he secretly corresponded with liberal Unitarians in Boston and became well acquainted with Owenite Free Enquirers. Reading Fanny Wright's lectures to his family, he was moved to tears and was tempted to become an apostle of religious skepticism and free inquiry. Even after his conversion to Christianity, Alcott found himself occasionally

wandering back into the wilderness of doubt. More importantly, in his later career as a health and education reformer he recognized lingering “habits of thinking, and feeling, and reasoning, and acting, formed in the school of skepticism.”

The accumulation of such stories—not just as religious biographies but as tiles in a larger mosaic of American cultural politics—suggests that those habits lingered in the broader society as well. By the time Abraham Lincoln had turned from his earlier skepticism about Christianity to see himself as an instrument of Providence, and Christian soldiers in North and South marched righteously off to war, the triumph of American faith over deists, infidels, and doubters can seem complete. But the nature of that faith, and the manner of its triumph, calls out for more free inquiry.

Further Reading:

On Ezra Stiles, see Stiles, *The United States Elevated to Glory and Honor* (New Haven, 1783). See also Christopher Grasso, *A Speaking Aristocracy: Transforming Public Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Connecticut* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1999): chapter 5, and Edmund S. Morgan, *The Gentle Puritan: A Life of Ezra Stiles* (New Haven, 1962). Three important studies of American religious history in this period are Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, 1989); Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990); and Mark Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford and New York, 2002). Quotations are from “Communications. Prossimo,” *The Free Enquirer* (Dec. 3, 1828); Orestes A. Brownson, *Charles Elwood, or the Infidel Converted* (1884), in *The Works of Orestes A. Brownson* (New York, 1966): IV, 315; “Infidelity,” *Christian Register* (July 18, 1829): 114; “Scepticism and Infidelity,” *Christian Secretary* (Oct. 4, 1839): 2-3; M. Stuart, “Article I. The Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels, by Andrews Norton,” *The American Biblical Repository* (April 1838): 265-343; Gardner Jones, “Infidelity—Its Consequences!” *The Catholic Telegraph* (June 27, 1834): 244-6; “Natural History of Enthusiasm,” *The Spirit of the Pilgrims* (May 1830): 256-79, quotation on 277; Franklin L. Baumer, *Religion and the Rise of Scepticism* (New York, 1960): 4; William Smyth Babcock, “Declaration of the Christian Revelation Made Friday Evening January 16th 1800 at Weathersfield Vermont” (“boundless dream of Doubt”) and “Journal,” *William Smyth Babcock Papers*, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Mass.; other quotations are from journal entries for July 28, 1801; Aug. 21, 23, and 26, 1801; and Sept. 7, 1801.

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