

“THE LIGHTNING FROM THE SKY AND THE SCEPTRE
FROM TYRANTS”:
RELIGION AND THE AMERICAN ENLIGHTENMENT

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Ferguson, Robert A. *The American Enlightenment, 1750-1820*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997. Pp. xii + 220. \$14.95 paper.

Howe, Daniel Walker. *Making the American Self: Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997. Pp. 342. \$39.95 cloth.

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A generation ago, scholarly treatments of late eighteenth-century America were predominantly secular in tone. Historians, for instance, usually analyzed the Revolution and the creation of the Republic in light of contemporary socio-economic and political developments. They likewise tended to trace the thought of the Founding Fathers either to the European Enlightenment or to Anglo-American traditions of radical political dissent long removed from their Puritan origins. Students of American culture and literature, similarly, in general saw the period as one in which religion was a curiously persistent influence destined to disappear in time. (At best, like Henry May, they credited its presence, but did so apologetically.) Nor was this approach without its merits. In many respects, it obviously bore much fruit. One only has to think of Bernard Bailyn's *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* or of a number of other distinguished studies from the 1960's and 1970's to be reminded how much this scholarship contributed to our understanding of revolutionary and post-revolutionary America.¹

Yet even three decades ago, a minority of scholars dissented from the prevailing secularism. They took the view that religion was a central force in American intellectual, political, social, and cultural life throughout the eighteenth century. Perhaps most prominent among these historians and literary critics was Alan Heimert, whose *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* seriously challenged the then dominant academic outlook. One sign, in fact, both of the former strength of the secularist consensus and of its more recent decline is that Heimert's book

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– frostily received in some quarters when it was published in 1966 – has latterly achieved general scholarly rehabilitation. In the tradition of Heimert, both the volumes reviewed here at least in part seek to prove that religion had a decisive impact on the American eighteenth century. More than that, they demonstrate that like the American Revolution, the American Enlightenment was not really a purely secular affair at all, having been intimately bound up with emergent – rather than receding or just persistent – Protestant ideas, values, feelings, and institutions. Indeed, paradoxically, both works claim that far from undermining traditional belief, the American Enlightenment actually set the stage for the complex rapprochement between religion and secular thought that characterizes so much in antebellum America (a grand intellectual and cultural compromise which, the authors claim, still influences us today).

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Originally written for *The Cambridge History of American Literature*,² Robert A. Ferguson's *The American Enlightenment* at first glance seems more focused on politics than religion. For like John Adams, Ferguson believes that the Revolution was "the central event of the American Enlightenment" (1), the struggle for "the political right of self-determination" that put into practice "the basic eighteenth-century tenets of Enlightenment thought: the primacy of reason, the reliability of human understanding, the value of individual freedom, trust in method, faith in education, belief in progress, and a corresponding disregard for tradition, constituted authority, and received dogma." It was the Revolution that made "consent of the governed . . . the sign and symptom of the Enlightenment at work in each succeeding generation" (22); and so, the business of enlightenment in America was at one level essentially that of imitating the archetypal new world secularist, Benjamin Franklin, who devoted his life to fighting religious obscurantism and royal absolutism: to seizing (as Turgot put it) "the lightning from the sky and the sceptre from tyrants" (36).

Read this way, moreover (as a book just about how eighteenth-century American politics manifests the secular goals of the Enlightenment), Ferguson's study is arguably the most stimulating treatment of the period in a generation, a work replete with often stunning examples of how the Founding Fathers did two interrelated things, one practical and the other cultural. The first was "to forge artificial unities amidst a contentious, far-flung populace" by creating a politically effective aesthetic of consensus: a

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grammar of assent for the proposition that the truths contained in the Declaration of Independence and other American Enlightenment political documents were indeed self-evident (and as such, worthy of civil allegiance as what Jefferson called constitutive “expression[s] of the American mind” [6]). The second was to use the spoken discourse, written texts, and public actions in which this aesthetic was embodied to advance a moderate, consensualist vision of enlightenment (i.e., a vision informed by the eighteenth-century *bourgeois* model of authority which – steering a centrist ideological course between genetic patriarchy and popular democracy – refigured the exercise of authority as an educational process in which the upper classes and members of the professions attempted to convince the lower classes to allow them to govern by consent for the common good).³

Thus, Ferguson demonstrates, the Declaration of Independence was not only a practical response to political grievance, but a manifestation of its authors’ belief in the inevitable “spread of the Enlightenment.” As such, the Declaration was for them – as it soon became for their fellow citizens – a “natural event, a part of the history and science of the New World” rather than a discrete political instrument (104). Similarly, the United States Constitution was simultaneously an enlightened attempt to create a new political order, and a consensualist response to the grave challenge the Revolution and its aftermath posed for elite authority (a text that successfully created an impression of unanimity and ideological harmony in order both to mask its antidemocratic features – as well as its omissions, compromises, and ambiguities – and to mystify itself as an uncrafted, inevitable document worthy of an enlightened people).

At one level, therefore, Ferguson presents us with an intellectual and political history of the foundational events and texts of the American Republic that is arresting – all the more so for the further insight it provides into their grounding in the Age of Reason. Yet reading *The American Enlightenment* just in this fashion – only placing it within the secularist tradition in American historiography – misses one of its author’s deeper purposes, which is nothing less than to desecularize the American Enlightenment. For throughout the book, most obviously in the chapter devoted to religion (44-79), Ferguson is at pains to demonstrate that “eighteenth-century American thought” was as much influenced by “Protestant Reform Christianity” as by the forces of secular reason (21). Like Heimert, for example, he believes both in “the dominance of religious expression in American culture” (44) at every stage in the run-up to the Revolution, and that the effect of religion during this first period was mostly to *reinforce* (and to be mutually *reinforced by*) Enlightenment values,

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rather than to stand in opposition to them. Similarly, Ferguson amply illustrates religion's pivotal influence later on during the War of Independence – for “faith, not logic, carries a rebellion” (49) – even, notwithstanding their anticlericalism and disdain for enthusiasm, among the enlightened. Only after the Revolution does he find the power of faith temporarily in decline; significantly, because at that point the “anti-authoritarianism in American Protestantism” combined with Enlightenment skepticism to undercut all forms of “communal leadership” (including that of the clergy), by suggesting that “Providence” may be found “in the mass rather in the hierarchy of civil society” (56). In Ferguson's view, however, this secularist triumph was only temporary; and the Enlightenment's establishment of “an elaborate, institutionalized civil religion in America” (78) soon had to come to terms with Christianity in order to survive in the cultural compromise that dominated until at least the Civil War.

Read in this second light (as an attempt to collapse cultural and historical antinomies of long standing), Ferguson's achievement is even more impressive. In fact, the only general objection one might make to his important and stimulating revisionary account is that it tends to side with the eighteenth-century establishment in its view of its subject. As a result, the perspective we get of the American Enlightenment, including its relation to religion, is mostly from the top down. Politically, for instance, Ferguson throughout privileges the views and texts of the Founding Fathers, thereby reinforcing the traditional impression that they were high-minded *savants* whose irresistible powers of expression allowed them to create, and then effectively control “an experimental republic on the edge of a vast and unformed new world” (28) against an opposition unworthy of sustained intellectual attention. This not only overestimates the Fathers' political, social, and economic disinterestedness, initial influence, and long-term ideological effectiveness, it also tends to underestimate the intellectual, moral, and political claims of those more radical, anti-consensualist Americans who paved the way for the triumph of a more egalitarian and democratic nation after 1800. Indeed, in many ways one would not know from Ferguson that the latter *had* triumphed in the long run, since whenever they figure in his story, they invariably lose the debate to the Founders.

Similarly, Ferguson virtually identifies the American Enlightenment with moderate Whig consensualism. As a result, he tends to lump his enlightened heroes together ideologically, coopting the more radical among them (like Tom Paine) to the consensualist cause, and minimizing the differences among the rest (e.g., between Jefferson and Adams). For the same reason, he also hermeneutically circumscribes American Enlightenment

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documents, ignoring eighteenth-century interpretations of them which fall outside certain ideological limits (e.g., as in the case of the Constitution, which – despite the best efforts of John Marshall – rapidly came to be popularly perceived as anti-consensualist and democratic in intent). Even when he assigns some blame to the consensualist Enlightenment culture out of which the Constitution arose (as in his final chapter explaining why “Black Americans, Native Americans, and women all lose ground in the first decades of the Republic even as the rights of citizenship are spreading to a broader population base” [151]), he characterizes these and other marginalized “early republicans” both as being “wholly *without* eloquence” or public voice, and as submitting quickly to the Founders and the consensualist culture of textual performance they created (169). (A view that flies in the face of much recent literary and social history, which suggests that African Americans, women, and lower-class men never gave up their protests against the hegemony of the great and the good that Ferguson historiographically perpetuates here.)⁴

So too, seen as a work concerned with problematizing the secularism of the American Enlightenment, Ferguson’s volume fails to pay sufficient attention to the often abrasive religious radicalism of eighteenth-century American culture. Though not, perhaps, as deficient in this respect as he is in regard to political dissent, Ferguson once again tends to coopt malcontents to the consensualist cause, too often portraying politically and socially radical believers as working in tandem with the elite. Among other things, this seriously underplays the now well-documented oppositionalism, subversiveness, and revolutionary effect of evangelical Protestantism from 1750-1820, imposing – again, in the face of much recent work, in history and sociology – an old-fashioned, essentially northwestern European model of the social function of religion onto the American scene.⁵ While in the end, this does not detract from the overall impact of his contribution to ending the previous generation’s historiographical polarization of faith and reason – not to mention, their all too frequent suppression of any significant reference to religion in the history of the American Enlightenment – it does mean that Ferguson’s otherwise excellent book needs to be read with some caution. For good as it is, it is definitely a view of America “from above,” one that does not wholly comprehend the claims, needs, values, and passions of ordinary eighteenth-century folk, let alone the empowering and liberating force of faith and reason among them.

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At first glance, Daniel Walker Howe's *Making the American Self* also seems written from the largely secular perspective of the older generation in American studies. For he tells us that his subject is the "ideas Americans once had concerning the proper construction of the self" (1), in particular, the way eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Americans "postulated not only the existence of a self as the consequence of an individual's personal and social history, but also the capacity of the individual for critical reflection upon that self, with the power to modify it through conscious effort." Like the older generation too, he specifically attributes the origins of this model of a wisely-constructed, balanced character to the Enlightenment, especially to the "paradigm . . . of faculty psychology" (5).⁶

Howe contends that this essentially rationalist view of human nature permeated early American culture, providing the new nation with a language for discussing public as well as private issues (the former by "analogy between the construction of individual character and the construction of the commonwealth"). This is the main reason, he claims, why Enlightenment psychological and moral concerns (e.g., about "the supremacy of reason over passion" and of "the common good over demagoguery, fanaticism, and faction" [6-7]) pervade public texts from Washington's Farewell to the Gettysburg Address. It is also why such concerns underlie so many of our foundational national beliefs (e.g., that of the right to what Jefferson called "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" [9]). So too, the Age of Reason explains why American intellectual and political life kept to a largely moderate course both before and after the Revolution. For faculty psychology and the model of self-construction allied with it affirmed an "ideal liberal personality" characterized by the Enlightenment virtues of "reflective self-awareness, active self-control, an openness to change, and critical support for the public morality." This both restrained the anti-authoritarian, democratic individualism set in motion by the evangelical revivals and "market revolution" in the eighteenth-century Anglo-American world, and moderated American culture's antithetical needs for order, piety, *bourgeois* respectability, and social morality. Similarly, faculty psychology allowed the Founding Fathers to draw alike from the classical republican and the liberal traditions in political theory,⁷ since the model of the well-balanced character to which it gave birth, by subordinating passion to reason, encouraged both the morality of the ideal republican citizen and the prudence and enlightened self-interest of the ideal liberal. This in turn enabled the political order enshrined in the Constitution and Bill of Rights to make the transition from republican elitism to liberal democracy after 1800 (11).

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Yet as with Ferguson, “the little, lower layer” of Howe’s book is his attempt to bridge the antinomies of reason and religion when discussing the American Enlightenment. This is why, for instance, he spends so much time at the beginning showing how Benjamin Franklin and Jonathan Edwards “both addressed the problem of human nature” by using faculty psychology to explore the chief, self-deconstructing limitation of Enlightenment moral philosophy: its naive “assumption that rationality ought to govern human nature.” For though their “answer[s] to the problem of humanity’s perverse irrationality” differed (Franklin recommended the cultivation of good habits; Edwards hope in the “disinterested benevolence” of divine grace); and though their analyses of “the process of self-construction” varied (Franklin conceived of it as “secular, deliberate, and highly individualistic”; Edwards as anti-individualistic, distrustful of self-interest, and “at best a preparation for” religious conversion), nonetheless “after their deaths the intellectual history of self-construction in America” synthesized “their approaches rather than leaving them as mutually exclusive alternatives,” one secular and the other evangelical (44). And so, the archetypal colonial rationalist and the great defender of New England orthodoxy both lay the groundwork for one of the major features of the grand compromise between secularism and Christianity in antebellum America.

Similarly, Howe goes out of his way to emphasize another major reason why a polarization between reason and religion did not occur in America in the aftermath of the Enlightenment. This was because the model of self-construction used by both Franklin and Edwards connected in the late eighteenth century with moderating intellectual currents within the Enlightenment itself, most notably the Scottish Common Sense philosophy. A major influence on Thomas Jefferson as well as on the texts of the Declaration and the Constitution, the Scottish philosophy rejected the atheism and radical skepticism of David Hume because it “dissolved human consciousness into a mere chain of sensory experiences. . . . Determined to retain the integrity of the individual *self*” (and in most cases, determined too to support religion, at least of a socially-useful, latitudinarian sort), they instead asserted the existence of a regulating faculty (“the common sense”) which made sense of sense experience, urging its cultivation through education and exposure to polite society. In America, this moralistic and reassuring doctrine not only encouraged self-culture as a project, it made the philosophy popular among both the enlightened, and middle-class clerics and evangelicals, reinforcing the already strong belief within each group that “manners and morals,” encouraged by reason and religion, are necessary in

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the creation of a national character (75). Likewise, the Scots' commitment to balancing diversity and control led them (based upon the analogy between political institutions and "the faculties of human nature" [63]) to "endorse the features of mixed and balanced government embodied in the British constitution" (55-56). In *The Federalist Papers* (especially those by James Madison, himself educated at Princeton by John Witherspoon, one of the Scots divines most amenable to the moderate currents in the Enlightenment), this reappears in the belief that order and liberty (like reason and the passions) should be balanced in a political system in which the legislative, executive, and judicial branches mirror the roles of the understanding, the will, and the conscience in the individual psyche.

In the early nineteenth century, the now aligned forces of Christianity and the Enlightenment (reason, progressivism, individualism, evangelical Protestantism, capitalism, and consumerism) then spread this ethic of balanced "voluntary choice and self-discipline" as the means of achieving "the heroic ideal of the self-constructed individual" throughout the population (109-112). At the same time, the American elite, regarding "the construction of disciplined individual selves" as the goal of all reform, connected the ideal of the voluntarily chosen identity to their "concern with the reformation and discipline of others throughout society" (112-113). One result was antebellum America's public schools, library companies, literary societies, lyceums, and mental health institutions, which were founded (often under religious auspices) out of a concern for self-improvement and the attainment of a well-balanced character. For reformers like Horace Mann, Dorothea Dix, and Horace Bushnell stood very much in the tradition of Franklin and Edwards, drawing equally upon faculty psychology, the Common Sense philosophy, and Protestant values as the basis for their efforts.

In much the same way, the Victorian ideal of "the self-made man" obviously stems from the Protestant/enlightened paradigm of self-construction (something evident in the speeches and autobiographical writings of Lincoln, Henry Clay, and Frederick Douglass, not to mention the novels of Horatio Alger, Jr.). So too, antebellum America's most famous "self-made woman," the feminist, Transcendentalist, and reformer Margaret Fuller, was also deeply indebted to the paradigm, both in her life and writings (which affirmed that equally as a matter of "personal fulfillment" and "public policy," there was "no reason why the good republican citizen could not be a women" [224]). And more ironically, Henry David Thoreau, a religious skeptic and yet a Puritan *manqué*,

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was quite indifferent to the ideal of success as American society defined it. He despised the world of middle-class respectability that Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass worked so hard to join. He dismissed the party politics that engaged them so deeply. The market revolution, which Lincoln sought to foster, held no allure for a man who deliberately set out to prove that one could get along without most of its new consumer goods. Polite culture he rejected along with the prudential rationale that justified it. Yet Thoreau was, in his own way, engaged in the same sort of enterprise as Lincoln and Douglass: consciously constructing an identity of his own.

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His proclamation in *Walden* “that his art is a form of self-deconstruction rather than a product produced for a patron, a public, or a market” is thus drawn equally from a secular romantic belief in sincerity and a New England Protestant commitment to spiritual integrity. Similarly, his “Resistance to Civil Government” (also known as “Civil Disobedience”) is a statement of principled resistance to authority as familiar to Voltaire as to any Puritan, by which men and women may attain what Thoreau took to be the goal of all self-fashioning: “authenticity in action” (248).

As this should suggest, like *The American Enlightenment, Making the American Self* is an important book. To be sure, its author’s insistence on the centrality of faculty psychology and self-construction, and his narrow focus on intellectual history at times lead him astray (e.g., like Ferguson, he misses the Founders’ real intellectual diversity and ignores their political and economic self-interestedness during the post-revolutionary decades). His own well-known commitment to rehabilitating Unitarianism intellectually is certainly in places on display too. Yet these shortcomings detract little from his achievement, which is hardly limited to fulfilling his stated goal of proving that a reexamination of “the place of morality and the ‘moral sense’ in the process of character-formation,” both individual and national, is long overdue. For along the way, he shows that this effort must not neglect the role of religion in the making of the American self. And in that, like Robert Ferguson, Daniel Walker Howe more broadly suggests that American history is a matter best not left to those who worship exclusively in the Temple of Reason.

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NOTES

- 1 Studies of the highest quality are still being written from this secular perspective, of course (e.g., Elkins and McKittrick).
- 2 It was originally published in 1994 as part of Vol. 1 of *The Cambridge History of American Literature: American Literature, 1590-1820*, ed. Bercovitch, 345-537.
- 3 The fullest discussion of consensualism as an ideology and historical force in America is Fliegelman, *Prodigals and Pilgrims*; but see also, Silverman, *A Cultural History of the American Revolution*; Lynn, *A Divided People*; Ferguson's earlier *Law and Letters in American Culture*; and Howe's earlier *The Unitarian Conscience* and *The Political Culture of the American Whigs*.
- 4 Many good accounts of late eighteenth-century American political and social radicalism and dissent now exist, some of which also include treatments of its grounding in the Enlightenment; three recent examples are Davidson, *Revolution and the Word*; Elliott, *Revolutionary Writers*; and Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution*.
- 5 There have been many distinguished studies of the intersection of political, social, and religious radicalism in late eighteenth-century America since Heimert's *Religion and the American Mind*. These range from regional histories (like Isaac's 1983 Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Transformation of Virginia*) and family histories (e.g., Cole's *Mary Moody Emerson*, esp. 15-79) to more general treatments (like Butler's *Awash in a Sea of Faith*; Hatch's *Democratization of American Christianity*; and J. C. D. Clark's recent *The Language of Liberty*). (Though to be fair to Ferguson, some of the titles just mentioned have appeared since the first publication of *The American Enlightenment*.) At the same time, the appropriateness of applying models of the social function of religion developed in the context of the state churches of northern Europe to the American situation has come in for increasing criticism; see Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion*; Roof and McKinney, *American Mainline Religion*; and Greeley, *Religious Change in America*.
Finally, let me add that in using the word "class" here, I am well aware that I am doing so very loosely. Cannadine, *The Rise and Fall of Class in Britain*, esp. 1-58, makes full reference to the major studies of class in eighteenth-century British North America in the context of a more wide-ranging discussion of the awareness and realities of class in the first British Empire.
- 6 As Howe goes on to define it, this was the belief (originating at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth centuries) that "human nature could be analyzed in terms of certain components, such as the 'understanding' (powers of awareness, including both sensation and reflection) and the 'will' (powers of action or motivation). Among the powers of the will could be distinguished a variety of human motives, typically arranged in a hierarchically defined sequence of 'faculties.' The moral and rational powers (because they partook of the divine nature) had precedence over emotional and instinctive impulses (animal powers). Last of all came

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- the mechanical reflexes (vegetative powers), over which there was no conscious control" (5).
- 7 These are respectively (in Howe's words) the belief that the purpose of society is to promote "the common good, which can be discovered by inquirers" possessing "wisdom and virtue" versus the belief that "there is no such thing as a common good, only individual preferences" and a "diversity of viewpoints" that require protection "through legal means" (11).

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