

*Skepticism and American Faith:  
From the Revolution to the Civil War*

CHRISTOPHER GRASSO

Oxford University Press, 2018

649 pp.

Historian Christopher Grasso has a problem: the “problem of skepticism and faith” (4). His expansive new book on religion in America from the Revolution to the Civil War takes its place among a welter of contending academic studies that characterize the period as one of either evangelical ascendancy or secular insurgency. But for Grasso, it is the “entanglement” (7) of the two that mattered most—and that would, in time, come to define the sprawling religious culture of the new United States.

Of the two eponymous categories, skepticism initially seems to dominate. Grasso begins with the assertion that his study will put “skepticism back into the story of American religious history” (7). Yet this is no mere reclamation project. In Grasso’s assured prose, skepticism and faith become much more than a “contest of opposing ideas” (4). He envisions them anchoring the ends of continuum across which people moved throughout their lives. Grasso is especially attuned to the specific moments in which these terms were invoked and mobilized in particular economic, political, or social contexts—the “alchemy of real life” (195). Drawing on the extensive literature of lived religion—and “lived irreligion, too” (4), as the author quips in his introduction—*Skepticism and Faith* seeks to move “beyond the confines of traditional intellectual history” and into the “daily practices” (4) of an eclectic cast of characters who engaged with and expressed indifference toward traditional forms of Protestantism.

Grasso organizes the book into four loosely chronological parts. “Revolutions, 1775–1815,” examines the “relationship of religion and government” and the “ways that religion could be practiced in a ‘free’ environment” (20). Part 2, “Enlightenments, 1790–1840,” presents a broad array of clergymen and freethinkers who grappled with new intellectual and philosophical trends and vigorously debated what it meant to live in an “enlightened and Christian” nation. Social reformers take center stage in part 3, “Reforms, 1820–1850,” in which Grasso shows how the twin poles of skepticism and faith shaped Americans’ experiences of emergent capitalism and its attendant social ills. The final two chapters, in a part titled

“Sacred Causes, 1830–1865,” trace the diverse strategies through which the skeptical and faithful alike “sanctified” (394) sectional politics during the decades leading up to the American Civil War.

Seen from one angle, *Skepticism and Faith* is an ambitious cultural history written on a vast scale. Grasso tackles large historiographical issues ranging from citizenship and social reform to slavery and western expansion. He draws on a staggering number of newspapers; books, tracts, pamphlets, and essays; autobiographies and novels; letters, journals, and other archival texts. Yet the book remains an intimate portrait of antebellum religious life, carefully organized around prosopographical chapters featuring both notable and obscure individuals. In early chapters recovering the intellectual worlds of deists and other skeptics, Grasso offers tantalizing evidence of freethinking African Americans whose experiences of enslavement led them to reject all forms of religion; and he plumbs the troubled mind of Connecticut lawyer William Beadle, whose dabbling in deist literature led to murder and suicide—and partly inspired Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland*. Other chapters track the sinuous religious lives of prominent figures, including novelist and Catholic convert Orestes Brownson, abolitionist Jarena Lee, biblical numerologist William Miller, Methodist itinerant Jeremiah Minter, and social reformers Frances Wright and Robert Dale Owen. Grasso also works with a fascinating cast of little-known but not-quite-ordinary men and women, such as Richard Hildreth, a bookish Utilitarian philosopher; Ernestine Rose, whose incendiary assault on the fundamentals of the Christian faith and passionate defense of women’s rights sparked a riot at the 1853 Hartford Bible Convention; and a host of others who read Thomas Paine’s *Age of Reason* and the Bible, attended philosophical lectures and revival meetings, joined churches and utopian communities, and, above all, preached, discussed, debated, and published their endlessly shifting views on natural philosophy and revealed religion.

Grasso’s braided biographies brim with irony, strange twists and turns, and unintended consequences. Readers encounter David Nelson and Ezra Stiles Ely, two Presbyterian stalwarts who founded a college in Missouri dedicated to the ideals of “Christian enlightenment,” only to watch it collapse under the weight of slavery controversies and economic mismanagement. Thomas Cooper’s forays into biblical criticism and the new science of geology eventually led to his dismissal as the president of South Carolina College, but they also fueled his states’ rights political theories and ardent

support of nullification. Cooper's students, however, rejected his skepticism and fashioned a proslavery Christianity that underwrote white supremacy in the South. A trio of avowed infidels—lawyer Charles R. Baldwin, shoemaker John Scarlett, and printer John Bayley—eventually found shelter from the maelstrom of the capitalist marketplace in the very faiths they once derided as superstitious priestcraft. And the voluminous journals and unpublished writings of John R. Kelso—which Grasso has published in *Bloody Engagements: John R. Kelso's Civil War* (Yale UP, 2017)—reveal how the Unionist guerrilla fighter sloughed off the Methodism of his youth and embraced a strident atheism in his public lectures only to discover to his dismay that he had been deifying the Union itself.

Literary critics interested in the genealogy of secularism traced in important recent books such as John Lardas Modern's *Secularism in Antebellum America* (U of Chicago P, 2011) or Emily Ogden's *Credulity: A Cultural History of US Mesmerism* (U of Chicago P, 2018) may find less of use in *Skepticism and American Faith*. To be sure, Grasso is well versed in the literature of the secular turn in philosophy and literary theory (see his trenchant review essay "The Religious and the Secular in the Early American Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic*, vol. 36, 2016, pp. 359–88), but he largely sidesteps this ongoing conversation in favor of a detailed excavation of "what people in the past actually said and the relationship between how they talked and how they lived" (6). Early nineteenth-century intellectuals, clergymen, artisans, and reformers were more likely to speak of a generalized *faith*, "a trust and confidence in divine direction" (10), than "religion" in general. Many adopted various forms of skepticism (or were branded "infidels" by their opponents), which Grasso defines as a general orientation of doubt toward the authority of the Christian Bible, church institutions, and personal experience. But only a few people during the first half of the nineteenth century appear to have claimed the modern mantle of secular.

Grasso's distinctive biographical approach furthers a broader shift away from static histories of ideas, beliefs, theology, leaders, and denominations and toward a more fluid model of American religious history. In this way, *Skepticism and Faith* might profitably be read alongside an important essay on the "free seekers" of the early American Republic by historian Alan Taylor ("The Free Seekers: Religious Culture in Upstate New York, 1790–1835," *Journal of Mormon History*, vol. 27, 2001, pp. 42–66). As with

Taylor's radical evangelicals, Grasso's struggling Christians and uncertain skeptics seldom remained in one place for long—geographically, intellectually, or otherwise. Readers following their circuitous passages from faith to doubt and back again will become increasingly convinced that thinking about the religious history of the early American nation in any singular or linear manner misses the point. All nineteenth-century Americans—from zealous evangelicals to strident skeptics—were seekers of one kind or another. Their winding routes through an incipient national culture matter as much, or perhaps more, than the specific theologies and ideologies they espoused.

*Skepticism and Faith* establishes an impressive new framework for reconsidering many of the era's most pressing social, political, and economic concerns. It admirably revises and supersedes Henry May's taxonomic *The Enlightenment in America* (Oxford UP, 1975); serves as an absorbing prequel to Leigh Eric Schmidt's recent *Village Atheists: How America's Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation* (Princeton UP, 2016); and provides essential historical grounding for emerging debates in secularization theory. Neither a product of democratization, as Nathan Hatch famously asserted (*Democratization of American Christianity* [Yale UP, 1989]), nor "conceived in doubt," as Amanda Porterfield has recently challenged (*Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation* [U of Chicago P, 2012]), "American styles of Christianity," Grasso concludes, were "forged in the foundry of culture" (17), on the iron of faith and the hammer of skepticism.

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### *Maternal Bodies: Redefining Motherhood in Early America*

NORA DOYLE

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286 pp.

At some point in my courses in history of women and history of reproduction I like to show students images of pregnancy from eighteenth-century medical anatomy texts. I ask my students to gaze at images from William Hunter or William Smellie, to think about how these illustrations of