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CONSTRUCTED IN DOUBT: THE EVANGELICAL INVENTION OF RELIGION IN EARLY AMERICA

Michael J. Altman

I write this contribution to the roundtable with Thomas Paine as my muse. I am a skeptic. Paine is more than my muse, though. He is my spirit animal. I picked up Amanda Porterfield's wonderful book in the midst of my own crisis of doubt. In the midst of my own skeptical turn. It was a very Tom Painian mood. While the field of American religious history continues to churn out well written and rigorously researched work, I had begun to wonder if all of our energies were not just variations on a single theme. And I was losing my belief in that theme. I was growing skeptical of American religious history.

About a year ago I was having coffee with a mid-career religious historian whom I greatly admire. We were discussing how we imagined ourselves, our work, and our audience. This historian looked at me at one point and said something to the effect of, "I wanted to show historians that religion is a powerful force. That it does stuff." Religion does stuff. This is the mantra of our subfield. I do not walk the halls of a history department, but I imagine this is what the religious historian says to his or her Marxist colleagues: "Religion is not epiphenomenal! It is not simply a mask for politics or capital! It does stuff." For example, Paul Harvey and Kevin Schultz describe the ways historians of American religions have "found the persistence, continuity, and adaptability of American religion an impressive, motivating, guiding, and ever shape-shifting specter."[1] The verbal quality of that language is telling: motivating, guiding, shape-shifting. Because religion does stuff, right? Religion guides, motivates, adapts, continues, persists, right? Or maybe it does not. Maybe those moments of persistence, guidance, motivation, and continuity are actually the moments where religion itself gets constructed. Maybe it is shape-shifting because it is constantly being rebuilt. But by who? And to what end? These were the questions driving my doubt.

"Religion came to designate a diffuse realm, protected by the state, where people built communities, conceived relationships with God, and lamented the corruption of the state and of profane, mistrustful society," writes Porterfield.[2] Here religion does nothing. People build, conceive, and lament, and in that process they

[1] Kevin M. Schultz and Paul Harvey, "Everywhere and Nowhere: Recent Trends in American Religious History and Historiography," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78:1 (March 1, 2010): 131.
[2] Amanda Porterfield, *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 12.

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build a diffuse realm they call religion. And so, as she closes her introduction, Porterfield proves my doubts warranted. Religion is not an agent, a force, or a motivator. It is a realm, a category, a way of cordoning off this and not that. It is a product of distinctions and combinations.

In my reading, Porterfield's most important contribution to American religious history is the shift from arguing that religion does stuff to an argument about how religion became a "diffuse realm" that Americans distinguished from the political and the profane. It is a shift from descriptivism to constructivism—a shift from looking for religion and seeing what it does to tracing out how Americans built this category they called "religion."

Two examples of these distinctions from Porterfield's book will add clarity to this abstract constructivism. The shift from what religion does to how religion came to be appears in two places: evangelicals' relationships with their others and disputes over true religion. In these two cases Porterfield does not attempt to prove that religion is doing something. Rather, she pays particular attention to how Americans distinguished religion or evangelical religion and how these acts of distinction, difference, and boundary maintenance shaped the realms of religion and politics.

In Porterfield's narrative, evangelical revival washed away the doubts and skepticism of the late eighteenth century. This narrative highlights the ways evangelicalism functions as a mode of identity construction that depends on distinguishing oneself from others. Evangelicalism is a strategy for claiming a unique identity in American culture. To that end, it always needs an other—something else outside of itself. Evangelical identity, at its theological root, is about being in or out, saved or not, a believer or an unbeliever. As Porterfield argues, unbelievers and skeptics—others—fueled the revivalism of the first decade of the nineteenth century.

Just beyond the period Porterfield covers comes the rise of the missionary movement, a hallmark of evangelical identity, which was predicated on a distinction between the Christian and the heathen. Even before American missionaries launched ships for heathen lands, evangelicals made the connection between the heathen over there and unbelievers here at home. An 1801 tract titled *Gospel News, or, a Brief Account of the Revival of Religion in Kentucky and Several Other Parts of the United States* included a series of extracts from letters and accounts of revival combined with letters from British missionary William Carey. One extract of a letter from Lexington, Kentucky described an outsider to the evangelical revival: "But alas, poor L——, yet in measure stands out, though I trust even in this Sodom there are a few brought to the saving knowledge of a precious Christ. I was told yesterday, that the wicked son of E. D. has been bro't in the gospel fold."[3] The revival depended on distinctions and difference: sheep and goats, insiders and outsiders, evangelicals and unbelievers.

Further on in the same tract came a letter from British missionary William Carey. In his letter Carey lamented the "truly deplorable" state of religion in India. The Europeans are all young deists who "having read so much of Jupiter, Juno,

[3] *Gospel News, or a Brief Account of the Revival of Religion in Kentucky and Several Other Parts of the United States, Likewise, the Pleasing Accounts of the Success and Prospects of the Everlasting Gospel in the East Indies* (B[illegible] 1801)

Bacchus, &c. under the name of Deists, and of their worship under the disguised name of sacred mysteries, they admire the words, and call Hindoo abominations by the same name."[4] Even worse, they are marked by idolatry, luxury, and vice. The "natives" in India are in an equally "deplorable state" according to the Baptist missionary. "Their worship is idle ceremony; moral vicissitude of conduct makes no part of their system, and may be literally said to be pickled in vice."[5] This sounds a good bit like the evangelical critique of Federalist religion Porterfield outlines. But even more importantly, Carey puts the heathen and the deist in the same boat and his own evangelical religion stands in contrast to these others. The difference between evangelicals and Federalists was more a matter of identity than theology or practice, and it depended on others—those outside the evangelical fold like the "heathen Hindoo," "poor L," or "the wicked son of E. D."—for its maintenance.

The evangelical identity built on opposition, on insiders and outsiders, constructed the religion in America as a realm of choice. Moving from one side of the ledger to the other required a decision to leave behind sin and fall upon the grace of God. As Porterfield acknowledges, this new realm of choice put theological pressure on New Light Presbyterians to leave behind Calvinist predestination, but it posed no hurdles for the Methodists and Baptists. Religion as choice had a downside for evangelicals, though, because one can always choose to opt out altogether, like poor L in Lexington. Revival is necessary to continually reinforce the right choices. But while evangelical religion was a religion of choice, there was always only one right choice to make. Such a "choice" hardly seems democratic.

This leads to a second example from Porterfield's book, the conflicting definitions of true religion in this early period of American culture. Throughout *Conceived in Doubt* Americans of different stripes continually argue for "true religion" in contrast to whatever they see around them. Thomas Paine argued that true religion relied on reason endowed by the Creator. Federalists argued that true religion maintained moral and civil order. Evangelicals argued that true religion was a matter of religious experience and personal transformation. But more importantly, Republican evangelicals argued that true religion was free and separate from government intervention. The evangelical critiques of Federalist religion did not argue about the role of religion in government but about the very authenticity of any religion tied up with government. This argument, which won the day according to Porterfield, constructed the realm of religion as something that, by definition, existed outside of politics. Religion tied to civil government is no religion at all. It is priestcraft, as critics so often declared it. Priestcraft was a category that tied together Federalist state religion, Catholicism, and even pagan religions like Tibetan Buddhism (Lamaism) and Hindu religion (Brahman priestcraft). It was a category for things that were not true religion.

Taking these two moments of construction together, Porterfield reveals how the realm of religion emerged in the early nineteenth century as a space defined by personal choice and identity that stood separate and apart from government. It is

[4] Ibid., 15–16.

[5] Ibid., 16

within this realm that Jeffersonian politicians and evangelicals found common ground. They shared the belief in individual choice, and they shared an opponent in the Federalists. In imagining religion as a realm separate from government, evangelical Republicans opened it up as a realm for political cooperation with skeptic Jeffersonians. Ironically, in claiming to separate religion from politics, evangelicals placed themselves in a better position to act as a political force. But above all, Porterfield has asked an important question in this book: How did Americans construct religion? It's a question more of us should ask. So, perhaps I started with the wrong skeptic. I am not Thomas Paine. I am Francis Scott Key, asking if the flag of American religious history still stands. If we can produce more work like this—if instead of asking what does "religion do?" we can ask "how is religion constructed?"—then I think I can still see that flag in the dawn's early light.