

BOOK REVIEWS

***Everyone Orthodox to Themselves: John Locke and His American Students on Religion and Liberal Society*, by John Colman**

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The Trump era and the accompanying political realignment has presented a new, openly transactional religious politic to the American public. Donald Trump, openly irreligious and only vaguely aware of major precepts of the Christian religion, nonetheless offered himself—successfully as it would turn out—as a sort of tribune for conservative Evangelical Protestants and conservative Roman Catholics. Conservative Christians of all stripes claim political priority for being orthodox, a claim that is enduring and substantive but also difficult to substantiate in a disestablishmentarian republic where there is no official religion and where the federal state is officially unable to judge anything about religion other than to announce federal protection over said religion. Christians, and especially conservative Christians, argue that their beliefs underpinned the Founders’ understanding of liberty and that those same conservative Christian beliefs—orthodox Christian beliefs, as it goes—are what America still needs to support its time-honored constitutional liberties. The only problem with this account, argues John Colman in *Everyone Orthodox to Themselves: John Locke and His American Students on Religion and Liberal Society*, is that American liberty was not founded on orthodox Christianity in the first place. American liberty, says Colman, was founded fundamentally on the rejection of the very idea of orthodoxy. American liberty instead was predicated on rejecting theological uniformity. America, unlike Europe or Britain, was a place where everyone could maintain their own version of “orthodoxy.”

The plan of Colman’s book works through Locke and his prominent devotees in the American Founding Era: Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. Locke’s legacy in America was not one of a political order protecting conservative Christian political-theological conceptions. Lockeanism instead wanted to create a theology of liberalism, wherein Christianity was remade to support liberalism. Original sin, historic Christian insistence on justification through Christ’s atonement, and messianic language all came under the withering revisionist gaze of thinkers like Franklin, Jefferson, and Madison. Jefferson went so far as to engage the

Bible directly, editing a version for himself and for posterity that took out the miraculous aspects of Christ's life. Lockeans wanted morality more than anything else from the Christian religion and had no use for the dogmatic, mystical, or sacramental aspects of Christianity.

A predilection for morality was on full display in the life of Benjamin Franklin. The Boston-born Philadelphian regularly attended church services and found the overly doctrinal and spiritually oriented preaching of Jedidiah Andrews, who emphasized the sacraments, public worship, and keeping the Christian sabbath, utterly impractical. Franklin felt entirely differently about Samuel Hemphill, an Irish-born young minister who used the pulpit to encourage the laity to moral action and right living rather than doctrines and sacraments. Hemphill's preaching eventually landed him in hot water with the local presbytery, and Franklin came to his defense. The episode convinced Franklin that the very notion of orthodoxy clouded, rather than clarified, Jesus's teachings. Constant concern for doctrine was therefore a disruptive force that should be done away with, and the church as a vehicle for that disruption should not be given official status in a commonwealth devoted to liberal development of humanity's innate moral aptitudes.

Franklin's belief that true freedom lay in reduced human certainty on orthodox Christian beliefs was shared, argues Colman, by James Madison. The erstwhile father of the Constitution concerned himself with the question of religious factions, and his political answers were not to privilege one faction or try to remove religion from political society altogether. Instead, he sought an order that downplayed the social privilege that orthodox belief historically granted. Once orthodoxy was not so socially powerful, citizens in the American republic would embrace an epistemological humility. From that epistemological humility would come a realization that, because believers could not be as certain about their own beliefs, they could not impose those same beliefs on others. Reason and conviction, not law, were the appropriate means by which someone could come to divine truth. Madison, according to Colman, believed that an intellectual modesty that acknowledged the incomprehensibility and mystery of God was the surest foundation of religious liberty.

Colman's chapter on Jefferson will perhaps be the most interesting to readers, largely because he makes Jefferson's intellectual materialism a key aspect of the third president's approach to religious freedom. Jefferson worried about the degree to which believers were enthralled by religion, and that thralldom inevitably leads humans to ignore reason and rationality in their approach to government and society. The captors of believers' reason, per Jefferson, were the immaterial doctrines of the Christian religion. Jefferson's own approach to religious liberty was to attack and downplay the immaterial aspects of Christianity, and he accused the Gospel writers of corrupting Christ's teachings, which he saw as moral and rational.

Colman's book offers a substantive thesis, and it's hard to deny that he understands the principals he's focusing on. Nonetheless, federal laws were of secondary importance to state laws in the constitutional era, and state laws were to a large degree wedded to "orthodox" Christianity. But even in those states that were conservative, the political regimes were quick to remove establishmentarian structures. So, it seems that even if we grant a continuing reliance on orthodoxy in some political structures, Colman still seems correct. Americans—unorthodox and orthodox—could be orthodox unto themselves.

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