
by Francesca Bregoli

David Sorkin’s studies to date have concentrated on 18th-century Jewish culture and the *Haskalah* (the Prussian Jewish Enlightenment), considering them within the larger context of the German moderate, theological Enlightenment. Certainly not a novice of comparative intellectual history, thus, Sorkin builds on the conceptual premises of his earlier works to widen the analytical scope of his argument in his fourth and latest book. Here he casts his net wider, endeavoring “to revise our understanding of the Enlightenment,” arguing - against the “secular master narrative” that emerged in the wake of the French Revolution, reinforced by two centuries of historical scholarship - that the “Enlightenment was not only compatible with religious belief, but even conducive to it” (p. 3).

This “Religious Enlightenment”, claims Sorkin, was “perhaps the first development common to Western and Central Europe’s religions” (p. 5), emerging from over a century of conflict after the Protestant Reformation. The study posits a history of filiations and affinity between the Religious Enlightenment’s various manifestations, with Dutch Arminianism and Jansenism providing the ground over which religious enlighteners developed their theological and political argumentations. A central, underlying assumption of the book is that all religious traditions faced similar challenges in the course of the 18th century, seeking similar answers to their dilemmas. Sorkin’s history therefore not only includes Protestantism, Calvinism, and Catholicism, but also Judaism: the *Haskalah* should be equally investigated alongside the Christian expressions of 18th-century moderate religious traditions.

Following a general introduction, each of the book’s six chapters offers a detailed and richly erudite case study of a single intellectual figure – all of them, with the exception of Moses Mendelssohn, little-known to the modern reader – representing a specific national and confessional expression of the phenomenon. William Warburton (1698-1779)’s “Moderation”, which gained state sponsorship in Whig England, embodies the first coherent version of the Religious Enlightenment, with an emphasis on toleration and reason, Newtonian science and natural law. Jacob Vernet (1698-1789), a “passionate popularizer” of Calvinist enlightened
Orthodoxy in patrician Geneva, in turn inspired by Arminianism, Cartesian philosophy and Anglican Moderation, combined a politics of subordination with a theology of free will, toleration and liberty of conscience. Siegmund Jacob Baumgarten (1706-1757), influenced by the teaching of Christian Wolff, was one of the most influential historians of his day and an early exponent of what will become Prussian Neology – a form of “enlightened piety and practice guided by a critical-historical method of scriptural interpretation” (p. 159). Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), the best known of the figures analyzed in the book and the most radical in his appeal to religious toleration, was a leading member of the Berlin Enlightenment and the foremost representative of the Haskalah, celebrated for his influential German translation (in Hebrew characters) of the Pentateuch as well as for his defense of Judaism. Joseph Eybel (1741-1805) was the “quintessential public reformer” in the Catholic Habsburg Empire. Supporting Joseph II’s fast program of reforms, he envisioned a “state church” that would shed its corporate characteristics and “wield authority on the basis of revelation, natural law, and the commonweal” (p. 229). Finally, Adrien Lamourette (1742-1794), was part of a loose group of “patriotic” and “enlightened” clergy that emerged during the early years of the French Revolution. Believing that Christianity and Revolution were mutually supportive, Lamourette (ineffectively) defended the middle ground in the Legislative Assembly; during the Terror, he (vainly) endeavored to avoid the extremes of counter-revolution and ongoing revolution. The “case study approach”, moreover, allows Sorkin to reach a degree of generalization. Two main intellectual traits seem to have characterized the Religious Enlightenment wherever it emerged: the search for a middle ground of reasonable religiosity, based on the re-appropriation of natural religion (traditional domain of deists and freethinkers) alongside revelation; and the commitment to tolerating religious minorities and dissenting sects, based on ecclesiastical versions of natural law theories, as propounded by Collegialism and Territorialism. Two common socio-political trends, furthermore, allowed its flourishing: the burgeoning public sphere with its expanding net of journals and salons; and the powerful state sponsorship enjoyed by most religious enlighteners. Sorkin’s work has real stakes for contemporary society, he readily acknowledges. Reconstructing the role of belief in the time of the Enlightenment seems particularly urgent today, as the polarization of secularists and believers has become increasingly fraught with difficulties (p. 314). One however needs to ask what the legacy of such 18th-century religious moderation was. Opposing the secular
narrative of the Enlightenment, the study aims to demonstrate that “modern culture also has religious roots and that the Enlightenment origins of modern culture were neither secular nor religious but a complex amalgam” (p. 21). And yet, Sorkin shows well that the Religious Enlightenment enjoyed short-lived success wherever it emerged; the thinkers under consideration, with the exclusion of Mendelssohn, left hardly any intellectual legacy to posterity. In fact, the fleeting nature of state support would seem to have determined both the initial success and the ultimate failure of the Religious Enlightenment. Although the movement “may have had more influential adherents and exerted more power in its day than either the moderate or the radical version of the Enlightenment” (p. 21) because of the state sponsorship that it obtained, Sorkin also provides much evidence to the contrary. With the significant exception of the Lutheran theological Enlightenment, which enjoyed uninterrupted support from the authorities, while also exerting significant influence among other confessions, Sorkin reconstructs a story of eventual failures. Towards the end of Warburton’s life, Moderation lost state support and stopped being a public factor (pp. 64-65). Calvinist enlightened Orthodoxy crumbled at the end of the 18th century as a result of new political circumstances in the 1780s and was later on crushed by the French Revolution and the Terror (pp. 109-110). The Haskalah, which for obvious reasons could not enjoy state sponsorship, needed to rely on the assistance of the Jewish mercantile elite, a circumstance that brought about the collapse of its political aspirations (p. 213). Habsburg Reform Catholicism was a factor primarily during the decade of reforms pursued by Joseph II, losing its importance after his death in 1790 (pp. 258-259). Lamourette, condemned to the guillotine in 1794, epitomizes the ultimate and complete failure of the Religious Enlightenment. Utterly destroyed by the French Revolution, the historical legacy of the trend of religious moderation reconstructed by Sorkin, as well as its actual impact over “modern culture,” remains uncharted.

The fleeting nature of the Religious Enlightenment raises some broad historical questions: Why was the “middle way” embraced by religious enlighteners in the end not compatible with late-18th-century developments? Why did religious moderation cease to be a compelling historical factor at the time? Are “faith” and “progress” ultimately mutually exclusive? Can the nature and circumstances of the Religious Enlightenment help explain the fact that categories such as “secular” and “radical” have enjoyed and still enjoy a wider popular and historiographical appeal than “religiously moderate”? Nevertheless, the fact that the Religious Enlightenment only existed
as a force in the European public sphere for a brief season should not detract from the many accomplishments of Sorkin’s masterful study. The individual chapters will certainly appeal to academic readers looking for information on little-studied intellectuals. The work particularly comes to life in its analysis of Protestant German lands. It is in the skillfully argued chapters concerning Baumgarten and Mendelssohn that Sorkin is at his most convincing in propounding the theory of a Religious Enlightenment and exploring its wider implications and connections. The section on Mendelssohn additionally provides a succinct, yet rich and sophisticated, overview of both the Haskalah and his chief protagonist, which could be fruitfully assigned in college surveys of Jewish history and thought. The ambitious comparative approach of this work is to be applauded, and should serve as a model for future studies of early modern European religious and intellectual history.

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