

*H-France Review* Vol. 10 (December 2010), No. 192

David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews and Catholics from London to Vienna*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008. pp. xv+339. \$35.00 (cloth). ISBN-10: 0691149372.

Review by Ronald Schechter, College of William and Mary.

Over the past three decades a dominant trend in Enlightenment-era historiography has been to identify three major parties. A “radical” Enlightenment espoused democratic politics and atheism or pantheism; a “moderate” Enlightenment compromised with absolutism and espoused deism; and “enemies of the Enlightenment” energetically promoted a rigidly reactionary “throne and altar” agenda.[1] David Sorkin’s thoughtful and erudite new book encourages us to consider adding a fourth party into the mix. Exponents of a “religious Enlightenment” espoused reason, embraced natural law theory, welcomed the scientific method and discovery and championed toleration and the separation of church and state. They found adversaries in “fanaticism” and obscurantism and demanded social utility from religious practices and institutions. Yet they contended fiercely with skeptics and freethinkers, whether atheist, pantheist or deist. They were uncompromising on matters of doctrine, steering clear of anything smacking of heresy. They insisted on the divinity of Scripture and the truth of miracles. Carefully embracing the concept of “natural religion,” or the religion that all human beings would derive simply by consulting their reason, the representatives of the religious Enlightenment nevertheless declared Revelation indispensable to knowledge of God and his intentions for creation. These theologians were not concentrated in a single denomination or country. Sorkin focuses on six thinkers “from London to Vienna,” devoting a chapter to each. His figures include an Anglican (William Warburton), a Calvinist (the Genevan Jacob Vernet), a Lutheran (Siegismund Jacob Baumgarten of Halle), a Jew (Moses Mendelssohn, the “Socrates of Berlin”), and two Catholics: the Austrian Joseph Valentin Eybel and the Frenchman Adrien Lamourette.

In chapter one, Sorkin discusses Warburton (1698-1779), the famous champion of so-called Moderation in the Church of England. Unlike the High Church Tories who adamantly opposed changes to the Anglican liturgy and supported coercion in the conversion of Dissenters, Catholics and Jews, Moderates such as Warburton were Whiggish, open-minded with regard to liturgical reform and in favor of persuasion over force when proselytizing. Among Warburton’s intellectual influences was Arminianism, a sixteenth and seventeenth-century Dutch conviction that tempered Calvin’s emphasis on predestination by stressing free will and good works in the attainment of salvation. The humanistic bent in Arminianism allowed Warburton to champion reason and science as well as Scripture. Warburton also embraced collegialism, a seventeenth-century Dutch theory that conceived of the Church as a voluntary society independent from the State and therefore lacking coercive power. He nevertheless managed to square this evidently irenic conviction with support of the Test Act that barred non-Anglicans from civil and military office.

Jacob Vernet (1698-1789) similarly charted what he called a “middle way” between fanaticism and skepticism, as Sorkin shows in chapter two. An Arminian with a distaste for the more extreme Calvinism espoused by some of his fellow Genevans, he promoted religious tolerance as a means of achieving civil peace and order. Though a republican by political conviction, Vernet was obviously not

espousing a radical position in a city that was, after all, a republic. Indeed, Vernet reliably sided with the Patricians in the various late eighteenth-century showdowns between the hereditary political class and the less privileged residents who demanded a greater share of sovereignty. He was not averse to associating with Enlightenment writers. An editor of Montesquieu's *Esprit des lois*, he also supported Rousseau in the famous debate over the establishment of a theatre in Geneva. (Both Vernet and Rousseau felt that a theatre would corrupt the simple morals of the city's inhabitants, whereas Voltaire supported it as a means of increasing their level of civilization.) But he feared deism as much as he feared atheism (and, for that matter, Judaism).

Sorkin's third representative of the religious Enlightenment is Siegmund Jacob Baumgarten (1706-57), a Lutheran pastor who likewise sought what he styled a "middle way" between confessional bigotry and freethinking philosophy. A professor of theology in the newly founded University of Halle, Baumgarten embraced the Prussian institution's pragmatically ecumenical spirit. He interpreted the natural law theory of Samuel Pufendorf in a manner that supported both collegialism and "territorialism," i.e., the doctrine that placed the prince in control of his subjects' religious institutions and thereby forestalled clerical despotism. He also attempted the delicate task of marrying the Leibnizian rationalism of fellow Hallenser Christian Wolff to the Pietist mysticism that had long irritated orthodox Lutherans. (Unlike Warburton and Vernet, he harbored no hostility toward mystical "enthusiasm.") He was a prolific writer of both sacred and secular history, as well as a meticulous producer of Biblical exegesis. Unlike Vernet, Baumgarten believed that religious toleration should extend to the Jews. Like other Christian "enlighteners," however, he looked forward to their conversion.

Chapter four centers on Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86). In a previous book Sorkin focused on Mendelssohn's Hebrew writings and their place in the *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment. Here he integrates these works with Mendelssohn's German writings to show how the Jewish philosopher fit into the broader "religious Enlightenment." In his Hebrew Bible commentary, Sorkin shows, Mendelssohn introduced and elaborated on Wolffian concepts. Rather than accepting the rationalist's endorsement of theoretical argumentation, Mendelssohn emphasized the moral application of Scripture to such worldly concerns as love and friendship. Like Baumgarten, he was a prolific exegete who believed that scrupulous philological analysis was necessary for a true understanding of Scripture; he therefore emphasized the study of Hebrew grammar and vocabulary. Meanwhile he wrote tirelessly in German, treating such diverse subjects as aesthetics, theatre, theodicy and political philosophy. On this last topic, Mendelssohn championed the separation of church and state. Often writing for the practical purpose of convincing sovereigns to reduce the Jews' legal disabilities, he used natural law arguments to support toleration. Like Christian supporters of the religious Enlightenment, however, he refrained from calling for a more democratic distribution of political power.

Chapter five examines the phenomenon of reform Catholicism through the lens of the Austrian theologian Joseph Valentin Eybel (1741-1805). A response to post-Tridentine Baroque piety, with its affirmation of papal power and inquisitorial suspicion of heterodoxy, the Catholicism of Eybel and likeminded believers combined a Jansenist-inspired distaste for pomp with a conciliarist territorialism that justified independence from Rome. Eybel deployed natural law theory, citing Wolff and Montesquieu, in works that criticized papal control over distant churches as unreasonable innovations from a more primitive state of decentralization. At the same time, he worked with Maria Theresa and Joseph II to incorporate the church into the state bureaucracy (especially in the field of education). He justified the Habsburg program of reforms that began with Maria Theresa and expanded notably with her death and the accession of Joseph II as emperor. Specifically "Josephist" measures included imperial oversight of the publication of papal bulls, releasing monasteries from papal control and placing them under episcopal jurisdiction, and granting broad toleration to Protestants and Jews.

Sorkin's final chapter recounts the story of Adrien Lamourette (1742-94), whose brief career in the Constitutional (French-revolutionary) church ended violently with his execution during the Terror.

Legendary for the “kiss” by which he sought to reconcile factions of the Legislative Assembly (of which he was a member) in July 1792, Lamourette is interesting to Sorkin because even before the Revolution he “tried to invent a theological middle ground that reconciled major features of Enlightenment thinking with the Gospel: reasonableness and natural religion, moderation and Rousseauist sentiment” (p. 282). These predilections were unusual in a Catholic of Ancien Régime France. Whereas in Austria Jansenism had served the purposes of enlightened absolutism, in France this austere version of Catholicism had long been associated with the anti-absolutist stance of the judiciary. Meanwhile the Jesuits’ affinity for ideas of natural law and natural religion rendered these concepts abhorrent to the Jansenists. This peculiar configuration, Sorkin suggests, made the French Enlightenment unusually irreligious. *Dévots* could not abide the *philosophes*, but neither could the Jansenists. Thus the *philosophes* were bereft of any religious constituency. The climate of opinion changed drastically with the Revolution, as the newly-constituted National Assembly placed the Catholic Church under the jurisdiction of the state after enshrining religious toleration in law. Lamourette thus presided over an unprecedented (though tragically brief) convergence of piety and “reasonableness.”

For Sorkin the exponents of the religious Enlightenment should prompt a reevaluation of the Enlightenment more generally. Rather than treat the movement as axiomatically secular, he argues, “we need to expand the canon of Enlightenment thinkers and literature to include theologians and theology.” He adds, “Only by reclaiming these heretofore ostracized thinkers can we begin to replace the master narrative of a secular Enlightenment with a more historically accurate notion, complex, differentiated, plural” (p. 5). Moreover, Sorkin claims, “If we trace modern culture to the Enlightenment, its foundations were decidedly religious” (p. 3). It is hard to know precisely what this means; though the conflation of “modern” and “secular” should be avoided, saying that “modern culture” has “decidedly religious” foundations sounds comparably reductionistic. Later Sorkin tempers his claim, however, writing, “The Enlightenment origins of modern culture were neither secular nor religious but a complex amalgam” (p. 21).

Of course, there is a difference between stating that “the origins of modern culture were neither secular nor religious but a complex amalgam,” a rather non-controversial position, and asserting that “[t]he *Enlightenment* origins of modern culture” were such an amalgam, a claim that begs the question of what qualifies a thinker for inclusion in the Enlightenment. There is a risk of making the Enlightenment so “plural” that it loses any explanatory power. If it can include politically radical atheists together with conservative trinitarians who insisted on the literal truth of the Gospel, then saying that a particular thinker belonged to the Enlightenment may not be saying very much. To be sure, the point of Sorkin’s book is to complicate matters rather than simplify them, and the designation “religious Enlightenment” should avoid the risk of conflating fundamentally different world views, just as the distinction between “radical” and “moderate” Enlightenments prevents historians from overlooking the important differences between and among *philosophes*. But the tests that Sorkin applies to membership in the Enlightenment – the advocacy of reason and science, belief in free will and (often quite grudging or limited) toleration of religious pluralism – could be seen as more broadly humanistic than specifically “enlightened” traits. After all, the principal doctrines that Sorkin finds characteristic of the religious Enlightenment – e.g., Arminianism, collegialism, and conciliarism – long predate the Enlightenment itself.

If Sorkin’s Enlightenment is potentially too capacious, his concept of “religious” may be overly restricted. As Daniel Gordon has persuasively argued, Voltaire was “a man of passionate faith.”[2] He was a deist who never tired of ridiculing the Bible, but his objections to traditional religion were based on the conviction that its dogmas and practices constituted an affront to God. Yet deists do not qualify for inclusion in Sorkin’s religious Enlightenment. Nor do pantheists, whose conviction that God and nature were identical was arguably as religious as any other theology. Even Unitarians and other anti-trinitarian Christians are absent. Of course, Sorkin is charting a new course and wisely avoided retracing too much familiar ground. Paradoxically, however, a little more attention to non-traditional

religiosity among Enlightenment figures would have strengthened the author's argument about the role of religion in the Enlightenment.

Still, what Sorkin has accomplished is remarkable. He has examined significant theological writings in four languages (English, French, German and Hebrew) and shown important similarities between them despite the differing religions and nationalities of their authors. If the term "religious Enlightenment" is problematic, Sorkin has located, highlighted and explained an important body of thought in eighteenth-century European religious and intellectual history. With the exception of Mendelssohn, moreover, Sorkin's subjects were closely allied with state power. Warburton was a bishop and chaplain to King George II. Vernet was a professor of theology at the University of Geneva and the city's "pontiff" (p. 75). Baumgarten was a privy councilor to Frederick the Great. Eybel was a professor at Vienna and subsequently a bureaucrat at Linz who "personified the state's alliance with reform Catholics" (p. 218). Lamourette was bishop of Lyon, France's second-largest city. As members of their countries' respective establishments, they are harder to like than *philosophes* who did time in the prison or fled from the authorities. (Not that historians should choose their subjects on the basis of likeability.) But their very complicity with state power put them in a position to translate their theory into practice. Whatever one calls it, the movement they embraced "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) This alone is reason to take it seriously.

#### NOTES

[1] Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons, and Republicans* (London and Boston, Allen & Unwin, 1981); Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Jonathan I. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670-1752* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[2] Daniel Gordon, "Introduction: The Paradoxes of Voltaire," in Voltaire, *Candide*, trans., ed., and with intro. by Gordon (Boston: Bedford St. Martin's, 1999), 14.

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ISSN 1553-9172