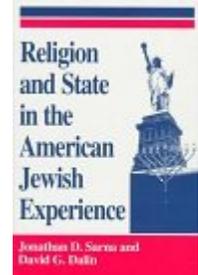


**Jonathan D. Sarna, David G. Dalin.** *Religion and State in the American Jewish Experience*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997. xiii + 331 pp. \$40.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-268-01654-8.



**Reviewed by** Peter S. Margolis

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*Religion and State in the American Jewish Experience*, co-authored by Jonathan Sarna and David Dalin, is a valuable compendium of sources for the study of American Jewry. As such, it takes its place beside similar collaborative efforts in which Sarna has participated, such as *American Jewry: Selected Bibliography of Hebrew Publications* (with Yocheved Liss, Hebrew University and Hebrew Union College, 1991) and *American Synagogue History: A Bibliography and State-of-the-Field Survey* (with Alexandra Shecket Koros, Wiener Publishing, 1988). The book is the expansion of a monograph written by Sarna in 1984 at the invitation of the American Jewish Committee, entitled "American Judaism and Church-State Relations: The Search for Equal Footing," which also forms the basis of the book's Introduction and its chapter structure. These chapters portray the representative religion-state issues for Jews in each era of national development by means of a historical overview, the essential correspondence, and relevant legal documents. With the exception of the Introduction, the book substitutes extensive Suggestions for Further Reading for conventional scholarly apparatus.

Sarna and Dalin amply demonstrate that Jews and non-Jews alike have diversely interpreted the separation of church and state enshrined in the U.S. Constitution at different points in American history. Moreover, they maintain that what is often perceived as an iron-clad Jewish consensus favoring the strictest separation has not always been the case, opening the way for increased recognition by American Jews that religion has a place in the common good and in the public square.

The selection of religion and state issues faced by Jews are extensive and their temporality well substantiated. Reacting to the deeply religious character of American society, the pattern that emerges is one of Jewish responses to the shifting winds of Christian religious sentiment in the United States. American Jews have chosen their battles carefully, if not always consistently. Thus, in the Civil War, with its overtones of a great Christian crusade, Jews petitioned to send Jewish chaplains into the field as was permitted for Christian denominations. "Jewish representatives prudently ignored radical claims that the military chaplaincy as a whole violated the Constitution," the au-

thors write. "They warned instead that infringements on Jewish equality would inevitably spiral down to affect the religious freedom of all" (pp. 129-30).

Yet, beginning just a decade later, when one of America's periodic waves of Evangelical fervor produced a flood of popular agitation to proclaim America a Christian nation, "American Jews began to express public support for secular government, and began increasingly to invoke the principle of strict church-state separation" (p. 167).

The circle closes in the second half of this century. Following decades of successfully defending the legal doctrine of strict separation, some Jewish thinkers began to question whether this effort was coming at the expense of a more positive approach to the place of religion in general, and Judaism particular, in American society. Part of this change resulted, in part, from the increased prominence of Orthodox Jews in American Jewish life, who legitimately petitioned for accommodation of their religious needs in the public sphere. Further, the destruction of European Jewry by the Nazis illustrated the extremes of which a society devoid of transcendental principles is capable. The authors quote Rabbi Jakob Petuchowski, one of the critics of strict separation, in this regard: "Jews fared infinitely worse in those modern societies from which the God of Abraham and of Jesus had been banished" (p. 223).

Sarna and Dalin present both the Jewish consensus and the dissenting voices on religion-state issues in the various periods of American Jewish history. Indeed, the book culminates in the observation that the concept of consensus no longer applies to the American Jewish scene. In choosing a representative and comprehensive selection of materials, the authors of necessity favored some examples over others. For example, they included the case of Jewish opposition to a commercial treaty with Switzerland in 1850 because of an anti-Jewish clause in the Swiss Constitution, rather than the cancellation of a similar trade

agreement with the anti-Semitic regime of Russia in 1912. The reader can only speculate if this choice was influenced by the current investigation into Swiss conduct toward Jewish lives and property during the Second World War.

*Religion and State in the American Jewish Experience* organizes, in an annotated and accessible format, rare documents on a central aspect of the evolving Jewish encounter with America. In the process, the authors make a case for a public presence for Judaism as a positive addition to American civilization that is consistent with the Constitution. By so doing, the book places the Jewish experience in America within the context of other legal systems under which Jews have lived: *dhimmi* status under Islamic law, corporate rights in Constitutional Poland between the world wars, or enforced nationality under Soviet law. As in those states, Jews have also served as the litmus test of the state's principles in America, albeit with far more favorable results. This chronicle of the uniquely positive accommodation of Jews and Judaism by the American system, with all its conflicts and imperfections, is the book's essential contribution.

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