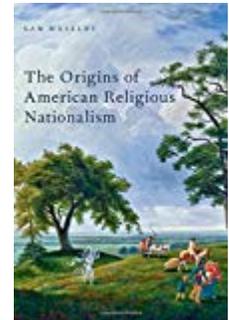


**Sam Haselby.** *The Origins of American Religious Nationalism.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 352 pp. \$74.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-932957-1.



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Buoyed by the political mobilization of American evangelicalism, the current historiographical conversation lends itself well to research on the interweaving of faith, politics, and national identity. Recent works by Kevin Kruse, Peter Manseau, Andrew Preston, and David Sehat have complicated our understanding of Protestant America and the myths that underlie our politics. Enter, in this line of inquiry, Sam Haselby, who offers his critical reexamination of Early Republic evangelicalism as a much-needed revisionist endeavor.

In *The Origins of American Religious Nationalism*, Haselby, a visiting assistant professor at Columbia University, argues that neither the Revolution nor the Constitution definitively settled the United States' national identity. Self-definition occurred as settlers pushed the frontier westward and established a contested political section with distinct interests. Into the institutional vacuum of the frontier, New England congregations funded missions and schools and printed religious tracts to counter the threat of infidelity. Efforts to evangelize among the Natives were refocused in white

frontier communities, who would be enrolled in the building of the nation. In response, frontier revivalists decried the arrogance and money of an elite that seemed intent on subordinating and exploiting western farmers. Efforts towards religious and economic nationalization soon blended as faith and the question of the Bank of the United States merged. The missions, revivalists claimed, were but a disguise for external control.

The first two chapters introduce two intellectual universes: one of Enlightenment secularists Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, and the other of New England's Christian Federalists. Behind the latter stood Timothy Dwight and the Connecticut Wits, whom Haselby understands to be the first proponents of an American nationalism on the eve of the Revolution. Against the Virginians, the Wits and their heirs extended the bounds of the religious community to include the entire nation. Chapter 3 describes a third religious environment, the frontier, with attention to the pioneering work of Methodist preachers. The vacuum that enabled revivalism in the backcountry

originated in Virginian disestablishment but, quite distinctly, frontier Methodism “remained indifferent to the American national project” (p. 163). As Haselby later notes, in this group’s religion, “the nation was not a factor in the mechanics of salvation” (p. 279). Alongside the Methodists, we then find the story of Richard McNemar, a Shaker. With McNemar and others it becomes apparent that frontier anti-elitism was founded first in religion and its text, and not in social or political institutions.

Nation-building and imperialism came together in Northeasters’ national evangelicalism, elaborated in chapters 5 and 6. As Federalism declined, New England’s civic spirit persisted in the religious efforts deployed throughout the Appalachians and beyond. This we see with William Ellery Channing’s turn to missionary work, the writings of Samuel Gilman, and Elias Boudinot’s organizational talents. Missionaries and religious literature served national ends, with New York capital at their service. This, however, could only occur with a Protestant turn from theology to ethics that emphasized common moral denominators. The spirit of fraternity seen in the American Bible Society and the American Tract Society increased with the bureaucratization of evangelicalism. On these grounds, Haselby asserts, “the national evangelist movement abounds with newness” (p. 277), though that newness had very much to do with the place of faith in the age of nationalism.

Political and cultural forces merged and the American Protestant struggle reached its denouement with Andrew Jackson, the first man *of* the people to reach the White House and the first to run explicitly against elites. Haselby sets aside Jefferson’s “revolution of 1800,” which would otherwise have significant bearing on his narrative. Instead, he focuses on how Jackson prevailed against John Quincy Adams and then against Henry Clay’s nationalizing American system. The revivalists had their way with Jackson’s war on the

Bank and his policy of Native eradication, but the religious conflict did not end with an unquestioned triumph. The missionary-revivalist struggle “resolv[ed] itself into an enduring religious nationalism” (p. 3) and in this regard the author’s argument is especially interesting.

The groups warring for the souls of frontier families were evangelical and, though at odds over nation-building, collectively reveal something of the essence of Protestantism. Haselby emphasizes their lay proselytization and traditional reverence for text rather than learned authority. A “plain” reading of scripture, truly a legacy of the Reformation, would soon be mirrored in the appropriation of the Constitution and other founding documents as sacred texts. The rhetoric of a sacred community and an essentialist reading of these sacred texts came together as Jackson, in 1830, “turned to a theological justification for an imperial act” (p. 312), namely Indian removal. The president did not formulate a new language of nationality, but rather embodied and gave voice to the internal dialectic of Early Republic Protestantism.

Both artfully and dubiously, Haselby circumvents major historiographical problems concerning the Early Republic: the relevance of the frontier thesis, the roots of Manifest Destiny, and the character of the market revolution. More crucially, in a work whose scope coincides with the traditional periodization of the Second Great Awakening, the author challenges the early nineteenth-century revival as unhelpful in the way that historians conventionally package it--and then abandons all consideration of an “awakening.” The cautious reader will only find two short paragraphs as justification. Here in particular an overview of the landscape of American religion from the days of Gilbert Tennent and George Whitefield to the Civil War would serve Haselby’s argument well, or at least clarify it.

By touching indirectly on these varied overlapping subjects, *The Origins of American Reli-*

*gious Nationalism* defies easy categorization. This is a clear asset: by blurring (and in a few unfortunate cases, ignoring) old lines of debate, Haselby invites the historical community to reimagine the religious and intersectional struggles that quickly followed upon American independence. Yet the book's greatest strength may be in suggesting a longer view of disruption experienced in the integration of "island communities" in a national capitalist framework. The late nineteenth-century process of disruption described by Robert H. Wiebe (*The Search for Order, 1877-1920*, 1967) was matched in many respects under the Early Republic. In this sense, the forces that joined in Andrew Jackson's ascent appear to prefigure Populism. This is fitting in that Haselby ends his narrative more than he concludes it. Jackson appears, Jackson rises, setting the stage for Polk's saber-rattling and the new burst of expansion that would try the Union and further decimate the Native American population. On the other hand, little is said about the religious struggle's legacy. How are developments under the Early Republic pertinent to the subsequent course of American history? What bases in law and national identity are set on the eve of mass Irish Catholic immigration?

The prose is clear, but researchers will be inconvenienced by the presence of footnotes without a full bibliographical listing, such that the author's source base is not immediately apprehensible. Yet the tracing of evangelical literature from the Connecticut Wits to Jacksonian America, when coupled with nationalism studies, certainly reveals a creative organization of sources, some of them well known, that tells a new story of American sectionalism and development. As a complement to the works of Jon Butler (*Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 1990) and Christine Leigh Heyrman (*Southern Cross*, 1997), Haselby's *Origins of American Religious Nationalism* provides a new narrative of faith and nationhood that will likely earn it a place on future graduate reading lists and fur-

ther stimulate engagement with American Protestant history.

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