Religion in the Early Republic

Here is a very brave, and a very good, book. Brave? Few topics in American history would appear to be less fashionable today than the intellectual history of the New England clerical elite in the early republic. But Jonathan Sassi here courageously tackles that topic and defiantly proclaims that in 1800, "elites mattered" (p. 22)! Moreover, he limits his analysis to the public sphere; not for him the trendy gendered analysis of the private, domestic world. And, finally, he informs us that he will be working only with published sermons and that they will suffice for his purposes. Bravely spoken. And admirably done.

Sassi has several primary goals. He wishes to trace changes occurring during the half-century after 1783 in the public religious culture, what he calls “the Christian social ideology” of the established Congregational Church in southern New England (p. 5). But he wants to connect those changes to developments in the period that preceded the Revolution and in the antebellum period that followed the decades of his analysis. And he wishes to do all of this while treating the period of the early republic as a discrete entity, worthy of attention in and of itself and on its own terms.

The introduction to Sassi’s analysis effectively sets the work into its historiographical context and it does so without sounding like the revised dissertation that it is. He deplores especially the marginalizing of the New England clerical elite that, in his view, has too often marked recent studies of American religion before and after the Revolution.[1] He hopes to “rehabilitate” the clerics (p. 10). The introduction lays out the central interpretive focus of the analysis, what Sassi later calls the abiding “unresolved ambiguity regarding the relationship of Providence to the nation-state and the church” (p. 174).

Sassi begins with Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion as a symbolic system that carries meaning which, in turn, orders culture, and then analyzes what he calls the “standing order’s corporate vision” in the late eighteenth century. That analysis provides the best concise discussion of the actual mechanics of state establishments of religion while effectively relating post-revolutionary developments to colonial changes and persuasively demonstrating the ways in which the Congregationalists exercised religious hegemony in southern New England during what Sassi labels the “Indian summer” of the establishment in the 1780s and early 1790s (p. 22). He does this within the context of the providential world view that was the basis of the establishment’s corporate vision: the belief that Providence directed the fortunes of a covenanted New England, that godly rulers would govern the state with the advice and support of the established clergy, and that the potentially disruptive forces of individualism in the new republic would be restrained by Christianity. Sassi also lays out the ways in which the New England establishment, from 1783 to about 1800, withstood the opposition to its hegemony of dissenters and liberals who did not subscribe to its corporate social ideology.
After 1800, however, a variety of opposing forces weakened and finally ended the last state establishment, Massachusetts, in 1833. Dissenters argued that the establishment was antithetical to the egalitarian impulse of the Revolution. Liberals, influenced by the Enlightenment, insisted that Christianity was not the only possible source of the virtue necessary for a successful republic. Most important, the Standing Order finally divided against itself. In the first decade of the nineteenth century New England Congregationalists split into Trinitarian and Unitarian factions and thereby made the establishment ever more vulnerable to external challenge. The triumph of Thomas Jefferson in 1800 taught the establishment that the government might not always be in the charge of the godly. What then became of any notion of a covenant between a directing providence and the state? Moreover, the emergence of competing political parties fundamentally challenged the Standing Order’s ideal of a united godly community led by the virtuous, especially when most of the establishment’s clergy identified with one of those parties, the Federalists, and led in the attack on the opposing Republicans.

Faced by what they viewed as the unrestrained licentiousness unleashed by first the American and then the French Revolution, much of the Standing Order at first merely reasserted its traditional corporate ideology and lashed out at all who opposed them. Some even attacked the Federal Constitution for its failure to mention religion. But in the first three decades of the nineteenth century, the establishment found ways to accommodate itself to and even adopt much that had at first alarmed them about the new dispensation. The key to that process of accommodation was the revivals of the Second Great Awakening.

In the strongest part of his analysis, Sassi turns to the diary of one of the established clergy to demonstrate the ways in which the Standing Order used the revivals of the early nineteenth century to regain much of its social authority. Joseph Goffe kept a diary of his ministry in Worcester County, Massachusetts, from 1800 to 1830. He adapted himself to the individualistic impulse of the evangelical revival, especially in his preaching style. He co-operated in promoting those revivals with like-minded evangelical clergies of other denominations, like the Baptists who had recently been among the establishment’s strongest critics. He joined with other Trinitarian Congregationalist ministers in forming ministerial associations that allowed the united clergy to exercise an informal social authority that was in many ways as effective as the power of the official establishment had been. That authority was exercised primarily in creating and supporting voluntary associations such as Bible and tract societies, education and temperance associations and, most important, missionary societies. Those organizations did not always have a very obvious effect on the objects of their concern, but they had a very powerful influence on their members. They provided evangelical Christians with a sense that they had identity and power in a world that, in all sorts of ways, appeared increasingly threatening. Sassi argues in his conclusion that a now-united evangelical community created, after 1830, a new regional society in southern New England, which then became the most powerful source of support for the antebellum reform movement in the generation before the Civil War. The New England clergy, no disestablished, no longer thought of the church as the “steward” of the state but as its “redeemer.” The church would no longer influence society from the top down but from the bottom up. Through grassroots political organization and pressure, Christians would now sanctify society, no longer dependent upon an official establishment that was now indefensible in a pluralistic, democratic and individualistic culture. By 1830, then, the individualistic revival had replaced the corporate, covental institutions of the establishment.

This is an extraordinarily powerful argument, cogently and effectively argued. No recent student of the New England clergy has treated them with the respect and even-handedness of Sass’s analysis; it is, in fact, the first to take the clergy of the early republic seriously on its own terms. Nor has any scholar so effectively related developments in the early republic to what preceded and followed them. Sassi does a superb job of treating the early republic as a discrete entity on its own terms and does so without calling undue attention to the project. It may finally be time for students of the period to stop worrying the issue! The early republic now seems firmly established as in independent field of inquiry. Sassi is correct that his printed sources are adequate to the task that he sets for them and the chapter on Worcester is a model for using a private document, a diary, to illuminate substantial public issues and developments. More specifically, the analysis is especially useful for reminding us that not all Congregational clerics were Federalists in the 1790s. His analysis of the growing cooperation between Trinitarians and their former dissenter critics adds an important dimension to our understanding of the end of the New England establishments. Sassi’s analysis of the significance of the Trinitarian/Unitarian schism in that defeat is masterful, although one might wish that he had
done more to prepare the reader for the division within the establishment by explaining the origins of the Unitarians.

The only real issue for this reviewer was not raised until the last paragraph of the epilogue. Sassi assures us that “this study did not begin as a tract for the times, searching for a usable past to deploy in present controversies.” But, he hopes that in the current “sharp debate” about “the role of religion in American public life" his analysis “will provide historical perspective from the early republic in today’s debates” (p. 202). Sassi writes at an intriguing moment in the study of the history of religion in America. Over the past fifteen years or so, a growing number of scholars of American religion, not all evangelical Christians, have endeavored to write about their subject, at least in part, from the perspective of their own religious experience. Few have been as bold as George Marsden, who argues for what he calls "the outrageous idea of Christian scholarship."[3] But all have endeavored to write as both Christian and scholar.[4] Unlike most of these historians, Sassi does not provide any information about his own religious persuasions, which is, of course, appropriate. However, in what he admits is a uniquely charged moment in the history of church-state relations in the republic, a scholar writing on the topic—especially when he recommends his text as an aid in current controversies—owes it to the reader to clearly demonstrate how thoroughly the social ideology that supported the New England establishment was discredited and rejected in the early republic. There is present today an idea among some conservatives that, while the Founders did not favor an establishment of a specific religious community, they were not opposed to the government supporting religion in general, or perhaps even Christianity. It is not always possible for us to ascertain what is called the “original intent” of the Founders on issues that might look very different today than they did in the late eighteenth century. One thinks, for instance, about race. But it is possible for us to be very clear about the issue of a general establishment of religion. First in Virginia and then at the federal level, the issue was thoroughly debated and soundly rejected. Writing as he does in the early twenty-first century about the crucial battles of the late eighteenth century, Sassi needs to be very clear as to which side won.

Notes


[4]. One of the earliest examples and perhaps the most interesting of the group is Richard L. Bushman, Joseph Smith and the Beginnings of Mormonism (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1984). A more recent and equally intriguing example is Grant Wacker, Heaven Below: Early Pentecostalism and American Culture (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).