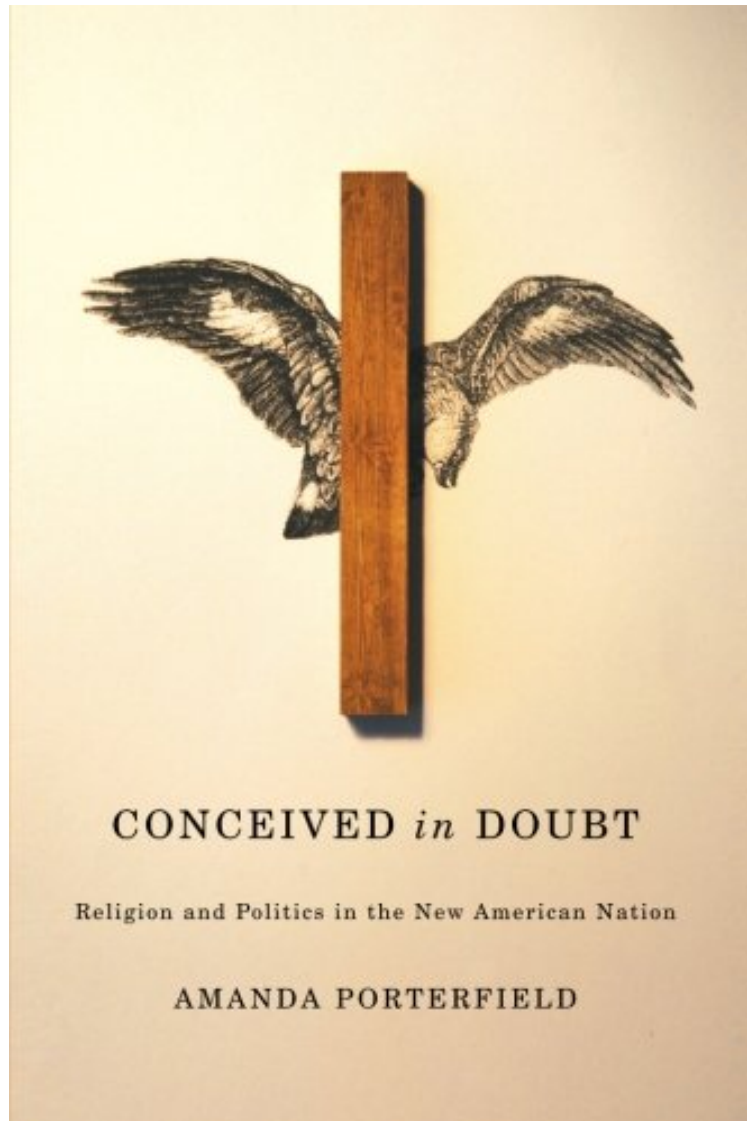


[Read now] *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation (American Beginnings, 1500-1900)*

Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation (American Beginnings, 1500-1900)

Amanda Porterfield

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Amanda Porterfield : Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation (American Beginnings, 1500-1900) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised *Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation (American Beginnings, 1500-1900)*:

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful. The Codependence of Religion and Politics in the Early U.S. By Frank Bellizzi According to the author, historian Amanda Porterfield, this book is about "religion's powerful relation to American politics." More specifically, it's about "the codependence of libertarian politics and evangelical religion in the formative era of American politics and religion" which, she says, "has not received the attention it deserves." Okay, even more specifically, this book is a take down of Nathan O. Hatch's much-loved modern classic, *The Democratization of American Christianity*. As Porterfield sees things, "misrepresenting evangelicalism as antiauthoritarian and disregarding the connection between the evangelicalism and the growth of slavery and invasion of Indian lands, Hatch did as much to mask the developing relationship between religion and politics as to reveal it" (p. 11). Porterfield seems to be saying that the growth of religion in the early republic was not so much the result of the democratization of truth, but rather the resolution, and sometimes the management, of doubt. The last sentence of her Introduction reads: "With doubt the cultural sickness that religion nursed, religion thrived as a way to interpret, relieve, and feed it" (13). Contrary to Hatch--a graduate of a Christian college (Wheaton), who wrote his book during the Reagan Administration--the growth and strength of conservative protestantism in the U.S. was not simply the result of American political freedom. Instead, as rationalists and skeptics like Jefferson and his ilk warmed up to conservative protestants, a sort of quid pro quo emerged. Jeffersonians backed off of their public suspicions of supernaturally-revealed religion, while the religionists, Baptists and especially Methodists in this case, were expected to back off of their opposition to citizens' control of property (i.e., slaves). That's just one of Porterfield's lines of argument, one of the better ones in my opinion. So why did I give this book four stars? It's an impressive achievement, and I learned a lot from reading it. But there are times when Porterfield distorts things in order to make them fit her thesis. The best (or worst) examples of this show up in Chapter Three, which includes a skewed reading of the 1801 Cane Ridge Revival. Overall, this is an interesting, significant contribution to the study of religion and politics in the early republic.

Americans have long acknowledged a deep connection between evangelical religion and democracy in the early days of the republic. This is a widely accepted narrative that is maintained as a matter of fact and tradition and in spite of evangelicals' more authoritarian and reactionary aspects. In *Conceived in Doubt*, Amanda Porterfield challenges this standard interpretation of evangelicals' relation to democracy and describes the intertwined relationship between religion and partisan politics that emerged in the formative era of the early republic. In the 1790s, religious doubt became common in the young republic as the culture shifted from mere skepticism toward darker expressions of suspicion and fear. But by the end of that decade, Porterfield shows, economic instability, disruption of traditional forms of community, rampant ambition, and greed for land worked to undermine heady optimism about American political and religious independence. Evangelicals managed and manipulated doubt, reaching out to disenfranchised citizens as well as to those seeking political influence, blaming religious skeptics for immorality and social distress, and demanding affirmation of biblical authority as the foundation of the new American national identity. As the fledgling nation took shape, evangelicals organized aggressively, exploiting the fissures of partisan politics by offering a coherent hierarchy in which God was king and governance righteous. By laying out this narrative, Porterfield demolishes the idea that evangelical growth in the early republic was the cheerful product of enthusiasm for democracy, and she creates for us a very different narrative of influence and ideals in the young republic.

With sound scholarship and deep research, Porterfield offers a fresh interpretation of the symbiotic relationship between evangelical popular religion and libertarian politics in the early republic. I am confident that *Conceived in Doubt* will take its place as a seminal work in the study of American religion and politics. Franklin Lambert, Purdue University