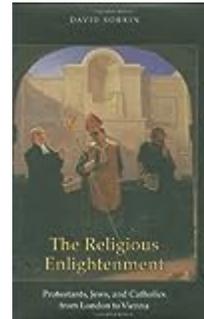




**David Jan Sorkin.** *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008. xv + 339 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-13502-1.



**Reviewed by** Jeffrey Freedman (Department of History, Yeshiva University)

**Published on** H-German (July, 2009)

**Commissioned by** Susan R. Boettcher

## Recapturing the Middle Ground: “Reasonable Belief” in the European Enlightenment

On January 14, 1791, the Comte de Mirabeau delivered a speech to the National Assembly in defense of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, the controversial project of ecclesiastical reform that threatened to divide revolutionary France into two warring camps. The speech (which had, in fact, been written by the future constitutional bishop of Lyons, Adrien Lamourette) appealed to “enlightened Christians” to repudiate the “ecclesiastical aristocracy” of the Old Regime and to throw their support behind the building of a new French Church, one that would demonstrate to “the surrounding nations that the Gospel and liberty are the inseparable bases of all true legislation and the everlasting foundation of the most perfect state of man” (p. 294). It was an eloquent appeal, delivered by the most famous deputy and the most charismatic orator in the assembly. But it fell on deaf ears because the audience to which it was addressed scarcely existed. The clerical deputies on the right side of the assembly got up and left the hall in protest; the anti-clerical deputies on the left reacted to the mere mention of “enlightened Christians” with catcalls and heckling. During

the Revolution, religion was so deeply polarizing an issue that it seemed to leave hardly any room for the middle ground of enlightened religious belief.

That had not always been so. In his learned and superbly researched book, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna*, historian David Sorkin leads readers on a city-by-city tour of the religious Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. Each stop on the tour corresponds to a separate chapter of the book, and each chapter focuses attention on the thought of a single religious enlightener: the Anglican William Warburton (1698-1779) in London, the Calvinist Jacob Vernet (1698-1789) in Geneva, the Lutheran Siegmund Jacob Baumgarten (1706-57) in Halle, the Jew Moses Mendelssohn (1729-86) in Berlin, and Catholics Joseph Eybel (1741-1805) in Vienna and Adrien Lamourette (1742-94) in Paris. Sorkin does not claim that those six thinkers were among the most original and innovative thinkers from the age of Enlightenment: “In historical retrospect,” he concedes, “[they] were, by and large, decidedly second rank” (p. 5). But

“they were prominent and influential in their day,” and can serve therefore as “touchstones, rendering movements and events personal and tangible” (p. 5). By comparing the works of Anglican, Calvinist, Lutheran, Jewish, and Catholic writers from across the European continent, Sorkin is able to show that the religious Enlightenment was a coherent body of thought, an international, cross-confessional movement of ideas with its own distinct orientation towards some of the major issues of the eighteenth century.

First of all, and most importantly, these religious enlighteners always tried to steer a middle course between the extremes of unbelief on the one side and dogmatism or fanaticism on the other. Their theological positions, therefore, involved a series of compromises. They accepted the idea of natural religion but denied that natural religion was sufficient either for salvation or as a guide to morality: Revelation was necessary to supplement the truths of natural religion. They embraced the new science of Galileo Galilei and Isaac Newton with its reliance on reason even as they defended the mysteries and miracles recorded in the Bible, which they held to be “above reason” (*supra rationem*) rather than “contrary to reason” (*contra rationem*). And they accepted the historicity of the Bible but denied that it was a merely historical artifact. They read the word of God according to the exegetical principle of “accommodation,” insisting that in the Bible, God accommodated himself to the specificities of time and place and adapted divine truths to the mental horizons of the Jews at different stages of their historical development. Neither literalist nor historicist in their approach to scripture, religious enlighteners defended the middle ground of what Sorkin calls “reasonable belief” (as distinct from “rational belief”).

Secondly, the religious enlighteners fully accepted that the Reformation and Counter-Reformation ideal of the homogeneous confessional state was dead, buried beneath the devastation and the carnage of the age of religious wars. Following the Peace of Westphalia, religious pluralism was a fact of life in many German states, as it was in England following the Glorious Revolution and the Act of Toleration. Religious enlighteners registered that fact by conceiving of the church (or synagogue) in terms of natural law theory, as a voluntary association distinct from the state. Most of them (with the noteworthy exception of Mendelssohn) allowed that the church should have the authority to enforce doctrinal discipline among its own members by imposing the minor ban of expulsion from the church community, but only the minor ban. The state alone, they argued, had the

authority to impose the major ban of expelling subjects from its territory—a punishment applicable to pernicious beliefs that harmed the temporal well-being of civil society, not to heterodox beliefs that merely violated the doctrines of the church. And yet, the religious enlighteners did not favor the separation of church and state. They supported the model of an established religion and a state church with limited toleration for (some) minority faiths, a model already realized in Britain and the Protestant states of Germany and that Reform Catholics like Eybel and Lamourette sought to promote in Austria and France through the ecclesiastical reforms of Joseph II and the Civil Constitution of the Clergy. Nothing, therefore, could have been further from their minds than the rigid dichotomy between religious and secular affairs that some scholars impute to the Enlightenment as a whole.

Of course, the religious Enlightenment was not monolithic. The settings in which it developed and the traditions out of which it evolved were so different that it was bound to assume a variety of forms. Protestants and Catholics derived their theological positions from different sources—Arminianism in the case of Protestants, Jansenism in the case of Catholics. The extremes of dogmatism or fanaticism that the religious enlighteners sought to combat looked different in different contexts: for the Anglican Warburton, the enemy was the “inner light” enthusiasm of dissenting Protestant sects; for the Jew Mendelssohn, it was the ossified tradition of rabbinic Talmud study and mystical Kabbalism; for the Catholic Eybel, it was the devotional practices of “baroque piety.” In Prussia, both the Lutheran Baumgarten and the Jew Mendelssohn sought to articulate their respective faiths in terms of Christian Wolff’s rationalist philosophy, a body of thought little known (except in caricatured form) outside of German-speaking Europe. And, in Austria, the Catholic Eybel sought to justify Joseph II’s ecclesiastical reforms against the ultramontanist claims of the papacy by drawing on such sources as Gallicanism, Febronianism, and medieval conciliarism—a whole tradition of anti-papal thought largely irrelevant to the concerns of Protestants and Jews. Dispersed across the continent, engaged in local struggles, and the heirs of distinct traditions, the religious enlighteners were related to one another like the different branches of a far-flung family. Their affinities were those of cousins, not brothers.

But all the figures whom Sorkin discusses did share at least one common experience: they pursued their careers during periods when the religious Enlightenment seemed to have the wind in its sails—in England, during the pe-

riod of Whig supremacy under George I and II; in Geneva, under the patrician-dominated *petit conseil*, from the beginning of the eighteenth century to the revolts of 1781; in Prussia, from the triumphal return of Wolff to the University of Halle in 1740 to the death of Frederick the Great in 1786; in Austria, during the tumultuous reign of Joseph II; and, in France, very briefly, during the first two years of the French Revolution. During those periods, the religious enlighteners enjoyed the support of their governments; therefore, the *via media* of “reasonable belief” was also the high road to a successful career, to bishoprics, professorships, and government positions. Despite those rewards, Warburton in England spoke of “heroic Moderation,” but it’s hard to see what was so heroic about it. While Denis Diderot was valiantly battling the censors in France, Warburton, Vernet, Baumgarten, and Eybel were reaping the benefits that came from telling the powers-that-be what they wanted to hear. No *embastillement* for them! (No *embastillement* for Mendelssohn either, though, as a Jew, he was, of course, ineligible for state patronage. Of the six religious enlighteners whom Sorkin discusses, the only one who really suffered for his convictions was Lamourette, who died a martyr’s death during the Terror.)

In his introduction, Sorkin speaks of the “spread” of the religious Enlightenment (p. 6). But this “spread” is not really the topic of his book (though Princeton University Press has encouraged such a misreading through its design of what book historians would call the “paratext”—each chapter of the book is preceded by a map of Europe with a shaded vertical bar superimposed on the region that is the subject of the chapter, as if we were watching the ideas of the religious Enlightenment radiating outward across the continent). To trace the spread of the religious Enlightenment, Sorkin would have had to devote far more attention than he does to cultural intermediaries, to such figures as booksellers or journal editors who formed the mediating links in the chain of transmission. His main concern, however, lies with the content of ideas, not the modalities of their spread. Methodologically, therefore, his book fits the (by now rather old-fashioned) model of intellectual history. Each chapter begins by briefly sketching in the relevant “background” before moving on to the main subject, analyzing the works of a particular thinker. Put all the chapters together, and what emerges is a comparative history of ideas rather than a history of cultural transmission.

So what to conclude? Following the example of Jonathan Israel, Sorkin sets out to demonstrate that the Enlightenment covered a much wider spectrum of the-

ological, philosophical, and political positions than is sometimes assumed, and that the deist Enlightenment of a *philosophe* like Voltaire was merely one position on that spectrum.[1] Israel demonstrates that point through his study of the radical Enlightenment, which he depicts as atheist, materialist, democratic, and egalitarian; Sorkin does so through his study of the religious Enlightenment. Of course the religious enlighteners in Sorkin’s study did not inhabit a separate intellectual world, any more than did the radical enlighteners in Israel’s study—they responded to and interacted with thinkers from across the Enlightenment spectrum. And we need to bear that qualification in mind, lest we fall into the trap of reifying the various movements within the Enlightenment. But otherwise it is hard to see how any scholar could take issue with Sorkin’s central claim about the existence of the religious Enlightenment. At the risk of applying anachronistic categories from the Revolution to the intellectual culture of Old Regime Europe, one could say that Sorkin does for the right wing of the Enlightenment what Israel does for the left.

Had Sorkin confined himself merely to demonstrating the existence of the religious Enlightenment in its multiple incarnations, his thesis would be unassailable. But he also wishes to make a larger argument against what he calls “the master narratives” of “modernization” and “secularization” (p. 21). According to Sorkin, those narratives have exercised so powerful a hold over the historical imagination that scholars have neglected the “religious roots” of modern culture (p. 21). If they treat the religious Enlightenment, they are apt to do so within a teleological frame, according to the metaphor of the “slippery slope”; and that metaphor is fundamentally misleading, Sorkin argues, because it implies that the middle ground of enlightened belief was merely a provisional stopping place along the road of secularization, rather than a defensible set of positions in its own right. It is simply not true, he maintains, that anyone who abandoned the firm ground of orthodoxy “inevitably slid through a series of compromised positions into deism or unbelief” (p. 17).

“Inevitably”? Framed in such starkly deterministic language, the slippery slope hypothesis hardly seems to merit refutation from historians. Either it is a claim about logical necessity, in which case it would fall within the domain of philosophy; or it is a claim about historical fact, in which case it would be practically indefensible, since one would need to cite only one counter-example to disprove it. It is not quite clear, therefore, with whom Sorkin is taking issue. One could quite legitimately in-

investigate a less deterministic and more defensible version of the hypothesis by simply asking how the religious Enlightenment evolved and whether the theological positions of “reasonable belief” continued to satisfy the generations of religious enlighteners who came after the figures in Sorkin’s study. One could investigate it in that way, though not by means of Sorkin’s comparative method. By comparing the thought of six religious enlighteners from different religious traditions, Sorkin is able to identify what was common to them and thereby situate the religious Enlightenment within the “Enlightenment spectrum” (p. 19). To say anything about how those traditions evolved, however, one would have to approach the Enlightenment in a different way, not as a spectrum but as a process.

Take, for example, the tradition of religious Enlightenment in Lutheran Germany. Sorkin studies that tradition, as we have said, by examining the works of Baumgarten, a theologian in Halle. Baumgarten, however, died in 1757, nearly three decades before the death of Frederick the Great and the accession of Frederick William II, who cut the ground out from under the religious Enlightenment by withdrawing state support and restoring theological censorship. What happened in the meantime? In the final brief section of his chapter on Baumgarten, Sorkin addresses that question by alluding to the “neologians,” the religious enlighteners (many of them students of Baumgarten) who came to the fore in the decades following Baumgarten’s death. But he treats neology like an impatient tour guide. “No time to linger in Halle, we have to move on to the next stop on the tour,” he seems to be telling us; after having devoted roughly thirty pages to Baumgarten, he dispatches Baumgarten’s successors in a mere four. It seems worthwhile, therefore, to linger for just a moment in Halle and to say a few words about how the religious Enlightenment evolved in Lutheran Germany during the decades following Baumgarten’s death, not with a view to challenging the merits of Sorkin’s comparative method (his method is good for what it does), but in order to illustrate what the religious Enlightenment might look like if one were to consider it as an unfolding process rather than a position on a spectrum.

The first thing to be said about the neologians and their popularizers (the best-selling authors who spread the ideas of neology through novels and essays) was that they went well beyond the positions that Baumgarten had staked out: they rejected the doctrines of original sin, eternal damnation, and vicarious satisfaction, and vigorously defended the notion that pagans could be virtuous

and hence justified in the eyes of God. They no longer maintained, in other words, that Christianity was necessary either for salvation or as a guide to morality. Nor did they use the exegetical principle of accommodation like a shield, to defend the truths of revelation against rational critique. Instead, they used it like a surgeon’s knife, to excise those dogmas they considered irrational—most notably, in the controversy over demonic possession that erupted in the mid-1770s. At that time, a Catholic faith-healer named Johann Joseph Gassner was attracting a great deal of attention to himself by performing exorcisms in various south German towns. Hundreds of ailing men and women, Protestants as well as Catholics, flocked to Gassner’s exorcisms to be cured of their various afflictions. And many of them claimed that they had been cured. To convince the skeptics, however, defenders of Gassner invited Johann Salomo Semler, a leading neologian and professor of theology at the University of Halle, to attend one of the exorcisms so that he could witness with his own eyes how they worked. Semler declined the invitation. He did not need to witness the exorcisms, he explained in a published reply. He already knew that the cures did not involve exorcisms because the doctrine of demonic possession was nonsense—a belief that the evangelists had invoked in the New Testament when describing how Jesus had cured madmen and epileptics, but merely as an accommodation to Jewish and Greek superstition.[2] In the hands of Semler, the principle of accommodation was considerably less accommodating to the mysteries and miracles recorded in the Bible than it had been in the hands of Baumgarten or Warburton. It was even less accommodating to them in the hands of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, who, to be sure, was neither a neologian nor a student of Baumgarten, but who nevertheless made explicit references to Warburton and the principle of accommodation in his *Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*. Published in 1780, it argued that the Old and New Testaments represented successive stages in the education of humanity (the Old Testament was like a primer for children; the New, like a primer for youths), and that humanity would eventually outgrow both of them once it reached adulthood, when it would learn to grasp the truths of revelation as truths of reason and to perform right actions for their own sake, out of a sense of duty, rather than in expectation of rewards in the life to come.

Should one conclude, then, that Lessing and the neologians had slid down a slippery slope to deism and unbelief? Certainly not. Where Lessing ended up in his religious beliefs will forever remain a matter of dis-

pute, and the neologians stopped short of abandoning Christianity—in any case, in their own estimation (their orthodox critics were less certain). But that they broke through the limits which Baumgarten had tried to impose on the use of reason and the critique of religious dogma seems hard to deny. And Sorkin does not, in fact, deny it. He admits that Semler advocated “the free application of reason to all of scripture, including the New Testament” (p. 161). The “all” in this phrase is crucial. By expanding the domain of rational critique to include all of scripture, Semler came very close to treating the Bible as a *purely* human document. He thus abandoned the middle ground of “reasonable belief” that Sorkin considers a defining feature of the religious Enlightenment.

And one final observation about Germany: I doubt whether historians of the German Enlightenment will be surprised at Sorkin’s claim about the existence of a religious Enlightenment. From Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz to Immanuel Kant, the problem of how to limit reason so as to preserve a space for religious belief threaded its way through the debates of the German Enlightenment.[3] By the time those debates reached the stage of self-reflection in the 1780s, by the time, in other words, that the German Enlightenment turned back on itself to reflect on what “Enlightenment” meant, it seemed self-evident that religion would be at the center of that reflection. In his famous essay of 1784, “Was ist Aufklärung?,” Kant described religious matters as Enlightenment’s main point. To speak of the religious Enlightenment in Germany, therefore, seems just a little redundant. To a considerable extent, the Enlightenment in Germany *was* the religious Enlightenment—or, in any case, about religion.

Such objections seem like mere quibbling, however, when set against the strengths of Sorkin’s erudite study. And it is very erudite, firmly grounded in a vast body of primary and secondary literature in English, French, German, and Hebrew. A recognized authority in the Jewish Enlightenment (Haskalah), Sorkin is ideally—perhaps

uniquely—qualified to synthesize the scholarship on the different branches of the religious Enlightenment, and he is the first scholar to have produced such a synthesis. The broad comparative perspective of his work, therefore, is also its chief merit, not least for historians of the German Enlightenment, who will come away from Sorkin’s book with a fresh perspective on some of the oldest clichés about their subject. Of those clichés the most tenacious among Germans of the Left has been the notion that the religious orientation of the German Enlightenment was a peculiarly German defect, an early symptom of the cowardice and timidity that would hobble the German bourgeoisie and impede revolutionary movements during the nineteenth century. Germans of the Left measured the German Enlightenment against the standard of such radical *philosophes* as Paul Henry Thiry d’Holbach or Diderot, and found it wanting. But why take d’Holbach and Diderot as the standard? Readers who accompany Sorkin on his learned grand tour of the religious Enlightenment will be able to see that the religious orientation of the Enlightenment in Germany was not an isolated phenomenon. Such thinkers as Baumgarten in Germany formed merely one branch of an international and interdenominational family of thinkers who pursued their intellectual projects along the *via media* of “reasonable belief.”

#### Notes

[1]. Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[2]. Erik Midelfort, *Exorcism and Enlightenment: Johann Joseph Gassner and the Demons of Eighteenth-Century Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 87-94, 105-108.

[3]. Ursula Goldenbaum, *Appell an das Publikum: Die Öffentliche Debatte in der deutschen Aufklärung*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2004), 1: 32-79.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-german>

**Citation:** Jeffrey Freedman. Review of Sorkin, David Jan, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. July, 2009.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=25002>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.