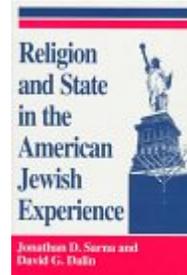


Jonathan D. Sarna, David G. Dalin. *Religion and State in the American Jewish Experience*. Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997. xiii + 331 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-268-01654-8.



Reviewed by Caryn E. Neumann (Department of History, Ohio State University)

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Documenting American Jewish Relations with the State

With this reader, Jonathan D. Sarna and David G. Dalin illustrate the diversity of opinions by American Jews about the place of religion in public life. While the notion that Jews have always adhered to a strict separation of church and state is a popular one, it is not an accurate one. Throughout the years, the Jewish community has accommodated a rich variety of outlooks and positions.

By examining documents from 1654 to the present day, Sarna and Dalin seek to recover “divergent voices and opinions” and correct the misassumption that American Jewry has always embraced separatism (p. xi). The primary sources provided are ones that represent different positions on both general and specific church-state topics as they affected Jews. Each chapter opens with a two-page essay that provides a broad historical context for the selected topic. The chapters are then divided into sections and each section starts with an explanatory paragraph. The book itself is arranged chronologically.

Sarna’s foreword centers on “American Jews and Church-State Relations” but it also serves as a superb introduction to the history of Jews in America. In the colonial period, he explains, Jews never expected to achieve

full religious equality. Permitted to buy land, gain citizenship, and exercise their religion, Jews accepted political restrictions and church taxes.

With American independence came a widening of religious liberty. The first years of the new nation witnessed an extension of the freedom to worship, culminating in the Constitution’s “no establishment” and “free exercise” principles. Following the adoption of the Constitution, America’s small Jewish communities engaged in a variety of campaigns to achieve equal rights in the states. As Sarna reports, Jews typically pointed up contradictions between their rights under the Constitution and their rights under state law. They pleaded for religious equality in patriotic terms. By 1840 Jews had won political equality in most of the states. Full equality remained elusive because many Protestants believed that the Constitution implicitly endorsed Christianity. Denying that Christianity formed part of the common law, Jews called for the equal footing of all religions. Early American Jews never linked themselves with nonbelievers and some of the more interesting documents in this collection are those praising state support of religion.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, immigration

had caused the Jewish population to boom. Increasing numbers led to a national community with leaders, institutions, and a number of newspapers to trumpet Jewish concerns to every end of the nation. The major concern facing Jews during these years were the Sunday laws. These regulations required the shuttering of stores on the Christian Sabbath thus making it economically difficult for Jews to rest on their own Sabbath. This issue tested church-state separation and raised the problem of majority rule versus minority rights. Jewish attitudes toward the state began to shift and, by the turn of the century, Jews called for a government free of religious influences.

The question of religion in the public schools emerged as the dominating church-state issue in the twentieth century. Fueled in part by Protestants who saw public schools as a vehicle for Americanizing the immigrants, pressure to strengthen the religious component of education was strong as the century opened. By 1950, major Jewish organizations condemned both religious education in the public schools, but also all state aid to parochial schools. In 1965, when Congress earmarked funds for special educational services in both denominational and private schools, intra-Jewish divisions emerged. The ensuing calls for a new American Jewish policy on church-state questions went far beyond the issue of aid to parochial schools.

As Sarna and Dalin note, the American Jewish community has divided between those who oppose any establishment of religion and those who argue for the free exercise of religion. Both positions have some Consti-

tutional support and this dispute will likely engage Jews well into the millennium.

The authors' discussion of church and state is drawn from the papers of men and those agencies, such as the Synagogue Council of America and the American Jewish Congress, dominated by men. While it is debatable whether male and female interests diverge on many of the issues surrounding religious freedom, the topic of marriage and the family is certainly an area where women should not be silenced. Adding a woman's voice about whether a secular judge can compel a religious divorce would boost the value of this reader, especially since this debate is becoming increasingly heated and has garnered much media attention. Under Jewish religious law, a marriage can only be terminated by death or the issuance of a religious divorce, known as a Get. Only the husband can issue a Get and, by refusing to do so, many a man has prevented his former wife from remarrying.

Nevertheless, Sarna and Dalin have created a wonderful compendium of primary sources. With the boom in Jewish studies, a reader on the relationship between church and state is a most welcome addition to the literature and this book is exceptionally well constructed. Suitable for upper-level courses, this anthology is recommended for students of history and philosophy as well as those with an interest in political science.

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