

New Approaches to Religion and the Enlightenment (Review)

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New Approaches to Religion and the Enlightenment, edited by Brett C. McInelly and Paul E. Kerry. Lanham, MD: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press and Rowman and Littlefield Publishing, 2018. Pp. 416. \$100.79. ISBN: 9781683931614; electronic ISBN: 9781683931621. Kindle edition. ISBN: 9781683931614.

The twenty-first century has seen the reestablishment of religion at the center of Enlightenment studies. If there was a belief toward the end of the twentieth century that the growing modernization of society in the eighteenth century resulted in a fading of religious influence on people's lives,¹ it is being increasingly asserted now that even this secularization was not free of religious influence.² As the blurb on the back cover of *New Approaches to Religion and the Enlightenment* states, while people still believe that the Enlightenment led to a growing secularization of society, the fact is that religion not only continued to occupy a central position in all aspects of eighteenth-century life but also "shaped the Enlightenment project itself in significant and meaningful ways." The fourteen essays by as many writers in this book continue the exploration of the interweaving of religious and Enlightenment concepts. They do not all follow the same definition of religion or indeed even of the Enlightenment; in fact, none attempts a definition of these contentious terms. But many exhibit originality of argument as well as deep and thorough scholarship, and all are written in a clear, very readable, sometimes elegant style.

In a collection such as this it is inevitable that while certain subjects are dealt with, others perhaps equally important have to be left out. *New Approaches* offers illumination into little-known recesses and crevices of the eighteenth century's religious concerns, but in the process bypasses certain major issues. Thus we have a very fine essay by Kevin Cope on insecto-theology, but nothing on the development and spread of Methodism in Britain and the United States, its influence on the lives of the working classes, and its contribution to the Industrial Revolution. The late Bob Tennant contributed a very scholarly study of the work of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) in the Isles of Scilly, a far-flung corner of England that was little visited in the eighteenth century, but the book has nothing about Christian missionary work further afield in India, China, or Japan. There is an essay on the Jewish scholar Daniil Avraamovich Khvol'son, who converted to the Orthodox Russian Church, but nothing about any of the three important British writers and religious thinkers, Swift, Johnson, or Blake, or about August Herman Francke and the Halle Pietists. The occasional essay refers to

1. This view was most forcefully expressed by Peter Gay in his two-volume *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (New York: Knopf, 1966, 1969).

2. See, *inter alia*, Jonathan Clark, "Providence, Predestination and Progress: or, did the Enlightenment Fail?" *Albion*, 35 (2003): 559–89; Stephen J. Barnett, *Enlightenment and Religion: Myths of Modernity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); and David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008). A good recent summary of the subject can be found in Simon Grote, "Review-Essay: Religion and Enlightenment," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 75, no. 1 (January 2014): 137–60.

eighteenth-century sermons. Sermons formed an important part of the publications of that period: they were widely read, and it was in them that major theological positions were advanced or controverted. However, no essay in the book deals with them. The result is that while the topics addressed in *New Approaches* make it a valuable research tool for the specialized scholar, they also limit its appeal for the general student who wishes to find out more about significant religious developments in the age of Enlightenment.

Collections of this sort usually have a broadly defined focus, generally thematic, though they can sometimes follow other organizing principles, and the essays themselves tend to be prefaced by the editor(s) laying out the aims and purposes of the book. Such an introductory essay is absent from this volume. It does have a one-and-a-half page preface in which the editor, Brett McNelly, states that the essays demonstrate “a breadth of disciplinary perspectives” on the study of religion in the Enlightenment, but the blurb on the back cover is more useful in explaining the essays’ purpose.

In the absence of any guidance or direction from the editor at the outset, and lacking a theme, however broad, the book is less like other collections and more like a high-class scholarly journal that includes many outstanding essays on widely disparate subjects, not all of them having to do fully with religion or indeed even the very long eighteenth century. (Khol’son, the subject of one of the essays, died in 1911.)³ Essay follows essay without any sense of theme, national boundaries, or chronology; they seldom talk to one another, and if they do, it is only by accident. One peculiar and ironical consequence is that the whole book is somehow less than the individual essays that make it up. Therefore perhaps the best way to review it might be to consider the essays individually, noticing where they might show some convergence.

Those who have heard or read Kevin Cope will agree that of all contemporary eighteenth-century scholars he has the most distinctive style. I can characterize this style best in words that Sir John Denham applied to the Thames in “Cooper’s Hill”: “Though deep, yet clear,” and “without overflowing, full.” This style is on display in Cope’s essay on Pierre Lyonnet’s 1799 commentary on Friedrich Christian Lesser’s *Insecto-Theology* as an example of the argument from design: God exists because without Him the complex designs and subtle interrelationships we perceive in the world of insects would not be possible. Both these entomologists, Cope maintains, hold that the structure of an object corresponds “to some greater structure in the cosmos,” (6) that in the minute parts of an insect and their interconnectedness one can perceive the hand of a master Creator. But while Lesser bases his reasoning on a rather simple taxonomical analog, Lyonnet, fully conscious of contradictions and discrepancies in Lesser’s argument, proposes what may be called a more complex ecological model that perceives the wholeness of relationships between all life forms. All of them, even the meanest, have intelligence, and thus are participants in the creation of God’s design. But, though Cope does not say so, this God is not necessarily a Christian God; He is more akin to the deists’ God, who has created a perfect and complex world which now keeps ticking on its own. This is an ironical conclusion, given that Lesser was a parish priest and Lyonnet well read in theology.

On the other hand, Samuel Clarke visualizes a Christian God. A Newtonian and a latitudinarian, he argued in his Boyle lectures, as Jonathan Pike demonstrates, that human beings have free will because God has it and He has endowed them with it. So, like the entomologists,

3. After submitting this review to the editor I learned that the essays were, in fact, originally slated for inclusion in *Religion in the Age of Enlightenment*, a learned journal published by AMS Press. Following the death of the owner, Gabriel Hornstein, and the dissolution of the press, it became necessary to find a new home for them, and they have been accommodated in book form by Fairleigh Dickinson Press.

Clarke sees a relationship between God and the nature of human beings. However, God, being good, cannot choose but to do good. However, human beings in their postlapsarian state, though capable of making the right use of free will, are free to choose wrong; and this is what makes them moral agents. This view takes God away from the deists and allies Him closer to a more generally accepted Christian view, even as Clarke clarifies and adds to the discussion of free will and human intelligence.

Andrew Kloes shows that in Britain, America, and Germany there existed an anti-Enlightenment movement that can be labeled as the evangelical revival and that saw history as an ongoing spiritual war between the devil and the people of God. The Enlightenment was the work of the devil. So were all revolutions, for though they tried to usher in a better society, it was not truly better because it was not based on religion. Kloes's essay, unfortunately, suffers from overkill: he piles example upon example and gives quotation after quotation to prove what is ultimately a simple and clear point.

The evangelical revival was represented in the Massachusetts Bay Colony by the Mathers, father and son; Newtonian science and rationality had Thomas Brattle as their spokesman. In his essay entitled "Tale of the Comet," Douglass M. Furrh maintains that Increase Mather thought that the 1680 comet presaged destruction: it was a sign of God's anger. So he asked people to repent and reform. Brattle, on the other hand, saw it as a natural phenomenon that needed to be studied scientifically and explained rationally. These divergences were to fracture the political stability of the Colony, for Increase's attitudes led eventually to the Salem witch trials in which his son Cotton played a leading part, instigating the execution of the accused. Ultimately Brattle's scientific attitude prevailed. The Mathers were expelled from Harvard College, the curriculum was secularized, and a nature-based theology emerged in the Colony. Enlightenment ideas won out over superstition-laden religious beliefs.

Two essays in *New Approaches* deal with religion in Russia. Andrew C. Reed, in "An Apostate Maskil," offers an account of the life and achievements of Daniil Avraamovich Khvol'son. In the 1830s Nicholas I started a project of encouraging Jewish children to get an education, partly to suppress any danger of uprisings and partly to get qualified people to serve the state. Khvol'son took full advantage. He went to study in Germany, where he was exposed to Enlightenment ideas. He obtained a doctorate from Munich; his book on the Sabians was greatly praised, and on returning to Russia he was appointed a professor in St. Petersburg. He converted to the Russian Orthodox Church, becoming what Shulamit Magnus has called a "good bad Jew," one who gave up his religion but then used his newly gained position of importance to help former coreligionists. The essay demonstrates the influence of German Enlightenment thought in modernizing Russia.

Andreas Berg's essay is also concerned with modernizing Russia. He discusses Mikhail M. Kheraskov's belief that religious sensibility is crucial in transforming a nation from rudeness to civilization. Russian Orthodoxy, Kheraskov thought, was incapable of inculcating civic morality in its followers. Only to a select few individuals of pure lives were God's truths revealed, and they then spread these truths among the general people, a point which he argued in his novel *Numa Pompilius*. Numa, Rome's ruler and founder of the Roman religion, realized that though the State may legislate a religion which, in turn, may lead to civic virtue, this religion has to be grounded in spiritual values that belong only to the pure at heart, for spiritualism is within the purview of the individual alone, not of the State. Historically Numa's religion had transformed Roman society into a virtuous one; and Kheraskov hoped that if Russian rulers

could be virtuous like Numa, they would, without opposing existing rituals, be able to create new ones that would inculcate civic morality.

In his essay on George Whitefield and John Wesley, Glen O'Brien says that in many ways Whitefield was less liberal than Wesley. Whitefield supported the Hanoverians because he thought that their Anglicanism represented a spirit of freedom that the Stuarts had tried to suppress. He upheld slavery and himself owned slaves, though he wanted their conditions ameliorated. On the other hand, Wesley opposed slavery and saw the hypocrisy of American freedom fighters who owned slaves. But the revolutionaries adulated Whitefield while castigating Wesley because the former supported war while the latter, though detesting tyranny, opposed it. Whitefield was afraid that Britain would impose an episcopacy on America and held that this should be opposed by violence; Wesley saw an organic unity between the Crown, Parliament, and the people, and he opposed the revolutionaries for wanting to disrupt this unity.

In one of the finest essays in the collection, John J. Burke Jr. discusses Milton, Dryden, and the politics of biblical interpretation. His two texts are Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (1671) and, written only a decade later, Dryden's very different *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681), and his argument is that both Milton and Dryden used the Old Testament, especially the story of Samson, to different religious and political ends. In Milton, Samson destroys the Philistines as the poet hoped his works would destroy kingship and the Anglican Church in favor of a puritan orthodoxy. Dryden's *Absalom*, too, tries to destroy the kingdom in order to fulfill his political ambitions. Ultimately neither Samson nor the man who would be like Samson, the Duke of Monmouth, succeeds. This is a barebones summary of an essay that is well written, clearly and compellingly argued, and richly documented. A marvelous teaching essay for anyone teaching Milton and Dryden or the Restoration period generally, it is also a model for those who wish to write about the creative use of sources, especially the Bible.

Two essays deal with women writers. Robin Runia disagrees that Sarah Fielding's *Volume the Last* (1753), which was intended as a sequel to her earlier *The Adventures of David Simple* (1744), views death as the only escape from the pain of this world while the earlier novel had extolled the pleasures to be gained from tenderness and benevolence. Rather, Runia sees *Volume the Last* as an extension of its predecessor and says that both novels argue that Christian faith must be grounded in rational principle while also claiming "the potential for women's intellect to justify their moral exemplarity" (229). She makes her points by examining various incidents in *David Simple* to show that reason has to be an essential element in a true Christian life, and that Christian reasoning is different from secular or "Human Reason" because it is based on an acceptance of God's will. Using Milton, Sarah Fielding also argues for women's superior Christian intellect which enables Cynthia to repulse the Satan-like Atheist. By depicting her triumph, Fielding offers Cynthia up as a new Eve who is capable of a life of "principled piety."

Contrasting Aphra Behn's treatment of Isabella in *The History of the Nun* with her later treatment by Thomas Southerne and David Garrick in their plays, Lisa Sikkink claims that Behn's Isabella has agency, which Southerne and Garrick's Isabellas lack. This agency is the result of her religious faith: in spite of her many sins (including bigamy and murder) she always returns to prayer and penitence and thus regains her spiritual equilibrium. It is this quality that enables her to accept her punishment of death at the end and yet remain in good standing with her community, while Southerne and Garrick's heroines, who lack this religious faith, are passive victims whose only solution is to commit suicide. I thought that this essay, wholly competent though perhaps the slightest in the collection, was also a trifle repetitious. Given that

the author was finishing her PhD dissertation when the essay was written, it is good to see that the editors reached out to one just beginning her career in the profession.

Séverine Collignon-Ward analyzes the *Mémoires*, published in 1757, of the Huguenot Jean Marteilhe, who served as a galley slave from 1700 to 1713 because of his religion. The *Mémoires* may be approached as an example of the Protestant Memoir, stories of French Protestants who suffered persecution on account of their religion in the reign of Louis XIV, but they are also a plea for religious tolerance in the manner of the *philosophes*. Marteilhe, like the *philosophes*, recognized that fanaticism prevailed in France, but he also believed that France could be saved, and the publication of the *Mémoires* was aimed at bringing about greater toleration. Collignon-Ward examines the rhetorical features that the memoirist used to make his work credible and interesting and concludes that these features were similar to those used by the *philosophes*.

Toleration and harmonious coexistence between different faiths is also the theme of Paul Kerry's study of four new translations of Schiller and Goethe. In the first piece by Schiller, "Jesuit Rule in Paraguay," the author attacks the intrigue, machinations, and spiritual bankruptcy of the Jesuits and their exploitation of indigenous South American populations. In his account of the Duke of Alba at breakfast in the Rudolstadt Castle in 1547 Schiller shows how the firmness and foresightedness of the hostess, Catherine of Swartzburg, was able to save her poor peasants from depredation by the Spanish army. Goethe, in response to a question by some students as to how he might have completed his epic *Die Geheimnisse* (*The Mysteries*) wrote an essay in which he laid out the scheme of the poem. There would be twelve men, each representing a different religious tradition, gathered around a man called Humanus. The twelve would honor and respect one another, and each would have found his own way to God. Through this fiction Goethe hoped to preach not only religious tolerance but also religious appreciation and the view that each faith can lead to God. Tolerance and respect for other religions is also the theme of his essay "On the Reformation Festival" (1817). He realized that if Germany were to celebrate the tercentenary of Martin Luther's nailing of the 95 theses to the doors of the church at Wittenberg, it would alienate the Roman Catholics. So he proposed that Germany should celebrate instead its victory at Leipzig in the battle known as the *Volkerschlacht* (the Battle of the Nations, 1813), which would bring the whole nation together. Once again, respect for other religions was emphasized.

Monika Renate Barget's essay on British caricatures of the 1745 Jacobite rebellion is excellent and skillfully analyzes the satirical prints and caricatures that both sides, the Hanoverians and the Jacobites, produced. But it has nothing to do with religion except in the most obvious sense that the Jacobites represented a Roman Catholic threat to the Anglicanism of the Hanoverians.

The last essay in *New Approaches*, Bob Tennant's on the SPCK in the Scilly Isles, 1796–1819, based on solid archival research, shows the extent and nature of the control that the society exercised on the Anglican establishment of the islands, and the kind of competition that the Anglican church had to face from the Methodists. It examines two incidents, one related to staffing and the other to the inhabitants' economic and political relationship to the government and to the Duke of Leeds, who was the lord proprietor, in order to establish that economic, political, and ecclesiastical issues are inextricably interwoven in missionary activity.

New Approaches to Religion and the Enlightenment concludes with a thirty-six-page bibliography (365–90), which is exhaustive and will prove a great boon to all students and researchers. The book is well bound and got up and will withstand a lot of handling in libraries.

It is well printed on good quality paper. I was able to detect only two very insignificant typos, both in the last essay: *islands* spelled with an *o* (353), and *was* as *as* (367).