Book review: "Skepticism and American Faith: From the Revolution to the Civil War" by Christopher Grasso

By Glenn C. Altschuler  Aug 5, 2018
In 1839, Unitarian minister James Walker claimed that “latent and passive skepticism is much more widely diffused in the community than is generally supposed.” A skeptical critique of traditional Christianity, Walker maintained, could bolster, rather than extinguish, true faith.

According to Christopher Grasso, a professor of history at the College of William and Mary and the author of “A Speaking Aristocracy: Transforming Public Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Connecticut,” Walker was right. In “Skepticism and American Faith,” Grasso draws on an avalanche of research to challenge conventional wisdom about the “lived religious experiences” of American Protestants. Between the American Revolution and the Civil War, he demonstrates, deism, doubt, skepticism and even infidelity were often hidden in plain sight. Stimulated at times by “worldly concerns,” individuals moved back and forth between skepticism and faith, engagement and indifference, asking fundamental questions “no longer easily satisfied by their preachers’ practiced answers.” As skepticism touched individual lives, it also played a pivotal role in setting, upsetting and resetting doctrinal denominational boundaries.

“Skepticism and American Faith” is, dare I say it, one hell of a book. As he brings back to life a vast cast of characters, many of them long forgotten, as they struggled with faith and doubt, Grasso adds immeasurably to our understanding of American history and culture.

Grasso demonstrates, for example, that skeptics and defenders of orthodoxy “corralled Enlightenment appeals to reason and nature.” He finds evidence of non-religious perspectives among enslaved and free blacks. He tells us how “the Four Horsemen of the Marion [Ohio] Apocalypse” — floodwaters of the Mississippi, the blight of slavery, the Depression of 1837, and interminable litigation — destroyed the dream of a college that would train missionaries to convert the world.

He revisits the speech of women’s rights advocate Ernestine Rose, who turned the Hartford Bible Convention of 1853 upside down, by exposing the religious roots of patriarchy.

He points out that the theology of pro-slavery Southerners reflected “less a monolithic consensus than a public silencing” of the religiously indifferent, the skeptics, and those who supported a wall of separation “not just between church and state but between religion and politics.” And he emphasizes that “if the relationship between doubting and believing was complicated with Abraham Lincoln, it was more complicated still in the nation he left behind.”

Throughout the book, Grasso emphasizes that definitions of skepticism and atheism (terms often used as synonyms) changed, as core precepts of Protestantism changed. In the 18th century, orthodox Christians deemed Unitarianism beyond the pale. In the 1830s, Unitarian minister Andrews Norton became a heresy hunter for the Protestant establishment. A belief in miracles, Norton declared, should serve as a baseline for what did and did not count as Christianity. Biblical inerrancy also served as a litmus test – until it didn’t.

Grasso does not estimate the percentage of antebellum Americans who can be characterized as skeptics. How can he, when belief and nonbelief co-existed and competed in the minds of many individuals — and doubt was an unstable staple of religious life?
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