
Book Review

Adam Jortner, *Blood from the Sky: Miracles and Politics in the Early American Republic* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017), xiii + 247 pp., \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN: 978-0-8139-958-2.

Reflecting on the ‘shouting, jerking, barking, or rolling’ that he witnessed in an 1804 Ohio revival, Richard McNemar, Presbyterian preacher-turned-Shaker, labeled the experience ‘an extraordinary shower of blood’, miraculous evidence of a new opening of God’s ‘kingdom of righteousness’ in frontier America (p. 1). That image contributes to the title and thesis for this fine study by historian Adam Jortner. While building on the earlier studies of Jon Butler, Elizabeth Babcock, and Richard Godbeer, Jortner contends that our understanding of ‘the early republican supernatural is incomplete’ (p. 9). As he sees it, the phenomenology and controversies related to ‘miracles, wonders, and other supernatural events’ inform larger questions of religion and republicanism, church and state, Enlightenment philosophy and sectarian radicalism in the early eras of American history.

Jortner insists that Enlightenment rationalism did not put an end to such supernaturalism; rather, the advocates of miracles utilized certain Enlightenment categories—particularly Scottish Common-Sense Realism—to defend the enduring presence and validity of the miraculous. Drawing on Thomas Reid’s version of Frances Bacon, it involved the assertion that ‘*judgment or belief* is not got by comparing ideas, it is included in the very nature of perception’ (pp. 30-31). This relationship between facts and sense experience meant that both observation and observer could be trusted. In this way, miracles and the supernatural were thought to be grounded in ‘facticity’, verifiable evidence of divine activity in human affairs. Experientialism facilitated revivalistic conversion of revivalists and ‘increased confidence in the reliability of the senses and the American reliance on individual experience’ (p. 11). This fascinating connection, Jortner believes, has significant implications for understanding other religious aspects of American political and cultural origins then and now.

Jortner maintains that colonial Americans (white males) understood that republicanism required the nation to distance itself from a religion of miracle and superstition, replacing it with a more Christianized rationalism that promoted ‘civic virtue’ (p. 15). For Jortner, this freedom-rationality nexus offers clues to the continuing violence visited upon those groups—Mormons, Shakers, Native Americans, and others—that affirmed the power and presence of the supernatural in their own religious experiences. With this assertion Jortner reveals his own thesis regarding the early church/state framework promoted by the founders of the Republic: ‘a state that

divested itself of a church needed to demonstrate that supernatural powers could not exist, because of course the state itself could not offer any' (p. 15). Republicanism required that the new American government relinquish claims to supernatural power characteristic of old-world religious establishments, and resist those who appealed to supernatural intervention in the affairs of state. Thus 'liberty and supernaturalism were incompatible' (p. 16).

Concerning the supernatural, Jortner builds on earlier studies that document extensive connections between supernaturalism and Christianity, often linking magic to direct spiritual encounters with the presence and power of Jesus Christ. Many utilized texts—grimoires—that provided instruction for using incantations, amulets, dream interpretation, and other magical resources. At the same time, other segments of the nineteenth century fiercely opposed such practices, often taking punitive, even violent action against the miracle workers, particularly where witchcraft was suspected. The case of Gullah Jack Pritchard, executed for his 'conjurations' associated with the ill-fated Denmark Vesey slave rebellion, is particularly poignant. Jortner concludes that the relationship between liberty and the supernatural crossed ethnic, racial, and social contexts, even as organized republicanism campaigned against the practice of magic on personal and communal levels.

In tracing political efforts to cast supernaturalism as detrimental to liberty and republicanism, Jortner points to such nineteenth-century works as Andre Oehler's 1811 strange, albeit colorful, autobiography, *The Life and Unparalleled Sufferings of Andrew Oehler*, and the more widely read classic 'The Legend of Sleepy Hollow' by Washington Irving. These and other materials not only denied the veracity of miracles, but contended that they created chaos and disorder, undermining the rationalism that was the foundation of democratic government.

The second half of the book surveys certain sectarian movements—Shakers, Native American prophets, Mormons, and other lesser known groups—that perpetuated elements of the supernatural, often eliciting suspicious, even violent responses from wider American society. Jortner reminds readers that the early Shakers were charismatic, séance-conducting, glossolalia-speaking millennialists, a far cry from the quietist, artsy, furniture-building image of recent popular memory. Jortner's inclusion of Native American prophets is a particularly insightful addition to this study, evidence of the impact of supernaturalism and nineteenth-century nativism on a besieged people. The Latter Day Saints began with Joseph Smith's dramatic claims of direct conversation with a heavenly visitor, and the discovery of a new revelation that became the Book of Mormon, a supernaturalism some thought so threatening to republicanism that 'Mormon Wars' were necessary.

In his discussion of the lesser-known sects, Jortner suggests that early American supernaturalism may be best demonstrated in the prophetic 'dialogic revelation' of Jemima Wilkinson. Wilkinson claimed that she had died, only to be overtaken by the spirit of the Public Universal Friend. Her millennial community preceded the Shakers and Mormons, what Jortner calls the 'first wonder-working sect of the new republic' (p. 166).

Jortner concludes that early republicans viewed rationality as essential to liberty, a liberty that was indispensable to religious freedom, connections that politicized American religion from the beginnings of the Republic. Thus, beyond the rhetoric of religious freedom, Americans developed a religio-political system for rewarding those

faith traditions that conformed to a certain standard of 'civility', as John Murray Cuddihy called it in *No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste* (1978). Non-conformist sectarians were often granted religious liberty grudgingly, until properly civilized.

Reference

John Murray Cuddihy. 1978. *No Offense: Civil Religion and Protestant Taste* (New York: Seabury Press).

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