



Conceived in Doubt: Religion and Politics in the New American Nation (American Beginnings, 1500-1900)

Amanda Porterfield

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Americans have long acknowledged a deep connection between evangelical religion and democracy in the early days of the republic. This is a widely accepted narrative that is maintained as a matter of fact and tradition—and in spite of evangelicalism’s more authoritarian and reactionary aspects.

In *Conceived in Doubt*, Amanda Porterfield challenges this standard interpretation of evangelicalism’s relation to democracy and describes the intertwined relationship between religion and partisan politics that emerged in the formative era of the early republic. In the 1790s, religious doubt became common in the young republic as the culture shifted from mere skepticism toward darker expressions of suspicion and fear. But by the end of that decade, Porterfield shows, economic instability, disruption of traditional forms of community, rampant ambition, and greed for land worked to undermine heady optimism about American political and religious independence. Evangelicals managed and manipulated doubt, reaching out to disenfranchised citizens as well as to those seeking political influence, blaming religious skeptics for immorality and social distress, and demanding affirmation of biblical authority as the foundation of the new American national identity.

As the fledgling nation took shape, evangelicals organized aggressively, exploiting the fissures of partisan politics by offering a coherent hierarchy in which God was king and governance righteous. By laying out this narrative, Porterfield demolishes the idea that evangelical growth in the early republic was the cheerful product of enthusiasm for democracy, and she creates for us a very different narrative of influence and ideals in the young republic.

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