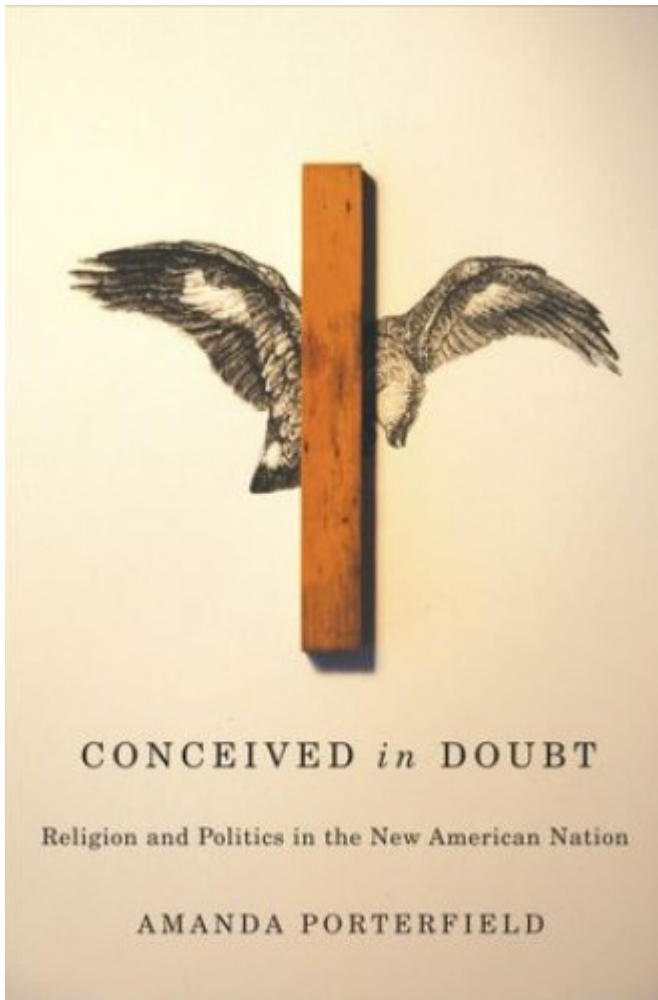


That old-time skepticism

by [John G. Turner](#) in the [July 25, 2012](#) issue

In Review



Conceived in Doubt

By Amanda Porterfield
University of Chicago Press

In 1809, Thomas Paine died in poverty, alcoholism and obscurity. Only a dozen people attended his funeral, and few American newspapers bothered to mention his death.

Had Paine's death occurred in the late 1770s, it would have caused tremendous joy in the hearts of American loyalists and a corresponding outpouring of grief from patriots. "'Tis time to part," proclaimed Paine in *Common Sense*, his antimonarchical, anti-Catholic, anti-elitist tract that helped galvanize support for American independence.

Paine's reputation declined in the eyes of most Americans because of his support for the French Revolution and his satirical critiques (most notable in *The Age of Reason*) of the Bible and Christianity. Many Americans feared the export of French Jacobinism to the New World, but it seems strange that they would waste time worrying over the spread of religious skepticism. After all, it was soon clear that the young United States was experiencing a tremendous upsurge of evangelical revivalism.

Amanda Porterfield details both the surprising amount of rationalist skepticism in 1790s America and its demise in the face of a devastating Protestant counterattack. Historians have sometimes understood the Second Great Awakening as a democratic outgrowth of the American Revolution, an efflorescence of popular frontier religiosity. Porterfield's view is rather more elegiac. In her telling, Protestants of various theological and political stripes browbeat skeptics into submission by warning that unbelief promoted immorality and imperiled the fragile new nation. Meanwhile, Methodists and Baptists formed political alliances with Jeffersonian Republicans, supporting religious freedom for themselves while giving approval to the expansion of slavery and the conquest of Indian territory.

While many Protestant ministers no doubt exaggerated its threat, skepticism was popular for a time. Tens of thousands of copies of *The Age of Reason* flooded the United States, and ordinary people found it as accessible as *Common Sense*. Many Americans suspicious of distant political leaders found that Paine's arguments against religious authority resonated with them as well. Deist clubs flourished in some cities, and even on the frontier some politicians and other leading citizens were skeptics about traditional Protestantism. Although they objected to Paine's irreverence, many New England clergy and Federalist politicians shared his skepticism about miracles and his high regard for human free will and reason.

Paine's attachments to the French Revolution and infidelity created political headaches for Thomas Jefferson and his libertarian allies. Federalists such as Alexander Hamilton attacked Jefferson for his purported atheism (a false charge) and his friendship with Paine. Given this political climate, acknowledged skepticism

was no longer a viable option for public figures in America. “Churned into the politics of mistrust,” writes Porterfield, “optimistic faith in human reason receded, and skepticism was increasingly represented as a symptom of decadence rather than as a salutary habit of mind.”

The counteroffensive against deism and skepticism was multifaceted. New England’s Federalist ministers led the charge, but populist Republican politicians also warned of the dangers of skepticism. To them, skeptics were not just iconoclastic nuisances but grave threats to the social order. In the words of Kentucky revivalist James McGready, the “unrepentant” were “murderers, robbers, and distracted persons . . . spreading misery and destruction through the country.” Authors penned cautionary tales, vividly personifying the hazards of unbelief in young women who lose their virtue and young men who succumb to vice.

Skepticism and mistrust were widespread in the early republic. However, most expressions of doubt centered not on God, but on the new nation and its institutions. Democratic-Republicans saw in the Washington and Adams administrations dangerous reminders of monarchical authority; Federalists worried that Jefferson’s party would foment infidelity and social chaos. The patriotism of Anglicans-turned-Episcopalians remained suspect, and top-down Methodist organization seemed out of place in a democratic republic. By the time of the War of 1812, with Federalist New England speaking of disunion, mistrust was an endemic part of American religious and political culture.

In return, evangelicals, especially the increasingly numerous Methodists and Baptists, joined forces with libertarian Republicans. The latter insulated themselves from allegations of infidelity, and evangelical revivalism now occupied the center of American religious life in many parts of the country. What was lost in the process, laments Porterfield, was a place for constructive and rational skepticism, for men and women to fearlessly question the political and religious shibboleths that surrounded them. Admirers of Mary Wollstonecraft, Methodist opponents of slavery and critics of the second war against Great Britain (at least those outside New England) now found it dangerous to speak their minds.

At times, Porterfield’s tone seems gratuitously critical. “Preachers insisted that the imagined worlds supported by religious communities were real,” she writes. Of course they did. Those preachers believed in the better world they were attempting to create, and they strove to bring others into those communities. Certainly they

tried too hard to dispel doubt, and their methods were sometimes crude and sometimes cruel. Today, many religious believers have grown resigned to living with a muddy combination of doubt and faith. That sort of religious journey, however, had not gained social acceptance in the early republic.

As Porterfield perceptively observes, churches managed rather than eliminated doubt. They stoked people's doubts and fears and then used those fears to solidify their position in the nation. Ironically, the religious societies that most benefited from greater religious freedom often fostered authoritarian leadership and imposed strict forms of discipline on their members. In a further irony, ministers who celebrated democratic politics demanded that their congregants fully submit themselves to the "King of Kings" and his representatives on earth.

Porterfield sees the growth of Enlightenment-era deism, free thought and rationalism as a thrilling moment in early American history that vanished all too quickly. However, much was gained during these years. Though religious freedom was still attenuated for many groups, American Christians generally enjoyed a higher level of freedom. A relatively small percentage of Americans could vote, but politics had become more democratic. Porterfield properly reminds us, however, that much was lost as well. Intelligent voices were sometimes marginalized, and large numbers of people—especially Native Americans and African Americans—saw the field of oppression expand. Most tragically, white American Protestants who so eagerly guarded themselves against religious or political "enslavement" failed to offer serious resistance to these unfolding tragedies.