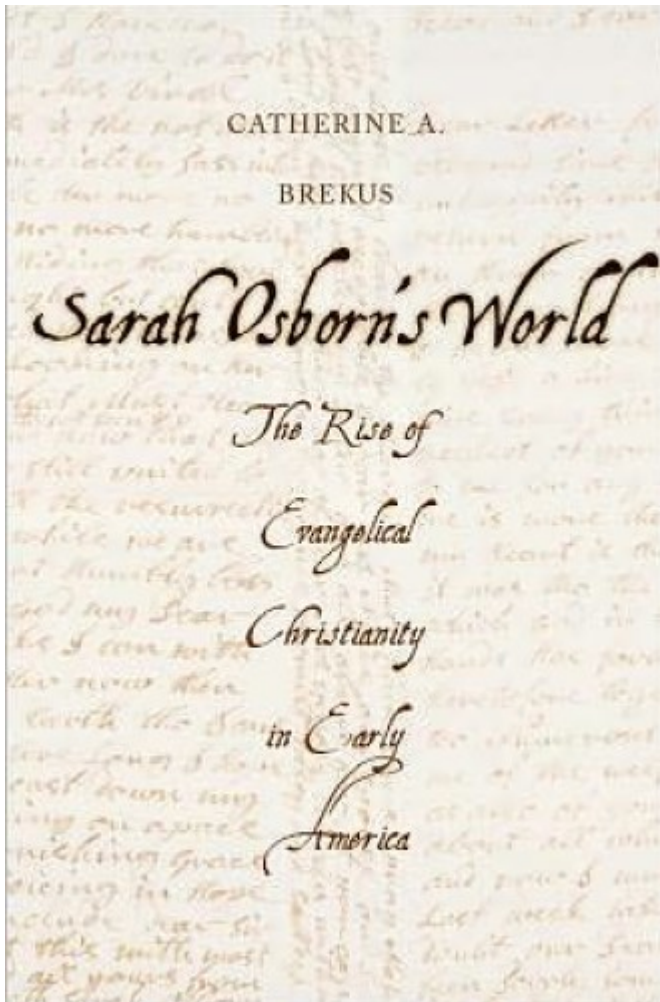


Sarah Osborn's World, by Catherine A. Brekus

reviewed by [John G. Turner](#) in the [May 1, 2013](#) issue

In Review



Sarah Osborn's World

by Catherine A. Brekus
Yale University Press

Catherine Brekus introduces us to a disturbing, heartbreaking and improbably inspiring life. Sarah Osborn's early years were an unending series of afflictions made worse by the austere Calvinism of her family and church. Born in England in 1714,

Sarah emigrated to America with her parents, who settled in Rhode Island. Her parents emphasized her sinfulness to such an extent that she interpreted any misfortune as God's just punishment. When, at the age of eight, she stumbled into the fire and burned her right hand, she believed that God had chastised her for playing on the Sabbath.

Her parents did not spare the rod, and Sarah's extreme self-loathing and repressed anger at her parents nearly led her to take her own life. She then married a sailor against her parents' will and stole a considerable sum of money when they refused to give her a "marriage portion." Shortly after the birth of their first child, Sarah's husband died. Another marriage brought her some renewed stability, but her second husband promptly went bankrupt, and only Sarah's unstinting work ethic kept them from starvation. All her previous struggles seemed trivial, however, compared to the death of her only child, Samuel, at age 11.

Sarah lived through the decades in which New England Puritanism evolved into early evangelicalism, which was distinguished by an intense focus on individual conversion, a willingness to trust experiences of the heart as clear evidence of salvation, and a weakening of established religious authority. While reading the early chapters of *Sarah Osborn's World*, many readers will find themselves repulsed by certain aspects of late-Puritan Calvinism. As the values associated with the Enlightenment began circulating in New England, Calvinists redoubled their insistence that all events reflected God's will and that God had predestined individuals—including those who died in the womb or as infants—to either hell or heaven.

When her son died, Sarah was grief-stricken not just because of her earthly loss, but because her son had died without any sign of spiritual regeneration. Furthermore, Sarah blamed his death on her excessive love for him. God had brought her "to the greatest extremity, that I may know assuredly, the work of deliverance must be all his own." Given that Brekus informs readers that suicidal tendencies were unusually common among mid-18th-century evangelicals (a claim probably hard to prove), it would be easy to have disdain for Sarah's religion and to dismiss it as defective and destructive.

Sarah, however, did not remain mired in her misery and self-loathing, and her faith provided ballast and purpose to her life. In the midst of a period of depression that included thoughts of suicide, she sat in the gallery of a church watching its members

receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper (participation followed church membership, which required a firm testimony of inward regeneration). Suddenly, she was overcome with a sense of Christ's suffering and her own sinfulness. "Oh," she later wrote, "how did my heart melt and my eyes flow with tears when I thought I saw my dearest Lord in his bitter agony in the garden." Employing the language of the Song of Solomon, she reveled in her Savior's love: "He appeared Lovely, the chiefest among ten thousands, was ten thousand times welcome to me."

Sarah's conversion prepared her for a remarkable series of events. She quickly gained renown for her evangelistic dedication, but her influence peaked in the mid-1760s when her physical strength began to fail. Though she was only 50 years of age, her eyesight was failing, and she suffered from rheumatism. Nevertheless, she was a mighty instrument of revivalism. In 1764 slaves and free African Americans began coming to her Newport home every Sunday evening for prayer and Bible teaching. They wanted to learn how to read, and they wanted to hear Sarah explain the gospel. Soon Sarah's home was full nearly every night, with African Americans, Baptists, women and children coming on different evenings.

The meetings generated opposition on a number of levels. Slave owners and other whites feared any gathering of black people apart from their authority. Congregationalist ministers worried about any ecclesiastical association with Baptists. Men wondered about the propriety of a woman teaching men. Sarah mitigated the last objection by having her husband pray in front of the adult white men who came to her home. Nevertheless, when even her ministerial friends encouraged her to end her meetings, she refused. "Man can't determine me," she wrote in her diary. She meant that God, rather than any human beings, directed her path.

Sarah Osborn's meetings demonstrated the evangelical tendency to exalt religious experience—"experimental religion," it was termed—above other sources of authority. Although she lacked any formal position of leadership, Sarah became the most powerful figure in Newport's First Church. When her congregation searched for a new minister in the late 1760s, candidates preached at her home. Her support eventually secured the position for Samuel Hopkins, who was renowned for both his abolitionism and his modifications of Jonathan Edwards's theology. After Hopkins moved to Newport, he often stopped at the Osborn residence on Saturdays to test out his ideas for the next day's sermon.

Brekus does more than recover the life of a once-famous woman. She also reappraises the relationship between the Enlightenment and evangelicalism. Eighteenth-century evangelicals presented themselves as implacable opponents of a host of values associated with the Enlightenment: optimism about human nature and agency, a benevolent view of God, humanitarianism and individualism. Brekus demonstrates, however, that evangelicals modified—and perhaps saved—their religion in accordance with Enlightenment impulses. They stopped seeing their love for family members as idolatry, they backed away from theological self-loathing, and they grew more confident in their ability to oppose earthly injustice.

American evangelicals, at the same time, exerted a positive influence on the early Enlightenment. At least for a time, they critiqued economic self-interest, and they cautioned against unrealistic expectations of human progress. Moreover, early evangelicals sometimes valued the experiences of women, Native Americans and blacks in a way that most white, male Enlightenment thinkers did not.

In one of the most poignant scenes in *Sarah Osborn's World*, Sarah contemplates selling a slave named Bobey, whom she received as a gift. Sarah was a friend and spiritual mentor to Bobey's mother, Phillis, who had gained admittance as a full member to Newport's First Church. "She is made free indeed," Sarah wrote after seeing Phillis receive the Lord's Supper for the first time.

Phillis and Bobey were not free in this world, however. When Sarah decided to sell Bobey, Phillis upbraided her white friend. Sarah felt betrayed by Phillis, but she eventually concluded that a future master might imperil Bobey's salvation and chose not to sell her slave. Through the influence of Hopkins, Sarah later rejected the institution of slavery entirely.

In Brekus's account, the intersection of evangelicalism and the American Enlightenment produced a religion that discarded some of its most disturbing beliefs and became more able to both perceive and relieve human suffering.