“The War of Independence,” Sam Haselby explains in *The Origins of American Religious Nationalism*, “posed rather than answered the question of American nationality” (1). The solution, according to Haselby, came through colonization and the cultural politics that were associated with settlement on the early frontier. Haselby highlights the extensive growth of the western territories following the ratification of the Constitution, especially in areas such as Ohio, and argues that, though there were political activities that shaped much of this development, it was through religious disagreements that westward expansion was understood, which in turn transformed broader conceptualizations of the nation itself. The battle between what he calls “frontier revivalism” (2), the democratic forces evident in the growth of sects such as the Methodists and Baptists, and the nationalist “missions movement” (3), which was spearheaded by groups such as the New England Congregationalists and elite Federalists such as Timothy Dwight, “reshaped American nationality, resolving itself into an enduring religious nationalism” (3).

Many scholars have previously addressed the question of nationality in the early Republic. Leading the way were David Waldstreicher’s *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes* and Len Travers’s *Celebrating the Fourth*, both published in 1997. More recent examples include Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s *This Violent Empire* and Kariann Akemi Yokota’s *Unbecoming British*.1 Given the richness and success of these works, some might think that these nationalist revisions are no longer in need of revising. Yet Haselby adds two important dimensions to this literature: the role of religion and the ideological and geographic influence of westward expansion.

Historians have long noted the impact of American nationalist thought on both religion and colonization. Both the democratization of American Christianity and the sway of Thomas Jefferson’s “empire of liberty” are common refrains in the scholarship of the early Republic. Yet most historians still work under the assumption that the influence only moved in one direction: from the nationalist ideas of the elites to the grassroots activities

of religious practitioners and westward settlers. Haselby challenges this notion by showing that these influences went both ways and that religion and expansion were not only the byproducts of a new political age but also drove much of the change. Indeed, *The Origins of American Religious Nationalism* is framed in a way that highlights this dialogic relationship between nationalist thought, religious foment, and geographic expansion. As a result, the book ably captures the diversity and ambiguity of nationalist thought during the period.

In tracing this argument, Haselby seeks to put to rest other key interpretive frameworks that fail to capture the heterogeneity and anxiety of the early Republic, each of which has been quite influential in the field's literature: “church-state” (22), “awakening” (23), and “evangelicalism” (24). These terms, he explains, mask the fact that though most citizens, east and west, agreed with those principles in theory, their different social conditions, religious beliefs, political allegiances, and interpretations make the use of these framing devices both difficult and of little value. To explain the broader religious and cultural movements, Haselby urges, we must look elsewhere.

After a brief discussion of the debates over the influence of religion at the nation's founding, in which he argues that the secular political body the founders established in turn laid the groundwork for competing nationalist visions among its inhabitants, Haselby turns his attention to the Connecticut Wits and their quest for an American empire. These New England Federalists cultivated a vision for what they termed an “American society” (52) and they were anxious to see that vision extended westward. Their aims led to an ecumenism that allowed similarly minded religious groups to converge while constructing nationalist missions. The discussion then moves to the frontier and traces Methodist Francis Asbury and Shaker Richard McNemar, men who respectively represent organized and mystic democratic forces, and their extension of Jeffersonian principles.

Haselby's focus on frontier Methodists and Baptists, who mostly eschewed party politics, may seem an odd choice for understanding political history. And at times the analytic tissue does indeed wear thin. But Haselby often paints his cultural analysis with a brush that is broad enough to demonstrate the wider relevance. If the personal is the political, then so also is the religious. “Early Methodism,” he writes, “was [both] a social and religious movement” (121). Most especially, he shows that these itinerant preachers' rejection of nationalist missions shaped their understanding of political power, regional autonomy, and geographic authority. What these itinerants did was nothing less than cultivate “alternative forms of sovereignty” (165). Haselby is at his best when he connects these regional disagreements over religious messages in the 1810s to the debates over the National Bank in the 1820s. Though perhaps not the original intent, religious practice on the frontier set the stage and provided the tools for
democratic action, which in turn cemented the region’s commitment to Andrew Jackson’s political party.

The examination then moves forward by focusing on how organizations such as the American Tract Society, the American Bible Society, and the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions were nation-building institutions that orchestrated the clashes necessary for a nationalist dialogue. Haselby’s nationalism is one of debate, a give-and-take between these eastern-based organizations and westward-centered expansion. The nationalisms produced by political thinkers are rarely the nationalisms normalized through local experiences, and thus Haselby focuses on this transition between state formation and popularization. The western itinerant experience, then, served as a testing ground for new democratic practices that would come to dominate the political culture of the region. It was through these ecclesiastical battles that westerners sharpened their tools for political warfare, and the entirety of nationalist discourse was shifted as a result.

For a book that attempts to prove that the outcome of these important debates was a powerful “religious nationalism,” religious thought plays a surprisingly limited role in the analysis. This is mostly because Haselby presents both sides of this nationalist debate in ecumenical terms: the Congregationalists and Presbyterians worked together in establishing nationalist missions, and the Baptists and Methodists joined up to cultivate a frontier Jeffersonianism and, later, Jacksonianism. Yet a serious theological difference influenced their broader political arguments: the decision to accept or reject Calvinism did much to frame how individuals understood their world to operate. That the nationalist missions headed by New Englanders dissolved at the same time, and in the same regions, as Calvinism is more than coincidence. Further, even among the Congregationalists of New England, there was considerable anxiety over whether western missions were necessary at all—and, more generally, whether westward expansion was inimical to the American nation in the first place. Though the book mentions it only in passing, many of the Hartford Convention’s proposed solutions for America’s problems in 1814 were to surrender the idea of further colonization and retard the impulse to extend America’s boundaries. In his rush to cast them as eager to expand the Protestant empire, Haselby sometimes overlooks the hesitation New Englanders felt toward colonization prior to the War of 1812.

These limitations aside, *The Origins of American Religious Nationalism* is an important contribution to and correction of the literature on the origins of America’s multifaceted identities. It proves that religion was more than a mere cultural expression reacting to broader political developments: it drove much of the discussion in its own right. And it shows that westward expansion was not merely the logical result of nationalist ideas held by
people such as Jefferson but also presented new cultural realities and social circumstances that transformed nationalist thought in fundamental ways. Most importantly, this book demonstrates that the religious and political histories of America’s early Republic are best understood in tandem.