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Charles P. Hanson. *Necessary Virtue: The Pragmatic Origins of Religious Liberty in New England.* Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1998. x + 277 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-1794-8.

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Revolutionary New England Confronts its Roman Catholic Allies

Necessary Virtue springs from an intriguing contradiction: colonial New England had long been a hotbed of anti-Catholicism, but during the Revolutionary War patriots suddenly had to confront the prospect of making common cause with Roman Catholics, either among the settlers of Quebec or the soldiers and sailors of the French armed forces. Charles P. Hanson finds that the American Revolutionaries quickly dropped their traditional anti-Catholic rhetoric in order to advance their movement for independence.

As such, his research complements Francis D. Cogliano's *No King, No Popery.*[1] Hanson goes on to argue that the encounter with these Catholic allies produced the broader effects of an expansion of religious liberty and a diminution of the authority of the Congregational clergy. Moreover, Hanson positions his findings historiographically against Alan Heimert's *Religion and the American Mind.*[2] Hanson contends that the patriots' experience of "pragmatically" dealing with their Catholic allies belies Heimert's interpretation of a strong link between Calvinism and the American Revolution. When *Necessary Virtue* stays close to its sources, it illuminates an interesting aspect of the religious diplomacy of the American Revolution. However, when Hanson stretches to connect his study to more overarching themes, his interpretative reach comes up short.

Hanson's main finding, contained in chapters two to five, is that the American Revolutionaries did not antagonize their Canadian or French allies with their anti-popery. What Hanson refers to throughout the book at "the Catholic Question" first arose at the time of the invasion of Quebec in 1775-1776. Although patriots had complained loudly in 1774 over the perceived pro-Catholic slant of the Quebec Act, the Continental Congress abandoned this tack in its appeal to the people of Canada. In addition, the couple thousand soldiers who made the invasion march northward discarded their old prejudices, while the Canadian settlers welcomed the New Englanders as potential allies against their own ruling class. "[L]ike atheists in foxholes," Hanson surmises, "bigots were scarce in the Maine woods (p. 58)." Similarly, Catholics from France were accorded respect upon their arrival. Frenchmen who had been stereotyped formerly as foppish, immoral, and/or benighted were now lauded as affable, wise, and incipiently republican. American spokesmen even went so far as to claim that the French were not really very deeply Catholic after all. Loyalists, however, were quick to pick up the fallen standard of anti-Catholicism and point out the patriots' flip-flop. For insight into these encounters, Hanson mines a diverse array of source materials, including sermons, almanac and newspaper pieces, the reminiscences of soldiers who invaded Quebec, and the correspondence of both prominent Americans such as John Adams and assorted British and French observers.

When Hanson turns to address his study's larger significance in chapters six and seven, he is less compelling. He claims that the decrease of anti-Catholic rhetoric led to a broadening of religious liberty. This argument is most plausible when it is narrowly framed, as when Hanson writes, "tolerating the presence of Catholics and permitting their public worship had a certain legitimacy conferred on it by the mere fact of the Canadian and French alliances (p. 219)." However, when he asserts more expansively that "the boost that the alliances gave to the idea of religious toleration in general proved a useful tool in dismantling the claim to primacy of the Congregationalist Standing Order (p. 21)," the point remains unsubstantiated. For example, Hanson describes how during the 1780s, Universalists and their Congregational opponents rebuked each other with the language of anti-popery. Conservative Congregationalists labeled the Universalists as papists on account of the liberals' open church membership and denial of eternal damnation, which was similar to the belief in purgatory. The Universalists replied that it was the conservatives who

looked like Catholics with their persecuting clergy. Hanson tells us that New England Protestantism broke apart on this issue and yielded greater religious liberty, because it no longer enjoyed the consistently clear negative referent provided earlier by anti-Catholicism. However, Hanson's reasoning breaks down when one realizes that at least since the Great Awakening New England Protestants had been attacking each other with the "papist" label.[3] There undoubtedly was a growing trend toward religious liberalism in New England during the 1780s, but there are more proximate causes than the decline of anti-Catholicism like the Enlightenment or the Baptists' struggle, as suggested in the works of Conrad Wright and William G. McLoughlin, respectively.[4] Moreover, if anti-Catholicism decreased during the period 1775-1795, Hanson largely neglects to account for the tidal wave of it over the next twenty years.

Hanson furthermore contends that the findings of *Necessary Virtue* undermine the argument of Alan Heimert and others that there is a strong link between Calvinism and the coming of the American Revolution. On this point, Hanson seems to have created something of a straw man. *Religion and the American Mind* has not lasted as the "enduringly influential" (p. 15) thesis that Hanson makes it out to be. Certainly the work of scholars such as Jon Butler or Melvin B. Endy, Jr. has already called into question the purported links between Calvinism and the Revolutionary movement.[5] Hanson would perhaps be better served historiographically if he situated his work in the context of the contributions of Butler and Endy rather than as a response to Heimert.

Charles P. Hanson's *Necessary Virtue* will be useful especially to people interested in the long history of American anti-Catholicism as well as the diplomatic aspects of the American Revolution. As to the larger debates over the origins of religious liberty and the link between the Great Awakening and the Revolution, the book's contributions are less. Instead of billing itself as *The Pragmatic Origins of Religious Liberty in New England*, the book might more accurately be subtitled, "New England anti-Catholicism confronts Canadian and French Catholics, 1775-1783."

Notes:

[1]. Francis D. Cogliano, *No King, No Popery: Anti-Catholicism in Revolutionary New England*, Contributions in American History, no. 164 (Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 1995).

[2]. Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind, from the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966).

[3]. For instances of New Light (Ebenezer Frothingham) and Old Light (John Caldwell) usages of the "Papist" epithet, see Richard L. Bushman, ed., *The Great Awakening: Documents on the Revival of Religion, 1740-1745* (1970; reprint, Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 108, 158.

[4]. Conrad Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America* (Boston: Starr King Press, 1955); William G. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent, 1630-1833: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971).

[5]. Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1990); Melvin B. Endy, Jr., "Just War, Holy War, and Millennialism in Revolutionary America," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 42 (January 1985): 3-25.

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