

H-Net Reviews

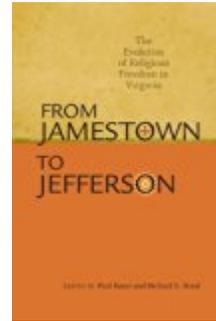
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Paul Rasor, Richard E. Bond, eds. *From Jamestown to Jefferson: The Evolution of Religious Freedom in Virginia*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011. viii + 203 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-3108-1.

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This collection of six essays examines the extent to which religious toleration and diversity existed in colonial Virginia, whether such toleration contributed to the statute for religious freedom, and the impact of the statute on Virginia's religious groups. As the editors note, the statute has more often been studied for its intellectual or revolutionary origins. This longer time horizon is both helpful and rewarding. It allows religious toleration in Virginia to be studied in terms of its deeper colonial context, as well as its daily realities, as an outgrowth of the relations between religious groups and as the result of legal changes brought about the statute's adoption.

The first four chapters, focusing on relations between different religious groups, help to illustrate how religious freedom existed in the tension between diversity and an Anglican establishment. Increased religious diversity in the late colonial period did not necessarily cause nor lead directly to greater religious toleration, though coeditors Paul Rasor and Richard E. Bond contend that "colonial Virginia was more religious, more diverse, and by necessity (often) more tolerant than commonly supposed" (p. 6). The final two chapters examine changes brought about by the American Revolution generally, as much as by the statute, that established a new basis for religious authority and religious liberty in both Virginia and the nation.

In chapter 1, Brent Tarter provides evidence of religion in seventeenth-century Virginia, noting that too often it has been depicted simply as the irreligious opposition of pious New England. He makes a significant comment about the Lawes Divine, Morall and Martiall, the laws of Jamestown, as expressions of religious belief and

practice, and considers evidence of religious organization from the well-documented Eastern Shore. Elsewhere, he argues, a lack of surviving evidence does not prove a lack of religion. Virginia's early laws and its parish structure matched the religious sensibilities and commitments of its early English migrants, while the presence of English Puritans, Catholics, and Quakers, as well as African and Indian residents, confirms the colony's diverse religious origins.

Edward L. Bond's "Lived Religion in Colonial Virginia" considers the range of behaviors encompassing the lived experiences of colonial Virginians. It is helpful in reminding readers that early settlers there saw their New World experiences through the lens of biblical lessons, as well as a supernatural world, similar to that of New Englanders. This chapter examines the meaning of Anglican practices at church and home, noting the communal and religious values attached to the Eucharist, the experience of attending church services as "communal auditory events," and practices of private devotion (p. 57).

Philip D. Morgan's "Religious Diversity in Colonial Virginia: Red, Black, and White" provides a unique overview of the experiences of Native Americans, African American slaves, and non-Protestant whites. Seeing orthodoxy and unorthodoxy as "primarily matters of perspective, dependent on whose vantage point is taken," Morgan aims not only to document the diversity, but also to consider how orthodox Protestantism aimed to suppress the most unorthodox, and how the unorthodox resisted (p.75). This essay offers many helpful observations, including the Anglican tendency toward religious dualism that often had proto-racial overtones; the

credible but limited success of English missions among the local Indians; and likely explanations for different, fluid understandings of the sacred and secular among Native Americans and Africans in contrast to the beliefs of Europeans and Anglo-Virginians.

In chapter 4, “Sectarians and Strategies of Dissent in Colonial Virginia,” Monica Najar acknowledges that the heightened persecution of dissenters, particularly Baptists in the 1760s and 1770s, had earlier roots. Three major dissenting groups in Virginia, Quakers, Presbyterians, and Baptists, had “collectively, if not collaboratively” over the course of the eighteenth century challenged the prevailing view of toleration by requiring local Anglican authorities to abide by the English Toleration Act of 1689 (p. 109). The appeal of these groups in the late eighteenth century when the local Church of England was also on the rise is explained in terms of Rhys Isaac’s counterculture argument, the communal dynamism of mid-century evangelicalism, and the rigors of dissenting membership. Najar considers how each of these dissenting groups both benefited from and learned the limitations of the Toleration Act. This essay is unique in the volume for its inclusion of gender and the domestic arena, particularly the Baptists’ campaign that dependents within the household have the freedom to worship according to their consciences.

In “Establishing New Bases of Religious Authority,” Thomas E. Buckley, SJ, focuses more on the postrevolutionary era, first by offering perceptive descriptions of four alternative views of Virginians on the proper church-state relationship during the Revolution. That the

assembly later chose to confiscate the property that previous assemblies (in 1776, 1784, and 1786) had guaranteed to the Episcopal Church, Buckley finds, “marked a major socioeconomic revolution” (p. 150). His explanations that this occurred partly as a result of Episcopalian distractions aptly highlight internal tensions within the denomination, especially differences between two of Virginia’s Anglican clergymen, James Madison and David Griffith.

In the most wide-ranging of these essays, Daniel L. Dreisbach argues that from 1776 to 1787 Virginia led the way among other states in its transformation from religious toleration to liberty. “Virginia’s Contribution to Religious Liberty” considers Virginians’ pivotal role in establishing religion as part of the American national narrative, in highlighting religious diversity in the nation, in articulating a belief in religion’s role in supporting morality, and in advancing religious liberty over the state church model of limited religious toleration.

This very effective anthology is comprehensive and brief, a difficult combination. The editors’ twin goals of integrating colonial material on religious diversity in Virginia and describing the impact of the legal changes unleashed in Virginia after 1776 means that the book, to its credit, looks both backward and forward. The colonial and early revolutionary contexts are more deeply covered than the legacy of the statute, given the balance of materials included. Meanwhile the mixture of essays illustrates that the history of religious diversity, toleration, and freedom significantly benefits from the integration of colonial, revolutionary, and postrevolutionary eras.

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