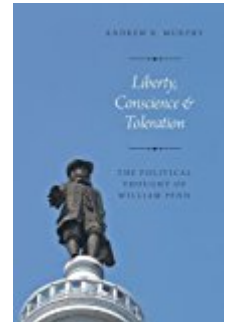


Andrew R. Murphy. *Liberty, Conscience, and Toleration: The Political Thought of William Penn.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 320 pp. \$74.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-027119-0.



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William Penn makes cameo appearances in many works, but takes the lead in few. Andrew R. Murphy rectifies this oversight in his new book, *Liberty, Conscience and Toleration: The Political Thought of William Penn*, which examines both Penn the man and the theorist in all his complexity. The author forthrightly notes that the annals of Atlantic history are populated with the ideas of renowned thinkers from Robert Boyle to John Milton. What distinguishes Penn, “a figure whom many know a little, but few know well,” from such a distinguished line-up is his schooling in both the philosophy and the practice of governance (p. ix). While Penn wrote treatise upon treatise examining the core concepts of political science, he also gained on-the-ground experience in governance while serving as Pennsylvania’s first Quaker proprietor. Where John Locke helped conceptualize South Carolina’s colonial constitution, Penn not only drafted a *Frame of Government* (1682-83) for his colony, but worked to implement it. An examination of Penn’s life thus provides a unique lens by which to examine how po-

litical theory influenced colonial governance and was, itself, refashioned in the process.

Just as important, a close examination of Penn’s life affords Murphy the chance to do what he does best—meditate on the meaning and place of liberty of conscience in an Atlantic world desperately seeking to come to terms with burgeoning religious diversity. Penn proved a dedicated foot soldier in the battle for religious freedom. Though Penn’s fortunes changed markedly over the years, Murphy shows that his dedication to the right of private (Protestant) judgment never wavered. As a young Quaker convert, Penn called on Parliament to repeal the Conventicle Act of 1664, which prohibited unlawful religious assemblies, while also urging the body to revoke laws requiring Quakers to swear oaths. When Britons ratcheted up anti-Catholic invective during the Exclusion Crisis of 1668, Penn took the opportunity to argue that Dissenters, however they might differ in religious practice from their Anglican countrymen, believed that popery threatened British liberties, and should thus be accepted

within the body politic. In Penn's mind, "civil loyalty and unity were compatible with religious difference." To "focus on the things that purportedly divided the nation along religious lines," only "played into the hands of those who sought to undermine the common good" (pp. 113-114). As Murphy amply demonstrates, Penn's early notions of religious liberty took shape against fears of Catholic oppression.

One of the strengths of Murphy's work lies in his willingness to analyze the gamut of Penn's written works, from "correspondence" to "promotional literature" in his effort to explain how Penn's political philosophies impinged upon the day-to-day realities of colonial governance (p. 126). Close reading of the *Fundamental Constitutions of Pennsylvania* (1681), for instance, allows Murphy to reiterate the fact that Penn viewed freedom of conscience not only as liberty of belief," but also "freedom of worship," while attention paid to the early laws of Pennsylvania becomes an instance to remind scholars that legislation forbidding insults directed at fellow colonists' religious persuasions had roots in Penn's previous political thinking (p. 137). In a word, Murphy argues, scholars do themselves a disservice when they look only to major philosophical works to explain the genesis and evolution of political thought.

In fact, political theorization of religious rights proved to be an endeavor that crossed multitudes of genres as well as multiple loyalties. In the longest of the book's chapters, Murphy scrutinizes the writings Penn crafted while cooperating with James II in an effort to repeal Britain's penal laws (under which religious dissenters could be imprisoned for worshipping in an unauthorized manner) and Test Act (which required civil leaders to swear that they renounced the doctrine of transubstantiation and papal supremacy) by royal fiat. Where previous biographers have critiqued Penn for cozying up to a monarch displaying "absolutist tendencies," Murphy emphasizes Penn's

continued dedication to freedom of conscience. Royal power, he believed, could be used aggressively in defense of fundamental religious rights, particularly if parliamentary approval was sought in a timely manner. Though the 1680s found Penn a changed man in many ways, his dedication to private judgment remained intact.

On the whole, Murphy's work is both timely and well executed. It deserves to be read (and even reread) by scholars interested in the transatlantic economy of ideas. Still, while Murphy does an exceptional job tracing the lineaments of Penn's political thought, he at times ignores its relevance to Penn's Quaker loyalties. In Murphy's telling, freedom of conscience in the seventeenth century was, first and foremost, a concept defined through struggles with and against coercive state actors and institutions. This is not wrong, but such an emphasis overlooks the fact that liberty of conscience was as fiercely debated within church bodies as it was between churches (or individual members of religious bodies) and the state. Penn himself lived through a period of seismic change within Quakerism. As Friends became ever more concerned with their public image, they increasingly disowned members who did not appear to abide by Quaker principles. Such struggles inevitably raised issues of religious freedom in meetinghouses throughout the British Empire. Yet, Penn's relationship to questions of conscience within institutional Quakerism is rarely mentioned. Quakerism proper, is, of course, not the book's main point of departure. But in a work which so diligently elucidates Penn's struggles of behalf of religious liberty, it is an aspect that one wishes received more attention.

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