

H-Net Reviews

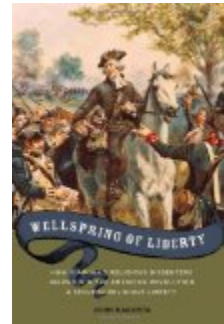
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John Ragosta. *Wellspring of Liberty: How Virginia's Religious Dissenters Helped Win the American Revolution and Secured Religious Liberty*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. viii + 261 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-538806-0.

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Original Intent Revisited

In *Wellspring of Liberty*, John Ragosta argues that the struggle of dissenters to the established church in Virginia not only resulted in separation of church and state, but was also an important element in the success of the War for Independence. He then uses the revolutionary experience to explore modern claims about the original intent of the First Amendment. The first two sections of the book covering the contentious relationship between Anglicans and dissenters before the war and revolutionary politics in Virginia after independence suffer from a lack of breadth of background and perspective. The final section discussing the meaning of separation of church and state in the new Republic is the most successful.

According to the author, Virginia has an undeserved reputation for toleration of dissenters. His description of the negative and sometimes violent reaction of many Virginians to the itinerant Baptist and Presbyterian preachers of the Great Awakening closely follows the heroic narratives of early nineteenth-century Baptist historians. This is then reinforced in an appendix listing alphabetically by person every individual persecuted for religion in Virginia during the Great Awakening. Since many of the early Baptist preachers traveled in groups, this results in multiple listings of the same event. "Persecution" in this context means everything from being beaten by a mob to being told "not to come there again" (p. 175). There is no distinction made between official action (arrest and/or trial for breaking laws requiring a license to preach) and mob or individual actions (such as a man

threatening a preacher for baptizing a family member without permission). Ragosta sees all of these actions as part of the Anglican elite's reaction to a movement that threatened their hegemony.

Where Ragosta differs from previous historians of the Great Awakening in Virginia is in acknowledging the more than two decades of scholarship documenting a vibrant and largely healthy established church on the eve of the Revolution. This, however, leads to a disturbing tendency to set up a monolithic church united and coordinated in its efforts to beat down dissenters. Anglicans themselves did not feel united, and when church taxes were suspended during the war, both vestries and clergy were unhappy. Vestries could not deal with the increased demands for poor relief brought by the war; clergy were left without any pay, and by canon law could not turn to secular employment without leaving the ministry. If dissenters felt persecuted, Anglicans often felt their church was under attack.

In his arguments that the legislature and dissenters struck a deal bargaining relief from religious persecution for support of the war effort, political nuances disappear. Ragosta documents the enlistment of dissenters and their leaders' support for the war. Categorizing the state into regions that were strongly or moderately dissenter versus "Anglican" areas, the author provides charts showing stronger support in men and materials from dissenting regions. A second appendix discusses the methodol-

ogy of his geographical analysis of support for the war effort. The charts do not take into account differences of the racial mix of a county, crops grown in different regions, or immediacy of threat (such as being on the frontier). His conclusion that there was a causal link between greater numbers of dissenters in a county and greater war support is an example of what statisticians call the “ecological fallacy.” The complicated politics that divided Anglicans on church politics are better covered in Thomas Buckley’s *Church and State in Revolutionary Virginia, 1776-1787* (1977).

The most glaring oversight in this discussion of the early part of the War for Independence in Virginia is the lack of any sense that Virginia’s legislature actually faced a wartime threat. There is a brief discussion of Lord Dunmore’s offer to free slaves who fought for the British and later of some raids launched from naval vessels, but the complete destruction of Norfolk in 1776, continued guerilla activity by loyalists located on the Eastern Shore or working from the Great Dismal Swamp, and continued fighting on Virginia’s exposed frontier are completely ignored even though these events resulted in a press of refugees that created major challenges for local officials. (As an example of this oversight see pp. 47, 52, 86.)^[1] For more on Norfolk and refugees see my essay, “‘We Bear the Yoke with a Reluctant Impatience’: The War for Independence and Virginia’s Displaced Women,” in John Resch and Walter Sargent, eds., *War and Society in the American Revolution*, DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007, pp 263-288.) Nor does the author seem to grasp the fact that the religious situation in New England was the reverse of that in Virginia. There members of the Church of England were the “dissenters” from an established congregational church.

Following the peace treaty, dissenters renewed their efforts for disestablishment and the Anglicans tried to organize as Episcopalians, but as a state church needed legislative action to authorize a meeting. Ragosta keeps his focus on dissenters, and continues to treat the power elite as a unified Anglican bloc that reluctantly gave up each privilege. The story simply does not work, because, as he admits, Anglican leaders both supported and opposed disestablishment, and definitely took different positions on whether church property should stay with the Episcopalians. Again, Buckley’s book provides a more nuanced account of these events.

There are certainly slips of sources and problems with research. At one point, Ragosta cites a nonexistent appendix in my book on Virginia clergy with an obviously

wrong page number (see page 18 and the corresponding citation on page 196). He seems unaware that the famous “10,000 name” petition includes multiple examples of double signing. He seems unaware that John Peter Muhlenberg actually had been ordained in the Church of England and treats him as a Lutheran pastor serving both Lutherans and Anglicans (p. 27). Numerous paragraphs assert fact without any citations (see pp. 20, 21, 28, 140).

The point of the earlier discussions becomes clear in the final chapter of the book. What actually interests the author is modern debates over whether the United States began as a “Christian nation.” Here Ragosta discusses what disestablishment and separation of church and state meant to dissenters given their experience in Virginia. His focus and conclusions are explicitly modern. Ragosta finds little support for the idea that the new nation was explicitly a “Christian nation.” In the process, he discusses how late eighteenth-century Virginians (and other Americans) would have understood peace and good order, separation of church and state, and freedom of religious expression (including the right to be non-Christian or an unbeliever). In general, he argues that the religious beliefs of dissenters and the persecution they faced in Virginia had led them to a position opposing positive governmental action of any kind in support of religion. Government could maintain good order and individuals were certainly free to act on deeply held beliefs by trying to influence policy measures, but the idea of a “Christian nation” was itself a form of establishment of religion that infringed on free exercise of religion. The discussion of good order is ironic. Most of the actions by officials that Ragosta covers as persecution in the opening section of the book were, in fact, attempts by Anglican officials to maintain public order against itinerant preachers. However, the desire of dissenters to influence morality left them willing to allow broad latitude for officials to maintain order in a post-establishment Virginia.

In the end, the final chapter and epilogue will be of interest to legal and constitutional historians and are worth the read, but scholars should be on notice that the first part of this book is very flawed and lacking in balance.

Note

[1]. For more on Norfolk and refugees, see my essay, “‘We Bear the Yoke with a Reluctant Impatience’: The War for Independence and Virginia’s Displaced Women,” in *War and Society in the American Revolution*, ed. John Resch and Walter Sargent (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007), 263-288.

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