

Book Forum

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A Discussion of Evan Haefeli's *Accidental Pluralism: America and the Religious Politics of English Expansion, 1497-1662*

Chris Beneke (review)

Professor of History, Department of History, Bentley University, Waltham, MA,
United States of America
cbeneke@bentley.edu

Benjamin J. Kaplan (review)

Professor, Department of History, University College London, London, United
Kingdom
b.kaplan@ucl.ac.uk

Tim Harris (review)

Munro, Goodwin, Wilkinson Professor of History, Department of History, Brown
University, Providence RI, United States of America
timothy_harris@brown.edu

Wayne Te Brake (review)

Professor Emeritus of History, Purchase College, State University of New York,
Purchase NY, United States of America
wayne.tebrake@purchase.edu

Evan Haefeli (response)

Associate Professor, Department of History, College of Liberal Arts, Texas A&M
University, College Station TX, United States of America
evanhaefeli@tamu.edu

Abstract

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Evan Haefeli, *Accidental Pluralism: America and the Religious Politics of English Expansion, 1497-1662* (Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 2021), viii + 383 pp. ISBN 978-0-226-74261-8 (cloth).

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In his sweeping new book, Evan Haefeli scales up a powerful interpretation of early American religious history that he first articulated in his 2012 work, *New Netherland and the Dutch Origins of American Religious Liberty*. In the latter, he showed that the Dutch colony of New Netherland was neither a model for, nor a progenitor of, the religious freedom that became a defining feature of the United States. In his new book, he shows that no British colony, either in North America or the Caribbean, was model or progenitor of the same either. New Netherland was an outpost of Dutch society and the form of religious toleration practiced in it bore no resemblance to the form enshrined in the American constitution. Rather, it conformed to the main arrangement back in what the Dutch referred to as *patria*: it involved not formal recognition of religious diversity but connivance; it maintained the monopoly of a single, official church (the Reformed) in the public sphere while allowing for a diversity of beliefs and practices in private. In short, religious toleration in New Netherland was “an extension of and variation on the European pattern” (282). So too in his new book, Haefeli shows that America was “an extension ... not an escape” (78) from religious conditions back in Britain—that “the Anglo-American colonies [should be understood] not as alternatives or exceptions to the religious dynamics of the English world but merely variants along the broad spectrum within it” (6). Religious diversity in the ‘New World’ was, as Haefeli tells it, an Old-World story.

New Netherland was, of course, just one colony, whereas in his new book Haefeli tells the story of religious aspirations and arrangements in all the colonies established by the British in the Caribbean and North America. Indeed, the number of colonies treated is even greater as it includes ones that failed, such as New Albion on the mid-Atlantic coast and Eleutheria in the Bahamas. These, Haefeli argues, are just as indicative of intentions and approaches to religious diversity as are the colonies that succeeded and survived. Haefeli thus begins his story not with the founding of Virginia in 1607 but with John Cabot’s planting a crucifix on the shore of what is now Newfoundland, Canada. This shift in perspective is one of the freshest and most valuable aspects of *Accidental Pluralism*. Despite its prodigious scope, the book is anything but a catalogue with separate chapters treating each colonial variant. Rather, the book incorporates the religious history of all the colonies into a single, chronologically ordered narrative, one whose defining contours are determined by events back in British *patria*—by the course of religious history in Ireland, Scotland, and above all, England.

In some respects, the story Haefeli tells is a peculiarly British one. Above all it attributes religious pluralism in British America to the decline of religious unity within England

itself. This decline, as is well known, had its origins in the English Reformation and the ambiguities of the Elizabethan settlement, which embraced Protestants of varying inclinations within a single national church. It continued under James I, who sought to balance religious factions off against one another and rewarded the personal loyalty of aristocrats, including Catholic ones such as Cecil Calvert, Lord Baltimore. It went further under Charles I and Archbishop Laud, whose efforts to impose an “avant-garde conformism” (54) had just begun to extend to the colonies when war broke out with Scotland, then Ireland, then within England itself. In the 1640s English Protestantism fragmented into a multiplicity of discrete groups, out of whose puritan elements Oliver Cromwell sought in the 1650s to forge a “loose but consistent Republican church order” (282). Haefeli’s narrative of British religious history is for the most part well known and even traditional in its privileging of elite, national politics. What is illuminating is how Haefeli shows religious life in each colony being shaped by circumstances back in Britain at the time the colony was founded, and then subsequently modified by successive phases of national religious politics. Take, for instance, Virginia, which started out as a “constantly shifting mix” (116) of puritan and non-puritan, including “the full range of opinions available within Jacobean conformity” (111). In the 1630s, its royal governor, Sir John Harvey, set about aggressively imposing a narrower, Laudian conformity, driving puritan influence into the southeastern corner of the colony. In 1643 Virginia declared for the king and all “nonconformists” were ordered “to depart the colony with all conveniencie” (218). After the Commonwealth gained control of the colony in 1651, its religious life moved again in a puritan direction, as sabbath observance and moral standards began to be strictly enforced. No sooner did its Cromwellian governor die in 1660, though, than Virginia moved quickly to restore the prerevolutionary church.

Like Virginia, most colonies sought to impose conformity—adherence to the laws of the Church of England—on their inhabitants. But as the case of Virginia highlights, conformity itself varied over time and, in some phases, left a great deal of room for religious diversity. By the latter, Haefeli means specifically the range of opinions and practices allowed within a single church. To it Haefeli contrasts ‘pluralism’, by which he means the coexistence of multiple churches. The distinction is a crucial one, for which early modern people had terms of their own, for example contrasting ‘latitude’ or ‘comprehension’ with ‘toleration’. I would question, though, Haefeli’s use of the word ‘diversity’ for the former, as the usage seems unusual and artificially restricted.

If each British colony had its own religious establishment, most colonies sooner or later also had among their inhabitants dissenters from that establishment. Even intolerant Massachusetts, which executed four Quaker missionaries, had by the 1660s a Quaker community. Such toleration as dissenters enjoyed, though, was not legally codified. One of the most striking observations in Haefeli’s book is that no formal grant of toleration was ever made to a dissenting religious group. The closest thing to such a grant was probably the 1649 order by the governing assembly of Barbados “that coercive Ecclesiastical Lawes, and the penalties thereof, and every clause and particle in any former, shall be and are hereby fully, absolutely, and totally repealed” (265). Even this law, though, did not sanction gatherings for worship separate from the established church; indeed, it made it a criminal offence to attend ‘conventicles’ or to seduce people away from the established religion. Haefeli is perhaps at his most revisionist in his treatment of Maryland, where Calvert instructed his co-religionists

to practice their religion “as privately as may be”, to “be silent upon all occasions of discourse concerning matters of Religion”, and to ‘suffer no scandall nor offence to be given any of the Protestants” (191). In other words, even the toleration of Catholics in Maryland was *de facto*, not *de jure*, as the toleration of dissent generally was in many parts of Europe, including the Dutch Republic. The crucial condition for this *de facto* toleration was that dissenters had to maintain a discreet veil of privacy, worshiping behind the closed doors of buildings that looked like houses (or barns or warehouses), not churches. Avoiding legal codification and tolerating dissent only ‘by connivance’ allowed communities large and small to maintain a public semblance of religious unity and thus avoid some of the dangers posed by religious divisions to their cohesion and peace. In this regard, the story of religious toleration that Haefeli tells about British colonies in the Americas is not distinctly British. Rather, it fits a broader, European pattern—not, to be sure, the only pattern or form of religious accommodation on the European continent, which had also its multiconfessional states like France (until 1685) and Hungary, but one of the most widespread and fundamental ones.

Equally European was the debt pluralism in the Americas owed to the sheer multiplicity of colonies. Back in the Old World, the ultimate guarantor of religious pluralism was the political and legal fragmentation of the continent. In the wake of the Protestant Reformation, sovereign rulers in western and central Europe either enjoyed by law (as in the Holy Roman Empire) or seized *de facto* (as did most monarchies) a power to choose between faiths and impose their choice on their subjects. Different states had different official religions, and efforts to impose a religion on other states by military force (as in the Thirty Years War) chalked up few successes, thanks chiefly to a rough balance of power between Catholic and Protestant states. In eastern Europe it tended to be nobles who enjoyed a comparable power over those living on their estates. Whatever form it took, the fragmentation of European society into different jurisdictions resulted in a vast multiplicity of ecclesiastic establishments, as even states sharing a common religion had separate national or territorial churches (Catholic states such as France and Spain sought to give the Catholic establishments in their lands some of the attributes of national churches). Such fragmentation was characteristic also of the British Isles, where the Churches of England, Ireland, and Scotland were not just distinct institutions but had varying norms, the most extreme variation being the presbyterianism of the Scottish church. Britain had more variety, though, than just its four nations. As Haefeli entertainingly surveys in his third chapter, the lesser lordships and other territories scattered along England’s frontiers—Calais, Boulogne, the Channel Islands, the Bishopric of Durham, Lancashire, Cheshire, the Isle of Man—all constituted distinct jurisdictions whose partial independence, along with “their very different histories, cultures, and conditions, undercut the demands for religious unity emanating from the center” (76). Britain’s colonies in the Americas were often modeled on these lordships, and indeed Ireland itself was already for England a prototype-colony. Thus the American colonies joined a Britain that was already (to use Haefeli’s terminology) pluralistic as well as diverse in having multiple religious establishments.

Another Old-World phenomenon transplanted to the Americas was the power wielded in religious affairs by local elites. In Europe, noble families whose medieval ancestors had provided endowments for parish churches often enjoyed more than an informal say in parochial affairs; many held legal privileges such as the right of patronage to determine who

would be appointed vicar or curate. Many a religious reformer found such rights an obstacle to their efforts, though by the same token the enthusiastic backing of a local noble could provide a powerful impetus to the same. In cities, magistrates sought and often obtained comparable powers, while in both city and countryside lay elites participated in church governance by serving as vestrymen, churchwardens, elders and deacons, or other sorts of parish or church officials. Then there was the decisive influence of the local priest or minister himself, who in England might prefer to perform a stately liturgy based on the *Book of Common Prayer* or be one of those didactic, disciplinarian, preaching types. The influence of both lay elites and clergy on local religious life was, if anything, even greater in the colonies, where low numbers amplified the impact of individual inclinations and where founders and early arrivals might leave enduring legacies. Longevity too counted for a lot in the colonies, where so many early settlers died or returned home. A good example of these dynamics is offered by Bermuda, which in its early years usually had just a single minister and where councils of lay overseers ran churches. Serving for about a decade, Bermuda's second minister, Lewis Hughes, managed with the support of Governor Nathaniel Butler to leave a puritan stamp on the island's religious and social life. Haefeli rejects any suggestion that religious life in the British colonies had special qualities due to the American environment and its character for Europeans as a frontier, but from the perspective of a Europeanist it does seem that the roles played by founders and early settlers add something distinctly colonial to the story Haefeli tells of the influence of local elites.

The distinctiveness of the colonial context is perhaps most manifest in relation to slavery, which scarcely figures in histories of religious toleration in Europe, despite the important place of slavery in Christian-Muslim relations. Around the Mediterranean, Muslim forces took Christian captives as slaves and vice-versa, while on the Iberian peninsula, the only European region with a large population of slaves, the latter included thousands of Moriscos (Muslims forced to convert to Christianity, and the descendants of such) as well as non-Muslim Africans. Haefeli does not devote a great number of pages to slavery, but the latter nevertheless plays a striking role in his account of religious pluralism in the British colonies. Through the seventeenth and into the eighteenth century, explains the author, the notion prevailed among colonists that one should not enslave fellow Christians, creating a reluctance to convert African slaves to Christianity, as doing so might require their manumission. Indeed, in these years some colonists questioned whether Africans were capable of being Christianized. These notions, combined with the economic gain derived from slavery, encouraged colonists to tolerate the African religions practiced by slaves. Only later did the idea gain widespread acceptance that enslaved people could become Christian and remain enslaved (36). Until then, religious difference helped to justify slavery, while the latter in turn extended pluralism beyond the bounds of Christianity. The 'enslavers' indifference to the spiritual fate of those they enslaved was effectively a form of toleration' (33), asserts Haefeli, and in this way, by the 1660s 'non-Christian religion was being unofficially tolerated in some form or other across the English colonies' (36). This seems to have been a distinctly British colonial phenomenon, as the Spanish and Portuguese baptized most of their slaves and had little compunction about keeping them enslaved.

Obviously, the toleration of slaves' non-Christian beliefs and practices was not the product of some commitment on the part of the British colonists to freedom of conscience or

worship. Rather, it exemplifies what Haefeli sees as the unprincipled, unintended character of toleration in the colonies generally. Haefeli entitles his book *Accidental Pluralism*, by which he means that the religious pluralism that came to characterize Britain's American colonies was not a result of colonists' holding pluralism as an ideal or establishing it in some planned or deliberate fashion. This position situates the book firmly in the body of revisionist historiography that, for more than two decades, has questioned the influence of ideas and intellectuals in the history of religious toleration. America was not intended as a refuge for the persecuted, never mind an exemplar of religious freedom: this main argument reaches its climax in the last chapters of the book where the author traces the colonists' opposition to the religious liberty promoted in the 1640s-50s by the New Model Army and Cromwell, and where he pointedly contrasts the intolerance of Massachusetts' Congregationalists to the tolerance championed by their counterparts back in *patria*, the Independents. Although the empirical base of his study ends rather abruptly in 1662, in his introduction and conclusion Haefeli extends the argument to the late eighteenth century. The religious pluralism that characterized the United States of America from its founding had no single origin or source, copied no long-established model, fulfilled no ideal or ambition shared by the land's early settlers. Ultimately, suggests Haefeli, the United States ended up with no national religious establishment because the colonies from which it was constructed had distinct religious establishments that could not be reconciled or merged with one another. It was a product of circumstance, above all of the brute fact of multiplicity.

Despite, then, its broad scope and synthetic character, *Accidental Pluralism* is a book with an argument. With it Haefeli aims to shoot down a centuries-old myth that represents American religious freedom as a sort of manifest destiny—a fated future that fulfils a mission embarked upon by the land's first European settlers. This myth retains a place in contemporary American culture, and for this reason Haefeli is to be applauded for attempting an important intervention in public discourse. If the same myth continues to inform academic writing on colonial religious history, the book will also be a powerful and important scholarly intervention. That, though, is a question colonialist colleagues are far better placed than me to address. In any event, the book is a major addition to the growing body of revisionist historiography mentioned above, contributing to our understanding of the realities of life and practices of accommodation in religiously mixed societies of the past.

Review by Tim Harris

Review by Wayne Te Brake

Response by Evan Haefeli

