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Book Review: Beyond Toleration: The Religious Origins of American Pluralism by Chris Beneke

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Beneke, Chris. *Beyond Toleration: The Religious Origins of American Pluralism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Chris Beneke, an associate professor of history at [Bentley University](#) in Massachusetts, has a longstanding interest in the issue of religious tolerance in the United States. *The Religious Origins of American Pluralism* was his first monograph. The volume consists of five chapters with an introduction and conclusion, the citations are in a separate notes section, and the volume concludes with an index.

Beneke is a good writing historian, who fleshes out his narrative with relevant and engaging illustrations. He begins his introduction with the story of a parade in Boston where ministers of various denominations were asked to walk arm in arm in a deliberate symbolic show of unity and equality. This was 1791, not long after the conclusion of the rebellion and during a time when religious toleration was transitioning into religious liberty. Beneke purposes to show how this process unfolded religiously and politically, and to highlight how this process is similar to the process the west has experienced through the multiculturalism of the twenty-first century. He claims that culture and law worked together to move the United States toward the embrace of religious pluralism.

Beneke's first chapter is an effort to create a sense of context for the twenty-first century reader to understand religious culture in the North American colonies. Beneke moves between New England, with its Congregational "establishment" and Virginia, with its official Establishment to weave his story, beginning with early efforts in the colonies to curtail dissent. The Quakers were troublesome in the colonies in the seventeenth century, as Massachusetts sought to keep them outside their boundaries. He describes Congregational reaction to Quaker proselytizing as the "disease of dissent" and he indicates that the dissenters were managed like disease-carriers. If they could not be cured; they had to be killed to prevent the spread of their contagion. Baptists in New England countered with an argument from Locke, a right to private judgment. Beneke cites the situation in Virginia as no less hostile to dissenters, though they made provision for them under the Act of Toleration. While they were tolerated, dissenting Virginians were expected to pay their taxes and meet their other civil obligations. Preachers who strayed outside the boundaries set for them were often punished severely.

Beneke further argues that the Establishments in the colonies were hindered in their efforts to squelch dissent by the increasing availability of printed material. Indeed, anyone who had the money to pay the publisher could have their thoughts typeset and published. Dissenters and supporters of the Establishment made ample use of the printing presses available in the colonies.

Beneke's second chapter argues that the Great Awakening, which caused church divisions, also contributed to the development of religious pluralism in the colonies. Indeed, conversions became a cross-denominational experience. Pastors were divided within denominations over whether to embrace or reject the raw emotionalism of the first Great Awakening. New Lights and Old Lights became labels within churches. Thankfully, there was plenty of space and members who no longer were unified could choose to separate and form new congregations.

A third factor, the society also helped facilitate was a culturally-acceptable means to relate to Christians outside one's church. This is the focus of the third chapter. Beneke indicates that while the Great Awakening divided churches, it also gave the leaders who embraced the phenomenon the opportunity to see the possibility of working together for positive social change. This is seen in the joint venture in New York of a university where both Presbyterians and Anglicans were on the Board of Trustees (King's College; now Columbia University). Beneke cites as further examples of the ecumenical spirit, the goal of the Moravians to unite all denominations under the lordship of Christ, as well as the efforts to rally all good protestants against the ever-present "Catholic menace." He also mentions fraternal societies, such as the Masons, as contributing to the breaking down of walls between denominations. They urged their members to see religion as a matter of loving God and practicing good morals. Another outside influence was politics. In a "free colony" such as Pennsylvania, Quakers were soon forced to deal with non-Quakers who were elected to their legislative body. Leaders in the colonies sought to build coalitions across church groups toward supporting the rebellion.

Beneke's fourth chapter turns to the question of how the discussion moved from religious toleration to religious liberty. He notes that the terminology changed because the established religious leadership in the colonies kept responding to challenges to their dominance. He presents the bishop

controversy as it was expressed in New England and the rapid expansion of dissenting meeting houses in Virginia to explain how thinking on pluralism progressed. New England Anglicans chafed under what they perceived to be “toleration” when they were the King’s church. It made no sense to them that they should not have the same right to the religious structures of their church that the dominant Congregationalists enjoyed. They wanted a bishop and hoped for such, and used the language of religious liberty to argue their case, little knowing that this same language would be turned on the Anglicans in the Southern colonies where their establishment was stronger. Beneke briefly surveys the lobbying pressure that dissenters put onto the House of Delegates in Virginia for religious freedom.

He continues the chapter with an overview of the Congregationalist response to the concept of a church not supported by taxation, and Pennsylvania’s Quakers’ dilemma when dealing with the majority of colonists (even within their borders) who resented the practical outworking of their core doctrine of pacifism. Quakers were allowed to “pay a fee” in lieu of militia service to cover costs for the willing non-Quaker to participate in the militia. Beneke assesses this as an example of the kind of compromises that were being made; pacifism while not treasonous was nevertheless “tolerated.” He concludes that the move from religious toleration to religious liberty was tumultuous; hard fought; and sometimes ugly, but the nation nevertheless got there. The rhetoric moved from slandering the religious motives of opponents to making every effort to not injure the conscience of those who held opposing views.

The fifth chapter covers changes in the public expression of religion that occurred during the early republic period. Church leaders worked to emphasize points of agreement rather than disagreement. Beneke highlights Virginia’s Statute of Religious Freedom as a fundamental shift from looking to the state to support religion to putting the support of the expression of faith among the various religious groups voluntarily meeting together. Eventually, religious liberty was legislated into the laws of all thirteen United States. Critics of the novel concept of religious liberty worried that infidelity would gain a beachhead in the new nation if there was no firm established church of some sort.

Beneke indicates that the Revolution, because it brought so many people, from so many backgrounds, to the same places, working toward the same goals, that it inadvertently created a

“connection between public civility and religious liberty.” Indeed Christians became American Christians, and denominational labels became secondary in their identity. While this shift did much to encourage civility, Catholics and Jews and other minorities did not enjoy this space. Catholics were given more leeway when the French were not threatening America’s borders, and laws were changed which allowed Jews to hold public office. Beneke sees these small steps toward religious pluralism in America as the first tentative steps to its fuller expression as this nation of immigrants learned to tolerate one another by leaving religious convictions unmolested as long as the government was not threatened by it.

Beneke is definitely hoping in this volume to let the past speak to our present experience as America walks through the cultural anxieties created by now fully developed multiculturalism. The nation’s heritage speaks anew as it deals with an interesting confluence of secularism and Islam into the public conversation. He observes “over the course of American history, racial and ethnic identities often did supplant the religious identities that had been so central to early white Americans. Yet as that happened, many of the same patterns emerged. A common template appeared again and again in the public interaction among different groups. In almost every case, the codification of equal rights was followed by social integration and the extension of public recognition.” He cites the American civil rights movement as an example of this. The rights African Americans claimed as their own were not gained easily or without resistance.

This volume offers a useful overview of the cultural and legal transition between religious toleration and religious liberty. Beneke does so without creating the typical Hegelian formula of conflict/resolution cycles through which this process has often been seen. He is very fair to those who very much wanted, for good reason, an established church. His analysis has helpful applications to students surveying the current cultural milieu in America.

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