Eliane Glaser, ed.


In recent years, our understanding of toleration has become more interesting, and its triumph less certain. The early modern roots of our Western concept of toleration are often acknowledged, but the line that connects these post-Reformation ideas to the present day is more often asserted than explored. In this collection of essays, the authors bravely straddle the early modern and modern periods to discuss connections between toleration then and toleration now, within the Atlantic world. The editor’s purpose was to highlight the “mercurial and ambivalent tensions” (4) within both the idea of tolerance and its use in practice, and to do so by asking the authors to comment on contemporary issues, as well as early modern themes.

The result is a volume that is suggestive, offering a series of fresh insights, rather than a new narrative or model. Many of the essays juxtapose early modern and modern case studies, showing that the questions faced by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century men and women have not gone away. The best essays offer some suggestions as to why that might be, pointing not only to the ways in which our societies have inherited the problems of our own past, but also examining the character of religious commitment and the issues it necessarily raises for those who are believers and citizens, or would-be citizens. In the first chapter, John Coffey argues that religious people who prioritize sacred texts will only defend toleration if they believe it is endorsed by those texts—citing Protestant advocates of toleration, including John Locke, who defended their position by re-interpreting the Bible. He suggests that Locke’s example might appeal to Muslims sympathetic to the concept of toleration, seeking themselves to show how toleration can be found in the Qur’an. In contrast, Justin Champion argues that, in the seventeenth century, it was only by critiquing the traditional and deeply religious metaphysical framework that true civil liberty could be defended. Other essays touch on similar themes. Andrew Murphy and Sarah Morgan Smith outline William Penn’s theory of toleration, which, they argue, stemmed from his conception of the limited purposes of government—itself a result of his own understanding of the (divinely ordained) relationship between church and state. And Nicholas McDowell analyses John Milton’s view of liberty, showing that, taken as whole, it demonstrates the paradoxical character of liberalism itself.

Several contributors foreground early modern conceptions of community and the complex relationship between spiritual and secular communities. Achsah Guibbory examines the notion of “chosenness” in her study of the controversy
over the readmission of Jews into England in the 1650s and after. Many of those concerned about allowing Jews into England feared that this would undermine England's status as a chosen nation, a concept itself built upon Christian readings of the Old Testament. She argues that these Old Testament narratives of election are still with us today, citing the rhetoric of John F. Kennedy and Jez Butterworth's play Jerusalem. Ingrid Crepell examines the beliefs that held the Puritan community in New England together, and suggests the role of "enmity" towards the native Indians within that cluster of beliefs. She outlines a model of enmity designed to help explain particular instances across time and space, although historically minded readers may find this less compelling than the case study itself. Continuity through time is also discussed by Matthew Dimmock, whose chapter on representations of Mohammed shows how a fairly stable caricature of the Prophet has been adapted to suit the cultural prejudices of particular times and places. In all these chapters, it is clear that toleration is problematic because it threatens to undermine the ideological glue holding societies together—although Guibbory points to Obama's "inclusive" language of exceptionalism as a more positive model.

The early modern language of toleration implied distance between public and private beliefs, and in his chapter on the Jesuits, James Kelly shows some of the problems with this framework. His chapter is primarily a study of the English Catholic John Petre, arguing that his "church papistry" was both braver and more important than previous historians have realized. It ends with a criticism of state efforts to control religious beliefs and to determine the boundary between public and private. Feisal Mohamed examines the ways in which "private" claims to liberty of conscience can be used by religious groups to further their own ends. This note of pragmatism is found in many of the chapters, perhaps most prominently in Jacob Selwood's account of the fate of Jews within England and English colonies—where toleration existed, it was more for economic and political than religious reasons.

As this brief survey of the range of themes covered shows, it is a rich and wide-ranging collection, and the contributors' willingness to tackle modern as well as early modern problems sets it apart from other, similar studies. But the price for this breadth is the limited intellectual depth of the volume; none of the authors goes into much conceptual detail. Moreover, there is relatively little about the intellectual underpinnings of toleration or liberty of conscience, perhaps because this was not seen as the purpose of the collection. It would have benefitted from a final chapter (or a longer introduction) pulling some of the themes together and making connections between the articles; as I have tried to show, there are threads which run through the book and which link particular chapters together, but there is no commentary upon these shared