
Kaplan provides an exceptionally thoughtful, compellingly argued, and eminently readable study of confessional tensions and the realities of toleration in Europe from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. It unquestionably confirms our pessimism over the capacity of religious differences to incite conflict. At the same time, Kaplan challenges our conventional, all too comforting belief that notions of toleration gradually emerged in reaction to the overly ardent, deadly violence spawned by the Reformation. Equally important, he notes that concerns over religious strife and a desire for peaceful coexistence are no less prevalent today than they were half a millennium ago. What then might a critical re-evaluation of a shared past experience tell us about our current afflictions? In his response to this and related queries, Kaplan underscores four key elements. They, in turn, frame his analysis of the disjuncture between the perceived promise of religious tolerance and the absence of its practice by ordinary Europeans. What, to begin, were the “obstacles” that served to divide people of faith and propel them to assault and badly mistreat one another? Secondly, how did early modern political and social groups craft the “arrangements” that promoted religious understanding and toleration, or at least separated competing confessional groups and allowed them to coexist peacefully? Thirdly, what were the “interactions” between and among people, both Christian and non-Christian, that provoked tensions or conversely promoted harmony? A final brief concluding section discusses “changes,” notably the emergence of far greater and more widespread toleration during the Enlightenment. Kaplan is well positioned to undertake this re-evaluation of toleration. He is a highly regarded historian. In addition, his specialization in the religious culture of the Netherlands during the early modern period has made him keenly aware of the myriad of confessional divides, how they could lead to conflict and how, in some instances, political initiatives and social imperatives could serve to overcome the problem.

The first part of the book examines the fundamental problem of why people of faith found it nearly impossible to get along. In the wake of the Reformation, Catholics and Protestants alike stood ever ready to legitimate the abuse and persecution of those who held opposing beliefs. This willingness to defend their positions through coercive word and violent deed found its roots in the advance of confessional identity—the elucidation of precise doctrinal positions and complimentary devotional practices—within the major Christian traditions. This development also meant increasing rigidity, exclusivity, and stridency. Confessionalism promoted, in Kaplan’s words, intolerance as “an essential attribute of piety” (p. 47). Furthermore, the equation of the civic and the sacral prompted...
communities from the humblest village to the mightiest kingdom to support unity and common purpose, all the while vigilantly guarding against religious pollution. Corporate rituals such as the Catholic procession or the Reformed Lord’s Supper proved highly effective in furthering these objectives. Corpus Christi celebrations, funeral services, and a variety of other collective religious activities quickly became opportunities for riots and massacres.

Kaplan next addresses the equally absorbing subject of those communities that succeeded in defusing and containing these murderous religious impulses. Though most western Europeans emphatically rejected the notion that Christianity was irretrievably shattered, a few voices hesitatingly articulated projects for accommodating differences in religious positions. In some cases, especially in the German imperial world, believers trekked across nearby political borders to worship in ways forbidden in their home territories. Another possibility, popular in Dutch cities, were the clandestine churches, which were in fact not entirely secret as authorities knowingly and quietly acquiesced. Thus, Catholics, Mennonites, and Lutherans could practice their faith in relative freedom, while Jews sometimes openly worshiped in impressive synagogues. In yet other places, competing congregations managed to negotiate the mechanisms for sharing a single worship space through a system commonly known as Simultaneum. Sharing power through appointment of equal numbers of Protestants and Catholics to law courts, municipal councils, and school faculties was yet another experiment in the search for peace. In France, the 1598 Edict of Nantes offered a wide range of security guarantees and the monarchy even created bipartisan commissions to enforce the edict’s many provisions.

Having devoted substantial attention to the political instruments for disengagement, Kaplan turns finally to the underlying social structures and the interactions of ordinary people in their daily lives. One particularly striking experiment amounted to social segregation. People of differing faiths may have physically cohabitated in the same towns and neighborhoods, but their religious leaders steadfastly discouraged relationships that led to interdependency. Sacred space for worship, burial and instruction was rigidly demarcated. Accordingly, luring people across the confessional boundaries and actively seeking converts could be profoundly destabilizing. All sides targeted the young and elderly, sick and poor. Not surprisingly, confessionally mixed marriages proved a major battleground. Here Kaplan makes the perceptive observation that communities of faith found it easier to accept those who did not share their specific belief system if they were strangers and foreigners. Perhaps they were less immediately threatening. Christian groups also seem to have extended this practical toleration of the outsider to Jews but not to Muslims.

What meaning does Kaplan draw from this wide-ranging, discerning examination of confessional abhorrence and intolerance? Sadly, religious strife remained a constant throughout the early modern era. Tolerance found no more than sporadic