Religious Conflict and Accommodation in the Early Modern World ed. by Marguerite Ragnow and William D. Phillips Jr (review)

J. Michael Raley

Journal of World History, Volume 24, Number 2, June 2013, pp. 426-430 (Review)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/jwh.2013.0063

Religious Conflict and Accommodation in the Early Modern World. Edited by MARGUERITE RAGNOW and WILLIAM D. PHILLIPS JR. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Center for Early Modern History, 2011. 257 pp. $55.00 (cloth).

Religious Conflict and Accommodation in the Early Modern World emerged from a 2003 lecture series and symposium sponsored by the Center for Early Modern History (CEMH), University of Minnesota, in the wake of the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001. As Jamie Rae Bluestone and William D. Phillips Jr. make clear in their introduction, the essays of this collection challenge the post-Enlightenment perspective, so dominant throughout the twentieth century, which regards early modern religion as a vestige of the superstitious medieval past. Proponents of this paradigm typically view the secularization of society, separation of church and state, and recognition of liberty of conscience as hallmarks of modernity, while rejecting religion's utility as a public moral force. The present collection, on the other hand, contributes to a growing body of scholarship that acknowledges the continued significance and complexity of the religious impact upon the early modern world (ca. 1350–1750). Religious differences often spawned internal religious conflicts within, as well as external wars between, the world religions of Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity. Equally often, however, early modern political and religious leaders achieved accommodation through dialogue and compromise, not only vis-à-vis external enemies, but also with opponents within their respective faiths.

James D. Tracy's essay, "The Background War of the Early Modern Era: Christian and Muslim States in Contest for Dominion, Trade, and Cultural Preeminence," continues in this vein, arguing that the long-standing conflict between Islamdom and Christendom for global dominance continued as a "background war" during the early modern era behind more immediate concerns as "statesmen, merchants, and religious thinkers, European and Ottoman alike, were preoccupied by enemies or rivals of their own faith" (p. 13). Thus the French monarchy entered into alliances with the Sublime Porte and the Dutch Republic against the Hapsburgs, while Ottoman Sunnis campaigned repeatedly against Shi'ite Persians. Meanwhile, as Charles V competed with Suleiman I in elaborate displays of state power, northern European Christian allies of the Porte undercut Venetian Levant trade and controlled eastern Mediterranean commerce upon which the Ottomans depended by collaborating with Arab, Jewish, and Turkish merchants and defending their routes with heavily armed galleons. The

combined mercantile interests, state-sponsored warfare, and Western "cultural offensive in which all Europeans—Habsburg or Habsburg-foe, Protestant or Catholic—spoke a common language" (p. 33) shifted the balance of global power. "Europeans came to outmatch the Ottomans not by working together, but by working at cross purposes" (p. 26).

Anne Marie Wolf's essay, "Pleas for Peace, Problems for Historians: A 1455 Letter from Juan de Segovia to Jean Germain on Countering the Threat of Islam," examines a fascinating exchange between Spanish theologian-conciliarist Juan de Segovia and French bishop Jean Germain following the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Rather than calling for a holy war against the Ottoman Empire, Segovia proposed that Christian theologians follow Christ's command to love their enemies and engage in peaceful dialogue with Muslim leaders, trusting that the "sword" of Holy Scripture and reason would convince them of the "truth." Wolf's contribution here is commendable, although assessing her bold claim that Segovia's "arguments . . . taken to their logical conclusions . . . would have supported a stance of religious toleration" three centuries before the Enlightenment (pp. 62–63) is more difficult. Segovia regarded Muslims with disdain and sought the eradication of Islam. He differed from his Catholic contemporaries only in the means he recommended to accomplish this goal: peaceful conversion rather than the slaughter of Muslims. Thus he proposed a short-term *modus vivendi* more along the lines of "concordance" than "toleration." Nonetheless, in an earlier letter to Nicholas of Cusa, mentioned but not discussed here by Wolf, Segovia seems to have come closer to true toleration when he acknowledged that long-term dialogue between leading Muslims and Christians would yield important political advantages even if it failed, or required many years, to achieve religious unity.[1]

Through the reign of Henri II, Denis Crouzet argues in "Violence and the State in Sixteenth-Century France," the Valois kings united their nobles and fashioned a public image of *virtus divina* by leading them into battle against distant Italian or Habsburg armies while using royal power at home to suppress religious heresy that endangered the body politic. The Treaty of Cateau-Cambrésis (1559), which abruptly

[1] See R. W. Southern, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1962), pp. 89–92; James E. Biechler, "A New Face toward Islam: Nicholas of Cusa and John of Segovia," in *Nicholas of Cusa in Search of God and Wisdom: essays in Honor of Morimichi Watanabe by the American Cusanus Society*, ed. Gerald Christianson and Thomas M. Izbicki (Leiden: Brill, 1991), pp. 185–222, esp. pp. 191–194; and Jesse D. Mann, "Truth and Consequences: Juan de Segovia on Islam and Conciliarism," *Medieval Encounters* 8, no. 1 (2002): 79–90.

ended the Habsburg-Valois wars, together with the untimely death of Henri II that same year, threatened this royal ideology. In the religious and civil strife that ensued, Huguenot resistance theory and a radical Catholic "vision of violence" (p. 96) competed with the French monarchy's quest for politico-religious stability. Henceforth the king was compelled to base "the sacred character of his office . . . on his desire to maintain peace among his subjects" (p. 91). After 1589, the future Henri IV fused these images of divine monarchy, depicting himself as a warrior king trusting in God's protection as he ushered in a golden age of peace between Catholics and Huguenots.

In Eastern Europe, leaders of Transylvania accommodated several religions in the late sixteenth century. As Graeme Murdock suggests in "Transylvanian Tolerance? Religious Accommodation on the Frontier of Christian Europe," this begs the question whether the absence of religious violence reflected a lack of confessional zeal. While French monarchs were quenching the fires of religious civil wars, however, the principality of Transylvania was struggling to survive amid threats from the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires. Rather than setting out to establish a policy of religious toleration, Transylvania's leaders embraced religious plurality only after a complex legal process of negotiation and compromise in response to ongoing political pressures. Ultimately, their "acceptance of religious diversity . . . came to bolster the power of Transylvania's princes as elected defenders of the different faiths of the principality in competition with their religiously-monochrome Habsburg rivals" (p. 121).

"Roman Catholic Conservatism in a New North Atlantic World, 1760–1829," by Luca Codignola, examines the crisis of Catholicism in the North Atlantic world after the Treaty of Paris (1763). French-speaking Catholics in Anglican Quebec endured a precarious existence through privileges that might have been revoked at any time. They "adjusted to new political realities" (p. 156) by adopting a conservatism that advocated British loyalty. To the south, most American Catholics opposed British rule after 1776, but with the ratification of the Bill of Rights and the guarantee of religious liberty in 1791, along with the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789, they, too, called for loyalty to the established government. Ultimately, "a flexible and accommodating stance toward civil authorities helped Church leaders strengthen their organization and consolidate their power and authority" as "political necessities became ecclesiastical virtues" (p. 179).

Turning to Asia, Stephen P. Blake's "Religious Conflict in Early Modern India: Akbar and the House of Religious Assembly" revisits the familiar story of sectarian and religious dissent that arose at the

Mughal court of Jalal al-Din Akbar (r. 1556–1605). To counter prophecies that a "Guided One" would usher in a new age at the end of the first millennium of the Islamic era (1592 C.E.), Akbar invited Muslim sectarian leaders along with non-Muslims to discussions at the House of Religious Assembly in Fathpur Sikri. He also adopted a policy of "Lasting Reconciliation," in which he granted Hindus—and to a lesser extent Jains, Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians—concessions and participated in their ceremonies even as he mediated Muslim sectarian disputes. Contrary to claims of many earlier scholars,[2] Akbar's Tauhid-i Ilahi was a "sufi-like imperial order," not a new monotheistic religion, in which Muslims who renounced sectarian conflict were offered reconciliation and status as "disciples" (pp. 78–79). Though short-lived, Akbar's policy provides a "fascinating example of an unusually open-minded approach to the problem of religious conflict in an extraordinarily crowded and explosive religious and sectarian milieu" (p. 80).

In "The Battle of Christ and Lord Guan: A Sino-European Religious Conflict in the Philippines, 1640," Timothy Brook explores "the place of religion in the historical experience of imperial expansion" by examining "how communities rallied for action in moments of crisis by casting themselves as communities of worship" (p. 130). In 1639–1640, economic distress at Manila escalated into armed religious conflict between the local Chinese and Spanish communities. Whereas Spanish Catholics envisioned Christ as "a god of war, a god of state, and a god of empire" (p. 148), Chinese merchants and farmers living in the Philippines remained polytheistic even after converting to Christianity. As Chinese casualties mounted, one of them dug up a statue of the Chinese deity, Emperor Guan, which had been buried to save it from destruction by Catholic missionaries. Thereafter, as the two sides clashed, the exhumed image of Emperor Guan went head to head with a fire-tested statue of Christ in a "battle of the gods" (p. 130) whose outcome was predetermined by European military technology.

Frederick M. Asher's essay, "Temple and Mosque, Conflict and Balance," considers modern implications of contesting religious space at Katra Mound in Mathura, India. Although occupied today by Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb's seventeenth-century mosque and a modern Hindu temple complex, the sharing of religious space between Hindus and Muslims remains problematic. Seeking to elevate the Hindu presence in India, the international Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP) insists

[2] For a summary of this scholarship, see Ashirbadi Lal Srivastava, *Akbar the Great*, 3 vols. (Agra: Shiva Lal Agarwala, 1962–1973), 1:310–311.

today that Aurangzeb's mosque was wrongly constructed over Krishna's birthplace. Here the VHP is endeavoring "to transform the space of *a* temple into the space of a *specific sacred locus*" (pp. 210, 215) in order to justify the razing of Aurangzeb's mosque. Locally, however, Muslims and Hindus are more accommodating of each other because Mathura reaps huge economic benefits from pilgrimage.

This thought-provoking book contains a valuable bibliography of twenty-seven pages, but lacks an epilogue that might have synthesized the authors' findings in dialogue with the introduction. In terms of substantive content, both the scope of the essays and the implications of their arguments are far-reaching, particularly in their exploration of the intersection of Christianity and Islam in the early modern world. Here one witnesses the impact of 9/11 upon the CEMH symposium. Nevertheless, the book would have benefitted from more extensive discussion of (and perhaps even additional essays addressing) the places of Buddhism and Judaism within the religious pluralism of the early modern world. A related lacuna is the absence of any consideration of religious and ethnic trade diasporas across North and sub-Saharan Africa.

Clearly religion played a critical role in the early modern world of international, as well as internal, politics, although just as clearly, it seems, religious differences were set aside whenever other, more pressing concerns—military, political, or economic—came to the fore. Typically such agreements were achieved only through intense dialogue, complex negotiations, and compromise. Moreover, whereas we normally think of early modern Europe as a world of absolute, divine-right monarchs supported in their rule by confessionalized state churches, yet also at times constrained by their respective faiths, the essays in this collection show that early modern rulers not infrequently strengthened their political rule through accommodation of religious plurality. The collection as a whole thus adds a balanced corrective to our understanding of the place and function of religion at this critical juncture. And if accommodation was not only possible but also achievable, both between and within each of the major religions of the early modern world, perhaps a better understanding of the means by which these accommodations were achieved may enable those of us living in a post-9/11 world to envision more clearly how acceptance of religious pluralism in a spirit of tolerance might facilitate greater harmony between East and West.

J. MICHAEL RALEY
Hanover College