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BOOK REVIEW AND NOTE

Accidental Pluralism: America and the Religious Politics of English Expansion, 1497–1662. By **Evan Haefeli**. American Beginnings, 1500–1900. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. 384 pp. $45.00 cloth; $44.49 PDF and epub.

Evan Haefeli criticizes conventional histories for asking the wrong question: what made America the natural home of religious pluralism? The real answer was, nothing. Tiny Barbados had more religious pluralism in 1662 than did the entirety of New England. If anything, the colonies were often the most religiously *conformist* parts of England's empire. Haefeli argues that there was nothing inevitable about American religious pluralism. Contrary to frequent academic assertions, and many popular accounts, American religious pluralism cannot be understood as the natural result of the colonies' position across the Atlantic from old European conflicts, nor as the inevitable consequence of the vastness of the American continent. After all, Spain's colonies were overseas too, and they stretched from California to Tierra del Fuego – yet they held to one institutional church for centuries.

English colonists' political ideals were not exceptionally friendly to religious pluralism, either. Pluralism had few intellectual advocates. Until the English Civil War, it also had few toeholds, with Maryland and Rhode Island being the only fledgling efforts at embracing religious pluralism as a matter of principle. Tolerance was ad hoc and often depended on peculiar political circumstances and mere chance (untimely deaths from disease and accidents are a recurring theme of Haefeli's narrative). Religious pluralism came about more because of failures to achieve any one variety of conformity than for any other reason.

Further undermining theories of American exceptionalism, the first large-scale religious toleration came in the core British realms of England, Scotland, and Ireland after the overthrow of the Stuart dynasty. In fact, up through the time of the Restoration, the colonies were religiously pluralist only when seen as a whole. At that point, Congregationalism in New England, and Anglicanism in Virginia and much of the Caribbean, were actually *strengthening* religious conformity, not embracing local coexistence. Religious pluralism emerged through conflicts within the English empire as a whole, not its American colonies in particular, as Haefeli convincingly demonstrates.

Haefeli's chapters are organized topically rather than chronologically, each with one eye toward the colonies and the other looking back at England. Haefeli criticizes the siloed nature of much historical writing, seeing English histories as too exclusively concerned with developments in court politics, but imperial histories as too willing to isolate colonial issues at the expense of affairs in the British Isles. Haefeli prefers to sketch out connections between, say, conflicts within the Church of England and Puritan migrations to the Caribbean, or persecutions of Irish Catholics in their homeland and in Jamaica.

He illustrates many of these ties by talking about people's lives. Haefeli quotes primary sources and biographical materials heavily, showing how the political positioning

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of English leaders affected their attitudes toward religion in the colonies under their supervision. He also provides rich stories about the converts, missionaries, enslaved and indigenous people, and settlers whose lives were shaped by the empire's religious tensions.

This book has a wide scope. Haefeli is writing big history, trying to set out a comprehensive narrative that can explain the course of nearly two centuries of history. It is a refreshing change from much current historical scholarship, where minute examinations have too often substituted for more ambitious visions. Haefeli's willingness to take the intellectual context of his subjects seriously is commendable, too, as it keeps him from judging historical actors using anachronistic standards or reducing difficult human conflicts to mechanistic models of causation.

For all the breadth of his project, Haefeli also shows awareness of big history's critics. He is careful to let primary sources speak for themselves and not distort his evidence to fit his thesis. He frequently notes when the historical record is too thin to prove his point conclusively, and he is upfront about occasions when he is making inferences from parallel events.

Stylistically, Haefeli's introductions and conclusions are excellent, making the book very easy to follow despite its constant movement. There is a lot of color to the narrative, while Haefeli spares the reader from the minutiae of historiographical debates. This is an up-close tour, not a dry and distracted tome.

Some quibbles: Haefeli does not pause long enough to explain some curious terms and practices, such as "Sunday church ales," churching women after they gave birth, and "wearris." (53, 71) He has a tendency to characterize things as unfortunate without explaining for whom or why, such as the Scottish Kirk having "had little room for royal authority." (73) Maps often appear well into discussions of far-off lands and not at the outset where they would be most helpful. At a more substantive level, as Haefeli readily grants, his book is a history of religion and politics rather than a survey of theology; those interested in sounding out, say, Puritan understandings of justification will need to look elsewhere.

In the final analysis, the book is an important alternative to the temptation to divide historical inquiry into center and periphery. And it demolishes quite a giant – the myth that something special about America made it the historically determined birthplace of religious pluralism. Haefeli argues persuasively that the true history happened amid the contingencies and controversies of the English world as a whole.

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