

## RESPONSE AND REBUTTAL

I am grateful for being allotted some space in which to rebut Jeremy Bangs's lengthy attack on my book *The Island at the Center of the World* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), which ran in the September 2010 issue. The error in Bangs's article is in his statement of my thesis. He credits me with a false and easily demolishable argument, then proceeds to demolish it. Had I argued as he suggests—that the Dutch colony of New Netherland comprised a population dedicated to promoting religious toleration in the New World, that Adriaen van der Donck set himself in the role of champion of tolerance, that there was no English influence on America in this regard but rather that the Dutch colony became the motivator of diversity and religious toleration in America—then I would deserve to be put in my place. To dispense with a couple of the more absurd claims Bangs credits me with: of course the English had an enormous impact on North America; yes, John Locke exercised a philosophical influence on America. I never say that New Netherlanders were inflamed with a passion for religious toleration, nor do I put van der Donck forward as a banner-waver of tolerance.

What I argue is that tolerance was an important factor underlying the society that developed in New Netherland, especially in New Amsterdam; that without it New York City would not have become what it did; and that van der Donck was instrumental in advancing the colony. But my argument is that this tolerance came into being, very often, *in spite of* the prevailing ethos of what might be called bigotry. The Dutch of the time were often boorish haters of Catholics, Jews, Muslims, the French, the English, the Spanish. But, crucially, some of them managed to rein in their bigotry, in a way that set them a slight but world-historically important cut above their contemporaries. The influence of Dutch tolerance in North America came not through any grand ideals in the hearts of the population of New Netherland but because, at various periods in the course of the seventeenth century, religious toleration was official policy in the homeland. This official policy had many causes, few of which were idealistic. Geography was one factor: the Dutch lived in a flat country, which was easily invaded, and into which refugees could easily flee. They thus had a mixed society forced on them, and they devised a way to make this mixed population work.

In my portrayal of the advent of Dutch tolerance and the development of New Netherland, I rely on many established authorities, and I take pains to lay out an argument that has some complexity to it—complexity that Bangs has ignored. One might liken the influence of seventeenth-century Dutch tolerance on New Netherland to the official policy of openness in the Netherlands in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, which resulted in a huge rise in the foreign-born population of that country, particularly of Muslims. That policy does not mean that the Dutch today go around hugging Moroccans and Turks, but it does mean that Dutch society today is in the process of being changed by the country's earlier era of tolerance. Something of this kind took place in the seventeenth century, when a multicultural society founded a colony on a wilderness island called Manhattan and the mixed society there developed in wholly new ways: it led, in short, to the densely mixed immigrant hub

of New York. To argue this is not to deny that there were other avenues by which ideas of tolerance were planted in America: there was Rhode Island, for example; there was the Pennsylvania settlement. History is a big pot of stew; it has many ingredients. I make this point and underscore it in my book—though, given my focus, I do not devote a great deal of space to other colonies. My goal was not to push the Dutch colony as the source of religious toleration in America, but rather to highlight it as an underacknowledged influence, especially on the mixed, immigrant society that flourished in New York. A second part of the argument is that, in turn, the influence of New York on American culture has been underacknowledged, thanks largely to the fact that its population was mixed and it did not conform to the dominant English paradigm.

Regarding van der Donck, Bangs declares with seeming decisiveness that in his published writings van der Donck showed little interest in tolerance. But why would he have? van der Donck had a passionate interest in the colony of New Netherland, and became the leader of the colonists in their case against the West India Company. His focus was not religious toleration but the cause of the colonists.

Finally, I cannot let Bangs's astounding slur "journalistic jingoism" go without comment. Jingoism is commonly defined as belligerent nationalism; the word has no relevance to my book—nor, for that matter, can I locate even a shred of it in my being. His use of it is a smear unbecoming a serious historian. As to "journalistic," sometimes historians use it to refer to a work of history that has suffered the fate of becoming popular—of being read. If that is the intended meaning, then I accept the adjective, but not its pejorative intent.

There is a well-established historical thesis—which I accept and follow in my book—that the Dutch in the seventeenth century developed a form of toleration of religious differences that became broadly important as a foundation to the European Enlightenment. Bangs's real intent seems to be to rebut this, which of course he is free to do; such is the way historical discussion proceeds. I am flattered that he chose to use my book as his *raison d'être*. But I would have preferred that he had responded to the book, and not to a disingenuously manipulated idea of its thesis.

**Russell Shorto**