Jews and the Sources of Religious Freedom in Early Pennsylvania

Jonathon Derek Awtrey, Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

Degree
Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

Department
History

Document Type
Dissertation

Abstract
Historians' traditional narrative regarding religious freedom in the colonial period and early republic focuses on Protestants and sometimes Catholics to the exclusion of other religious groups; the literature also emphasizes the legal dimensions of freedom at the expense of its cultural manifestations. This study, conversely, demonstrates that Jews, the only white non-Christian minority group in early Pennsylvania, experienced freedom far differently than its legality can adequately explain. Jews, moreover, reshaped religious freedom to include religious groups beyond Protestant Christians alone. But such grassroots transformations were neither quick nor easy. Like most of the Anglo-American world, William Penn's "Holy Experiment" excluded Jewish émigrés and other non-Protestants from citizenship and full participation in civil society. Jews, though, played active, not passive, roles in redrawing the boundaries around freedom. Jews participated in the secular marketplace, enlightenment culture, and newspaper politics, which normalized Jews and Judaism in public life and forged important relationships between Jews and economic and political patrons of cultural and political authority. Although Jews contended with prejudices, their activities in the public square and relationships with patrons granted them enough influence among enlightened elites to demand wider parameters for their public religious expressions and political participation. After about 1800, Jews enjoyed full religious freedom, cultural integration, and citizenship, but waves of nineteenth-century Jewish migrations revived dormant anti-Jewish and anti-Semitic sentiments. Despite pervasive prejudice that sometimes negated their statuses in civil society, Jews utilized cultural institutions to refashion their reputations, honor, and respectability in the eyes of their Protestant neighbors. As activists, not victims, Jews sat in the vanguard of the cultural transformations that made a meaningful religious pluralism in antebellum culture a reality.

Date
4-3-2018

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/4544

Committee Chair
Foster, Gaines

Atkyns report, and the unpublished manuscript seem to have been independently recorded when the decisions were read, given that some material appears in the Durnford report and only one of the two earlier reports. Compare 1 Willes 541 ("Serjt. Jews and the State in Christendom. Jewish Communities Outside Islam and Christendom. Jewish Intellectual and Religious Life. Christian Anti-Semitism. Early Modern Jewish Life. Jews and Economic Activity. Three facts predominate when considering the important role of Jews in the Medieval economy. In most places and times, medieval Jews were legally unable to participate in agriculture, the economic activity of the vast majority of both Christian and Muslim populations. There is a lot of evidence that scattered Jewish communities kept in contact with each other. Finally, although credit was essential to economic activity, lending money on interest (usury) was forbidden by Muslim and Christian law [although there were, in practice, many Christian money-lenders]. In many ways, religion was the United States' first prejudice—both an early source of bigotry and the object of the first sustained efforts to limit its effect. Chapter 3 The Episcopate, the British Union, and the Failure of Religious Settlement in Colonial British America. (pp. 75-97). Liberty and Toleration in Early Pennsylvania. (pp. 143-166). Andrew R. Murphy. Pennsylvania has long been considered a singular success story in the history of Anglo-American religious liberty. In the standard narrative, William Penn's colony illustrates how adherents of diverse religious views can peacefully coexist, creating a vibrant public life bound together by civil interest and a commitment to the common good.