Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe
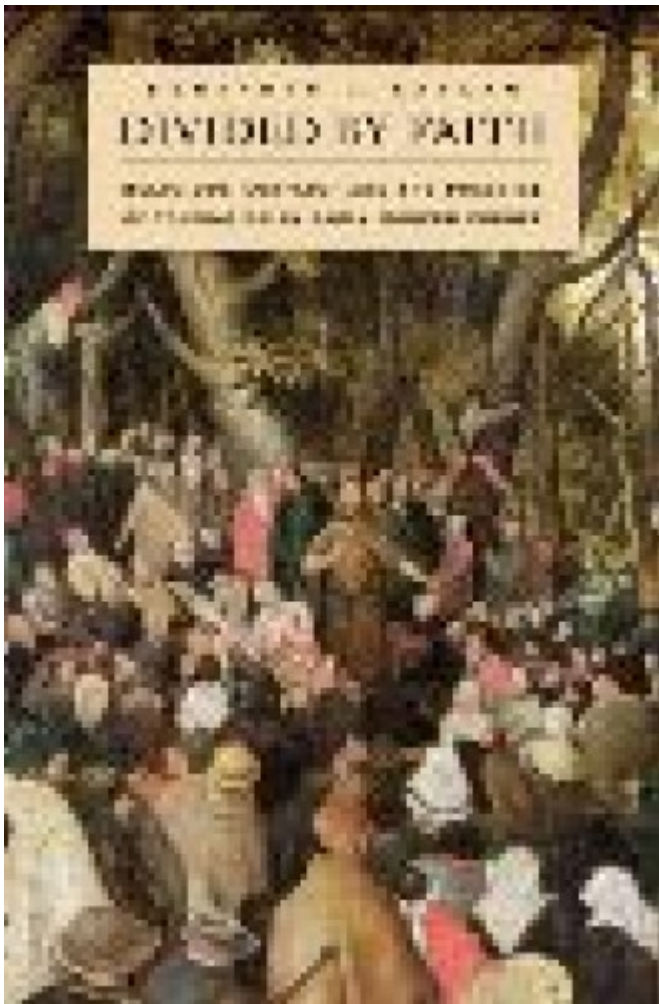
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In Review

Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe

Benjamin J. Kaplan

In U.S. Protestant circles there is a particularly popular story about the origins of religious toleration. In the aftermath of the Reformation, the story goes, there was an Age of Religious Wars typified by unrelenting repression in all matters religious. Puritans preached denial of the flesh and persecuted alleged witches, Catholic inquisitors burned heretics at the stake, and papalists sought to reestablish the Catholic Church's fading political power. Most of all, the period was a time of violence by Christians against Christians—a time in which denominational affiliations and sectarian differences toppled kingdoms and launched armies. Religious intolerance ruled.

Thankfully, we are assured, we have moved beyond this unhappy age. In part due to the lessons that period taught us about the futility of religious wars and in part due to the revolutionary ideas of Enlightenment thinkers, we have come to pursue a model of peaceful coexistence in which religious choice is recognized as a cherished individual right. We now tolerate (if not always embrace) the religious differences in our midst. Thomas Jefferson is held up as one of the heroes of this transformation. "It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg," Jefferson famously wrote in 1781. Led by such influential thinkers, we have come to accept religious toleration—and even to define ourselves by it.

It's an inspiring tale, but is it true? What if this story, so much a part of American identity, is merely that—a story? What if the so-called Age of Religious Wars is really not so different from our own times, not simply because intolerance still surfaces today but because models of religious reconciliation and compromise were being pursued long before Jefferson supposedly introduced his revolutionary concepts in the late 18th century? These are the provocative questions posed in a new book by Benjamin Kaplan.

Kaplan, a professor of history at University College London and the University of Amsterdam, does not deny that religious persecution was often fierce in early modern Europe. The tensions between Protestants and Catholics in particular ran deep and surfaced in multiple (and at times colorful) ways.

In March 1607, a Catholic priest in Biberach, Germany, intentionally disrupted a Protestant worship service by repeatedly running back and forth while making "loud

chattering" sounds and "unseemly gesticulations." The congregation put up with the disturbance, but when the priest returned and began the same performance a second day, several members of the congregation rose up, beat the priest badly and landed in jail on assault charges.

In 1628, the Catholic children of Gap, a small town in the French Alps, celebrated a jubilee with a processional, the boys dressing up as angels and the girls as virgins. The local Huguenot children pleaded with their parents to allow them to join in on the Catholic fun, and some parents relented, fashioning costumes for their children and allowing them to sing and march in the processional. But when some Huguenot children returned home that evening announcing, "We too, we are Catholics," they were severely beaten by their parents. In Europe in the centuries after the Reformation, people did tend to look harshly on challenges to their religious beliefs and practices.

Kaplan does not deny that the process of making religious toleration a concept palatable to the masses was a protracted one. We sometimes forget that the traditional meaning of the word *tolerate* is "to suffer, to endure, or to put up with something objectionable." Not all En lighten ment thinkers could embrace such a notion. Thomas Paine, for instance, saw toleration as a vice, not a virtue: "Tol eration is not the opposite of intolerance but is the counterpart of it. Both are despotisms. The one assumes to itself the right of withholding liberty of conscience and the other of granting it." In toleration there is an inherent assumption of the superiority of one's own position. After all, there is no need to tolerate that which is true and good. As the poet Goethe put it, "To tolerate is to insult."

Other—and more common—objections to toleration at the time were less conceptual. For many traditional religious believers, tolerating those religious beliefs that were antithetical to one's own was, quite simply, theologically unacceptable. To do so was considered a form of blasphemy, a public denial of the true God. As the Puritan Daniel Cawdrey put it, toleration "is the last and most desperate design of the Antichrist." For such thinkers, the pious are by definition obligated to intolerance.

So post-Reformation Europeans were intolerant, and getting them to accept religious differences was difficult. But, Kaplan suggests, precisely the same things can be said of present-day Americans—the very people supposedly miraculously transformed by the Enlightenment concept of toleration. There are still many towns like Gap where

parents recoil at the thought of their children parading in the costumes of the enemy. Just try to hold a Halloween costume party in a public elementary school and not have some parent object to the satanic images of witches, ghosts and goblins on display. Contemporary Cawdreys abound, often redirecting their accusations to new targets but hardly tempering their vehemence. And the sects may have changed, but religious wars continue.

Kaplan definitely does not claim that all of the manifestations and permutations of religious intolerance are the same today as they were in 1700. Of course they are not. Rather, Kaplan questions the simple and self-congratulatory tale of our moral transformation from superstitious and close-minded to enlightened.

The difference between us and them is diminished when we recognize that religious toleration is not merely a modern idea. Long before Jefferson or the Bill of Rights, the European masses, plunged after the Reformation into a world in which religious diversity was suddenly an everyday reality, were cobbling together complex and at times innovative means of peaceful coexistence.

As early as the 1570s, France, on the prompting of Huguenots, established religiously mixed "chambers" to adjudicate conflicts between Protestants and Catholics. In Germany, Biberach and Augsburg emerged as biconfessional cities in which not only did people of different faiths worship openly, but their various faiths were legally recognized and approved. In both cities Christians divided by religious affiliation worked out ways of sharing political rule. In Dutch neighborhoods statutes were developed to ensure financial and social cooperation among the religiously mixed population; a typical law forbade neighbors "in any way to offend, injure, or speak any contemptuous words . . . to one another, or . . . do any violence or make any threats." Religious differences would have to be put aside for the health of the community.

Ways also would have to be developed to address religious differences on a personal level. In 1677, Utrecht's magistrates issued a law that required mixed Reformed and Catholic couples to pledge fidelity and noninterference before they wed. In Friesland some couples agreed that "of the children who were born, the boys would be baptized in the Reformed church and the girls in the papist, or vice versa," thus ensuring that the proportion of adherents to the faiths would remain roughly constant. Similar practices could be found in Prussia, France, Scotland and Ireland.

Though not all of these compromises and innovations were successful in maintaining the peace, they were significant in conveying a reality about human nature: although we are resistant to change and difference, humans also are practical creatures who can and will adapt to new ways of being. In a post-Reformation Europe, according to Kaplan, "Religious tolerance became the paradigmatic, first tolerance in Western history . . . out of which emerged the modern concept of tolerance as applied to all forms of difference—ethnic, cultural, and racial as well as religious." Religious divisions necessitated that people develop fundamentally new ways of interacting—legally, politically and personally. In this new world order, compromise and reconciliation had to take precedence over control and hegemony. Survival demanded it. In a post-9/11 world of new diversities and deepening tensions, it may be time that we learn this lesson anew.