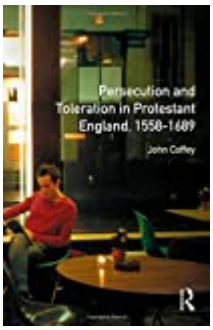
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences



John Coffey. *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England 1558-1689.* London: Longman, 2000. xii + 244 pp. $25.40 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-30464-2; $109.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-30465-9.

Reviewed by William Gibson (Basingstoke College of Technology)

Published on H-Albion (March, 2001)

The Emergence of Modern Values

The Emergence of Modern Values

To the relief of this reviewer, and as John Coffey makes clear in his preface, his goal is to survey persecution and toleration between the accessions of Elizabeth I and William III in a shorter and more accessible form than W.K. Jordan's four volume work *The Development of Religious Toleration in England*, published between 1932 and 1940. Coffey's book fits nicely into John Morrill's and David Cannadine's Longman Studies in Modern History series, which is targeted at undergraduates.

Coffey begins with an effective analysis of the historiography of toleration. Few subjects are more redolent of Whiggishness: progress, liberty, and toleration appeared to go hand in hand on the upward path from the Reformation to the present. Of course Jonathan Clark, Colin Haydon, Jeremy Black, and others have shown that intolerance continued well into the eighteenth century, and that such a Whig continuum from persecution to toleration is a dangerous simplification. But Coffey suggests that the pendulum has swung back to a "post revisionist" interpretation that liberalism had its roots in the seventeenth century, from which English civil society drew its growing sense of toleration. Coffey's historiographical synthesis locates this study in a European and global context, and in the political philosophy of secularisation. Coffey also defines different "tolerations": legal, ecclesiastical, social, and polemical, each adding layers of restraint and rights to the debate on toleration.

In developing Protestant theories of persecution and toleration, Coffey argues that there was a strong continuity of desire for uniformity, and the will to achieve it, from before the Reformation. Like true converts, Protestants zealously rooted out schismatics and heretics. Protestant emphasis on access to the scriptures equipped them with plenty of Biblical examples of cruelty. But the Protestant belief in a "Godly community" drove their consciences to be troubled by those who would not conform. This framework had the benefit for monarchs of imposing political as well as religious conformity; and the concept of *adiaphora* ("things indifferent or inconsequential") relied on the regulation of such things by the monarch. Coffey traces Protestant ideas of toleration to Milton, Walwyn, Robinson and Williams who broke with Augustinian attitudes to coercion and, in contrast

to the continent, developed a patchwork of tolerant values: civil, political and theological.

Having thus established a framework for early modern toleration and persecution, Coffey takes a chronological tour through the Elizabethan, Early Stuart, Puritan and Restoration regimes. Coffey argues *inter alia* that Elizabethan persecution was every bit as brutal as the Marian variant, that James's succession simply substituted Calvinist for Anglican intolerance, and that the severest punishments were reserved for anti-Trinitarians. Paradoxically it was in Puritanism that persecution formed an alliance with toleration: Cromwell was both a bigot and a promoter of toleration, who readmitted Jews to England. Charles II continued this curious and complex mixture. Charles was a Catholic (at least by his death), who made the Declaration of Breda granting liberties, but sought to marginalise Dissent with the "Clarendon code." Persecution became largely an economic force (with the ejection of the nonconformist ministers from parishes) and a political one (with the passing of the Test Act). Imprisonment of Dissenters existed but torture and executions were rare.

In this analysis, Coffey is lucid, analytical and establishes a concise and intelligent narrative of persecution and toleration. He draws a picture of early modern beliefs that is rich and complex. Coffey is less effective in explaining whether persecution was effective. Catholicism and Puritanism survived Elizabeth's ravages, but why? When Huw Green, the Catholic priest, was executed in Dorchester, and his head used as a football by the mob, did this affect the profession of faith by Catholics? Admittedly the psychology and theology of stubborn belief is not the task Coffey set himself, but it is perhaps the principal question left unanswered. Coffey is also quick to agree that toleration was a reflection of weakness, rather than strength. A tighter-built ship – on the European model, following the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes – might find its back broken; but the growing tolerance in English society made it stronger rather than weaker. But perhaps this presses "post revisionism" too far.

Notwithstanding these criticisms, this is a fine book with a fresh and bracing momentum. Coffey draws on a wide range of scholarship and blends it into an effective narrative. Coffey's book admirably improves Jordan's work and enhances our understanding of early modern persecution and tolerance.

Citation: William Gibson. Review of Coffey, John, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England 1558-1689*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. March, 2001.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=5025