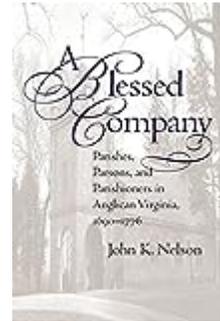




John K. Nelson. *A Blessed Company: Parishes, Parsons, and Parishioners in Anglican Virginia, 1690-1776.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xiv + 477 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2663-8.



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Re-Evaluating Colonial Virginia's Anglican Church

Re-Evaluating Colonial Virginia's Anglican Church inhabitants (p. 8).

When Perry Miller published his article "Religion and Society in the Early Literature of Virginia" in the late 1940s, his claim that religion played a central role in the settlement of early Virginia was widely dismissed. After all, historians had long argued that—in contrast to the New England colonies—Virginia was settled for profit and remained largely secular in tone and character throughout the colonial period. More recent studies of colonial Virginia have reinforced this impression of a largely secular society. At best, the church was spiritually stunted and poorly led, a tool wielded by the planter elite to maintain and support the social order upon which their authority depended.[1] However, in his prodigiously researched, richly detailed, and gracefully written *A Blessed Company*, John K. Nelson presents a sharply revisionist portrait of colonial Virginia's established church. Drawing primarily on an exhaustive examination of the extant vestry and county records, Nelson argues that before 1776 Virginia possessed "a pervasive Anglican culture," at the heart of which was a strong, flexible, spiritually vibrant church that shaped the lives of all the colony's

Nelson organizes his study into four topics—parishes, parsons, rituals and rites, and parishioners—enabling him to examine the church from a variety of perspectives and in the process reveal its centrality and vitality in Virginian life. The parish, for example, was a central institution of local government, operating in concert with the county. Indeed, in this "parish-county" structure (p. 13), the tax burden of the parish—used primarily to pay ministerial salaries, construct church buildings, and provide relief to the poor and orphans—was on average two and one half times greater than county rates. The most striking characteristics of Virginia's parishes were their flexibility and lay control. The geographic mobility and dispersed settlement patterns of Virginians necessitated the frequent creation of new parishes by the colonial assembly, and the adoption of a multicongregational structure within each parish. Ministers traveled among the congregations from Sunday to Sunday, and in their absence a lay clerk read the Divine Service. Through local vestries, the planter elite controlled the parish, setting parish rates, recruiting ministers, constructing and

maintaining the church and parsonage, and supervising the local welfare system. Local gentry control, Nelson argues, rather than being a source of weakness, actually reveals Virginians' deep commitment to maintaining a strong and active established church.

Nelson's discussion of Virginia's Anglican parsons likewise overturns the conventional portrait of an inadequately trained and uncommitted clergy. In what amounts to a collective biography, he argues that though Virginia's church was not without wayward clergy, over 90 percent acted within the norms of the society, and most were well respected by their parishioners. Moreover, the quality and commitment of the clergy improved over time. Most were college educated, and increasing numbers—37 percent by 1776—were American born, despite the need to travel to England for ordination. Finally, few parishes went without a minister for long. At no point after 1725 were more than 25 percent of parishes empty, despite a near doubling in the number of parishes. Based on these quantitative measures Nelson concludes that “stability and security were the hall marks of the parish ministry” (p. 132).

If the clergy of the Anglican church was a serious and respected group, the services they conducted played a central role in Virginians' understanding of their world. Though Sunday services served a social function, they were also, Nelson argues, a serious spiritual event. The liturgy, read each week, laid out “the entire drama of the faith” (p. 190). The sermon, delivered only by the minister in a “plain style” (p. 207), reflected the prevailing “moral rationalism” (p. 205) and broadly tolerant faith of the Anglican church in the eighteenth century. Finally, it was to (and usually in) the church that parishioners turned to mark the major passages in life—birth, marriage, death, and burial. Indeed, Nelson finds in four sample parishes that the vast majority of white Virginians baptized their children in the church, as did a significant number of black parishioners. Historians' easy dismissal of the importance of the rites and rituals of the Anglican church, Nelson argues, reflects a persistent “antiliturgical bias in American culture” sparked by the rise of evangelical sects in the late-eighteenth century (p. 191).

But the question of what the Anglican services meant to those who participated in them remains difficult to answer. Nelson argues that historians must judge the depth of spirituality within the Anglican church by “the everyday behaviors” of parishioners (p. 9). And it is to that subject that Nelson turns in the last part of the book. By definition, parishioners included all Virginians—the

wealthy, the poor, planters, yeoman farmers, merchants, even dissenters, servants, African Americans, women, and “miscreants”—and all who were baptized were considered members. No one was exempt from the parish levy, and parish assistance was extended to all in need regardless of religious affiliation. Moreover, everyone was required by law to attend the Anglican church regularly. Though previous scholarship has declared such laws “a nullity” (p. 7), Nelson's examination of county court grand jury presentments reveals that nonattendance was the most frequently prosecuted infraction between 1690 and 1775 (p. 330). And if the number of dissenters in Virginia was growing after 1750 they remained, Nelson asserts, a distinct minority whose “dual religious allegiance” did not disrupt “the customary routines of parish life” (pp. 287, 285).

Cumulatively, the religious behaviors Nelson depicts provide a convincing portrait of the pervasive nature of Anglican practice and culture in colonial Virginia. This, then, is a book that will reshape the way historians think about religion in the colony. But it also raises as many questions as it answers. Most notably, many historians will find Nelson's tendency to downplay the significance of religious dissent in the late-colonial period curious. Though evangelicals were certainly a minority before 1776, the appearance of a growing number of “parishioners” with questionable attachment to the church must have raised doubts about the inclusive nature of the establishment. This was particularly the case in the newer, western parishes, where dissenters actually sat on vestries and helped administer a church to which they had little spiritual commitment. Nelson's work would have been strengthened if he had examined this growing threat to parish life in more detail. Perhaps more intriguing is Nelson's conclusion that the quick collapse of the spiritually vibrant Anglican establishment in the years after 1776 reveals the radical nature of the American Revolution. If, as Nelson convincingly asserts, the Anglican church was deeply ingrained into the daily life of the colony, what did it mean to have the institution—and its stability, its time-tested traditions, and its spiritual imperatives—dismantled so quickly? The short epilogue describes the political process by which disestablishment took place, but it does not explain how the process impacted church adherents, the vast majority of Virginians according to Nelson.

Such questions, are, strictly speaking, beyond the scope of Nelson's book. But it is a measure of his work's significance that it prompts such queries. Having persuasively argued that colonial Virginia's Anglican establish-

ment was a vibrant and thriving institution that shaped the spiritual and secular lives of all Virginians, it now awaits a new generation of scholars to explore more fully the causes and the ramifications of the church's rapid demise.

Notes

[1]. Perry Miller, "Religion and Society in the Early Literature of Virginia," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 5 (October 1948): pp. 492-522, and 6 (January 1949): pp. 24-41. For more recent literature that stresses the secular nature of Virginian society before the rise of

evangelicalism in the mid-eighteenth century see, Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982); T. H. Breen, *Tobacco Culture: The Mentality of the Great Tidewater Planters on the Eve of Revolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco and Slaves: The Development of Southern Cultures in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986); and Kathleen M. Brown, *Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996).

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