

The Sacred Rights of Conscience: *Selected Readings on Religious Liberty and Church-State Relations in the American Founding*. Eds. Daniel L. Dreisbach & Mark David Hall.

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REFERENCES

Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2009. Pp. 672 ISBN: 978-0-86597-0.

- 1 In the lively debate about the proper relationship between church and state, this collection of historical documents seeks to confirm the strong religious underpinnings of the founding of the United States. The editors acknowledge the different sources for the arrangements of church and state and the debates about the preferred nature. It is their purpose to provide evidence of the dominance of the Christian tradition in the formulation of the new political arrangements. While almost everyone agreed that it would be impossible to establish a state church and due to the pluralistic nature of religion, most of the contributors of the early modern period endorsed the important role of religion in the public arena. The editors claim that even the Enlightenment ideas that penetrated the constitution were seen through Christian lenses.
- 2 While the book collects an impressive record of the impact of Christian ideas on the US, which makes it difficult to deny it, it leaves it to the user of this collection to establish the connections between the Christian ideas and the political translation. The editors emphasize that “the contention was that the political order must acknowledge and nurture basic religious values in order to prosper” (xxviii). This explains why the ideas of James Madison are over-represented in the collection. He made a strong plea for the

government not only to allow religious exercise, but that the civic authorities should actively protect these rights of its citizens. A substantial part of the documents emphasize that church-state arrangements are (or should be) defined on the local and state levels. States were free to establish a religion. This seems to suggest that the federal government should abstain from interfering in curtailing the decisions of the states, which has political and legal consequences.

- 3 The editors emphasize that history plays a pivotal role in the understanding of church-state relations and that the voices included in this debate should be more than only James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, and Roger Williams. The selection criteria are: “the importance of their contribution to American political and intellectual thought, the saliency of the ideas they illustrate, and relevancy to enduring of church-state relations” (xxxii). These features are strongly present in public documents. These criteria make sense, but the real question is what constitutes these choices. Why is one document considered more influential than another? And how do they function in debates with opposing views?
- 4 The book is divided in four parts and fourteen chapters beginning with Biblical quotations, church fathers, Anglican theologians, texts by John Hobbes, William Penn, and various British laws. It is followed by the principles in colonial America, including four pages on the Dutch West India Company. While some texts have been reprinted numerous times, such as the famous texts by John Winthrop and John Locke, others are rare: especially the various state constitutions of the 1780s are useful and show the local variations, and state and Supreme Court’s rulings.
- 5 The comments introducing the documents are minimal. Since the selection of documents confirms the religious underpinnings of the American state, the book does not engage the spectrum of ideas that argue that religious policies have shaken the separation of church and state. Because the collection preaches to the converted and does indeed show that there was broad support for positive expectations of religion in the public square, it needs additional selections to get a real debate going. The book dwells on the premise that the historical process provides the guidelines for the future. I cannot imagine many European historians sharing this premise, but it makes the collection in itself a clear example of the importance of the topic in the United States. Nevertheless, it clearly shows that earlier generations had sophisticated positive ideas about the place of religion in American society.

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