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Gill's "The Political Origins of Religious Liberty" - Book Review

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The Political Origins of Religious Liberty. By Anthony Gill. Cambridge University Press, 2008. 263 pages. \$23.99.

When Americans describe the origins of religious liberty, they often point to brilliant, progressive writers and legislators such as John Locke, Roger Williams, William Penn, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. Each of these men wrote persuasive letters, essays, or memorials that helped convinced others of the value of “the sacred rights of conscience.” Moreover, many of them were motivated by their commitment to freedom to draft laws and constitutions to expand the scope of religious liberty.

Anthony Gill, in *The Political Origins of Religious Liberty*, does not dismiss the significance of ideas, but as a political scientist he is convinced that the traditional telling of this tale ignores the reality that civic and religious leaders are often motivated by self-interest. As well, this Anglo-American account does not offer a theory explaining the development of religious liberty in other countries. To remedy both problems, Gill proposes “a general deductive theory regarding the political origins of religious liberty that incorporates the role of human agency through the use of rational choice theory. This theory places interests, as opposed to ideas (or culture), at the center of analysis” (22).

Rational choice theories have become a leading approach among sociologists who study religion. A major contribution of Gill’s book is to apply the insights of scholars such as Rodney Stark, Laurence Iannaccone, Roger Finke, Steve Pfaff, Paul Froese, and Carolyn Warner to the development of religious liberty (27). The first two chapters of his work are dedicated to defining terms and explaining the theory’s axioms and propositions—often in language borrowed from economics. For example, a “*religious firm* (i.e., a church or denomination) is an organization that produces and distributes religious goods” (42) and “*religious liberty* (or freedom) represents the degree to which a government regulates the religious marketplace” (43). His model’s axioms and propositions are too numerous to be listed here, but for the purposes of illustration it may be useful to quote his first proposition in full:

Proposition 1: Hegemonic religions will prefer high levels of government regulation (i.e. restrictions on religious liberty) over religious minorities. Religious minorities will prefer laws favoring greater religious liberty.

Proposition 1a: In an environment where no single religion commands a majority market share, the preferences of each denomination will tend toward religious liberty. (45,46)

Altogether, Gill proposes five propositions that he believes explain the rise (or decline) of religious liberty in any society. His theory is sophisticated and nuanced, but at its root is the conviction that religious and political leaders support religious liberty when it is in their interest to do so. To test his theory, Gill applies it to the case studies of America, Mexico and Latin America, and Russia and the Baltic States. He acknowledges the limitation that these regions are predominately Christian, but he encourages other scholars who believe his theory has merit to apply it to non-Christian countries (24).

Britain’s American colonies were initially homogeneous, so religious leaders demanded and governments created religious establishments or laws that heavily favored the dominant faiths. However, the need to attract immigrants and encourage trade prompted colonial leaders to reduce religious regulations. Increased religious liberty led to greater religious pluralism, and with larger numbers religious minorities became better able to oppose religious

establishments and advocate equality. Eventually state churches were disestablished and the First Amendment was added to the Constitution that, at a minimum, prohibits the creation of a national church. Gill does not deny that great men and ideas were important in this process, but in his account the driving force behind the development of religious liberty in America was the self-interest of civic and religious leaders.

Gill next considers the separate but closely related cases of Mexico and Latin America. In both instances, Roman Catholicism maintained a monopoly on providing religious services well into the nineteenth century. This was in part because these colonies relied on slave labor and did not need to relax religious regulations to attract immigrants. As well, because their economies focused on raw material extraction rather than trade, it was not necessary to adopt religious liberty to promote commerce. After independence, politicians often sought support from the Catholic leaders, who in return asked for subsidies and restrictions on religious minorities. Although the Mexican revolutionaries placed numerous restrictions on the Roman Catholic Church in 1917, a *modus vivendi* rapidly developed that benefited both civic and Catholic leaders. Eventually, the desire for international trade (especially with the United States) led these countries to relax laws restricting religion. Moreover, as democracy returned to the region in the 1980s, Protestants found that by voting as a bloc they could wield significant political power and demand the removal of religious restrictions. As these countries became more pluralistic, religious liberty was gradually expanded.

Finally, Gill (with the assistance of Cheryl Žilinskas) explores the case of Russia and the Baltic States. Christianity came to Russia in 988, and for a thousand years the Russian Orthodox Church dominated the country. Church leaders regularly supported the tsars, who reciprocated by restricting religious competition. Orthodoxy never achieved hegemonic status in the Baltic States, and the region eventually became and remains a mix of Lutheran, Catholic, and Orthodox believers. Of course, all churches in this region had to contend with a regime dedicated to atheism for much of the twentieth century, but even under the Soviet Union, interests often informed church-state relations. The status of religious liberty in these countries has been in flux following the collapse of communism, but as predicted by Gill's model the pluralistic Baltic States have tended to be freer than Orthodox Russia.

Gill's case studies offer a wonderful introduction to the history of religious liberty/church-state relations in three major regions. However, as with any sweeping account, experts on parts of the story will likely object to elements of his presentation. For instance, as a student of church-state relations in early America, I found his treatment of the Puritans to be problematic. Contrary to Gill's assertion, it is not "ironic" that Puritans opposed "religious conformity" in England and then established it in America (65). Instead, Puritans attempted to create their version of a Christian commonwealth in England, and when they failed many came to America to continue this project. Similarly, many Puritans did not believe the "Half-Way Covenant" imparted

“full church membership” (69), Puritans did not oppose the use of alcoholic beverages in general (87), and his claim that Quakers and Baptists were “routinely jailed and/or beaten” in Congregational New England is misleading (69). In spite of these and other quibbles, his account of the development of religious liberty in early America is within the boundaries of mainstream scholarship.

Gill makes a strong argument that the interests of civic and religious leaders must be considered when telling the story of the development of religious liberty, but it is not clear that he proves his thesis that interests play “an equally important if not more critical role” than ideas in “securing legislation aimed at unburdening religious groups from onerous state regulations” (7). Although he repeatedly concedes that ideas have consequences, his “brief discussion” of the role of ideas does not take intellectual influence seriously enough (22,125,168,57–59). Even within the context of rational choice theory, it is necessary to consider the role of ideas in shaping values. Gill acknowledges this when he writes that rational choice theory merely assumes that people have preferences, and that they will pursue those preferences in the least costly manner (22,28). As an example he describes Mother Teresa deciding how to spend a million dollars. Because of her commitment to serving people, she will undoubtedly spend it altruistically, but she must still calculate how to spend it most efficiently—the central point being that even saints are “not immune from worldly considerations” (30). But if Mother Teresa is motivated by the *idea* that people should be served, might not statesmen such as William Penn, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison be motivated by a commitment to religious liberty? Certainly they will use reason to help craft legislation, and they may recognize the political and economic benefits that stem from religious liberty. Yet an excellent argument can be made that these and other key statesmen were profoundly informed by an ideological commitment to “the sacred rights of conscience.”

Take the case of William Penn. Gill acknowledges in passing that he was motivated by ethical considerations, but he strongly implies that Penn supported religious liberty because it leads to economic prosperity (98–99). But a careful study of Penn’s life and work indicates that he embraced religious liberty because of his theological convictions. While some of Penn’s many essays defending religious liberty mention practical benefits of expanding freedom, the vast majority of his arguments are biblical, theological, or ideological. This is not to say that Penn was only motivated by ideas, but it is to suggest that by downplaying ideological influences Gill deemphasizes a key part of the story of the development of religious liberty.

Gill’s book provides an important service by reminding academics—particularly students of intellectual history—that as significant as ideas are, they seldom effect change by themselves. Interests matter, and if we hope to fully understand the development of religious liberty it is necessary to explore the political and economic interests that might encourage religious and civic leaders to embrace or reject religious liberty. *The Political Origins of Religious*

Liberty is an excellent introduction to this study. It should be read by every serious student of the history of religious liberty and church–state relations.

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