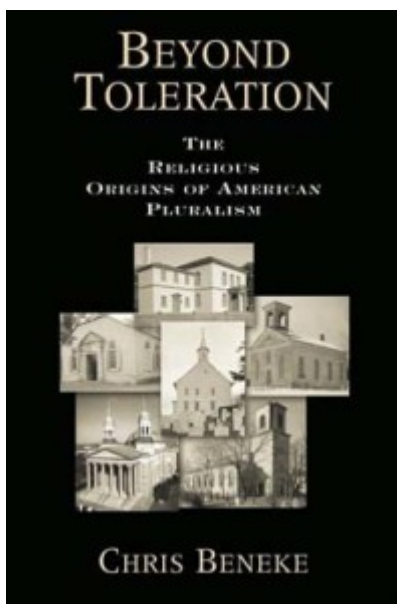
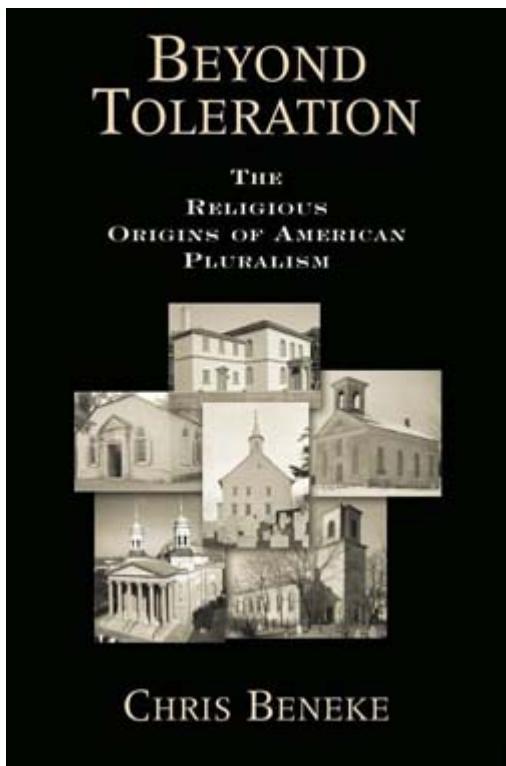


# “Can Two Walk Together, Except They Be Agreed?”



Chris Beneke, *Beyond Toleration: The Religious Origins of American Pluralism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. 305 pp., cloth, \$35.00.

A 1788 July Fourth parade in Philadelphia included an extraordinary group of seventeen clergymen representing Christian churches and a single synagogue, walking arm-in-arm before cheering crowds. Three years later, John Carroll, the United States' first Roman Catholic bishop, was cordially received in that once

most anti-Catholic of cities, Boston, by Protestant clergymen who treated him to "great civilities." So begins Chris Beneke's debut monograph, *Beyond Toleration*, and an auspicious and timely debut it is, as this still-new century has begun to ask fresh questions about religion and harmony in multicultural and religiously diverse societies, especially in Western countries faced with growing numbers of Muslims. Owing much to Thomas J. Curry's *The First Freedoms: Church and State in America to the Passage of the First Amendment* (1986) and Jon Butler's *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (1990), *Beyond Toleration* digs deep into the intellectual history of early American Christianity to explain how Americans could go from executing Quakers and barring Catholics from public office to codifying freedom of religion in state and federal constitutions. Certainly "late eighteenth-century America" was not "some inclusive nirvana" (10), but the hurdles to ecumenism and broad toleration had been significant; that they were overcome, Beneke shows, was made possible by the pluralistic nature of early American society.

Beneke offers a general history of Christianity in early America, concentrating on the development of a religious landscape in the early eighteenth century that came to resemble that of Europe after the Peace of Augsburg in 1555: *cuius regio, eius religio* (as the ruler, so the religion). Before 1730, most of the colonies strenuously enforced laws punishing "blasphemy," "atheism," and heterodoxy. Likewise, it was considered treasonous to criticize the government publicly, and questioning theological doctrines and otherwise criticizing churches or denominations was tantamount to heresy and dissent. Dissenters' efforts to garner toleration and relief from ministerial taxation were harshly rebuffed in language replete with epithets such as "sectaries," "infidels," or "atheists." This was so largely because in the late seventeenth and very early eighteenth centuries printing was controlled by the clerical intelligentsia. However, the importation of books from Europe was impossible to control, and those of John Locke expressed a new liberalism that attacked the notion of innate ideas and championed the right of private conscience in religious matters. The dissenters harnessed Locke in their defense. By the 1700s it was becoming clear that the law protected the right to private conscience, while religious societies (denominations) reserved the right to define and defend their doctrines through their own internal judicatory organs. The rapid proliferation of newspapers created an enormous forum for opinions by elites and the literate middle class alike, which made it completely impossible for the clergy to control the flow of ideas in the public sphere. Colonial governments decreasingly prosecuted citizens for blasphemy and seditious libel after 1715, and the liberalizing trends opened up by the influx of Lockean ideas forced churches to relax their guard against dissenting opinions.

Beneke credits the First Great Awakening for the fundamental right to private judgment in religious matters and for encouraging ordinary people to explore alternative expressions of Protestant faith. "[R]eligious boundaries . . . came under nearly unrelenting assault" (53) at this time and so did parish boundaries, as itinerant ministers moved from place to place up and down the eastern seaboard and—in the case of the era's most famous preacher, George

Whitefield—across the Atlantic. The activities and antics of the New Lights, had they taken place in the previous century, would have resulted in numerous imprisonments, prosecutions for heresy, and occasional capital punishments, but instead the New Lights were confronted by Old Lights who used Lockean language and what Charles Chauncy insisted had to be “gentle persuasion” to discredit the revivalists. The achievement of the Great Awakening was the belief that religious experience is inherently subjective. The rigid intolerance of the previous century had, by the eve of the Revolution, become intolerable.

“In religion as in politics, the call for unanimity was never more insistent than it was during the American Revolution, as distinctions once made between Churchmen and Dissenters gave way to distinctions between Whigs and Tories, Patriots and Loyalists” (193). In this Beneke follows Jon Butler’s claim that the Revolution was essentially secular in nature. A nation at war and struggling to define itself along liberal Lockean lines could no longer afford the distraction of religious bigotry. This made it possible for Protestant America to ally with Catholic France. However, for racial minorities there were no such magnanimous gestures. Indians and blacks were not considered citizens of the republic, and discrimination against them remained as virulent as ever. Church establishments, which had been the norm in the eighteenth century, declined rapidly as a result of the Revolution and disappeared altogether by the mid-nineteenth century, but that did not dilute the competition for adherents that is the hallmark of a religiously diverse society. An ecumenical spirit prevailed into the nineteenth century but only among closely related Protestant denominations. Beneke is assiduous in noting that any sense of quiet respect was not extended to the Mormons and was practically revoked from Catholics in the period from the 1830s to the 1850s. Even among Protestants, there developed a divide between evangelical and nonevangelical conceptions of scripture. The gains of the eighteenth century seemed to lose ground in the nineteenth. But that is not Beneke’s point. Instead, his point is that America experienced a rapid progression from intolerance, to tolerance, to religious freedom and equality.

There is much to commend here: the thoroughness of the research, the dovetail construction of the arguments, and the candid presentation of contrary evidence, which Beneke convinces the reader does not compromise his fundamental thesis. However, in his discussions of African Americans, Beneke relies a bit too heavily on Jon Butler for his understanding of African American Christianization and religio-cultural survivals from Africa; on these topics, Albert J. Raboteau, in the second chapter of *Slave Religion* (rev. ed., 2004), is more reliable. As to American Indians, Beneke notes that “by the late eighteenth century, Native American faiths survived mostly in fragments” (11), which was only true in those areas that had been thoroughly colonized. He should have stated that native religions persisted, especially in the West, but in altered forms suffused with elements of Christian theology.

In spite of these minor imperfections, Beneke eloquently demonstrates that while there was a legal revolution that amended the laws discriminating against

dissenters and religious minorities, there was also a broader cultural process whereby ordinary and elite Americans of different faiths achieved a degree of religious harmony. Careful to note that religious establishments were maintained in the colonial, revolutionary, and early national periods and that the scope of his study is limited to white, Protestant, male clergymen, Beneke is clear that in relative terms postrevolutionary Americans achieved something quite singular: the capacity to tolerate religious differences. Ours is the open, liberal, and tolerant society it is because of this achievement.

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