

Wellspring of Liberty: How Virginia's Religious Dissenters Helped Win the American Revolution

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Often forgotten in any analysis of American constitutional rights is the extent to which those rights are grounded in the state-level revolutionary settlements prior to 1787. In this short monograph, John Ragosta makes a valuable contribution to the field by showing how religious disestablishment in Virginia, which became the template for freedom of religion at the national level, was the hard-won product of political and military mobilization during the War of Independence and the early years of the peace. Rather than being handed down from on high by the Anglican-dominated Virginia Assembly, Ragosta makes the case that religious freedom resulted from grassroots political action that forced the Anglican gentry to give concessions in exchange for back-country military mobilization. By the time the war ended, the dissenters had built up a critical mass of political power that in 1786 made possible the passage of Thomas Jefferson's Statute for Establishing Religious Freedom.

A lawyer by profession, *Wellspring of Liberty* is Ragosta's first book, adapted from his doctoral dissertation at the University of Virginia. His background in law brings valuable context to the historical material; a 1776 petition from a Presbyterian synod rejecting the logic of being a Christian nation and a 1785 petition from Chesterfield County citing the equal rights of Muslims resonate during an age of 'ground zero mosques' and religious bigotry (pp. 143–4). Ragosta is also keenly aware of a historical and jurisprudential tradition that gives primary credit for disestablishment to Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. *Wellspring* is very much a dissent of its own from the Jefferson-centric historiography of early American republican religious liberty. 'Although both men were intimately engaged in the fight for religious freedom in Virginia,' Ragosta argues, 'overemphasis of their work tends to deny an appropriate voice to the dissenters. After all, it was the dissenters who bargained for, and fought for, religious freedom' (p. 11).

Wellspring is therefore very much a social history, in similar style to Michael McDonnell's recent *The Politics of War*, which examined the War of Independence in Virginia as a class struggle of small landowners and tenants politically coming into their own.⁽¹⁾ Ragosta's research nicely complements McDonnell's, as many of those small landowners were from the ranks of the back-country dissenters who form the core constituency of Ragosta's book. But the book is also an intellectual and political history. The petitions of dissenting congregations and synods, such as the vocal Hanover Presbytery, form much of the primary source material Ragosta works with. Discussions of rights in the pages of petitions frequently rival

in complexity those of Jefferson in the *Notes on the State of Virginia* or Madison in the *Memorial and Remonstrance*.

The book is divided into six chapters with two appendices, the chapters being arranged in chronological order with a transition chapter explaining British policy. In an arresting opening chapter, Ragosta shows, in great detail, how oppressive the establishment regime was on the eve of revolution, with British officials attempting to enforce the Act of Toleration an only partially-effective check on the excesses of local gentry officials as they attempted to impose conformity on dissenters. Next, Ragosta explains the process by which dissenters leveraged concessions in exchange for their mobilization. He then transitions to a discussion of British policy, and how imperial officials could not conceive that it was the Anglicans who led the resistance to colonial rule, and therefore could not construct an effective policy for wooing dissenters to the British standard. Returning to Virginia, Ragosta examines the extent to which Dissenters did respond to mobilization, and then in the final chapter assesses what they got for their participation. The book concludes with two appendices containing more information on pre-revolutionary persecution by Anglican authorities and on denominational mobilization by county.

Ragosta's argument can be understood via three broad themes: the role of dissenter agency in organizing their own affairs, the needs of the state in war, and the individual versus institutional ways people experienced religion. The Virginia that he describes is one very much still in the early modern period, with more in common with the 17th century than the 19th.

The rationale for the entire book is that dissenters were active agents in their own liberation. Ragosta takes repeated issue with any suggestion that religious liberty was a gift bestowed by Jefferson, the gentry, or the Virginia Assembly. He rejects the notion that disestablishment was foreordained by republicanism, reversing the equation and instead arguing that rather 'than republicanization inevitably leading to the patriot movement and disestablishment, the process of negotiating disestablishment, necessitated by the moment, politicized the dissenters, which proved to be a key element in the republicanization of Virginia' (p. 45).

Through his emphasis on mass military mobilization paired with grassroots political activism, Ragosta makes the dissenters active agents in Virginia's revolutionary settlement. The contest between establishment and dissenters breaks down into four periods. From 1768–75, dissenters engaged in 'unsuccessful pleas for greater tolerance.' With the outbreak of war in 1776, dissenters began to demand religious freedom in exchange for their support for the war effort. From 1777–80 they engaged in wartime negotiations, then struggled to hold the line during the period of demobilization from 1781–6. Ragosta emphasizes that 'it is important to keep in mind the corresponding progress of the war and various crises of recruiting and mobilization ... all of which affected the tenor of the dialogue between dissenters and the establishment' (p. 47).

While disestablishment remained a far-off goal virtually until the moment of passage in 1786, the war years were marked by considerable give and take on both sides of the Establishment divide. Ragosta details how conformity taxes and the vestry system in dissenting counties were relaxed, and how in turn dissenting preachers often functioned as enthusiastic recruiters, putting thousands of able-bodied frontiersmen into the Virginian forces. It is this dynamic that forms the 'wellspring of liberty' from which the book takes its title and which comprises another main theme. As Ragosta describes it, 'the Whigs' need for broader support proved to be the wellspring of liberty by requiring political leaders to enlist the evangelicals in the war.' Connecting developments in Virginia to those in the United States as a whole, he continues that the wellspring led 'to a uniquely American development of the modern state, first and most impressively in the development of religious freedom and separation of church and state. Democratization in this context then mediated development of every aspect of the young republic' (p. 70).

Most striking is the degree to which religion, as experienced by Virginians before 1786, was very much an institutional affair unrecognizable to a 21st-century observer, and the extent to which this institutional paradigm remained intact virtually until the moment the Statute for Religious Freedom was passed in 1786.

The Virginian state levied taxes for support of Anglican parishes and vestries throughout the colonial period, phasing them out in certain dissenter strongholds during the war as part of the 'wellspring' phenomenon. However, as late as 1785, the General Assembly's Committee on Religion was considering a plural Establishment of the Protestant denominations, supported by a general assessment of all Virginians to pay a tax for the support of the denomination of their choice. This general assessment was narrowly defeated through parliamentary maneuvering in the House of Delegates and in the following year influential dissenting congregations and synods switched their support to Jefferson's disestablishment bill.

Key to this institutional way of experiencing religion was the debate over the incorporation of the Episcopal Church. After independence, the Anglican Church in Virginia had severed its ties with Britain and reformed itself as an independent, Episcopalian denomination. As the successor to the Established Church, it sought and received incorporation under state law. This allowed it to securely hold property and gave it a material advantage over its unincorporated dissenting competitors. Along with the general assessment, Ragosta describes the incorporation battle as the last stand of an Establishment out of touch with new realities in Virginian politics, but nonetheless exercising 'continued strength' as it negotiated with the increasingly numerous and enfranchised dissenters (p. 110).

The specter of historical contingency hangs over the passages dealing with the years 1784–6, for it was during these years that the establishment made its last stand. The description of the battles over incorporation, the general assessment and disestablishment leave the reader with the conclusion that the liberalization of Virginian religious life nearly did not happen, and until a very late date the establishment came close to co-opting the largest dissenting denominations into a plural arrangement that would have broadened the establishment but left its core assumptions and institutions in place. Had that happened, there would have been no disestablishment, and no model of secularization for the federal constitution to follow.

Overall Ragosta's arguments are highly persuasive and the book stands well on its own. However, given its brevity, coming in at a mere 261 pages including appendices and index, one wonders whether the author could have gone into more depth on other aspects of the dissenting communities not strictly related to military mobilization but still relevant to political enfranchisement and religious disestablishment. For instance, rather than excluding Jefferson and Madison from the main narrative, more could have been done to integrate them as partners with the dissenting community. This holds especially true for Madison, who was educated by Presbyterian clergy and carried on a lengthy correspondence on the moral meaning of the revolution with Samuel Stanhope Smith, a Presbyterian clergyman who founded a dissenting academy in the Virginia back country and later became president of the College of New Jersey.

Ragosta also goes slightly astray by excluding Jefferson from the main narrative due to his desire to focus on the 'voice' of disestablishment. 'The change in Virginia politics that allowed adoption of religious liberty had far more to do with the dissenters' views than the erudite reasoning of Madison and Jefferson', Ragosta claims. Perhaps so. But aside from the fact that Madison, educated by Presbyterians, was intellectually as much at home amongst dissenters as he was amongst the Anglicans, Ragosta's focus on dissenting thought and agency overlooks the material support given the dissenters by sympathetic Anglican gentry, most notably Jefferson and Madison. It was Jefferson whose proposals for increased representation of dissenter-populated western counties, and for making land available to western settlers, swelled the ranks of dissenting delegates in the General Assembly and provided the votes for final passage of the Statute for Religious Freedom. And it was Madison who assumed floor leadership within the House of Delegates on behalf of the dissenters, and thereby successfully blocked the general assessment vote and organized the vote on disestablishment. Even if the voice of disestablishment was that of dissenters, the arguments had to appeal to enough Anglicans to get them to switch sides when the vote was called. Ragosta acknowledges as much when he writes that the 'Enlightenment rationale, joined with the dissenters' ideology, was essential' to winning support for final passage (p. 169).

This criticism is not to take away from Ragosta's excellent treatment of the dissenters themselves – it is only to note that the scope of the book could have been expanded. His core theme, that the dissenters created their

own liberation through prudent manipulation of wartime conditions, is an important antidote to a historiography that often does privilege Anglican elites and treats religious freedom as a right bestowed downwards from the Olympian heights of the Virginia Assembly. As a social history, it is a superb telling of an inadequately explored part of the revolution in Virginia. *Wellspring of Liberty* deserves to take a prominent place on the shelf of religious and social history during the American Revolution.

Notes

1. Michael McDonnell, *The Politics of War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2007). [Back to \(1\)](#)

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