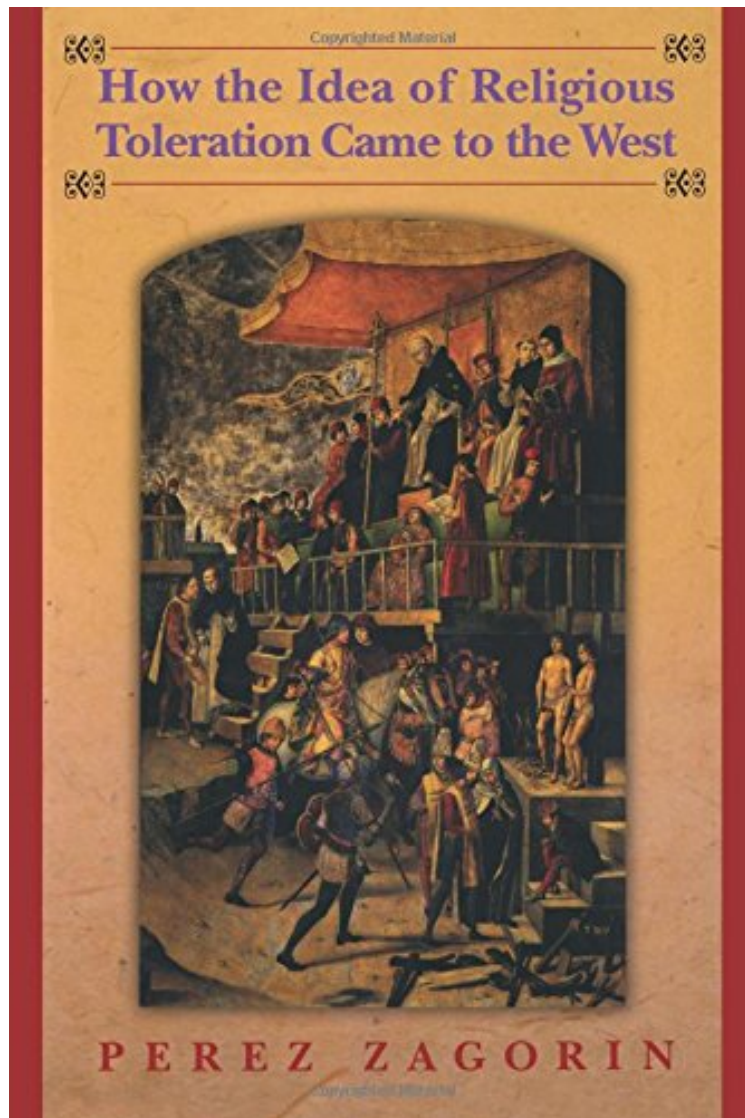


[Free] How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West

How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West

Perez Zagorin

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Perez Zagorin : How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West:

14 of 16 people found the following review helpful. An Exploration of an Important Topic...Especially Now By Jeffrey Morseburg Today, Catholics and Protestants are overwhelmingly tolerant of people of other religious faiths and non-believers. They may advocate their values - as the secularists do as well - in the liberal marketplace of ideas and criticize those who oppose them, but in the western democracies and republics, religious differences are usually settled in a courthouse. This religious tolerance, enshrined in the American founding, was won at a tremendous price and in

the era of the Reformation, both Catholics and Protestants persecuted those whose views they saw as heretical. Today, the current battle between the liberal west and the forces of Islamic fanaticism has brought the issue of religious intolerance to the front pages of the world's newspapers and the top of news broadcasts. So, it is a timely subject for a book like the one Perez Zagorin has written. Historically, Islam had a tradition of tolerance for Christians and Jews who were known as "people of the book" because of their shared biblical heritage, but Sayyid Qutb and other radical Islamic thinkers have turned this idea on its head and now seek to convert or exterminate them. Zagorin takes readers back to a time when the churches of the west dedicated themselves to crushing all dissent and then introduces the reader to early advocates of tolerance who found the seeds of a more tolerant and pluralistic philosophy in the great religious texts and tradition. It was these deep philosophical thinkers - Erasmus, Sir Thomas More, John Locke - who advanced the notion that challenge and pluralism was actually good for their religions, not simply an effective political policy than enhanced trade and diplomacy. The most important single figure in the book is Sebastian Castellio, an early advocate of pluralism and tolerance who dueled with the Protestant reformer John Calvin, the man who was largely responsible for the burning of Michael Servetus, the controversial doctor and theologian. Zagorin writes about the origins of religious tolerance in the Netherlands, which played a vital role in the founding of some of America's colonies and the growth of tolerance here. He concludes his book with chapters on religious tolerance in England and the figures of John Locke and Pierre Bayle. Much of the history that Zagorin writes of here has not been widely disseminated and his very readable account of the men and ideas that advanced tolerance and pluralism should be widely read.

15 of 20 people found the following review helpful. Good Descriptions, Weak on Analysis; 3.5 By R. Albin

This is a well written concise intellectual history of the idea of religious toleration. This is not a history of the development of toleration per se, which would require more political and social history. Zagorin is concerned particularly with exploring the role of early writers on this topic, most of whom are largely forgotten today. He begins with a sketch of the development of the doctrine of persecution in the early church and intolerance in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Ernest discussions of tolerance then become a major issue with great religious conflicts engendered by the Reformation. Zagorin then traces the development of the idea of tolerance in the writings of pioneering individuals like the French humanist scholar Castellio and a variety of Dutch intellectuals. Zagorin works his way through the 16th and 17th centuries concluding with the works of Locke and Bayle. This is very well done and parts are very informative. For example, Zagorin's concise description of Roger Williams' thinking about church-state separation is the best I've read. A recurrent theme is that these early advocates of toleration were driven by a conception that toleration was mandated by the essential message of Christianity and an appropriate reading of scripture. While this is quite good, Zagorin doesn't really provide any analysis for the basis of the development of tolerance. Why, for example, were all the major writers on tolerance Protestants? Why Europe at this particular time? Why these particular individuals? There are some reasonable possible answers to these questions. All the early advocates of toleration appear to have been humanist scholars very interested in Classical literature. Surely, the encounter with a powerful non-Christian intellectual tradition and the knowledge of religious pluralism in the Classical world must have had some impact. Similarly, the Protestant emphasis on a personal relationship with God surely influenced the tolerationist emphasis on liberty of conscience. Finally, the practical experience of relatively tolerant societies like Holland, France under the Edict of Nantes, and parts of Switzerland must have had an impact.

12 of 28 people found the following review helpful. Questionable Thesis By A Customer

Zagorin's thesis is that the key to the West's religious tolerance is the large body of theoretical/political/philosophical writings supporting tolerance -- writings that give the idea more heft, cultural significance, and endurance than it could have had without them. True enough, but in order to suggest this body of writings as the key to our heritage of tolerance, Zagorin explicitly downplays the significance of two other keys: 1) the spread of disbelief/skepticism, and 2) the fears, the political and economic instability, and the human tragedies created by religious wars. But the evidence he presents shows that these two were precisely what inspired the body of writings! Even Sebastian Castellio, Zagorin's "hero" in this book, speaks again and again about the obscurity and difficulty of the doctrines of baptism, predestination, and trinity, and how the difficulty leads to disbelief and therefore controversy and therefore pain and suffering. A pleasant but unimportant book.

Religious intolerance, so terrible and deadly in its recent manifestations, is nothing new. In fact, until after the eighteenth century, Christianity was perhaps the most intolerant of all the great world religions. How Christian Europe and the West went from this extreme to their present universal belief in religious toleration is the momentous story fully told for the first time in this timely and important book by a leading historian of early modern Europe. Perez Zagorin takes readers to a time when both the Catholic Church and the main new Protestant denominations embraced a policy of endorsing religious persecution, coercing unity, and, with the state's help, mercilessly crushing dissent and heresy. This position had its roots in certain intellectual and religious traditions, which Zagorin traces before showing how out of the same traditions came the beginnings of pluralism in the West. Here we see how sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thinkers--writing from religious, theological, and philosophical perspectives--contributed far more than did political expediency or the growth of religious skepticism to advance the cause of toleration. Reading these

thinkers--from Erasmus and Sir Thomas More to John Milton and John Locke, among others--Zagorin brings to light a common, if unexpected, thread: concern for the spiritual welfare of religion itself weighed more in the defense of toleration than did any secular or pragmatic arguments. His book--which ranges from England through the Netherlands, the post-1685 Huguenot Diaspora, and the American Colonies--also exposes a close connection between toleration and religious freedom. A far-reaching and incisive discussion of the major writers, thinkers, and controversies responsible for the emergence of religious tolerance in Western society--from the Enlightenment through the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights--this original and richly nuanced work constitutes an essential chapter in the intellectual history of the modern world.