BOOK REVIEW

Andrew Fitz-Gibbon, 2017, *The Fragility of Tolerant Pluralism*, Palgrave Macmillan, USA, 124 pages, ISBN: 978-3-319-69468-9

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Understanding and approaching the importance of pluralism, both as a concept and regarding its meaning for modern societies, has rarely been more relevant. For plurality, together with its great opposite, totality, have worked as guiding forces for the development of human culture with regards to both ideas and ideals. The implementation of a climate based on a mostly stable political pluralism took place, to an extent, almost as much by chance as it was by design. Nonetheless, the sacrifices which were undertaken for this ideal matter all the more since they were typically the works of a few individuals who went against the dominant currents of their day. In the context of the contemporary West – beset as it is by terrorist threats and rapidly changing societies, cultures, and attitudes – the climate of tolerant pluralism in Europe in particular is faced by an unprecedented challenge in its postwar history. Indeed, it is with a certain sense of urgency that one must look upon the interaction between the various forms of pluralism and totalism at this point in time.

In his work, Fitz-Gibbon focuses on pluralism and religion during the early modern period, making use of primary sources which have been translated into English. As the author himself states from the onset, the book does not aim to be a social history of 16th century radicalism, neither as an extensive analysis of the development of toleration, toleration and pluralism in a European context. Rather, in a period when the social good of tolerant pluralism exists ever more

precariously, the work seeks to consider the early 16th century seeds of tolerant pluralism – as found in the writings of a number of radical sectarians – and consider how the social, philosophical, and political importance of those writings may contribute to understanding the contemporary period (pp.1-2). As the book mentions, the Protestant Reformation began as a challenge to the existence of a dominant monist religious vision, yet the State Protestantism which followed introduced its own kind of "monism that brooked no alternatives" (p.2). In this respect, the author makes an intriguing point in stating that "a monist society morphing into a genuinely pluralist society has not yet happened in entirety, and tolerant pluralism is always under threat form old and dominant monisms" (p.5).

In the first chapter, the author is right to point to the difficult question of religion, as premodern European understanding of religion was very different from its individualized and privatized conceptions which emerged after the Reformation – with the radical sects of the 16th century representing this very transition (pp. 17-18). Further on, the work suggests five sociological types aside from monism, namely, nonresistant separatism, nonresistant monism, revolutionary apocalypticism, cenobitic mysticism, and eremitic mysticism (p.19). In turn, these types are found in various contexts – which the author adapts from Niehbuhr – such as "religion against culture, religion of culture, religion above culture, religion and culture in paradox, and religion the transformer of culture" (p.20). This then leads to the idea of community and society, and the ways in which adherence or opposition to them may manifest.

The second chapter focuses on a foundational Anabaptist document, namely, *The Schleitheim Confession*, which represents the major difference from the host society both in doctrine and in practice. The seven religious articles it espoused were based on a literalistic reading of the New Testament and possessed socio-political overtones, dealing with the following: the baptism, the ban, the common meal of those united by baptism, the separation from "popish" community, the shepherd of the Anabaptist church, the sword as an "ordering of God outside the perfection of Christ", and, lastly, the refusal to take oaths (pp.41-42). Such principles completed the separation of the radicals from the dominant culture and its vision, and which ultimately led to their violent suppression, even

though the Anabaptists themselves varied in the interpretation and implementation of the articles.

While early persecutions could interpret the actions of militant Anabaptists in the conquest of the city of Münster as a logical outcome of all Protestantism, the intensity of the persecution would wane in Protestant territories, who chose not to suppress them violently and rather tolerate their existence. In this respect, the Anabaptists, by their very existence, came to promote the cause of religious pluralism (p. 70). Perhaps most significantly with regard to the Anabaptists ideals of toleration – even if they did so for the purpose of enhancing their own views and position – one encounters the idea of toleration for all creeds, whether Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, rather than for Christian sects alone (p. 73).

Fitz-Gibbon then uses the third chapter to discuss six areas which show how the radicals of the 16th century may contribute to facing the apparent fragility of tolerant, pluralistic democracies and what this might mean for future research. The first point focuses on the originality of Anabaptist ideas. It is worth mentioning here that the Anabaptists built their own community as both separate from and opposed to the host society, which meant foregoing the emerging pluralism found in their own doctrine. Nonetheless, even as the Anabaptists themselves likely did not understand the implications of this pluralism, and although their own ideas of social toleration were not to be directly responsible for forming the ideas of future generations of scholars in Europe (pp.91-92), the author points out that these the first dissenting groups to make a case for religious toleration. Other important factors, such as pacifism, the varied forms of resistance, and the suppression of dissent are also considered, with the author acknowledging a key fact, namely, that the recurrence of intolerance might suggest "an inherent flaw in the liberal democratic vision of the good" and, most importantly, a number of limits facing pluralism itself (p.109).

Like the 15th century Hussites, who had once proclaimed during the early days of their movement, the Anabaptists vowed to "not resist evil", in imitation of the model provided by the New Testament. Still, this not dissuade the formation of militant wings which were ready to pursue their revolutionary socio-political aims in a total manner, as seen most clearly in the Münster Rebellion during the

early 1530s. And even those who took the path of quietism were to see toleration as a path to practicing their own religion, a fact which became clear in their attempt to stamp out plurality within their own ranks even as they successfully withdrew from the world of their host societies (p.77).

Thus, the demand for plurality and toleration by groups which do not see it as an end in itself and which, instead, pursue totalist aims, is perhaps the most important idea which the book touches upon, even if briefly. Indeed, one finds in such cases the potential peril of totalist militancy, which, even when framed in pluralist terms, actually aims for the promotion of a withdrawal from or domination of the existing social order, which may result in the formation of alternative societies or in civil strife. A useful effort would have been to expand upon – as the author calls them – the monist visions of society against which the Anabaptists fought, and on establishing parallels to the potential monisms of today. The potential for nascent pluralism to turn to "monism", or, more ominously, a militant totalist worldview, also deserves a more detailed approach in future research.

All in all, Fitz-Gibbon manages to provide convincing arguments on the necessity of analysing premodern religious radicalism and associating it with the contemporary issues plaguing pluralist democracies and societies. Thus, such movements are worth investigating in any attempt to understand the potential and the challenges of pluralism in contemporary societies, with perhaps a particular relevance for the current state of Europe.