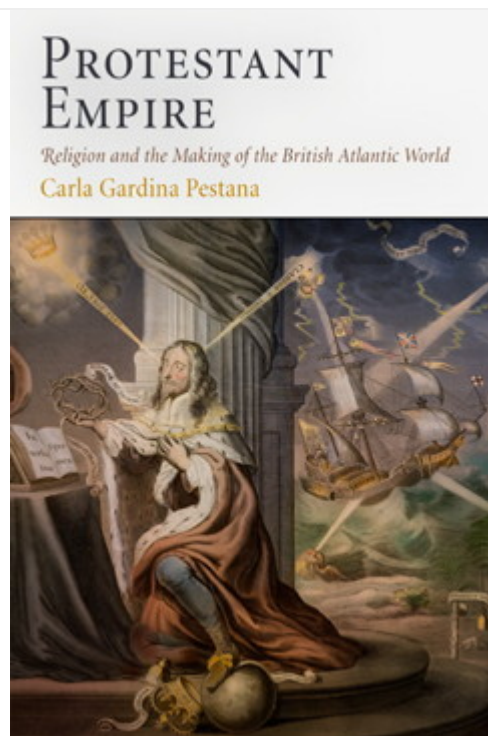


# {essays in history}

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## Protestant Empire: Religion and the Making of the British Atlantic World



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### Reviewed Work(s)

Protestant Empire: Religion and the Making of the British Atlantic World. By Carla Gardina Pestana (Philadelphia: University of

Pennsylvania Press, 2009). Pp. 312. Cloth, \$39.95.

The history of religion in colonial British America has been told using a variety of narratives, as a declension from pious beginnings or as the Christianization of mostly pagan common folk. But the story has consistently been geographically centered in the colonies themselves, with an occasional look to the European past for context. Carla Gardina Pestana's new synthesis, *Protestant Empire: Religion and the Making of the British Atlantic World*, sets religion in the British colonies in its proper context: the Atlantic. In this lucidly written and highly accessible text, Pestana showcases how integral religion was in shaping the Atlantic world.

Pestana begins with a snapshot of the cultures of the littoral in 1500. Despite differences in form, indigenous religious systems shared a tendency to view the world as highly spiritualized, to believe in an afterlife, and to have ritual calendars tied to the seasons, to name only a few commonalities. However, the European tendency to think in binaries of Christian and pagan meant that these similarities would be papered over as cultures met. Confident in their possession of truth, Europeans viewed exploration and colonization as projects of conversion, wedding religion to empire from the start.

In the sixteenth century, the Reformation divided a European continent that had been somewhat unified by religion. After experiencing the different reform programs of Henry VIII, Edward VI, and Mary Tudor, England found a dedicated reformer in Elizabeth, but her reign was still an early period of English Protestantism. Pestana draws deserved attention to the religious differences between England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland. English rulers were never pleased with the existence of religious divisions within their realm, and they worked to create a Protestant hegemony first among the Catholics across the Irish Sea before expanding into the New World. Contact with Catholics in Ireland, combined with national animosity toward Spain (and later, France), resulted in strong anti-Catholic feelings that strengthened the imperial impulse.

Pestana identifies the English Civil War and the migration of Puritans to New England as signal events in the development of Atlantic religion.

These were key components of a process of “puritanization” sweeping through British culture, as dissenters resisted the authority of the Church of England (87). Puritans were in retreat after the Restoration, and “confessional identity, or the church an individual joined, came to be read as a sign of political position...” (88). In an increasingly pluralistic context, the ruler’s religion was no longer necessarily that of the people.

By the late-seventeenth century, religious diversity had become the norm in the Atlantic, broadly conceived. Although state churches prospered in England and Scotland, Anglican efforts like the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts did little to stem the tide of Baptists, Huguenots, Mennonites, Quakers, and others who openly expressed their beliefs in the colonies. Pestana argues that religion fueled conflicts commonly understood in secular terms, such as Bacon’s Rebellion and King Philip’s War. But, overall, a spirit of Protestant unity motivated by the success of the Glorious Revolution and fear of Catholics permeated the colonies.

In the mid-eighteenth century revivalism both strengthened transatlantic bonds based on belief and shored up denominational affiliation, measured in large part on reactions to evangelical doctrine and enthusiastic religious practice. The Great Awakening, according to Pestana, also marks the first point at which large numbers of Indians and African Americans became sincerely interested in Protestantism. Revivalism’s popularity in the colonies ensured that religious affiliation would be based on personal thoughts and feelings rather than institutional fiat, effectively barring the possibility of religious establishment after the American Revolution.

While Pestana includes individual believers and minority faiths in this narrative, the actors are often political rulers and denominations. Yet, *Protestant Empire* is not the top-down style of study that led denominational history out of vogue. Rather, Pestana demonstrates that this was an age in which politics and religious institutions were decisive forces in the shaping of the Atlantic world. Pestana’s work also exhibits the sophistication of both Atlantic and religious historiography by weaving religion and politics into a single narrative, instead of treating each as a separate phenomenon. Scholars and students of religious and Atlantic history will benefit greatly from such a clearly written, concise, and intelligent survey.

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