Religion, as a Power Device.

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Abstract. What does “just” government mean in the Early Modern Era? Haig Z. Smith’s book brings new light to this interesting question. The author examines five English companies in 17th century North America and Asia. Smith’s research is confined neither to the usual economic and political issues nor the equally familiar religious and administrative matters. Instead, Smith presents the operation of the religious governments as a hybrid of all these factors. The work complements the literature of Early Modern world history and “company studies” in the field of religion and state administration.

Key Words. Religion, company history, just government, 17th century

Haig Z. Smith’s work concentrates on the religion and government of England’s emerging colonial empire. His book examines five English companies’ religious governance and their effects from 1601 till 1698, from the New World to Asia.

The book consists of seven main chapters, which are followed by an abundant bibliography. The chapters, apart from the first and the last ones, deal with different English companies’ overseas religious or spiritual governments in the 17th century. The author does not cover all English companies, colonial settlements, and governmental structures in the era, but to some extent discusses Iberian (Spanish and Portuguese) colonial history and their Catholic and commercial networks.
The sources used are copious and very thorough. Next to manuscripts, archival records, and printed sources, Smith also uses online databases and secondary sources. The book’s framework is also interesting. Each chapter circles back to the different companies in subsequent times. This may seem odd, but it does follow a linear time structure. The chapters’ arrangement can be explained by the geographical grouping of the companies, as well as their forms of religious government.

The author would like to shed new light on the governmental forms, company identities, religious and colonial power structures and their effects on the English expansion in the 17th century. He also mentions the English attempts to regulate and control the behaviour and religious life of the people (English and local) living under their “rule” and how they tried to “gain” them for the English government and empire.

Smith describes three main questions. The first question is how corporate flexibility helped the establishment of overseas companies as distinguishable bodies that operated as extensions of English authority abroad. The second question is how companies developed different ways of controlling the religious behaviour of the English settlers and the people who came under their jurisdiction. The final question is whether the control and regulation of religious behaviour through ‘Protestant civility’ was crucial to the success of their colonial enterprises. He addresses these questions in his work thoroughly.

The first chapter serves as an introduction to “just” government, empire, religion, chaplains, and the companies, bringing the reader into the given space and time.

The second chapter is about the Virginia Company and its religious government, missionary aims working within its commercial expansion, and the strict religious laws, regulations, and pastoral control which they thought was “needed” because of the English and the native populations.

Evangelism was not only important from a religious point of view: they thought that whoever was converted into the “Protestant civilization” would become a subject of the English monarch and the Virginia Company, thus growing their power. Hence, in this form, evangelism worked as a power device.

The next chapter discusses the Plymouth and the Massachusetts Bay Companies. The Plymouth Company was based on Congregational republicanism and Presbyterian principles, which were later adapted by the MBC when creating a theocratic religious government. According to the MBC’s idea, democratic collectivism and the election of their members would not allow any space for corruption. Over time the theocratic government became violent and indulged in persecutions and ostracizations.
The fourth chapter examines the East India and the Levant Companies. Here, Smith highlights the chaplains as key figures in the formation of the companies’ pastoral religious government, which was the usual structure for the companies’ just governments in Asia and the Middle East before the British gained territories.

The clergy was important as a “policing force” against apostasy and to control the behaviour of the employees and their relations with the other surrounding religions and, of course, for the observation of their own Protestant religion.

Passive evangelism was a characteristic of the East India Company, where they thought that the adherence to their faith and their appropriate Protestant lifestyle would be sufficient even for converting the locals. The original pastoral religious governance changed with Bombay’s acquisition.

The next chapter returns to North America. The New England Company (NEC) was chartered to convert the Indigenous Peoples, after which the relation of the companies with religion started to change. This resulted in the creation of companies specifically to deal with evangelism, since the English thought that the existing companies did not do enough to convert the locals of the regions they were in.

The converted Native Americans meant a new market for the colonial trade of the English. The baptized Indigenous people were called “praying Indians” and the English created “praying towns” for them to live in, though these were mostly unsuccessful.

In the sixth chapter, the reader is once again in the Eastern sphere of the world. After 1661, the East India Company created an ecumenical religious government in India, which seemed to be the best option in the multireligious subcontinent. They hoped that the Protestant morals and piety would influence the locals and that they would convert without active evangelism.

Smith also writes about Armenians, the Iberian religious government and the Inquisition working in the area and how these factors moved migration to the East India Company’s territories. The company’s religious patronage (not exclusively for Protestants) and passive evangelism was also important for the success and relations after gaining territories. The ecumenical religious government gave space for religious freedom, political representation, and influence, which all led to the company gaining even more strength and power.

The scale was wide, the English political powers thought the Massachusetts Bay Company too theocratical, the East India Company too tolerant. The English political powers also believed that these companies did not do enough to secure the religious aspects set out for them, thus they founded explicitly evangelist companies (NEC, Society for Promoting Christian
Knowledge or SPCK, Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts). With this, the different trading companies did not have to deal with religious aspects and a more aggressive imperial expansion could start.

Religious government appears as a basic device in the companies’ repertoire to regulate the behaviour of those people who came under their power in one way or another. Exclusivity and inclusivity, while very different methods, were both used in the era, with the main aim being to secure the success of trade and settlement; English expansion also served the same purpose, with the supervision of religious and political behaviour.

Smith brought something new into the research of Early Modern English overseas history, with the examination and comparison of the companies’ religious governments. The book thoroughly and carefully examines the topic of religious government in some of the 17th century’s English companies all over the world. The companies, which also worked as the extensions of the English government, are carefully analysed, as well as the Iberian presence and the local circumstances which also influenced their operation.

Smith’s main conclusions include that corporate flexibility gave space for the companies to construct their own government and to control the English and the locals. The question about how the control and regulation of religious behaviour through “Protestant civility” impacted or even acted as a key to the successfulness of the English expansion brings interesting answers. On the one hand, for example, in the English East India Company, it is perceptible that with “Protestant civility” the “strategy” of passive evangelism whilst concentrating on their own community’s pastoral governance was for the most part successful against apostasy and helped their success. Their ecumenical religious government was also successful because it helped the company’s main aim to trade and create networks. On the other hand, as Smith shows through the history of the MBC, even if the conversion of some part of the local population is successful, when aggression and paranoia exceed “Protestant civility”, the concept could be deformed and become extreme.

In summary, the aim was to regulate and control the behaviour of the English and the local populations overseas, which impacted the character of the religious governments and the English expansion. Despite the common corporate framework, the pastoral, theocratical and ecumenical religious governments developed in different ways, which were influenced by the diversity of aims, territories, populations, and religiousness.

In this book the companies were not examined from the usual points of view: the research is confined neither to the usual economic and political issues nor the equally familiar religious and administrative matters. Instead, Smith presents the operation of the religious
governments as a hybrid of all these factors. The work complements the literature of Early Modern world history and “company studies” in the field of religion and state administration. Compared to previous research, the examination of the administration of the companies from a religious point of view, connected to how religion and their goals influenced them, as well as how individual denominations could influence certain companies’ attitudes towards the locals served as a novelty.

The author reached his aim to present a new view about religious governance. His results are important from a religious and governmental point of view for the primarily trading or settler companies in the 17th century, which not only impacted the local population and religious situations but also influenced the history of all parties.

Works Cited


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