

# Book Review

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*John Clarke and His Legacies: Religion and Law in Colonial Rhode Island, 1638–1750.* By Sydney V. James; ed. by Theodore Dwight Bozeman. (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1999. xiv, 202 pp. \$35.00, isbn 0-271-01849-6.)

The history of Puritan New England continuously attracts able historians. To this 1  
burgeoning field the late Sydney V. James has added a new and important study of  
Doctor John Clarke, 1609–1676, a radical Puritan whose life "took him through  
some of the great scenes of the seventeenth century": he was among the founders of  
Rhode Island, went back to England during the Puritan revolution, became there a  
Fifth Monarchist, and later returned to New England. Accordingly, as James's  
impressive study shows, "Clarke's was not provincial life." James being unable to  
bring this study to publication before his death, his colleague at the University of  
Iowa, Theodore Dwight Bozeman, edited his manuscript and, by overseeing its  
successful publication, paid a tribute to his friend.

Born and educated in the Puritan circles in England, Clarke left for New England 2  
to realize his religious beliefs. Coming to Massachusetts at the height of the  
Antinomian controversy, 1637, he became Antinomian himself and sided with Anne  
Hutchinson and her followers. Realizing that the orthodoxy established in  
Massachusetts was incompatible with his religious persuasions, he joined forces  
with a band of other Antinomian exiles who founded Rhode Island. Clarke had a  
prominent role in the establishment of Newport in 1639 and in launching the first  
Baptist church there. There, out of their religious convictions, these radical Puritans  
erected a unique relationship between church and state, whereby "no longer was  
government conceived of as having a divine source" and where "no longer would  
secular power be put behind any religious purpose." This belief, according to which  
religion became an affair solely between individual and creator and thus required no  
meddlesome political intermediary, preceded the New England Baptist Isaac  
Backus's views as expressed in his *A Door Opened for Equal Christian Liberty*,  
1783, James Madison's *A Memorial and Remonstrance*, 1785, and of course the  
Constitution and its Bill of Rights.

In 1651, Clarke returned with his wife to England and eagerly joined the 3  
vigorous public life of the interregnum. Having caught beforehand the "infectious  
millenarianism" while living in Newport, he became "a Fifth Monarchist" in  
England, though later in 1661 he denounced this movement and returned "to  
advocating separation of church and state." With the Restoration of the house of  
Stuart, Clarke negotiated the colony's royal charter, which, according to James, was  
"his best-known achievement." In spring 1663–1664 he and his wife returned to  
New England, and there for the rest of his life "he endured painful controversies"  
regarding both ecclesiastical and political issues.

James's careful and well-documented study will greatly enrich those interested in 4  
understanding the history of Rhode Island within the broad cultural and religious  
context of seventeenth-century England and New England. By showing the close  
and inextricable relationship between Puritan modes of conviction and modes of  
conduct, it clearly reveals once more that the idea of religious liberty and toleration

originated first and foremost among religious thinkers, who, in order to preserve the purity of the church, sought to separate it from the state, and not the other way around.

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