Early Experiments in Religious Freedom in Colonial America

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Eminent scholar of religion David Little compares two early American experiments in religious freedom—Rhode Island and Pennsylvania—in order to understand the differences in perspective and enduring implications of these pioneering efforts to protect religious liberty for people of diverse religious beliefs. Although American colonialists "invented modern constitutionalism and bequeathed it to the world," only a few of the colonies included the protection of religious freedom in their early constitutions. Two such colonies were Rhode Island and Pennsylvania. Their respective leaders, Roger Williams and William Penn, though sharing some similar commitments, had different outlooks and played different roles in trying to secure religious freedom. Whatever the differences, however, these colonial enterprises helped to launch the religious freedom protections that came to characterize modern constitutionalism.