A Religious Movement You've Never Heard Of

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They were outsiders in their day, a nonconformist sect of principled if often-difficult people who emerged from the rough-and-tumble life of a Colonial port, New London.

The Rogerenes they came to be called, for religious dissenter John Rogers, and at least one latter-day scholar has come to view their colorful story more charitably than some others have in the past.

The sect might best be described as a Protestant reform effort at the edge of Congregational, Quaker and Seventh Day Baptist faiths. Rogerenes argued for a non-institutional faith, believed in faith healing, demanded separation of church and state, sought emancipation for blacks and even endorsed polygamy, though it is unclear to what extent followers practiced plural marriage.

Inevitably, in a time when the Congregational Church was the established church, they clashed with the New London power structure, enduring frequent jailings, even beatings.

Jan Schenk Grosskopf, an adjunct professor of history at the University of Connecticut in Storrs, is convinced that the Rogerenes are evidence that Colonial life in Connecticut was not nearly as orderly and conservative as many people think.

``It is not rigid people bowing their heads in church every Sunday,`` she said. ``It is more like people going to the meeting house to argue with each other quite often.``

There were fights and murders, thefts and drunkenness in the Colonies. Language could be salty and unvarnished. Children were born out of wedlock. It was not a monolithic society of piety.

``Society was very disorderly. There was a great range of opinion,`` she said.


Rogers, born in 1648, was a principled man, the antithesis of go-along-get-along. In the 1670s, he removed himself from the mainstream Congregational faith and fashioned his own beliefs. He came from a wealthy family and was himself wealthy, despite nearly a lifetime's worth of trouble with Congregational and political leaders in the city.
Rogers argued for separation of church and state almost from the moment church and state were joined in Colonial Connecticut. He was an early advocate of the emancipation of slaves. He also believed in faith healing, adult baptism and polygamy by followers. Church on Sunday? No need to go to church at all, Rogers said.

``Your life is supposed to be a worship," Grosskopf said of Rogers' belief. ``And therefore it should be an entire encompassing spirituality that informs everything you do.''

Unhappy that he had to pay to support the Congregational Church -- and unhappy that he was required to attend services -- Rogers would stand up in church and challenge the minister on points of doctrine and refuse to pay his share of church costs. He was carted off to jail.

Rogers would not just argue; he would preach.

``He'd get up and say, `Since you took five of my cattle or whatever to pay the rates for this meeting house, I own this meeting house, too. We all own it.' Then he would get up and preach," Grosskopf said. ``They used to arrest him, but after a while they just sort of ignored him.''

By 1700, Rogers had written five books on his religious philosophy. All were burned by the government. At one point Rogers was locked up for madness.

``They boarded up the windows -- a new treatment for madness -- but the local people ripped off the boards and set him free," Grosskopf said.

Indeed, Rogers, a charismatic man, was popular in New London society, even among those who did not share his views, with the notable exception of the political and religious establishment.

**Rebel Preacher**

Rogerenes at first were a small circle of family and friends -- notably John Bolles, whose family became longtime followers of the Rogerene sect. Never a major religious movement, the Rogerenes nevertheless grew over the years, with adherents among several New London area families, including the Bolles.

Camille Hanlon, a professor emeritus of human development at Connecticut College in New London, has researched the Rogers and Bolles families and their traditions of principled dissent.

``Both of these families seem to have taken very seriously the principles of the English Reformation," she said, including making the church less institutional.

``I think John Rogers and John Bolles hoped they could persuade the local Congregationalists to separate church and state," Hanlon said. The Rogerenes never let the issue drop, but Connecticut did not formally separate the church from the state until 1818.
In the 19th century, Rogerenes, by then sometimes affiliated with other Protestant churches, were leaders in the abolitionist movement, which was strong in the New London area, Hanlon said. Even in the 17th century, both Bolles and Rogers were freeing or trying to free slaves.

Grosskopf said the Rogerenes of the 19th century were not only prominent in the abolitionist movement but characteristically in the thick of other social issues.

``They were involved in women's issues. ... They wanted to keep Texas out of the Union because it was a slave state. They worked to get rid of the death penalty. Some were interested in vegetarianism. They were involved in all the hot issues of the day."