Establishment or Tolerance?

Summary: *Many American colonies were founded by dissenting or establishment English religious sects that sought to practice their own traditions freely but were, in some cases, less lenient toward other sects. Rhode Island and Pennsylvania, founded by Roger Williams and William Penn, respectively, more readily affirmed free practice of religion. Although the framers of the Constitution repudiated the idea of an official established state religion, most considered the United States a Christian nation.*

The newcomers who settled the colonies along the east coast of America were European Christians, mostly Protestants. Some came for profit and adventure, but many came explicitly to seek the freedom to practice their religion. They hoped to establish enclaves of faith in the new world. These Christians in the new America encountered the challenge of religious difference first, and most sharply, amongst themselves. The question of whether there should be one "established" religion or whether there should be tolerance for religious "dissenters" was one of the first major issues each new colony faced.

The Pilgrims, a separatist reform group that had broken with the Church of England, landed in 1620 and established the Plymouth colony. A few years later, the Puritans—so named because of their intention not to separate from but to purify the Church of England—established what would become the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In 1630, on board the *Arabella*, the ship that brought the Puritans to the new world, John Winthrop gave a sermon on the new biblical society they wanted to create. The society would be based on a covenant of the common moral and religious understandings that bind people to God and one another. In describing their common enterprise he invoked a biblical image: "For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us." Winthrop's vision of a Christian society rising in the new world was shared by many who made the voyage to America. The sense of mission and purpose evoked by his image of the city on a hill has inspired the vision and the rhetoric of American political leaders to this day.

In England, the Puritans were dissenters. But in New England, they became the Christian establishment, envisioning a new world in which Christianity would decisively shape a whole civilization. In Massachusetts they established a "Biblical Commonwealth," The Massachusetts Bay Colony, in which church and state united to work together for the glory of God. The Cambridge Platform of 1648 detailed the shape of the orthodox Puritan establishment in early New England society. While it was not quite a

theocracy, the civil authorities were to rule by what they considered to be the law of the Bible. "Idolatry, blasphemy, heresy, venting corrupt and pernicious opinions that destroy the foundation, open contempt of the Word preached, profanation of the Lord's Day" were deemed punishable civil offenses. Religion—meaning Puritan Christianity—permeated every aspect of life.

There were early dissenters, including people of non-established churches and those who completely rejected the very idea of the "establishment" of religion. Roger Williams, originally a Puritan minister, insisted on what he called "soul liberty" as the indispensable condition of faith. He said that because faith is a disposition of the heart, it cannot be subject to the coercion of the state. The church must be a voluntary community. Williams challenged the Massachusetts Bay Colony at his trial, saying, "The state should give free and absolute permission of conscience to all men in what is spiritual alone. Ye have lost yourselves! Your breath blows out the candle of liberty in this land." In the 1630s, banished from Massachusetts, he went on to found the colony of Rhode Island, pledging "full liberty in religious concernments." Rhode Island had no established church and permitted freedom of conscience and worship for everyone, including Jews and Quakers. Roger Williams' classic statement, "The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution," set forth a strong Christian basis for rejecting any persecution in the name of religion or conscience.

Tried as a heretic in Massachusetts and then expelled from the Commonwealth, Anne Hutchison took refuge in Rhode Island in 1638. Her friend Mary Dyer, a Quaker, was also run out of the Bay Colony as a dissenter but refused to accept expulsion. She returned repeatedly to press for her own religious freedom until she was finally hung on Boston Common in 1660. Accusations of heresy escalated and, by the late 1600s, there were accusations of witchcraft as well. Before the Salem witch trials were over nineteen people, mostly women, were accused of being witches and hung or pressed to death.

The colony of Virginia, with its headquarters at Jamestown, was founded by Anglicans in 1607. Like the Puritans, they understood themselves to be acting "with God's providence" and were intent on spreading Christianity. In the 1620s, the Virginia legislature took steps to ensure that the Church of England would be the only established and publicly funded church in Virginia. Within a few decades, around thirty Anglican parishes stretched across the Virginia landscape, and despite increasing numbers of Puritans and Quakers migrating there, the Church of England was the only legally protected institution. The

"Declaration of Religious Toleration" was issued in England by King William and Queen Mary in 1689, but full religious toleration did not dawn in Virginia until the time of the American Revolution.

Maryland was founded in 1634 by a Catholic, Cecil Calvert. From the beginning, a large number of Catholic settlers flocked to this colony, along with a great many Protestants. The initial vision of Maryland as a place of toleration was a practical necessity. Nonetheless, Protestant-Catholic tensions were present from the beginning. In the 1650s, the Protestants gained control, banished the Jesuits from Maryland, and barred other Catholics from holding any office. In 1702, the Protestant Church of England was legally established as Maryland's official church and harsh anti-Catholic laws appeared on the books, the most severe of which was the unambiguously titled 1704 law, "An Act to Prevent the Growth of Popery within this Province," forbidding the public exercise of Catholic rites. Catholics were forced to practice their religion privately, even secretly.

New York also wrestled with religious diversity. In the 1620s, the Dutch laid claim to Manhattan, then called New Amsterdam, and the Dutch Reform Church received recognition from the Dutch West India Company as the colony's official church. Religious diversity was accepted as long as it did not interfere with commerce and civic stability. But when Peter Stuyvesant rose to the position of director general of the colony in 1647, he was considerably less tolerant. Already disgruntled with the presence of Lutherans, Quakers, Presbyterians, and Catholics in New Amsterdam, Stuyvesant drew the line when a small group of Jews arrived in the port city in 1654. Though he pressured them to leave, they appealed to the Dutch West India Company, which reconsidered and gave them permission to travel, trade, and live in the colony. Thus the Jews of New Amsterdam developed into a small but sustained community, establishing America's first synagogue, Congregation Shearith Israel, in 1729.

The Quakers were also the target of Stuyvesant's intolerance: both Quakers and those who protected them were arrested and fined. In 1657, the inhabitants of Flushing drew up what has become a landmark document of religious freedom, the Flushing Remonstrance. It was a bold moment in colonial history, with citizens resisting the governor for trying to impose religious uniformity. Today the home of John Bowne, a central figure in this struggle, has become a "National Shrine to Religious Freedom." Within half a mile of Bowne House, quite by chance, is now one of America's most religiously diverse neighborhoods. Its Buddhist and Hindu temples, Muslim mosques, Sikh *gurdwaras*, Jewish synagogues,

and wide variety of Christian churches, including Korean and Chinese speaking congregations, are living evidence of the heritage of this first stand for religious freedom.

Of all the colonial experiments, none was based on so wide and explicit a vision of religious liberty as Pennsylvania. William Penn first offered a place of refuge for Quakers facing persecution in England and Ireland, yet his vision did not stop there. He believed that religious conscience should be kept separate from civil matters and resisted any established religion. Even "toleration" was not enough: freedom of religious practice, he believed, should be actively protected. In 1662, he drafted a Frame of Government protecting all persons of religious faith, so long as they shared an acknowledgment of God as the creator. Freedom to worship, minister, and affiliate with particular sects was granted to all; the right to compel an individual to practice a particular faith granted to none.

Penn's open door policy allowed a strong Quaker community to form not far from where Quakers were routinely fined, silenced, or hanged. As the years unfolded, Pennsylvania also became home to German Lutherans and Calvinists, Mennonites and Amish. Free black Methodists, Jews, and Irish Catholics began to form small communities that flourished in the 19th century. It is a fitting coincidence that, at the end of the 20th century, one of America's first large Hindu temples was built on a hilltop near Pittsburgh, the Sri Venkateswara Temple, dedicated in 1977.

Through trial and experiment, the colonial period provided different models of dealing with religious diversity, though largely within the Christian spectrum. When America became a new nation, those who framed the Constitution pointedly repudiated any establishment of religion. Even so, most citizens of the new republic were broadly Anglo-Protestant and no doubt thought of American society as Christian. The idea of a "Christian America" continued to be a powerful, although voluntary, proposal for foundational American identity. This can be seen in John Henry Barrows welcome to delegates to the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. Barrows, a Presbyterian minister, explained: "There is a true and noble sense in which America is a Christian nation, since Christianity is recognized…by general national acceptance and observance as the prevailing religion of our people."

However, America's growth came with a strong and diverse Jewish community and, more recently, substantial Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu minorities. The early colonial experiments in intra-Christian diversity made religious tolerance and religious freedom the watchwords of a new order. As America

has become more and more religiously diverse, the visionary experiments of Roger Williams and William Penn have taken on new dimensions of meaning.