

Colonial Beginnings

Reformation and European Expansion

Medieval Europe dreamed of Christendom—one civilization united by one faith. This ideal of Christendom was shattered in the sixteenth century when Protestant reformers broke with papal authority in Rome. Europe became a patchwork in which each territory was its own little Christendom with its ruler determining the religion of the people. Meanwhile, several European powers laid claim to huge tracts of land across the Atlantic Ocean. These territories were named New Spain, New France, New Netherlands, New Sweden, and New England.

Thus, two great dramas overlap in time: the Reformation and European expansion in the Americas. For example, Luther began the Reformation in 1517, at about the same time Córdoba explored the Yucatan peninsula. William Tyndale prepared his English translation of the New Testament in 1524, the year that Verrazano probed the Atlantic coastline. In France, a young lawyer named John Calvin embraced the Reformation in 1534, the year Jacques Cartier first sailed into the St. Lawrence Gulf. By the close of the Reformation era in 1648, European settlements in North America included Jamestown, Quebec, Santa Fe, Boston, and New Amsterdam (New York).

The Reformation affected European exploration and settlement of America. Not only did Protestant and Catholic nations compete for territory; they also brought to America several assumptions and strategies forged

in the Reformation. These concepts were the basis for colonial Christianity, at least in the early stages. One such concept was *territorialism*.

Territorialism was a strategy for dealing with the religious differences set loose by the Protestant Reformation. By 1648, religious and political wars had failed to establish either Catholicism or any type of Protestantism as Europe's sole faith. War could not settle the matter. The slogan *cuius regio, eius religio* ("whose the region, his the religion") expressed the strategy by means of which rulers tried to assert religious unity within their own realms. The ruler decided the religion.

European rulers expected their religious authority to extend to their American territories as well. To this day, the religious footprint of territorialism can still be seen in French-Catholic Canada, in the heritage of Spanish Catholicism in Mexico and the Southwest, and in the Anglo-Protestantism in much of the United States.

Another theme from the Reformation era was *freedom of conscience* to "obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). Here the individual is accountable to God alone in matters of faith. No human authority, not even a king or a bishop, has the right to gainsay God's claim on an individual. And if this does happen, the individual is bound by conscience to resist. These two views of religious authority—territorialism and individual conscience—clashed repeatedly in colonial America until religious freedom at last became the norm.

American Lutherans have sometimes been tempted to draw a straight line between Martin Luther and the rise of religious freedom in America. A crooked line would be better for two reasons. First, Calvinism (not Lutheranism) was the dominant influence in American Protestantism for generations. Second, Luther did not think that one person's beliefs were as good as any other person's, nor did he say that individuals should simply believe whatever appeals to them. Luther (and other reformers) did say that when *human* authority conflicts with the Word of God, then *God* must be obeyed. Martin Luther criticized the church of his day not because he was a free spirit but because his conscience was "captive to the Word of God." This and similar appeals to the Word of God continued to inspire dissent against religious territorialism in the colonies. With the Enlightenment came new forms of dissent. For those influenced by the Enlightenment, the conscience

of the individual (rather than the Word of God) became the final court of appeal. In the story of Christianity in colonial America, territorial religion (in which the ruler sets religious policy) clashed with appeals to a higher authority—whether Scripture, conscience, or reason. These conflicts began in Europe during the Reformation and took on a life of their own in America.

Native American Religions

The Reformation was still in the future when Columbus landed on the island he called San Salvador in 1492. There he saw no temples or robed priests, heard no prayers or liturgies. Columbus wrote that “Los indios . . . will easily be made Christians, for they appear to me to have no religion.”¹ Columbus was an explorer, not a sociologist of religion. Even if he had been able to see and describe the religion of the Taino people, this would have been one among hundreds of religions in North America at the time of European contact.

There is no separate word for “religion” in many Native American languages. Instead, there is a “whole complex of beliefs and actions that give meaning” to everyday life.² In Native American religion, spiritual forces helped people to carry out the central tasks of hunting, courtship, and warfare. Healing was especially important; shamans or holy people would use spiritual powers to remove the evils that caused pain and sickness, or to restore the good things that had been stolen by bad spirits.

Native American beliefs passed by word of mouth to each new generation. Stories told the people who they were in relation to the land and to other tribes and marked the rites of passage in life. In contrast to European Christians with their written scriptures and creeds, Native cultures relied on oral tradition.

Land was central to Native American religions. Land was not “private property” or “real estate.” It was sacred, the mother of all living things. Land was revered not for its monetary value but for its beauty, for its abundance of game and fish, and as a reminder of great events and spirits of ancestors. But even before the Europeans came, native peoples could be displaced from their ancestral lands by tribal warfare or by changing patterns of climate, hunting, and trade. When the Europeans

came with their relentless appetite for land, the conflicts had religious dimensions, not least because land was sacred to Native peoples.

From colonial times until well into the twentieth century, missionaries to Native American peoples seldom differentiated the Christian gospel from their own cultures. A common assumption was that Native converts must forsake all tribal ways in order to become Christian. Even so, missionaries tended to treat Native peoples more humanely than did most of their fellow Europeans. Missionaries were more likely to see Native people as human beings, with souls to be saved, than to see them as enemies to be killed or obstacles to be removed from the path to progress. Many missionaries learned the languages and customs of Native peoples. A few missionaries lived with Indian peoples and adapted to tribal ways. Missionaries sometimes became advocates for Native peoples, condemning white encroachment on Indian land or trying to stop the alcohol trade that all too soon blighted Native cultures. Some missionaries paid the ultimate price of martyrdom in their attempts to bring Christianity to Native peoples.

Even the best-intentioned Europeans, however, could unwittingly carry smallpox, measles, and other diseases against which tribal peoples had no immunities. The death toll from European diseases may never be fully known, but estimates run to the tens of millions of Native people. Hardest hit were those peoples who lived in larger, more settled communities. For example, the Pueblos of New Mexico had roughly forty-eight thousand people in the sixteenth century. But by 1800 they were down to about eight thousand people.³ The loss of entire peoples, with their cultures and religions, can scarcely be measured.

Catholic Missions in North America: Spain and France

The first Catholic missionaries to America arrived with Columbus's second voyage in 1493, making their landing on the island of Hispaniola (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic). By the early 1500s, Spanish priests were active in Mexico, a large area whose northern lands later became part of the United States. This area, in turn, was part of a much larger Spanish empire extending through Central and much of South America.

Conquistadors (explorer-soldiers) advanced Spain's empire by crushing Native resistance. Spanish settlers carried on trade and provided a permanent European presence, while missionaries converted the Native peoples to Catholicism and taught them European ways. Thus, "conquest, settlement and evangelization" brought about a new rule whose purpose "was to create Christian peoples out of those regarded by their conquerors as members of barbarous and pagan races."⁴ The Spaniards had many internal conflicts between military, church, and trading interests; but there was general agreement that Native peoples who became Christian had to abandon tribal ways.

Spain could send very few European settlers to the far edges of its empire. It therefore sought to keep other European powers away by converting Native peoples and making them into loyal Spanish subjects and devout Catholics. Consequently, Spain established missions in Florida and along the northern rim of the Gulf of Mexico. In New Mexico, twenty-five missions were established by 1630. Another stage of mission planting was led by the Jesuit missionary Eusebio Kino (1645–1711), who was active in what we now know as the southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico. Later on, Spain built a string of missions in California between San Diego and San Francisco, with the dual purpose of converting Indians and securing Spain's claims against Russian and English interests along the Pacific coast. The Franciscan missionary Junipero Serra (1713–1784) led in creating these California missions. Serra gathered Native peoples into the missions, where they were taught Christianity, European customs, and agriculture. He is said to have baptized six thousand persons and confirmed five thousand. In keeping with attitudes of his day, "Serra held that missionaries could and should treat their converts like small children. He instructed that baptized Indians who attempted to leave the missions should be forcibly returned, and he believed that corporal punishment—including the whip and the stocks—also had a place."⁵

Spanish missions often resembled medieval European villages. Inside the protective walls lay the church, school, and hospital as well as a dormitory and work areas for various trades. Outside the walls, the people grew crops and tended livestock; in some places, they worked in mines or quarries. Some of the most successful missions were located near



Old Mission Church, Zuni Pueblo, New Mexico

Photo: Timothy O'Sullivan (1840–1882), New York Public Library/Art Resource, NY

Native villages that already had a settled, stable population. But Spanish success was short-lived. Native peoples commonly deserted the missions as soon as they had opportunity, taking elements of Christian belief and ritual to blend with their own traditions. From the Spanish side, the mission compounds were costly to maintain and difficult to staff. After Texas (and then the United States) gained control of these territories, many of the old missions crumbled into ruins.

Native responses to Spanish missions ranged from violent resistance to adaptation and cooperation. Take, for example, the Pueblo peoples of what is now New Mexico. Early on, the Spaniards exacted hard labor from the Pueblos and punished them for practicing Native religions. In 1680 Pueblos organized a revolt involving many villages. Four hundred Spaniards, including twenty-one missionaries, were killed. Crops, churches, and other buildings were destroyed. The Pueblos drove the Spanish out, but later the Spanish returned and regained control. The two peoples learned to coexist; they intermarried and became allies against mutual enemies such as the Apaches.⁶ Over many generations,

the Spanish and Native cultures blended, producing a form of Catholicism distinctive to that region.

Far to the north and east of Mexico, French Catholic missionaries had similar goals: to convert Native peoples to Christianity and strengthen France's claims in the New World. But the territory called New France was a different world from that of New Spain. Colder climates meant that Native peoples depended much more on hunting and fishing than on agriculture and were less likely to form large permanent settlements. Conditions in Canada were not favorable to the mission-compound strategy that the Spanish had tried in the Southwest.

In addition to dealing with a cold climate, France also had to contend with Protestant rivals along the Atlantic coast. In this age of territorial religion, conflicts between Protestants and Catholics were common. For example, in Acadia (present-day Maine and the Canadian Maritimes), English and Dutch Protestants and their Iroquois allies expelled the French Catholics. France had better luck establishing mission stations in areas now known as Northern Ontario, Wisconsin, Michigan, and Illinois—along the rivers and lakes where the French were the only Europeans. French priests were great explorers of North America, mapping waterways of a vast region while searching for the fabled Northwest Passage to the Pacific Ocean. They also founded settlements as far south as Mobile and New Orleans.

Early French missionaries learned Native ways and adapted to a lifestyle of extreme hardship and danger. Several religious orders and “secular priests” (those not attached to an order) evangelized in New France, but none surpassed the Jesuit order. The Jesuits (also known as the Society of Jesus) were founded by Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556), one of the most important Catholic leaders in the Reformation era. An ex-soldier, Loyola combined military ideals with a life of holiness. Pope Paul III approved the new order in 1540. Like “special ops” troops, Jesuit priests were trained to go anywhere, endure anything, and adapt to local conditions.

An early Jesuit missionary to New France was Jean de Brébeuf (1593–1649), who worked among the Huron peoples. In 1636 he wrote to would-be missionaries back in France, warning them to expect extreme heat and cold, dangerous travel through rapids and around waterfalls,

and nights of torment from mosquitoes, fleas, and sand flies. Food was scanty; there was no medical care and little or no shelter. Hardest of all was learning the Huron language, a task to humble even the most learned priest. Brébeuf advised his colleagues to stay home unless they were prepared to die. Some thirteen years later, the Iroquois—sworn foes of the Huron—tortured and killed Brébeuf. In 1930 Brébeuf and several other Jesuit martyrs were elevated to sainthood by the Roman Catholic Church.

After the martyrs, another generation built more lasting Catholic settlements. A great leader in this effort was Francois Xavier de Montmorency Laval (1623–1708), a Jesuit who became the first Catholic bishop in Canada. Laval established a seminary in Quebec in 1663, supported the work of women's orders in New France, and secured land grants for the church. He strove to protect Native peoples from exploitation at the hands of white trappers and rum traders. After Laval's time, the Jesuit mission was cut off—not only in New France but throughout the world. For largely political reasons, France suppressed the Jesuit order in 1763, and the pope abolished it completely in 1773. Jesuit missionaries were recalled to Europe, reassigned to other orders, or pensioned off. Although the Society of Jesus was restored in 1801, Catholic mission suffered a major setback. This is but one example of how decisions made far away in Europe affected Christianity in the Americas.

Around the time the Jesuits were suppressed, French and English hostilities came to a head in North America. When the British captured Montreal in 1760, the Governor of Canada surrendered to the British. In 1763 the Peace of Paris ended both the Seven Years' War in Europe and the French and Indian War in North America. England now formally controlled Canada, together with all its territories east of the Mississippi. But French Catholic heritage was laid deep in the foundations of Canada. French Catholicism had a lesser, though significant, impact in the United States, first through settlements such as Duluth and New Orleans, and later through the French priests imported to serve American Catholic parishes.



Map of the colony of Virginia, seventeenth century

From an expedition to the colony of Virginia by William Strachey as Secretary of State

Photo: HIP/Art Resource, NY

Protestant Settlements in North America

Many types of Protestants were active in early colonial America. The so-called magisterial groups, Reformed, Lutheran, and Anglican, represented state or “established” churches back in Europe. These groups were soon joined by radical Protestants such as Baptists and Quakers, which had known persecution in Europe. One may also describe the various Protestants in terms of nationality. There were Dutch and Swedish and German settlements as well as English; but because the English colonies had the greatest long-term influence on North American Christianity, they will receive greater attention.

England’s thirteen colonies in North America differed sharply from each other in matters of religion. Though founded by England, the colonies did not all adhere to the Church of England. Indeed, New Englanders tried to keep the Church of England out. In an era of territorialism,

one may ask how England ended up with more than one “established” church in its colonies, and with some colonies that openly welcomed dissent. At a practical level, this happened because England needed settlers and could not afford to be too selective. But a deeper reason for the religious patchwork in its colonies lies with England’s own history.

During the Reformation and its aftermath—which overlapped with the early European settlements in America—England careened through several religious and political upheavals. It began in 1554 when King Henry VIII declared himself (and not the pope) to be the supreme head of the church. After Henry died, each of his successors became the head of the church, and they had authority over England’s religion. What was legal under one monarch could bring exile or death under the next. Therefore, dissenters left England or returned, depending on who was in power. At last, the third monarch after Henry—Elizabeth I—achieved some religious stability for her country. The “Elizabethan Settlement” provided a moderate Protestant theology, set forth in *The Thirty-Nine Articles*, and a revised *Book of Common Prayer* as the basis for worship. The Church of England continued a “threefold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons and claimed to have kept the apostolic succession.”⁷ The church was firmly tied to the state because the Crown retained control over bishops.

Not everyone was satisfied with the Elizabethan Settlement. A coalition of zealous reformers wanted to free the Church of England from royal control and “purify” it from all remnants of Catholicism. These reformers were called Puritans. After enduring suppression and persecution, the Puritans executed King Charles in 1649 and briefly ruled England through the Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell. But after Cromwell died in 1658, the Puritans lost political power. The monarchy was restored, renewing the prospect for a Catholic king. But when Protestant monarchs William and Mary were crowned in 1688, England’s Protestant identity seemed secure.

Because this period of turmoil overlapped with England’s early claims and settlements in America, England could not secure a firm establishment of the Church of England in all of its American colonies. The Church of England was established in Virginia and other southern colonies and in some parts of New York. But Puritans had already set

up their own establishment in New England, while Protestant dissenters and Catholics were settling in several other colonies. Thus, England's history played a large role in shaping colonial Christianity (as did African slavery, immigration from continental Europe, religious awakenings, and the Enlightenment, which are described in due course). With this background in mind, the balance of this chapter will survey the story of Christianity in the early colonial period by region—from the southern colonies to New England to the middle colonies.

The Southern Colonies

The first permanent English settlement on the Atlantic seaboard was Jamestown, Virginia. It was founded in 1607 by the Virginia Company, a group of private investors who sought profits through trade. Jamestown had a Church of England minister to hold worship services for the colonists and to evangelize Native peoples. But the Jamestown venture won few converts, lost money, and cost hundreds of lives.⁸ Few of these early settlers knew how to raise crops; some may have refused to do menial labor, regarding it as below their class as gentlemen of trade. Soon starvation and disease took a heavy toll. The colony was saved by new recruits from England and by a regimen of strict rules for work, worship, and community discipline. In 1619, as Jamestown was beginning to stabilize, a Dutch trading ship arrived with captured Africans who were put to work in the tobacco fields.

The Virginia colony came under royal control in 1624, with the Church of England as its established church. Laws and punishments were devised to keep out dissenters—Congregationalists, Baptists, Puritans, and Quakers.⁹ But the Anglican Church in Virginia still faced daunting challenges. Clergy had to serve large, sparsely settled parishes, where roads were poor or nonexistent. In Virginia and other areas in the south, well-to-do laypersons organized “vestries” that ran parish affairs and resisted clergy control.

Similar conditions prevailed in North and South Carolina. Except for towns like Charleston (founded in 1670), the colonists were spread so far apart that gathering for regular worship seemed nearly impossible. Anglican clergy reported a very low interest in religion among

these colonists. Despite its status as the official religion, the Church of England was relatively weak in much of the South during the early colonial period. With a sparse population and so much backcountry, religious nonconformists could often avoid the reach of the established church. Religious diversity in the southern colonies increased when certain groups from continental Europe—such as French Huguenots and German Lutherans—received permission to settle in the Carolinas. This religious toleration was a privilege, however, not a right.

Maryland was a brief exception to the Anglican establishment. In 1634 a powerful English Catholic family, the Calverts, began the settlement of Maryland. The new colony was both a successful business venture and a place of refuge for English Catholics (the first settlers were a mix of Catholics and Protestants). Maryland's early Catholic colonists had large land grants and were active in colonial government. Their future looked bright in 1649, when the Maryland Assembly passed an Act of Toleration. This meant that the Church of England tolerated the presence of Catholics in the colony. But if toleration can be given, it can also be taken away. The Act of Toleration was repealed when Puritans briefly took power in Maryland. Years later and an ocean away, England's "Glorious Revolution" of 1688–89 rejected James II (a Catholic) as king and instead crowned William and Mary (Protestants). After that, Maryland Catholics could not vote, hold public office, or worship freely in Maryland until the American Revolution.

The last British colony, Georgia, was chartered in 1732. Some of Georgia's colonists came from overcrowded debtors' prisons in England. Others were religious exiles, like the Lutherans who were expelled from their home in Salzburg, Austria, by order of a Catholic ruler. Protestants across Europe raised money to pay for ships' passage to America for these exiles. Arriving in Georgia, the Salzburger Lutherans founded a community that they called Ebenezer, a biblical word meaning "rock of hope." By 1741 the Ebenezer settlement had twelve hundred people. Historian Abdel Ross Wentz describes these Lutherans, in the prime of their settlement, as living in peace with their neighbors, rejecting slavery, and evangelizing Indians. The Salzburger Lutherans grew cash crops and built churches, schools, and an orphanage. Their pastors had great authority and required no outside help to keep order in the Lutheran

settlements. Wentz further notes that “the famed evangelist George Whitefield and the founders of Methodism, John and Charles Wesley, who visited Ebenezer, were deeply impressed with the faith and piety of these Lutherans.”¹⁰

The Beginnings of Slavery

There were many forms of labor in England’s American colonies. Indentured servants sailed to America on credit, working off their debt over a period of several years. There were also free laborers and debtors transported from English prisons. African slaves soon became the bottom layer of this diverse labor system.

When the first Africans and Creoles (persons of mixed descent) arrived in Virginia as captives, their long-term future was unclear. Perhaps, like the white indentured servants, they could be released after several years. Indeed, some Africans were able to negotiate their freedom and become landowners.¹¹ But loopholes began to close as the slave labor system developed. Historian Ira Berlin notes the essential characteristics of slavery: Africans became legally “chattel” (property) until they died; their children were born into a system that bound them for life to white masters, who could use irresistible force to back up their demands. In contrast to indentured servitude, which was based on economic status, slavery was based on race. This was the most important characteristic of all in the American context. To be sure, the circumstances of slavery could vary greatly from one generation to another, from one part of the country to another, and even from one plantation to another. But beneath all this variety, slavery had the same basis everywhere: race, chattel property, and the use (or threat) of force.

African slavery was present in all of the colonies, even in the North; but the slave system struck deepest root in the South, where labor-intensive crops—tobacco, rice, and finally cotton—made it profitable. Ambitious colonists, aspiring to be like the landed, titled nobility of Europe, found that slave labor increased the wealth and enhanced the social status of slave owners. Slavery quickly became embedded in colonial economies and social structures, so that everyone was affected by slavery, even those who did not own slaves.

Slavery had deeply religious dimensions. The Africans brought with them many tribal religions and probably some forms of Islam. But the slave trade disrupted African religions; it tore families apart, destroyed entire villages, and removed people from sacred places. Slave trade patterns often threw together Africans of diverse languages and beliefs. And slave owners suppressed African religions, fearing, above all else, a slave revolt. Any religious practice that might subvert the slave owner's power was forbidden. This meant, for example, that blacks were seldom if ever allowed to meet together without white supervision, even for religious ceremonies. Drumming was integral to African worship, but drums were banned lest they be used to send messages or inspire rebellion.

Nevertheless, many African beliefs and customs persisted. The spirit world remained vivid to most Africans. Spirits of ancestors might give help or do harm, and therefore needed tending. People wore amulets or charms to ward off evil spirits or attract good ones. Courtship rituals, tribal lore, and burial customs were carried to North America and adapted to new situations.

At first the English showed little interest in Christianizing the Africans; it seemed more prudent to withhold Christianity from the slaves. Baptism was problematic, since it declared people to be children of God rather than the property of this or that owner. To address this problem, several local laws were passed, such as the 1667 Virginia statute declaring that "Baptisme doth not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or freedom."¹² Early in the eighteenth century, Anglican missionaries sought to evangelize the African slaves. To gain access to slaves on plantations, missionaries had to convince slave owners that Christianity would not subvert slavery. The bishop of London helped their cause by declaring in 1727 that baptism in no way changed a slave's status as property.

Armed with guarantees that Christianity would not harm slavery, Anglican missionaries could often obtain permission to preach to slaves on a plantation. Gaining access to plantation slaves was only the first hurdle; next came the problem of language. In the early years, there might be several African languages on any plantation, all in various stages of blending with English. Even if the language barriers could

be breached, the message problem remained. The doctrinal instruction offered by early missionaries did not connect with the experience of slaves. Moreover, Africans had little reason to trust what a white person said to them. It is not surprising, then, that relatively few African Americans embraced Christianity in early colonial times.

New England: The Puritan Society of Visible Saints

The first Puritan colony in New England was Plymouth, Massachusetts (1620); it was followed by the colonies of Massachusetts Bay (1628) and Boston (1630). Between 1630 and 1640, the “Great Migration” brought some twenty thousand English Puritans to the New England colonies. Puritans also settled in the middle colonies, mingling with other types of Protestants. The Puritan movement did much to shape Christianity not only in the New England colonies but in the United States more broadly. So before continuing with the story of the Puritan colonies, we must sketch the broad range and reach of Puritanism.

As we have seen, Puritanism was a late-born child of the Reformation, dedicated to purifying the Church of England. Theologically, the Puritans drew from the Reformed wing of the Reformation, as articulated by John Calvin and his heirs. The challenge was how to put Calvinist theology into practice in an English context. Not all Puritans agreed on how this was to be done. Their various reform strategies gave rise to several groups: Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, the Society of Friends (Quakers), and many small radical sects. Later on, in the United States, Unitarianism split off from Congregationalism to become a sort of free-thinking grandchild of Puritanism. Many nineteenth-century reforms, including abolitionism, had deep roots in the Puritan tradition.

Puritans saw themselves as God’s chosen people, delivered from bondage and given a divine mission in a promised land. As David Gelernter points out, this set of beliefs arose from the Old Testament story of Israel as God’s chosen people, which animated Puritanism and lives on today as the essence of “Americanism.”¹³ This belief (in a divinely chosen people with a special role to play in the world) runs like a red thread from the first Puritan settlements down to politics and foreign policy in the early twenty-first century. To be sure, there are also discontinuities

between then and now. The remnant in the wilderness has become a superpower, and the old Puritan sense of accountability to divine judgment has all but vanished. Yet the chosen nation idea lives on. One need not accept this worldview to recognize its power in history.

The original Puritans wanted a godly society—a fully reformed church and nation. When they lost their political power in old England, New England became their last chance to complete the Reformation. This “holy experiment” was guided by religious convictions.¹⁴ For example, people become Christians through an experience of *regeneration* (rebirth), which confirms them as God’s chosen saints. A *covenant* (solemn promise) binds each saint to live out this new birth with God and in a faith community. Living in these covenanted relationships, the faithful become *visible saints*—their faith can be seen by all. (This was both a positive program and a critique of the national or territorial church, to which individuals belonged by birth, not by personal commitment). Puritans looked to the Bible as God’s final authority. The minister’s sermons interpreted the Bible for the community by applying Scripture to every facet of life, from prayer to politics to planting crops. Since Puritans revered Scripture, they also prized literacy for all their members. Determined to cultivate an educated ministry in New England, Puritans founded Harvard College in 1636; the Puritan tradition contributed much to the cause of literacy and education in the colonies. Thus, spiritual rebirth, covenant, and the Bible were pillars of Puritanism.

Those pillars, the Puritans believed, were set deep in the foundation of divine purpose. John Winthrop (1588–1649), governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony, expressed this faith in God’s purpose. As a group of Puritans crossed the Atlantic aboard the ship *Arbella*, Winthrop spoke to them of a “special overruling providence” that would make their colony “a city upon a hill,” with “the eyes of all people upon us.” Winthrop exhorted his fellow Puritans to “choose life” by keeping all God’s laws, so that “God may bless us in the land we go to possess.” But he warned that if the people failed to serve God, they would bring down a curse and provoke God to remove them from the promised land.

Arriving in New England, Puritans created closely knit communities that were very different from the scattered and sparse settlements in the South. At the center of each Puritan settlement was the meeting



John Winthrop, Puritan governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony

house, where the Word of God was preached and community concerns addressed. Houses and other buildings clustered near the meeting house; animals grazed on common pasture. This arrangement gave early colonists maximum protection and mutual help. But the layout of the early Puritan village also reflected the centrality of the preached Word for the Puritan community. What Puritans lacked in privacy and personal freedom was more than compensated for by their sense of conducting a holy experiment with a divine purpose.

A society made up of dissenters and reformers, however, was bound to have conflicts. The first big controversy within New England Puritanism began when Anne Hutchinson (1591–1643) held meetings in her Boston home to discuss the sermons being preached in the colony. At first the meetings were for women only, but soon men began to attend as well. Hutchinson charged certain ministers with preaching a “covenant

of works” (in which people save themselves) rather than a “covenant of grace” (in which God saves sinners). Hutchinson saw a strong bent toward legalism among the Puritans, and she called for a larger role for grace. She began to question certain ministers’ interpretation of Scripture, and this was taken by some as a threat to ministerial authority. In 1637 Hutchinson’s teachings were formally condemned as “antinomian” (against the law or promoting lawlessness). Appalled when Hutchinson claimed to receive private revelations of the Holy Spirit, Puritan leaders expelled her from the colony; some years later she was killed in a violent confrontation with Native Americans on Long Island. But Hutchinson’s critique of Puritan legalism lived on, as did the Puritan dread of antinomianism.

Another insider critique came from Roger Williams (1603–1683), a minister who charged that the Puritans were not pure *enough*. Some of the Puritan congregations did not separate from the Church of England; Williams demanded complete separation from what he saw as a corrupt church. Williams also objected to the Puritans’ settling on Native lands without negotiation or payment. Williams became such an irritant that the General Court of Massachusetts ordered him to return to England. Instead, Williams made his way through the wilderness to the tiny settlement of Rhode Island. Without the help of Native American friends, he may not have survived this winter exile.

Later on Williams did return to England, but for his own reasons. He sought an official charter for a new colony south of Massachusetts. In 1644 Parliament authorized Williams to organize Rhode Island as a new colony. Included in the charter was a guarantee of religious liberty, because Williams insisted that religious belief cannot be coerced by any government. Land for the new colony was purchased from the local Narragansett people. Since Rhode Island attracted people of many religious persuasions, including several who were expelled from Puritan colonies, the Puritans called Rhode Island the sewer of New England.

Meanwhile, Williams continued his spiritual quest. He came to believe that baptism is for adult believers and that Puritans were wrong to practice infant baptism. Williams helped to begin North America’s first Baptist congregation in 1639, but soon he rejected the idea that this group was the one true church. Calling himself a seeker, Williams finally

did not belong to any particular church. Williams's refusal to accept any form of religious coercion (whether from government or church) marks him as a pioneer of religious liberty.

Ablaze with intellect and zeal, both Hutchinson and Williams challenged Puritan authority in New England. But Puritans faced an even harder challenge from those who lacked zeal. Like lava flowing from a volcano, the Puritan movement eventually began to cool and harden. Those Puritan churches that required an experience of regeneration for full membership noted with dismay that fewer young adults could join the church. This raised some practical questions: Could unconverted churchgoers receive Holy Communion? Could their children be baptized? The deeper question was whether the Puritan ideal—a community of visible saints—could be sustained over time. Of several attempts to deal with this issue, the most important was the Halfway Covenant of 1662. The Halfway Covenant allowed unconverted children of members to have their children baptized, attend worship, and hear the preaching of the Word (there was always the hope that a halfway member might be converted and become a full member). Halfway members, however, could not receive Holy Communion or vote on church matters. The Halfway Covenant was not adopted by all of the New England churches, but it was a clear sign that the Puritan experiment was not producing the hoped-for results.

Back in England, there was little sympathy with the Puritans. The mother country wanted Massachusetts to be a profit-making venture, not a holy experiment. In 1691 the old charter of the Massachusetts Bay Colony was revoked. The new charter loosened the grip of the Puritan establishment on commerce, religion, and politics. The charter also declared religious toleration, clearing the way for an Anglican church to open in Boston. Henceforth, the British Crown would appoint the colonial governor, and property (rather than church membership) would be the basis for participation in politics.

Shortly after the new charter was imposed, witchcraft hysteria erupted in Salem, Massachusetts. Even though most Puritan ministers opposed the witch trials and sought to bring them to an end, the imprisonment of 150 people, 19 of whom were put to death, discredited the religious leadership of the colony. Historian Harry Stout notes

that “Salem stands as a symbol of all people’s vulnerability to mass suggestion and scapegoating.”¹⁵ The Puritans themselves explained their troubles as “God’s controversy with New England,” brought on by their own failure to live up to their holy covenant with God. In spite of these controversies and failures, however, Puritanism retained a strong hold on New England. In the 1730s a great religious revival began in New England under the Puritan preacher Jonathan Edwards, as we shall see in the next chapter.

The Middle Colonies: Ventures in Pluralism

The southern colonies had an Anglican religious establishment, not as strong as the Puritan stronghold in New England. In between lay the middle colonies, which, by the standards of those times, enjoyed some religious pluralism. The middle colonies (also called the mid-Atlantic colonies) included New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware. Religious diversity in this region was partly by necessity and partly by design. The mid-Atlantic colonies were “the only part of British North America initially settled by non-English Europeans.”¹⁶ By the time the English gained control, Dutch Reformed and Lutheran communities were already planted. By today’s standards, the religious pluralism of the middle colonies was limited and uneven, consisting of several Christian groups and a small number of Jews. Nevertheless, the middle colonies set a direction that pointed toward greater religious freedom for a new nation.

New Netherlands

Henry Hudson’s explorations helped the Dutch to claim the Hudson River Valley, where the colony called New Netherlands was founded in 1624. At the tip of Manhattan Island, the Dutch trading town of New Amsterdam was home to the first Dutch Reformed congregation, which in turn was a forerunner of an extended family of Reformed churches in America.

The term “Reformed” refers to a cluster of Protestant movements arising from the Reformation. The chief theological mentor of this tradition was John Calvin (1509–1564), reformer of Geneva. (In some strains

of the Reformed tradition, Ulrich Zwingli [1484–1531] of Zurich was also significant.) Reformed theology proclaims the sovereignty of God over all things—including the salvation of human beings—which Christ accomplishes apart from human choice or merit. Human beings, for their part, are “totally depraved” by sin. Religious authority rests in the Holy Scriptures, interpreted by theological statements such as the Canons of the Synod of Dort (1618). In Reformed polity (church structure), congregations are accountable to a presbytery (a ruling body made up of ministers and representative elders from congregations within a district). Church organization was important, and so was society; the Reformed tradition has shown a lively interest in ordering society according to God’s will. The Reformed tradition was suppressed in France but strong in Switzerland, Holland, Scotland, and parts of Germany; it provided the theological backbone of the Puritan movement in England and New England, although most New England Puritans believed that the congregation, not the presbytery, was the true form of the church.

Despite the rigors of Dutch Reformed faith, religion in the colony of New Netherlands was weak. Relatively few Dutch settlers came to the colony, which was, after all, a trading venture and not a holy experiment. Peter Stuyvesant, who became governor in 1647, tried to achieve religious conformity by expelling a Dutch Lutheran pastor. But in the long run, it proved wiser to encourage trade than to enforce religious uniformity—a farsighted approach for the town that became New York City. By the time the English seized the colony in 1664, its inhabitants included not only Dutch Reformed but Lutherans, Anglicans, Congregationalists, Quakers, Huguenots, Roman Catholics, and a few Jews. About three hundred African slaves made up roughly one-fifth of the population at the time, giving New Amsterdam “the largest urban slave population in mainland North America.”¹⁷

Religious freedom had a checkered career in the colony the English renamed New York. For example, a Catholic, Thomas Dongan, was the colonial governor from 1683–88. Under his leadership the colony adopted a “Charter of Liberties” that granted toleration to Protestants and Catholics and gave some civil liberties to Jews. These policies ended after William and Mary took the English throne. By 1691 New York had an anti-Roman Test Act, which required “all public officials . . . to deny

transubstantiation as well as to declare the Mass and adoration of Mary or ‘any other saint’ to be ‘superstitious and idolatrous.’”¹⁸ As already noted in the story of Maryland’s Catholics, windows of opportunity for religious freedom could open or close depending on the political and religious weather back in England. By 1694 the Anglicans established the Church of England in the four southernmost counties of New York, but the colony already housed so many religious groups that a larger establishment was impractical. Since trading partners, settlers, and laborers were needed—regardless of their religious belief—territorial religion took a backseat to practical needs.

New Sweden and Pennsylvania

New Sweden was the only colony founded by Lutherans. This Reformation tradition was called *evangelisch* (“evangelical”) in Germany, but in America it became known as “Lutheran” in honor of its theological mentor, Martin Luther (1483–1546), who started the Protestant Reformation. Central to Lutheran theology is the doctrine of justification. According to Article IV of the Augsburg Confession (1530), justification means that people cannot make themselves right before God by their own works. Instead, they are “freely justified for Christ’s sake through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in his sight.” In matters of polity, Lutherans have claimed gospel freedom to use different forms and strategies, ranging all the way from a state church to independent (“free church”) congregations and many shades in between.

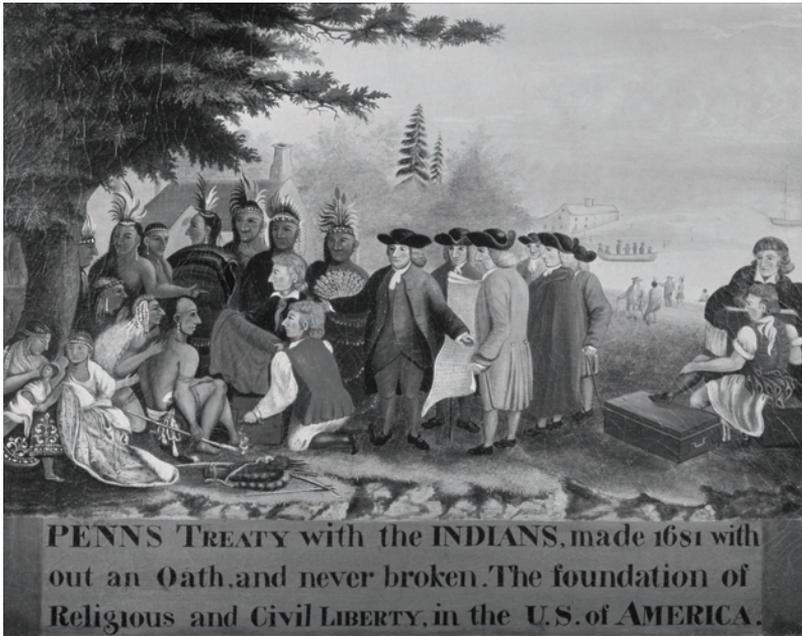
In 1638 Lutherans from Sweden founded Fort Christina (now Wilmington, Delaware). The colony branched out into several settlements along the Delaware River, with several congregations. Finnish and German Lutherans were present in these settlements, but the colonial churches of New Sweden were an extension of the Church of Sweden. The pastors were instructed by the Swedish Crown to teach and preach according to the Augsburg Confession and to conduct worship just as they had in the Church of Sweden. They were told to treat the Indians “with all humanity and respect, that no violence or wrong be done to them,” and to instruct them “in the Christian religion . . . civilization and

good government.”¹⁹ Toward that end, Pastor John Campanius translated Luther’s *Small Catechism* into a local Native language, perhaps the earliest such translation.

The Swedish settlement was short-lived. The Dutch captured it in 1655 and, following a policy of territorialism, made the Dutch Reformed Church the only legal form of Christianity. Lutheran pastors were sent back to Europe, and their congregations languished. Then in 1664 the English seized the Dutch settlements and gave the Lutherans permission to worship freely. But the Swedish Lutherans never fully recovered from their setbacks at the hands of the Dutch.

Pennsylvania was another story. This colony began with a policy of religious openness. Its roots were in an English sect called the Society of Friends, also known as “Quakers” because they trembled under the power of God in worship. The Friends began as a radical wing of the Puritan movement, so extreme in their reforms that they alienated more conventional Puritans. For example, the Society of Friends saw no need for sacraments. They encouraged any believer moved by the Spirit to speak out in worship, rather than rely on professionally trained clergy. Inspired by their founder, George Fox (1624–91), the Friends proclaimed the “inner light” of Christ shining within each believer. Friends refused to take legal oaths, serve in an army, worship in a traditional church, or acknowledge social rank. This noncompliant behavior offended not only the Puritans but those loyal to the Crown and the Church of England. In England and some of its colonies, Friends could be forced to pay fines, put in jail, or even be put to death for their beliefs.

The founder of Pennsylvania was William Penn (1644–1718). Born into a high-ranking family in England, Penn attended the best schools. To his parents’ dismay, he converted to the Society of Friends. He was jailed at least twice for leading Quakers in worship. Yet because Penn was connected to powerful and wealthy people, he was uniquely positioned to become an organizer and founder of colonies in America. Penn helped to set up East and West Jersey (later New Jersey) with policies of religious toleration. In the early 1680s, the Crown gave the Penn family a huge tract of land in North America to pay off an old debt. A new colony was chartered and named Pennsylvania. William Penn encouraged not only English and Dutch Quakers to settle there but also Mennonites,



William Penn's treaty with the Indians

Photo: Giraudon/Art Resource, NY

Amish, and others who had known persecution in Europe. Pennsylvania farmland also attracted a great many German Lutherans, while in Philadelphia a Catholic community gathered. A small and persecuted sect, the Quakers did much to set the stage for religious freedom in America.

No introduction to colonial Christianity would be complete, however, without the Presbyterians. They did not found a colony and were not an “established” church. But by 1776 they were second only to the Congregationalists in number. Presbyterians were most numerous in the middle colonies, but were also present in New England and some parts of the South. In early colonial times, the key Presbyterian leader was Francis Makemie (1658–1707). Born in Ireland and educated in Scotland, Makemie came to America in 1683 and traveled widely to preach and gather Presbyterian churches. He is remembered for defending religious liberty and for organizing the first American presbytery.

Presbyterians may be viewed as arising from the Puritan movement in England, with strong roots in Scotland as well. Like the Puritan Congregationalists, they subscribed to the Westminster Confession of

1646, which famously declares that “the chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.” The Presbyterians loved the Bible and therefore prized literacy and an educated ministry. In the colonies they quickly established an apprenticeship system for training ministers. In 1746 they founded the College of New Jersey (later renamed Princeton University).

At least two things distinguished the Presbyterians from their Congregationalist cousins. First was their polity, or mode of church organization. The Presbyterians, instead of defining the church as the local congregation, had a larger and more complex view of the church. They had clusters of congregations, “whose presbyters (or elders), clerical and lay, governed the church’s affairs through the local session, the larger presbytery, the regional synod, and in America by the time of Independence, the national General Assembly.”²⁰ A second distinguishing mark was the Scottish influence. In the early 1700s, a large migration of Scots-Irish Presbyterians gave a distinctive character to colonial Presbyterianism. The Scottish immigrants carried with them the legacy of John Knox (1513–1572), the reformer who used Calvin’s theology to bring revolution to Scotland. Knox was a principal writer of the Scots Confession of 1640, which affirmed God’s sovereignty in all things. This confession declared that “civil power is not absolute” and reserved for Christians “the right of just rebellion.”²¹ Scottish Presbyterians brought this militant faith to America, where they soon found new reasons to resist English control.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Books

Berlin, Ira. *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in America* (Belknap Press, 2000). This book explores the origins and development of slavery in America from 1619 up through the American Revolution. The lives and experiences of African American slaves varied greatly according to time and place, but as a system based on race, slavery was set apart from other forms of servitude in the colonies.

Gill, Sam. *Native American Religions: An Introduction* (2d ed., Wadsworth, 2004). Gill introduces Native American religions with an appre-

ciation for their variety and complexity, drawing from a broad range of Native peoples and religious experiences.

Miller, Perry. *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (reprint ed., Belknap Press, 1983). First written in 1939, this is one of the landmark books in the study of American religion. Miller gives a penetrating analysis of Puritan theology and explores how the Puritan vision shaped their society.

Websites

Primary documents for the study of United States History, East Tennessee State University Department of History. See especially the “Colonial Period” section: www.etsu.edu/cas/history/americanadocs.htm

“America as Refuge.” Part 1 of an online exhibit by the Library of Congress entitled “Religion and the Founding of the American Republic.” The site includes narrative descriptions and graphics on persecution in Europe, the Puritans, and Bible commonwealths: www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/rel01.html

Discussion Questions

1. What was “territorialism”? How did it shape religion and society in North America in the early colonial period? What long-term effects of territorialism can still be seen in North America today?
2. Who were the Puritans? What is their continuing legacy in America?
3. What challenges did the Church of England face in Virginia and other southern colonies?
4. In the colonial period, Europeans used several different approaches to evangelize Native Americans. What insights may be drawn from these early encounters between European missionaries and Native peoples?
5. To gain access to slaves on plantations, missionaries often had to convince slave owners that Christianity would not subvert slavery. How do you respond to the claim that Christianity posed no threat to slavery?
6. Name several types of religious authority in England’s North American colonies; then note at least one instance when rival claims to religious authority came into conflict.