

Religion in the American Colonies

by

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There was RELIGION along the north and east coast of North America long before the Europeans arrived. But it was a religion unrecognizable to the newcomers. One perplexed Englishman observed an important Native ceremony to celebrate the harvest and pray for success in the next planting. He sat through the night in the hot dark “State House,” ate his fill, gaped at the “frightful postures” of masked Indian dancers, and listened while two old men filled the thick air with songs and stories.(1) The same man records that “a violent wind struck the Saponi town one night toward the end of the trip; he staggered from his bed to watch in amazement as the village chief calmed the storm.”(2)

The Native Americans did not regard spiritual beliefs and practices as a “religion” in the same way the Europeans were used to. Native beliefs and practices formed an integral and seamless part of their very being.(3) What the strangers saw as antics were in truth meaningful rituals and beliefs that promoted and preserved their very existence through hunting and agriculture. The Natives demonstrated a close bond with the animals by simulating animal behavior in frequent rituals; especially after a successful hunt. The goal was to appease its spirit and convince other animals to be willing to be killed in the future.

The Native Americans did not “attend” worship or “apply” their religion, they lived it every minute and saw the spiritual in every action they did, every thing done to them or around them. They, their existence and the spiritual were one.

There was much that the newcomers could have learned and appreciated from this circular, all pervasive spirituality, but it was too big a step for the linear, “apply as needed” Europeans. They saw the Native Spirituality as worthless superstition inspired by the Christian devil, Satan.(4)

So, there WAS religion along the north and east coast of North America long before the Europeans arrived, then the Europeans began arriving and they brought their own religions. With a contemptuous understanding of the natives, with superior firepower and a perceived mandate from God to Christianize the heathen, men like Robert Beverly broke into Powhatan temples in what is now Virginia.

He later describes what he found: Around its perimeter were standing posts, each carved and painted with a threatening face to warn off unwanted visitors. Inside, the temple was dark, but there was enough light to see shelves holding three bundles. These he ripped open. The first contained bones. These were the revered remains of former leaders. In the second were carved and painted weapons. And in the third were wooden segments of an articulated human figure. (This served as an idol and an oracle.) Later, Beverly boasted of his sacrilege to one of his native friends, who was visibly shaken. He realized that if the Europeans were now violating native temples, it would not be long before they started to violate native religion. He was right. Within a few decades, native beliefs were replaced by Christianity—at least in public.(5)

The Europeans came for economic, political and religious reasons. For the purpose of this paper we will dwell chiefly on the religious; however we will soon see that the political system set up in the new land had profound effect on the religious.

The thirteen original colonies eventually gave rise to eighteen present-day states(6) and, while religion was involved with all of them, Massachusetts, New Haven (eventually incorporated into Connecticut), Maryland, and Pennsylvania were established exclusively for religious purposes. New York and New Jersey were initially economically focused, while the southern colonies had a balance of governmental, economic and religious motivation.

What was to become one of the greatest strengths of the new nation occurred individually, yet simultaneously in each colony – that of strong religious core values. Every Christian denomination along with Judaism was soon in the new land.

The Puritans

The Puritans (forerunners of the Congregationalists and Presbyterians) came to Massachusetts's via Holland, fleeing persecution, jail and even execution in England. Because of their Puritan beliefs, they initially had good relations with the Native Americans. Their pacifist nature led the Indians to help with their crops. In thanks, the Pilgrims celebrated that first thanksgiving in 1621. A second group of Puritans in England, the Massachusetts Bay Company, came to Massachusetts for more economically motivated purposes.

The Puritan mission was to establish a godly society based on church membership and worship that was purified from the corruption of the Church of England.(7) While there were plenty of brands of Puritans most notable was the extreme of the Salem Witch Trials during which 13 women and 7 men were hanged on

Gallows Hill. Finally in 1692, realizing the severity of the witch craze, Governor Phips discharged the remaining accused and the trails came to an end.

The Puritans lived according to a strict faith and a constant fear of Native American attacks. Many believed that the Native Americans worshipped the devil. War hysteria set the stage for a larger hysteria and explains, at least in part, how an isolated case of perceived “possession” turned into an extensive witch-hunt.

At the same time, in the same area, it was the same passion of the Puritans that begat Harvard in 1636 and Yale in 1701. In fact all of this country’s colonial colleges, in addition to Harvard and Yale, William & Mary, College of Philadelphia, Princeton, Columbia, Brown, Rutgers, Dartmouth rose out of a religious context (8), nearly all under the sponsorship of a single denomination.

The Anglicans

Of all the religious bodies which were brought from the Old World to the New during the entire colonial period, none received so much assistance from the mother country in gaining a foothold in America as did the Church of England. The Anglicans came to occupy the most privileged position in six of the colonies: Virginia, Maryland, New York, both Carolinas and Georgia. However, in the long run the special privileges which it enjoyed proved a handicap rather than an advantage. The Anglicans did not have the strong emotional or spiritual motivation to leave their homeland to seek a religious refuge and to secure freedom of worship. (9)

If the English government may be said to have had any ecclesiastical policy relative to her colonies it was to obtain the establishment of the Church of England as

widely as possible. In none of the thirteen colonies, however, was the Anglican Church completely established, since in none was there ever a bishop or ecclesiastical court. It was not for the lack of trying. The charter of Virginia in 1609 required all persons going out to the colony to take the Oath of Supremacy, since a principal purpose of founding the colony was to convert the natives to the true worship of God and the Christian religion.

Clergymen were to read the service, and exercise their ministerial functions according to the Ecclesiastical Lawes and orders of the church of Englande. On Sundays they were to Chatachize suche as are not yet ripe to come to Com[munion]. (10)

Of the northern colonies, only in New York was there a semblance of the Anglican Church. And this came about by a peculiar partnership with the Dutch Reformed Church. New York was founded for purely economic reasons by the Dutch West Indies Company and the Dutch Reformed Church was its only legal religion. When the English took over the area in 1664 they gave generous treatment to the Dutch and an English chaplain found himself conducting Anglican services in the Dutch chapel within the fort at Dutch invitation – toleration unusual for the time, but a forerunner of the future.

The Baptists

The same type of religious ferment which had produced the first Baptist congregations in England and Holland was responsible for the beginnings of Baptist congregations in the colonies. Rogers Williams, father of the American Baptists passed through several stages of religious change, from Anglicanism to Puritanism, from

Puritanism to Separatism, from Separatism to the Baptist position. Religious services were held in Williams home in Providence, Rhode Island and a Baptist church was formed in March 1639 with nearly sixty residents. All of the original members were rebaptized (in true Baptist fashion). The story being that Ezekiel Holliman rebaptized Roger Williams and then Williams rebaptized Holliman and ten others. (11)

Only five years later the Baptists spread to Massachusetts and traditions clashed. It seems one William Witter, a Baptist, was arraigned in the Salem Court for calling the baptism of infants “a badge of the whore.” The next year he was in court again charged with saying “that they who stayed while a child is baptized do worship the devil.” Cases of persons refusing to present their newborn infants for baptism became increasingly common, and in November 1644 the Massachusetts Court enacted a law making it a crime punishable with banishment for any to deny the validity of infant baptism, or for holding any of the other views peculiar to Baptists. (12)

Nevertheless the Baptists spread south and by 1746 gained a foothold in all the southern colonies. Their great expansion south, creating what we now know as the Bible Belt, did not take place until the Great Awakenings to come.

The Quakers

1660 was a high water mark of Quaker missionary zeal. Headquartered in Amsterdam the command to spread “the Word” drove them far and wide. Six Quakers set out for Turkey and Jerusalem to convert the Sultan, no less, and preach to the Jews. John Love denounced the Pope to his face and Daniel Baker interrupted worship in a Catholic church in Gibraltar by rending his outer garment and stomping his hat as a

symbol of disapproval of what he saw as mockery of true religion. These missionaries felt they were being led by the direct word of God and were merely instruments in God's hands.

So, it was not immigration that brought the Quakers to New Hampshire on the north down to the Carolinas on the south, but their missionary activity that made Quakerism one of the most widely distributed religious bodies in the colonies and which gave them a far larger influence on the new nation in the 1800's than they have ever had since.

Imagine this missionary zeal meeting the Puritans who themselves felt that their Church and government were God's chosen instruments in carrying out His will in State and Church. They were, as Rufus Jones states, "two different spiritual empires" foredoomed to clash. (13) As a result of the clash fourteen years of persecution of the Quakers took place --fines on ship captains carrying them, arrests, whippings, imprisonment and banishment. Several were even martyred causing Charles II himself to intervene.

From Massachusetts the Quakers retreated to a base in Rhode Island, which was founded on the principle of "freedom of different consciences" and was a model for what would eventually be. There the Quakers eventually became the rulers of the colony.

A 60 year period of Quaker expansion south and west began. Living rooms of well-to-do members served as meetings for worship. They sat in silence, but when the God of the Universe prepared a mouthpiece for his Word it came in emotion filled, rhythmical, rapturous phrases heavily laden with Scripture.

The Quakers brought hard work and general prosperity. They prohibited vices and held public office. Not allowed to marry outside the fold they became a society based on heredity and became more and more a social caste, albeit one that contributed much to our heritage.

The Roman Catholics

The beginnings of English colonization of America and the outlawing of Roman Catholicism back in England were simultaneous events. The English Reformation and Queen Elizabeth's reign had swept Roman Catholics out of practically every influential place in the kingdom. The few remaining were economical and political conservatives little moved to establish new social or political order. They longed for the restoration of the good old times and good old ways and only played a minor role in the colonization of America.

The only successful attempt of a Catholic to establish a colony was undertaken by George Calvert, the first Lord Baltimore. Having failed in attempts in Newfoundland and Virginia, he resisted the advice of the King to refrain from further colonization, for it was laid on his conscience as a sacred duty to find a refuge for his Roman Catholic brethren. His persistence was rewarded by a patent for the Province of Maryland, but he died at the early age of 52 leaving his plans and hopes to his son, Cecelius.

The Maryland Charter was remarkable, giving over complete control of the government and sole ownership of the land to the Proprietor. The old maxim stated "What the King was without, the proprietor was within". Maryland was as free from royal

intervention and control as had ever been and became a model for later grants made in America.

Under the Catholic banner Maryland was established with only the Proprietor in authority and with full religious toleration, and the Proprietor was determined that it remain on this basis. Thus the dispute with the Jesuit Priests who felt they should be independent of the Proprietor and were ready to shed their blood in defense of the faith and liberty of the Church. Cooler heads prevailed and the Proprietor retained complete authority. Laws were soon passed that took away Catholic jurisdiction over marriages and wills, but a Jesuit mission was reestablished. In 1673 the Franciscans then arrived to join more Jesuits and the first Catholic school was founded. Catholic work expanded northward as Catholic settlers gradually filtered into the adjoining colonies.

Maryland holds a unique place in the history of American colonization in that here alone the attempt was made to have Catholic and Protestants live side by side on terms of equality, unusual in England. The Maryland Act was passed to promote equality, but was not as all encompassing as one might think. It limited the freedom of religion only to Trinitarians. Those who denied Jesus as the son of God or the Holy Trinity or who used reproachful language about the Trinity were subject to the death penalty.⁽¹⁴⁾ Divisive to some who put the Papists in this category.

In the mean time the Puritan Party came to power in England, took over control of the Maryland Assembly and immediately disfranchised the Roman Catholics. A petty civil war took place between the Puritans and the Proprietor with total victory by the Puritans. Savage vengeance was meted out with four Catholics hanged and all property confiscated. Jesuits fled to Virginia. Soon, however, Charles II came to the

throne in England and the Proprietor again regained total control in Maryland. So the Catholics and Protestants lived together in a relative atmosphere of amity and tolerance.

In other colonies Catholics had a difficult time. Quakers and Baptists did not believe Catholics were dangerous to civil government, but in the colonies they controlled (Rhode Island and Pennsylvania) Catholics could not hold office and only two colleges would admit Catholics. Even so Catholics, few and poor, built churches and supported priests. The brave work of the Catholic missionaries in the Spanish and French areas of colonial America is admirable and beyond the scope of this paper.

The Germans

Then came the Germans represented by a variety of distinct religious bodies, as Mennonites, Dunkers, Moravians, Schwenkfelders, Inspirationists, the Reformed and the Lutherans. Generally speaking all can be classed as Pietists. In a broad sense those who stress Christianity as life rather than a creed and who give chief place to the devotional side of religion. Lutheran and Reformed held to distinct traditions, but were similarly pietistic.(15)

Mennonites came to Pennsylvania as a result of previous Quaker relationships, counting about one tenth of the total German colonial immigration. Some found their way to Maryland and Virginia. Mennonite congregations conducted their own affairs with no outside control of any sort. With uneducated ministers they held to their old European customs, but with no encumbrance from higher authorities they also were often the first to form churches in new settlements.

The Lutheran and German Reformed Churches retained close Old World connections throughout the colonial period, and were dependent on Europe for leadership and financial assistance. They had been used to a close State-Church relationship in Europe – a real handicap in the New World where support for ministry was dependent on voluntary contributions.

A report to the home land in 1732 states fifteen to sixteen thousand German Reformed in Pennsylvania scattered over more than 300 miles, two ministers and no churches. Most were compelled to sell themselves for their passage money and were forced to serve until their twentieth year. Due to the dire physical circumstances of many of the European immigrants a strange union between the Dutch, German and Presbyterian Churches was proposed. Refused by the Presbyterians, the Dutch and German Reforms began to cooperate regularly in varying degrees of success.

The Lutherans came without pastors or school teachers and with meager economic resources. The Germans were shamefully exploited due to their inability to speak English. Unable to find land in New York most found their way to Pennsylvania. The forerunner of a long line of Lutheran ministers in America was Justus Falkner who came to Pennsylvania in 1700 with a chief concern for the religious welfare of the many German colonists. Soon installed in the Dutch Lutheran Church in New York City he considered the whole of the Hudson Valley, as well as Long Island and East Jersey as a part of his parish.

Several Lutheran congregations were formed in Georgia out of the Salzburgers who achieved unusually quick success economically in contrast to the more northern

Germans. Lutheran congregations sprang up in the Carolinas. Newbern, North Carolina took its name from the Germans and Swiss coming from Bern, Switzerland.

A Lutheran minister in South Carolina returned to London to secure Episcopal ordinations and upon his return his church became Episcopalian, a trend that became increasingly common as the eighteenth century wore on. (15)

By the end of the colonial period there were some seventy Lutheran congregations in Pennsylvania, some thirty in Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia. Many German communities were without religious leadership and, of all the religious groups, they probably contained the smallest proportion of Church members.

The Methodists

Somewhat late arrivals to the New World were the Methodists. John Wesley sent the first missionaries to New York and Philadelphia in 1769. The real strongpoint of the spread of Methodism was the activity of immigrant lay preachers. They preached doctrines of the lostness of the common person - in fact, all persons. They laid great stress on the necessity of conversion and urged hearers to rely on Christ for salvation.

Revival spread through Virginia in 1775 and into North Carolina. Many who were indifferent to religion now flocked to hear the revivalists. Methodist records show that numbers grew from 291 in 1774 to 6,968 four years later. Here indeed was the cradle of American Methodism.

The Presbyterians

Colonial Presbyterianism was the product of the mingling of English Puritans with Scotch and Irish Presbyterians. The Presbyterian and Congregational Union of London sent ministers to become pastors of Presbyterian Churches in Massachusetts, Connecticut, Pennsylvania and Delaware.

Economic hardships at home have generally been considered as the principal incentives for the great Scotch-Irish arrival. At the same time in 1704, dominated by the Episcopal bishops in Ireland, laws were passed there to keep Presbyterians from holding office, Sacraments had to be received only according to the Episcopal Church and Presbyterian ministers could no longer marry. Further reason to immigrate to the English colonies where there were no Catholics and few Episcopalians.

1729 was a foundational year as in Philadelphia Presbyterian clergy from Ireland, Scotland and England met to adopt uniform standards and erect ecclesiastical fences to keep out the heretical doctrines. (17)

Judaism

The first recorded Jew in the Americas was Joachim Gans, an English metallurgist. In 1584, Sir Walter Raleigh recruited him to join an expedition to explore the Virginia territory in hopes of founding a permanent settlement as well as satisfying Queen Elizabeth I's desire for discovering copper, silver and gold, or at least finding a passageway to the Orient. When the Roanoke colony folded, Gans returned to England where, because he was Jewish, he faced persecution for "blasphemy.

Though most of the earlier Jewish emigrants settled in New York City, a few settled beyond its limits, some even as far as the confines of what now constitutes the state of Pennsylvania. In 1661, when Albany was but a trading-post, Asser Levy, owned real estate there, but between that date and the early years of the nineteenth century there are no records of any Jewish settlers in that town. They were not there in sufficient numbers to form a congregation until 1838, and they had no rabbi until 1846.

The Jews were among the first settlers in Rhode Island as a result of the toleration in that colony. Fifteen Jewish families arrived in 1658 there, bringing with them the first degrees of masonry. They established a congregation almost immediately, and in 1684 had their rights to settle confirmed by the General Assembly.

A considerable number of the early Pennsylvania colonists were German Jews. The first Jewish resident of Philadelphia was Jonas Aaron, who was living there in 1703. Another early pioneer and one of considerable prominence was Isaac Miranda. A number of Jews settled in Philadelphia in the first half of the eighteenth century, and became prominent in the life of the city.

Our founders all came from the Old Country for economic, governmental and religious reasons. Many were persecuted beyond measure and merely wanted to care for their family, live without undue governmental authority and worship in their own way -- "worship in their own way". While many came to escape religious persecution, isn't it ironic that as soon as they had the opportunity to set up religious structures, they created systems very similar to those from which they escaped. With minor exception they wanted to worship in their own way. They didn't want be in a place where there

was religious tolerance and people could worship as they desired. Even though they fled state religion & persecution they set up state religions & persecuted.

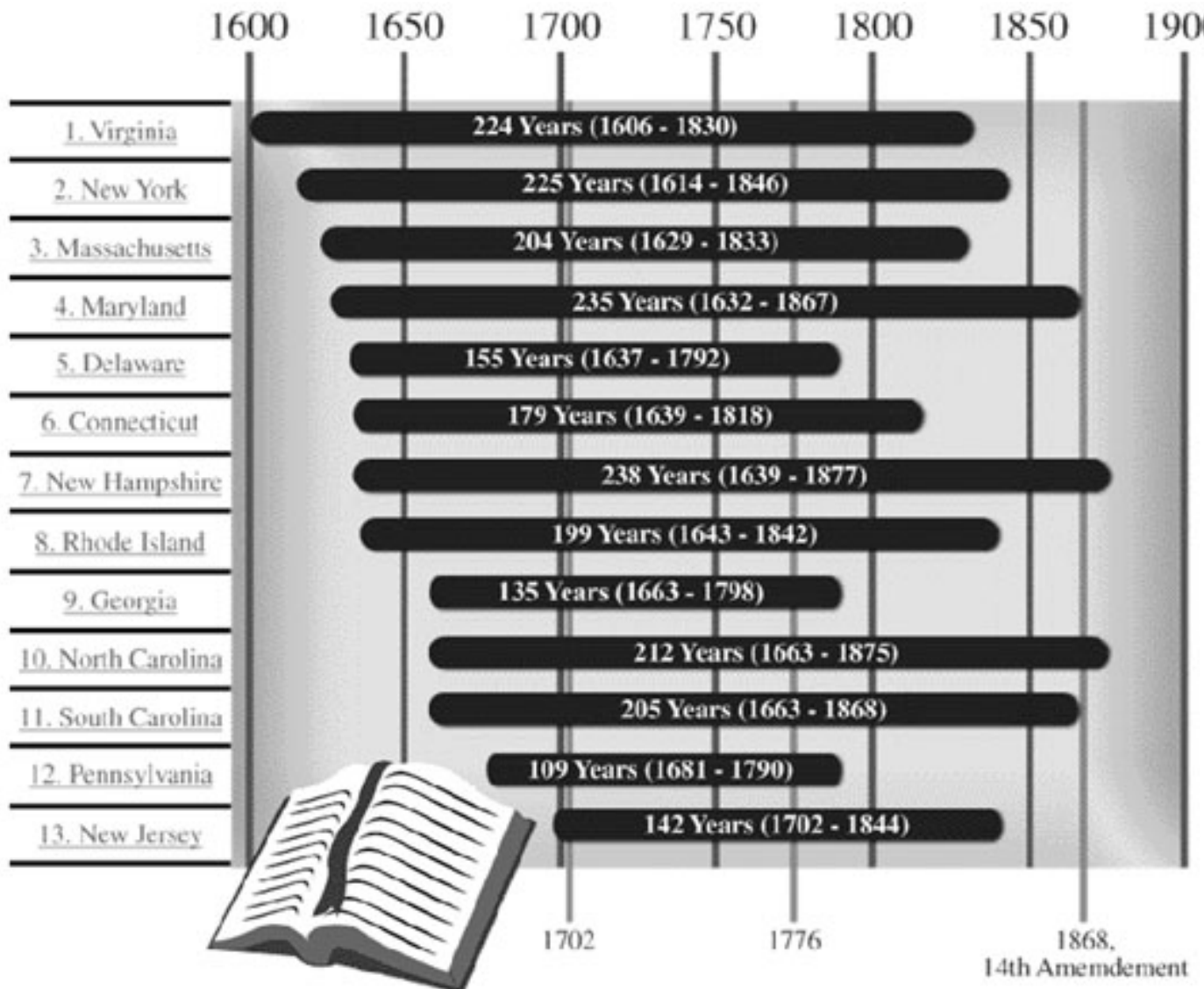
Their structures ranged from all out intolerance and persecution as the Puritans in Massachusetts through the exclusiveness of the Anglican Church in Virginia to the Quakers with their “freedom of different conscience” in Rhode Island.

By the year 1702, all thirteen American colonies had some form of state-supported religion. Support varied from tax benefits to the state religion to restrictions on voting and serving in the legislature of other religions.

Although Delaware quit government support for religion as early as 1792, some states continued state support for religion and/or restrictions on anyone but Protestants holding public office until after the American Civil War. The last states to cease all government support for religion were Maryland (1867), South Carolina (1868), North Carolina (1875), and New Hampshire (1877).

Maryland's law requiring that one must believe in God to hold public office was not overturned until 1961 by the U. S. Supreme Court.

The following chart shows the time between original colonial charter and the end of state supported religion. (18) And illustrates vividly how entrenched the state religions were.



All state religions were, however, eventually abolished. And this is where the strength of our colonization shines. Whether it was intentional, accidental or an act of God, we are the beneficiary of the way our governmental system tempered and shaped our religious system. Our democratic governmental system, debated hotly, penned laboriously and fought for resolutely, was one that philosophically disallowed a state, much less a national religion. How could one live in place where each person voted

individually for their government leaders, but at the same time have a religion imposed on them?

Individualism reigned. If I can choose my elected leaders, then I can choose my religion. If I can tolerate opposing political views I can tolerate differing religious neighbors.

The Democratization of American Christianity by Nathan O. Hatch makes this point poignantly and adds that it is precisely the strong religious activists that not only spread their religion; they also incarnated the church into popular culture.(18) The crusading vigor of the early Puritans and first generation Methodists and others thrived on the democracy of the government and the ability to sustain ones family independent of the state, to foster a generation of rootless, visionary young preachers. Widely diverse in religious convictions, they were alike in their ability to portray, in compelling terms, the deepest hopes and aspirations of popular constituencies.

As a result of the spread of religion in the American colonies Americans continue to maintain their right to shape their own faith and to submit to the leaders they have chosen.

As this paper progressed the writer became more and more cognizant of the fact that the Fort Wayne religious community remarkably mirrors the religions of the first American colonies. Representative notables might be First Presbyterian, Trinity English Lutheran, Trinity Episcopal, Plymouth Congregational and The Cathedral downtown; with Good Shepherd United Methodist and Blackhawk Baptist to the northeast and my own Fellowship Missionary representing our Mennonite heritage in

the southeast. The city of churches to numerous to name – all from our original 13 colonies.

Since we in Fort Wayne mirror the religions and their development and spread through the American colonies, what might we take away from our study?

First, what a shame if you and I and each person in Fort Wayne do not personally embrace one of the religions for personal edification, moral guidance and spiritual realization.

What a shame if our community does not support the present and future religions of Fort Wayne through favorable laws and partnerships.

What a shame if the present religions of Fort Wayne against the tradition of our forefather's attempt to create an exclusive spiritual community excluding those religions of our new citizens.

Finally, what a shame if 400-500 years from now someone writes a paper that begins, there was religion at the merging of the Maumee, St. Joseph and St. Mary's rivers long before.....this happened or they arrived.

Notes

1. James H. Merrell, *The Indians' New World* (Chapel Hill & London, 1989), 3.
2. Ibid., 3.
3. "Native American Spirituality", impurplehawk.com, 1.
4. Ibid., 2.
5. Jay Miller, "Blending Worlds," in *The Native Americans*, ed. Betty and Ian Ballentine (Atlanta: Turner Publishing, Inc, 1993), p. 182.
6. "Thirteen Colonies," Encyclopedia Britannica.
7. Rickie Lazzerini, "History of Massachusetts", kindredtrails.com 1.
8. Edwin S. Gaustad, *A Documentary History of Religion in America to the Civil War* (Grand Rapids, 1982), 201
9. William Warren Sweet, *Religion in Colonial America* (New York, 1951), 28
10. Ibid., 30
11. Ibid., 128
12. Ibid., 130
13. Ibid., 144
14. Ibid., 180
15. Ibid., 221
16. Ibid., 238
17. Ibid., 263
18. "Religion in the Colonies", undergod.procon.org
19. Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven and London), 1989, 9

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