Divining America  
17th & 18th Centuries  
19th Century  
20th Century

**Religious Pluralism in the Middle Colonies**

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If the American experiment in pluralism at times suggests the metaphor of a pressure cooker rather than a melting pot, this should come as no surprise to observers of the **Middle Colonies**. The Middle Colonies of British North America—comprised of New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Delaware—became a stage for the western world’s most complex experience with religious pluralism. The mid-Atlantic region, unlike either New England or the South, drew many of its initial settlers from European states that had been deeply disrupted by the Protestant Reformation and the religious wars that followed in its wake. Small congregations of Dutch Mennonites, French Huguenots, German Baptists, and Portuguese Jews joined larger communions of Dutch Reformed, Lutherans, Quakers, and Anglicans to create a uniquely diverse religious society. African Americans and the indigenous Indians, with religious traditions of their own, added further variety to the Middle Colony mosaic.

Historians conventionally note that early New England’s religious character was shaped primarily by English Puritans, and the religious character of the South by English Anglicans. But no two-word phrase can capture the essence of those who set the mold for Middle Colony religious culture. To see why this is so, we must look a little closer.

**New York**

The Dutch were the first Europeans to claim and settle lands between the Connecticut and Delaware Rivers, a region they named New Netherland. Yet half of the inhabitants attr...
to the new colony were not Dutch at all but people set adrift by post-Reformation conflicts, including Walloons, Scandinavians, Germans, French, and a few English. In 1664 New Netherland was conquered by England. The colony, renamed New York, only slowly acquired an English character, one citizen complaining in 1686, “Our chiefest unhappyness here is too great a mixture of Nations, & English the least part.”

Religious patterns in New York followed the ethnic configuration of the colony, with geography often facilitating the colonists’ impulse to form separate enclaves. Wherever the Dutch settled, as in the Hudson River Valley, the Dutch Reformed Church predominated. An example is the west-bank town of Kingston, where the Reformed congregation met in a large stone church while the few Anglicans made do with a “mean log-house.” Germans and Lutherans spread out along the Mohawk River west of Albany. Suffolk County, at the eastern end of Long Island, settled by migrating New Englanders, was the stronghold of Congregationalists. French Huguenots, fleeing religious persecution after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, established their own town at New Rochelle in Westchester County, for decades keeping local records in French.

New York City’s religious scene was quite another matter. From its earliest years a port of entry for assorted newcomers, the city increasingly came to reflect its polyglot heritage. A woodblock of 1771 shows a skyline etched by church spires—eighteen houses of worship to serve a population of at most 22,000.

New Jersey

New Jersey, if slower to develop, also embraced a variety of religious groups. By 1701 the colony had forty-five distinct congregations; unable to afford churches, most met in houses or barns. And because clergymen were few, lay leaders frequently conducted services, with baptism and communion being offered only by the occasional itinerant minister. All denominations in New Jersey expanded rapidly over the eighteenth century. A church survey in 1765 lists the active congregations as follows:
Quaker 39
Church of England 21
Dutch Reformed 21
Baptist 19
Dutch Lutheran 4
Seventh Day Baptist 2
German Reformed 2

and a few scattered others.

Pennsylvania

William Penn, an English gentleman and member of the Society of Friends, founded the colony of Pennsylvania in the early 1680s as a haven for fellow Quakers. But Penn’s conviction that in religion “force makes hypocrites; ’tis persuasion only that makes converts” led him to institute a policy of religious tolerance that drew other persecuted sects to Pennsylvania. Such groups as the Amish, Dunkers, Schwenkfelders, Mennonites, and later the Moravians made small if picturesque additions to the heterodox colony. The most influential religious bodies beside the Quakers were the large congregations of German Reformed, Lutherans, Anglicans, and Presbyterians. Pennsylvania’s religious spectrum also included small communities of Roman Catholics and Jews.
Delaware

Delaware, first settled by Scandinavian Lutherans and Dutch Reformed, with later infusions of English Quakers and Welsh Baptists, had perhaps the most diverse beginnings of any middle colony. Yet over the eighteenth century Delaware became increasingly British, with the Church of England showing the most striking gains before the Revolution.

African Americans and Native Americans

Adding further diversity to the region were inhabitants some missionaries considered ripe for conversion to Christianity—African Americans, who may have comprised 15 to 20 percent of the population of New York City and parts of New Jersey, and the native Indians. African Americans appear on the roles of almost every religious denomination, if usually in small numbers. Pennsylvania’s Germantown Quaker Meeting in 1688 issued the first American antislavery proclamation, though it was not until the 1750s that leading Friends endorsed their reform wing’s campaign to end the traffic in human property. “we therefore, believe ourselves religiously bound to lay this subject before you”

Portion of a Quaker petition to abolish the slave trade, addressed to the first U.S. Congress, 1790.

New York City Anglicans enjoyed considerable success in educating and converting slaves to their denomination. Yet slave owners throughout the Middle Colonies, as in the South, feared that admitting slaves to church membership would make them proud and rebellious. The passage of legislation in New York and New Jersey specifying that baptism did not alter a slave’s status as chattel, or legal property, only partially quieted such misgivings.

A number of Middle Colony clergymen expressed concern for the souls of Native Americans if primarily to counter the success of rival French Canadian Jesuits in drawing some tribes to Roman Catholicism. But when the Indians resisted surrendering their native ways as a prerequisite to conversion, most missionaries lost heart. It was not until the 1740s, with the arrival of the Moravians—a sect less focused on sin and uniquely respectful of native cultures—that any Middle Colony mission made significant inroads among the local Indians.

Religious Toleration in the Middle Colonies: A Trade-Off

This bird’s-eye view of Middle Colony society illustrates its patchwork religious geography, a pattern that often sparked anxiety and xenophobia in early modern times (A.D. 1400–1800). While the region’s multiple denominations did not always coexist harmoniously,
certain environmental as well as social imperatives tended over time to erode historic tensions. The availability of land in rural sections often led to thinly settled communities, which for reasons of economy shared church buildings and even preachers. In more urban areas, social mixing, economic interdependence, and intermarriage blurred religious differences or reduced their importance.

One of the earliest efforts to assess the character of the Middle Colonies was that of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, a Frenchman who in the third quarter of the eighteenth century lived in New York and traveled frequently to Pennsylvania. In his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), Crèvecoeur noted that when variant religious groups are mixed together, their zeal for specific church doctrines "will cool for want of fuel." Then, just as national characteristics become blurred, "in like manner, the strict modes of Christianity practised in Europe are lost also... Here individuals of all nations [and religions] are melted into a new race." The Frenchman's sanguine temperament and benign view of human nature led him to round off the sharper edges of religious and ethnic competition, though there is some truth to his amiable picture, as Americans' frequent recourse to the melting pot metaphor suggests.

**Early American churchmen and churchwomen soon discovered that if they wanted to practice their beliefs unmolested in a diverse society, they had to grant the same right to others. This wisdom did not come easily.** Another way to think about the rise of religious toleration (which is not the same thing as religious liberty on principle) is to see it as a kind of trade-off. Early American churchmen and churchwomen soon discovered that if they wanted to practice their beliefs unmolested in a diverse society, they had to grant the same right to others. This wisdom did not come easily. Yet over time, along with bickering and competition among denominations, there also were bargains, accommodations, and compromises. In realizing that no single doctrine of faith could dominate Middle Colony society, a heterogeneous people learned, not to cherish their differences, but, at least, to tolerate and live with them. If the American experiment in pluralism at times suggests the metaphor of a pressure cooker rather than a melting pot, this should come as no surprise to observers of the Middle Colonies. For it was there that the most complex problems of American religious diversity, as well as measures to manage and moderate its extremes, were first confronted.

**Guiding Student Discussion**

Your main challenge in teaching about colonial religious pluralism will be to infuse these remote, and perhaps somewhat alien, conflicts with tension. My students in New York City have always known a lot about Catholicism and Judaism but not much at all about Protestantism, which many think of vaguely as a single denomination. (This will, of course, vary by region.) Given that the colonists were about 98 percent Protestant, students may view their struggles as rather quaint—not like today’s real tensions among national groups and races, to say nothing of those among Christians, Muslims, and Jews. Here is your
chance to introduce the concept of historical perspective, while at the same time drawing on young people’s own experiences with multiculturalism.

Looking at the past through modern eyes drains history of much of its novelty and drama. We know that George Washington wasn’t caught and hanged by the British as a traitor, and that the Cold War didn’t lead to World War III. But people living in those times made decisions and took risks while having no idea how things would turn out. To perceive not only what they did but why, we have to recreate the cultural environment and mentality of their era. The century and a half following the Reformation was an Age of Belief when the finest minds tussled with theological questions and marked out boundaries that people of faith were prepared to defend with their lives. To them, the distinctions between Lutheran and Quaker and Calvinist Reformed seemed just as tautly drawn as today’s cultural differences seem to us.

Some of these early religious enmities were carried to North America in the first half of the seventeenth century. The Puritans of Massachusetts Bay were determined to exclude any elements from their spiritual community, and they hanged four Quakers to prove it. Virginians at about the same time expelled from their Anglican province every Puritan they could lay hands on. New Netherland governor Peter Stuyvesant cleansed his colony of Lutherans and Quakers, and tried to do the same to Jews. Such episodes were largely confined, however, to the seventeenth century. Subsequently the extremes of religious conflict were moderated by the colonists’ growing sense that in a spacious land, which offered many opportunities for self-improvement, religious wars on the European model ran counter to their own best interests.

Though religious strife was not completely extinguished in America in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, its expression was often indirect and less harsh, frequently taking a political form. Philadelphia politicians tried to disenfranchise the Germans—whose churches had organized them into an effective political bloc—until they learned to speak English. Quaker and Jewish votes were disallowed on at least two occasions in closely contested New York elections. And authorities in New Jersey periodically tried to disfranchise Quakers from public office, given their pacifist disinclination to raise a militia. In the heated New York City election of 1769, an “Anglican party” squared off against a “Presbyterian party.”

Modern students accustomed to seeing politicians march in St. Patrick’s Day parades or appeal to religious blocs at election time will note that religion and politics have always been connected in American history. And in times of high tension, then as now, religious politics could turn ugly. The rivalry in Pennsylvania between pacifist Quakers and Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who had settled in the colony’s western region—on land disputed by the Indians—became a central issue in that colony’s election of 1764. Political writings were laced with religious and ethnic slurs. Presbyterians charged that Quakers were not fit to sit in the legislature since they showed “more real Affection for Enemy Savages than for their fellow Subjects, of certain Denominations.” Quakers in turn reviled the Presbyterians as a lawless rabble “of the same Spirit with the...blood-thirsty Presbyterians who cut off King Charles Head” in the English Civil War of the 1640s.

The addition of race to religion precipitated two of the most violent moments in eighteenth-century Middle Colony history, brief reversions to the bloodletting of an earlier age. One was the so-called Negro Plot of 1741 in New York City. The town seethed with rumors that Catholics were conspiring with slaves to instigate a rebellion. The magistrates launched a fierce investigation, the result of which was the execution of thirty blacks and four whites (more than half again the number executed as witches at Salem). The other episode,
1764, involved Scotch-Irish Presbyterians in the western Pennsylvania town of Paxton. Enraged at the Quaker assembly’s failure to protect their families from Indian attacks, frontiersmen turned on a village of peaceful Indians at Conestoga, killing twenty of them in cold blood. It is not clear whether race or religion was the more significant catalyst for these melancholy events.

Maintaining group identity: An Amish woman in Pennsylvania, 1973

This history of group tensions in the Middle Colonies can serve as a springboard for discussion about the pros and cons of group identity, a subject that has gained renewed attention in recent American discourse and practice. Is it better for Americans to play down their ethnic, religious, and racial differences in order to nurture an overarching national identity? Or should we cling to those differences as valuable attributes that enrich our society, and also amplify each group’s voice in politics?

The religious pluralism so visible in the Middle Colonies also bears on another issue much in the news these days—the relationship between church and state. To set the stage for this discussion, students must enter another time-warp. A primary axiom of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century political thought asserted that a strong church was the mainstay of civic stability. The church instilled moral behavior and respect for authority; in turn, the government protected the church. Throughout the early modern world, each state sanctioned but one official church—an established church—that was supported by taxes and received privileges granted to no other denomination. Every colony founded in the western hemisphere before the mid-seventeenth century, except one, conformed to this pattern. The exception, Maryland, was the personal fiefdom of a Catholic proprietor whose dependence on Protestant settlers ruled out any church establishment. But elsewhere establishments were the norm—the Church of England in Virginia, Puritan churches in New England, the Dutch Reformed Church in New Netherland. Such an arrangement, early colonial leaders believed, would shield their frail colonies from the turmoil of religious conflict.

Yet no colony could survive without people, and those most eligible to remove to British America from the later seventeenth century on were a mixed lot—the same Quakers, Lutherans, Anabaptists, and other Dissenters who now streamed into the mid-Atlantic section. Clearly no church establishments could be imposed on such a mixed population. Instead, a new form of religious practice emerged in the middle region: the voluntary church—an institution supported not by compulsory taxes and legal scaffolding but by the free choice and personal commitment of its adherents. That churches might endure, even thrive, in such an unregulated environment ran counter to ancient wisdom about the reinforcing nature of church and state. Yet over the eighteenth century the number and variety of churches in the region proliferated. Indeed, by 1750 there were more churches per capita in the Middle Colonies than in any other section, though many congregations were small.

Over the eighteenth century this positive experience with religious pluralism and voluntary churches gradually infiltrated Americans’ thinking about church and state. It became manifest after the American Revolution as Americans debated the form their new United States Constitution should take. Some leaders feared that without a specific statement favoring, at least, the Protestant religion, “Papists…deists…or Mahometans” might gain office. But the majority, wary of attempting to formulate language acceptable to an increasingly diverse people, settled on a broad statement of religious liberty. The Middle Colony experience with religious voluntarism provided a model for many Americans. As Thomas Jefferson wrote, "Pennsylvania and New York...have long subsisted without any..."
establishment. ... They flourish infinitely. Religion is well supported.” James Madison concurred: “The example of the Colonies...which rejected religious establishments altogether, proved that all Sects might be safely & advantageously put on a footing of & entire freedom.”

**Historians Debate**

Historians are not exempt from the human tendency to dispose of complicated questions by sorting them into neat categories. Yet, as noted earlier, the effort to put a label on the pluralistic Middle Colonies has befuddled and challenged students of that section over several generations. One of the first historians to assess the character of the “Middle region,” as he called it, was the venerable Frederick Jackson Turner. Democratic, materialistic, and tolerant were the qualities most apparent to Turner at the end of the nineteenth century. A quarter century later Charles H. Maxson, exploring the Great Awakening’s effect on the Middle Colonies, concluded that diversity had been a pernicious influence on religion, prompting competition, discord, and finally apathy. There the interpretation stalled for over fifty years.

Michael Kammen’s fine narrative survey, *Colonial New York: A History* (1975), took a more benevolent view of New York’s religious pluralism. Kammen charted church squabbles and ceasefires while noting the growth of all denominations; the end result of religious competition, in his view, was secularization and broad toleration. Two other Middle Colony historians, Sally Schwartz ("A Mixed Multitude": The Struggle for Toleration in Colonial Pennsylvania [1987]) and Richard Pointer (Protestant Pluralism and the New York Experience [1988]), saw clear evidence of rising religious toleration while rejecting secularization.

How can historians disagree on such basic issues? Are they to be trusted any more than soothsayers, or economists? One problem is that historians’ conclusions often depend on the point at which they enter their subject and on how narrow or broad a view they take. If a historian, for example, looks at Middle Colony religious life only during a period of flux (new immigrants, populations on the move, wars, few clergymen), s/he is likely to discern conflict and disorder. By contrast, if the scholar focuses on a period of consolidation (when churches and ecclesiastical structures are abuilding), a more benign and tolerant atmosphere will be discovered. The same pertains to all history writings. So the reader’s motto must be caveat emptor.

You might conclude from the above that I recommend only long-term synthetic works for those seeking historical “truth.” I wrote such a book myself about colonial religion (*Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* [1986]), in which I identified voluntary churches and lay participation as critical components of early denominational development. A short time later, Jon Butler produced another synthetic study (*Awash in a Sea of Faith* [1990]) that saw not voluntarism but ecclesiastical coercion as the key dynamic of colonial church development. And Butler wondered whether the majority of Americans went to church at all before the Second Great Awakening, whereas I had perceived strong church adherence in the eighteenth century. Both of us, you’ll be glad to know, see Christianization in considerable disarray in the seventeenth century, yet rising in the eighteenth century.
As for the question of whether religious pluralism leads to discord, perhaps the best thought to leave you with is that expressed by H. Richard Niebuhr. “The history of American Protestantism,” he wrote, “is one of many reformatory movements...of shaken foundations and new construction on ruins. Everything...is movement; everything a becoming.” Yet, over time, I might add, our Middle Colony inhabitants found ways to deal with their diversity, ways that eventually led to compromises, a growing toleration of differences, and perhaps the most modern society in British America.


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