

NEW WORLD FAITHS



RELIGION IN COLONIAL AMERICA



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*To the memory of three wonderful teachers and friends:
Anita Rutman, Darrett Rutman, and Paul Lucas*

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CONTENTS

PREFACE

ix

CHAPTER ONE: Worlds Old and New

01

CHAPTER TWO: Religion and Missions in New Spain and
New France

21

CHAPTER THREE: Religion in England's First Colonies

47

CHAPTER FOUR: The Flowering of Religious Diversity

71

CHAPTER FIVE: African and American Indian Religion

91

CHAPTER SIX: Reviving Colonial Religion

110

CHAPTER SEVEN: Religion and the American Revolution

132

CHRONOLOGY

152

FURTHER READING

159

INDEX

167

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PREFACE

Colonial America has always seemed an especially religious place. This identity derives from accounts of Spanish and French missions in the Caribbean, California, and Canada, of Puritans entertaining American Indians at Thanksgiving, and of Quakers establishing a tolerant society in Pennsylvania. In fact, the religious vitality of early America stretched far beyond these typical and sometimes mythical scenes. From the early 1600s to the American Revolution, colonial North America and the Caribbean teemed with an abundance of religions. The Spanish and French sought to conquer natives with missions and arms alike. American Indians and enslaved Africans transformed their own traditional religious practices, often under difficult circumstances. In Britain's mainland colonies, Philadelphia emerged as a capital of American Protestantism, and new church buildings and new religious patterns, including revivals, utterly transformed the pre-Revolutionary spiritual landscape.

We cannot understand early America without understanding religion, and religion emerged everywhere in tumultuous, unexpected ways. Sometimes religion rested seamlessly within

native American, English, French, and Spanish cultures. But sometimes it became paramount to shape each culture or to defend itself within each culture. The multiplicity of religious expression in early America, success and failure in plans for religious orthodoxy and perfection, the spiritual ingenuity and perseverance of American Indians and Africans, the roles of women, the relationship between religion and government, and the fateful connections among religion, the American Revolution, and the shaping of the new republic transformed religion and society alike in America before 1800.

As late as the 1960s, historians paid relatively little attention to religion beyond studies of early French and Spanish missions and New England's Puritans. But the rise of a more sophisticated history and the need to explain the remarkable persistence of religion in modern America have brought new attention to the years that laid the foundations of the American experience. As a result, new histories have thoroughly transformed our knowledge of almost every American religious group and have fully revised our understanding of religion's role in shaping the development of North America.

It is impossible to capture the flavor and character of the New World experience without understanding the connections between secular activities and religion. Spirituality stood at the center of Native American societies before European colonization and has continued to do so long after. Religion—and the freedom to express it—motivated millions of immigrants to come to North America from remarkably different cultures, and the exposure to new ideas and ways of living shaped their experience. It also fueled tension among different ethnic and racial groups in America, and in the United States specifically. Regrettably, religion also has accounted for bigotry in America and, for many if not all settlers, also sanctioned the enslavement of

Africans. Religion urged Americans to expand the nation—first within the continental United States, then through overseas conquests and missionary work—and has had a profound influence on American politics, from the era of the Puritans to the present. Finally, religion contributes to the extraordinary diversity that has, for four centuries, made the United States one of the world's most dynamic societies.

Religion, in short, molded the New World everywhere. It was not the sole influence, and sometimes religion's contributions were dwarfed by materialism, politics, or traditional understandings of family life. But even in these realms, religion acted powerfully to rationalize impulses and justify behavior, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively. The stories told about religion in early America bear the marks of a society far different from our own—far less anonymous and much more intimate, profoundly rural, and technologically simple, if hardly rude. Yet the religion of early America bears a power and lure that modern Americans will find simultaneously familiar and fascinating, and also revealing about the complexity of their own spiritual heritage.

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Worlds Old and New

The French Jesuit Pierre de Charlevoix was fascinated by the religious customs of the Algonquian-speaking Indians of southern Canada and northern New York and New England. In his two-volume *Journal of a Voyage to North-America* (1761), Charlevoix related many stories about Algonquian religion that seemed both wonderful and strange. Charlevoix was especially intrigued by Algonquian dreaming and its dramatic effect among traditional Algonquian believers. He was particularly taken by a story told to him by French Jesuit missionaries working among the Algonquian Indians. An Algonquian man dreamed that he had been a prisoner held by Algonquian enemies. When he awoke, he was confused and afraid. What did the dream mean? When he consulted the Algonquian shaman, the figure who mediated between humans, the gods, and nature, the shaman told him he had to act out the implications of the dream. The man had himself tied to a post, and other Algonquians burned several parts of his body, just as would have happened had his captivity been real.

For Algonquian-speaking Indians and other eastern woodlands Indians, dreams and visions gave signals about life that must be followed. The dreams and visions exposed dangers, revealed opportunities, and explained important principles. Dreams demonstrated that the souls of men and women existed separately from the body. The souls of others spoke to the living through dreams, including the souls of the dead. When Algonquians dreamed about elk, they felt encouraged because the elk was a symbol of life. But when Algonquians dreamed about bears, they became afraid because the bear signified the approach of death.

The Algonquian dream episodes signaled the compelling interrelationship between the Indians' religious life and their day-to-day existence. Dreams and visions allowed spirits to communicate with Indians who revealed eternal values. Dreams and visions evoked ordinary emotions and everyday circumstances to explain how the world worked. They described where each individual fit in a universe that otherwise seemed so often disconcerting and confusing. For Indians, dreams revealed how thoroughly religion was not merely "belief," but an intimate and interactive relationship among humans, the supernatural, and nature. As Charlevoix put it, "in whatever manner the dream is conceived, it is always looked upon as a thing sacred, and as the most ordinary way in which the gods make known their will to men."

Judith Giton did not want to go to America. She was a French Protestant, or "Huguenot," in the village of La Voulte in Languedoc in southern France. But in 1682 the French king, Louis XIV, began using soldiers to enforce restrictions on Protestant worship in La Voulte, sometimes with violence. As Judith Giton wrote years later in a memoir, the village "suffered through eight months [of] exactions and quartering...by the soldiery, with much evil." With her mother and two brothers, Pierre and Louis, she decided "to go out of France by night, and

leave the soldiers in bed.” The Gitons fled to Lyon and Dijon, then on to Cologne, Germany, where they met other refugee Huguenots. Judith, Louis, and their mother fervently believed they should settle thirty miles from Cologne with another brother. But Pierre had read a pamphlet advertising a colony in America—South Carolina, a place with many opportunities as well as freedom of religion. Pierre had “nothing but Carolina on his thoughts,” Judith wrote.

Pierre won the argument. He took Judith, Louis, and their mother to Amsterdam and then London to book passage for South Carolina. The voyage to the New World turned out to be a disaster. Mother Giton died of scarlet fever. Their ship’s captain left the three Giton children in Bermuda, where they had to find another ship for South Carolina. Louis died of a fever eighteen months after arriving in South Carolina. Although Judith and Pierre survived, she remembered the ordeal as extremely difficult. She experienced much “sickness, pestilence, famine, poverty [and] very hard work. I was in this country a full six months without tasting bread.” Later she married another Huguenot refugee in South Carolina, Pierre Manigault. “God has had pity on me, and has changed my lot to one more happy,” she wrote. “Glory be unto him.”

Sometime in late 1723, the Protestant bishop of London, who had informal responsibility for Church of England affairs in America, received a wrenching petition from slaves in Virginia. It was unsigned, written by a mulatto slave “baptized and brought up in the way of the Christian faith.” He described how the masters were harsh with him and all other slaves, “as hard with us as the Egyptians was with the children of Israel. . . . To be plain, they do look no more upon us than if we were dogs.” Masters kept the slaves “in ignorance of our salvation . . . kept out of the church, and matrimony is denied [to] us.” The slaves begged the bishop

for opportunities to learn “the Lord’s Prayer, the creed, and the Ten Commandments.” They hoped that their children could “be put to school and learned to read through the Bible.”

The Africans feared for their lives in writing this petition. If their masters were to discover the document “we should go near to swing upon the gallows’ tree.” But they wrote anyway. They hoped that the bishop, “Lord King George, and the rest of the rulers will release us out of this cruel bondage, and this we beg for Jesus Christ’s his sake, who has commanded us to seek first the kingdom of God and all things shall be added unto us.”

These slaves need not have worried about the effects of their petition. It was ignored in London and remained unknown in Virginia despite many rumors about slave dissatisfaction and rebellions in that colony throughout the 1720s. After being received in London, the petition was misfiled with papers on Jamaica; it was discovered by historians only in the 1990s, its author unknown now as then. And the petition’s eloquent pleas remained unfulfilled, in Virginia as in the other British colonies. Through most of the colonial period, religion never disturbed the advance of slavery.

Nathan Cole had been bothered by religious questions for some time. Twenty-nine-years old, a carpenter and a farmer, Cole lived in Kensington, Connecticut. In 1739 he heard that the British revivalist George Whitefield had arrived in the colonies. When Cole wrote many years later about his experience hearing Whitefield, he remembered the event vividly.

Now it pleased God to send Mr. Whitefield into this land....I longed to see and hear him, and wished he would come this way. I heard he was come to New York and the Jerseys and great multitudes flocking after him...next I heard he was at Long Island, then at Boston...Then of a sudden, in

the morning about 8 or 9 of the clock there came a messenger and said Mr. Whitefield preached at Hartford and Wethersfield yesterday and is to preach at Middletown this morning at ten of the clock. I was in my field at work, I dropped my tool that I had in my hand and ran home to my wife telling her to make ready quickly to go and hear Mr. Whitefield.

On high land I saw before me a cloud or fog raising. I first thought it came from the great [Connecticut] river, but as I came nearer the road, I heard a noise something like a low rumbling thunder....It was the noise of horses feet coming down the road and this cloud was a cloud of dust made by the horses feet....When we got to Middletown['s] old meeting house there was a great multitude, it was said to be 3000 or 4000 people assembled together....The land and banks over the river looked black with people and horses....I saw no man at work in his field, but all seemed to be gone.

When I saw Mr. Whitefield come upon the scaffold he looked almost angelical; a young, slim, slender, youth before some thousands of people...He looked as if he was clothed with the authority from the Great God...and my hearing him preach gave me a heart wound. By God's blessing, my old foundation was broken up, and I saw that my righteousness would not save me...all that I could do would not save me.

Within a year, Nathan Cole had undergone a "born again" experience, feeling guilt because of his sins but placing all his faith in God's forgiveness. He later joined an evangelical congregation that limited its membership to men and women who had had similar experiences, then left that congregation to join an evangelical Baptist church that limited the rite of baptism to believing or converted adults. Cole belonged to that congregation for another forty years until he died in 1783 at the age of seventy-two.

How thoroughly religion affected individuals and society in early America can be difficult to understand. We have been taught to believe that our ancestors, especially our colonial

ancestors, were remarkably pious, and indeed many were. Yet religion's importance for individuals and societies also produced numerous differences and antagonisms that leave a confusing picture of early American religion. In Europe, Catholics and Protestants opposed each other and then divided among themselves as a consequence of the Protestant Reformation that began in the 1520s, thirty years after Columbus's discovery of the Americas. National rivalries separated French Catholics from Spanish Catholics and Protestants in England from those in the Netherlands. In turn, theological differences caused many internal divisions among Catholics and Protestants. In Africa, language and cultural differences reinforced religious disagreements between different societies, while within the same society individuals often disagreed about the expression and practice of religion. The importance of nature in American Indian religions never guaranteed that all native groups would honor nature in similar ways; the contrasts in their religious customs produced discord between individuals and rivalries between societies.

As a result, religious expression was complicated throughout America. In Catholic France and Protestant England, among the Ibo and Ashanti peoples of Africa, and amid the Micmacs and Catwabs of America, religious expression emerged in many different ways. What and how these men and women thought about religion was important to them as individuals and to their societies. In crucial ways, their religious beliefs and practices often accounted for the distinctiveness of their societies. These differences and similarities—individual and national, linguistic and theological—became the foundation of the diverse, historically evolving experiences of religion that characterized the entire American experience, both before and after the American Revolution.

What did religion mean to men and women on the eve of European colonization in America? Many things, it turns out.

When the British writer Henry Fielding published his comic novel *Tom Jones* in 1749, the Reverend Mr. Thwackum, Fielding's ludicrous Church of England, or Anglican, clergyman, became one of Fielding's most memorable characters. Thwackum's fussy description of "religion" exemplified the narrow-mindedness of Britain's mid-eighteenth-century Anglican establishment that Fielding detested: "When I mention religion, I mean the Christian religion; and not only the Christian religion but the Protestant religion; and not only the Protestant religion, but the Church of England."

Unfortunately for Thwackum, reality was—and long would be—far more complex in Britain and throughout Europe, Africa, and America. In Europe, state-supported churches formally monopolized public worship and gave each nation an appearance of unanimity in religion. Clearly, politics played a major role in determining both national and local religious commitments, as symbolized in the phrase "whose Prince, whose Church." Because King Henry VIII willed it, England became Protestant, and all English men and women legally became members of the Church of England once it had separated from the Roman Catholic Church. But then England switched back to Catholicism under Mary I, after which Elizabeth I brought the nation back to Protestantism. France and Spain remained Catholic because their monarchs not only remained Catholic, but used their faith to expand the power of the state in both religious and secular life. The numerous German principalities presented a patchwork of faiths. Most of the northern princes, including the king of Prussia, chose Protestantism, whereas many of their southern counterparts, including the rulers of Saxony, chose Catholicism.

In England, the royal command that created the Church of England fanned further religious debate. Elizabeth I controlled

demands for wider reform of the Church of England better than any of her successors did. She eliminated practices that seemed Catholic yet vigorously suppressed radical Protestants. In the 1580s, she simply forbade meetings by Protestant “schismatics” who sought to split off from the official church, the Church of England, and enforced her orders with remarkable success.

Elizabeth’s successor, King James I, who had previously been King James VI of Scotland, experienced greater frustration in matters of religion. By his reign reformers were demanding more changes in the Church of England. As their numbers multiplied under James, opponents decried them as “Puritans”—rigorous, overly demanding religious zealots. By the time King James asked the archbishop of Canterbury, William Laud, to suppress the Puritans in the 1620s, they were too numerous to put down easily. The effort, often poorly planned and clumsily executed, initiated debates in the 1630s that ultimately produced major parliamentary confrontations, the English Civil War of the 1640s, and the beheading of James’s son, Charles I, in 1649.

As a result, by the 1690s England possessed a seemingly endless array of religious groups, which helps explain Thwackum’s prissy bitterness about the meaning of the term *religion*. Most English men and women formally remained Anglicans, or members of the Church of England. But many others were Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Quakers—all Protestants, as were the Anglicans—and some even remained Catholics despite the century-long attack on their church and the social and political penalties that English Catholics endured. In addition, England also contained a small number of Jews, concentrated mostly in London and the port towns, not unlike the urban pattern of Jewish residence throughout the European continent. The 1689 Toleration Act grudgingly recognized this