

**Beyond Toleration:
The Religious Origins of
American Pluralism**

CHRIS BENEKE

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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of American Pluralism*

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Printed in the United States of America
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To my wife, Christa

And my parents, George and Cathy

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Beyond Toleration

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Introduction

Can two walk together, except they be agreed?

—Amos 3:3

During the late spring of 1791, an unusual visitor strolled the streets of Boston. Recently appointed as the nation's first Roman Catholic bishop, John Carroll had traveled from his home in Baltimore to settle a dispute between clergymen of his own church. Dressed in plain black clothing, Carroll probably offered few outward signs of his religious affiliation. But his faith could not have remained a mystery for long. Boston's Protestants would have been sensitive to the presence of a Catholic prelate in their midst. After all, until just a decade and a half before, they had celebrated "Pope's Day" by parading around grotesque effigies of the pontiff every November 5th. The merriment concluded with the burning of either the North End or the South End Pope. Fortunately for Bishop Carroll, he enjoyed a much different reception. Taking a moment to write a friend, Carroll noted that the religious atmosphere in Boston had altered considerably. He testified to the "great civilities" extended by his local acquaintances. The magnitude of the change may not have been apparent until the bishop was told that, in years past, his fellow pedestrians would "have crossed to the opposite side of the street rather than meet a Roman Catholic." Now, important members of the community walked alongside him.¹

An even more notable event for contemporaries occurred three years earlier, on a gray July Fourth morning in Philadelphia. Perching

upon an ornate carriage next to a framed copy of the newly ratified Constitution, the chief justice of the Pennsylvania Supreme Court set out near the head of a mile-long column. Members of every major occupational group marched behind him with tools in hand and livestock in tow. Groups of farmers, tailors, coopers, printers, potters, hatters, and harness-makers passed by eager crowds who lined the city's doorways and leaned out its windows. Thousands marveled as horses wheeled a replica warship over the bumpy cobblestone streets. The three and a half-hour affair was suffused with symbolism. An immense columned dome (each column representing a state) emblemized the federal union. Blacksmiths diligently stoked the "flame of liberty" and a rider carried a reminder of the revolutionary union with France—a white flag decorated with three fleurs-de-lis and thirteen stars.² Even more gratifying to the organizer of the procession, Francis Hopkinson, was the "universal love and harmony" that evidently prevailed on this day. That spirit, he wrote in a newspaper account of the event, was illustrated "by a circumstance which probably never before occurred in such extent"—the sight of seventeen clergymen, representing various religious faiths, walking three and four abreast, arms locked together. Nor was it just Christians who walked side by side through the streets of Philadelphia. Proceeding arm in arm beside two ministers was a rabbi. "May they and their flocks so walk thro' life!" Hopkinson gushed.³

Obviously, there was more to the spectacle of the seventeen clerics than their exhibition of professional skill. No one asked the clergymen to bring their writing desks and pulpits. Instead, they were expected to display a more universal, though less tangible, talent: an affectionate regard for people of other faiths. "Pains were taken," Benjamin Rush recalled in his description of the event, "to connect Ministers of the most dissimilar religious principles together, thereby to show the influence of a free government in promoting christian charity." In case anyone missed the significance of the performance, Rush explained it. "There could not have been a more happy emblem conceived of that section of the new constitution," he wrote, "which opens all its powers and offices alike, not only to every sect of christians, but to worthy men of *every* religion."⁴

In our cynical age, we might wonder at the Catholic bishop who was impressed by modest gestures of respect from his fellow citizens. We might also mock the pretensions to religious inclusion that the seventeen clergymen were supposed to represent and ask how Jews really benefited from "christian charity." In 1788, we might point out, Jews and Catholics were still denied access to civil offices in several states within the federal union and neither outright anti-Semitism nor anti-Catholicism was unknown to contemporaries. Yet if we

ignore the delight and surprise that came upon John Carroll and those who witnessed the clergymen of different faiths walking arm in arm, then we will have failed to recognize the momentous importance of these events.

To avoid that fate, we need to consider the bishop's visit and the Philadelphia parade from a late eighteenth-century perspective, rather than our own. We have to remember that the history of Europe and America had, until this time, been distinguished by a long train of bigotry and persecution. We have to recall that most early modern governments treated dissenters from their state-sponsored church establishments as criminals. Religious minorities could be imprisoned, exiled, or even whipped, branded, and hanged; their property could be confiscated, and their churches closed. This meant that Bishop Carroll and the gentlemen who marched in the Philadelphia parade were not much farther from the brutal persecution of dissenters than we are from the lynchings of African Americans. Nor were they any farther from the exclusivity practiced by most colonial governments in the early eighteenth century than we are from the *de jure* racial segregation that persisted until the 1960s.

Viewed in such a light, the image of clergymen from various denominations walking arm in arm assumes the gravity it warrants. Even in Philadelphia, where religious minorities had been free to worship privately since its founding, there was nothing natural or easy about forging this particular symbol of religious ecumenism. Benjamin Rush's words should be emphasized: "*Pains were taken* to connect Ministers of the most dissimilar religious principles together." Perhaps the parade's orchestrators met resistance in the attempt, or perhaps they just expected the ministers to display the perfectly human inclination of walking alongside those whom they knew best or agreed with most. In either case, a self-conscious effort was made to bring men of distinct religious persuasions together. We can imagine an analogous plan to bring black, white, and Hispanic marchers together today. There may have been no more interreligious harmony at that time than there is interethnic harmony in our own time. Yet, then as now, inclusion, equality, and cooperation among different groups mattered deeply. But then, unlike now, it was religious inclusion, religious equality, and religious cooperation that concerned people. Though still practiced inconsistently in the late eighteenth century, these ideals had become incontestable. The history of their controversial emergence is the history of America's first great attempt to accommodate diversity, its first experiment with pluralism.

Two revolutions, one in law and one in culture, made it possible for men of different denominations to walk together in the streets of Boston and Philadelphia during the late eighteenth century. The first, a better-known revolution,

took place in the statute books. By the 1730s, major American dissenting groups across most of the colonies had gained the right to worship privately and to direct their tax payments toward the support of their own ministers. Many also gained the right to participate in politics. They obtained what contemporaries called “toleration.” In more than half of Britain’s mainland colonies (as in Western Europe), however, these rights had to be squared with the prerogatives of the established churches and the public’s contempt for dissenters. The policy of toleration relieved religious minorities of some physical punishments and some financial burdens, but it did not free them from the indignities of prejudice and exclusion. Nor did it make them equal. Those “tolerated” could still be barred from civil offices, military positions, and university posts. In colonial Virginia, dissenters still had to petition for the right to preach dissenting doctrines, while Massachusetts’s Quakers, Anglicans, and Baptists still had to go through the unpleasant ordeal of obtaining state certification before they could be freed from the religious levies that benefited other groups. The outright persecution of small, marginal churches continued until the last third of the century. European governments generally went no farther in the eighteenth century. But in America, the legal revolution did not stop at toleration.

As gradually as colonial governments adopted the legal practice of toleration, they suddenly abandoned it between the 1760s and the 1780s for something that is usually called “religious liberty.” From Georgia to New Hampshire, the barriers that had prevented white Americans from practicing their religion freely and speaking their views openly gave way during the revolutionary period. The new state governments either could not or would not maintain the discriminatory policies that continued to characterize European societies. By the end of the 1780s, traditional religious establishments had been either pruned back or completely eliminated. When the United States Constitution was signed, it prohibited religious tests for federal office. The First Amendment, ratified four years later, precluded a national religious establishment.⁵

Momentous as this statutory revolution was, a revolution of equal importance and lesser fame took place in the realm of ideas and public norms. Eighteenth-century America experienced a rhetorical or ideological transformation—a shift in discourse—that moved it well beyond the language of toleration and toward a much more egalitarian mode of addressing its religious differences. The way people discussed their faiths in public changed dramatically between the first and the last decades of the eighteenth century. Through a process much like the one we have seen in the modern movement toward racial equality—following the establishment of equal standing before

the law, proceeding with the inclusion of different groups in the same cooperative endeavors, and culminating with self-conscious gestures of respect between different groups—eighteenth-century Americans stumbled their way toward something usually called “pluralism.” Through both concentrated effort and historical accident, they created a society defined by integrated social and political institutions, public deference toward different beliefs, and repeated assertions of equality. If living peacefully among a great diversity of people with roughly equal rights signaled a new direction in Western culture, so did the changes in language and behavior that made some degree of unity and cooperation possible. In both respects, late eighteenth-century Americans distinguished themselves from the persecution of the past and established important precedents for the future.⁶

The latter, cultural, revolution will receive the most attention in this book. The legal changes that brought toleration and religious freedom to the United States have been well documented elsewhere. But no one has yet explained how it was that eighteenth-century Americans managed to accommodate the religious differences that produced so much bloodshed in the past. The ensuing chapters first explain how the right of private judgment gained the status of an unquestioned assumption, then how the print trade expanded its meaning, and how a series of evangelical religious revivals transformed it. They go on to recount the subtle changes in public language and social behavior that occurred as official persecution ceased and social institutions became integrated, as toleration first became law and then became irrelevant, as religious establishments crumbled and an ambiguous concept called “religious liberty” triumphed. They examine the move away from the assumption that dissenting faiths were merely permissible and toward the conviction that all faiths deserved equal treatment. They explain how it was that a people who still cared deeply about the fate of their immortal souls could manage to live with those who held significantly different beliefs about God and the church. They seek to show, in other words, how Americans learned to live with differences in matters of the highest importance to them.⁷

At this point, it might be worthwhile to stop and ask: Why should the study of pluralism’s origins be confined to religious differences? Why not political or ethnic differences? For anyone interested in the origins of American pluralism, there are several good reasons to focus on religion. First, and perhaps most obviously, a considerable amount of religious diversity existed in the area that became the original United States. On a church census taken in 1775, the number of congregations in the original thirteen colonies appeared as follows: Congregational, 668; Presbyterian, 588; Anglican, 495; Baptist, 494; Quaker,

310; German Reformed, 159; Lutheran, 150; Dutch Reformed, 120; Methodist, 65; Catholic, 56; Moravian, 31; Congregational-Separatist, 27; Dunker, 24; Mennonite, 16; French Protestant, 7; Sandemanian, 6; Jewish, 5; Rogerene, 3. The major port cities—especially New York, Philadelphia, and Charles Town (now Charleston)—hosted a broad array of religious groups. Reporting to London officials on the eve of the American Revolution, Charles Woodmason noted that the capital of South Carolina was home to two Anglican churches, “A Presbyterian Meeting,” “An Independent-Meeting,” “A Baptist Meeting,” “A Quakers Meeting,” “An Arian Meeting,” “A Dutch Lutheran Church,” “A French Calvinist Church,” and a “Jews Synagogue.”⁸

These kind of denominational calculations are misleading because they give the impression that the proportions were constant throughout the colonies. In fact, there were large concentrations of Congregationalists in New England, large concentrations of Presbyterians in the Middle Colonies, and large concentrations of Anglicans in the South. But denominational diversity tells only part of the story. In many areas—particularly New England and the Middle Colonies—these denominations were divided among themselves. That is because the formation of a new church represented a preferred method of resolving doctrinal disagreements. Early Americans’ seemingly limitless capacity for separation continually extended an already impressive religious diversity. Choices have proliferated and differences have been multiplied ever since. By 1850, there were four distinct varieties of Methodists and eight distinct varieties of Baptists in the United States. Thus, from the mid-eighteenth-century onward, most Americans would have to live amid a range of faiths, all endowed with similar legal rights.⁹

If the range of churches in early America provides one reason to focus on the issue of religious pluralism, the contemporary importance of religion offers another. Even though church membership rates stayed low (less than one in five) through the eighteenth century, a much larger percentage of Americans (perhaps as many as eight in ten) attended church regularly. At the same time, printed sermons and theological treatises were widely purchased and widely read. There was, moreover, hardly an occasion in either private or public in which God was not invoked. It may not, then, be shocking to learn that serious consideration was given to religious diversity long before it was given to ethnic or political diversity. Several decades before they imagined the formation of open, organized party competition, and two centuries before the emergence of ethnic multiculturalism, Americans wrote extensively about the importance of getting along with those whose religious beliefs were quite distinct. If political and ethnic diversity were not regular topics of public discussion, neither were the rights of political dissent or the preservation of

ethnic autonomy especially valued ideals. Though private religious liberty was often an object of sacred reverence for eighteenth-century Americans, political opinions and ethnic affiliations garnered no comparable protections.¹⁰

There is a third reason to focus on the development of religious pluralism. The success that early Americans had at maintaining civil peace and encouraging cooperative endeavors between different religious groups provided a reassuring template for those that followed. In whatever form pluralism surfaced thereafter, it usually began with the popularization of roughly equal rights in speech, property, and assembly, continued with the integration of social and political institutions, and was always characterized by a shift in public rhetoric toward some kind of equal recognition. In this way, the political egalitarianism prevalent by the 1840s, like the ethnic pluralism and gender consciousness developing by the late 1960s, followed a well-trodden path. For ordinary white men of the early nineteenth century and white women and African Americans of the late twentieth century, the achievement of formal legal equality made integration possible, while integration made respectful language necessary. Today we distinguish ourselves as right-thinking people by our inclusive rhetoric about race and ethnicity. Mid-nineteenth-century folks did it by displaying their reverence for the common man. Eighteenth-century Americans demonstrated their “liberality” by making ecumenical statements about religion.

Indeed, it's not hard to locate some striking resemblances between the development of late eighteenth-century religious pluralism and the development of modern multiculturalism. Although eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Americans usually did not celebrate diversity as a positive good or insist upon the preservation of every unique identity, they nonetheless found ways of addressing important religious differences in ways that exceeded toleration. If they did not accord legitimacy to the most culturally distant religions or the most suppressed, the egalitarianism they articulated demanded the same sort of cultural leap that multiculturalism has required from those living at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Throughout early America, standards of public expression changed to accommodate the unprecedented diversity of beliefs, practices, and institutional affiliations that made up the nation's religious landscape. Along the way, the bounds of mutual respect and the expressions of solidarity expanded dramatically, and began to include previously marginal groups and unorthodox beliefs. Like the toleration that preceded it, such recognition may have been offered begrudgingly, it may have often been insincere, and it may have been generally confined to Protestant Christians, yet the very fact that it needed to be given at all is testimony to the momentous change that had occurred. Eighteenth-century Americans

extended what the philosopher Charles Taylor terms “a presumption of equal worth” to a wide range of beliefs and institutions.¹¹

Developments of this nature should probably not faze us. A casual observer of our own culture could tell you that a diverse society in which individuals are treated as the legal equals of one another may require a different set of norms for behavior and speech. In the case of eighteenth-century Americans, the religious integration of their society prompted a newfound inclination to find points of fundamental agreement and a newfound sensitivity to the harm caused by aspersions cast upon other faiths. Outside judgments, indeed, any kind of religious authority, stood on increasingly tenuous ground. Just as they removed the legal barriers that prevented them from practicing their religion freely and speaking their views openly, early Americans increasingly deferred to the descriptions that individuals and churches offered of themselves. In short, as people acquired greater freedom to define their own religious experiences, their liberty to criticize other people’s diminished. A pluralistic society required nothing less.

One could justly argue about the extent of these achievements. And it would indeed be a mistake to think of late eighteenth-century America as some inclusive nirvana. The routine denigration and occasional persecution of eighteenth-century Catholics presents one of the more glaring exceptions to the argument being advanced here. Anti-Catholicism possessed a long and venerable tradition within Anglo-American culture, and remained vibrant into the revolutionary period. Almost everywhere in colonial America, Catholics were denied civil offices, militia service, and voting rights. They were taxed to support Protestant churches and routinely harassed. Yet before we draw the conclusion that Protestant tolerance for other Protestants was insignificant, it should be remembered that the vast majority of white American colonists belonged to a wide range of Protestant denominations. Catholics, meanwhile, made up a very small proportion of the colonial population—probably no more than one percent. Of the fifty-six known Roman Catholic churches established in the colonies at the time of independence, the vast majority were in Delaware, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. Moreover, the legal disabilities that Catholics suffered, and the indignities they endured throughout much of the eighteenth-century must be seen in the light of a long-standing Protestant hostility toward Catholicism and a longstanding suspicion of Catholic political motives. Eighteenth-century Americans feared that Catholic armies, accompanied by their Indian allies, were ever poised to strike and that, in such a conflict, only Protestants would prove reliable citizens and soldiers. When the threat of imminent attack faded, so did much of the anti-Catholic animus. During and

after the American Revolution, Catholics enjoyed a reprieve from the heretofore unrelenting charge of “popish” intrigue. For several decades thereafter, they were frequently accorded the same deference Protestants enjoyed.

Native Americans and African Americans enjoyed no such reprieve. Those called “heathens” by their white contemporaries were consistent objects of Christian proselytizing. Seldom did the traditional beliefs of either group receive public acknowledgment, let alone respect. With a few important exceptions, white colonists simply had difficulty viewing those outside the monotheistic faiths as religious. While some devout missionaries managed to muster admiration for Indian believers, even they professed contempt for Indian beliefs. From the very beginning, Native American religions were equated with witchcraft and devil worship. Traditional African beliefs and rituals fared no better in European opinion. Part of the explanation lies in the fact that neither Native Americans nor African Americans confronted Europeans with the confident, carefully structured networks of belief that Protestants would have associated with alternative religious systems, such as Catholicism, Islam, or Judaism. The authority of Native American shamans and belief in the efficacy of customary spiritual remedies were deeply shaken by the devastation wrought by European-borne diseases. African faiths fared still worse—as religious systems, they simply did not survive colonial American slavery. By the late eighteenth-century, Native American faiths survived mostly in fragments, while West African faiths persisted only in traces.¹²

European contempt for Native American and African faiths was embedded within an even more encompassing disdain toward non-European cultures. In fact, the persistent refrain that Native Americans and African Americans needed to be civilized before they could become Christians, as well as the continued deprecations of their religious practices and beliefs after they did convert, might lead us to the conclusion that early American whites were not genuinely interested in bringing their faith to non-Europeans. The Reverend Hugh Jones of Virginia, for example, suggested that it was a “Prostitution” of the baptismal sacrament to extend it to “wild Indians and new Negroes” who seemed attached to “their own barbarous Ways.” By the end of the colonial period, Christian teaching had been made available to only a tiny fraction of blacks and Indians. Nor did Christian baptism (a practice usually neglected) bring release from slavery or other forms of social oppression. African American and Native American church members almost always occupied subordinate roles within the churches, just as they did within the larger society. The former were sometimes forced to sit so far back in the meetinghouses that they could not hear their minister’s sermons. For a time,

upstart evangelical churches, such as the Separate Baptists and the Methodists, treated black worshipers like brothers and sisters in faith. Yet as the status of their churches improved, even these groups succumbed to the racism that stood in marked contrast to the religious equality that so many white Americans professed to embrace.¹³

We can locate still more exceptions to the general pattern of religious pluralism in the nineteenth century. During the 1830s and 1840s, the founders of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, or Mormons, were continually harassed and beaten. At approximately the same time, Catholic churches and convents were burned. And, of course, throughout the twentieth century, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, and, more recently, Muslims have endured repeated rounds of discrimination. All of this has been sufficient to convince some that eighteenth-century Americans were far from pluralistic. Even those who do concede that America has developed into a religiously pluralistic nation push its appearance back to the late nineteenth, or even the late twentieth century. According to the leading scholar of modern religious pluralism, Diana L. Eck, America maintained its exclusionary approach to religious differences until roughly 1965.¹⁴

As vital as Eck's work has been, it underestimates the religious pluralism that emerged in eighteenth-century America and the capacity of Americans to maintain it ever since. The fact that eighteenth-century religious pluralism was generally extended only to white Protestants should not obscure its significance. When we measure the intra-Protestant ecumenism of the late eighteenth century against the intra-Protestant persecution that had prevailed across much of northwestern Europe and colonial America for the previous century and a half, the change is stunning. Until the beginning of the eighteenth century, religious differences had always been treated with disdain if not violence. But by the end of the eighteenth century, Eck's description of her own Christian pluralism—it is "incumbent upon Christians" to "witness to their faith," but "not fine for us to bear false witness against neighbors of other faiths"—would have found many sympathetic ears. As early as 1753, the New York essayist and politician William Livingston wrote: "I Believe, that to defend the Christian Religion is one Thing, and to knock a Man in the Head for being of a different, is another Thing." Livingston's blunt statement was not all that distant from Eck's. Few would be startled to learn that pluralistic ideals were first applied to white Protestants by white Protestants. Fewer still would be surprised to learn that many white Protestants acted in a manner grossly inconsistent with those ideals. Yet, as Bishop Carroll's experiences and the Philadelphia parade of 1788 suggest, the civil treatment of Jews and Catholics was already evident at the founding. Since then, the scope of

American religious pluralism has certainly extended much further. Nonetheless, its basic premises have been with us since the beginning.¹⁵

A note must be made regarding the subjects examined on the following pages. Every first-year graduate student in history will readily point out that the “Americans” to whom this book refers are almost exclusively adult, white, and male—and, very often, ordained clergyman. However, it’s worth observing that if there were standards of public discourse in the eighteenth century, adult, white, male Protestants articulated them. Ministers represented the largest professional group of writers in the American colonies. They possessed a virtual monopoly when it came to religious publications. In this way, as in others, eighteenth-century ministers were the intellectual leaders of their communities. They were the ones who would have attended Oxford, Harvard, or William and Mary. They were the ones who purchased large collections of learned tracts and corresponded with friends in other colonies or in Great Britain. They were the ones to whom local parishioners were compelled to listen—in some cases, several times a week. It was they who spoke on the days when militias drilled and voters gathered to cast their ballots. They were the ones who shaped the social and cultural assumptions that had to be accepted, brashly resisted, or reluctantly endured. And while their opinions may have sometimes been ridiculed and their instructions often ignored, most of them were dependent upon their parishioners for their positions. These self-described shepherds could not stray too far from their flock’s fundamental assumptions.¹⁶

One further caveat is in order. The audience for eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century religious writing was largely male. But the audience for the sermons that ministers personally delivered on Sundays would have been heavily female. In fact, throughout the years examined here, the majority of members in most colonial churches were probably women. Except for the Quakers and a few short-lived separatist groups, however, the churches forbade females from regular preaching and church elections, just as contemporary governments excluded women from civil offices. And no colonial-era woman was known to have contributed regularly to the newspapers or the pamphlet literature. Nonetheless, the early modern history of female piety and religious dissent may have shared a good deal in common. It is clear, for instance, that women’s speech was curtailed throughout the colonial period. There is also evidence that female religious leadership was equated with religious heterodoxy. Moreover, the research of historian Catherine Brekus has revealed that female preaching became much more widespread and far less controversial following the disestablishment of America’s churches during

the founding period. Unfortunately, we do not have enough information to say whether the same rights of private judgment and, later, full religious liberty, applied to women *within families*. That is, we do not yet know to what extent early American women could dissent from their husbands' beliefs and practice. There is another whole book to be written on the topic. The present work will focus on those differences that preoccupied religious institutions and civil governments between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries: the conflicts over doctrine and practice, between churches and within them, which had once resulted in great wars and inspired countless executions.¹⁷

Ultimately, the following pages offer readers a brief introduction to the kinds of problems that arose when a culture premised upon uniformity gave way to a culture premised upon diversity. While they have not addressed the entire range of early American opinions on the subject of religious differences, I hope that they have at least recovered the major questions that these issues presented, as well as the general tenor of debate and the core of assumptions that would be employed in developing the answers. This is, after all, a story about our own time as well, of great hope and great uncertainty. For if religious pluralism represents one of the most laudable features of the modern world, it also ranks among the most difficult to achieve and maintain.

I

The Plague of Dissent

And the Rise of Toleration

All the days wherein the plague shall be in him he shall be defiled; he is unclean: he shall dwell alone; without the camp shall his habitation be.

—Leviticus 13:46

The Believer's private judgment of discerning, implies a supernatural ability, of knowing what he judges, to be certainly true; and therefore such a private judgment, is always right . . . no man ever had a right to judge wrong, and many men that have a right of judging, do abuse it, to make wrong judgments.

—Hugh Fisher, *A Preservative from Damnable Error* (1730)

As he approached the gallows on Boston Common in the late winter of 1661, William Leddra may have experienced a glimmer of relief. Leddra was probably aware that his impending death would be neither painless nor short. Once his body dropped from the tree limb, the noose would tighten around his neck, cutting the air passage through his trachea until he died of strangulation. Leddra probably also knew that he might very well expire in a convulsive fit, emptying his bowels and foaming at the mouth. Yet having spent the winter shackled to a log in a cold, damp prison cell, this devout Quaker must have also anticipated a glorious afterlife where his sufferings would be redeemed. Offered an opportunity to recant and avoid such

a terrifying end, Leddra refused. He would neither forsake his faith and join one of the established Congregationalist churches nor stay out of Massachusetts. He remained as committed to the absolute truth of his faith as his persecutors were to theirs. So on March 14, 1661, William Leddra passed from this world.¹

Leddra's hanging marked the last of four that occurred over a two-year span. The executions confirmed Massachusetts' reputation for intolerance from London to Providence. Contemporary observers were appalled. The colony's authorities, however, saw no alternative. Quakers had been coming together for unauthorized religious gatherings, publishing tracts favorable to their sect, and proselytizing among the Congregational laity. Every one of these actions constituted a punishable offense. To this point, however, cropped ears and public floggings had produced no discernible change in Quaker behavior. Quaker missionaries remained stubbornly determined to spread the truth they knew, even if it meant interrupting Congregationalist meetings. Instead of keeping their heretical thoughts to themselves, they displayed a seemingly irrepressible inclination to impose them on others.² The Massachusetts General Court felt it had exercised every other recourse. If a man could not be blamed for protecting his family from "persons infected wth the plague of pestilence or other contagious, noisome, & mortall diseases," neither could the legislature be blamed for protecting its subjects from this spiritual plague. In executing these afflicted souls, the Court claimed, it had done what any responsible father would have.³

Never again in American history would government officials hang a person for his or her religious beliefs. The horror that the Quaker executions evoked among outsiders was shared by later generations of New Englanders. The recently restored king of England, Charles II, brought a rapid end to the executions. Thirty years later, the British government would force the Puritan Commonwealth to accept a policy of toleration. Yet in its zealous persecution of the Quakers, the Bay colony had followed a long-accepted formula for dealing with religious differences. Most seventeenth-century European and American governments suppressed dissent. In their role as guardians of public order and spiritual uniformity, they confined minority beliefs to private settings, denying them the public access and recognition that established faiths enjoyed. An increasingly widespread commitment to religious toleration would emerge during the second half of the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth centuries. Nonetheless, legally sanctioned assemblies of worshipers, open proselytizing, and religious publications—not to mention public dignity—remained the preserve of established clergymen and churches. The idea that these figurative fathers should treat dissent like a plague, that they should quarantine what they could not destroy, survived many decades past William Leddra's body.⁴

The Religious Settlement of British America

Beginning students of American history often make the forgivable mistake of assuming that Britain's North American colonies began as cradles of religious freedom. It would be more accurate to say that many of the early colonies began as sanctuaries for religious *dissenters*, particularly those seeking to escape the impositions of established churches in northwestern Europe. Whether they protected religious liberty was another matter. Almost right from its founding in 1682, Pennsylvania was known throughout Europe as an asylum for persecuted minorities. New England represented a "City upon a Hill" for the English Puritans who could no longer endure the spiritual "corruption" or the legal disabilities they encountered back home. And the southern colonies attracted oppressed Protestants (known as Huguenots) fleeing the oppression of an absolutist French monarchy. Yet only a minority of European migrants settled in colonies where extensive religious liberties prevailed from the beginning. Moreover, some of these dissenters proved perfectly capable of systematic intolerance themselves. No sooner had the Massachusetts Bay colony been established as a Puritan refuge from the Church of England than Rhode Island was established as a dissenting refuge from Massachusetts Puritans. The Quakers who were hung on Boston Common between 1659 and 1661 illustrated what might happen to those who challenged the orthodoxy that former dissenters had created themselves.

Early modern authorities on both sides of the Atlantic possessed a perfectly good reason to suppress religious dissent: they knew they were right and the dissenters wrong. They operated under the reasonable premise that there could only be one legitimate form of religious truth. For this tradition they owed something to the Roman Catholic Church, whose beliefs and institutions had structured religious affairs in much of western Europe for centuries. There was, according to the conciliar decrees of 1215, one universal church and no salvation outside it. The Church was never as universal as it hoped and rarely as oppressive as critics later claimed. Yet, for an entire millennium, it squelched every serious challenge to its religious rule. The heresies of the Cathars, the Waldensians, and the Hussites all met dismal fates. Dissenters confronted the severest repression from the thirteenth through the seventeenth centuries as the Church tracked down errant souls and—barring a torture-induced decision to repent—delivered them to the flames. To be sure, few if any persecuted groups should be revered as patrons of religious pluralism. In the opinion of historian Perez Zagorin, the heretics would have established their own faiths and imposed their own forms of intolerance had they been in charge.⁵

At the start of the sixteenth century, one dissident movement finally succeeded. An uprising of discontented ministers and laypeople, which would become known as the Protestant Reformation, broke the Catholic Church's grip on western Europe. Condemning the mediation of priests, the corruption of bishops, and the abuse of the sacraments, the German monk Martin Luther fomented a revolution in the name of sincere faith, plain scripture, and the individual's right to read the Bible in his own way. But neither church establishments nor the ideal of uniformity disappeared. In place of the one, universal, Catholic Church, the princes and kings who ruled northern Europe created their own exclusive church establishments. When the Peace of Augsburg brought a temporary end to religious warfare between Protestants and Catholics in the middle of the sixteenth century, the parties involved agreed to recognize whatever church each state called its own. Confessional boundaries would conform to political boundaries. The Latin phrase, *Cuius regio, eius religio*, encapsulated the resolution upon which most of Europe would arrive: "as the ruler, so the religion." If you were a resident of Florence, you lived under the political rule of the Medici, and you took your religious instructions from the Vatican. If you made your home in northern Germany, you lived under the rule of Lutheran princes and paid for the support of the Lutheran Church. Of course, all this might very well change when your prince was deposed or decided to embrace a new faith.⁶

Catholic or Protestant, Lutheran or Calvinist, all the states of eighteenth-century Europe bestowed exclusive privileges on a favored church. Offices and tax revenues were shared. Theological doctrines and political ideologies were fused. Those who differed from the established church were usually suspected of political disloyalty as well. The perpetuation of a single theology and a single ecclesiastical system was the ideal to which most religious and political leaders aspired and toward which some made considerable progress. Even in the famously tolerant and diverse Dutch Republic, the Reformed Church remained established to the end of the eighteenth century. Dissenting ministers relied upon their own congregations for support, while Dutch Reformed ministers enjoyed the largesse of a government whose revenues were contributed by people of every denomination. Dutch religious dissenters could neither hold public office nor freely voice their grievances.⁷

The story was similar in the nation from which most of the American colonists migrated. England's religious affairs were dominated by the Anglican Church, which achieved its independence from the Roman Catholic Church in 1534. In England, a growing reform movement had coincided with Henry VIII's unrequited desire for papal annulment of his marriage to bring about the separation from Rome. Queen Elizabeth's Act of Uniformity (1559)

reinstated the Protestant Church of England for good and prescribed penalties for nonconformity. Like other seventeenth-century states, England punished a number of religion-related offenses, including blasphemy, atheism, and heresy. It also prohibited sincere dissenters from holding civil or military office, worshiping openly, or preaching where they pleased. English Catholics received especially harsh treatment. With them, the connection between dissent and political subversion seemed more than an abstraction. Partly in response to actual plots against the monarchy, the government required an oath of allegiance to the crown, which compelled the Catholic faithful to renounce the pope's injunctions to overthrow excommunicant princes.

Here, in brief, was the background for the religious settlement of British North America. At the end of the sixteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries, European governments were not the powerful imperial institutions that they would become in the eighteenth century. So when the challenge of establishing colonies in North America arose, the task devolved upon a range of proprietors and joint-stock companies, and each colonial enterprise came to be distinguished by its own particular religious institutions. Consequently, the tapestry of church-state relations in Britain's North American colonies defies easy description. None of England's mainland settlements imposed religious tests or articles of belief as did most of their counterparts in Europe. Yet because of the decentralized character of early settlement, faith would long remain a largely local affair—highly segmented and internally uniform.⁸

Before they could establish their own peculiar forms of religious life on North America, of course, European settlers had to displace the Indian souls that dwelled there. Colonial accounts of the European-borne diseases that wiped out entire villages within a matter of weeks were notable for the callous disregard they displayed toward Native Americans, as well as for their confidence that God had a hand in such seemingly fortuitous developments. An example was the revisionist history of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations published by the Baptist minister John Callendar in 1739. This influential tract extolled the tradition of religious liberty that distinguished Rhode Island from almost every other part of the Western world at the time. Noting wryly that early Massachusetts' authorities had (as was the custom of the day) suppressed heretics so "that they might not infect the Church, or injure the publick Peace," Callendar went on to assert that God had readied an "Asylum" for Massachusetts' exiles to the south by killing the Native Americans who inhabited the region. Though these dissenters had experienced hardship in their new home, they had been spared the diseases that afflicted local tribes in the years before white settlement. The military annihilation of the Pequot