

M. Trevor Przyuski
Teacher Scholars Program
February 15, 2010

Question: *How did the experiences of minority religious groups in Europe influence the development of a policy of religious freedom once they migrated to the British colonies in North America?"*

The Birth of Religious Freedom in the New World: A Global Perspective

Today in America we will go to the office, the factory, or the school and work side-by-side with people of countless faiths and creeds and levels of belief in God. Our neighbors will be Muslim, Mennonite, Mormon, and atheist. Our community's leaders and our children's teachers will be Baptists, Quakers, Jews, Jehovah's Witness and Unitarians. And under all but the most unusual circumstances, we won't question it, resist it, or worry much about it. I doubt this phenomenon exists as uniformly in many other nations. Even in the most developed and modern western nations, divisions are created or perpetuated between Catholics and Protestants, Jews and Gentiles, Muslims and Christians. So how did it happen that in the relatively young United States of America this seemingly radical idea of religious freedom took root and grew into an institutionalized and shared belief? What conditions of religious and secular life in Europe's 16th and 17th Centuries compelled the first waves of immigrants to this New World to establish codes and laws, however restricted or unenforceable, that ensured "freedom of conscience" to other newcomers to this wilderness?

Generations of American children have been taught the history that highlighted the flight of Pilgrims and Puritans to the New World in search of freedom from persecution. Who is not familiar with the Mayflower mythology, the story of the first Thanksgiving, and the notion of that “City upon a Hill” that we carry in our shared National identity even today? Yet the slightest shift of the historical lens from the beginning of Colonial migration to the time just before that migration began, raises rather obvious questions that, until recently, teachers and students of American History have not fully entertained. A Global perspective on the origin of religious freedom in America must begin with religious intolerance and persecution in pre-America Europe and an examination of both the perpetrators and the victims of that persecution. Viewed as a narrative of the turbulence created by the Enlightenment and its accompanying (or causal) scientific revolution, one can see religious persecution as a reaction against the growing forces of individualism, the rise of an independent merchant middle class, and the threat of exotic outsiders brought on by a rapidly increasing internationalism. Whatever or whomever held the mantle of power sought to fight against the threat of change by branding, punishing, or exiling that “other” who sought to share or usurp that central power.ⁱ

In Europe of the 16th and 17th Century, that “otherness” was defined by how one chose to worship God. The Reformation established that it was possible for one to challenge the authority of the church. The growth and proliferation of various sects further proved that Christian philosophy was subject to wide interpretation and an even wider array of ritual and ceremonial observation.ⁱⁱ What had *not* changed in Europe was the long held belief that societal order, stability, and

prosperity could only be assured through religious uniformity. A threat to the agreed upon religious dogma was naturally equated with a threat to the common moral standard and therefore treated with all the single-mindedness of anyone defying the law of the land. Obedience to God and obedience to State were considered of the same action and so it stood to reason that the persecution of “dissenters” and “heretics” was not only necessary to ensure the common peace, but required by God who called on his true followers, whatever sect they might be, to either convert or destroy the infidel or the Anti-Christ.

In England, France, Spain, Germany, and Holland, the formula for persecution was quite the same. Whether it was the Anglican Church of England harrying the Puritan “dissenters,” or the Catholics of Holland torturing and murdering Anabaptists, or the Protestant authorities ordering the expulsion of Mennonites from Salzburg, one thing stood true; conformity to the dictates of the Church that ruled was strictly enforced and diversion or dissent was punishable by the most extreme measures. And each of these persecuted groups sought refuge and remove from their respective oppressors and the inviting isolation of the New World colonies seemed the ideal destination for all Europe’s unwanted Christian sects. Further, the timely philosophical tracts of John Locke and Roger Williams in England and Baruch Spinoza in Spain reinforced the Enlightenment principals of natural law, freedom of the conscience, and the rights of man.ⁱⁱⁱ In William’s 1644 treatise on tolerance, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, he contends that the bloodshed and war waged between Protestants and Catholics are “not required nor accepted by Jesus Christ the Prince of Peace.” He adds later that secular governors should not be

counted as “judges, governors, or defenders of the spiritual or Christian state of worship.”^{iv} In the new American wilderness, adherents to this new doctrine of defiance were free from the threat of any nearby authority and while it wasn’t long before persecution found its way to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the ideals of toleration were sewn in the seeds of this newfound freedom.

In each of the North American colonies, disenfranchised groups sought to establish for themselves a place to live and worship freely according to the dictates of conscience and an individual interpretation of God’s will. The Puritans of Massachusetts, William Penn’s Quakers and outcast Mennonites in Pennsylvania, the cast-off followers of Roger Williams in Rhode Island, even the displaced Jews who fled the Inquisition in Brazil and settled in Dutch New Amsterdam, all came to establish religious communities free from persecution by others. And so it was that with this experience of persecution, each group, in varying degrees, sought to be tolerant of others settling in nearby areas. Catholic Lord Calvert, in establishing the Catholic colony in Maryland, sought to protect his followers from the horrors of the Thirty Years War that had decimated a generation of European Catholics and Protestants. In the Maryland Toleration Act of 1649, the rules governing tolerance are clearly state:

“...whatsoever person or persons...in a reproachful manner or way declare, call, or denominate any person or persons whatsoever inhabiting, residing, trading, or commercing within this province or within any of the ports, harbors, creeks, or havens to the same

belonging, a heretic, schismatic, idolator, Puritan, independent, Presbyterian, popish priest, Jesuit, Jesuited papist, Lutheran, Calvinist, Anabaptist, Brownist, Antinomian, Barrowist, Roundhead, Separatist, or any other name or term in a reproachful manner relating to matter of religion, shall for every such offense forfeit and lose the sum ...or the value thereof to be levied on the goods and chattels of every such offender and offenders...”^v

While the whole of the Maryland Toleration Act is anything but tolerant of anyone by Catholics, the intent is clear. The business of operating the settlement was not to be disturbed by the mischief of religious dispute.

It has been theorized that the common foe of hostile Natives, a threatening wilderness and harsh climate necessitated or at least made palatable the religious practices of others. Other historians point out that tolerance truly came when the economic benefit of working and trading with those outside of one’s own sect became evident. William Penn’s “Holy Experiment” in Pennsylvania of recruiting and welcoming Christians of all sects was motivated as much profit as by Quaker convictions. In correspondence to his English supporters, Penn wrote, “While I desire religious freedom, yet I want some recompense for my trouble.”^{vi} Whatever the cause or reason, colonists of North America began to see, and then set out to prove, that religious uniformity was not prerequisite for societal stability or economic strength. The flourishing colony of Pennsylvania, a haven for immigrants

of all sects and traditions, stood as startling evidence that equality among citizens of different faiths could in fact improve the quality of life for all.

The factors that drew the first waves of immigrants onto the dangerous shores of North America are varied and complex. Yet an examination of the seemingly disparate groups reveals commonalities that make it easier to understand how the notion of freedom from conscience succeeded, in fact could *only* have succeeded, in the wilderness of the New World. The desire for freedom, for distance from oppression, for opportunities to establish and live in communities that upheld the principles and values of religious faith, all compelled the first settlers to establish the North American colonies. This was their common link. The then recent experience or threat of persecution in their respective homelands fostered an understanding of the importance of tolerance, and while this understanding didn't always equate to tolerance of others at the outset, the principles of religious freedom had been outlined for future generations to adopt, embrace and more fully live up to.

ⁱ See Lambert (2003) for details on 15th and 16th Century machinations between Pope and Crown in England, especially Chapter 1, section titled "*The Crown and the Church.*"

ⁱⁱ See Noonan (1998). Chapter 1 includes a catechism on the long range effects of the Protestant reformation.

ⁱⁱⁱ Noonan (1998)

^{iv} Williams, Roger. *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience* (1644) Cite from Google Books at

<<http://books.google.com/books?output=text&id=IL8MAAAAIAAJ&dq=bloudy+tenent+of+persecution&q=prince#v=snippet&q=prince&f=false>>

^v Maryland Tolerance Act of 1649. Cited from on-line collection at
<<http://www.sagehistory.net/colonial/docs/MdRelTol.htm>>

^{vi} Cited by Gary Nash, *Quakers and Politics; Pennsylvania 1681-1726* (Princeton, 1968) pg. 10.