

## Protestant Settlements in North America

Many types of Protestants were active in early colonial America. The so-called magisterial groups, Reformed, Lutheran, and Anglican, represented state or “established” churches back in Europe. These groups were soon joined by radical Protestants such as Baptists and Quakers, which had known persecution in Europe. One may also describe the various Protestants in terms of nationality. There were Dutch and Swedish and German settlements as well as English; but because the English colonies had the greatest long-term influence on North American Christianity, they will receive greater attention.

England’s thirteen colonies in North America differed sharply from each other in matters of religion. Though founded by England, the colonies did not all adhere to the Church of England. Indeed, New Englanders tried to keep the Church of England out. In an era of territorialism, one may ask how England ended up with more than one “established” church in its colonies, and with some colonies that openly welcomed dissent. At a practical level, this happened because England needed settlers and could not afford to be too selective. But a deeper reason for the religious patchwork in its colonies lies with England’s own history.

During the Reformation and its aftermath—which overlapped with the early European settlements in America—England careened through several religious and political upheavals. These began in 1554 when King Henry VIII declared himself (and not the pope) to be the supreme head of the church. After Henry died, each of his successors became the head of the church, and they had



**Fig. 1.8** Elizabeth 1 brought stability to the Church of England, but the Puritan movement arose to demand a more definite form of Protestantism. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

authority over England’s religion. What was legal under one monarch could bring exile or death under the next. Therefore, dissenters left England or returned, depending on who was in power. At last, the third monarch after Henry—Elizabeth I—achieved some religious stability for her country. The “Elizabethan Settlement” provided a moderate Protestant theology, set forth in *The Thirty-Nine Articles*, and a revised *Book of Common Prayer* as the basis for worship. The Church of England continued a “threefold ministry of bishops, priests and deacons and claimed to have kept the apostolic succession.”<sup>7</sup> The church was firmly tied to the state because the Crown retained control over bishops.

Not everyone was satisfied with the Elizabethan Settlement. A coalition of zealous reformers wanted to free the Church of England from royal control and “purify” it from all remnants of Catholicism. These reformers were called Puritans. After enduring suppression and persecution, the Puritans executed King Charles in 1649 and briefly ruled England through the Lord Protector Oliver Cromwell. But after Cromwell died in 1658, the Puritans lost political power. The monarchy was restored, renewing the prospect for a Catholic king. But when Protestant monarchs William and Mary were crowned in 1688, England’s Protestant identity seemed secure.

Because this period of turmoil overlapped with England’s early claims and settlements in America, England could not secure a firm establishment of the Church of England in all of its American colonies. The Church of England was established in Virginia and other southern colonies and in some parts of New York. But Puritans had already set up their own establishment in New England, while Protestant dissenters and Catholics were settling in several other colonies. Thus, England’s history played a large role in shaping colonial Christianity (as did African slavery, immigration from continental Europe, religious awakenings, and the Enlightenment, which are described in due course). With this background in mind, the balance of this chapter will survey the story of Christianity in the early colonial period by region—from the southern colonies to New England to the middle colonies.