

Penn's "Holy Experiment": The Vision and Reality of Religious Pluralism in Colonial Philadelphia

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The First Amendment states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free-exercise thereof." The precise meaning of what has come to be known as the "establishment clause" and the "free-exercise" clause has been vigorously debated in Supreme Court cases ever since the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights were put into effect over two hundred years ago. However, there is broadly-shared consensus among Americans today that citizens should be able to worship, or not worship, as they please. This was not always the case in colonial America. Most colonies operated with a religious establishment and placed strict limits on how its residents could practice religion. In some cases, religious nonconformists faced criminal prosecution or worse.

Pennsylvania stood out as an important exception and it played a pivotal role in how the newly-formed nation came to terms with the reality of religious pluralism. As one historian puts it, "Real liberty of worship in the American republic probably owes more to the fact that William Penn's 'Holy Experiment' worked than to any theory of the separation of church and state articulated and advanced by Thomas Jefferson."¹ This essay examines the radical vision of religious toleration as imagined by the colony's founder, William Penn, and assesses the degree to which this vision was realized as a social, cultural, and legal reality during the colonial period.

The Establishment Status Quo

To better understand how unique Penn's colony was, it is necessary to understand the more typical approach to religious diversity in colonial America. Most American colonies functioned with an established religion, meaning that residents were only permitted to participate in the one religious tradition authorized by the government. In colonies like Massachusetts and Connecticut, Puritans established their religious monopoly through the Congregational Church. In Virginia, Maryland, the Carolinas, and Georgia, the Church of England reigned supreme.

In colonies with a religious establishment, churches and clergymen were supported by public moneys. Only ministers properly credentialed by the state were permitted to conduct church services. These colonies often were quite intolerant of religious difference. In Massachusetts, Quakers like Mary Dwyer were executed and nonconformist thinkers like Anne Hutchinson were exiled. In Virginia, Baptists

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were put in jail for preaching without a license. Many colonial Americans feared that unless there was a shared religion among the colonists, social chaos would result.

The colony of Pennsylvania took a different approach. From the very beginning, it was a haven for Lutherans, Quakers, Presbyterians, and Pietists from all over Europe. Later on, they were joined by Jews, Catholics, and many others. "While other colonies . . . were still wondering which form of Protestantism to establish . . . Pennsylvania was reveling in its diversity."² However, it is important to remember that Pennsylvania was not the first experiment in religious toleration.³ Roger Williams's "Lively Experiment" in colonial Rhode Island emerged as a haven for religious dissidents several years before William Penn was born. However, what distinguished Williams's colony from Penn's colony was that the former emerged out of immediate necessity, while the latter was founded by design.⁴ Williams's writings on religious liberty only took shape after his banishment from Massachusetts Bay Colony for sedition and treason. William Penn actively recruited a wide variety of settlers from throughout Europe, many of whom were oppressed religious minorities, before the colony ever began. From the start, "Penn envisioned a society where different beliefs could dwell together in peace."⁵

William Penn and the Quaker Origins of the "Holy Experiment"

Penn's personal experience as a member of a persecuted religious minority, no doubt, played a role in his thinking about how to deal with religious pluralism. Penn was born in London in 1644, the son of Admiral Sir William Penn. William Penn (the younger) grew up as an Anglican but he became a Quaker at the age of twenty-two after being inspired by the teachings of George Fox. Fox emphasized the innate equality in all people, an inward light that revealed divinity in each person, and a challenge to authority based on wealth, privilege, and militarism. Such assertions were seen as threatening to the Church of England; and many Quakers, including William Penn, were imprisoned. Others were put to death for their beliefs. This led Penn to consider leading his fellow Quakers to a place where they could live without persecution.

The opportunity arose from a debt that King Charles II owed William's father, Admiral Penn. After Admiral Penn's death, the king was faced with the dilemma of owing money to the younger Penn, who was a member of a radical religious sect. Rather than use money, the king paid off his debt to Penn with a large grant of land in colonial America. Spanning 45,000 square miles, the colony was named Pennsylvania or "Penn's Woods" for Admiral Penn, William's father.

By the time that Penn first sailed up the Delaware River in October 1682 on the ship *Welcome*, he had already established the rules for what religious freedom would mean (and would not mean) in the new colony. In the document *Frame of Government of Pennsylvania*, Penn asserted that all

who confess and acknowledge the one Almighty and Eternal God, to be the Creator, Upholder and Ruler of the world; and that hold themselves obliged in conscience to live peaceably and justly in civil society, shall, in no ways, be molested or prejudiced for their religious persuasion, or practice,

in matters of faith and worship, nor shall they be compelled, at any time, to frequent or maintain any religious worship, place or ministry whatever.

Penn went on to mandate that residents of the colony were expected to refrain from all labor on Sunday in accord with "the good example of the primitive Christians." Penn also stated that all "offenses against God" would be prohibited by law and "severely punished." A sampling of activities that Penn said would "provoke the indignation of God" included swearing, drunkenness, fornication, sodomy, stage-plays, cock fighting and any activities "which excite people to rudeness, cruelty, looseness, and irreligion."⁶

To modern ears, Penn's rules regarding morality seem archaic and his understanding of religious liberty sounds parochial. Freedom was limited to those who gave deference to "the one Almighty and eternal God." The legal code in his colony was infused with strict Quaker values because he endeavored to establish a virtuous society. Additionally, Penn did not view religious liberty as an end in itself. He viewed religious coercion as a stumbling block for people to discover "true faith" and, therefore, the freedom to follow one's conscience was "an instrument of Christian salvation."⁷

Nonetheless, by the standards of the time, Penn's embrace of religious diversity was indeed quite radical. It would have been almost inconceivable for an American colony to be founded without some unifying notion that God was sovereign over human affairs. Despite their rigid rules for social life, the comparatively-tolerant culture of Quakers welcomed a diversity that was not often experienced in colonial America.

Penn's Colony: Haven for Religious Diversity

The diversity of religious and cultural life was evident in what became known as the Delaware Valley even before Penn's arrival. The Lenape people had lived for thousands of years on the land they called Lenapehoking. They continued to live in the region even after Penn brokered the treaty with Tamanend, a Lenape chief, in 1683. Europeans started arriving in the early seventeenth century. The first enduring European settlement was that of the Swedes, who practiced the Lutheran faith. They established Old Swede's Church 1667. Its current edifice completed in 1700, stands today as the oldest church building in Pennsylvania. Although the Dutch and later the English came to dominate the region politically, the Swedish Lutherans continued to have a presence.

The Quakers, who began arriving in larger numbers in 1680s, came from a wide variety of places, not only England. The Society of Friends (Quakers) sent missionaries throughout Europe during the late seventeenth century. Although most of the early Quakers who came to Philadelphia were from England, many came from Wales, Ireland, and also the German and Dutch-speaking regions of the Rhine Valley, where Penn had actively recruited settlers for his new colony.

Perhaps one of the most religiously-diverse areas of early Pennsylvania was the settlement at Germantown founded in 1683, several miles to the northwest of Penn's city. Germantown became home to Lutherans, Mennonites, Moravians, Dunkards,

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Calvinists, and even a few Catholics. It even attracted spiritual seekers such as the Transylvanian mystic, Johannes Kelpius. His religiously-eclectic society, known as the Women in the Wilderness, moved into the woods of the Wissahickon Valley to await the return of Jesus Christ. They even built an observatory on top of their tabernacle for monks to search the nighttime sky for signs of the Second Coming.

Closer to the ground in Penn's city, there was also an array of religious communities. The Church of England established Christ Church in 1695. When it reached 800 members in the 1720s, they constructed the large edifice that still stands near Second and Market Streets today. Presbyterians and Baptists met for worship in nearby commercial buildings. In 1700, Quakers remained the largest minority in the colony at 40 percent of the population.

Although Quakers would remain in political and social control for some time, their numbers were quickly surpassed by new immigrants of other faiths. Some 40,000 German-speaking immigrants arrived between 1726 and 1755.⁸ In 1727, Reformed minister George Michael Weiss led a boatload of 400 people from the German Palatinate to found a congregation near Fourth and Race Streets. Although many German Lutherans gravitated to Germantown, they were a significant presence in Philadelphia. When Henry Melchior Muhlenberg arrived in the 1740s, he built and consecrated an impressive edifice with a tall steeple and bells near Fifth and Arch Streets. The more-evangelistic German Moravians succeeded established a church nearby on Race Street.

The Presbyterians flourished in Philadelphia especially due to the large influx of Scottish-Irish immigrants. The Presbyterians were of two varieties. The "Old Lights" were associated with the likes of Reverend Jedidiah Andrews who was a Harvard graduate and advocate of traditionally-educated clergy. William Tennet represented the so-called "New Lights" movement which emphasized the emotional rather than intellectual dimensions of faith. The Old Lights attracted the elite while the New Lights were typically made up of the poor and working class. When the passionate revivalist George Whitefield visited Philadelphia between 1739-1740, he attracted thousands of people to his rallies and the New Light Presbyterians constructed an assembly hall so large that "neither the secular State House nor the latitudinarian Anglicans' Christ Church" surpassed it in size.⁹

The legacy of Philadelphia's religious diversity had an impact on how various institutions developed. When Dr. Thomas Bond and Benjamin Franklin founded the Pennsylvania Hospital in 1755, they established a medical institution intended to serve low-income sick people from "whether Inhabitants of the Province or Strangers." This was a unique approach because most hospitals of the day were charities supported by particular church denomination. Bond envisioned the hospital as a public charity and with the help of Franklin's fundraising prowess, he managed to draw support from donors of many religious backgrounds.¹⁰ In a similar fashion, the predecessor to the University of Pennsylvania was founded as a nonsectarian school and its first trustees were made up of Anglicans, Quakers, and Presbyterians.¹¹ However, despite these examples of interdenominational collaboration, it is clear that the lived reality of the "Holy Experiment" did not always live up to Penn's ideals.

Exploring the Limits of the Holy Experiment

Despite the remarkable religious diversity of the colonial city, there were still many groups at the fringes of social power. Colonial officials dispossessed the Lenape of a vast section of southeastern Pennsylvania via the dubious Walking Purchase of 1737. However, some Native Americans remained in the region. In the aftermath of the frontier upheaval of the French and Indian War, a group of "Moravian Indians" sought refuge in Philadelphia from both angry white settlers and fellow Native Americans who shunned them due to their pacifist stance. A white vigilante group known as the Paxton Boys descended on Philadelphia in 1754 to attack this group. The unarmed Moravians would have been killed if it weren't for the intervention of a newly-formed militia lead by Benjamin Franklin that stopped the so-called "Christian White Savages" before they got into town.¹² Despite this effort to save the lives of the Moravian Indians, colonial city officials made arrangements to have them sent away from white settlements to remote Western Pennsylvania. Even though this group shared a Christian identity with many of the Philadelphia's residents, it is clear that their racial "otherness" prevented them from being welcomed into Philadelphia society. Although Penn has been lauded for his comparatively benevolent treatment of Native Americans, those who succeeded him had little interest in peaceful coexistence with the Lenape, whether they were Christian or not.

Christianity was also limited in its ability to bridge other racial divides in the city. In 1684, a slave ship arrived in Philadelphia carrying 150 persons from Africa. By the time of the revolution, there were some 1,400 enslaved Africans and around 100 freed men. Despite the religious diversity of the city, Africans had limited choices for where or whether to worship. Traditional African religious practices would not have been permitted by Christian slave owners. However, "Congo Square," what is now named Washington Square, was a known gathering place for Africans at the edge of the city to practice traditional burial customs, dances, and music. Most slaves in Philadelphia were household slaves and if they were permitted to attend church, it would have been at the church of the slave master. An experience of racial discrimination at one church, Old St. George's Methodist, sparked the birth of an autonomous denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Church, led by Richard Allen.

The English Jesuit Reverend Joseph Greaton founded the Old St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Philadelphia in 1733. Catholics migrated from Maryland after the colony made the decision to establish Anglicanism as its official religion. At the time, Philadelphia was the only place in British North America where it was permitted to hold mass in public. Despite this, the Protestant neighbors expressed concern that a "Romish Chapel" had been established and appealed to the city for it to be closed down. However, due to the religious freedoms guaranteed under the Charter of Privileges, it was determined that the church could remain open.

Although the church was legal, parishioners did not wish to draw unnecessary attention. The chapel was hidden in the middle of the block. Even the present church building, constructed in 1839, is somewhat hidden from the main thoroughfares of the city and it earned the moniker "church in the alley."

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9. Ibid., 49
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Jews also found an early acceptance in Philadelphia. Although the oldest synagogue in North America was founded in Newport, Rhode Island, the second oldest was established in Philadelphia. Jewish businessman Nathan Levy settled in Penn's city in 1735. Within a decade, Levy and other Jews had successfully appealed to the governing authorities to establish a Jewish cemetery and had begun a weekly communal prayer service, which became the Congregation Mikveh Israel.

Although, Mikveh Israel was tolerated in the city and had even earned the financial support of neighboring Christ Church, there were limits to the ability of Jews to achieve political power. Pennsylvania law required that members of the state assembly were required to agree to a religious oath affirming that the New Testament was the word of God. Since Jews do not believe in the divinity of Jesus, the effect of the law was to exclude them from holding political office.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations in both the design and implementation of Penn's "Holy Experiment," the Pennsylvania colony established an important precedent. Social and economic prosperity could flourish in a religiously diverse environment. During Penn's time, few would have predicted that the notion of religious freedom would one day be enshrined in American law. Although we still struggle to be a society where people of different religious beliefs and practices can live together in peace, we can look to history of Penn's Holy Experiment for what it has to teach us today.

Notes

1. James Hudnut-Beumler, "Protestants in the Middle Atlantic Region," in *Religion and Public Life in the Middle Atlantic Region: The Fount of Diversity*, (Lanham, MD: Alta Mira Press, 2006), 68.
2. Hudnut-Beumler, "Protestants in the Middle Atlantic Region," 67.
3. Maryland also had a short-lived policy of religious toleration until the Church of England became the establishment church in 1702. New York was also quite diverse but became so largely due to commercial reasons.
4. Andrew Murphy, "'Livelie Experiment' and 'Holy Experiment': Two Trajectories of Religious Liberty," in *The Lively Experiment: Religious Toleration in American from Roger Williams to the Present*, ed. Chris Beneke and Christopher S. Grenda (Lanham, MD: Roman and Littlefield, 2015) 38.
5. David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 461.
6. http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/pa04.asp.
7. Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*, 459.
8. Russell F. Weigley, ed., *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History* (New York: W. W. Norton), 47.
9. *Ibid.*, 49.
10. George W. Boudreau, *Independence: A Guide to Historic Philadelphia* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing), 209.
11. Weigley, *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History*, 83-85.
12. Weigley, *Philadelphia: A 300-Year History*, 108.