**Religion in America in the 17th-19th Centuries**

Virginia, beginning with Jamestown in 1607, was settled largely by members of the Church of England, which became the established religion. Since the bishop was the monarch of England, the Anglican Church in Virginia was an Episcopal Church without a bishop until after the Revolution.

Massachusetts and other parts of New England received many Congregational dissenters. There were two categories of Congregationalists. One was the Pilgrims who came to Plymouth in 1620. They were “separatists” who had gone to Holland seeking religious freedom. The other was the Puritans of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1628. They were “non-separatists” who came to organize a “Godly Commonwealth” in the “wilderness”, according to their understanding of the Biblical pattern (a State church with Congregational organization). Since British church leadership was not present in the new world, this disagreement over being a State established church became less important to the separatists and so a State established church with congregational organization immerged. Quakers and Baptists were especially unwelcome in Massachusetts.

Rhode Island was the exception. In 1639 the first Baptist Church in America was established in this colony.

In Maryland in 1649, Governor William Stone (an ancestor of Barton Stone) passed the Maryland Act Concerning Religion. It was a Toleration Act establishing full religious liberty in the colony.

In 1682, Pennsylvania was settled by the Quakers. Their pacifist policies prevented them from being involved with government at all and so the colony quickly became the most religiously diverse of all.

The Dutch brought their Reformed faith to New York.

Scottish and English Presbyterians brought Calvinism throughout all the colonies.

Results of Religious Liberty

With the securing of independence and the founding of a new nation, the ties to European national churches were broken. The new nation was taking shape and most of the churches each established new national independent denominational organizations. The “Methodist Episcopal Church held its organizational conference in 1784. The “Protestant Episcopal Church” adopted national constitution in 1789. In 1788 the Presbyterian Church established a national organization. Since there was so much religious diversity, determining a national religion was impossible, and the principle of religious freedom was written into the constitution.

Separation of church and state was very important to a lot of Americans. In 1786, Virginia was the first state enact a “Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom”. Statesmen such as Thomas Jefferson (a Deist) and James Madison (Episcopal) combined with Baptists and Quakers (these were the groups most concerned with separation) to advocate for national policy separating church and state. Massachusetts was the last state to “disestablish” its church in 1833.

Characteristics of Churches

Despite the separation of church and state, churches have been heavily influenced by national history. For example, most churches divided as a result of the Civil War. Much of American church history is a study in American sociology. Very few new ideas or influential theologians have contributed to world church history from the United States.

Freedom of religion, an atmosphere of free thought, and open propaganda, encourages the proliferation of many different sects and sub-groups, each assuming its own institutional form.

Characteristics such as congregational church leadership, layperson participation in worship, voluntary financial contribution, and representative conventions within denominations (example: Methodist synods, and Baptist conventions), are all related to the political atmosphere of the country. These traits give American church members a vitality which contrasts many European national churches where the members may be Christian in name and tradition only and have little concern for the affairs of the church (This is of course a broad generalization). Revivalism became one of the main currents in American church history.