

Discussion guide: Religion in early America

BY PAULINE S. JOHNSON

Religion is one of the most challenging discussion topics for the public school social studies classroom. And yet, it is imperative for students to learn about the importance and influence religion had on immigrants and early Americans in order to truly understand the period. Our students, having grown up in a “separation of church and state” society even with the increased place of religion in modern politics, may have difficulty comprehending that there was a time when some American colonies were theocracies.

Particularly after the events of Sept. 11, 2001, 8th graders will recognize that there are global tensions that seem to have a basis in religious beliefs. And they will have heard current events that focus on Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and other religions as a cause of some actions. But most middle grade students will not have considered that early Protestant (if they even really understand that term) sects disagreed with one another to such an extent that dissenters were disenfranchised or persecuted (see the article “Quakers¹,” which mentions the execution of Quakers by the Puritan Massachusetts government).

It is also important to consider that any discussion of religion in the classroom must be balanced and maintain a historical focus, particularly when working with 8th graders, who are becoming self-aware, are often idealistic, and can become impassioned with their own beliefs. Setting the tone in your classroom for discussions about religion that focus on historical reasons and perspectives will enable you and your students to talk about other charged or controversial issues in the future. As you discuss this topic, constantly remind students to think about the time and place being discussed — to be historically empathetic and consider multiple perspectives.

For some excellent teacher background information in 17th and 18th century religion in America you may want to access the page “Divining America: Religion in American History²” on the TeacherServe website at the National Humanities Center.

Classroom discussion

This classroom discussion can take place after the students read the article “Quakers³,” but would probably be more useful *before* the students read the article. (It can also be used as a template for discussions of religion in other historical contexts.)

1. **Bell-ringer activity (oral or written): What is the relationship between religion and government in the United States? (or, if you dare: What *should* be the relationship between religion and government in the United States?)** Ask several students to share their ideas. Take care to guide the discussion so it does not devolve into arguments of specific theological precepts or denominational proselytizing.

Students should reference the First Amendment or at least recognize the concept. If they do not mention it specifically, you should lead them to the amendment.

2. **Explain to the class that in order to understand early America and why our government is based on the separation of church and state (government), they need to think about the influence and importance of religion in both Europe and the fledgling colonies.**
3. **Ask students to share what they remember about the religion during the early Age of Exploration — the 1400s and early 1500s.**

Students should indicate the supremacy of Roman Catholicism in Western Europe. Some may remember that one of the motives for exploration was to spread Catholicism. If the students are having difficulty recalling this information, you may want to have them read (or re-read) “Spain and America: From Reconquest to Conquest⁴.”

4. **Ask the students to name some of the first religious groups to settle English America.** Most will name Puritans, Pilgrims, and Quakers. Some might include other denominations such as Anglicans, Presbyterians, Mennonites, etc.
5. **What is the reason for the change between the first explorers, all of whom were Roman Catholic, to the variety of denominations by the time the English settled their colonies?**

Some students may point out that the earliest explorers to the New World were Spanish and therefore Roman Catholic. If so, remind students that several other countries (Portugal, France, and even Henry Cabot’s exploration for England) explored and all were still Catholic at the time. At this point you may want to include a general overview of the Protestant Reformation, if most of your students don’t have a good grasp of the time period. The article “England’s Flowering⁵” provides a good summery. Students generally do not understand, however, that many of the new Protestant religions became the official state religion of European nations. In fact, many do not grasp the concept of state religions. Explain this or have the class discover through brainstorming and interactive lecture (questions 6 and 7) that religious toleration or freedom was generally an unknown concept at this time in history.

IMPORTANCE OF STATE RELIGIONS

6. **Allow the students to brainstorm why governments at this time adopted or supported state religions. This can be done as a class but would probably be more successful in small groups of three or four. After giving the students time to think and discuss their ideas, record their responses on chart paper, board, or electronically using a projection device.**

Some concepts that should come from the discussion — or to which you should lead the students — include:

- A church brought on a solid civic foundation — it taught morality and respect for authority in much the same way that religion was used to protect and justify slavery in the American South in the nineteenth century.
 - It was a symbiotic relationship — governments benefited from this stability in their citizenry and in turn the church was given funds (often tax monies), land, and other privileges.
 - Church leaders and governmental officials were often the same people or closely aligned politically.
 - Citizens that were required to go to church, paid taxes to support the church, and were instructed what to think and believe were not likely to question either governmental or religious leaders.
7. **Now ask the students to consider the impact of the Reformation into this situation. Again you may want to ask the students to discuss this first in their small groups and then share with the class.**

Students should recognize that the Reformation challenged the status quo of Roman Catholic Western Europe. Some people and even entire nations (England, for example) were questioning the authority of the Pope and the Catholic Church. But it is important for the students to realize that even as nations left the Catholic Church most did **not** allow religious freedom, but simply adopted their own state religion like that of the Anglican Church in England. The same rules applied, but with a different church working with the government.

RELIGION IN EARLY U.S. SETTLEMENT

8. **Ask the students to think about the early settlement of North America. Which religions were generally associated with which regions or colonies? You may make this a homework or group assignment with students researching on the internet. Have the students make a list of the thirteen colonies plus Florida and New Netherland and find the religions associated with each.**

- Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Connecticut: Puritan or Congregationalists (some may include Pilgrims for early Massachusetts)
- Rhode Island: this colony was founded on the concept of religious freedom and a separation of church and state when Roger Williams was banished from Massachusetts in 1636 for speaking out against Puritan Church practices
- New Netherland: Dutch Reformed Church
- Much of New York, North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Virginia: Anglican
- Delaware: First settled by Scandinavian Lutherans and Dutch Reformed, by the time of the Revolution it was predominately Anglican

- Pennsylvania: settled by Quakers, but allowed most religions to worship freely
- New Jersey: Like Pennsylvania and New York, this colony attracted many Protestant denominations
- Florida: Settled by Spanish Roman Catholics
- Maryland was a different case: Owned by Roman Catholics, it tolerated Protestants to encourage settlement, by the late colonial period it recognized the Anglican church as the official colonial church.

HIGHER-LEVEL THINKING QUESTIONS

Note: Depending on your class, you may want to use all, or just a few, of these questions.

9. **Even though most colonies had state-supported religions, why might persecuted religious groups have continued to immigrate to the British colonies?**

Through discussion and debate, students may conclude that these were the people with the most to gain in America. They had no hope of advancement in their European homes, but had possibilities in the American colonies, which were anxious to attract more settlers. As a side note you might want to ask why the British wished to have more colonists: In the 17th century, reasons would have included a larger tax base, more labor for producing or extracting raw materials to ship to England, and the colonies offered a place for British poor or criminals to go. In the 18th century as the Industrial Revolution and the British military required more of the lower class, there was less emigration from England and more from Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and European nations — particularly Germany, where warfare and famine brought thousands to America in the early 1700s. The British encouraged this emigration as the need for colonial labor and back-country defense increased; it strengthened the colonies without depleting the English mother country of her cheap labor.

10. **As more colonists from different religions began to live in the colonies, it became more difficult for colonial governments to support one religion. How did the emergence of British colonies that were not totally British and not one state-supported religion affect the development of the colonies?**

The colonies became more and more diverse during the colonial era. Settlers had the opportunity to practice their own religion and become self-sufficient.

11. **How did the geography of Europe and the American colonies affect religion in the colonial period?**

In Europe, there was limited available land. Due to the crowded conditions, it made sense for government and religion to work together to control the population (see questions 5 and 6) and a single dominant religion lessened the possibilities of controversies or rebellion. In the colonies there was an abundance of land. Different religious groups could, and often did, settle great distances apart. This reduced religious tension — all could find a place to call their own in the American colonies. European dissidents believed they could establish their own communities without fear of governmental interference. This, naturally, was a great incentive in group colonization — a concept that continued to attract immigrants after the Revolution.

This discussion can also lead to the Great Awakening and Revolutionary American thought. You may choose to wait and address these questions at that time in the chronological study.

12. **Ask the students to imagine life in the American colonies, particularly on the frontier in the early 1700s. What were some of the dangers and problems that faced these settlers?**

Attacks by wild animals. Attacks by Indians whose lands were threatened by white colonial encroachment. Poor harvests. Lack of community, predominantly for women who were more often tied to the homestead. Continued upheaval as settlers moved to a new homesteads. Lack of conveniences and luxuries due to lack of money or distance from supply. (While thousands of colonists moved south and west, even more Europeans left war, famine, persecution, and poverty in their home countries and immigrated to America.)

13. **Have students read “Nathan Cole and the First Great Awakening.”⁶ Discuss the Great Awakening phenomenon. Why were colonists so attracted to this movement? Remind the students to think about what they had discussed about life in the back-country in the 1700s.**

Not only did the movement appeal to a religious experience, but it offered camaraderie, comfort, community involvement, and the emotional release of worries and tensions that were accentuated by the extreme dangers of a frontier environment. Women, in particular, found fellowship in the meetings that were so instrumental in the Great Awakening. The stability of a shared religious experience brought communities closer together.

14. **Now bring the discussion to the psychology of the pre-Revolutionary American. How did the colonial American religious experience help to develop a climate that accepted the concept of independence?**

Help the students discover that the colonists felt free to choose their own religious beliefs and/or denominations. These were life-altering decisions for people of this time; in many cases they believed these were choices that determined whether each man and his family would be saved or eternally doomed. Crucial choices were not new to this generation, so it was not a huge step from religious decisions to political ones. And neither was there a fear of challenging authority. As these same men and women, a second or third generation of Americans, determined their religious roles, they often challenged the accepted or prescribed rules of the state religion. This was a group that felt enabled to make those decisions that heretofore had been made by their social superiors. Religious freedom had empowered a new generation to seek its own destiny.

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Notes

1. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-colonial/2.5>.

2. See <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/divam.htm>.
3. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-colonial/2.5>.
4. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-twoworlds/3.1>.
5. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-twoworlds/4.1>.
6. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-colonial/6.13>.

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