

# A Land of Many Gods – A Timeline of American Religious Diversity

## Colonial Beginnings

Pre-contact native cultures – Estimated number of tribes in North America prior to European contact: 140-160; dozens of distinct language groups. Wide diversity in “religious” practices and ideas.

1492 – Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain and the Inquisition banish Jews and Muslims. A period of Christian dominance and forced conversion/emigration begins along with European exploration of Western hemisphere.

Members of **Roman Catholic** orders (Franciscan, Dominican, Jesuit) participate in the conquering of Central and South America. Establish missions along SE coast of North America.



1564 – **French Protestants** found Fort Caroline (in what is now Florida) in **Timucuan** territory (Jacques le Moyne drawing, left, ca. 1564); later establish Charlesfort (now Port Royal, SC).

1565 – St. Augustine, FL, founded by **Spanish Catholic** explorers charged with routing the **Protestants** and converting the **Timucuan** peoples to **Catholicism**.

1612 – Earliest Spanish (**Roman Catholic**) missions founded in the Southwest region (now New Mexico).

1630 – **English Puritans** arrive; found the Massachusetts Bay Colony. 1647 – the colony forbids **Catholic priests** and Jesuits from entering the city upon penalty of death. Dissenters Roger Williams (**Baptist**) and Anne Hutchinson (**Puritan**) are banished to Rhode Island, and four **Quakers** are hanged for challenging Puritan authorities.

1600s – Churches are established as part of the governing structures in several colonies: Quebec: **French Catholic**;

Virginia: **Church of England**; Massachusetts: **English Puritans**; New Netherlands (New York): **Dutch Reformed**; South Carolina: **Church of England**; Pennsylvania: **Quaker**; and Maryland: **Roman Catholic**.

1643 – At least 18 different languages are spoken in New Amsterdam. In addition to the established **Dutch Reformed Church**, numerous religious groups are present: **Calvinist** (French, Dutch), **Lutheran** (German), **Anabaptist** (English, Dutch, German), **Quaker** (English), **Jewish** (Sephardic, by way of Spain and Brazil in 1654)

1654 – Shearith Israel, first **Jewish** synagogue in North America, founded in New York City. Sephardic **Jewish** families found synagogue in Newport, RI, 1658. (Photo right, c. 1910)



1692 – William of Orange, King of England, repress **Catholicism** in Maryland and establish the **Church of England** in its place.

1689 to 1773 – 18 **Roman Catholic** (Spanish) missions are found in what is now Texas.

## 1700s – 1800

Laws regarding religious groups vary widely from colony to colony. Only **Christians** could hold office in Massachusetts, but **Catholics** had to renounce the pope to do so. New York banned Catholics from holding public office. In Maryland, **Jews** were denied full rights. Several colonies forbade **Catholic** church building: Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Connecticut, Vermont, Maine, South Carolina, Georgia. In Georgia (1732) the **Church of England** is established, but immigrants to the colony include **Presbyterians**, **French Huguenots**,

**Calvinists**, **Lutherans**, **Moravians**, and **Jews**. **Catholics** were excluded.

1768-1775 – Several **Baptist** ministers are imprisoned in **Church-of-England**-dominated Virginia for unlicensed baptizing, aggressive proselytizing, criticizing the government, disturbing the peace.

1769 to 1823 – 21 **Roman Catholic** (Spanish) missions are founded in what is now California.

1774 – Virginia Declaration of Rights argues against the established Church of England in Virginia and calls for “free exercise” of religion.

1777 – John Jay’s *Federalist No. 2* states that toleration be extended to “**Jews**, **Turks** [**Muslims**] and **Infidels**” in the new America, but not to **Catholics**.

1791 – First Amendment of the Bill of Rights forbids the establishment of religion by the federal government and guarantees the free exercise of religion.

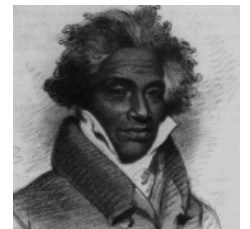
1794 – Thomas Paine’s **Deist** work, *The Age of Reason* initially printed.

1833 – Massachusetts is the last state to disestablish its state-supported (Congregational) churches.

## 1800 to 1924

1800 – approximately 16% of the American population is “churched.”

10-15% of enslaved Africans brought to North America are **Muslim**, including Abdul Rahman Ibrahima Sori (figure right; 1762-1829), the subject of the film *Prince Among Slaves* (2008).



1806 to 1817 – **Shawnee** religious leader, Tenskwatawa (“The Prophet”), leads restorationist movement among Eastern and Central tribes. (Painting, right, by George Caitlin, 1830)



1816, **African Methodist Episcopal Church** is founded by Richard Allen in Philadelphia.

British, Scottish, and Scots-Irish immigrants arrive (**Presbyterian, Methodist**)

1820s+ – Growth of **Evangelical Protestantism**, revivalism (Second Great Awakening). Founding of **Disciples of Christ**.

1830 – **Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints** (Mormons) founded by Joseph Smith. 1846 Mormon migration to Utah begins.

1840s – Transcendentalist writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson are influenced by **Hindu** texts, including the *Bhagavad Gita*, and Hindu travelers.

1840s – **Catholic** immigration from Ireland during famine. German immigration 1848 and on (**Catholic, Lutheran, and Jewish**)



1849 – Chinese (**Buddhist**) immigrants arrive during Gold Rush and by 1853 found temples in San Francisco. By 1900 some 400 Chinese temples exist in California. Temples, like the one at the left in Evanston, WY (Photo c.

1890s), are derogatorily called Joss Houses by whites.

1860s – Scandinavian immigration (**Lutheran, Baptist**)

1884 – Native American religious practices outlawed. 1892, penalties for engaging in indigenous practices raised to imprisonment. 1889, **Ghost Dance** is created.

1860s and 70s – **Seventh-Day Adventists** founded by Ellen G. White (1863). **Jehovah’s Witnesses** founded by Charles Taze Russell (1870s). **Church of Jesus Christ, Scientist** (Christian Science) founded by Mary Baker Eddy (1879).

**Salvation Army** founded in England (1864) and arrives in US in the early 1880s.

1874 – Some 12,000 people attend **Vodou** Queen, Marie Laveau’s ceremony at Lake Pontchartrain in New Orleans.

1886 – Jewish Theological Seminary, adopting the new “**Conservative Judaism**,” founded in New York City.

1893 – World’s Parliament of Religions held during the World’s Columbia Exposition in Chicago. Representatives from traditions around the world meet to discuss the importance of religion in the modern world: **Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, Shintoism, Hinduism, Islam**.

**Hindu** Swami Vivekananda tours the US (1893-96) and establishes Vedanta centers.

1890s – **Jewish** immigration from Russia and Eastern Europe in the face of pogroms. **Orthodox** synagogues founded across the US.

**Russian (Eastern) Orthodox** immigrants from Alaska settlement found the county’s first Eastern Orthodox Church in San Francisco. Late 1890s, **Eastern Rite Catholic** Carpatho-Rusyn immigrants convert to **Russian Orthodoxy**. 1895, initial converts to **Bahá’í** in Chicago.

Early 1900s **Muslims** from Turkey and Albania immigrate to Chicago, New York, and East Coast. Islamic benevolent organizations formed.

Syrian, Lebanese, Palestinian, immigration begins in 1910s, mostly **Maronite and Orthodox Christians**, but some **Coptic Christians and Muslims** as well. First mosque in the US founded in Ross, ND, in 1929. Mosque built in Cedar Rapids, IA, 1934.

1906 – Asuza Street Revival in Los Angeles launches **Pentecostalism**, or spirit-filled worship characterized by speaking in tongues, ecstatic bodily motion, faith healing.

**Sikhs** migrate from British Columbia to Washington State to work in lumber mills. 1907 – Bellingham (WA) Riots result in



forcible banishment of hundreds of Sikhs by a mob of nativist whites opposed to non-Christian immigration. (Photo right: 16 Sept. 1906, *Puget Sound American*)

1924 – Severe restrictions placed on US immigration, excluding Asians, Jews, and others.

## 1924 to the Present

1924 – The **Nation of Islam** (NOI) founded by Wallace D. Fard Muhammad. In 1964, many would follow Malcolm X out of the NOI and into **Sunni Islam**.

1940s – US authorities seize **Japanese Buddhist** temples and property in Hawaii and California.

1954 – **Church of Scientology** founded by L. Ron Hubbard.

1955 – Will Herberg’s best-seller *Protestant-Catholic-Jew* acknowledges religious diversity but ignores many groups.

1957 - Billy Graham revivals, Madison Square Garden, launch an upswing in **Evangelical Protestantism**.

1965 – US immigration quotas relaxed and new immigrants arrive from India, South Asia, Korea, Middle East, Iran, etc. They establish **Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Sikh**, and other congregations throughout the US.



1978 – American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA) grants **Native**

**Americans** the right to engage in religious practices and to access sacred sites. (Photo left, Ojibwe drumming circle, *Mpls. Star Tribune*, 14 Mar. 2014)

## For further reading:

Diana L. Eck. *A New Religious America: How a “Christian Country” Has Become the World’s Most Religiously Diverse Nation*. Harper San Francisco, 2001.  
Peter Manseau. *One Nation, Under God: A New American History*. Little, Brown, & Company, 2015.

*Pamphlet created by Jeanne Halgren Kilde, June 2016*