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Issues of Religious Freedom: Religious Minorities

Baptists

By the 18th century, while the idea of religious freedom was spreading, a large majority of Americans lived in states with an established religion: Congregational in the North (Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Connecticut) and Anglican (or what is known today in America as Episcopalian) in the South (North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia), meaning that all citizens had to pay a religious tax for the support of religion. In some states, the law authorized the taxpayer to designate his share to the church of his choice.

In the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights, the Founding Fathers set out to define what role the national government would play in religious matters. Would it guard the religious liberty of individuals and religious groups and guarantee that diverse religious traditions could co-exist on an equal basis? Or would faith traditions of religious minorities merely be “tolerated” by the religion of the majority? A prior century of religious conflicts and persecution of certain religious sects in colonial America would have weighed on the minds of the Founding Fathers in their deliberations.

For example, in the years before the American Revolution, Baptists were among the most oppressed groups, particularly in Virginia where their presence and practices challenged the authority of Anglican Church leaders. Often the persecution of Baptists was physically violent. Many Baptist ministers deliberately violated the Virginia law requiring a license to preach because they considered it unacceptable to ask another man’s permission to preach the Gospel. Baptists believe that each individual can directly approach God through the study of the New Testament. Ministers are not needed to interpret God’s will. The persecutors were members of the Anglican Church, sometimes acting as vigilantes but often collaborating with local authorities.

One such example was described by the victim himself, Preacher Jack Waller in 1771. *“The parson (minister) of the parish (Anglican) accompanied by the local sheriff would keep running the end of his whip in (Waller’s) mouth, laying his whip across the hymn book, etc. when done singing (Waller) proceeded to prayer. In it he was violently jerked off the stage, they caught him by the back of his neck, beat his head against the ground, sometimes up and sometimes down, they carried him though the gate. . .where a gentleman (the sheriff) gave him. . .twenty lashes with his horsewhip.* (Source: Library of Congress www.localgov/exhibits/religion/rel05.html).

Baptists differed from Anglicans regarding the appropriate time, purpose, and method of baptism. For example, they believed that the ritual should serve to induct adults into membership in the local church only after their salvation was assured by their study and acceptance of the teachings of the New Testament, which they viewed as the supreme authority

of God's will. Therefore the baptism of children was seen as inappropriate. In keeping with the practices of the earliest Christians, the ritual of baptism required the total immersion in water of the follower. The refusal to have their infants baptized led to the enactment of the following law in the colonial legislature of Virginia:

Whereas, sundry and divers persons, out of adverseness to the establishment of orthodox (established) religion, or out of new-fangled conceits about their own heretical (unorthodox) inventions, refuse to have their children baptized, Be it enacted, that whosoever shall refuse when he might carry his child to a lawful minister within the country, shall be fined two hundred pounds of tobacco, half to the informer, and half to the parish. (Source: www.reformedreader.org/history/ford/chapter01.htm).

David Barrow was a minister of the Mill Swamp Baptist Church in the Portsmouth, Virginia area. He and a "ministering brother," Edward Mintz were conducting a service in 1778, when they were attacked. *"As soon as the hymn was given out, a gang of well-dressed men came up to the stage...and sang one of their obscene songs. Then they took to plunge both the preachers. They plunged Mr. Barrow twice, pressing him into the mud, holding him down, nearly succeeding in drowning him...His companion was plunged but once...Before these persecuted men could change their clothes, they were dragged from the house, and driven off by these enraged churchmen."* (Source: Library of Congress www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/re105.html).

These and other horrendous acts of oppression against Baptists had a lasting impact on many of the Founding Fathers who valued religious liberty over their own loyalty to the Anglican Church. Among them were George Washington, James Madison, Patrick Henry, and Thomas Jefferson.

To the 21st century American, 18th century America—with its overwhelmingly Christian majority—may not seem very religiously diverse. But the Western Europeans that settled the American colonies arrived with a memory of religious persecution, turmoil, and in some cases even civil war because of *differences* in Christian sects that began to emerge following the Protestant Reformation (which had ended the religious conformity existing since the fourth century). No doubt James Madison had this in mind when he wrote: *"Torrents of blood have been spilled in the Old World [by] vain attempts of the secular arm to extinguish religious discord by proscribing (prohibiting) all differences in religious opinion. Time has at length revealed the true remedy. Every relaxation of narrow and rigorous policy, wherever it has been tried, has been found to assuage (lessen) the disease."* (Source: "Madison's Remonstrance" from The Separation of Church and State edited by Forrest Church 68)

Based on this reading, be prepared to discuss the following questions:

1. Identify the time, place, and religious minority experiencing oppression.
2. How and why was this group considered to be out of the religious mainstream?
3. What forms of oppression did this group experience?
4. Why did the religious majority perceive this group to be a threat to society?