

# *Continuum of Greatness*

*The Hall of Fame for Great Americans  
at Bronx Community College , CUNY*



## *Religion in America*

*As developed through three early colonial figures:*

*Roger Williams 1603-1683*

*William Penn 1644-1718*

*Jonathan Edwards 1703-1758*

# Religion in America

**R**eligion is one of the most significant factors that has influenced the course of the American nation from its founding to the present time. The Hall of Fame for Great Americans has recognized this in the installation of three individuals that are a part of this religious experience. They are Roger Williams, William Penn, and Jonathan Edwards.

Before we weigh the influence of each of these important religious figures, let us look at the development of religion in America through the consideration of certain questions. Was it intended that the American development from its inception was to foster religious freedom? Were all those involved in the American settlement since 1607 advocates of religious freedom? Did the American foundation anticipate that state and church would be separate, and that the early Americans would be free to follow their own mind too the context of the growth of religious liberty in America? These are questions that need consideration for a fuller understanding of religious development within the American nation.

In a recent publication entitled, Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America, by Steven Waldman, examines the question of religious freedom the earliest stages is examined, and whether the United States was founded to be a Christian nation or a secular one. In the words of Waldman, he answers this question by noting that the Founding Fathers developed a revolutionary formula “for promoting faith by leaving it alone.” He considers the First Amendment which states: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting, the free exercise thereof.” At the present time, the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, together with many U.S Supreme Court decisions provides for the separation of church and state. Yet, Waldman, contends, that the Founders only expected this, the First Amendment clause to apply only to the federal government not to state governments. Today, we understand that, the First Amendment to apply to both.

It must be understood, that the Founding Fathers of the nation were practical men. God was an important part of their lives, and he was concerned with all aspects of their lives. Yet, nothing was emphatically established and ideas would change over time.

This is the very essence of religious liberty. Alexis de Tocqueville, in his Democracy in America, was able by 1830 to see the changes, as he observed that one of the distinguishing characteristics of America was religious liberty.

It was within this framework, that the three individuals, who are the focus of religious freedom in America: Roger Williams, William Penn, and Jonathan Edwards brought to the fore a remarkable concept concerning God and government. It was sinful to believe, in the word of John Pomfret, in The Founding of American Colonies 1583-1660, that it was sinful to place God as part of the covenant that established government. Government was good to protect people in their possessions, but could not and should not make God part of this process. This concept as early as 1636, would create quite a stir in the Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony through the efforts of Roger Williams who questioned the attempt of government to control religious thinking. William would be banished in 1636 for what was considered heretical religious thinking.

William Pen, founder of the Pennsylvania Colony in 1681, established that freedom of religion could be conducted without an established church. In this colony complete freedom of religion and conscience was guaranteed.

With Jonathan Edwards, and his vibrant preaching, religion was to be considered as a personal force. Religion by the 18<sup>th</sup> century was not to be viewed intellectually guided an directed by a central authority. Thus,



*First lady Laura Bush (L) and U.S. President George W. Bush applaud as Pope Benedict XVI waves to the crowd at the White House during an arrival ceremony at the White House April 16, 2008 in Washington, DC.*

# Roger Williams

1603-1683



**R**oger Williams was from an upper-middle class family in London. He arrived in Massachusetts Bay colony in 1629, and he accepted the position of assistant pastor in Salem, and then by 1635, became its acting pastor. Yet, in the midst of religious orthodoxy, he favored an extreme version of separation of church and state. He upheld religious toleration, and denied the right of the government to control one's worldly goods.

The town of Salem was refused an assignment of land in 1635, possibly because Williams was ordained minister there. With the consent of his church, he sent letters protesting the refusal to grant the land. He called for the separation of his church from other churches, and stated that unless this was done he would separate from the church. When this refused, he detached himself from all church affairs. It was this idea that led him to detach himself completely from his church.

For Williams, the purity of the church required a complete separation of church and state, and the freedom of religious thought. This freedom was to be free from and free from coercion on the part of government. "Forced worship," he once declared, "stinks in God's nostrils..." He questioned the authority of government to impose religious conformity upon any individual. These were advanced views that were obviously hard to assimilate in 1636. But they were the basis for the more modern concepts upon which religious liberty was to be established.

Unable to gain any following or hearing in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, by 1638 he left and went to Narragansett Bay, the first permanent settlement that was to become Rhode Island Colony. It must be noted that he was scheduled to be sent back to England and perhaps stand trial. But he was a likeable fellow, and the Governor John Winthrop, liked him and allowed him to slip away. There he was able to establish the beginnings of a colony which under his leadership was to foster religious liberty and separation of church and state.

# William Penn

1644-1718



**W**illiam Penn was the son of the Admiral William Penn, Sr., who had supported first Oliver Cromwell and later the restoration of the crown in 1660. Penn Jr. had become attracted to a religious group known as the Society of Friends, referred to familiarly as Quakers founded by George Fox. This group faced many restrictions in England. To dissociate his son from this

Quakers, his father had sent him to Paris hoping this would change his mind. Upon his return, the younger Penn, still not dissuaded from Quakerism and he began thinking of ways to help them achieve freedom of thought.

The opportunity arose when his father died and left as part of his estate a claim of 16,000 pounds that Penn's father had lent to the crown. Perhaps as a way to settle the claim, Charles II of England, granted Penn land west of the Delaware River in North America that was named Pennsylvania (Penn's Woods) in honor of his father. It was a refuge for the Quakers, but more that that it was to be a refuge for people of all religions. This was to attract those of numerous faiths. In his constitution for the government of the new colony, he noted: "Any government is free...where the laws rule and the people are a party to the laws." It was Penn's intention to show that a government that operated in conjunction with Quaker principles could maintain peace and that religious would be able to flourish without a state church, and there would be complete freedom of conscience.

Pennsylvania became a refuge for more than just Quakers. Dissenters of all types were welcomed. One has only to look at the variety of religious groups that flocked to Pennsylvania: Roman Catholics, Mennonites, Presbyterians, and the Jewish element. All freed from the yoke of government control and allowed to pursue their own religious preferences. Here we see in early form, how religious freedom and separation of church and state was becoming a trend that would reach into the future.

1636

Roger Williams  
Break with Puritans  
Goes to Rhode Island



1649

Tolerance  
Maryland Act of  
Toleration

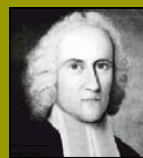
1681

William Penn  
Pennsylvania colony  
complete religious  
freedom



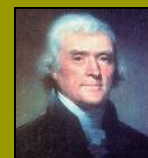
1720-1750

Jonathan Edwards  
1st Great Awakening



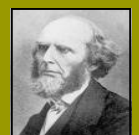
1779-1801

Thomas Jefferson  
Separation of church  
and state.



1830

Charles Finney and the  
2nd Great Awakening  
reestablishment  
evangelism



# Jonathan Edwards

## 1703-1758

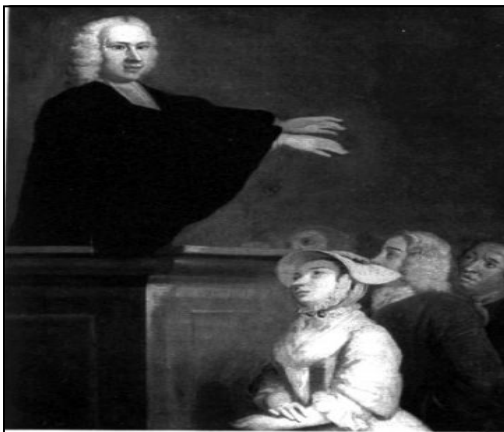


Jonathan Edwards may be seen as one of the principals initiators of the movement between 1720-1750, referred to as the First Great Awakening. It was this that brought to the fore, the realization and religious experience was to be an individual expression not to be enforced by an established authority such as government. It was to reflect true worship of God and to emphasize moral values. Edwards was one of America's most brilliant philosophers and theologians. He combated the intense rationalism that had been made a part of religious thinking. Further, he criticized the constant concern with monetary values and the fact that religion had become too intellectual.

The eloquent preaching of George Whitefield stirred Edwards to present his won revivalist gospel, that he viewed as basis of a true faith. As Edwards explained it, the Christian "does not rationally believe that God is glorious, but he had a sense of the gloriousness of God in his heart." Thus, we can see that religion is not to be imposed by anyone, but is to be achieved through intense emotional individual experience. He saw himself as the instrument of the process, as he used his tremendous preaching powers to "awaken" the divine spirit within people.

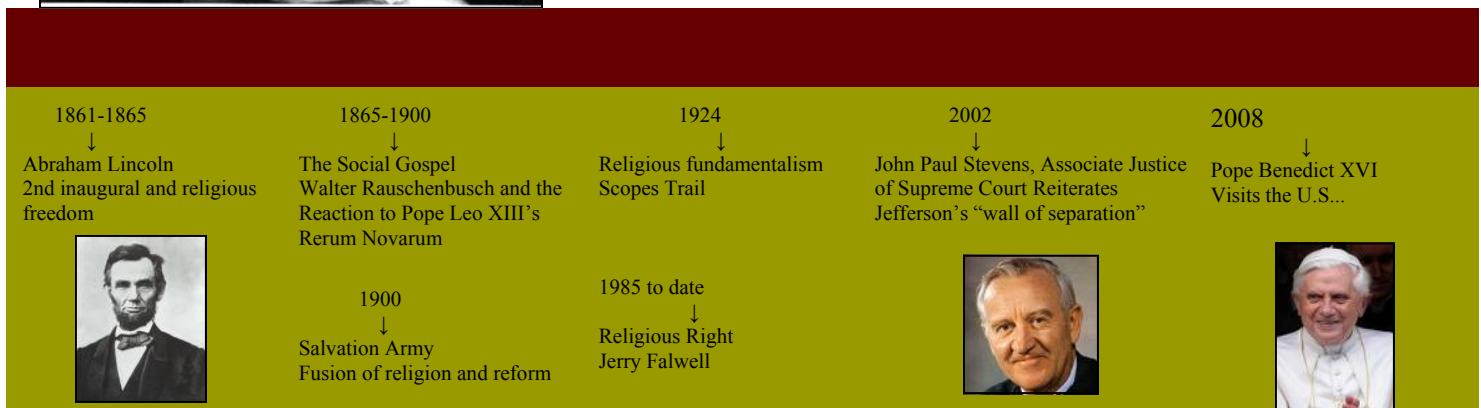
Edwards may be considered as the greatest theologian that America has produced. Through his writings, he helped to establish the beginnings of the Evangelical Missionary movement, which during his time was still in its infancy. He influenced the various practices of the evangelical movement, as it moved through the American Colonial period. Gone were the excesses, and he brought religious experience to what it should be, as a personal experience in the worship of God, and a desire to do good. Although he criticized Whitefield, and other Great Awakening preachers for their practices, Edwards did realize that emotional preaching was necessary to an understanding of God.

The overall significance of Edwards was the removal of religion from a constituted authority and placing it in the hands of the individual. This leads one to understand that religion is a personal matter not to be established from above. From this point it can be seen that he had laid the foundation for freedom of religion and its separation from the state.



*George Whitefield (Painting by John Wollaston, Courtesy of The National Portrait Gallery, London)*

Written and compiled by Vincent Bonelli.  
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