

The United States has long been known as a beacon of religious freedom and diversity. Authors in Europe and America have expounded on and celebrated this fact since the 18th century. The peaceful co-existence of a wide range of competing faiths has elicited admiration, condemnation, surprise, amusement, and wonder. In the intervening centuries American pluralism has evolved, been challenged, theorized, theologized and naturalized as a hallmark of American society. Consequently it has become impossible for Americans to imagine democracy existing without religious freedom and pluralism. However the existence of pluralism has not received much sustained analysis. This paper will set America's experience with religious freedom and diversity in the context of its origins in the struggles over empire and toleration in seventeenth century England. English imperial policy, conspicuously absent from most accounts of the rise of American religious pluralism, is of crucial importance in the creation of American pluralism. The existence of the peculiar religious arrangements of Maryland, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, New York, Carolina, and New Jersey owes much more to events and ideas in England than America. The Restoration period in particular (1660-1688) proved to be a period of tremendous constitutional experimentation motivated largely by the desire to protect religious liberties. There was no single method for doing so, nor an ideal of religious freedom that was being aimed at. Rather, this paper argues, it was the cumulative effect of these various arrangements that enabled pluralism to take root in America, rendering the creation of a national church for the US unthinkable by the time of Independence.