
INTRODUCTION

More Than Two Centuries of Religion in Ohio

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LAYERS OF SEDIMENTARY ROCK OFTEN GREET THE EYE AS ONE DRIVES through the hilly portions of Ohio. Sometimes horizontal, but more often tipped topsy-turvy, the rock layers give clear evidence both that the present terrain of Ohio has been built up over time and that it has occasionally been affected by cataclysmic events.

So it is with religion in Ohio. The religious topography of Ohio includes many layers, and also gives evidence of significant upheavals. Both the layering and the upheavals have had a number of consequences, some of which are explored in the essays that follow in this volume. In this essay, the goal will be to look at the general “lay of the land,” so that the individual essays that follow can be understood in a larger context.

Humans have lived in Ohio for thousands of years. Although we know very little about the first inhabitants, they left a legacy that continues to awe and inspire us—the mounds and other earthworks that are still prominent on the landscape, in spite of centuries of neglect and destruction. Many Ohioans have at least a passing acquaintance with the names—Adena, Hopewell, Fort Ancient—associated with the mound builders and their immediate successors.



Effigy mounds, such as the famous Serpent Mound in Adams County, were probably constructed for ceremonial purposes that we today would describe as “religious.” (Courtesy of the Ohio Historical Society)

Were these prehistoric peoples “religious”? No doubt they were. They certainly paid attention to those events—birth, death, the passing of the seasons, the vagaries of nature and human behavior—that give rise to religious reflection, as is evidenced in their artifacts. But we can know few of the details of their perspectives on life, or of their specific behaviors, because there is too little available evidence.

Much more is known of the religious views of the historic Native Americans, whose beliefs and customs European explorers and settlers recorded from the time of the first contact between the two peoples. In Ohio, the major Indian tribes in the eighteenth century, just prior to large-scale white settlement, were the Delaware, Miami, Mingo, Ottawa, Shawnee, and Wyandotte. Their religion was part and parcel of everyday life, with no distinction between “sacred” and “secular.” Elders, shamans, and other religious leaders of these communities interpreted the significance of, and were involved in, all aspects of life. Sometimes looked down upon by European Americans as “pagans” or “animists”—because of their belief that all living creatures, and even some inanimate ones, contained spirits—most Native Americans combined this view with belief in a Great



A bird's-eye view of the reconstructed village at Schoenbrunn, Tuscarawas County. Schoenbrunn was established in 1772 by Moravian missionaries. (Courtesy of the Ohio Historical Society)

Spirit who ruled over the lesser spirits. Indeed, Native Americans in Ohio were indignant when early Christian missionaries intimated that they were hearing of the one true God for the first time.

Contact between Europeans and Native Americans had profound religious implications for the latter, as they became the objects of missionary efforts by various Christian groups. In Ohio, the best-known Christian missions were those of the Moravians among the Delawares on the Tuscarawas River just before and during the American Revolution, and of the Methodists among the Wyandottes at Upper Sandusky after the War of 1812. Both stories had unhappy endings, giving credence to the views of those Native Americans who argued that they had no business being involved with a “white man’s religion.”

Both sides in the Revolution suspected the peaceful Moravian Delaware Indians of giving aid and comfort to the enemy. On March 9, 1782, a day of infamy in Ohio history, American militia—acting on the flimsiest of pretences—massacred ninety-eight nonresisting Moravians at Gnadenhutten. Although American authorities decried this deed, it reflected the widespread belief among frontier whites that Native Americans—no

matter what their formal religious affiliations—were never to be trusted. For their part, Native Americans avenged their kinsmen's deaths with the subsequent capture, torture, and execution of Col. William Crawford, who had led a military expedition against them in May of that same year. After the war, a few Moravian Delawares did return to the Tuscarawas River valley with the aid of the U.S. government. Regardless of such conciliatory gestures, the credibility of Christian America remained at low ebb among most Native Americans.

Later, the Wyandottes, confined to a reservation at Upper Sandusky after the War of 1812, fared better. But in the end they fell victim to the white greed and racism that had always troubled European–Native American relationships. The fact that a majority of the Wyandottes converted to Methodist Christianity during the 1820s and 1830s, under the empathetic tutelage of black and white missionaries, and that the tribe had considerable success in adapting to European American methods of agriculture and commerce, was not enough to prevent their white neighbors and the state and federal governments from forcing them to sell their reservation in 1843. As the last organized tribe in Ohio began its westward trek to Kansas, one of its preachers noted: “Here our dead are buried. Soon they shall be forgotten, for the onward march of the strong White Man will not turn aside for the Indian graves” (Thelma R. Marsh, *Moccasin Trails to the Cross: A History of the Mission to the Wyandott Indians on the Sandusky Plains* [Upper Sandusky, Ohio: John Stewart United Methodist Church, 1974], 121).

Indian graves, and the cataclysmic end to the ancient culture that they symbolized, were of little consequence to the European American settlers who had flooded into eastern and southern Ohio after the Treaty of Greenville in 1795. With Native Americans confined to the northwestern part of the territory after this date (although this arrangement was disturbed both by continuing Native American resistance and by white violations of the treaty line), white settlement proceeded rapidly. It would take only a short eight years to achieve statehood.

As white settlers streamed in from the East, they brought their religion, or lack thereof, with them. Nominally, most were Protestant Christians, whose “layer” of religion in Ohio has been particularly thick and durable. Naturally, churches that were prominent in the East followed

their adherents to Ohio, providing various forms of assistance to the migrants, including missionary clergy. Several of the churches described later in this book—including the Congregationalists, Episcopalians, German Reformed, Lutherans, Mennonites, Presbyterians, Quakers, Universalists, and Unitarians—got their start in Ohio this way.

The established churches had to cope with one indisputable fact of frontier life, namely widespread irreligion among the new settlers. Some migrants to Ohio had never been a part of organized religion. Some were outspoken disbelievers. Some shed their nominal religious allegiances, as a snake sheds its skin, as they crossed the Appalachian ranges. Although it would not be until 1834 that the Reverend Lyman Beecher of Cincinnati would publish his *Plea for the West*, in which he identified the dangers of “barbarism” for this vast region, the worry that western Americans would not remain—or become—good Protestants was there from the beginning.

Protestants did more than worry. They took concerted action to win the West for their faiths. In addition to the missionary efforts of older groups, newer denominations entered the effort. These denominations either originated in, or were invigorated by, the phenomenon known as the Second Great Awakening, beginning around 1800. The western form of the Awakening was identified with colorful camp meetings and “protracted meetings” that gathered large crowds for emotional seasons of praying, preaching, singing, and sacramental celebration. New members were added to the churches, and backsliders were reclaimed. Baptists and Methodists were especially adept at this work, and their churches grew rapidly in the first decades of the nineteenth century. A new group, the Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) also established itself during this period, winning numerous adherents in Ohio.

Outside the Protestant mainstream, Amish Christians entered Ohio from Pennsylvania early in the nineteenth century. Widely noted for a conservative lifestyle that set them apart both from their fellow Christians and from society at large, the Amish settled in northeastern Ohio, where they were and are particularly prominent in Holmes, Wayne, and Geauga counties. Although viewed by many outsiders in recent years as “quaint,” or as “living ancestors,” the Amish way of life is in fact founded upon a thoughtful Anabaptist theology that eschews worldliness in favor of what is believed to be a primitive Christian simplicity. Amish beliefs,

and those of their Mennonite cousins, are explained at the Amish and Mennonite Heritage Center at Berlin, the centerpiece of which is the 265-foot-long *Behalt*, a cycloramic painting that depicts the history of Christianity from an Anabaptist perspective.

Not all of the new Buckeyes were migrants from the eastern United States. After the end of the napoleonic era in Europe and the opening of the Erie Canal (1825) in this country, a steady stream of immigrants came to Ohio directly from Europe. Irish, Germans, and—a bit later—Eastern and Southern Europeans came in ever larger numbers. They strengthened existing churches and added new Christian denominations as well. Roman Catholic churches, which had been relatively small in size and number, now grew rapidly. Eventually Catholics would become the largest religious body in the state. German Catholics in Columbus founded the Pontifical College Josephinum in 1888; this was, and still is, the only school for priests in North America that is under the direct control of the Vatican. Lutheran and German Reformed churches also grew dramatically as a result of immigration. Eastern Orthodox churches, organized along linguistic lines, were established a bit later, adding another layer to the religious landscape. With the exception of the Civil War years, this immigration continued at a high level until the early twentieth century.

Some of the newer groups did not fit preexisting patterns. Notable among these was the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons), which claimed both a restoration of an ancient revelation in *The Book of Mormon* and new revelations through its prophet, Joseph Smith Jr. From 1831 to 1838 Smith had his headquarters at Kirtland, where a venerable temple still stands as testimony to the ingenuity and persistence of the early Mormons. The Swedenborgians (Church of the New Jerusalem), a small theosophist group, were also active in the state in the early nineteenth century. Their most famous member was John Chapman, better known to generations of Ohio schoolchildren as “Johnny Appleseed.”

Communal religious societies also found a congenial home in Ohio. The Shakers and “Zoarites” (Society of Separatists at Zoar) are discussed in an essay in this book. They are representative of a widespread phenomenon in the early nineteenth century, when many groups attempted to form utopian societies throughout the United States. These societies, usually grounded in a religious point of view, intended not only to pro-

vide an ideal society for their own members but to present an example to the larger world of how people should live together. Both migrants from the East (for example, the Shakers), and immigrants from Europe (for example, the Zoarites), founded utopian societies on the western frontier.

Utopianism was not the only way to address the ills of society in the nineteenth century. Many other religiously motivated people were also keenly aware that there were a multitude of societal wrongs that needed righting. By 1850 Ohio was a hotbed of reforming groups that were promoting particular causes—temperance, abolition of slavery, women’s rights, prison reform, and many more. Theodore Dwight Weld, for a time one of the most prominent of the abolitionists, began his active antislavery career while a student at Lane Seminary (Presbyterian) in Cincinnati in the 1830s. When Lane proved less than hospitable to his abolitionist activity, he and seventy-five of his student colleagues left the seminary. Many of these “Lane Rebels” completed their theological educations at nascent Oberlin College, an evangelical Protestant school that became nationally famous for its policy of admitting women and African American students alongside white males. Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of the religiously motivated antislavery novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), lived for many years in Cincinnati, where her father Lyman was president of Lane Seminary. Living just across the river from the slave state of Kentucky provided her with important information for her antislavery writings. She also learned much from Theodore Dwight Weld, having more appreciation for his intense abolitionism than did her father.

African Americans migrated to Ohio under the most difficult of circumstances, whether they were free or enslaved. In spite of the presence of active abolitionists and the state’s reputation as a “main line” on the Underground Railroad, not all white Ohioans welcomed blacks, whether transient or newly resident. As early as 1804, “black laws” were passed to discourage migration to Ohio. There was a major riot in Cincinnati in 1829 that led to the forcible removal of eleven hundred blacks from that city. Nonetheless, both free blacks and fugitive slaves continued to come to Ohio. Soon they had founded congregations and began to support denominations. Macedonia Baptist Church at Burlington (1849), founded by emancipated slaves from Virginia, is one of the oldest African American church buildings in the United States. The African Methodist Episcopal



The arrival of thirty-two freed slaves from Virginia in 1849 enabled a congregation that had been in existence in Lawrence County near Burlington since 1820 to build the Macedonia Baptist Church, now one of the oldest surviving African American church buildings in the United States. (Courtesy of Dianne Small)

Church, the first organized black denomination in the United States, already had a significant presence in Ohio prior to the Civil War. In the 1860s it took over the operation of Wilberforce College (1856), the first college founded by African Americans in the United States. After the war, several black denominations prospered in Ohio as the African American population increased, adding an important layer to the religious topography of the state.

The Civil War was a cataclysmic event for religion as well as for all other aspects of American society. Some of the religious upheaval before and during the war was organizational, as in the splitting of denominations into northern and southern branches. Some of it was spiritual—the debates over slavery caused some to reexamine the teachings of the Bible, and the immense number of deaths during the war led many to question their traditional beliefs, or to seek out new spiritual experiences. Cultural

upheaval was also significant during this period. Some of these changes, as for example those which took place during and after the war, affected the churches directly. Other changes, as for example those that were precipitated by increasing industrialization and urbanization, had a more indirect impact.

Growing cities had both good and bad consequences for the churches. On the positive side, large urban congregations often developed sophisticated programs housed in new facilities that met the religious needs of many people. On the negative side, industrialization was accompanied by widespread poverty and disruption of traditional family life among the working classes. Churches responded to these challenges in a variety of ways—most often by helping to ameliorate immediate needs (through settlement houses, soup kitchens, orphanages, hospitals, etc.), and sometimes by seeking to change the societal conditions that led to poverty, hunger, disease, crime, and premature death. Many Ohio Protestants became adherents of the “Social Gospel,” which argued that Christians have a duty to make society as a whole more just and compassionate. Rev. Washington Gladden, Congregationalist pastor in Columbus from 1882 until his death in 1918, was a national leader of this movement.

By 1890, Ohio had many, mostly Christian, layers in its religious landscape. The ten largest religious groupings in the state at that time were the Roman Catholic, Methodist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Baptist, Christians/Disciples of Christ, United Brethren (now United Methodist), German Reformed (now United Church of Christ), Congregationalist (now United Church of Christ), and German Evangelical Synod (now United Church of Christ). Judaism was the only significant non-Christian religion.

Jews came to Ohio early in its history; the first Jewish congregation was established in Cincinnati in 1824. By the 1860s there were organized Jewish communities in all of the larger cities and some of the smaller ones. Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise of Cincinnati became a national leader of the Reform movement, which advocated the modernizing of Jewish worship and customs. Hebrew Union College was founded by this group in Cincinnati in 1875. It was the first rabbinical college in America and remains the center of Reform Judaism in North America. Other Jewish groups also flourished in the state in the nineteenth century, and on into the twentieth and twenty-first.



The Islamic Center of Greater Toledo, a striking mosque designed by Talat Itil and constructed in 1982–83, overlooks the junction of Interstates 75 and 475 at Perrysburg in Wood County. It is the first mosque in North America constructed in classical Islamic architectural style. (Courtesy of Dianne Small)

The twentieth century saw several new religious layers added to the Ohio religious landscape and some upheavals as well. A symbolic turning point in the ever-changing and expanding American religious landscape was the Parliament of the World's Religions, held at Chicago in 1893. Although hardly all-inclusive, this gathering did introduce many Americans for the first time, and in a positive context, to religious traditions other than Judaism and Christianity. Hinduism had a permanent presence in the United States from that time forward, in the form of the Vedanta Society, although organized Hinduism would not be present in Ohio until the 1960s. Buddhism was also much better known after the parliament, but it remained mostly a coastal phenomenon among Asian Americans until the 1960s. Jain representatives were also present at the 1893 parliament. The Bahá'í Faith entered American consciousness after the parliament and managed to found its first permanent organizations in Ohio as early as the 1930s. And the Muslim community in northwest

Ohio, which was an extension of a significant Muslim presence in the Detroit area, achieved its first formal organization in 1939. Today, the growing Muslim community in Ohio is perhaps best symbolized by the magnificent mosque at Perrysburg. It is the first mosque in North America to utilize classic Islamic architecture.

Still, Ohio was largely a Judeo-Christian society until after World War II. This was reflected in this volume's predecessor, the slim sesquicentennial volume *Churches in the Buckeye Country: A History of Ohio's Religious Groups Published in Commemoration of the State's Sesquicentennial, 1953*, which contains accounts of only Christian and Jewish groups.

At this point it is important to take note of one early-twentieth-century upheaval that affected many Ohio churches. This was the persecution of German Americans during World War I, a phenomenon which had religious as well as secular consequences. In 1917–18, after comments by Attorney General Thomas Gregory, former President Theodore Roosevelt, and others about “the Huns within our own gates,” local vigilantes (called “Councils of Defense”) set to work harassing the German American community, including its churches. In Ohio, a Lutheran minister was attacked by a mob and a German parochial school was dynamited. German religious books were burned in several cities. Clergy were regularly vilified on the street and in the press. Individual Mennonites and Amish suffered more than most—many were imprisoned—because of their conscientious objection to war. The churches of German background—Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Mennonite, and others—defended themselves as best they could, calling attention to the patriotism of their members and to their many contributions to the state and nation. Their most effective defense, however, was to become “less German.” Protestant worship in the German language and German-language instruction in both Protestant and Catholic parochial schools declined rapidly, except in the socially conservative Amish community. Many Protestant parochial schools closed, never to reopen. Churches of German heritage struggled with the implications of these changes for many years after the war. Coupled with the restrictive immigration policies enacted by the United States government in the 1920s and the economic hardships they shared with all Americans in the 1930s, they struggled to retain the allegiance of their traditional members as they sought to determine their place in

the larger American scene. This struggle was evident in Ohio, where four of the ten largest Christian denominations in 1890 (Lutheran, United Brethren, German Reformed, and German Evangelical Synod) were largely of German background, and where two others (Roman Catholic, Methodist) had significant numbers of German American members. Many Ohio Jews, also, were immigrants, or descendants of immigrants, from Germany.

Significant religious change followed the Second World War, as well, and has continued to the present time, providing still more layers to the religious landscape. Many refugees and “displaced persons” came to Ohio soon after the war, including Jewish survivors of the Holocaust. While the religiously inclined among them usually joined existing groups, new perspectives and customs were introduced. Then came the Korean War and its aftermath, followed little more than a decade later by the Vietnam War. Both of these wars brought refugees to Ohio. For the first time, Ohio had a numerically significant Asian American population, which was reflected in the growth of traditionally Asian religions in the state. The liberalization of immigration laws in the 1960s also contributed to increasing religious diversity, as did the arrival of large numbers of international students, including those from Latin America, at the major universities. For example, many Sikhs from Punjab, India, came to study at the Ohio State University, bringing their faith with them. Jains from India, and Zoroastrians from India and Iran have had similar histories in Ohio. By the 1970s, the larger cities especially were becoming religiously cosmopolitan. Some of that diversity has been captured in the essays that follow in this book.

Ohio is more religiously diverse today than it has ever been. Still, the ten largest religious groupings in Ohio as late as 2000 continued to be Christian and Jewish. From largest to smallest, they were: Roman Catholics, Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans, Pentecostal/Holiness, Christians/Disciples of Christ, Presbyterians, United Church of Christ, Jewish, and Anabaptist/Pietist (primarily Mennonites, Amish, and Brethren).

Happily, what is largely missing from the above account is any tale of sustained interreligious conflict. While Ohioans certainly participated in the nativist movement of the nineteenth century, with its strong anti-Catholic and anti-Jewish sentiments, virulent nativism was of relatively

short duration. Anti-Catholic rioting in Cincinnati in the 1850s, paralleling similar outbursts in other large American cities, did not provide a pattern for the future. Sadly, Ohio has had its share of anti-black, anti-Semitic, and anti-immigrant attitudes and activities. But these have seldom been framed in terms of religious ideas or practices. They have instead been expressed mostly in the language of ethnic prejudice, racism, and xenophobic nationalism. The American tradition of religious freedom seems well established in Ohio. With the growth of religious diversity across the state, interfaith and ecumenical tolerance and understanding have increased, further strengthening the foundations of religious freedom.

What about the future? Clearly, if present trends continue, Ohio will become more religiously diverse in the coming decades. Protestant dominance has decreased significantly over two centuries. In 1803, almost all religiously affiliated Buckeyes were Protestant Christians. By 1890, approximately 67 percent were Protestants; a century later this number had fallen to 56 percent. The big gainers were Catholics (who increased from a minuscule percentage in 1803 to 28 percent in 1890 and more than 40 percent today), Jews (who rose to more than 2 percent of the total), and a potpourri of “others” (who represent approximately 2 percent). These figures include only those persons who are at least nominally affiliated with a religious organization. By most estimates, however, only half of all Ohioans had any kind of formal religious affiliation as the bicentennial approached. It should immediately be added that there are some groups that keep no statistics and others who deliberately function far from the public eye, so that it is very hard to estimate their numbers. Still, there is plenty of opportunity for religious groups in Ohio to grow if that is their desire.

While we cannot know with certainty what the future will bring, it is clear that the religious topography of Ohio has altered drastically over the centuries, and especially over the past two hundred years. As it continues to change, more layers will probably be added, and perhaps additional upheavals will occur. The Protestant pluralism of two hundred years ago is fast becoming a religious pluralism more extensive than our ancestors could have dreamed possible. It is unlikely that this process is complete. An especially promising harbinger of the future may be found in the fact that the almost universal dismissal of Native American religion in the

past is slowly being replaced with a modicum of understanding and appreciation. Within our treasured, albeit imperfect, American tradition of religious freedom, we can hope that mutual understanding and appreciation between and among all religions will continue to grow, even as people of faith honestly and forthrightly express their deepest convictions about the meaning of life. The essays that follow are offered in that spirit and as a contribution to that end.