



## Religion in Ohio

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Learn about the broad and vibrant range of religious experience in Ohio and the impact religion has had on our state and its people.

### **Background**

The first Christian missionary activity in the Ohio territory occurred as early as 1623, when Jesuit missionary Jean de Brebeuf (1593-1649) began his mission to the Hurons and other American Indian tribes in the Great Lakes area. Missionaries of different faiths later followed him. Moravians David Zeisberger and John Heckwelder founded churches for the Delaware tribe at Schoenbrunn in 1772 and Gnadenhutten in 1782. Methodist James Finley founded a church for the Wyandot tribe in 1821.

### **Communal Societies**

Some people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century believed that American society was too corrupt to be reformed. They formed separate societies of their own in hopes of showing outsiders the error of their ways. At least 21 communal societies existed in Ohio, many for only a few months. Religious societies were the most successful. The United Society of Believers in the Second Coming was also called Shakers because of the shuffling dance they did during their worship services. They formed communities in Warren and Cuyahoga counties. Shakers believed in the equality of men and women, with members of both sexes serving as leaders of communities. Rejecting marriage as a type of prison that destroyed women's health through frequent childbirth, the Shakers practiced celibacy. The Zoarites of Tuscarawas County were among the many communal groups that rejected capitalist society. Citing private property as a source of discontent and jealousy, they held all property in common. Members of the society were German separatists who settled in Ohio in 1817. In 1898, the few remaining members of the community divided the assets and disbanded.

### **Amish and Mennonites**

Today, Ohio has the largest population of Amish and Mennonites in the world. Both groups are offshoots of the Swiss Brethren or Anabaptists. During the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, some European Protestants and Catholics separated from their churches to join the Anabaptists. They believed in adult baptism rather than infant baptism, although at the time adult baptism was illegal. Anabaptist means re-baptizer. Other beliefs included separation of church and state, "turning the other cheek" instead of defending oneself, interpreting the Bible literally, and living in a plain style. The names of the groups have their origins in those of early leaders Menno Simons (c. 1496-1561) and Jacob Amman (1644-1730).

Intense persecution led the Anabaptists to move to the United States in the 1880s. Many settled on farms in the northeast part of Ohio, particularly Holmes, Trumbull, and Geauga counties. There are many types of Amish and Mennonites today; they range from conservative to liberal. The most conservative, "Old Order" adherents do not use electricity, automobiles or telephones. They do not send their children to school beyond the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. Called the "plain people," they wear simple clothing and deliberately keep their communities separate from their neighbors, whom they call "English." They maintain a lifestyle based on



farming, family and religion. Pennsylvania Dutch, a German dialect, is their common language. Formal German is used for worship. Children learn the English language in school.

### **Society of Friends (Quakers)**

Englishman George Fox (1624-1691) founded the Society of Friends, a Christian separatist sect, in 1652. Seeking relief from persecution, many members of the group, called Friends or Quakers, left England for the United States. Soon after the Northwest Territory was opened for settlement at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Friends from Eastern and Southern states began settling in what would become Ohio. For most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a third of U. S. Friends lived in Ohio and the other states of the Northwest Territory. Quaker faith focuses on the "Inner Light" or guiding spirit each person possesses, which makes trained clergy unnecessary. Business and worship took place at monthly, quarterly and yearly meetings. The meeting house for the Ohio Yearly Meeting, the first west of the Allegheny Mountains, was built in Mount Pleasant in 1814. Quakers were particularly active in the abolition movement and the Underground Railroad. Thomas Rotch, founder of Kendal, Ohio (now Massillon), served as liaison for the Quaker Committee on Indian Affairs and often sent reports about frontier life to Quakers in the Eastern states. Other causes supported by the Friends include pacifism, temperance, American Indian rights and prison reform.

### **Latter Day Saints Movement**

Late in 1830, followers of Joseph Smith Jr. (1805-1844) began to gather in Kirtland, Ohio, to build a church and community based on Smith's spiritual revelations. The Church of Latter Day Saints is often called the Mormon Church. Its book of scripture, the Book of Mormon, which was first printed in 1830, took its name from one of the ancient prophets whose writings it contains. While in Ohio, membership increased significantly, and many of the church's founding doctrines were developed in Kirtland. The Kirtland Temple was dedicated in 1836. In 1837, the church started its first international mission, to London, England. Smith's group encountered financial difficulties and tension with non-members in the community. As a result, they moved to Nauvoo, Illinois, in 1839. Joseph Smith was killed by an angry mob in 1844. After his death, his followers split into several factions. The largest group followed Brigham Young to the Salt Lake Valley in Utah. Another group formed the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in 1860 under Joseph Smith III, son of founder Joseph Smith Jr. The group, headquartered in Independence, Missouri, changed its name in 2000 to the Community of Christ.

### **Reform Judaism**

The first synagogue in what had been the Northwest Territory was built in Cincinnati in 1836. Cincinnati was also the home of the Reform Judaism movement in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At the time, it had one of the largest Jewish populations in the United States. Reform Judaism was intended to adapt the religion to modern American culture and de-emphasize ritual. Rabbi Isaac M. Wise (1819-1900) was a key proponent of the new branch of Judaism. Wise, an immigrant from Bohemia, settled in Cincinnati in 1854. Among his accomplishments are the founding of the Union of American Congregations (1873), the Central Conference of American Rabbis (1889), and Hebrew Union College (1875), the first Jewish institution of higher learning in the United States. In 1972, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion ordained Sally J. Priesand, the first female rabbi in the world.



## Religion and Education

By 1900 there were more than thirty colleges and universities with religious affiliations in Ohio, including:

Episcopalian Church	Kenyon College – 1828
Baptist Church	Denison University – 1831
Presbyterian Church	Oberlin College – 1833
Methodist Church	Ohio Wesleyan University – 1842
Lutheran Church	Wittenburg University – 1845
Disciples of Christ	Hiram College – 1850
Church of the New Jerusalem (Swedenborgian)	Urbana University – 1850
Society of Friends (Quakers)	Wilmington College – 1870
Catholic Church	Ursuline College – 1871
Reform Judaism	Hebrew Union College – 1875
Brethren Church	Ashland University – 1878

During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was common practice in the public schools to read aloud from the King James Bible. In 1869, because of Catholic and Jewish protests, the Cincinnati board of education prohibited the practice. Protestants objected to this and sued the board. The case went to the Hamilton County Superior Court. Two justices ruled against the board, but in a dissenting opinion, Judge Alphonso Taft (father of President William Howard Taft) wrote: "No sect can, because it includes a majority of a community or a majority of the citizens of the state, claim any preference whatsoever. It cannot claim that its mode of worship or its religion shall prevail in the common schools." The Ohio Supreme Court later upheld this decision.

## Missionary Work

Religious groups in Ohio have historically been active in missionary work. Oberlin College trained hundreds of Congregational missionaries who worked in the Southern United States after the Civil War and around the world in later decades. In 1900, a group of Oberlin missionaries were killed in the Boxer Rebellion in China. The Memorial Arch on the campus of Oberlin College was erected in their honor in 1903.

Ursuline Sister Dorothy Kazel of Cleveland was a member of the Cleveland Catholic Diocese's Mission Team in El Salvador from 1974 to 1980. She traveled to the rural villages of El Salvador teaching women about proper nourishment for their children. When civil war erupted in 1977, Sister Dorothy decided to stay in the country and helped refugees and families who had lost loved ones in the fighting. In December 1980, Sister Dorothy was abducted, abused and killed by Salvadorian national guardsmen. Her death shocked the world and inspired action by religious and human rights groups.

## Religion and Progressivism

Social activism in the United States often stemmed from religious sentiments. For example, Oberlin College played a role in the Underground Railroad. Charles Finney, a Presbyterian, head of the theological department at Oberlin and a prominent religious leader in early Ohio,



was one of the most outspoken opponents of slavery and helped to give Oberlin its reputation not only in the abolition movement but also in women's rights (Oberlin College admitted women in a time when it was unusual for women to be educated at all) and temperance. Ohio Quakers also opposed slavery. Charles Osborne, a Quaker publisher, printed *The Philanthropist*, an anti-slavery newspaper, in 1821 and his contemporary Benjamin Lundy, known as "the Father of Abolitionism," published a similar newspaper called *The Genius of Universal Emancipation* the same year. Both men were from Mt. Pleasant, Ohio. Horace Mann, the first president of Antioch College (founded by the Christian Church), strongly advocated both temperance and abolition. Also, many churches throughout Ohio supported the activities of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (which was founded in Cleveland) and other similar temperance groups throughout the state.

A particularly influential religiously-motivated effort to make the world a better place was the "social gospel" movement led by Ohioan Washington Gladden. According to Gladden, its goal was "the application of all human relations to the Christian law of brotherhood. . ." In other words, he wished to bring social and religious teachings into the public sphere. Gladden was a pioneer in sponsoring labor's right to organize and leading demonstrations against the exploitation of workers. In 1884 he supported a coal strike by the members of his congregation in Columbus, Ohio. Another important aspect of this social movement was an attempt to take religious views into public office. For example, Gladden was elected to the Columbus City Council in 1900. An even more prominent example of a politician who advocated the social gospel was Gladden's friend Samuel M. "Golden Rule" Jones, the mayor of Toledo from 1897 until 1904.

### **Religion and Immigration**

Religion was not only a platform for political candidates and a spur for progressive change, it was also a part of everyday life and a center for the domestic lives of Americans. This was especially true for the new immigrants who came to the United States during the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. For them, especially for Catholic immigrants, religion created a small enclave of their own countrymen in a strange land. Religious groups that catered to ethnic immigrants often founded their own schools and social services. In Cincinnati, for example, where the German population was very large, an increasing number of German newspapers, schools, and organizations were established, many of them centering around churches. With increasing religious diversity came greater religious conflict. Anti-Catholicism and anti-foreign sentiments became more common among native-born citizens. In large cities like Cincinnati and Cleveland, these differences led to riots.

The number of religious groups in Ohio increased dramatically in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Muslims began moving to the urban areas of Ohio, especially Toledo and Cleveland, in the 1920s and 1930s. The First Cleveland Mosque was founded in 1927, and by 1995 the Islamic population of the city had grown to nearly 25,000 people. In Toledo, the Islamic Center built a new mosque in 1983 to meet the needs of a growing Islamic population. Ohio's largest mosque, the Islamic Center of Greater Cleveland, includes a congregation of more than 5,000 people. Baptists, mainly from New England, were present in Ohio since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Beginning in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, their numbers increased dramatically as Southern African Americans immigrated to the industrial cities of Cleveland and Toledo in the 1920s, and



whites from Appalachia moved north to find jobs after World War II. By 1986, Baptist churches outnumbered those of any other denomination in the city.

### **Late 20th Century Religion**

Particularly after World War II, religious institutions took root in the suburbs. New churches and temples were built and some center city houses of worship moved to the outlying areas. This change reflected the growing importance of cars in American life and the greater potential for institutional growth in booming suburban areas. Churches that remained in urban areas often shifted focus to address urban problems. Many religious institutions expanded beyond religious studies to include counseling, childcare, social action, and recreation.

The Congregational Christian churches and the Evangelical and Reformed Church merged together to form the United Church of Christ (UCC) in Cleveland in 1957. The Church moved its headquarters from New York to Cleveland in 1990. The UCC has been active in fighting for civil rights in Ohio, and spoke out against issuing vouchers for students to attend private school. Despite their objections, the Supreme Court ruled vouchers to be constitutional in 2002.

Religion was an important factor in 20<sup>th</sup> century political life, strongly influencing party affiliations and voting patterns. The election of John F. Kennedy, the first Roman Catholic president, had a significant impact on Catholicism, bringing it into the mainstream. His term overlapped with the second Vatican Council, another strong agent of change from within the church. Until the 1960s, there was a parallel Catholic society with its own schools, hospitals, and other institutions. These remained, but were less separated from non-Catholic organizations.

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