

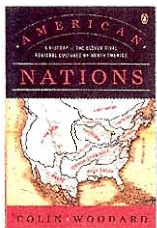


America's long-standing religious differences

In his book *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America* (Penguin, 2011), historian and journalist Colin Woodard explains



that our continent was originally colonized by 11 different “nations” – cultural groups whose influence is still apparent today. As shown on the map here and described in last month’s *Connections*, they are Yankeedom (New England and west through Minnesota), New Netherland (greater New York City), the Midlands, Tidewater (mid-Atlantic coast), Greater Appalachia (coal country and south to Tennessee, west to north-central Texas), the Deep South (Carolinas through east Texas), El Norte (both sides of the Mexico border), the Left Coast, the Far West, the First Nation (Alaska and Canada), and New France (Canada and Cajun Louisiana).



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The colonizers’ influence remains

Woodard finds that over the generations, members of these groups have altered the parts of North America to which they have emigrated, but they haven’t replaced the dominant cultures of those places. In terms of lasting impact, Woodard’s research tells him, the activities of a few hundred, or even a few score, initial colonizers can mean much more for the cultural geography of a place than the contributions of tens of thousands of new immigrants a few generations later. “Our continent’s famed mobility and the transportation and communications technology that foster it,” says Colin Woodard, “have been reinforcing, not dissolving, the differences between the nations.”



Are we really a melting pot?



Because we think of the U.S. as a nation of immigrants, it’s hard to believe that the distinct “American nations” that Colin Woodard describes have survived from colonial times until today. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, tens of millions of people came here from all over the world. Didn’t their arrival herald the birth of a unified American identity that cemented the country together? “The short answer,” Woodard says, “is no.”

Education was a unifying factor in the north

Until the 1950s, quotas mostly restricted immigration to northern Europeans, who didn’t spread out evenly across the U.S. Virtually none came to southern U.S. regions. Most were fleeing countries with repressive feudal systems, and the Deep South and Tidewater were like the entrenched aristocracies they longed to escape. Appalachia had few cities or jobs, and El Norte was too remote.

Many settled in Yankeedom, which focused on educating its immigrants and their children. Northerners valued equal public education for all, with a common curriculum to foster social and cultural assimilation. In Woodard’s view, the notion of America as a melting pot really refers to that civic education, which essentially changed many immigrants into Anglo-Protestant Americans.



A mythic “national” history

Woodard also observes that Yankee civic institutions crafted a mythic “national” history for students to celebrate. The story emphasized the Pilgrim voyage, the Boston Tea Party, and Yankee figures such as Paul Revere and the Minutemen. Largely ignoring other early settlements and colonizers, it highlighted the Puritans and recast them as champions of religious freedom—a twist that might well have surprised the Puritans themselves, who rejected Catholic and Anglican ritual, persecuted Quakers, and used censure and excommunication to enforce conformity.

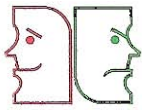
In the 21st century, a new wave of immigration continues to fuel a heated debate about American identity. What other ethnic, religious, and cultural groups were typically left out of the histories that we were all taught in school? What does it really mean to be American today?

That's true of their religious characteristics along with others. A 2008 Gallup poll that Woodard cites asked more than 350,000 Americans if religion was an important part of their lives. The top ten states to answer affirmatively, he reports, were all in the Borderlands or Deep South, while eight of the bottom ten states were dominated by the cultural group that Woodard calls Yankeedom.



Polarized into two hostile blocs

After the Civil War, Colin Woodard observes, differences in fundamental values polarized the U.S. nations into two hostile blocs separated by buffer states. The result was a cultural cold war between the angry, humiliated, salvation-minded Dixie bloc and the triumphant, social-reform-minded alliance of the North and West. That conflict simmered for a century before breaking into open struggle in the 1960s. Its roots are still glaringly apparent, not only within United Methodism and other church denominations, but also within our federal and state governments.



When Northern occupying forces set up racially integrated New-England-style systems in the South, they "freed" its enslaved and oppressed blacks, but failed to provide the security or economic environment needed for true independence. The backlash against northern "carpetbaggers" was harsh, unifying the three southern nations against northern groups to a degree never before seen.



Private Protestants and racial castes

With their institutions and racial caste system under attack, Woodard observes, the Deep South and Tidewater organized their resistance struggle around the one civic institution they still controlled: their churches. Unlike the dominant church denominations in Yankeedom, southern evangelicals (including Southern Baptists, southern Methodists, and southern Episcopalians) were becoming what religious scholars have termed "Private Protestants," in contrast to the "Public Protestants" who dominated the northern U.S. nations.



Private Protestants, according to Woodard, believed that the world was inherently corrupt and sinful, which seemed particularly evident

after the shocks of the Civil War. Their emphasis wasn't on trying to transform the world in preparation for Christ's coming, but on personal salvation—pulling individual souls into the lifeboat of right thinking. The Private Protestants had no interest in changing society, but rather sought to maintain order, obedience, and stability. They saw slavery, aristocratic rule, and the grinding poverty of most ordinary Southerners, both white and black, not as evils to be confronted, but as the reflection of a divinely sanctioned hierarchy to be maintained at all costs against the Yankee heretics.



In all three of the southern U.S. nations, resistance to Reconstruction was largely successful. Even without a return to formal slavery, the cruelly punitive racial caste system was essentially restored through segregation, sharecropping, draconian sentencing, and prison labor.

Public Protestants and a social gospel

While this Dixie bloc was coalescing around individual salvation and the defense of traditional social values, Colin Woodard reports, a northern alliance was forming around a very different set of religious priorities. Its religious ethos focused on the salvation of society, not of the individual, and on the social gospel. And while the southern Private Protestants emphasized individual responsibility for one's lot in life, the northern Public Protestants tried to harness the government to improve society and the quality of life.

Temperance and prohibition, for example, were driven almost entirely by Yankees and Midlanders. They saw the harmful effects of fathers' spending hard-earned money in bars, letting wives and children go hungry. The struggle for women's suffrage was also conceived and fought by reformers in the northern U.S. nations. They recognized the need for women to have equal rights with men and an equal voice in the public sphere. Residents of Yankeedom and New Netherland also led



turn-of-the-century crusades to ensure the welfare of children, many of whom were working long hours in unhealthy conditions, with little or no education.

The three northern groups' desire to improve the world often took precedence over religious belief, Woodard observes, especially when they saw

the church as standing in the way of needed progress. Yankeeism and especially New Netherland and the Left Coast, finds Woodard, were also becoming increasingly tolerant of unusual social experiments and countercultural movements, while the Dixie bloc was fighting to keep things as they were or return to the way they used to be.

But surely education and protection of children, and equal rights for all people in the eyes of the law, are goals consistent with Christian principles. Don't positive social changes deserve precedence over beliefs and customs that merely reflect the class-based traditions of the pre-modern world?

The Dixie bloc vs. the modern world

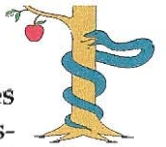
Sadly, we're still asking that question today. These conflicting worldviews have put the northern and western blocs on a collision course with the Dixie bloc that still strongly affects U.S. governments and churches in the modern day.



Opposition to modernism, liberal theology, and what Woodard calls "inconvenient scientific discoveries" occurred in pockets across the continent, he acknowledges, but only in the Dixie bloc did it represent the dominant cultural position, backed by governments and defended by state power. In the culture wars ever since the Civil War, the three southern nations have generally been the stronghold of biblical inerrancy; elimination of barriers between church and state; teaching children religious rather than scientific explanations for the origins and nature of the universe; and maintaining restraints against homosexuality and civil rights. In support of these positions, Christian fundamentalism appeared in North America, reaching its high-water mark in the 1925 Scopes trial.

After that, Woodard writes, Public Protestant majorities in the northern nations assumed that the fire-and-brimstone crowd was ruined and its irra-

tional beliefs exposed as superstition. But the fundamentalists spent the 1930s and 1940s organizing themselves and building Bible fellowships, Christian colleges, and a network of gospel radio stations. Unnoticed by North America's opinion elite, their numbers grew through the 1950s. A full-scale cultural war was brewing, to explode in the 1960s.



That "second Reconstruction" forced some social changes but didn't significantly change the Dixie bloc's Private Protestant values. And the youth-driven cultural revolution of the 1960s barely touched the Dixie bloc. In fact, it led many Dixie residents to become even further entrenched in the southern evangelical worldview.

Will the standoff ever end?

Colin Woodard feels that neither the Dixie bloc nor the northern alliance is likely to make major concessions to other groups. Instead, he predicts, the "red" and "blue" U.S. nations will keep wrestling with each other for control over federal policy, with each doing what it can to woo the "purple" nations to its cause, just as they have done since they gathered at the First Continental Congress.

Woodard hopes that over time, they will at least reach accommodation and agree that the status quo isn't serving anyone well. But I'm afraid that's unlikely, because so many powerful people, not just Southerners, side with tradition and the status quo.

Groups well served by the status quo

Unsurprisingly, holders of top government offices, recipients of the top salaries paid by giant corporations, and church leaders whose positions guarantee lifelong income, especially if it's large, feel that the status quo is serving them well.



This issue, several years' back issues, a list of all back issues, and a list of books I've written about, plus more *Connections*-related information, are available free from my web site, www.connectionsonline.org. To get *Connections* monthly by e-mail, let me know at BCWendland@aol.com. Please include your name, city, and state or country. To start getting *Connections* monthly by U.S. Mail, send me your name, address, and \$5 for the coming year's issues. For paper copies of any of the 21 years' back issues, send me \$5 for each year or any 12 issues.



I'm a lay United Methodist and neither a church employee nor a clergyman's wife. *Connections* is a one-person ministry that I do on my own initiative, speaking only for myself. Many readers make monetary contributions but I pay most of the cost myself. *Connections* goes to several thousand people in all U.S. states and some other countries—laity and clergy in more than a dozen denominations, and some nonchurchgoers. *Connections* is my effort to stimulate fresh thought and new insight about topics I feel Christians need to consider and churches need to address.

They don't want it changed. Others of us who are financially secure may not either.

How can Christians get past the past?

But what about the working poor and others who are not being served well by the status quo? How might Christians encourage the people in power, in our governments and our churches, to promote changes that would help those others—changes that would further the common good, not just our individual good? How could we help unify Ameri-



can identity by ensuring quality public education, civil rights, and religious freedom for all?

Some of these social movements began or first took hold in regions other than our own. Those of us who are Southerners, especially, may even have opposed social progress in the past. But we can't turn back time. We can't keep using the Bible to defend injustice in the way that our ancestors used it to excuse slavery, subjugate women, or suppress academic learning. The progressive community spirit fostered by inclusive education reflects core Christian values that we all need to promote, no matter what part of the U.S. we happen to live in.

Barbara



Connections
Barbara Wendland
505 Cherokee Drive
Temple, TX 76504-3629

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Updated *Connections* website will soon be online!



My *Connections* website, www.connectionsonline.org, is about to be functioning in revised form after many months of my having been unable to post new content because the software I had been using was discontinued. This issue and all back issues from September 1998 through July 2014 will be available on the site, as PDF (Adobe Portable Document Format) files that you can either read onscreen or download in order to print or forward.

Also on the site will be descriptions of all earlier issues, November 1992 through August 1998. I hope to get those onto the website in PDF form eventually, but for now, you can get any of them from me on paper by letting me know you want them.

The website will still contain, as before, brief descriptions of the many books I have written about in *Connections*, information about my personal background, answers to questions I get most often about *Connections*, links to some progressive church congregations and other organizations, and sources of information about progressive Christianity and related topics.

For reworking the website, my enthusiastic thanks go to *Connections* reader Paul Kirtley (pwk@me.com), a professional website designer and graphic artist in Boerne, Texas (which is pronounced "burny" . . .). And for helping to get the site online in its revised form, I'm grateful to Kyle Lamb and others in the tech support department of my longtime internet service provider, [vvm](http://vvm.com), whose headquarters are here in Temple.

