**The Puritans and Freedom of Religion**

There’s a kind of sucker punch in many presentations of American history, wherein we are told that the Puritans left England for America because they had suffered religious persecution—and then the Puritans persecuted other religions here!

Let’s explore this situation.

Yes, the Puritans did leave England because they had been persecuted for their religion.

The story in a nutshell is that the Puritans were members of the official state church of England, the Anglican Church, but they felt it needed to be reformed and restructured (purified) to be more Protestant. For their loud and continual protests and complaints against the Anglican Church, the church leadership, and even the English monarch and Parliament, the Puritans were disliked throughout the late 1500s and early 1600s.

When Charles I took the throne and in 1630 made William Laud, a pro-Catholic, anti-Puritan church leader the Archbishop of Canterbury (and thus basically in charge of the Anglican Church), the bulk of England’s Puritan population fled England. Laud harried them out, putting a price on the heads of more outspoken and powerful Puritan ministers, making it a criminal offense to attend Puritan worship services, and generally doing his best to squash all opposition to the Anglican Church.

So in 1630 the Puritans headed to what is now New England. There was already a small outpost of Puritan settlers in Salem (now part of Massachusetts) to welcome the group headed by John Winthrop. But Winthrop’s group soon headed to what is now Boston, and formed the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

**So why were the Puritans in New England?**

Because they had been forced out of England.

They were forced out because they wanted to reform human civilization through religion, to wipe out poverty, and to make a heaven on Earth in which everyone was free to discover God’s will for themselves. But these were not generalized goals; that is, the Puritans did not believe that any or every religion, diligently applied, could result in such a paradise. They believed that only their reformed version of Anglican Christianity could put such goals within reach.

They were not completely crazy for thinking so. In the world they knew, the world of European and especially English Christianity, the Puritans were the only group calling for an end to poverty, the only group demanding that all people, even women, be taught how to read (so they could read the Bible, God’s word), and the only group that required its members to work hard to improve the world on a person-by-person basis. Puritans were supposed to live exemplary lives in every respect so that anyone they dealt with—their customers, friends, even strangers they met—would see God through them, and be inspired to seek God themselves.

Thus the Puritans might be excused for thinking their religion was the only one that could save the world. In their limited experience of the world, theirs was the most actively reformist faith. They left England to preserve that faith, so that Puritanism would not be diluted or destroyed. They left England to create a place where Puritanism could thrive, and eventually grow so strong that when England was destroyed by God …. the fugitive Puritans would be left to re-establish Christian civilization.

Now we see why the Puritans did not encourage religious diversity or practice religious tolerance in New England. It was not because they were terrible, hateful people. It was because they were on a mission, and they feared God’s wrath upon themselves if they failed in that mission to create a holy nation on Earth. They left England to establish a Puritan state where Puritan Congregationalism could be practiced. They did not leave England to establish a state where people were free to practice whatever religion they wanted. It is incorrect to say the Puritans wanted freedom of religion; they did not. They wanted to be able to practice their own religion freely. Those are two very different things, and we should not misrepresent the Puritans by claiming they believed in freedom of religion.

The Puritans in New England broadcast their intentions, making it as clear as they possibly could that people of other faiths were not welcome there. They made no secret of their hostility to outside religious presence. When people of other faiths insisted on entering New England, the Puritans boiled over with anger.

The question we ask ourselves at this point is, why did people of other faiths go to New England when they knew the situation there?

Because they were just as zealous and single-minded about their own faiths as the Puritans.

We tend to think of the Quakers who were persecuted in New England as gentle innocents who did no wrong. But Quakers in the 17th century were the most radical Protestant sect in England, maybe even in Europe. They entered Puritan towns banging pots and pans, screaming and singing, entering meeting-houses during Puritan worship and yelling to the congregation to hear their words. Sometimes Quakers stripped themselves naked in the center of town to call attention to the need to strip oneself of earthly attachments. They got the derisive nickname “Quakers” because they would go into convulsive fits during their worship services.

The Quakers, then, were a radical and alarming people who went into New England with the express mission to destroy the Puritan way and introduce their own religious beliefs. They were just as feverishly devoted to Quakerism as the Puritans were fanatically devoted to Puritanism. Once the Quakers entered New England, persecution of the Quakers followed, as it did in London.

Almost no one in 17th-century Europe believed in freedom of religion or freedom of conscience. The Quakers did not, the Puritans did not. Almost all sects believed they alone had the truth of God and that they alone should exist. It took 150 years of religious co-existence in America to get to the point where freedom of religion could be put forward as a basic human right.