

Religious freedom as
a driving force behind
the british
colonization of north
ame...



The British Empire was for more than a century the dominant global superpower and the largest empire in history, with colonies in all the continents of the world – Europe (i. e. in Ireland), the Americas, Asia, Africa, and the Australian-Pacific subcontinent. (Canny, 1998) Many factors can be adduced as reasons for the establishment of the British Empire – economic, political, military, and explorative. These factors played varying and complementary roles in the establishment of colonies in different parts of the British Empire.

In the history of the British Empire in North America in the 17th century however, one peculiar factor that played an important role as a driving force in the setting up of colonies was the quest for religious freedom. A bit of historical background to the issue of religious freedom and colonization is important in appreciating the underpinnings of religious freedom as motivation for the founding of colonies in the 17th century. 6th century England under the rulership of Queen Elizabeth I was a scene of religious intolerance, notable between the Roman Catholics and the Protestants who had broken away from the control of the Papacy in Rome, and Queen Elizabeth herself was a protestant. (Canny 1998)

In the 16th century, the hostility between Roman Catholic Spain (the naval and military superpower of the time), and Protestant England came to a head, resulting in the Anglo-Spanish wars. Lawrence 2001) England fought not only for its political independence, put perhaps more importantly, for her religious freedom from Papal dictatorship and intolerance. (Canny 1998) The national struggle for religious freedom from Rome and her allies could thus be said to have laid the foundation for a more dispersed, cosmopolitan

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struggle for religious freedom and thus laid the foundations for the motivations of religious freedom that marked some of the founding of the colonies in North America in the next century.

Notable English seafarers like Sir Francis Drake and John Hawkins were given the Royal backing to launch attacks piratical attacks on ports owned by the Spanish in the Americas. (Canny 1998) These incursions into the Americas could be seen as the precursors of the British involvement and subsequent establishment of colonies in North America. Though the first British overseas settlement in present day U. S. A was founded in 1607 in Jamestown by the Virginia Company under Captain John Smith, this could be said to have had no religious motivations.

(Taylor 2001) The founding of Plymouth in 1620 was however purely inspired by religious motives. Plymouth was founded for a Puritan separatist religious group. These Puritans, also called the Pilgrim Fathers, sought a place where they could practice their religion in freedom from persecution. The Pilgrim Fathers were initially from Lincolnshire in England and had first migrated to Holland to practice their faith in freedom from the persecution they faced in England.

Holland was then noted for its religious toleration of religious diversity.

(Taylor 2001) The Pilgrims however sought a place where they could be freer and thus saw North America – ‘The New World’ – as a conducive place for the practice of their faith in freedom. In September of 1620, the Pilgrims set sail from Plymouth in England aboard the Mayflower. These first Pilgrims

were 35 in number and settled in New England on their reaching North America. (Taylor 2001)

This initial move by the Pilgrim Fathers to seek religious freedom in the ‘ New World’ inspired other migrations and the founding of more colonies which were based on the same ethos of religious freedom and toleration. Thus people from other Christian religious denominations who were facing persecution, or who wanted a place to worship in freedom (like the Pilgrim Fathers) also decided to make the journey across the Atlantic to the ‘ New World’, where they could also practice their religion in freedom. (Taylor 2001)

In 1629, another Puritan group secured a royal charter to trade in North America under the name, the Massachusetts Bay Company. This Puritan and trading group was led by John Winthrop set sail from England with eleven vessels carrying 700 settlers and some essential supplies like cows and horses. In 1630, this puritan group arrived in North America and chose Boston as their settlement and later became the capitol of their colony. (Taylor 2001) The settlers of Boston apart from being Puritans, were also Congregationalists.

They believed that each local church should be autonomous and thus the churches they founded in different parts or towns of the colony became the focal point of not only church administration, but also the administration of the town. Adult males had a right to vote on issues that affected the church and the town. This system in Massachusetts was very successful and soon attracted more migrations from England. By 1640, an estimated 20, 000

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settlers had migrated from England into Massachusetts. (Taylor 2001) Other colonies were also founded on religious motivations.

In 1634 for instance, Maryland was founded for Roman Catholics who were also seeking a safe haven to practice their faith. Rhode Island was founded in 1636 as a colony that tolerates different forms of religious expression, and the Congregationalists established Connecticut in 1639. (Taylor 2001) As can be realised from the above, the quest for religious freedom (first from Papal Rome and Spain) was key to the establishment of the British Empire, and was also key to the establishment of colonies like Plymouth, Boston, Maryland, Rhode Island and Connecticut.