

American religion: the puritans and the quakers

[Religion](#)



In the mid-1500's, England saw a new trend in the way people worshipped and practiced religion. The new movement called " Puritanism," called for a life lived simply and spent in prayer, listening to sermons and worship in Church. The Puritans lived seriously and believed that celebrations such as holidays like Christmas and Easter as well as the arts like music and dance were unnecessary trappings to have in life. They believed that people should only be concerned about " godly" ways and plain living in order to reach heaven. This presented problems at that time for Queen Elizabeth.

In those years, the queen was tasked with stabilizing the country and decided that to do this, England had to have a comprehensive Church that could accommodate the views of both the Protestants and the conservative Catholics (Emerson 18). Therefore, it was decided that the Church of England teach doctrines that would be acceptable to the Protestants and at the same time keep alive the Catholic traditions used in worship. The compromise did not quite sit well as hoped. The Puritans believed that in religious worship, only the spiritual doctrines were the only things that were important.

All other external articles such as ministry vestments were not only unnecessary but could be taken as evil. The Conservatives however, defended the use of such vestments as traditional symbols of status and identification. Due to differences of opinion with regard to the way worship and the Episcopal structure is conducted in the Anglican Church, separatist and underground groups were formed with the object of seeking reform in the religious practices. Due to conflicts that usually arise where there is a difference of opinion, some Puritans decided

to leave England and settle in North America. It was in 1620 that the ship the Mayflower docked and the first Puritans came to settle in Massachusetts (Barbour, and Frost 5) One of the other Reformist groups was called the Quakers. Unlike the Puritans, the Quakers believed that religious worship was a personal and individual thing that did not require any intermediary in the form of leaders, priests or ministers. Like the Puritans, the Quakers also suffered the consequences of conflict and therefore some decided to migrate and settle in America as well.

It was in 1677 that a group of Quakers led by William Penn set foot on North American soil and settled in the state of Pennsylvania. This settlement of opposing religious groups would have significant effect on the way religion is practiced and how other differing faiths would be treated. The Quakers held meetings where people gathered to sit quietly to reflect and pray in silence. They only spoke up when they feel God wanted to, and this privilege was open to both men and women. They practiced their faith by action always looking out to help the poor and establish peace.

They also campaigned for women's rights as well as that of the Native Americans. Despite their similarities in terms of experience of persecution in England, subsequent emigration to America and ideals of a Utopia brought about by spiritual living, the fundamental beliefs of both groups differed thoroughly. Whereas the Puritans insisted on strict hierarchies, conformity to religion and the singular importance of doctrine, the Quakers propagated tolerance for all religions and races. They supported pacifism in the search for peace and equality with women in spiritualism.

The Quakers also believed that doctrine takes second place to an individual's " inner light. " This kind of thinking angered the Puritans so much that any Quaker who was caught trying to preach in Massachusetts was either tortured or executed (Hall 130) Such was the treatment experienced by female Quaker preachers Ann Austin and Mary Fisher (Jones, Sharpless, and Gummere 27) who tried to preach to the Puritan community in Boston in 1656. Upon arrival at Boston harbor, their luggage were seized and searched for " heretical and blasphemous doctrines.

" The women themselves were taken to prison and stripped before being confined in total darkness. It was only later that the captain of the ship that brought them was compelled to take them back to Barbados. These all happened despite the lack of any law declaring being a Quaker as illegal. Governor Endicott who was away from Boston at that time even said that had he been there, the women would never have been freed without some whipping. Later investigations as to why Boston was so hostile to the women reveal:

It must be said in the first place that the judgment of the officials, and particularly of the ministers, in the Massachusetts Colony had been seriously prejudiced by rumours and accounts that had preceded the arrival of the two women. Anti-Quaker pamphlets had already come from the press in great numbers, and they were unsparing in their accounts of the new " heresy. " Some of these pamphlets were written by ministers who, either before or after the publication of their attack, were settled in New England and were in high repute there. (Jones, Sharpless, and Gummere 29)

Modern studies also reveal that the Puritans believed that the Quakers brought with them discord, rebellion and witchcraft that threatened to undermine the sanctity of the Puritan community. Because the Quaker tenets were so opposed to that of the Puritans, Quakers were viewed to represent a new spiritual empire that threatened to overthrow the spiritual empire which the Puritan in strict religious fervor was building. Another main difference between the Puritan and Quaker settlers was their treatment and dealings with the Native Americans.

Due to their belief that every human being was born with the "inner light," the Quakers treated the Native Americans as friends and equals. In his "Letter to the Lenni Lenape Indians," William Penn states: "This great God has written his law in our hearts, by which we are taught and commanded to love and help and do good to one another, and not to do harm and mischief one unto another. "... I have great love and regard toward you, and I desire to win and gain your love and friendship by a kind, just, and peaceable life; and the people I send are of the same mind, and shall in all things behave themselves accordingly.

And if in anything any shall offend you or your people, you shall have a full and speedy satisfaction for the same by an equal number of honest men on both sides, that by no means you may have just occasion of being offended against them. " (Soderlund 88) The Puritans on the other hand, viewed the polytheistic and unorganized nature of religion in addition to the "inadequate" clothing of the Native Americans as "sinful." With their literal translation of the Bible, the Puritans viewed the Native Americans' regard for everything living in addition to the one "Great Spirit" as idolatry.

The Puritans also believed that only a select group of people was chosen by God to join Him in heaven. The Native Americans believed that in all men, were equally good in the " Great Spirit's sight. " The difference between the Puritan and Native American view of sin didn't help either. While the Puritans looked at man as " evil," and life was only a temporary transit before the more important and worthy life with God, the Native Americans believed that man was made up of both good and evil and that life in the present was no different from the afterlife.

(CultureClash: The Puritans and the Native Americans) Both the beliefs fostered by the Puritans and the Quakers contributed greatly to ideals of America as it is today. The value of hard work, discipline and steadfastness promoted by the Puritans in conjunction with the equality and emancipation brought by the Quaker attitude of tolerance for race, gender and religion, are just a few contributing factors that has made America society the way it is today. Works Cited Barbour, Hugh, and J.

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