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Religious Liberty Overstressed as Motive for Migration

DESIRE for religious liberty being more exalted than economic necessity as a motive for emigration, religious liberty has been widely given as the reason for the rapid settlement of America. This is so to a very limited extent. Those colonies which had been the most noted as havens of religious tolerance became the most intolerant.

In the 1600's there was rabid intolerance in England towards those who did not adhere to the Established Church. A sect of Separatists from the Church of England was so hounded by religious intolerance that some of them decided to seek habitations outside of England.

English settlement in Virginia had begun to be advocated and the first English colony was just then being sent there. But the Virginia Company was sponsored by people high in the councils of the Established Church, which made that opening unacceptable as a location for the Separatists.

So, in 1608, a year after the first English settlement in Virginia, some of the Separatists group departed for Holland and lived there eleven years enjoying religious liberty. During those years Dutch ships were making voyages between Amsterdam and the Hudson and Delaware Rivers, and the Separatists learned from these sailors of the broad expanse of land in America uninhabited by white people and apparently free to settlement.

The Thirty Years' War of opposing religious forces in Europe broke out in 1618. This, with prospects of free land, prompted the Separatists, together with some of their brethren who had

remained in England, to go to America. They landed at Plymouth, Massachusetts in 1620, and became known in American history as the Pilgrim Fathers.

In the grant by James I of land in New England to the Plymouth Company (not the Pilgrims) restrictions were placed upon Roman Catholics.

Other groups, known as Puritans, followed the Pilgrims to Massachusetts nine years later, partly, as noted in the chapter on New England, because of failure of their efforts to reform the Established Church, and partly to obtain land. Still others came, or were sent, as indented servants seeking escape from the economic and social distress resulting from feudal landlordism in England.

Fourteen years after arrival of the Pilgrims the population of Massachusetts was estimated by John Winthrop at four thousand; an average increase of only 285 persons per annum—though most of the increase came during the last four years of that period.

How many of these came seeking religious freedom is not known, but because a person needed to be orthodox in religion, and to have a taxable estate of £20, only one person in six had the right of franchise.

According to Bradford and Winthrop, both the Pilgrims and Puritans migrated to Massachusetts to better their condition by getting land. The inference is that only a small percentage of the settlers came to America to find religious freedom.

When Roger Williams was banished from Massachusetts he made a settlement at Providence, Rhode Island, in 1636 and proclaimed religious liberty for all sects. Population increased slowly, and to the displeasure of Williams, land grabbing, rather than religion, soon became the absorbing passion.

In 1643 the House of Burgesses of Virginia passed a stringent law requiring of all persons a strict conformity with the worship and discipline of the Church of England, the established church of that colony. This act was put into vigorous execution, and some Puritans from England who had been settled on the Nansemond River for twenty-two years were stopped from preaching and driven out, some of them settling on the Severn River in Maryland, and others in Massachusetts.

In 1659, during Berkeley's administration, Virginia enacted heavy penalties against Quakers, and in the eighteenth century Baptists were persecuted.

There was a belief that Maryland, established in 1634, was to be a refuge for Roman Catholics, and that adherents of all religions would be welcome. Of the more than three hundred original settlers, including priests, sent to Maryland by Calvert, the Roman Catholic lord proprietor, it is recorded that the large majority of them were Protestants. This fact is further indicated by the record that of twelve who died on the voyage, only two professed Catholicism.

Eleven years later it was estimated that three-fourths of the population of Maryland was Roman Catholic, but as years passed there was a greater influx of Protestants than of Catholics.

Four years afterwards, that is, fifteen years after the first settlement, Calvert, fearing loss of control of the government through the increasing number of Puritans, had the assembly pass the much-praised Toleration Act of 1649 providing religious toleration for all who professed belief in the Trinity. Refusal to believe was punishable by death. For the jeopardized Jews, it was restricted religious liberty.

The year following their arrival, the Puritans, who had been driven from Virginia and settled in Maryland, complained that their conscience would not allow them to acknowledge authority of the Calvert Catholic proprietary and they started a rebellion.

They convened a general assembly to which Roman Catholics, either as members or electors, were declared to be ineligible. The assembly repealed the Toleration Act of 1649 and enacted another providing "that none who profess and exercise the Roman Catholic religion can be protected in the province."

By this act the Roman Catholic Church suffered greatly. Chapels and mission-houses were broken into. Three of the Jesuit priests fled to Virginia and kept in hiding for some years. Only one priest remained in Maryland.

In 1658, although three-quarters of the members of the Maryland assembly were Puritans, the Calvert government was restored upon recognition by Cromwell, and the Toleration Act of 1649 was re-enacted. But twenty-seven years later the Protestant

assembly passed "protective" acts against Catholics. Seven years afterward a tax of forty pounds of tobacco (the currency of the province) was levied on all voters, rich and poor alike, regardless of their church affiliation, for support of the Church of England in Maryland. After being in effect eighty years, Charles Carroll of Carrollton, a Roman Catholic, led a legal assault against this illogical tax.

To regain the government of Maryland, of which Calvert had been again deprived, Benedict Calvert in 1715 renounced the Catholic faith and that year a Protestant assembly disenfranchised Catholics.

In the grant of all the land in Maine and New Hampshire to Gorges and Mason in 1639, confirmed by Charles I, it was provided: "Our will is that the religion now professed in the Church of England, and Ecclesiastical government, shall be for ever hereafter professed throughout the province."

At about that time whole towns moved from New England to New Netherland to enjoy among the Dutch that religious liberty denied them by their own people. But thirteen years later a proclamation, issued by Governor Stuyvesant at Manhattan, declared that "the public exercise of any religion but the Dutch Reformed, in houses, barns, ships, woods or fields would be punishable by heavy fines." And Quakers were being persecuted. Even after the American Revolution, John Jay, subsequently governor of New York and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, moved in the New York State Constitutional Convention that Roman Catholics be denied citizenship and the right to hold land. The motion was rejected.

Quakers went from England to Barbados, whence two of their number, Anne Austin and Mary Fisher, went to Boston in 1656. There they were arrested and jailed, and for fear they might proclaim their "heresies" to the crowd outside the prison, the windows were boarded up. There was, as yet, no law against Quakers, but a council declared their doctrines blasphemous and devilish. Their literature was burned, and after five weeks in jail the prisoners were put aboard a ship and returned to Barbados.

The following year the New England colonies passed a law

to banish Quakers, and in Massachusetts death was the penalty if they returned. One of the Quaker women did return and she, with three other Quakers, was hanged on Boston Common. In New Hampshire the penalty was a choice of imprisonment, banishment, whipping or branding.

President Oakes of Harvard, in a sermon in 1673, said: "I look upon unbounded toleration as the first-born of all abominations."[a]

In Carolina, notwithstanding the fact that the greater part of the inhabitants were not adherents of the Church of England the lords proprietors in England in 1672, ordered that the Church of England should be the ruling religion in Carolina. Thirty-two years later the assembly enacted that all members of the assembly should be members of the Episcopal Church. Liberty of speech, in pulpit, assembly and the community, was practically denied.

The East Jersey assembly, in 1681, ejected one of its members as being a Roman Catholic.

Aside from Rhode Island, the sections of America having the widest recognition of religious liberty were those under the direction of William Penn. During the six years preceding his obtaining the grant of Pennsylvania in 1681, Penn had been successfully establishing Quakers and religious freedom in West Jersey. He afterwards restricted religious liberty in Pennsylvania, where only those who professed faith in Jesus Christ could become free men capable of voting or being elected to public office. Thus Penn, as Calvert had done in Maryland, discriminated against Jews and other religious sects.

Queen Anne, when appointing her cousin Lord Cornbury as governor of New York and New Jersey in 1702, declared there should be "liberty of conscience for every one except Papists." The governor, however, imprisoned Presbyterian ministers and confiscated their meeting houses in New York; and the New York assembly passed a law condemning to death all Roman Catholic priests found in the colony.

The royal charter of Georgia in 1732 restricted settlement of the province to Protestants.

Even the Pilgrims, Puritans and Quakers, an infinitesimal

[a]Felt, Eccl. Hist. New England

number of all who migrated, while expressing religious fervor, were not disassociated from a desire for land.

An insight into the cause of the distressing poverty and man's inhumanity to man in Europe clearly shows that poverty emanated from feudal landlordism, and this being stabilized as it was, relief was possible only through emigration. America offered the only escape.

I believe it will be recognized that during more than two centuries the compelling cause of the mass movement of people seeking homes in the savage-infested wilderness of America was the desire for material betterment of themselves and their children through access to land.

Assigning a desire for religious freedom as largely the reason for peopling America, has been overstressed.