

Religion in Colonial America

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Many people came to America to search for religious freedom. Their hope was to escape the religious persecution they were facing in their countries. The one thing they did not want to do was to establish a church like the Church of England. The colonists wanted a chance to worship freely and have an opportunity to choose which religion they wanted to take part in. Upon arriving in America (the Pilgrims being the first to arrive in 1620), the journey began for the search of the "perfect" religion that could satisfy the needs of the people.

Many religious groups (such as the Quakers and Puritans) formed the first 13 colonies on the basis of their religious beliefs. Although the plan was to escape persecution, there was actually some amount of persecution happening in the colonies. One example of this persecution would be with the Puritans. The Puritans wanted everyone to worship in the Puritan way. In order to ensure that Puritanism dominated the colonies, nonconformists were fined, banished, whipped, and even imprisoned for not conforming to the way of the Puritans. Eventually this persecution was ended and other religions began to appear.

With the arrival of the Quakers in Pennsylvania in 1656, the path was officially paved for other religions to migrate to the colonies. The Anglicans were already established in most of the colonies and were even part of the group of people that were "persecuted" by the Puritans. However, after the dispersement of the Puritans, the number of other religions in the colonies began to increase. Baptists appeared in a majority of the colonies, Roman Catholics and Protestants organized in Maryland and even some German religions surfaced in a few of the colonies. Later came the Lutherans, who formed in the German communities in Pennsylvania, and the Presbyterians, who even had an appearance in the Massachusetts Proposals of 1705.

Religious diversity had become a dominant part of colonial life. The colonies were a patchwork of religiously diverse communities and, as a result, the population of America increased quickly. People from all over the world wanted the freedom that was found in America and they began to move their homelands to America. Groups such as the Scotch-Irish were among the first to begin that emigration to America. As a result, religious persecution was beginning to diminish and religious freedom began to replace it.

Religion also became a dominant part of American politics. The Cambridge Platform was established in the 1640's. This document was a part of the Puritan theology and adopted the Westminster Confession. Then, in 1649, the Act Concerning Religion was enacted. This act has even been considered one of the greatest additions to the freedom of religion in America. Later political documents included the Massachusetts Proposals and the Adopting Act of 1729. The Bill of Rights added to religious freedom with the First Amendment.

Eventually, the issue of church and state became a topic of debate. According to Clifton Olmstead, author of *History of Religion in United States*, the separation of church and state was completed by the Constitution in 1777 (214). There were numerous groups of people who disagreed with the separation. Some even thought that it would have no effect on the growth of religion in the United States.

Olmstead quotes a Congregationalist minister about his idea of the separation: "It was as dark a day as ever I saw. The odium thrown upon the ministry was inconceivable. The injury done to the cause of Christ, as we then supposed, was irreparable. For several days I suffered what no tongue can tell *for the best thing that ever happened to the State of Connecticut*. It cut the churches loose from dependence on state support. It threw them wholly on their own resources and on God. . . .They say ministers have lost their influence; the fact is, they have gained. By voluntary efforts, societies, missions, and revivals, they exert a deeper influence than ever they could by queues and shoe buckles, and cocked hats and gold-headed canes"(215).

Overall, religion was an important aspect in the colonization of America. It became a dominant part of the lives of the colonists and continued to grow over the years. Events such as the Salem Witchcraft Trials of the 1690's and the Great Awakening of the 1730's only increased the influence of religion in America. America had become a refuge for those who wanted religious freedom and became a home to the many people that had the chance to improve their lives.

Works Cited

Olmstead, Clifton E. *History of Religion in the United States*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1960.