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**L2: Semester 1 / 2020-2021**  
**Course: Colonial History of America**

## **8. Religious groups, Massachusetts, and Plymouth**

### **Objectives**

After this lecture, students should:

- ✓ be familiar with the different religious groups of colonial America
- ✓ be able to describe the colonies of Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth
- ✓ be aware of the ideals that framed the nation of the USA

### **Introduction**

This last lecture deals with the different religious groups of Colonial America and gives a general overview of the foundation of two colonies, namely Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth. By the end of the lecture, we will engage in a discussion about the different ideals that framed the USA of today and examine concepts such as: the Promised Land, hard work, and a city upon a hill.

### **1. Religion in the colonies**

Religion in the colonies was extremely diverse and many of the religious groups, such as the Puritans and the Quakers established the first of the 13 colonies on the basis of their religious beliefs. The long trip from Europe to North America was undertaken by many in a search for religious freedom.

The English society had been divided because of Puritanism. The Puritans demanded reforms that undermined the traditional festive culture. The Bible itself became part of the struggle between Puritans and James I, who headed the Church of England. Soon after ascending the throne, James commissioned a new version of the Bible in an effort to stifle Puritan reliance on the Geneva Bible, which followed the teachings of John Calvin and placed God's authority above the monarch's. The King James Version, published in 1611, instead emphasized the majesty of kings.

During the 1620s and 1630s, the conflict escalated to the point where the state church prohibited Puritan ministers from preaching. In the Church's view, Puritans represented a national security threat, because their demands for cultural, social, and religious reforms undermined the king's authority. Unwilling to conform to the Church of England, many Puritans found refuge in the New World.

The Puritans who undertook the voyage to the New World on the Mayflower were led by William Bradford. These Puritans were called Separatists who believed in a pure Christian church, with no vestige of the Catholic religion. They established the Plymouth Settlement in New England who later came to be known as the “Pilgrim Fathers” or simply as the Pilgrims.

It must be said that religious groups, such as the Puritans, looking to escape from religious persecution in their home country arrived in the colonies and promptly established their own form of religious persecution. There was no religious freedom in the areas inhabited by the Puritans as they did not tolerate any other form of religion. Their idea of religious freedom was restricted only to the Puritan religion. Puritanism was based on the following values: hard work, piety, sobriety, and thrift.

John Winthrop, a powerful Puritan leader was the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. His Puritan religious group believed that they would establish a pure church in New England that would offer a model for all churches. The Congregational Church eventually grew out of the Puritan Church and was formally established in the Colonial New England colonies, except for Rhode Island who favored religious tolerance.

As for William Penn (1644-1718), he was famous as a follower of the Quaker religion and the leader of the Pennsylvania Colony. William Penn promoted the ideals of religious tolerance and he strongly criticized the Church of England (Anglicans).

As other colonies were established in North America, religious tolerance was exercised. The colonists from different countries in Europe adhered to various religions including Roman Catholic, Jewish, Lutheran, Protestant, Anglican, Quakers and Presbyterians. Religious diversity had become a dominant part of religion in the colonies and colonial life.

## **2. Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth**

In 1620, Puritans founded the Plymouth Colony in present-day Massachusetts. The governor of Plymouth, William Bradford, was a Separatist, a proponent of complete separation from the English state church. Bradford and the other Pilgrim Separatists represented a major challenge to the prevailing vision of a unified English national church and empire. On board the Mayflower, which was bound for Virginia but landed on the tip of Cape Cod, Bradford and forty other adult men signed the Mayflower Compact,

which presented a religious (rather than an economic) rationale for colonization. The compact expressed a community ideal of working together. When a larger exodus of Puritans established the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1630s, the Pilgrims at Plymouth welcomed them and the two colonies cooperated with each other.

The Mayflower Compact has been called the first American governing document, predating the U.S. Constitution by over 150 years. Different labor systems also distinguished early Puritan New England from the Chesapeake colonies. Puritans expected young people to work diligently at their calling, and all members of their large families, including children, did the bulk of the work necessary to run homes, farms, and businesses. Very few migrants came to New England as laborers; in fact, New England towns protected their disciplined homegrown workforce by refusing to allow outsiders in, assuring their sons and daughters of steady employment. New England's labor system produced remarkable results, notably a powerful maritime-based economy with scores of oceangoing ships and the crews necessary to sail them. New England mariners sailing New England-made ships transported Virginian tobacco and West Indian sugar throughout the Atlantic World.

A much larger group of English Puritans left England in the 1630s, establishing the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the New Haven Colony, the Connecticut Colony, and Rhode Island. Unlike the exodus of young males to the Chesapeake colonies, these migrants were families with young children and their university-trained ministers. Their aim, according to John Winthrop, the first governor of Massachusetts Bay, was to create a model of reformed Protestantism—a “city upon a hill,” a new English Israel. The idea of a “city upon a hill” made clear the religious orientation of the New England settlement, and the charter of the Massachusetts Bay Colony defined the regulations of the company, the land it would be granted, as well as the rights and privileges of the colonists.

## **Conclusion**

- ✓ Class discussion