
The Pilgrims

Ah! The Pilgrims! Noble seekers of freedom, religious tolerance, and high adventure. Well....not really.

The story of the Pilgrims actually starts with Martin Luther and the Reformation, during the Renaissance. Many Catholics were upset with the Church's refusal to change its more-than-questionable money-raising techniques (selling fake holy relics, selling forgiveness for money, etc.). Thus it was that many in Europe left the Catholic Church to become their own kind of Christians, under the umbrella designation of "Protestantism".

One of the notable religious reformers of the time was John Calvin, from who the new Protestant religion of Calvinism arose. Calvinism embodied a 'hard work-no nonsense' ethic (no dancing, no music, no theatre, no playing cards, etc.). Surprisingly, Calvinism spread rapidly throughout Western Europe. In France, Calvinists became known as 'Huguenots'; in Scotland, they were known as 'Presbyterians'; in England, they became known as 'Puritans'.

Because of political and religious problems in England, a group of Puritans sailed for the New World and founded the colony of Massachusetts in 1620. For example, King Charles had promised his wife that their children could be raised as Catholics, and the Puritans had been working to eradicate all Catholic influences in England.

By 1648, Puritans had gained the majority in Parliament (although the vast majority of the English were Anglican), and under Oliver Cromwell (a Puritan, himself), they actually ran England from 1648-1658. This period in English history is called the "Commonwealth", and during those ten years, England had no monarch. Cromwell ended up doing a pretty good job of running the country, but the Puritan Parliament spent much of the ten years trying to ram their own form of Christianity down the throats of all the Anglicans.

When Cromwell died in 1658, and his son tried to step into his shoes, English voters threw the Puritans out of Parliament. They had had enough Puritan tyranny. And, with the Puritans now out of power, the Anglicans devoted themselves to...payback! Thus, a period of persecution of the Puritans followed.

Meanwhile, back in Massachusetts, the Puritans carried on with carving out a new life in the wilderness and continuing their 'puritanical' philosophy. Christmas, for example, seen as a Catholic celebration, was outlawed in the colony until 1681. The Puritans, in fact, as with most, if not all, of the western religions of the time, were only interested in religious freedom and toleration for themselves--which was an excellent example of why the later founding forefathers of this country pointedly established no official U.S religion and a 'separation of Church and State'. They did not want the new country to go through the religious strife and wars that Europe had already gone through.

Thus, it's ironic that today Massachusetts is one of the most liberal bastions in the United States.

