



Focus on Religious Freedom

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America As a Religious Refuge in the 17th Century - Part 1

Refusing to compromise passionately held religious convictions, in 1620, 102 Pilgrims, followed by thousands of Puritans from 1630 - 1640s, fled European persecution for the British North American colonies. The New England colonies of New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Maryland were established as "plantations of religion." ⁽¹⁾ Some settlers came for secular motives but the great majority left Europe to worship God in the way they believed to be correct. They enthusiastically supported the efforts of their leaders to create "a city on a hill" or a "holy experiment," whose success would prove that God's plan for his churches could be successfully realized in the American wilderness. ⁽²⁾ Even colonies like Virginia that were planned as commercial ventures, were led by self-proclaimed "militant Protestants."

The Puritans settled in Massachusetts with a goal to make the church more holy. By 1690 they were the largest religious group with 50,000 living in MA. Since they believed theirs was the only true religion, they expelled those who disagreed. Puritan minister, Roger Williams, disagreed with compelling others to agree with him and was forced to leave the colony in 1636. He went on to establish the colony of Rhode Island founded on the principle of religious freedom.

America is Still an Asylum for those Seeking Religious Freedom

A U.S. core value is the right to be a member of any religion you choose and to worship openly. This is why America grants religious asylum to those who have been persecuted for their beliefs. The Commission on International Religious Freedom was formed in 1998 to study the impact and violations of religious freedom around the world. ⁽³⁾

(loc.gov/exhibits/religion (1)(2); manythings.org; reference.com, 3/28/20; politicalasylumusa.com; mtsu.edu/first amendment; Proclamation on Religious Freedom Day, 2020)

Happening Now: Religious Freedom Day, January 16

On Jan. 16, 1787, the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom was signed into state law and is one of the most important documents in early U.S. religious history. It was the model for the religious clauses of the First Amendment of the Constitution, ratified in 1791.

Each year, the President of the United States issues a Proclamation on Religious Freedom Day. In 2020, Pres. Trump wrote:

"On Religious Freedom Day, we honor the foundational link between freedom and faith in our country and reaffirm our commitment to safeguarding the religious liberty of all Americans."