

A Lesson on English



“Our Christian Heritage”: Colonies to Nation by Sara

This is the second issue of ALOE in a series about the Christian history of the United States. Often in public debate the phrase “our Christian heritage” is used to describe the intertwining of politics and religion in the USA.

Most of the people referring to “our Christian heritage” are Protestants and make the case that the USA’s Christian heritage is Protestant, specifically the Protestantism of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Is this statement historically correct?

In the first issue of this series (August ‘09), the historical record revealed that the first Christians in what is now the USA were Roman Catholic (Spanish and French), Dutch Reformed and Anglican. This issue deals with Anglicans, Pilgrims, Puritans and other Christians found in the 13 US colonies and the US itself until the 20th century.

Anglicans in Virginia, Pilgrims and Puritans in Massachusetts

When a popular assembly, the House of Burgesses, was established in Virginia in 1619, it made Anglicanism the established church and enacted strict religious laws. Unlike the colonies to the north, where the Church of England was regarded with suspicion throughout the colonial period, Virginia was a bastion of Anglicanism.

On Sept. 16, 1620 the ship "Mayflower" set off with 102 passengers, some were Christian Puritan Separatists and some had no religious affiliation. All the passengers were referred to in history books as “Pilgrims” after they arrived. Their settlement was known as the Plymouth Colony.

The group known as Puritans, a much larger group than the Pilgrims, established the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1629 with 400 settlers. Puritans were English Protestants who wished to reform and purify the Church of England in the New World of what they considered to be unacceptable residues of Roman Catholicism (www.timepage.org).

Schoolchildren of my era were taught that the Pilgrims and the Puritans were the true American pioneers, that they had a mission from God, and that they fulfilled that mission. “The Puritans believed that the Bible was God’s true law, and that it provided a plan for living.”

“Religious exclusiveness was the foremost principle of their society. People of opposing theological views were

asked to leave the community or to be converted. Any deviations from the normal way of Puritan life met with strict disapproval and discipline. Since the church elders were also political leaders, any church infraction was also a social one. There was no margin for error.” www.nd.edu/~rbarger/

www7/puritans.html



A group of Pilgrims: Protestant refugees from England via Holland

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Sara and Jarda Tusek at Blue Springs
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"A Lesson on English" is a series of short lessons created for people who want to become fluent in conversational English. The lessons are practical and useful for students learning English in a traditional classroom setting or on their own.

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1st Amendment to the Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

Our Christian Heritage: Colonies to Nation—*from p. 1*

Lutherans, Reformed pastors and Friends

In 1643, John Campanius, Lutheran missionary to the Native Americans, arrived in America on the Delaware River; In 1649, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England was formed to reach the Natives. The Religious Society of Friends formed in England in 1652 around leader George Fox. "Quakers" (a mildly derogatory term) were severely persecuted in England; many sought refuge in New Jersey in the 1670's. In 1681, Quaker leader William Penn received a charter for the province of Pennsylvania; by 1685, as many as 8,000 Quakers had come to Pennsylvania.

Russians and Anglicans

The Russian or Orthodox Greek Church established missions along the southwestern coast of Alaska and the Aleutian Islands in 1794, when eleven monks were sent to a settlement on Kodiak Island. Church of England missionaries entered Alaska from the east (following the building of the Hudson's Bay Post at Fort Yukon in 1847, eventually sending three agents of the English Church Missionary Society into the Alaskan wilderness.

The Founding Fathers : Our Christian Heritage?

According to historian Robert T. Handy, "No more than 10 percent-- probably less-- of Americans in 1800 were members of Christian congregations." The Founding Fathers (the signers of the Declaration of Independence and the highest American elected political offi-

cial) rarely practiced Christian orthodoxy. Although they supported the free exercise of any religion, they understood the dangers of mixing politics with religion.

Most of the Founding Fathers believed in deism, not Christianity, and attended Freemasonry lodges. According to John J. Robinson, "Freemasonry had been a powerful force for religious freedom." Freemasons took seriously the principle that men should worship according to their own conscience. Masonry welcomed anyone from any religion or non-religion, as long as that person believed in a Supreme Being. George Washington, Ben Franklin, John Hancock, Alexander Hamilton and many others accepted Freemasonry.

These facts weaken the argument that "our Christian heritage" is the foundation of American political life, and certainly don't indicate that Puritanism, the Massachusetts Bay Colony's theocratic system, is the philosophical center of American character.

Clearly there have been Christians in the USA since the first European soldiers, settlers and missionaries crossed the Atlantic (and the Russians crossed the Pacific). However, there seems to be little historical evidence that any type of Christianity was crucial to the formation of the USA, especially in political terms.

In fact, separation of church and state is guaranteed in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. "Our Christian heritage" is just one among many perspectives on the history of the USA.