

Colonial Toleration, A Nation's Rule

by Stewart Whittle

Deputy Chaplain General

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When we met in Providence, Rhode Island, as the General Court, it was an opportunity to nose about the history of that place with regard to religious liberty. The two incentives of private ownership of land and freedom to worship God in other than the King's Own Church brought many families and men of the British Isles to these shores.

The movement for reform in the Church of England was an impetus for Puritan colonial immigration into New England. This was most intense from 1620 through about 1640, at which time the parliamentary party overthrew the King and created a more agreeable governmental and religious environment for the reformist. To their credit the Puritans brought with them the germinal idea for our nation to be of "congregational" democratic government. However, the practice of religious intolerance was so strong in their society, that a theocracy resulted. That "rule of law" produced persecution of non-puritan adherents. A similar situation developed in the Connecticut colony and the Congregational church. All of these faithful were committed to saving their souls in a way we, perhaps, have little contact; it was soul-threatening to disbelieve, life-threatening to live outside the huddled villages.

My own ancestor was punished by the Puritan led government of Massachusetts for being supportive of a Quaker family without demanding that they become Puritans. His ear was cut off and he was sent to jail for about two years. He "apologized" to the Court and was set free. Shortly thereafter, he moved with his family to the Southold community of Long Island and became a Presbyterian.

These same condition led Roger Williams to Providence, Rhode Island, and to establish the First Baptist Church in America. Many General court participants attended worship in the church he founded. His (and other's) idea of religious toleration became a guiding principle in the mores of that Colony. It was a refuge for Quakers, Jews and other communities of religious commitment. In Newport, RI, for example, the first synagogue in the colonies was established in 1763; Touro synagogue can be visited today. After the revolution, correspondence between the congregation and President George Washington reveals his attitude: it was not "by indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights," which by context he is referring to religious freedom. And again, "While just government protects all in their religious rights, true religion affords to government its surest support." Patriotism and Religious Freedom go hand-in-hand.