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Issues of Religious Freedom: Religious Minorities Quakers

By the 18th century, while the idea of religious freedom was spreading, a large minority of Americans lived in states with an established religion: Congregational in the North (Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Connecticut) and Anglican (or what is known today as Episcopalian) in the south (North Carolina, South Carolina and Virginia), meaning that all citizens had to pay a religious tax for the support of religion. In some states, the law authorized the taxpayer to designate his share to the church of his choice.

In the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights, the Founding Fathers set out to define what role the national government would play in religious matters. Would it guard the religious liberty of individuals and religious groups and guarantee that diverse religious traditions could co-exist on an equal basis? Or would faith traditions of religious minorities merely be “tolerated” by the religion of the majority? A prior century of religious conflicts and persecution of certain religious sects in colonial America would have weighed on the minds of the Founding Fathers.

One of the ironies of 17th century colonial America is that though many of the early settlers came here to escape religious oppression, they themselves were unwilling to tolerate much diversity. In the years before the American Revolution, Quakers were among the most oppressed groups in Massachusetts. The first Quakers arrived in Boston in 1656. They were not welcomed. To the Puritans, Quaker beliefs were not just heretical [opposed to established church teachings], but challenged the authority of the colonial government. Quakers believed that obedience to their conscience was more important than obedience to the state. The Quakers were viewed as troublemakers whose presence in the colony would lead to rebellion against the government. Quakers also began to enter the Plymouth Colony. As the Quaker threat grew, the governments of New York, Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth banned Quakers from entering their colonies. As Quakers disobeyed these bans, a series of laws were passed that became increasingly harsh. Here is an example of a law passed by the General Court of Boston on October 20, 1658.

“Whereas there is a pernicious sect (commonly called Quakers), lately risen, who by word and writing have published and maintained many dangerous and horrid tenets [beliefs], and do take upon them to change and alter the received laudable customs of our nation, in giving civil respect to equals, or reverence to superiors, whose actions tend to undermine the civil governments, and also to destroy the order of the churches, by denying all established forms of worship, and by withdrawing from orderly church-fellowship, allowed and approved by all orthodox [established] professors of the Truth, and instead thereof, and in opposition thereunto, frequently meeting themselves, insinuating themselves in the minds of the simple, or such as are least affected to the order and government of the church and commonwealth, hereby divers of our inhabitants have been infected, notwithstanding all former laws, made upon the experience

of their arrogant and bold obtrusions, to disseminate their principles among us, prohibiting their coming in this jurisdiction, they have not been deterred from their impetuous attempts to undermine our peace, and hazard our ruin.

“For the prevention thereof, this court doth order and enact, that every person, or persons, of the cursed sect of the Quakers, who is not an inhabitant of, but is found within this jurisdiction, shall be apprehended without warrant, where no magistrate is at hand, by any constable, commissioner, or select man, and conveyed from constable to constable, to the next magistrate, who shall commit said person to close prison, there to remain, without bail, unto the next court of assistants, where they shall have a legal trial: and being convicted to be of the sect Quakers, shall be sentenced to be banished upon pain of death: and that every inhabitant of this jurisdiction, being convicted to be of the aforesaid sect shall either by taking up, publishing, or defending the horrid opinions of the Quakers, or by stirring up mutiny, sedition or rebellion against the government, or by taking up their absurd and destructive practices, viz. Denying civil respect to equals and superiors, and withdrawing from our church assemblies, and instead thereof frequent meetings of their own in opposition to our church order; or by adhering to or approving of any known Quaker, and the tenets and practices of Quakers, or manifesting thereby complying with those, whose design is to overthrow the order established in church and state, every such person, upon conviction before the said court of assistants, in manner as aforesaid, shall be committed to close prison for one month, and then, unless they choose voluntarily to depart the jurisdiction, shall give bond for their good behavior, and appear at the next court, where continuing obstinate, and refusing to retract and reform the aforesaid opinions, they shall be sentenced to banishment upon pain of death. . . .”

Source: The Land of the Free <http://members.aol.com/wdwyllie6/1650-1699.htm>

Despite these punishments, the Quakers persisted in returning. So the following year, the legislature ordered that banished male Quakers who returned should lose one ear; if they returned a second time, the other ear. Females who came back were to be “severely” whipped, and on a third return, male or female should “have their tongues bored through with a hot iron.” But the Quakers kept coming, so in 1658, the General Court prescribed death by hanging, the same punishment imposed upon Jesuits and other Catholic priests who returned to the colony after banishment. Between 1659 and 1661 one woman and three men were hanged upon Boston Common.

Source: Rights of the People Individual Freedom and the Bill of Rights
<http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/rightsof/roots.htm>

Based on this reading, be prepared to discuss the following questions:

1. Identify the time, place, and religious minority experiencing oppression.
2. Why was this group considered to be out of the religious mainstream?
3. What forms of oppression did this group experience?
4. Why did the religious majority perceive this group to be a threat to society?