

Quakers in New England

Dogma - the belief or doctrine held by a religion

Heretic - someone who has religious opinions that differ from those accepted by his or her church or rejects doctrines and teachings prescribed by that church.

Quakers and Puritans traced their roots to the same religious turmoil in England. Both groups were dissenters who objected to the Church of England's rituals, dogma, and hierarchy. But Quakers took their reforms beyond what Puritans considered acceptable. Quakers believed an individual could experience God directly; they rejected ordained ministers and traditional forms of worship.

When the first Quakers arrived in Boston in 1656, they received a chilly welcome. To the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay, Quaker teachings were not just heretical but a direct threat to the authority of the magistrates who governed the colony. Quakers placed the demands of their conscience above the dictates of human authority. In the eyes of colonial officials, this "contempt of the magistracy" made Quakers "instruments of the devil" who sowed seeds of social discord, sedition, and anarchy. The authorities took immediate steps to suppress Quakerism.

Quakers made their way to Plymouth Colony. Law makers there responded by prohibiting the transporting of Quakers into the colony and authorizing punishment for residents who provided shelter to a Quaker or attended a Quaker meeting. In spite of these harsh measures, two Quakers began teaching in Sandwich (a town in Massachusetts); about 18 families joined what became the first Friends' Meeting in America. As word spread, Sandwich became a gathering place for Quakers. Colonial authorities responded by seizing any vessel that was headed for Sandwich with Quakers aboard.

As the Quaker presence grew, the governors of Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth both took legal steps to prevent Quakers from entering their colonies. Under the Massachusetts Bay charter, the governor had no authority to imprison Quakers. In late 1656 and 1657, the General Court rectified this situation when it passed a series of laws that outlawed "the cursed sect of heretics commonly called Quakers." Captains of ships that brought Quakers to Massachusetts Bay were subject to heavy fines; so was anyone who owned books by Quakers or dared to defend the Quakers' "devilish opinions." As the movement continued to gain adherents, Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth passed even harsher laws. Quakers who persisted in entering the colony were imprisoned, publicly whipped till they bled, and had ears chopped off. Finally, in October of 1658, the Massachusetts General Court passed a law that barred Quakers from the colony "under pain of death."

Not all Quakers were deterred. One who defied the authorities was Mary Dyer. Arriving in Boston in the early 1630s, Mary Dyer had become embroiled in the religious controversy surrounding dissenter Anne Hutchinson, a Quaker woman who held religious meetings at her house. When Hutchinson and her family were forced out of Massachusetts, Dyer followed them to Rhode Island. During a 1650 trip to England, she met and became a follower of George Fox, founder of the Quaker Society of Friends. Passionate about her new beliefs, Mary Dyer returned to Boston in 1657. She was immediately imprisoned. Her husband, who was not a Quaker, promised she would not preach as long as she was within the borders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and she was released. The Dyers returned to Rhode Island.

Despite the threat of death, Mary Dyer repeatedly returned to Boston to support fellow Quakers who had been imprisoned. Finally, in the fall of 1658, she and two other Quakers were arrested and sentenced to death. When the governor pronounced the death sentence, Mary Dyer responded, "The will of the Lord be done." A week later, the two men were hanged, but at the last minute, Mary Dyer was granted a pardon. She reluctantly left Massachusetts, but less than two years later, she returned one last time to defy "that wicked law against God's people and [to] offer up her life there."

Once again, she was arrested and condemned to death. On June 1, 1660, she was taken to the gallows. Her husband pleaded for her life, but she herself refused to repent. The execution of Mary Dyer and the other Quakers so appalled King Charles II that he ordered an end to the death penalty for Quakers in all his colonies. By 1677 members of the Society of Friends were free to hold regular meetings.

Religious Freedom: Quaker Experience

Name: _____

Directions: Answer the following questions using the secondary source: *Quakers in New England*.

1. In the second paragraph, it says: Quakers placed the demands of their conscience above the dictates of human authority. This means that they put what they know is right over what the government says they must do. What evidence from the article demonstrates this? Underline the evidence in the article and label it with #1. Then explain in the space below. (1 pt)
2. Mary Dyer, a Quaker, kept returning to Massachusetts even though she knew she didn't have the freedom to practice her Quaker beliefs. Was she justified in returning? Explain. (2 pts)
3. Did the Puritans live up to the expectations from John Winthrop's speech A Model of Christian Charity in their treatment of the Quakers? Explain. (2 pts)
4. Mary Dyer was willing to die for her determination to practice her religion. It is events like her sacrifice, that helped pave the way to freedom of religion for all people in this country. What freedoms do you value the most? What extent would you go to defend them? (1 pt)