



The 2012 Virginia Mayflower Society Mildred Ramos Scholarship recipient's essay

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(For the full article about Nick Aunspach's selection as our 2012 Scholarship recipient, see page 3 of the Spring 2012 issue of *The Virginia Mayflower* newsletter.)

Why the Pilgrims' Spirituality Could Not Exist in England

BY NICHOLAS M. AUNSPACH

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In England, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth (1533-1603), the Puritans, thus named as they wanted to purify the Anglican Church and its practices, were tolerated, but once King James became king in 1604, this tolerance began to erode. King James began to come into conflict with many across England who felt that the church's reformation had not gone far enough (Johnson, 2011). Slowly two different groups began to form. One, group, the Puritans, wanted the Anglican Church to continue to review their practices and "purify" the religion because they believed that the Church was moving away from its core values and if it were to endure, it must get back to its spiritual roots (Worrall, 2006). The other group, the Separatists, wanted to purify the church as well, but they wanted more changes and more radical changes (Worrall, 2006). Eventually, this group would separate from the Anglican Church over these theological differences.

One small group of separatists would eventually become the Pilgrims of Plymouth. They, like many of the other separatist groups, opposed many fundamental tenets of the Anglican Church. These tenets centered on differences of belief of predestination, sacraments, church organization, and the Bible (Johnson, 2011). These differences of belief would eventually lead to the inability of the Pilgrims to live in England and their migration to the New World.

In respect to the belief of the Catholics and the Anglican Church, God was a forgiving God. Followers could sin and then ask for forgiveness, perform acts of contrition and all was forgiven. The Reformers believed in the more literal statements in the Bible that when God made the world, He predestined all within the world, who would be saved and who was eternally damned (Johnson, 2011). The belief was that there was nothing a person could do in his life to change this destiny. God's elect were the ones who had faith, but then again, God would not choose to bestow his grace on sinners so those He chose were Godly to begin with (Johnson, 2011).

Another large area of discord was the sacraments of the church. Besides the reformists' view that the Anglican Church had not moved far enough away from the very ornamental rituals of the Catholic Church, again there were fundamental differences in the beliefs of the two groups. The reformists viewed baptism as a way to cleanse away original sin and a way to seal the covenant with Christ and therefore believed in infant baptism (Johnson, 2011). This was in direct conflict with other religious groups which viewed baptism as a sealing of the membership into the church; something to be completed later in life when the person could consciously choose to be initiated into membership (Johnson, 2011). In a similar

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vein, the reformists viewed marriage, Holy Days, and other sacraments as inventions of mankind to give a false sense of closeness to Christ. They viewed marriage as a civil union and the church not need to become involved. They did not celebrate Easter or Christmas, as these were invented Holy Days that celebrated certain days of Jesus' life but not Jesus himself (Gravatar, 2008). In the Pilgrims' view, the other sacraments celebrated by both the Catholic Church and the Anglican Church, such as confession, penance, confirmation, ordination, and Last Rites did not have a spiritual basis and again were only the inventions of man and therefore were at the least superstitions and more likely acts of heretics (Johnson, 2011). In rejecting many of the fundamental beliefs and practices of the Anglican Church, including the authority of the Bishops, Clergy, and even the head of the Church, King James, as well as the adoration of relics, saints, and other symbols of the faithful, the reformists were threatening the very power and rule of the king and thus were considered acts of treason (Worrall, 2006). Therefore, the tolerance for these separate groups of religious societies began to erode.

The reformists also had conflicts with the Anglican Church over the power the Clergy and Bishops had within the church and the state. They believed that everyone had a place within the society and that no one was more worthy or more holy than another. The pilgrims had leaders within the church, and each leader had a role, but no leader was held

in more esteem than another (Johnson, 2011). This again was in direct conflict with the Anglican Church's hierarchy of clergy, including the leader of the church, the king himself. The constant challenging of the order and power of the Anglican Church was adding to the growing intolerance of the separatists (Worrall, 2006). This is a difficult situation for any culture. Eventually, this intolerance turned to hate and persecution.

Given these fundamental and growing insurmountable theological differences, the Plymouth Pilgrims, my ancestors, formed their own religious society and began to meet in Scrooby Manor near Sherwood Forest (Johnson, 2011). They were led by Richard Clyfton, John Robinson, and William Brewster. They met in secret, but by 1606 the group was discovered, as were many others, and plans were made to flee to Holland. By 1607, through many hardships, the entire group had successfully fled to Holland (Johnson, 2011). Eventually they made their way to the New World, where they could embrace their religious beliefs, views, and practices as they saw fit. While they did not always look kindly on those practicing other religions in their colony, this became the first example of religious refuge in America (All About History.org, 2010). It later became the first inspiration for religious freedom in America (Worrall, 2006). However, most importantly of all, the Mayflower compact became the first permanent governing doctrine in America. ■

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