

Roger Williams: Pioneer on America's Journey towards Religious Liberty
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Abstract

The radical English Puritan Roger Williams (1603 – 1683) lived too early to be a direct influence on the American constitutional ideals of separation of church and state. His life and actions, however, are informative to our understanding of Colonial America's earliest disputes over religious freedom and established government.

Though banned from Massachusetts for his seditious ideas concerning the civil authority's power to enforce the "first tablet" of the Ten Commandments, Williams failed to be silenced. In establishing the colony of Rhode Island, Williams fought for the right of all to enjoy "soul liberty" in matters of religious faith and conscience—"pagan, Jewish, Turkish, or anti-Christian."

Williams championed civil and religious separation before the revolution was a thought, let alone before the framers of the Constitution could have imagined a Bill of Rights assuring a "wall of separation" between religion and government.

This paper will attempt to outline Williams' passionate engagement with the ideals of freedom of religion and the impact his writings may have on how we understand that freedom today.

Introduction

Most who are not familiar with the history of Rhode Island or the history of American Baptists may never have heard of Roger Williams. His statue adorns a national monument in Providence, Rhode Island, the Hall of Fame in the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., and a *bas relief* at the Reformation Monument in Geneva as the lead Reformer in America. Yet, very few are actually knowledgeable about the particulars of his stance on religious liberty and freedom of conscience.

Roger Williams is best known as the "first American to advance the view that religion and government are separate institutions whose purposes are not to be mixed."¹ This position pointed in a bold direction that few would be willing to follow for a century or more.² In many ways, it is also so bold that many are unwilling to follow it today, for it was a direction taken for theological and biblical reasons rather than for political ones. Williams may be too biblical for modern church-state separationists.

¹ Derek H. Davis, "The Enduring Legacy," 201.

² Edmund S. Morgan, *Roger Williams: The Church & the State*, 89.

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This paper will attempt a brief outline of Roger Williams' life followed by the pivotal points of his thoughts as gleaned from his writings. The final section will serve as a catalyst for dialogue on the impact of Williams' positions on modern issues of freedom of conscience and political issues.

Biography

The Great London Fire of 1666 destroyed the records of St. Sepulchre's Church and with those records the date of Roger Williams' birth was also lost. The fact that we cannot pinpoint a birth date for this man is a somewhat ironic commentary on the beginnings of one who was to be such an influential pioneer in the colonial American debate on religious liberty. There is little in the early biography of Roger Williams that would indicate the potential for his rise to such a significant role in the church-state arena.

Roger Williams was born *circa* 1603 to James and Alice Williams. His father was a merchant of some means. Roger grew up near the Smithfield plain of London in a turbulent time in England's religious and political history. While a young man, he may have been aware of the numerous burnings at the stake of so-called Puritans or heretics that took place at nearby Smithfield. It is only with some degree of conjecture that we can say that his ideas concerning religious liberty may have, thus, been set early in life.³

As an adolescent, Roger attracted the attention of Sir Edward Coke, a lawyer and one-time Chief Justice of England, who enrolled him at the prestigious Charter House School. Williams, who flourished in languages as varied as Greek, Hebrew, French, and

³ <http://www.rogerwilliams.org/biography.htm>

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Dutch, was a scholarship graduate from Pembroke College of Cambridge University in 1627.

Rather than moving into parish ministry, Williams took a position as chaplain to a wealthy family in Essex upon graduation. The story is told that Roger was rejected in courtship by the family of a young woman whom he loved. As fate would have it, he was nursed to health from his "love fever" by Mary Barnard whom he wed in 1629. It is thought that Roger Williams had already formulated some of his radical ideas on freedom of religion when he and Mary sailed for America in 1630. Upon his arrival in Boston on February 5, 1631, Governor John Winthrop noted the arrival and welcomed Williams as "a godly minister."⁴ How soon this opinion would change.

The basis of Williams' problems in the Massachusetts Colony centered on two related issues: Puritan separatism from the Church of England and separation of church and state. Williams was a Puritan Separatist: he believed that the only way the Church of England could be reformed was by separation from it. He deserted the Church of England because he believed that it falsely claimed to be the Church of Christ. As evidence, he cited their continued use of the "tools" of Rome (liturgy, vestments, icons, etc.), their position as the National Church, and what he called a "promiscuous membership."⁵ Others, among them civil and church officials in Massachusetts, were Puritans but non-separatists. They wanted to remain a part of the Church of England and reform from within. Because of his separatist stance, church fellowship was problematic for Williams in Massachusetts.

⁴ Edwin S. Gaustad, *Roger Williams*, 5.

⁵ Edmund S. Morgan, *Roger Williams: The Church and the State*, 18-19.

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Roger Williams was offered the prestigious pastorate of the Church at Boston but refused it because the church would not repent of holding communion with the Church of England. He was welcomed at the Church at Salem but was offered no official position because of the negative counsel to Salem concerning him offered by the Boston congregation. He and Mary moved on to serve the more separatist-leaning congregation at Plymouth for several years. After creating some fractiousness at Plymouth, Williams took part of that congregation and went to the Salem Church to teach. In these movements between churches, historians record that the Court repeatedly wrote against Williams.⁶ It was in his teaching ministry at Salem that Williams' problems with the Court became most contentious.

This brings out the second problem Williams encountered in the Massachusetts Colony. Williams objected to what he considered the Massachusetts theocratic state with its forced church attendance, a religious test for public office, and a required oath to God for citizenship.⁷ For Roger Williams, the Court had no business in Church matters and vice versa.

For his opinions, Williams was expelled from Massachusetts and was about to be deported to England when he fled into the wilderness southwest of Massachusetts in the winter of 1636. Williams lived through the winter with the friendship and help of Indians. He bought land from the Narragansett chiefs Canonicus and Miantonomi for the city he named "Providence" in thanks to God. Slowly, his family and others settled there with him and in 1637 he established the first Baptist Church in America at that site in

⁶ Isaac Backus, *A History of New England*, 41-44.

⁷ Derek H. Davis, "The Enduring Legacy of Roger Williams," 203.

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Rhode Island.⁸ With the exception of two trips to London in 1643 and 1651 on official business to obtain charters for Rhode Island, Williams remained there until he died in 1683. He served as Governor of the colony from 1654-1658. Under Williams' leadership, Rhode Island was the first colony to declare that "religious freedom and separation of church and state would be among their guiding principles."⁹

Williams' biography, though remarkable, matches the adventurous spirit of many other colonial settlers. It is his ideas that are a challenge even today to those who would take him seriously. It is no wonder that those of the 17th century had difficulty dealing with him and his ideas.

Roger Williams through his own Writings

It was in February 1631 that Governor John Winthrop declared Roger Williams to be a "godly minister" as he welcomed him to Boston. In July of 1635, however, Winthrop stated in his journal that this same Roger Williams had "dangerous opinions."¹⁰ At the time of the journal entry, Williams was facing charges from the General Court of Massachusetts over the central issue of the civil magistrates' "right to govern in ecclesiastical affairs."¹¹ Williams challenged the Court's authority to reprimand the Salem Church where he was a teacher. In the following October, Williams was sentenced to depart the Colony's jurisdiction. When he failed to do so by January, he was to be deported to England. Three days before the authorities arrived at his home to

⁸ Williams left the Baptist congregation in Providence after only a few months and never again participated in any established church. He felt that no church on earth was pure enough.

⁹ Rob Boston, "The Forgotten Founder," 81.

¹⁰ Governor Winthrop's Journal, Volume I, 162-163. Quoted by Isaac Backus, *A History of New England*, 53.

¹¹ Isaac Backus, *A History of New England*, 53.

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forcibly remove him to the ship, Williams slipped away from their grasp and fled into the Indian wilderness. All of this for what Isaac Backus called "sowing confusion."¹²

In Massachusetts as in all of Colonial America in the 17th century, the state had a "covenant imposed" responsibility for the church. Officers of the state were viewed as agents of God and had a "duty to protect true religion and the true church."¹³ Williams was decidedly opposed to this position. Williams had the foresight to see that the Massachusetts theocracy was developing essentially the same policy as England and the Vatican, that of "persecuting one another in the name of religion."¹⁴

His church-state position was based on two presuppositions that he stated clearly in the opening of his *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for the Cause of Conscience* (1644). First, Williams maintained that the government was not invested with power from Christ to rule the church. He denied the "agent of God" position of the colonial Puritans. Second, Williams denied the "covenantal" position.¹⁵ This idea was based on the assumption that Colonial America was the new Israel, that God had selected the settlers, given them the land, and modeled the colonies as the "chosen" much similarly to the covenant with Israel of the Old Testament. Williams described this as "none-such." The Old Testament pattern of church-state merger, the covenanted theocracy of God and Israel, was not a repeatable model for any other nation, stated Williams. Since the time of Christ, this model is non-repeatable. There must be governments and Christians

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Edmund S. Morgan, *Roger Williams: The Church and the State*, 84.

¹⁴ Perry Miller, "Roger Williams: An Essay in Interpretation," 20.

¹⁵ Roger Williams, *The Complete Writings*, III, 3.

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should submit and assist in establishing them but "no government should expect the divine assistance, guidance, and authority that God had given Israel."¹⁶

This opening salvo between Williams and the authorities of both the church and the state in Colonial Massachusetts points out the extreme renegade character of the ideas that Williams was espousing. The ideas that cost him his residency in the Massachusetts Colony did not wane with his movement to the wilderness of what became Rhode Island. Williams left extensive writings, often between himself and his detractors in Boston. John Cotton, a Puritan preacher, and Williams exchanged letters throughout the next decades.

One of the key points in Williams' underlying philosophy can be found in his essay entitled "Mr. Cotton's Letter Lately Printed, Examined, and Answered." Williams maintained that the Church must be separate from the world.

The church of the Jews under the Old Testament in the type and the church of the Christians under the New Testament in the antitype were both separate from the world; and when they have opened a gap in the hedge or wall of separation between the garden of the church and wilderness of the world, God hath ever broke down the wall itself, removed the candlestick, and made his garden a wilderness.¹⁷

If the Church does not remain separate from the hypocrisy and worldliness of the state, the Church's fight for God will be corrupted, according to Williams.¹⁸ Williams' reasoning is clear: it is "to keep the holy and pure religion of Jesus Christ from contamination by the slightest taint of earthly support."¹⁹

¹⁶ Ibid., 250.

¹⁷ Ibid., I, 392.

¹⁸ Ibid., I, 373.

¹⁹ Perry Miller, "Roger Williams: An Essay in Interpretation." In *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, "VII, 6.

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In "The Hireling Ministry None of Christ's," Williams answered quite succinctly the question: "What is the express duty of the Civil Magistrates as to Christ Jesus, his Gospel, and Kingdom?" The duties are limited to two: 1) to remove all obstructions such as forced oaths and 2) to free permission of all consciences. According to Williams, "Christ Jesus never called for the sword of steel to help the sword of the Spirit."²⁰ The role of the government was to provide for peace and civility.²¹

If the government requires conformity in religion, forces citizens to mass, and mandates the taking of an oath in the name of God, this government forces the unregenerate and unrepentant "to pretend and assume the name of Christ Jesus."²² All those who refuse these directives are "not permitted civil cohabitation . . . but have been distressed and persecuted."²³ Williams boldly stated that this is not the will of God: God's will is that all—pagan, Jew, Turk, or anti-Christian—be granted freedom of conscience.²⁴

This may, perhaps, be Williams' boldest assertion. For a Puritan in that day and time to allow for liberty of conscience for all, even for the atheist, was beyond comprehension. In an editorial in *The Journal of Church and State*, Derek Davis describes the background for Williams' thinking as twofold: 1) Williams believed that one's conscience belongs to God. 2) The government is not competent in God's domain because that amounts to "a perversion, an invasion of the divine providence."²⁵

²⁰ Williams, *Complete Writings*, VII, 179.

²¹ *Ibid.*, II, 256: IV, 222.

²² *Ibid.*, I, 361.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, III, 3.

²⁵ Derek Davis, "The Enduring Legacy," 208.

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At every level of his argument and writing, Williams moved not only at the level of reason or analytical rhetoric. He was first and foremost a Puritan who traveled in the realm of biblical proof-texts and argumentation.²⁶ Williams could leave the government out of the realm of salvation not because he was not concerned about salvation, but because he was ultimately concerned about salvation. God would take care of salvation. The government had no business in God's realm.

Williams' commitment to the separation of church and state was made most evident in the wording of the 1663 Charter of Rhode Island and the Providence Plantations:

Our royal will and pleasure is, that no person within the said colony, at any time hereafter, shall be anywise molested, punished, disquieted, or called in question, for any differences in opinion in matters of religion, . . . but that all and every person . . . freely and fully have and enjoy his . . . own judgments and consciences, in matters of religious concernments.²⁷

Williams' thoughts, writings, and actions were certainly problematic in 17th century Colonial America. He stands at the beginning of the American struggle for religious liberty, though there is no evidence for any direct line between his writings and the framers of the Constitution. Perry Miller credits Williams with the basic thesis that "virtue gives [one] no right to impose on others their own definitions."²⁸ Perhaps this will provide a starting point for discussing Roger Williams' impact on issues of church and state in the 21st century.

²⁶ Williams' writing is characterized by point by point biblical refutation of those who would argue against him. He engaged in typological exegesis which can be somewhat tortuous reading. There is no doubt that he was first and foremost a biblical scholar concerned with preserving the sacredness of Christianity from the secular realm of the government.

²⁷ Charter of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, July 15, 1663.
http://www.auok.org/rhode_island_charter.htm

²⁸ Perry Miller, *Roger Williams: His Contributions*, 254.

Roger Williams and Church-State Issues of the 21st Century

In writing a concurring opinion for the Supreme Court's decision in *Abington School District v Schempp*, Justice William J. Brennan correctly recognized the difference between the perspectives of Roger Williams and Thomas Jefferson on religious liberty: It has rightly been said of the history of the Establishment Clause that "our tradition of civil liberty rests not only on the secularism of a Thomas Jefferson but also on the fervent sectarianism . . . of a Roger Williams."²⁹

John Coffey states Williams' position somewhat more bluntly: Roger Williams' was "a Christian defense of religious liberty for all."³⁰ Within the Reformation tradition, Coffey distinguishes two distinct cultures.³¹ The first he categorizes as magisterial reformers or those whose ideal was to build a Christian nation, those who believed that God's plan was the conversion of whole nations to Christianity. Magisterial reformers believed that Christians were to create and maintain godly nations and states even if it required the marriage of government and church to accomplish this goal.

Radical reformers criticized the concept of a Christian nation. Roger Williams would fit this second category of reformer. His sensitivity to the Indians and refusal to demand wholesale conversion of the Indians to Christianity³² are one example of his full religious toleration and his repudiation of the magisterial reformation notion of Colonial America as a "Christian nation."³³

Roger Williams presents us with a remarkable vision of a just multi-cultural society, in which the Church is a vigorous private association, the state an

²⁹ *Abington School District v. Schempp*, 374 U.S. 259-260, quoting Paul Freund, *The Supreme Court of the United States: Its Business, Purposes and Performance*. Cleveland: World Publishing, 1961. Found in Timothy L. Hall, *Separating Church and State: Roger Williams and Religious Liberty*, 12, n. 6.

³⁰ John Coffey, "How Should Evangelicals Think About Politics?" 50.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 41-48.

³² Addressed in "Queries of Highest Consideration," Williams, *Complete Writings*, II, 241-276.

³³ John Coffey, "How Should Evangelicals Think About Politics?" 44.

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essentially civil institution, and people of different faiths live together as good neighbors. Moreover, he does this without once compromising the universal truth claims of Christianity, because his political vision is [an] intensely biblical one.³⁴

The infringement of the sacred on the secular and vice versa was in Williams' mind spiritual rape.³⁵ Williams' insistence was that a Christian could maintain with fervor that faith and live in compliance with civil law but that the law should have no power over religious matters. Neither should church officials have any power in government because of their religious roles. He did not believe in building a Christian civilization. This is a strong word that needs to be heard afresh in this day.

First and foremost for Williams, liberty of conscience meant the right to be wrong.³⁶ The government was charged with protecting that right to be wrong. One might actually say that it took a great amount of faith to be so radically in favor of religious liberty. "Most in the seventeenth century lacked Williams' confidence that God's true religion could take care of itself and that no one should lift a finger to defend it except by spiritual weapons."³⁷

Neither do most in the 21st century have that kind of confidence. Let us consider but two examples that consistently make news in the United States: prayer in public schools and copies of the Ten Commandments posted in government buildings. Each has been declared an infringement of the Establishment Clause. Repeatedly, renewed efforts attempt to re-instate them into public life. According to the premises of Williams, neither should be considered because each mandates a particularized religious heritage and, thereby, gives preferential treatment. Even if the prayer were a nebulous, "sectarian" one,

³⁴ Ibid., 53.

³⁵ Williams, *Complete Writings*, II, 260.

³⁶ Morgan, *Roger Williams: The Church and the State*, 141.

³⁷ Morgan, 98.

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it would advocate some form of God. Certainly the Ten Commandments adhere to the Judeo-Christian tradition and the "first tablet" specifies the God of that heritage at the expense of all other gods. Both prayer in public schools and the Ten Commandments in government buildings would constitute "spiritual rape" in the mindset of Roger Williams.

There is another more nuanced way in which Roger Williams speaks to the American dialogue on church and state today. Williams was able to distinguish between civility and Christianity, between morality and religious dogma. Many in his day were unable to make that distinction. He was also able to separate civic pride from national destiny and a sense of being favored by God. This is not necessarily because of any inherent humility on the part of Williams. He could be extremely arrogant in the certainty of his beliefs. But he held strongly to the opinion that just because one held resolutely to certain judgments, no one had the right to make their own orthodoxy into a matter of forced civil correctness.

American colonialism held within it a certain self-interpretation as being favored by God, a chosen-nation status. Roger Williams did not uphold that line of thinking, and he used the biblical witness against it. According to Roger Williams' line of reasoning, one might question the current nationalistic pride of America that is subtly portraying itself as the nation chosen to spread civility across the globe.

Though the name of God may not be used in political speeches nor cited directly as the reason for actions taken by the United States government, there does seem to be the unspoken notion that America is destined by God to civilize/save other nations of the world—to establish the democratic and Judeo-Christian ideals throughout the nations of

the world. Thus, the radical right wing Christian movement has allied itself with the current Republican political power base.

Roger Williams would stand diametrically opposed to this in the name of God. Roger Williams would do this because he would state that God would not need the help of the sword. God can take care of the world without the help of the government. God has not appointed the United States government nor any other government as the keeper of the world's morality, religious purity, or governing ideals. The United States government, according to Roger Williams, exists to protect her people and to allow the people to exercise freedom of conscience. The government cannot force its own citizens or any others to believe or live according to any religious principles.

If it could be recognized that the state has less exalted purposes, that it was simply a convenient arrangement for protecting life and property, then its citizens could go about their business, including their religious business, without being continually obliged to measure the behavior of their rulers against the Word of God. Similarly if the rulers went about their own limited business and stopped thinking of themselves as vicars of God, they would not give their subjects the occasion for engaging in holy rebellions.³⁸

Conclusion

We live in a world beset by skirmishes between governments and religions. If one were to spin a globe and point a finger at almost any nation, one could recall news of subjects of the nation engaged in rebellion in the name of one religion or another. Or one could cite a government oppressing a people because of a religious matter. The confusion of the lines of civil and religious authority is a plague of our time. It is the cause of too many battles in too many regions.

³⁸ Morgan, *Roger Williams: The Church and The State*, 124.

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Roger Williams was a prophet of his time who said "enough is enough." He clearly marked the boundaries between religion and government and did so with a clear concern for biblical and Christian principles. Standing at the beginning of the American tradition, Roger Williams has marked and molded the American character as a prophet of religious liberty.³⁹ It is time for our culture to remember those contributions afresh, to recall his cry for true liberty of conscience, for genuine freedom for all to live unmolested by a compulsory religious state of any sort.

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³⁹ Perry Miller, *Roger Williams: His Contributions*, 254.

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