

A Crisis of Conscience

The Story of Roger Williams

c. 1603-1683

A Persecuted People

Many people take freedom of religion for granted. In your country and in mine there is freedom of worship but such is not the case in other parts of the world. In recent years from around the globe reports are received of the suffering saints.

In Saudi Arabia two Christians are sentenced

to be beheaded for their faith.

In Indonesia there is violence and murder by

Muslim youths that set fire to churches and mutilate Christians.

In Burma the Buddha government did nothing to stop

Buddhist from attacking Christian and Muslim owned shops.

In Mexico a Presbyterian lay minister was gunned down

after months of harassment by local officials.

Signs are posted saying,

“Protestants are Prohibited. This village is Catholic.”

In Ireland, a firebomb killed three Catholic brothers all under the age of ten, continuing a long tradition of murder between Protestants and Catholics.

Similar stories come from India, China, Tibet, Pakistan, Egypt and Turkey.

Freedom of religion has always been purchased with the blood and determination of men and women of faith and courage. The story of Roger Williams reminds us of this fact.

The Early Years

Roger Williams was born of middle class parents in London in 1603. He grew up in New Gate a suburb of London and enjoyed a quality education. A gifted student he was educated at Pembroke College of Cambridge University, which had become a center of religious controversy. Embracing the Calvinist theology defending the doctrines of sovereign grace, Williams became a member of the party that opposed the ecclesiastical organization of the established church.

After being ordained to the ministry he served as chaplain to a Puritan household in Essex where he came into contact with important Puritan leaders such as

Oliver Cromwell

John Winthrop

and Thomas Hooker .

His association with the Puritan would lead to his complete separation from the Anglican Church.

The Great Migration

In order to flee church and state persecution in England a number of Puritans migrated to the New World in search of religious freedom. Hundreds of tiny wooden ships sailed across the troubled waters of the Atlantic Ocean to land on the rocky shores of America. The people wanted to be part of a new and holy city set upon a hill.

Many who migrated to America were called Puritans because they believed they should purify England's state church and provide a model of Christian charity. The Puritans did not oppose a state church conceptionally. In fact they believed that political rulers had a God given mandate to work with ministers and deacons to insure success in society and in one's personal life. This unity of Church and state was the natural order—or so it was thought by most.

Joining those who migrated to America was Roger Williams. Shortly after the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the New World by John Winthrop and others, Williams arrived in Boston on 5 February 1631. Because of his quality education and speaking abilities in public Williams was invited to be the pastor of the Boston congregation. However, because that church had not officially severed ties with the Church of England the invitation was declined.

Williams did accept an appointment as teacher of the church in Salem, Massachusetts but the position was not to last because he had some definite ideas about church and state one of which is that no king, judge, priest or minister had the right to enforce religious beliefs. Williams articulated the position that there was a hedge or wall separating church and state. The state had no authority to supervise man's duties to God.

For that day and age this was a revolutionary concept. Such thinking the Boston authorities could not tolerate. It was too disruptive to the social life of the colony and undermined the authority of the political leaders as well as the ministers.

Unity of Church and State

It is easier to understand why the thoughts of Roger Williams were so alarming to leaders in his generation when it is realized that since the fourth century, beginning with the Roman Emperor Constantine there had been a close unity between church and state in order to maintain social peace. For the 1,200 years the church, with the support of the state ruled in such an authoritarian way that civil and religious dissent was crushed with force.

Even after the Protestant Reformation was underway religious descent was not given much freedom. Europe became a battleground of contending religious armies while the ground grew wet with the shed blood of martyrs.

The Catholic Church launched crusades and made war upon any dissenting sect while Protestants killed Protestants—all in the name of Christ. One victim of this madness asked with biting sarcasm, “*Was all of this bloodshed really from God? If so, what had been left for the Devil?*”

This was the world into Roger Williams was born and grew to maturity. It was a time in which two simple concepts were held to be essential.

The first concept set postulated that whoever had the power to rule the state should have the power to determine the nation's religion.

The second concept argued that the survival of the state depended upon uniformity of religion. Within this structure there was little room for freedom of thought.

In England there was much social unrest as a result of these guiding thoughts. Each change in the monarchy brought the potential of change in religion. For example, the nation was Catholic under Henry VIII and then Anglican. It was Protestant under Edward VI then with Mary Tudor back it went to Rome. Then came Elisabeth I who moved the nation away from Rome's dominion. Said one historian, "*It has been England's shame to change her religion as lightly as she changes her clothing.*"

A Mixture that would not Match

Determined to have peace in her day Elizabeth I believed she could have a national church that was Catholic enough for Catholics and yet Protestant enough for Protestants. Unfortunately neither the Catholic nor the Protestant community shared in her vision as set forth in the *Elizabethan Settlement* (1558-59).

According to the *Settlement*, if everyone would comply with the rules and attended the same national Church at the parish level either as Catholic, Edwardian Protestant, or a reformed minded Protestant, the Queen would be pleased. To keep the peace was all that was required by the Crown. What one did at home in private was not her concern unless it became a problem to the Crown or the State.

Responding to the *Settlement* the papacy declared Elizabeth

to be “*an incestuous bastard*”,

excommunicated her and promised forgiveness

of sins to all that assisted in deposing her.

Not surprisingly, increased state persecution against Catholics increased in 1588 especially after the invading Spanish armada was defeated having been supported by Rome.

In the end, neither Catholic nor Protestant escaped the sword of injustice and religious intolerance completely during the reign of Good Queen Bess. Sixty-one priests and forty-nine Protestants were executed between 1588–1603.

A Time of Great Hope

In 1603 Elizabeth I died. James I ascended the throne. It was during his reign that Roger Williams was born.

Both Puritans and Catholics had looked forward to the reign of James I, sometimes called a “*Prince of Great Hope*”. The Catholics thought James would loosen the restrictions on practicing their faith. The Puritans hoped James would purify the Church of England more of its Catholic overtones.

To that end a group of Puritans had presented to him the *Millenary Petition* (1603). This document contained a wish-list of puritan reforms. Having been composed by Thomas Cartwright (1553-1603) and other Puritan clergymen the document was presented to the new King on the way to his coronation in London. The King agreed to discuss the requests of the Puritans after his coronation.

In an effort to keep his word *The Hampton Court Conference* (1604) was called to discussed the *Millenary Petition* (1603) which was reported to have been signed by 1.000 puritan clergymen.

For several days Puritan supporters and Church divines debated their positions before the King who became an active participant in the discussions.

In fact James actually agreed in principle to some of the Puritan concerns but then they went too far in their demands. A more moderate attitude on the part of the Puritans may have won concessions but that was not to be. The Puritans demanded immediate changes from the King.

Like other monarchs of his era, James I reacted and declared the doctrine of the divine right of kings to rule as he saw fit and not as he was being pressured. In the end the Puritans simply misread their new monarch. The King was very wary of any national church not under the control of the Crown—such as a Presbyterian Church. For James it was all very simple, “*No Bishop, No King*”. That became his mantra.

Killing the King

By 1605 it was clear to the Catholics they were not going to receive more religious freedom so a group conspired to blow up Parliament in general and the King in particular. The date of execution was set for 5 November. The *Gunpowder Plot* as it was later called was discovered due to the number of co-conspirators involved. The group included

Robert Catesby,

John Wright, and Thomas Winter, the originators,

Christopher Wright,

Robert Winter,

Robert Keyes,

Guy Fawkes, a soldier who had been serving in Flanders,

Thomas Percy,

John Grant,

Sir Everard Digby,

Francis Tresham,

Ambrose Rookwood, and Thomas Bates.

Brought to Light by Anonymous Letter

Thomas Percy hired a cellar under the House of Lords, in which 36 barrels of gunpowder, overlaid with iron bars and firewood, were secretly stored. The conspiracy was brought to light through a mysterious letter received by Lord Monteagle, a brother-in-law of Francis Tresham, on 26 October, urging him not to attend Parliament on the opening day.

The First Earl of Salisbury and others, to whom the plot was made known, took steps leading to the discovery of the materials and the arrest of Guy Fawkes as he entered the cellar. Other conspirators, overtaken in flight or seized afterward, were

killed outright,
imprisoned,
or executed by being hanged until groggy
then stretched out and dismembered
while they were still alive.

Fireworks, Bonfires in England

Among those executed was Henry Garnett, the superior of the English Jesuits, who had known of the conspiracy. While the plot was the work of a small number of men, it provoked hostility against all English Catholics and led to an increase in the harshness of laws against them. Guy Fawkes Day, 5 November, is still celebrated in England with fireworks and bonfires, on which effigies of the conspirator are burned.

No Place for Puritans

Meanwhile, apart from authorizing the publication of a new translation of the *Bible*, which came out in 1611, the Puritans found no favor in the sight of King James I because some would not stop speaking about separating from the Church of England, an act of treason in itself.

A Name for a Movement

Just as a historical aside, the word "*puritan*" had first come into usage about 1556 during the middle of the reign of Queen Mary. The word was originally used as a form of literary criticism towards Catholic writers who argued narrow points of view. Then, during the early part of Queen Elizabeth's reign ca. 1564 the term "*puritan*" began to be used in a different sense. The term was applied to certain voices of dissent within the Church of England. It was probably used initially as a form of ridicule.

Six Particular Concerns

Whatever the origin of their name the particular concerns of the Puritans centered around six issues.

- The apostasy of the Roman Church and its traditions
- The desire for a more educated clergy that embraced Protestant theology
- A simplified forms of worship without special clerical garb
- An emphasis on the literal teaching of the Bible and expository preaching
- A strict observance of the Sabbath
- An emphasis on the simple virtues of life.

James left the Puritans alone for the most part of his reign until the latter part when he promised to keep good his threat to “*harry them out of the land*” if they did not behave. Behave they would not.

A New Attitude

Following the death of James I, his son Charles I came to power. After 1628 he would receive religious counsel from William Laud Bishop of London. There was to be a more gentle and kinder treatment of dissenters. Rather than execute them they were to have their ears cropped and their tongues bored.

Growing more and more frustrated the Puritans decided to leave England and start a new work in a new land. Joining those already in the New World would be Roger Williams.

A Man with a Message

Unfortunately for the Puritans in America, Williams would prove to be a dissenter among dissenters. A man of strong conviction Williams would not be silent about some new beliefs he had come to embrace. As a result, Williams soon found himself in direct conflict with the colonial government over several critical issues.

Three Matters of Grave Concern

First, he challenged the validity of the Massachusetts Bay charter, which gave the authorities power to take land from the Native American Indians without compensation. Williams asserted that only direct purchase from the Native Americans constituted a valid title to land. “*What right did the King of England or anyone else have the authority to dispossess a people of their homeland without just compensation?*” It was a valid point.

Second, Williams opposed the establishment of a uniform faith and worship among the colonists. It was wrong, he argued to force people to attend services and fine them if they refused.

Third Williams denied the right of the government to punish what were considered religious infractions.

Dismissing the Dissenter

In October 1635, the Massachusetts general court issued an order banishing Williams from the colony. Three days before he was to be brought to trial and returned to England for his rebellious philosophies, Williams and a few faithful followers fled south to Narragansett Indian country. He and seven others survived the wilderness surrounding what is now Narragansett Bay, starving until the gentle Narragansett Indians befriended them. “*I was*

sorely tossed for one fourteen weeks in a bitter winter season, not knowing what bed or bread did mean," Williams wrote.

Toleration of Religion

Williams became friendly with the Narragansett Indians [lit. "*People of the small point*"] making a study of their language. "*My souls [sic] desire was to do the natives good, and to that end to have their language understood)...*God was pleased to give me a painful Patient spirit to lodge with them...to gain their tongue."

In 1636, having decided to settle among the Indians and honoring his own principles, he purchased lands from the tribe. Together with a few companions he established the settlement of Providence and the colony of Rhode Island, naming the settlement in gratitude "*for God's merciful providence unto me in my distress.*"

Freedom in Matters of Faith

The government of the new colony was designed to be based upon complete religious toleration and separation of church and state. In the fashion of true democracy each household was allowed to exercise a voice in the conduct of government and each household was to receive an equal share in the distribution of land.

A Baptism Revisited

Accepting at this same time the practice of adult baptism by immersion, Williams was baptized by a layman in 1639; he subsequently baptized a small group and so founded the first Baptist church in America.

Interesting enough, later in the same year Williams withdrew from the church he had founded and declared himself to be a “*seeker*,” that is, one who accepts the fundamental beliefs of Christianity but does not profess a particular creed.

The Plantation of Providence

In 1643 Roger Williams went to England and obtained (1644) a colonial charter incorporating the settlements of Providence, Newport, Plymouth, and Warwick as “*The Providence Plantations in Narragansett Bay.*”

During his trip back to England he wrote some important works including *A Key into the Language of America* (1643) and *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution* (1644), the latter setting forth the nature and jurisdiction of civil government.

Opposition in the Colony

Upon returning to Rhode Island, Williams found the leadership of the colony had been assumed by the opponents of his democratic system, and in 1651 he returned to England in order to confirm the rights granted by the charter. During this visit he became a friend of the English poet John Milton.

Returning to Rhode Island in 1654 Williams was elected president of the colony, serving until 1657.

Because of his policy of complete religious toleration, the colony was a haven for refugees. In particular the Quakers found freedom of worship having been forced by persecution to leave the Boston area. Ironically Williams himself became involved in a controversy with the Quakers, the substance of which is contained in his work with a humorous title *George Fox Digg'd Out of His Burrowes* (1676).

King Philip's War

When the Narragansett tribe joined the Native American revolt of 1675, known as King Philip's War, Williams served as a captain of forces defending Providence. Providence had for years been spared the arrow and the firebrand because of his presence there, but finally, the city was threatened with destruction. Bravely, Roger Williams went out, alone and

unarmed, to met the invaders, but for once his arguments failed. He was told that because he was an honest man not a hair of his head would be harmed, but that the city should be burned. Providence was burned on Mar 26 1676.

However, the final victory did not belong to the Indians. When the final battle was over Metacomet or Philip as he was called by the English, was slain, his body drawn and quartered, and his head paraded in triumph in Plymouth.

Philip's son, Massasoit's grandson, was sold into slavery in Bermuda. The generosity of Massasoit in 1620 to the first Pilgrims indirectly resulted in the enslavement of his grandson 56 years later.

Final Years

During the final years of his life Roger Williams participated in the political life of the colony. A few months before his death, on May 6, 1682 he wrote Governor Bradstreet, calling himself "*old and weak and bruised (with rupture and colic) and lameness on both my feet.*"

A Date with Death

The precise date of William's death is unknown, but it occurred sometime between January 16 and March 16 1683. He was buried in the orchard in the rear of his homestead lot.

A Final Tribute

Roger Williams is mainly remembered as one of the notable champions of democracy and religious freedom in the American colonies. However, his ideas and influence has circled the world.

- Freedom of conscious; soul liberty
- Separation of church and state To Williams, the only way to prevent wars based on religion was to actively sanction tolerance
- State funds should not support minister by way of taxation
- Non punishment for religious dissent
- Just compensation for land
- Religious toleration
- Political freedom and democracy
-

These ideas are the lasting legacy of a man who had a crisis conscience.

Timeline of William's Life

- 1603 Born in London, England; parents: James Williams, d. 1621, Alice Pemberton Williams, d. 1634; brothers: Sydrach and Robert; sister: Catherine
- 1621 Sent to Sutton Hospital (Charterhouse School)
- 1627 Graduated, Cambridge University, A.B. degree
- 1629 Church of England orders and post of Chaplain to Sir William Masham at Otes in Essex; married Mary Barnard, December 15
- 1630 Sail for New England on the ship "Lyon," December 1
- 1631 Arrive Nantucket Island, February 3; arrive Boston, February 5
- 1633 In Salem, preached personal liberty and Indian rights; questioned validity of Massachusetts Bay Colony and colony's right to take land from the native Indians; daughter Mary born in Plymouth
- 1635 General Court of Massachusetts Bay Colony threatens banishment; daughter Freeborn born at Salem
- 1636 Escapes to friendly Narragansett territory and purchases land on Mossahuck River; founds Providence Plantation; welcomes Quakers, Jews, and others fleeing from persecution; is the first to understand and empathize with the Native American culture; believes in spiritual freedom
- 1638 Anne and William Hutchison and William Coddington found Portsmouth; daughter Providence born at Providence
- 1639 Founds the first Baptist Church in America; withdraws from Baptist Church to become a *Seeker*, a separatist. *"As hardly any two Rhode Islanders shared the same beliefs,"* Williams foundered among a number of sects. The only basis could be religious liberty. William Coddington founds Newport.
- 1640 Daughter Mercy born at Providence
- 1641 Son Daniel born
- 1643 Returns to England; asks Cromwell to grant Charter for Providence, joining with Warwick, Newport, and Portsmouth; writes ***Key to the Indian Languages*** during voyage; Samuel Gorton founds Warwick; Son Joseph born at Providence

- 1644 Charter, a Colonial Patent, was granted; writes *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience, Peace and Truth Speak*; Williams argued that the government had no right to persecute him for his religious opinions and furthermore, he ought to be able to state them without fear of retribution. This was what lead him to become a stalwart in defense of the freedom of speech.
- 1651 Returns to England to confirm Charter; publishes *Experiments of Spiritual Life, and Health and Their Preservation*
- 1652 Writes: *The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, Williams argued that government control of religion eventually meant government control of all areas of human endeavor; after experiencing opposition by John Cotton; argues that a government that controls religion wants control of "all areas of human endeavor"
- 1653 Charter confirmed
- 1654-8 Elected president of the combined colonies of Providence, Newport, Narragansett and Warwick
- 1657 Quakers and Antinomians establish meeting house
- 1658 Newport Jewish congregation established
- 1658-61 Elected Commissioner
- 1660 Royal Charter necessary due to Stuart Restoration in England
- 1663 Royal Charter granted, serving as basic law until 1843
- 1670-80 Elected Deputy
- 1675-76 Served on Town Council
- 1675 Great Swamp Fight and the burning of Providence. *"For Williams, who witnessed the event, it represented the destruction of four decades of hard-earned progress."* Newport was spared.
- 1676 Providence burned in King Philip's War, but because Williams was *"an honest man, not a hair of his head would be harmed."* Writes *George Fox Digg'd out His Burrows*, attacking Quaker's "Inner Light"; wife Mary dies.
- 1683 Roger William actively served Rhode Island until his death

Roger Williams and His Critics

In the colony of Rhode Island there did arise so much dissension that it surprised Roger Williams. However he should not have been surprised for if, as he believed, every man should be free to follow the dictates of his own conscience, nothing can be declared wrong or unlawful.

No one can be condemned.

All laws are illegitimate since all law forces
the consciences of men in some way or another.

All government is wrong.

No true society is possible.

Dissention is unavoidable.

This is what happened in Rhode Island.

Interestingly, Williams saw this and for all practical purposes, abandoned his positions at the end of his life. In fact, he embraced exactly the opposite extreme. Realizing that "*no church could attain purity in this world,*" Williams dropped all regard for purity and in John Winthrop's words, "*having a little before, refused communion with all, save his own wife, now he would preach to and pray with all comers*" (*quoted in Morgan, op. cit., p. 131*).

Moving forward in time, the views of Roger Williams have now reached their logical end in America. Both Church and State, rather than being God's instruments to promote true godliness, have been reduced to institutions that promoted the destruction of godly society.

If Roger Williams is lionized by modern historians and viewed as an unblemished hero by many modern Americans it is because they understand what he really did was to oppose the sovereign rule of God in order to establish the autonomy of man. If that was not his intent it is nevertheless the consequences of his rhetoric and actions.

Roger Williams was in a very real sense, the first of his day to put a *Biblical* face on secular humanism. He sought to justify the "Neutral State" and thereby to nullify the importance of a distinctively Christian order in society.

Williams denounced godly authority to such an extend that he opened the way to anarchy and ultimately, centralism.

What happened in Rhode Island has now occurred throughout this country.

America as a nation has embraced darkness for light and error for truth. The death we see covering our land is a direct consequence of the seeds sown by Roger Williams and others that followed him.

God Makes a Path

*“God makes a path, provides a guide,
And feeds in wilderness;
His glorious Name, while breath remains,
O that I may confess.
Lost many a time, I had no guide,
No house but hollow tree;
In stormy winter night, no fire,
No food, no company.
In Him I found a house, a bed,
A table, company;
No cup so bitter but made sweet,
Where God shall sweetening be.”*

~*~

If Birds that Neither Sow nor Reap

*If birds that neither sow nor reap
Nor store up any food
Constantly find to them and theirs
A Maker kind and good;
If man provide eke for his birds,
In yard, in coops, in cage;
And each bird spends in songs and tunes,
His little time and age;
What care will man, what care will God
For wife and children take?
Millions of birds and worlds will God
Sooner than His forsake.*

~*~