

# Roger Williams Revisited

(1603-1683)

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A radical Puritan minister, Roger Williams left England only to be banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for his seditious ideas. Today, his name is nearly synonymous with civil liberties and the separation of church and state. In countless history textbooks, Roger Williams is described as “ahead of his time.” But was he really such an anachronism? Under closer examination, some common perceptions about Rhode Island’s founder fall flat, while others are strengthened.

Roger Williams’ ideas concerning the separation of church and state originated from a conceptual division of the Mosaic tablets. The first four of the Ten Commandments were defined as “ceremonial” and pertaining to religious worship, while the last six were defined as “moral” and pertaining to behavior among people. As John Garret explains in his book *Roger Williams: Witness Beyond Christendom*, John Cotton and his allies believed in a united church and state because they saw Moses as their predecessor: a wise, fair magistrate who governed both ceremonial and moral affairs (179). Williams disagreed. In his opinion, the tablets came from God, not Moses, and the state of Israel was neither a perfect nor an eternal model. Consequently, magistrates should enforce “moral” law, while church leaders should uphold “ceremonial” law.

Moreover, Williams supported the separation of church and state by citing Christ’s choices. As Williams wrote in his lengthily titled 1644 book *The Bloudy Tenent, of Persecution, for Cause of Conscience, discussed in a conference betweene Truth and Peace*:

Yea, he was the true heir to the crown of Israel, being the Son of Davis, yet being sought by the people to be made a king (John 5) he refused and

would not give a precedent to any king, prince or ruler to manage both swords and to assume the charge of both tables. (29)

If Christ himself was unequal to the task of enforcing both ceremonial and moral codes, Puritan and Separatist religious leaders could not dictate civil law.

Williams can be loosely considered a Jeffersonian Democrat. In terms of religious freedom although not in all civil liberties, Roger Williams believed that power rested with the people. He placed great importance on the concept of religious conscience. Edwin S. Gaustad adds in his biography that Williams considered personal religious conscience impervious to the state (97). As a corollary, New England government officials could not and should not regulate religious observances, such as church attendance and the observance of the Sabbath. Williams' attitude towards infant baptism exemplified the distinction he drew between religious and civic matters (Garret 101). Because he believed religion required a mature, conscious, and personal choice, he personally opposed infant baptism and preached against it. Due to his political views, however, he never outlawed it.

One of the major reasons why John Cotton and other clergymen supported theocracy was self-interest. As saints, they would naturally ascend the highest eschelons of political power. In *Bloudy Tenent*, Williams skewered the ethnocentrism and self-interest of the Bay colony authorities by posing challenging the absolute rectitude of the Bay Area's brand of Christianity, and by accusing Cotton of:

directing the sword of the magistrate to fall heaviest on such seducers only as trouble *his* conscience, doctrine, worship, and government. . . . Why now shall [a] Turk that hath seduced one of Master Cotton's conscience [a

Protestant] to Mahometanism [the Muslim religion] be more punished for that crime than for turning a Jew, pagan or papist to belief and worship?

(9)

As a religious leader and a saint, Williams stood to gain political power through theocracy, but he preferred democracy because state religions promote insincere faith. He also disliked the idea that Puritans, once persecuted in England, would in turn persecute other religious groups in Massachusetts (Gaustad 96). A fusion of church and state could facilitate such persecution, just as the state-sponsored Anglican Church had.

If religious leaders could not control civil government, then logically, some government officials would have to be non-saints. While the thought of government by non-saints horrified Cotton, Williams accepted the concept gladly. He even went so far as to claim that non-church members could make excellent magistrates, and that preventing non-church members from holding office “deprived and despoiled [them] of their natural and civil rights and liberties” (17). Unlike Cotton, he believed that Christians and non-Christians had the same legal rights. Williams was not liberal in his religious convictions, however; as a Calvinist, he felt that all non-saints were damned to hell.

Williams’s trust in the success of a secular government was based on his knowledge of pagan, Jewish and Muslim countries which had effective governments without Christianity (Garret 189). Williams was more well-traveled and well-read than his opponents. His broader world view informed his political beliefs. In *Bloudy Tenent*, Williams opined:

So many stately kingdoms and governments have long and long enjoyed peace and quiet, notwithstanding their religion is so corrupt, as that there is not the very name of Jesus Christ among them; and this every historian, merchant, traveler in Europe, Asia, Africa, America can testify. (23)

By “stately kingdoms . . . in America, Williams most likely means the governments of the Naragansett tribes among whom he lived. Before he was banished, Williams served as an invaluable peacekeeper among Indian nations and the English Bay colonies. In his biography *Roger Williams*, Henry Chupack credits Williams with contributing to the long period of peace after the Pequot War in 1636 and before King Philip’s War in 1675 (43). According to colonial records, the local Native American Indians were so grateful to Williams that they actually donated land to him to use for the settlement of Providence, Rhode Island.

Despite his worldliness and his reputation a peacekeeper, Williams did not explicitly champion civil rights for Native American Indians, as many think. In Roger Williams’ 1652 sequel to *Bloudy Tenant*, entitled *Bloudy Tenent Yet More Bloudy*, he railed against “the sin of . . . Christian kings – so called – are invested with right by virtue of their Christianity, to take and give away the lands and countries of other men” (47). He also chastised King James for using the phrase “Christendom” and identifying himself as Christ’s agent. In Williams’s eyes, the King’s primary crime was claiming to act under the unquestionable aegis of Christ. That King James seized tribal lands was a secondary matter.

Just as Williams did not champion civil rights for native peoples, he did not fight for equal rights for landless white men. Far from being a 17<sup>th</sup> century Jacksonian

democrat, he disliked self-made men, and ceded political rights to them only gradually (Garret 203). Williams believed firmly in religious freedom, and as a legacy of his beliefs, Rhode Island did not ratify the Constitution until the Bill of Rights was included. However, Williams did not always value the right to criticize government, particularly after he became the founder/governor of Rhode Island.

If modern historians sometimes frame Williams as a more democratic figure than he actually was, they also overstate the diversity of colonial Rhode Island. As author Carl Bridenbraugh notes in *Fat Mutton and Liberty of Conscience*, modern historians have distorted the truth by “stretching the “receptacle” theory of religious multiplicity . . . [and] overlooked the existence of an orderly population with a genuine respect for English law and Christian morality” (7). Rhode Island was not a true melting pot, but the absence of theocratic government did allow for free settlement and a competitive economy. Both factors contributed to Rhode Island’s success.

A century after the death of Roger Williams, the Constitution was drafted. Rhode Island was the thirteenth state to ratify the Constitution, because its citizens insisted on waiting for a Bill of Rights that ensured liberties, including freedom of religion. It would be a mistake to credit or blame Roger Williams for America’s imperfect but at least extant civil rights, theoretical political equality regardless of class, or comparatively secular culture. However, the first 16 words of The Bill of Rights can be considered the legacy of a man who fought tirelessly for “soul’s liberty”: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

## Bibliography

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