



# RHODE ISLAND

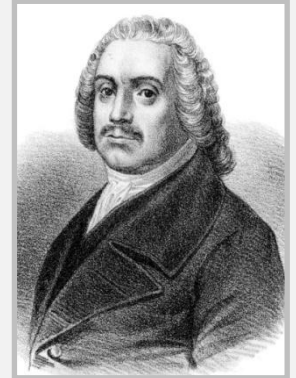
## AN EXPERIMENT IN LIBERTY

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Roger Williams' fame rests on the fact that he was among the very first to propose and above all to institute the total separation of the Church and the State and the absolute freedom of citizens in the field of religious thought and practice. He embodies the paradigm of the American spirit.



By the autumn of 1635, **Roger Williams** (1603-1683) was truly an exile from two worlds. He had emigrated from England in order to follow the dictates of his conscience, only to find that the Massachusetts authorities would tolerate no opposition to their theocratic philosophy. The decree for his banishment which they adopted October 9, 1635, was suspended until spring; but as Williams felt compelled to preach his individualistic doctrines even while under sentence, the authorities soon decided to send him to England at once. Warned of their decision, he quickly arranged his business affairs and fled from his home.



Roger Williams was aided by the Indians of New England when he fled from his Puritan persecutors.

## An Incongruous Paradox

Although he was fluke ill, and bitter winter storms were raging, he wandered **for fourteen weeks** among the Indians, "not knowing what bread and bed did mean." Without uttering a word of hatred for his persecutors, Williams' significant comment was: "A monster paradox that God's children should persecute God's children, and that they that hope to live together

eternally with Christ Jesus in the heavens should not suffer each other to live in the common air together."

Williams was well received by the Indians, for he had won their confidence in his earlier trading activities. They gave him a tract of land outside of the Massachusetts boundaries on which to settle, but he was soon forced to relinquish this site due to the objections of the Plymouth authorities. Another location was then obtained farther to the southward, and the settlement of Providence was begun in May, 1636. The site was an ideal one, and other colonists soon joined Williams in the development of the new commonwealth.

In an effort to avoid the evils of communism (which had failed so completely in early Virginia and Plymouth) as well as those of monarchy and theocracy (which he so strongly detested), Williams sought to establish "the least civil government consistent with public safety." He firmly believed in the "[compact theory](#)" of government, and insisted that the sovereign and original foundation of civil power lies in the people." Upon this premise he built his thesis that "a people may erect and establish what form of government seems to them most meet for their civil condition."

These ideas were put into practice in [Providence](#), and the result was an excellent application of lofty theories. The principles acknowledged in this colony are admirably summed up as follows: "The civil state founded by Roger Williams was a democratic federal commonwealth. His doctrines of state are people's sovereignty and rights of man: government by consent of the people with a written social compact giving only limited powers to civil government; the civil laws, constitution, and government subject to change by choice of the majority through referendum and recall, with civil channels open to the grievances of minorities; the essence of government as natural, humane, moral, and civil; the civil state a nonreligious body politic; the natural and civil right of man to liberty of conscience and worship, and freedom of press, speech, debates, and association; complete separation of church and state; freedom and equality of states; and the right of rebellion whenever the government or rulers usurp the civil rights and powers of the people."

## Freedom and Equality

In this colony the principle of majority rule was accepted, but "only in civil things." This was the outstanding contribution of Providence and Roger Williams. Others had sponsored the "social contract" theory with its philosophy of the sovereignty, the equality, and the natural rights of man; but Williams now added the principle of the complete -freedom of the conscience from civil domination. These principles of civil and religious liberty, of the separation of church and state, and of the freedom of the individual, are commonly accepted today as matter-of-fact principles. But to his generation, Roger Williams seemed "a most Prodigious Minter of Exorbitant Novelties," who was soon to be known as "[the New England Firebrand](#)." From pulpit, bench, and legislative hall he was denounced as a combination of heretic and anarchist, who would demolish the entire ecclesiastical, social, and civil structure over the heads of the people.

The Massachusetts theocracy maintained the position that the church and the state were closely associated, that the first duty of the state was to foster the interests of the Established Church, and that any schismatics accused by the clergy should be punished by the civil authorities. This philosophy implied further that only members of the Established Church were eligible for suffrage and office holding, while all residents of the colony were required to support the Established Church and to obey the religious legislation relative to morals and Sabbath observance. To sum it up, "on conformity to the theocracy depended all civil rights" in Massachusetts.

## Church and State Separate

To such ideas Roger Williams presented a complete and forceful denunciation. His philosophy consisted of two major premises. 1) **First**, he insisted, the church and the state should be completely and permanently separated. Their origin is different: the church exists by the command of Christ, while the state arises from the agreement of the people. Their aims are different: the church is to minister to the spiritual needs of the people, while the state exists to promote their civil and economic welfare. Having divergent origins as well as different aims, their spheres of jurisdiction should be entirely separate, and each should have its own laws and authorities. Neither should usurp the field of the other, and neither should allow itself to be inveigled by the other from its true sphere.

2) **Secondly**, Williams declared, separation of church and state required complete liberty of conscience. Declaring that "there is no sin ordinarily greater against God than to use violence against the consciences of men," he drew a sharp line between liberty and toleration. The former recognized the complete equality of men in spiritual matters, as well as their right to hold any or no religious views so long as no "evil against the civil state" is perpetrated. The latter implied that some particular religion was dominant over others, but that it granted temporary privileges to them. The philosophy of Roger Williams was in perfect accord with that of a later thinker **Thomas Paine** (1737-1809), who asserted, "**Toleration is not the opposite of intolerance, but the counterfeit of it. Both are despotisms.**"

In no uncertain terms Williams charged that "the Christian world hath swallowed up Christianity." While freely recognizing that "the punishments civil which magistrates inflict upon the church for civil crimes are lawful and necessary," he insisted that "the spiritual and civil sword cannot be managed by one and the same person." Williams admitted that attempts to do so had been all too common in the past, and decried such "bloody, irreligious, and inhumane oppression and destruction under the mask and veil of the name of Christ." The very aim of such persecution he held to be erroneous, for "God requireth not a uniformity of religion enacted or enforced in any civil state." In fact, such "enforced uniformity, sooner or later, is the greatest occasion of civil war, ravishing of conscience, and of the hypocrisy and destruction of millions of souls." Williams even ventured to suggest that "that cannot be a true religion which needs carnal weapons to uphold it." In the succeeding century the wise **Benjamin Franklin** (1706-1790) put it this way: "When religion is good, it will take care of itself ; when it is not able to take care of itself, and God does not see fit to take care of it, so that it has to appeal to the civil power for support, it is evidence to my mind that its cause is a bad one."

Roger Williams, in his colony of Rhode Island, determined to establish a refuge for the oppressed, where the fullest civil and religious liberty should be granted to all.

As a substitute for enforcement of religion by the state, Roger Williams suggested his famous "Ship of State" parable. The essential part of this vivid exposition is as follows:

"There goes many a ship to sea with many hundred souls in one ship, whose weal and woe is common, and is a true picture of a commonwealth or a human combination or society. It hath fallen out sometimes, that both Papists and Protestants, Jews and Turks, may be embarked in one ship; upon which proposal I affirm that all the liberty of conscience that ever I pleaded for, turns upon these two hinges—that none of the Papists, Protestants, Jews, or Turks be forced to come to the ship's prayer or worship nor compelled from their own particular prayer or worship, if they practice any. I further add that I never denied, that notwithstanding this liberty, the commander of the ship ought to command the ship's course, yea, also command that justice, peace, and sobriety be kept and practiced, both among the seamen and all the passengers."

This splendid philosophy was put into actual practice in the colony of Roger Williams. The entire course of action followed by this mild-spirited Christian is summed up in the following utterance: "I desire not that liberty for myself which I would not freely and impartially weigh out to all the consciences of the world besides; therefore, I humbly conceive that it is the express and absolute duty of the civil powers to proclaim an absolute freedom of conscience in all the world." How different would appear the pages of history if such a spirit had dominated all rulers and all governments! and how bright the future would appear if we were certain that our own society would accept his lofty principles of individual civil and religious liberty!

Roger Williams was truly one of the master builders of that splendid edifice we call the United States of America. His principles of complete religious and civil liberty constitute the cornerstone of our country. His philosophy is that of our Lord and Saviour, who clearly ordained the separation of church and state, when He said, "Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's; and unto God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21). Whenever the civil authorities exceeded their jurisdiction and usurped powers that belonged to God, or the ecclesiastical authorities encroached on the personal rights of the individual, Williams unhesitatingly followed the bold course of Peter and his associates whose guiding principle was, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

As might be expected, the pursual of such a course brought persecution to Roger Williams. Undoubtedly his persecutors thought they were right in their attempts to preserve the purity of their colonies from what they regarded as the stain of heresy. Christ foresaw such a situation when He advised His followers of all centuries, "They shall put you out of the synagogues: yea, the time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he doeth God service" (John 16:2).



From a vantage point of three hundred years we extol Roger Williams and his lofty principles, and we condemn his persecutors. It is easy for us to forget that three centuries ago he was considered the dangerous heretic, and his persecutors the orthodox "vessels of the Lord." In our meditations on the subject we reach the conclusions of **Thomas Macaulay** (1800-1859), the great historian, who asked, "Have not almost all the governments in the world always been in the wrong on religious subjects?" And of **Martin Luther** (1483-1546), the great Bible student, who opined, "Do not the Scriptures clearly show that they who persecute are generally in the wrong, and they who suffer persecution in the right,—that the majority has always been on the side of falsehood, and the minority only on the side of truth?"

We boast today of our unusual liberty, and our lot has surely been cast in pleasant places. But let us not assume that this favorable situation will always remain. Paul assures us that **"all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution"** (2 Timothy 3:12). It is well to be prepared for situations which will arise in the future. As we analyze our times, it is possible to discern situations and trends which are capable of sweeping away all our vaunted liberties with surprising suddenness. As we watch with eagerness to see whether such tempests will break immediately or will abate temporarily, let us adhere to the gospel of love, for **"love worketh no ill to his neighbor"** (Romans 13:10). But when an attempt is made to usurp the rightful sovereignty of God over us, may we be ready.

## THE END

Bible references: KJV



Memorial statue in Roger Williams Park in Providence.



Roger Williams Middle School in Providence (Rhode Island).

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