

ROGER WILLIAMS AND LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE

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Introduction

Imagine a sixty-nine year old man rowing thirty miles along the bay from Providence to Newport, Rhode Island, in 1672. He was going to debate with Quakers. He firmly believed they were disastrously misguided in their theology. But they were only there at all because this was Rhode Island, the state this elderly man had been instrumental in establishing some thirty years earlier.

Nothing illustrates Roger Williams better than this intense effort impelled by his love equally of truth and liberty. Truth because he was convinced that false religion should be argued with; liberty, because were it not for his own commitment to liberty of conscience, the Quakers would not have been there anyway; they were not allowed freedom of worship in the rest of New England at this time and indeed were severely persecuted in Massachusetts.

Roger Williams' commitment to freedom of conscience was not born of indifference but of religious conviction that God alone was Lord of the conscience; he insisted equally on freedom to argue and persuade if possible, based on a conviction that there is right and wrong in spiritual things.

So Roger Williams rowed his thirty miles along Narragansett Bay; he debated for three days; and he rowed back, and engaged in another day's debate in Providence to finish things off.

We tend to hear of Roger Williams as a pioneer of religious liberty. The danger is we see him as a modern hero of individualistic freedom of belief. My contention is that actually his concern for religious freedom was born of a conviction that this was the way to peace for church and state and was actually to the benefit of the faith he loved and shared in all essential points with those to whom he was so often opposed.

His Life (1603-83)

Early Life

Roger Williams was born in London, in Farringdon Ward without the city wall, in about 1603. His father, James Williams, was a merchant taylor which meant that he was more of a cloth merchant than a maker of clothes. His mother Alice (nee Pemberton) hailed from St. Albans.

Very little is known about his boyhood in Cow Lane, Smithfield; it is a reasonable conjecture that he inherited something of his father's trading ability for this is how he made his living in America. Perhaps proximity to London docks sparked a fondness for voyaging. There were refugee Dutch groups in his neighbourhood; it is possible that he picked up early knowledge of the Dutch language from them, and the reality of persecution. The family attended the local parish church, St. Sepulchre's, where Captain John Smith was a parishioner and perhaps Roger would have been aware of the excitement when Captain Smith brought home Pocahontas and her Indian retinue in 1616. He would have received some decent schooling as a boy but we have no details.

Sir Edward Coke

A turning point in Williams' life was his being taken under the wing of Sir Edward Coke, the prominent lawyer, sometime Chief Justice, and thorn in the side of monarchs with aspirations to tyranny. Sir Edward was an attender at St. Sepulchre's and the story is that he once saw a serious young man using shorthand to take sermon notes. He forthwith engaged Roger, probably now about 14, to take notes for him at certain cases in the Star Chamber. American historian John Barry in a recent biography of Williams surmises that his time with Coke was formative in

burning into him ideas of individual rights and limits on state power. In a letter to Coke's daughter Anne Sadleir in 1652 Williams wrote that her 'dear Father was often pleased to call me his Son, and truly it was as bitter as death to me' when he had to sail for America without the opportunity of saying goodbye to his mentor. He wrote that, when in America, 'how many thousand times since have I had the honourable and precious remembrance of his person, and the Life, the Writings, the Speeches, and Examples of that Glorious Light', (Gaustad *Liberty of Conscience* 136). Admittedly he was looking for support from Coke's daughter at this time (to no avail it might be said) but he evidently thought highly of Coke.

Yet however much he owed to one of England's greatest champions of civil liberty, his own motivations in terms of liberty of conscience were always religious, not political.

Charterhouse, Pembroke College Cambridge and Essex

What is undoubted is that through Coke's patronage he gained a place at Charterhouse school in 1621 and in 1623 he entered Pembroke College Cambridge from which he graduated B.A. in 1627. He stayed on for eighteen months to study towards an M.A. but left in 1629 to become chaplain to the household of Sir William Masham at Otes, Essex. Now 26 or so William married Mary Bernard, daughter of Richard Bernard a Puritan clergyman some time of Worksop, Nottinghamshire (and author of a book on conscience).

Spiritual Life

This move to Essex both revealed much about Williams and was significant for his future. We have not so far mentioned his spiritual life. Little is known. In a rare comment on his youth, he wrote in 1673, commenting on something that had happened more than sixty years ago, that 'From my childhood the Father of Lights and Mercies touched my Soul with a love to himself, to his only begotten, the true Lord Jesus, to his holy Scriptures'. He is presumably referring to his conversion and that would make him no more than ten. More sadly he wrote in 1632 (when aged 29) to John Winthrop, governor of Massachusetts, 'Myself a child in everything, though in Christ called, and persecuted in and out of my father's house these 20 years' (Winslow, 28).

Williams' Puritan leanings

When did he develop Puritan leanings, or even Separatist sympathies? We cannot be sure but it must have been during his Cambridge years that he came at least to Puritan sympathies. No doubt his time with Sir Edward Coke developed within him a healthy mistrust and dislike of divine right kingship though his main interests were never in opposing particular forms of government. He would not have gone to the home of a Puritan gentleman without being a Puritan, and at the home of the Mashams he would have mixed with many of the leading Puritans of Essex – including many who were foremost in planning migration to New England. These would have included John Eliot, Thomas Hooker, Hugh Peter and John Winthrop whose home was only 20 miles away. The gentlemen of Essex had been in the centre of agitation for the Petition of Right in 1628 drafted by Coke, demanding the recognition of rights – a kind of legislated republication of Magna Carta.

Turbulent times in England

These were of course turbulent times in religion and politics in England. The Puritans were increasingly at loggerheads with the King and his Catholicising religious policies implemented by William Laud. Puritans could not get a church post; one of the reasons suggested for Williams not continuing with his Cambridge studies was that Laud had by then ruled that anyone graduating would have to swear that the entire Church of England service conformed to Scripture. Most Puritans did not want to become Separatists after the manner of Browne, Barrow or Helwys, or go to Holland. What could they do? The government was encouraging colonization abroad, allowing joint-stock companies to find investors, raise money and sponsor expeditions or 'adventures' to land England claimed in North America. In 1620 James I had granted New England lands to the Council for New England; in 1629 the Massachusetts Bay Company received its royal grant. Plans to emigrate to America hastened on; in April 1630 John Winthrop the first governor of the MSB company sailed from Southampton on the *Arbella* arriving in New England two months later. In December of that year Roger and Mary Williams sailed from Bristol on the *Lyon* dropping anchor off Nantasket on 5th February 1631. Roger Williams was in America.

Williams in America

He was a Puritan but was he a Separatist? He must have been. He once recalled telling some Essex ministers why he ‘durst not’ take part in a Prayer book service. Indeed a rift between him and Coke which greatly saddened Williams seems to have been due to Williams’ religious convictions; Coke was staunchly Anglican, his daughter ‘blindly’ so (says Ola Winslow). Williams was not agitating about the sign of the cross in baptism, the ring in marriage, kneeling at the sacrament or wearing vestments; the target of his concern was the altogether bigger one, the strong links between church and state. The separation of church and state would become the determining cause of his life. His views along these lines must have been fairly well matured before he left England, given the speed with which they were manifest on his arrival in New England.

John Winthrop, the governor, did not, however, as yet know Williams’ convictions. Winthrop noted in his diary for 5th February 1631 the arrival of 20 passengers on the *Lyon*, the first named being ‘Mr Roger Williams (a godly minister) with his wife’. He was invited to become the Teacher of the church at Boston, an enviable settlement. Would he accept? No, he would not, as he ‘durst not officiate to an unseparated people’ (he wrote in a letter to John Cotton Jr in 1671). The Puritans should formally repent of being members of the Church of England and turn their backs on it.

Why did he say ‘no’ to Boston?

What was the problem here? Were the Puritans not separated enough? Was the fact of braving the high seas to settle in a virtually unknown wilderness not sufficient proof of godliness and separation from the corrupt Church of England? Not for Roger Williams. With a wife to support, in a new land, faced with what to any young minister must have been a tempting offer and a great honour, why did he shut the door in his own face?

The Puritan vision

Remember that it was no part of the general Puritan vision to separate from the Church of England. Winthrop and those with him, unlike the separatist Pilgrim Fathers of the *Mayflower* who had settled further south in Plymouth a decade earlier, strongly desired to remain attached to their nation and church, though a purified church. Indeed on leaving old England, Winthrop had been at pains to assure those he was leaving that he was no separatist. The reasons for leaving England were not merely political or economic, nor even to escape religious persecution and seek freedom. There was strong positive sense of mission, expressed for example in Winthrop’s famous sermon *A Modell of Christian Charity* written and preached on the *Arbella*. This sermon sets out, according to Francis Bremer (*The Puritan Experiment* p 90) many of the key elements of the Puritan view of society – awareness of community and individual interdependence, awareness of the various callings of men, and a sense of mission. More significantly for our purposes, it sets out the strong sense of New England being a new Israel and the conviction of a commission from God and a covenant with God that the settlers had.

“Neither must we think that the Lord will bear with such failings at our hands as he doth from those among whom we have lived; and that for these three reasons:

First, in regard of the more near bond of marriage between Him and us, wherein He hath taken us to be His, after a most strict and peculiar manner, which will make Him the more jealous of our love and obedience. So He tells the people of Israel, you only have I known of all the families of the earth, therefore will I punish you for your transgressions.

Secondly, because the Lord will be sanctified in them that come near Him. We know that there were many that corrupted the service of the Lord; some setting up altars before his own; others offering both strange fire and strange sacrifices also; yet there came no fire from heaven, or other sudden judgment upon them, as did upon Nadab and Abihu, whom yet we may think did not sin presumptuously.

Thirdly, when God gives a special commission He looks to have it strictly observed in every article; When He gave Saul a commission to destroy Amaleck, He indented with him upon certain articles, and because he failed in one of the least, and that upon a fair pretense, it lost him the kingdom, which should have been his reward, if he had observed his commission.

Thus stands the cause between God and us. We are entered into covenant with Him for this work. We have taken out a commission. The Lord hath given us leave to draw our own articles. We have professed to enterprise these and those accounts, upon these and those ends. We have hereupon besought Him of favor and blessing. Now if the Lord shall please to hear us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then hath He ratified this covenant and sealed our commission, and will expect a strict performance of the articles contained in it; but if we shall neglect the observation of these articles which are the ends we have propounded, and, dissembling with our God, shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnal intentions, seeking great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us, and be revenged of such a people, and make us know the price of the breach of such a covenant.

Now the only way to avoid this shipwreck, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God. For this end, we must be knit together, in this work, as one man. We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others' necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other; make others' conditions our own; rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, as members of the same body. So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. The Lord will be our God, and delight to dwell among us, as His own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways, so that we shall see much more of His wisdom, power, goodness and truth, than formerly we have been acquainted with. We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when He shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, "may the Lord make it like that of New England." **For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.** We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God's sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going.

And to shut this discourse with that exhortation of Moses, that faithful servant of the Lord, in his last farewell to Israel, Deut. 30. "Beloved, there is now set before us life and death, good and evil," in that we are commanded this day to love the Lord our God, and to love one another, to walk in his ways and to keep his Commandments and his ordinance and his laws, and the articles of our Covenant with Him, that we may live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our God may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it. **But if our hearts shall turn away, so that we will not obey, but shall be seduced, and worship other Gods, our pleasure and profits, and serve them; it is propounded unto us this day, we shall surely perish out of the good land whither we pass over this vast sea to possess it. Therefore let us choose life, that we and our seed may live, by obeying His voice and cleaving to Him, for He is our life and our prosperity.** "

Roger Williams was to profoundly challenge the Puritan status quo on just these issues: that any nation could be in the same place in relation to God as Israel had been; and that a nation could be in covenant with God. This was the great ideological and theological cleavage that divided Williams from Winthrop and the settlers in Massachusetts. It was a difference greater than the eight months (between Winthrop and Williams) in arriving in the new world; a difference greater than 3,000 miles across the Atlantic. It was the difference between the old and modern worlds.

Salem, then Plymouth, then Salem again

He became minister in Salem but Boston put pressure on Salem to remove him. This was one of the inconsistencies of the New England system. Officially and by conviction Congregationalist, the Boston church should not have interfered in what Salem was doing. But this was the problem: Williams was a troubler of the peace, of Israel, and civil and religious peace was barely distinguishable in early New England. Williams could afford the luxury of making difficult points from Scripture; the government of the colony had to operate more pragmatically.

So from Salem the Williams went to Plymouth, more hospitable to separatism, and there Mary gave birth to their first child in 1633. He served as assistant to the pastor - you get the

impression of a man whose ministry was quickly and widely appreciated. William Bradford, Governor of that colony, described Williams as 'a man godly and zealous, having many precious parts'. But when Plymouth residents went back to England and worshipped in the C of E and did not repent when they came back, Williams was worried and promptly worried others. After two years in Plymouth they went back to Salem.

Williams and the Indians

A notable legacy of his brief stay in Plymouth was his deep and extensive involvement with the Indians. Some brief comments are worth making at this point.

1. Williams had a missionary heart and longed for the Indians' conversion. 'My souls desire was to do the natives good, and to that end to have their language (which I afterwards printed) and therefore desired not to be troubled with English company' (Winslow, 128) he wrote when purchasing land from the Indians in Narragansett, Rhode Island. He spent much time teaching them and preaching to them though only one convert was ever noted. But Williams had a fear and hatred of forced conversions; a voluntary and comprehending acceptance of the gospel, and a compulsory and purely formal worship, are very different things.

2. A gifted linguist, his first book was *A Key into the Language of America*, a guide to the Indian language, published in 1643.

3. Williams both loved the Indians and was greatly respected by them. John Eliot did not preach to the Indians till 1646; Williams had been working with them for some thirteen years by then.

4. He was not sentimental about them, referring to his dislike of their 'filthy smoky holes' and abhorring their pagan religion but he spent time with them and had great respect for them. He often compared unfavourably the behaviour and morals of the whites with the Indians he knew:

If Natures Sons both wild and tame,
Humane and Courteous be:
How ill becomes it Sonnes of God (i.e. Christians)
To want Humanity.
(Gaustad 29).

5. In Williams political theology, if we may call it that, he asserts the possibility of civil government where the name of Christ was not known. His contact with the Indians was doubtless influential in strengthening this opinion. (Bloudy Tenent 216).

6. Williams was often called upon as a diplomat and ambassador on behalf of the white settlers in negotiation with the Indians. He couldn't avoid all troubles e.g. the destructive Pequot war in 1637 and the great King Phillip's War of 1675-78, but he did smooth relations and ensure justice and peace on many occasions. It is ironic that a man whom many would have accused of lacking all diplomacy when expressing his own opinions, (a 'polemical porcupine' John Quincy Adams called him nearly two centuries later) could be so skilled in delicate negotiations when called upon.

More trouble in Salem

After leaving Plymouth he returned to Salem. Issues kept arising. Williams is recorded by John Cotton who came to be minister in Boston in 1633, in a later letter, as having held the following offensive positions, and Williams in a reply to Cotton in 1644 did not deny them:

1. That the land they had received by supposed patent from the king was not his to give; it was owned by the Indians and the settlers ought to repent of receiving it. (This is not to deny that most settlers were fair in their dealing with Indians and did trade for land or goods).

2. It was not lawful to call a wicked person to swear (eg in court). This arose because of a requirement for all males of 16+ to take an oath of loyalty to the governor and leading officials of the colony. For an unbeliever to recite 'so help me God' would be sacrilege.

3. It was not lawful to hear any minister in parish assemblies in England – i.e. if settlers returned to England for a visit they should not go to the parish church.

4. That the civil magistrate's power extended only to the bodies, goods and outward state of men. This fourth was crucial; Williams held from the beginning that the magistrate had no

authority to enforce the first table (the first four commandments) of the law, relating to the individual's relationship with God.

Some of Williams' positions sound over-scrupulous to say the least, for example that a believer should not pray with an unbeliever, even in saying grace within his own family. But he was a man exploring the limits of biblical purity, that elusive boundary between genuine holiness in a fallen world and unrealistic perfection. The troubling thing about Williams was not so much what he believed, but the fact that he was prepared to act on his beliefs and if need be suffer for them. 'My conscience was persuaded against the national church and ceremonies' he wrote and he was not going to let his conscience, for which he left old England, be stifled and put upon in New England.

And so to the wilderness

In 1635 the Salem church appointed him Teaching Elder. So frustrated were the civil authorities with Williams that the General Court used its power quite unscrupulously to block the grant of land to Salem, to put pressure on the church to dismiss Williams. Williams' support ran low and after a trial he was ordered to leave Massachusetts Bay colony within 6 weeks of 9th October 1635. Due to his continuing propagation of his opinions (even though only in his own house) the Court decided to send him back to England; he got wind of this and escaped in January 1636, leaving his wife and children behind, to spend a bitter winter 'exposed to the mercy of an howling Wilderness in Frost and Snow, etc' throwing himself on the mercy of the 'savages' and for fourteen weeks not knowing what 'bread or bed' meant. He did have with him a domestic servant, and four other ejectees from the Bay who teamed up with him later, but whom he would have been better off without for the trouble they later caused.

The founding of Rhode Island

They settled at the head of Narragansett Bay and founded a village he called Providence – the city of today. The colony of Rhode Island was in the making. His land he acquired by agreement with the Indians. Within three years two more towns, Portsmouth (founded by Anne Hutchinson, the antinomian ejected from Boston, and her followers,) and Newport, and soon after Warwick, were also founded.

First Baptists

A significant and (unlike some colonists) helpful addition to the colony in 1639 was John Clarke who founded a Baptist church in Newport. Williams, having come to Baptist convictions and having had himself (re)baptised, founded with others a Baptist church in Providence and he is usually credited with establishing the first Baptist church in America (Barry, 263). Both these churches were Particular (Calvinistic) Baptist. (It was Clarke who entered Massachusetts with Obadiah Holmes in 1651, Clarke receiving a fine and Holmes ultimately a whipping for their pains. Massachusetts had outlawed Baptists in 1644. In 1651, when Clarke and Holmes were tried in Boston, John Cotton preached that teaching against infant baptism should be a capital offence as 'soul murder').

Leaving the church

It should be mentioned here that Williams only remained a member of this church for about a year. His restless spirit determined that there could be no true ministry or church founded without apostolic authority. He could therefore find no church in which to worship. He remained a non-church member for the rest of his life, a seeker, looking for, desiring, but never finding, a church, not that was worthy of him, for he was not a proud man in any sense, but which had the requisite apostolic authority. It was a strange position, but again – Williams had to act on his convictions. If no church was authorised, then he could not be a church member. He did meet with small groups and believed in what he called 'prophets in sackcloth' (from Revelation 11) but never associated himself with a church again.

A Charter for Rhode Island – London 1643-44

Williams became convinced Rhode Island needed its own charter to protect borders from predatory Massachusetts and Connecticut and to tame the increasingly unwieldy combination of free spirits entering the colony (a 'crazy quilt' as Perry Miller calls it – p158). In 1643 Williams returned to England. It took him time and the assiduous cultivation of friends and connections, including Sir Henry Vane, perhaps his greatest ally in this period, but he obtained the charter from the responsible Parliamentary committee. It gave the colony the right to govern itself 'by

such a form of Civil Government, as by voluntary consent of all, or the greater Part of them shall find most suteable' provided only that the laws 'be conformable to the Laws of England, so far as the Nature and Constitution of the place will admit' - in other words, a democratic form of government. Moreover, all decisions about religion were left up to the majority knowing full well that it wanted to remove completely the state from the issue of worship. 'Providence Plantations' thus exceeded any other known state in the world at that time in its freedoms. 'Williams created the first government in the world which broke church and state apart' ...the only such society [i.e. with 'soul liberty'] in the civilised world' (Barry, 389, 310).

The Bloody Tenent

Apart from obtaining this historic charter, publishing his *A Key into the Language of America*, giving Dutch lessons to his friend John Milton in exchange for some Hebrew revision and helping to collect firewood for the Londoners during the severe winter of 1643 when there was a coal stoppage during the civil war, Williams also had published in the summer of 1644, just before he left London to return to America, his book *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for cause of Conscience Discussed (BT)*. This is his major work on liberty of conscience and separation of church and state and an examination of it gives one his main arguments.

1. Twelve propositions at the beginning of the work set out his main assertions: e.g. that the blood of Protestants and papists spilled is not required or accepted by Jesus Christ the Prince of Peace; that all states are essentially civil and therefore not judges or defenders of spiritual things; since the coming of Christ it is a permission of God that freedom for pagan, Jewish, Turkish or antichristian consciences and worship be granted to all men in all nations and are only to be fought against with the sword of the Spirit; that the state of Israel is figurative and no pattern for any civil state today; that uniformity of worship is not to be enforced; such permission of other consciences and worship alone can procure lasting peace; true civility and Christianity can flourish notwithstanding such freedom of conscience.

2. In a preface Williams addresses parliament and pleads that 'whatever way of worshipping God your own consciences are persuaded to walk in, yet, from any bloody act of violence to the consciences of others, it may never be told in Rome or Oxford [presumably where the King was residing], that the Parliament of England hath committed a greater rape than if it had forced or ravished the bodies of all the women in the world' (6). 'Soul rape' was a favourite figure of Williams for violation of conscience. He concludes in an address to the reader, 'Having bought truth dear, we must not sell it cheap, no, not the least grain of it for the whole world...' (9).

3. The book proper begins with a letter from a prisoner for conscience in Newgate Prison (believed to be John Murton, the successor to Thomas Helwys as leader of the English General Baptists) dated about 1620, arguing freedom of conscience from Scripture, followed by the reply of John Cotton, from about 1632. The bulk of the book is Williams' reply to Cotton in the form of a dialogue between Truth and Peace; there follows a copy of a 'Model of Church and Civil Power' drawn up in Salem in 1635 but not previously printed, which sets out clearly the views Williams opposed. The final part of the book is his refutation of this 'Model'.

The main arguments can be summarised under three heads:

I. Conscience. Cotton asserted that no man should be persecuted for conscience. Fair enough. But he continues: in fundamental principles of doctrine and worship the Bible is so clear that a person could not but be convinced in conscience of the dangerous error of his way, 'after once or twice Admonition, wisely and faithfully dispensed (obviously by someone like Cotton) . 'And then if anyone persists it is not out of Conscience, but against his Conscience...so that such a man is not persecuted for cause of conscience, but for sinning against his own conscience' (BT 20).

His biblical proof was Tit.3:10, 11: (ESV) 'As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once or twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned'. Now (i) that text is about church discipline so in a sense proves Williams' point - Cotton and his friends used 'church' texts to justify civil proceedings; (ii) it is unlikely Paul has in mind the divisive person acting according to conscience but simply against the word of God properly applied in the church.

But you can see what Cotton's logic implies. (i) Only a Christian who agrees with him can have a good conscience; (ii) To hold to your beliefs when they disagree with 'orthodoxy' as currently interpreted is not to be *conscientious* but to sin against your conscience; (iii) Conscience is something therefore that is almost equivalent to the law of God; to have a good conscience you have to follow the teachings of orthodoxy even if you think they are wrong; (iv) the implication that an act of the will may even change belief or conviction, and also (v) that the conscience, being virtually equivalent to God's law, cannot err – for sin is *against* conscience, not by it.

For Williams, mind and will must act together; his is an idea of the self in which one cannot safely deny what one believes with the mind, by acting against it with the will. His idea of conscience is much more to do with the mind; Cotton's is to do with the will – *doing* what is right, according to God's law/ current orthodoxy, even when not convinced of it, and being prepared to go against what one believes. Williams is convinced that the conscience should remain inviolate and is convinced too of the futility of forced belief.

James Calvin Davis in *The Moral Theology of Roger Williams* (Westminster John Knox, 2004) suggests that Williams is here closer to Thomas Aquinas than to Reformed predecessors such as Calvin. Aquinas distinguished in the conscience between (i) *synderesis* which is the inner knowledge of the unchanging divine law, which could never err, and (ii) *conscientia* which is the application of divine law to given situation and in this the individual may be wrong. Nonetheless, freedom to make such decisions should still be respected.

For Calvin conscience was the 'arbitrator' or 'medium' between God and man, mostly accusing, sometimes excusing, moral actions. It is a universal capacity for morality. It pronounces God's verdict, so to that extent could not be wrong; but Calvin also allowed for respect for conscience even when wrong. According to Davis, William Perkins (1558– 1602) followed on similar lines; William Ames (1576-1633), rather after Aquinas, made more of a distinction between the habit (*synderesis*) of conscience and the 'operation' (*conscientia*) of conscience. The Puritan view in general was that conscience was to be followed because it was God's deputy in the soul, and even if it could be wrong it was never safe to go against conscience. Rebellion against what you believed to be God's voice (even if it was wrong) revealed contempt for God. The remedy was to align conscience more and more with the Word of God.

Williams, says Davis, was familiar with Perkins and Ames but was unlike the Massachusetts Puritans in his unwillingness to surrender freedom of conscience even in the cause of supposed doctrinal purity. He defined conscience as 'a *persuasion* fixed in the mind and heart of a man which enforceth him to judge ... and to do so and so, with respect to God, his worship etc...'. He spoke of it in familiar terms as the 'candle of the Lord' in the human heart. But basically he aligned conscience much more with mind and understanding than with will. To follow your 'persuasion' was to follow conscience, to obey it, not sin against it.

He believed, with the Reformed tradition, that it was a universal faculty and his dealing with the Indians was instrumental in enforcing this conviction. 'As it did for Thomas, Calvin, Perkins and Ames,' says Davis, 'the evaluative function of conscience in Williams' thought depended on the natural law' (p 79). Conscience is a judicial operation in the soul in which a person's actions and beliefs are evaluated according to the standards of natural morality.

His *Key into the Language of America* was really a comparative analysis of native American culture with English customs and behaviour. He believed that the Indians not only valued mature moral conscience more than the English but they also showed more respect for variations in conscience than he observed in his own society.

Summary of arguments for liberty of conscience

His arguments for the (relative) inviolability of the conscience included

- (i) God alone is Lord of the conscience;
- (ii) force does not work anyway as conscience is subject only to the rules of understanding which effect change by reason, argument and persuasion. The Bible after all only gives us the Word of the Spirit as our sword;
- (iii) it creates hypocrites;
- (iv) it hardens people in their erroneous convictions;

(v) it will eventually turn against the true church;

(vi) it hardens people and causes them to transgress their moral faculties, severing moral cooperation between the will and the intellect, in short to choose irrationally and without conviction; and

(vii) it will morally bankrupt society. At times for the public good a person may have to be coerced against conscience (say a man conscientiously believed in polygamy) but this was still a violation albeit a justified one.

The dominant spirit in Massachusetts was of the conservative Reformed strand that put conformity to institutional authority over allegiance to individual conscience. Richard Baxter was typical of such a view: ‘Liberty in all matters of Worship and of Faith, is the open and apparent way to set up Popery in the land...’ (*A Holy Commonwealth*, Davis 89). Williams may be said to represent the ‘liberal’ or ‘left wing’ of the tradition, arguing that conscience is what makes human beings, even ‘natural man’ capable of basic morality and sociability. His convictions about conscience paved the way not only for freedom of belief, but for the possibility of civil government amongst people of very different religious beliefs or of none.

II. Church and state.

In practice here the issue boiled down to how one viewed the model of Israel. Williams is clear that typological theology demands seeing Israel’s role as fulfilled in the coming of Christ. ‘The Pattern of the Nationall Church of Israel, was...unimitable by any Civill State’ (*Bloudy Tenent Yet More Bloudy*) Use of the Old Testament therefore to justify the punishment by the state of heretics, blasphemers or unbelievers, or to force people to go to church by law or to restrict civil office to church members, all of which was done in Massachusetts, was illegitimate, for Williams. The basic principle was the difference between his vision and that of Winthrop and the other settlers, of the commission which the settlers had in New England.

We must not make the mistake of course of thinking that the Puritans did not differentiate between church and state. Strictly speaking this was no theocracy. They were in principle jealous of the respective jurisdictions of both, particularly the church. The issue is always one of degree, and if we remember that Williams great concern was always worship and faith, the workings and relationship of the soul towards God, we see the big difference. This is the area where the state has no right to interfere; this is why early on he proclaimed that the state has no right to enforce the first table of the law. But he was not an anarchist by any means. Even in religion it was wrong he argued to allow human sacrifice or prostitution, and these came within the state’s proper jurisdiction.

A passage which receives much attention in *Bloudy Tenent* is the parable of the wheat and the tares. Williams was at pains to point out that the Lord says that the field is the world, not the church; that unbelievers should not be finally judged until the Last Day; and therefore it was wrong to punish heretics and blasphemers in the world, whatever one did in church discipline. There should be toleration.

III The state a nursing father to the church (Isa 49:23).

‘Kings will be to you foster fathers...’. The theology of the Puritans was that the state is responsible to God for the religion and morality of the nation and that if it could ensure, by force of law and punishments if need be, that true religion and godliness were maintained in the land, then prosperity would follow. Williams challenged this at a variety of levels.

(i) Government is a creation ordinance and is known amongst pagans as well as among Christians.

(ii) Unbelievers may make good governors and frequently do. If only Christians (church members as in Massachusetts Bay) could be public officers, look what a wealth of gifts in the unconverted world the state is being deprived of.

(iii) When the state is asked to look after the church, it inevitably happened in history ‘by degrees that the gardens of churches of the saints were turned into the wilderness of whole nations until the whole world became Christian, or Christendom’ (*BT 155*). The effect of Constantine’s making Christianity the official imperial religion was looked upon by Williams as a disaster for the church.

(iv) Look at the history of England – Henry VII found the country Catholic and left it Catholic; Henry VIII found it Catholic and left it half Protestant; Edward VI found it half Protestant and left it more fully Protestant; Mary turned it Catholic again; Elizabeth left it Protestant - and whither James, Charles or Charles II? Williams was realistic; give the government authority over the church and anything could happen.

He did allow that the government should encourage and protect true religion by protecting freedom of religion, but not to superintend it (BT 129, 334).

Images of church and state: the city with its free corporations; the ship with passengers.

Two favourite images perhaps portray his mind better than anything else.

The first is of the city:

‘The Church or company of worshippers, whether true or false, is like unto a body or college of physicians in a city - like unto a corporation, society or company of East India or Turkey merchants, or any other society or company in London: which companies may hold their courts, keep their records, hold disputations, and in matters concerning their society may dissent, divide, break into schisms and factions, sue and implead each other at the law, yea, wholly dissolve and break up into pieces and nothing, and yet the peace of the city not be in the least measure impaired or disturbed; because the essence or being of the city and so the well being and peace thereof is essentially distinct from those particular societies. ...For instance further, the city or civil state of Ephesus was essentially distinct from the worship of Diana in the city... Again, the church of Christ in Ephesus...was distinct from both’ (BT 46-7; see Barry 332-33).

Secondly in a letter to the town of Providence in 1655, asserting his firm belief in civil government in its rightful place, he used the image of a ship:

‘There goes many a ship to sea, with many hundreds of souls in one ship, whose weal and woe is common, and 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 supposal I affirm, that all the liberty of conscience I ever pleaded for, turns upon these two hinges: that none of the Papists, Protestants, Jews or Turks be forced to come to the ship’s prayers or worship, nor compelled from their own particular prayers or worship, if they practise any. I further add, that I never denied, that notwithstanding this liberty, the commander of this ship ought to command the ship’s course, yes, and also command that justice, peace and sobriety be kept and practised, both among the seamen and all the passengers. If any of the seamen refuse to perform their service, or passengers to pay their freight; if any refuse to help in person or purse towards the common charges or defence; if any refuse to obey the common laws and orders of the ship, concerning the common peace or preservation; if any shall rise up against their commanders and officers, if any should preach or write that there ought to be no commanders or officer, because all are equal in Christ, therefore no masters of or officers, no laws, no orders, no corrections, nor punishments; I say I never denied but in such cases, whatever is pretended, the commander and or commanders may judge, resist, compel and punish such transgressors, according to their deserts and merits.’ (Knowles, 279-80).

One other example of the ship imagery - which crops up frequently in Williams’ writings – this time to show the difference being a Christian makes in public life, even if unbelievers may make very good ships’ captains: ‘A pagan or antichristian pilot may be as skilful to carry the ship to its desired port as any Christian mariner in the world, and may perform that work with as much safety and speed: yet have they not command over the souls and consciences of their passengers or mariners under them, although they may justly see to the labour of the one and the civil behaviour of the other. A Christian pilot, he performs the same work, as likewise doth the metaphorical pilot in the ship of the commonweal, from a principle of knowledge and experience; but more than this, he acts from a root of fear of God and love to mankind in his whole course. Second his aim is more to glorify God than to gain his pay or make his voyage. Third, he walks heavenly with man and God, in a constant observation of God’s hand in storms, calms etc. So the thread of navigation being equally spun by a believing or unbelieving pilot, yet is it drawn over with the gold of godliness and Christianity by a Christian pilot, while he is holy in all manner of Christianity. But, lastly, the Christian pilot’s power over the souls and conscience of his sailors and passengers is not greater than that of the antichristian, otherwise

than he can subdue the souls of any by the two edged sword of the Spirit, the word of God, and by his holy demeanour in his place.’ (BT, 342).

‘Wall of separation’

One final quote from *The Bloody Tenent*: ‘First, the faithful labours of many witnesses of Jesus Christ, extant to the world, abundantly proving, that 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 that when they have opened a gap in the hedge, or wall of separation, between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world, God hath ever broke down the wall itself, removed the candlestick, and made his garden a wilderness as at this day. And that therefore if he will ever please to restore his garden and paradise again, it must of necessity be walled in peculiarly unto himself from the world, and that all that shall be saved out of the world are to be transplanted out of the wilderness of the world, and added unto his church or garden’ (435).

The phrase ‘wall of separation’ has of course become famous, or infamous, as used by Thomas Jefferson and as a commentary on the interpretation of the ‘no establishment of religion’ clause in the First Amendment to the American Constitution. Williams wrote of ‘the wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world’; Jefferson wrote (in 1800 in a letter to Connecticut Baptists) of the wall of separation between church and state. There is a difference of emphasis, and no documentary evidence that the latter was dependent on the former (though Jefferson in other contexts used words very similar to the Rhode Island and later Pennsylvanian charters to convey the ideal of religious liberty). But the latter is surely the development of the idea of the former.

Williams’ concern was to preserve the proper spheres of church and state and to protect the church from over-weening government; Jefferson was concentrating on preventing any establishment of religion. Judicial decisions in America in the latter 20th Century have abused the phrase to exclude religious conviction from public life, and without fair reference to the original context of the First Amendment.

This should not prejudice us against the fact that the first and most passionate call in America for the separation of church and state was not born of atheism or indifference, but of Calvinist and biblical principle.

Pluralism and natural law; civility

It is worth mentioning here two other principles in Williams’ battle for liberty of conscience that speak to the contemporary west.

1. **Pluralism and Natural Law.** The problem with pluralism is: on what moral basis does society build? Roger Williams was quite happy within the natural law tradition. That is, he believed that God’s absolute moral law was embedded in every human being, was reflected in conscience, and in the image of God which had been shattered but not destroyed completely by the Fall. Not only biblical arguments but his observations of history and life (particularly the Indians) made it clear to him that civil government could exist where there was no gospel. The gospel is the basis of the church; it need not be the basis of society. The world is God’s, but God does not rule the world and the church in the same way, and the church has no authority to impose on the world the norms of the gospel or Christian behaviour. This distinction between the church and the world enables Williams to allow freedom of conscience without fear that God will be dishonoured or true religion suffer. Williams believed they could fend for themselves.

2. **Civility** – a word Williams was fond of to describe the pattern of life in a society governed by moral law – or at least the second table of the law, specifically murder, adultery, theft and lying. And he would add justice as a ‘Golden Rule’ principle in society – do as you would be done by. Other virtues, said Williams, were sociableness, to live as neighbours; loyalty, dependability, respect for civil authority, and gratitude.

One may argue with the precise applications, but these were things that Williams could see in non-Christian societies.

After *The Bloudy Tenent*

After leaving *The Bloudy Tenent* with the publisher, Williams returned to America before it was published. The book sold out quickly but hardly to universal acclaim. William Prynne, who had suffered for writing against the immorality of stage plays in 1634, now showed that the persecuted are not necessarily tolerant. He condemned Williams' 'dangerous Licentious Booke' for suggesting that a person be 'left free to his owne free liberty of conscience'. Williams' book was ordered by Parliament to be burned in August 1644.

Meanwhile Williams passed through Boston, this time with a letter from England to commend him to the authorities there. In 1647 Cotton replied with *The Bloudy Tenent, Washed, and made white in the blood of the Lambe* and Williams responded with *The Bloudy Tenent Yet More Bloudy* in 1652. He had to return to England in that year to affirm the charter because of opposition within Rhode Island and challenges from Plymouth and Connecticut. He succeeded. It was John Clarke however who in 1663 obtained, from Charles II, the royal charter which stated 'Whereas...they have freely declared that it is much on their hearts (if they may be permitted) to hold forth a lively experiment, that a most flourishing civil state may stand and be best maintained, and that among our English subjects, with a full liberty in religious concernments... No person within the said colony, at any time hereafter, shall be any wise molested, punished, disquieted, or called in question, for any differences in opinion, in matters of religion, who do not actually disturb the civil peace of our said colony' (Barry, 381).

Final Years

In 1672 Williams, after years of public service, engaged in his last major public act, the debate with the Quakers. In 1659-60 Quakers including a woman (Mary Dyer) had been hanged in Massachusetts for propagating their faith in Boston. They did not all walk into services and in the streets naked! It was not until 1677 that they were free to hold meetings in Massachusetts. They had been settling in Rhode Island since the beginning. In 1674 the first of many Quaker governors was appointed in Rhode Island. But Roger Williams did not agree with their teaching. He published his notes of the debate as *George Fox Digg'd Out of His Burrowes*, a double pun as Edward Burrowes was a prominent Quaker.

Williams lived another decade. The precise date of his death is as uncertain as that of his birth. 1683 is probable. In 1917 he was included as one of ten figures whose statue forms part of the Reformation Wall in Geneva, standing next to Oliver Cromwell. In 1936 the edict of exile against Williams was revoked by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

I like Edwin Gaustad's comment: 'For Williams, religion had to be of the heart, not just of the mind – of direct transforming experience...In other words, Williams was a pietist, one who counted the presence of God in his life as more valuable than all the world's riches and honors'(163).

Conclusion

Roger Williams has something to teach us today.

1. The value of the individual conscience and soul.
2. The illegitimacy of imposing spiritually on a soul.
3. The illegitimacy of a national or state religion.
4. The importance of separating church and state not only notionally but in practice. Williams would have enjoyed Locke's *Letter on Toleration* (1689).
5. That this is for the sake of the church for when the wall of separation is broken down, it is the 'garden' that suffers as the weeds from the wilderness inevitably take over.
6. Confidence that civil society can operate on the basis of natural law; and that civil government can be operated by unbelievers, and that this is best for the church. In Os Guinness' words we should look not for a sacred public square (where one religion monopolises or at least is dominant eg Muslim countries or England) or a naked public square (from which religion is excluded eg France, or a Dawkins paradise) but a civil public square. This is what Williams sought.