

ROGER WILLIAMS

(c. 1603–1683)

The Separatists and Puritans, themselves the victims of persecution for their beliefs, have a reputation for intolerance when confronting doctrines in conflict with their own. Roger Williams is the best example of a Separatist victimized by his fellow Puritans for his heretical views. In response, he provided America with some of the most passionate defenses for the separation of church and state; and he argued eloquently for tolerance and against persecution for religious differences.

A Londoner educated for the law at Cambridge University, Williams turned to the ministry and to Puritanism. He came to New England in 1631 and became a minister at Salem, where he was soon in conflict with the church hierarchy of Massachusetts. He decried the treatment of Indians as inferior "savages" and argued that the royal charter had granted lands to the colonists that belonged rightfully to the Indians. Such views led to his banishment, and he set out on his journey of exile in a "bitter winter season, not knowing what bread or bed did mean." In his suffering, he was befriended by the Indians. Finally he made his way in 1636 to Rhode Island, where he founded Providence.

Many of the colonists at Salem followed Williams to Providence, where the principles Williams espoused were put into practice. Church and state were separated, and the government was democratic, based on equality and deriving authority from the governed. Such liberal practices frightened other colonies, especially as Providence welcomed dissenters and free-thinkers from all over New England. In response to this hostility, Williams decided to go to England to obtain a charter, thus providing a legal basis for his settlement.

On the way to England, he began to write his first book, *A Key into the Language of America*. Although designed to be a dictionary and phrase book for the Indian languages Williams had learned, it turned out to be in addition (when published in 1643) an eccentric book of philosophic commentary, with moral observations expressed at every turn. In describing Indian ways of eating and entertaining, Williams wrote: "It is a strange truth that a man shall generally find more free entertainment and refreshing amongst these barbarians, than amongst thousands that call themselves Christians."

Williams arrived in London at a time of turmoil and civil war. While there, a six-year-old letter by John Cotton, written in justification of the persecution and banishment of Williams, was published. Williams answered Cotton's charges in a pamphlet entitled *Mr. Cotton's Letter Lately Printed, Examined, and Answered* (1644), in which he wrote: "Persecutors of men's bodies seldom or never do these men's souls good." Williams almost immediately entered another controversy, arguing passionately for separation of church and state in *Queries of Highest Consideration* (1644), a pamphlet addressed to the British parliament, which was then debating the nature of the state religion to be established. Williams wrote: ". . . we ask, whether in the constitution of a national church it can possibly be framed without a racking and tormenting of the souls as well as the bodies of persons. . . ."

Fired up by the ideas about "soul-liberty" he had clarified for himself and others in these works, Williams went on in 1644 to write his most celebrated work, *The Bloody Tenet of Persecution for Cause of Conscience*. In it he argued for

total freedom for “the most paganish, Jewish, Turkish or anti-Christian consciences and worships” for “all men in all nations and countries.”

When Williams returned to Rhode Island in 1644, he became embroiled in a struggle for control of Providence. He finally overcame his rivals, but he spent the remainder of his life engaged in successive controversies. John Cotton attacked his *Bloody Tenet of Persecution* with *The Bloody Tenet Washed and Made White in the Blood of the Lamb* (1647). Williams answered with *The Bloody Tenet yet More Bloody, by Mr. Cotton's Endeavor to Wash it White in the Blood of the Lamb* (1652).

Williams was a stubborn and often rash man. He could appear dogmatic and arrogant in argument, unyielding and rigid in debate. At the same time he could be warm and generous. His was a prickly personality, in the American tradition of radical dissent. His obsessive ideas about spiritual and intellectual freedom became embedded in America's founding documents and are now an integral part of the American ideal. The fact that Williams was a Puritan holding such radical beliefs must undermine stereotypical notions of what Puritanism was and how it contributed to the shape of the American character.

ADDITIONAL READING

The Complete Writings of Roger Williams, 7 vols., a reprint of the 6 volume 1866–74 edition cited below together with a seventh volume edited by Perry Miller, 1963.

Moses Coit Tyler, *A History of American Literature, 1607–1765*, 1878; Vernon L. Parrington, “Roger Williams, Seeker,” *Main Currents in American Thought*, 1927–30; Perry Miller, *Roger Williams: His Contribution to the American Tradition*, 1953; Ola E. Winslow, *Master Roger Williams: A Biography*, 1957; Edmund Morgan, *Roger Williams, The Church and the State*, 1967; Henry Chupack, *Roger Williams*, 1969; John Garrett, *Roger Williams: Witness Beyond Christendom, 1603–1683*, 1970; Wallace Coyle, ed., *Roger Williams*, 1977; W. Clark Gilpin, *The Millenarian Piety of Roger Williams*, 1979.

TEXTS

The Writings of Roger Williams, 6 vols., eds. J. H. Trumbull, Samuel L. Caldwell, John Russell Bartlett, 1866–74; rpt. 1963. Typography, punctuation, spelling, and usage have been changed to conform with contemporary English and modern printing practices.

from A Key into the Language of America¹ Of Eating and Entertainment

It is a strange truth that a man shall generally find more free entertainment and refreshing amongst these barbarians, than amongst thousands that call themselves Christians.

¹Although a dictionary of the Narragansett Indian language, Williams's little book is much more poetic and philosophic than most dictionaries, as his full title proclaims: “A Key into the Language of America: Or, An help to the Language of the Natives in that part of America, called New-England. Together, with brief Observations of the

Customs, Manners and Worships, etc. of the aforesaid Natives, in Peace and War, in Life and Death. On all which are added Spiritual Observations, General and Particular by the Author, of chief and special use (upon all occasions) to all the English Inhabiting those parts; yet pleasant and profitable to the view of all men.”

More particular:

Coarse bread and water's most their fare,
 O England's diet fine;
 Thy cup run's o'er with plenteous store
 Of wholesome beer and wine.
 Sometimes God gives them fish or flesh, 5
 Yet they're content without;
 And what comes in, they part to friends
 And strangers round about.
 God's providence is rich to His,
 Let none distrustful be; 10
 In wilderness, in great distress,
 These ravens have fed me.

Of the Family Business

The sociableness of the nature of man appears in the wildest of them, who love society, families, cohabitation, and consociation of houses and towns together.

More particular:

How busy are the sons of men?
 How full their heads and hands?
 What noise and tumults in our own,
 And eke² in pagan lands?
 Yet I have found less noise, more peace 5
 In wild America,
 Where women quickly build the house,
 And quickly move away.³
 English and Indians busy are,
 In parts of their abode: 10
 Yet both stand idle, till God's call
 Set them to work for God.

Of Their Persons and Parts of Body

Natures knows no difference between Europe[ans] and Americans in blood, birth, bodies, etc., God having of one blood made all mankind, Acts 17, and all by nature being children of wrath, Ephesians 2.

More particular:

Boast not proud English, of thy birth and blood,
 Thy brother Indian is by birth as good.
 Of one blood God made him, and thee and all,
 As wise, as fair, as strong, as personal.

²Also.

³The migratory Indians changed living areas frequently, working quickly in putting up their "houses" and as swiftly

carting them away. The women had primary responsibility for the living quarters.

By nature wrath's his portion, thine no more,
 Till grace his soul and thine in Christ restore.
 Make sure thy second birth, else thou shalt see,
 Heaven ope to Indians wild, but shut to thee.

5

Of the Time of the Day

The sun and the moon, in the observation of all the sons of men, even the wildest, are the great directors of the day and night; as it pleased God to appoint in the first creation.

More particular:

The Indians find the sun so sweet,
 He is a God they say;
 Giving them light, and heat, and fruit,
 And guidance all the day.

They have no help of clock or watch!
 And sun they overprize.

5

Having those artificial helps, the sun
 We unthankfully despise.

God is a sun and shield, a thousand times more bright;
 Indians, or English, though they see.

10

Yet how few prize His light?

Of the Heavenly Bodies

The wildest sons of men hear the preaching of the heavens, the sun, moon, and stars, yet not seeking after God the Maker are justly condemned, though they never have nor despise other preaching, as the civilized world hath done.

More particular:

When sun doth rise the stars do set,
 Yet there's no need of light,
 God shines a sun most glorious,
 When creatures all are night.

The very Indian boys can give,

5

To many stars their name,

And know their course and therein do

Excel the English tame.

English and Indians none enquire,

Whose hand these candles hold:

10

Who gives these stars their names Himself

More bright ten thousand fold.

Of Their Nakedness and Clothing

How deep are the purposes and counsels of God? What should be the reason of this mighty difference of one man's children that all the sons of men on this side⁴ the way (in Europe, Asia, and Africa) should have such plenteous clothing for body, for soul! and the rest of Adam's sons and daughters on the other side, or America (some think as big as the other three) should neither have nor desire clothing for their naked souls, or bodies.

More particular:

O what a tyrant's custom long,
 How do men make a tush,⁵
 At what's in use, though ne'er so foul,
 Without once shame or blush?
 Many thousand proper men and women, 5
 I have seen met in one place:
 Almost all naked, yet not one,
 Thought want of clothes disgrace.
 Israel was naked, wearing clothes!
 The best clad Englishman, 10
 Not clothed with Christ, more naked is
 Than naked Indian.

Of Their Government and Justice

The wildest of the sons of men have ever found a necessity (for preservation of themselves, their families and properties) to cast themselves into some mold or form of government.

More particular:

Adulteries, murders, robberies, thefts,
 Wild Indians punish these!
 And hold the scales of justice so,
 That no man farthing⁶ leese.⁷
 When Indians hear the horrid filths, 5
 Of Irish, English men,
 The horrid oaths and murders late,
 Thus say these Indians then,
 "We wear no clothes, have many gods,
 And yet our sins are less: 10
 You are barbarians, pagans wild,
 Your land's the wilderness."

⁴Since Williams published his book in London, "this side" refers to Europe.

⁵To make a tush: to scorn, to pooh-pooh.

⁶English coin worth one-fourth of a penny.

⁷Loses.

Of Their Marriage

God hath planted in the hearts of the wildest of the sons of men an high and honorable esteem of the marriage bed, insomuch that they universally submit unto it, and hold the violation of that bed abominable, and accordingly reap the fruit thereof in the abundant increase of posterity.

More particular:

When Indians hear that some there are,
(That men the Papists call)
Forbidding marriage bed and yet,
To thousand whoredomes fall:

They ask if such do go in clothes,
And whether God they know?
And when they hear they're richly clad,
Know God, yet practice so:

“No, sure, they're beasts, not men,” say they,
“Men's shame and foul disgrace,
Or men have mixed with beasts and so,
Brought forth that monstrous race.”

5

10

1643

from The Bloody Tenet of Persecution for Cause of Conscience

PREFACE

[TWELVE ARGUMENTS FOR RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE]

First, that the blood of so many hundred thousand souls of Protestants and Papists, spilt in the wars of present and former ages, for their respective consciences, is not required nor accepted by Jesus Christ the Prince of Peace.

Secondly, pregnant scriptures and arguments are throughout the work proposed against the doctrine of persecution for cause of conscience.

Thirdly, satisfactory answers are given to scriptures, and objections produced by Mr. Calvin, Beza, Mr. Cotton,¹ and the ministers of the New English churches and others former and later, tending to prove the doctrine of persecution for cause of conscience.

Fourthly, the doctrine of persecution for cause of conscience is proved guilty of all the blood of the souls crying for vengeance under the altar.²

Fifthly, all civil states with their officers of justice in their respective constitutions and administrations are proved essentially civil, and therefore not judges, governors, or defenders of the spiritual or Christian state and worship.

Sixthly, it is the will and command of God that (since the coming of his Son the

¹John Calvin (1509–1564) and Theodore Beza (or Bèze) (1519–1605) were French Protestant theologians. Calvin went to Geneva when banished from Paris; Bèze converted to Protestantism in Geneva, and, when Calvin died, succeeded him as leader of the Reformation movement centered in Geneva. John Cotton (1584–1652), by his attacks

on Williams, inspired Williams to write *The Bloody Tenet* (see Introduction).

²Revelation 6:9: “I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held.”