

# **The Subversive Puritan**

**Roger Williams, Freedom of  
Conscience and Church and State**

**Mostyn Roberts**



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## Chronology

- 1603 Usual accepted birth date of Roger Williams (may have been as late as 1606)
- 1621 Enters Charterhouse School
- 1623 Attends Pembroke College, University of Cambridge
- 1625 Accession of Charles I
- 1628 Petition of Right
- 1629 Williams chaplain to the Masham family at Otes Manor, High Laver, Essex
- 1631 Roger and Mary Williams arrive in New England; called as pastor by Salem
- 1631–33 Serves church in Plymouth
- 1633–35 Acting teacher of church in Salem
- 1635 Order of exile by the court in Massachusetts
- 1636 Williams flees to avoid banishment to England; Providence, RI, founded
- 1638 First Baptist church in America founded in Providence

- 1642 Civil War begins in England
- 1643 Williams sails to England to get charter for Rhode Island
- 1643–44 Williams publishes: *A Key into the Language of America*, *Mr. Cotton's Letter Examined and Answered*, *Queries of Highest Consideration*, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*
- 1644 Charter granted by Parliamentary committee; Williams returns to Rhode Island
- 1645 Williams publishes *Christenings Make Not Christians*
- 1647 Rhode Island Constitution agreed
- 1649 Charles I beheaded; Oliver Cromwell, effectively, governs until 1658
- 1652–54 Williams back in London; Williams publishes: *Experiments of Spiritual Life and Health*, *The Fourth Paper Presented by Major Butler*, *The Hireling Ministry None of Christ's*, *The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, *The Examiner Defended*
- 1658 Oliver Cromwell dies
- 1660 Accession of Charles II and the Restoration of the Crown
- 1663 Royal Charter granted to Rhode Island by Charles II
- 1672 Williams debates with Quakers in Newport and Providence
- 1675–78 King Philip's War
- 1676 Williams publishes *George Fox Digg'd out of his Burrowes*, his record of the 1672 debates
- 1683 Williams dies, sometime before March



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## Introduction

‘HE DID BREXIT BEFORE YOU GUYS,’ SAID A STUDENT IN PROVIDENCE, Rhode Island, pointing to the outsize statue of Roger Williams overlooking the city. It was July 2016, a month after the United Kingdom’s EU referendum. The student knew his history. Whatever Brexit may mean for the UK, Roger Williams was a breaker away, an exit man.

Yet it was not because he wanted to be. With many Puritans he had gone to New England in the 1630s to be free to worship according to conscience. The church system being established there did not give him the freedom he had hoped for. Regarded as a troublemaker, he was exiled from Massachusetts. He founded the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations.

Williams did more than found the smallest state in the Union. He is more important for why he did things than for what he accomplished. His life touched on some of the most important events, he rubbed shoulders with some of the most important men and his big ideas touched on some of the most important concepts in British and American history. His motivation, indeed his obsession, was liberty of conscience. It buzzed incessantly. It

did not let him rest easy with any kind of compromise. It made him difficult to live with. He was prepared to suffer rather than yield a point.

For Williams, liberty was not the kind of freedom regarded as fundamental to the American way-of-life. Neither was it the freedom of civil rights that Williams cherished and struggled for. It was, instead, freedom to worship God according to conscience. Any other freedom was secondary. Moreover, what Williams needed for himself, he knew other human beings needed too. He fought for freedom not just for those who agreed with him, but for men and women of all beliefs or none. He was no relativist as to truth but knew that truth could not be imposed on people. Liberty of conscience for all was the guiding principle of his life. 'Freedom of different consciences to be protected from enforcement was the principal ground of our charter ... [and is] the greatest happiness men can possess in this world,' wrote a representative group of Rhode Islanders in 1657.<sup>1</sup> Their charter, first granted in 1644 and confirmed by Charles II in 1663, made Rhode Island the only society in the civilized world at that time that recognized what Williams called 'soul-liberty.'

It was also, as the historian John Barry says, the first in the world that 'broke church and state apart.'<sup>2</sup> Separation of church and state was the second, and subsidiary, bee in Williams' bonnet. It was, in his opinion, the only way to ensure soul-liberty. It sounded outrageous in his day, but it was to become enshrined in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution a century and a half later.

History has given Williams mixed reviews. To some he is a hero, perhaps over-romanticized; to others, he is a minor eccentric; but to too many, he is virtually unknown. In 1909 the Reformation Wall was built in Geneva. Ten heroes of the Protestant Reformation are honoured there by statues. The

American representative, towered over by John Knox to his right, is Roger Williams, standing alongside Oliver Cromwell, William the Silent and others. It is fitting recognition of his place at the root of the tradition of soul-liberty.

Do we need to remember him today? I believe so. We are living in turbulent times. Christians in the west are conscious of losing their heritage, perhaps fearful for the future. How do we live with our deep differences? How shall we live—together? Should we enforce religious beliefs and practices on others—or allow them to be enforced on us? What are the limits of toleration? Does civil society require safety from being offended or must it demonstrate the willingness to put up with it in the cause of freedom? How do we show confidence in the gospel and allow Word and Spirit to do their work freely? To what extent should the church look for support from the state? What is the nature and value of a Christian culture?

While the majority of the book is given over to the story of Williams' life, in the closing chapters I will seek to address three questions that particularly absorbed Roger Williams and which still concern us today: first, is liberty of conscience something we should treasure and protect? Second, what should the relation be between church and state? Third, how important is religion to the existence and stability of a society?

Williams is a difficult man to grasp. He is distanced from us by time. He is distanced by environment; he lived on the Wild West frontier long before Hollywood tamed it. He is distanced from us because he was of his age; once we feel we have grasped his age, Williams is then distanced from us because he was also not of his age, in some ways very far ahead of his age, and in some ways simply idiosyncratic. He was not an academic who only wrote about freedom, but was a man of study *and* action; even his greatest book was not written in the comfort of a study but

in scraps of time torn from a hectic visit on political business to England in the midst of the Civil War.

He not only thought and wrote, however; he lived his principles. He sought (too hard we might say) for purity in the church yet was able to live with the roughest and most difficult of people in civil society. He held firmly to his love for God, to the Bible, to his pursuit of the knowledge of the God whom he had known since he was a child; and he founded a state where other men and women of all faiths and none could live without being 'troubled for conscience.' He disagreed with their beliefs; but they were entitled to share with him the common air of creation. He was right, very right, on some things; he was very wrong on some things too. But he still speaks to us today.

My aim in writing has been, first, simply to introduce Williams to many who do not know about him. It is surprising to realize that while he is one of the most studied figures in pre-revolutionary America, he is not commonly known today. It would be rewarding to rectify that a little.

Second, we can learn from him. The Christian foundations in the west are rapidly crumbling—many would say, have crumbled. Where they were accustomed to being hosts, Christians now feel themselves to be guests and unwelcome ones at that. They are having to rethink their relationship to the state, their attitude to other religions, to competing ideologies, to fierce and unscrupulous opposition. They are conscious of losing their Christian heritage and culture. Williams would have questioned the meaning of such ideas. Moreover, he lived for a time under a government aspiring to create the most Christian society ever known and he could not tolerate it, nor it him. He set about building a state with no established religion and with freedom of conscience for all. He believed that that was more truly Christian than the Christendom of the Middle Ages and of his day. In