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CHURCH VERSUS STATE



Massachusetts Bay Colony was not a theocracy; ministers, though important there, could not serve as magistrates, nor could magistrates be ministers. Yet in Massachusetts the Puritans made the Congregational church the official state church, supported it by taxation, and prohibited people who did not share their views from worshipping as they pleased in the colony. In 1631, a devout young Puritan preacher named Roger Williams arrived in Boston and from almost the beginning began challenging the Puritan establishment. Williams favored separation of church and state; he thought religion was corrupted when it got involved in politics. He also championed religious liberty; authentic religion, he insisted, flourishes only when people can practice it freely without government coercion.

To the consternation of John Winthrop and other Massachusetts leaders, Williams began attracting support for his views among some of the people in the colony. In 1635 they put him on trial, convicted him of spreading “dangerous opinions,” and banished him from the colony. In January 1636 Williams and some of his followers fled into the wilderness. They made their way southward and finally reached the shores of Narragansett Bay, where they founded Providence Plantation. In 1640 the inhabitants of Providence drew up a “Plantation Agreement” for governing their town, emphasizing “liberty of conscience” and the settlement of disputes by peaceful arbitration. Eventually Providence joined with other settlements in the area to form the colony of Rhode Island, for which Williams secured a charter in 1644. Williams wrote many eloquent tracts setting forth his views on religious liberty and freedom of conscience; and in Rhode Island, where he held office for many years, there was religious freedom for Catholics and Jews as well as for Protestants of all denominations. In 1644 he published a book presenting his opinions entitled *The Bloody Tenent (Tenet) of Persecution for the Cause of Conscience*, the conclusion of which appears below.

Williams, the son of a tailor, was born in London around 1603. He studied theology at Cambridge University and served as chaplain to a

Puritan noble before coming to America. In Massachusetts he angered the authorities by both his political and his religious heresies. Not only did he espouse a democratic form of government ("The sovereign, original, and foundation of civil powers lies in the people"), he also insisted that the colonists were not entitled to the land on which they settled until they bought it from the Indians. In Rhode Island Williams purchased land from the Indians; he also made a study of their language and published a book about it. And he engaged Massachusetts's John Cotton in a lively controversy about religious liberty. When Cotton blasted Williams's *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for the Cause of Conscience* with a book entitled *The Bloody Tenent Washed and Made White in the Blood of the Lamb* (1647), Williams responded with *The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody by Mr. Cotton's Endeavor to Wash it White in the Blood of the Lamb* (1652). Williams's fight against religious repression continued until his death in 1683.

Questions to Consider. Two questions come at once to mind in reading the following summary of the major points made in Williams's book. First, what were his main arguments against religious uniformity? Second, how far did his toleration of religious diversity extend? Can it be said that Williams's toleration of differing religious beliefs and practices grew out of a lukewarm faith? Do you agree that a close connection between church and state would likely lead to "hypocrisy" and "destruction"? Why did Williams caution against trying to convert non-Christians such as Jews?



The Bloody Tenent of Persecution (1644)

ROGER WILLIAMS

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 [French theologian, 1519–1605], Mr. Cotton, and the ministers of the New English churches and others former and later, tending to prove the doctrine of persecution for cause of conscience.



Roger Williams with the Narragansetts. Expelled from Massachusetts Bay for challenging the Puritan magistrates and ministers, Roger Williams sought refuge in the country of the Narragansett Indians, later to become Rhode Island. Appalled by what he considered the Narragansetts' un-Christian superstition, Williams nevertheless appreciated their generosity, considered them full of natural kindness and decency, and consistently urged European colonists to adopt a policy of accommodation and fair dealing with the Native communities. He was seldom heeded. (Rhode Island Historical Society)

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.

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 Lord Jesus) a permission of the most paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or anti-Christian consciences and worships, be granted to all men in all nations and countries: and they are only to be fought against with that sword which is only (in soul matters) able to conquer, to wit, the sword of God's spirit, the Word of God.

Seventhly, the state of the land of Israel, the kings and people thereof in peace and war, is proved figurative and ceremonial, and no pattern nor precedent for any kingdom or civil state in the world to follow.

Eighthly, God requireth not an uniformity of religion to be enacted and enforced in any civil state; which enforced uniformity (sooner or later) is the

greatest occasion of civil war, ravishing of conscience, persecution of Christ Jesus in his servants, and of the hypocrisy and destruction of millions of souls.

Ninthly, in holding an enforced uniformity of religion in a civil state, we must necessarily disclaim our desires and hopes of the Jews' conversion to Christ.

Tenthly, an enforced uniformity of religion throughout a nation or civil state confounds the civil and religious, denies the principles of Christianity and civility, and that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh.

Eleventhly, the permission of other consciences and worships than a state professeth only can (according to God) procure a firm and lasting peace (good assurance being taken according to the wisdom of the civil state for uniformity of civil obedience from all sorts).

Twelfthly, lastly, true civility and Christianity may both flourish in a state or kingdom, notwithstanding the permission of divers and contrary consciences, either of Jew or Gentile.