**God, Government and Roger Williams' Big Idea**

**Banished from Massachusetts, the Puritan minister originated a principle that remains contentious to this day—separation of church and state** By John M. Barry  
 Even the most bitter opponents of Roger Williams recognized in him that combination of charm, confidence and intensity a later age would call charisma. They did not regard such traits as assets, however, for those traits only made the preacher more dangerous in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. With someone like him, they could not compromise.

For his part, Williams was not about to compromise, either, despite his benevolent intelligence and Christian charity. The error, he believed, was not his, and when convinced he was right he backed away from no one.

So the conflict between Williams and his accusers nearly 400 years ago was inevitable. It was also thick with history, for it concerned both the relationship between church and state and defining the very nature of state power. Its repercussions would be immense and reach into the present.

The American part of the story began when John Winthrop led 1,000 men, women and children to plant the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630. These Puritans were disgusted with what they regarded as corruption in the Church of England and the tyranny of the crown. Seeking simple worship and personal intimacy with God, Puritan ministers were compelled—upon pain of imprisonment—to wear the surplice and use the Book of Common Prayer, and their congregants were compelled to participate in what they regarded as rote worship. As they set out from England that April, Winthrop reminded them of their purpose, to establish a “city upon a hill” dedicated to God, obeying God’s laws and flourishing in God’s image as a model for all the world to see.

Williams, who had developed a reputation for scholarship and piety as a clergyman in England, brought his family to the colony a few months later. Winthrop hailed him as “a godly minister,” and the Boston church immediately offered him a post, the greatest such position in English America. But Williams declined, spurning the church as insufficiently committed to the proper worship of God. This astonishing charge would put him at odds with the colony’s leaders till the day he died.

Williams did not differ with them on any point of theology. They shared the same faith, all worshiping the God of Calvin, seeing God in every facet of life and seeing man’s purpose as advancing the kingdom of God. But the colony’s leaders, both lay and clergy, firmly believed that the state must prevent error in religion. They believed that the success of the Massachusetts plantation depended upon it.

Williams believed that preventing error in religion was impossible, for it required people to interpret God’s law, and people would inevitably err. He therefore concluded that government must remove itself from anything that touched upon human beings’ relationship with God. A society built on the principles Massachusetts espoused would lead at best to hypocrisy, because forced worship, he wrote, “stincks in God’s nostrils.” At worst, such a society would lead to a foul corruption—not of the state, which was already corrupt, but of the church.

The dispute defined for the first time two fault lines that have run through American history ever since. The first, of course, is over the proper relation between government and what man has made of God—the church. The second is over the relation between a free individual and government authority—the shape of liberty.

Eventually, after Williams accepted a church post in Salem, north of Boston, and gathered a like-minded congregation, the authorities in the Bay feared that the foul error emanating from him could spread and corrupt the entire colony. In October 1635, the General Court of the Massachusetts Bay Colony banished him, ordering him to leave the colony within six weeks. If he returned, he risked execution.

Williams was ill and winter was coming to New England, so the court extended him one mercy, suspending enforcement of the banishment order until spring. In return, he promised not to speak publicly. In his own home among his friends, however, he did not hold his tongue. Considering this a violation of his promise, the authorities in January 1636 abruptly sent soldiers to arrest him and put him on a ship bound for England. This went well beyond the banishment order: The best Williams could expect in England was life in prison; in English prisons such sentences were generally short.

Winthrop, though, did not believe Williams deserved that fate; in secret he warned him of the impending arrest. Williams acted immediately. Dressing against the winter, stuffing his pockets with the dried corn paste that Indians lived on for weeks at a time, he fled his home. He would never see it again.

The cold that winter struck with violence. Even some 35 years later Williams would refer to the cold and “the snow wch I feele yet.” For 14 weeks, he wrote, he did not know “what Bread or Bed did meane.” He would have died had not “the ravens...fed me,” meaning Indians, with whom he had long traded.

During that winter one of the Bay clerics wrote him letters, several of which Indians delivered. The last was marvelously taunting, saying that if Williams “perished” among the “Barbarians,” “your blood had been on your owne head; it was your sinne to procure it.” That the letter was sent at all, sent by someone who knew the desperate straits he was in, troubled him deeply—“stopt” him, Williams recalled decades later. It made him feel utterly isolated, even “cut off,” a phrase that generally meant “beheaded.”

Williams was no loner. He was a social creature, a man who made friends easily, yet he was now cast adrift emotionally, mentally and physically. But being unmoored in an entirely new world had one benefit: He began exploring, probing, thinking about what kind of society he wanted to create, for he now had, as Plymouth Gov. Edward Winslow told him, “the country free before me.”

Eventually, Williams made his way south to Narragansett Bay and chose a site for a settlement on a cove into which two small rivers emptied. He bought the land from the Narragansett Indians and wrote that “having, of a sense of God’s merciful providence unto me in my distress, [I] called the place PROVIDENCE, I desired it might be for a shelter for persons distressed for conscience.”

By “conscience” he meant religion. His family and a dozen or so men with their families, many of them followers from Salem, joined him. Few as they were, Williams soon recognized the need for some form of government. The Narragansetts had sold the land solely to him, and in all English and colonial precedent those proprietary rights gave him political control over the settlement. Yet he drafted a political compact for Providence, and in it he demonstrated that his thinking had taken him into a new world indeed  
 He relinquished nearly all his land—to a town common stock—and any special political rights, reserving for himself only a vote equal to others. But the most significant element was what the compact did not say. It did not propose to build a model of God’s kingdom on earth, as did Massachusetts. Nor did it even claim to advance God’s will, as did the founding documents of every other European settlement in North and South America, whether English, Spanish, Portuguese or French. The compact did not even ask God’s blessing. It made no mention of God at all.

Williams’ most implacable enemies never questioned his piety. His devotion to God informed everything he did—his thinking, his writing, his actions. In two volumes of his surviving letters hardly a single paragraph fails to refer to God in an intimate way. For him to omit any mention of God in this political compact underscored his conviction that to assume God embraced any state other than ancient Israel profaned Him and signified human arrogance in the extreme.

And Providence’s other settlers unanimously agreed: “We, whose names are hereunder...do promise to subject ourselves in active and passive obedience to all such orders or agreements as shall be made for public good...only in civil things.”

This government was to be utterly mundane in the most literal sense, in that it dealt solely with the world. Unlike all other English settlements, this one neither set up a church nor required church attendance. Indeed, later it would decree that a simple “solemn profession [had] as full force as an oath” in court. All this was revolutionary.

How Williams came to his views is a story of power, blood and intrigue. How he managed to ensure the survival of what became the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations—its full name to this day—is also bloody, involving religious wars on the European continent, civil war in England and the beheading of a king.

In 1534, Henry VIII had rejected Roman Catholicism and turned the kingdom Protestant, and Parliament declared him head of the new Church of England; he executed those who opposed him as heretics and traitors. His daughter Queen Mary made England Catholic again and burned Protestants at the stake. Then Queen Elizabeth turned it Protestant and executed Catholics who plotted against her—including her cousin Mary Queen of Scots. Her successor was King James, the Scottish Mary’s son.

James was Protestant but moved the Church of England ever closer to Catholicism, inflaming Puritans. In 1604, believing the existing English Bibles did not sufficiently emphasize obedience to authority, he ordered a new translation; what became known as the King James Bible satisfied him on that point. In politics, he injected the theory of the divine right of kings into English history and claimed that “the monarch is the law. *Rex est lex loquens*, the king is the law speaking.” Supporting him was Sir Francis Bacon, best known as a thinker who insisted that knowledge came from observation and who helped father the modern scientific method—but also a courtier and lawyer who became lord chancellor of England, second only to the king in the government.

Opposing James was Sir Edward Coke, arguably the greatest jurist in English history. It was he who ruled from the bench that “The house of every one is to him as his castle.” Precedents he set included the prohibition of double jeopardy, the right of a court to void a legislative act, and the use of writs of habeas corpus to limit royal power and protect individual rights. Coke took a young amanuensis with him to the Star Chamber, to the Court of King’s Bench, to the Privy Council, to Parliament, to meetings with the king himself. That amanuensis, whom Coke sometimes called his “son” and later put through the finest schools in England, was Roger Williams, who had been born into a middle-class family in London around 1603.

Coke’s conflicts with King James and then King Charles ran deep and hot; in 1621, James sent Coke to the Tower of London. Prison did not tame him. Six years after his release, he wrote the Petition of Right, declaring limits on royal power; he maneuvered its passage through both houses of Parliament and forced King Charles to embrace it. Winston Churchill would call Coke’s petition “the main foundation of English freedom....the charter of every self-respecting man at any time in any land.”

But only months later, in 1629, Charles broke his promises and dissolved Parliament. While soldiers hammered on the doors of the House of Commons, the floor in chaos, its last act was to resolve that the king’s supporters were traitors.

Williams was an eyewitness to the turmoil of that time, first as a youth accompanying Coke, then as a young minister and Cambridge graduate who served as trusted messenger between parliamentary leaders.

Without Parliament, Charles commenced an 11-year period of “Personal Rule,” crushing political and religious dissent with a network of spies and transforming the Star Chamber from “the poor man’s court” offering the prospect of equal justice into an epithet that now stands for the abuse of judicial power. It was this pressure that drove Winthrop, Williams and others to the New World, to Massachusetts.

In America, Massachusetts grew strong enough not just to slaughter Indian enemies but even to plan armed resistance to the king when it was rumored he would impose his form of worship there. It also grew strong enough to crush Rhode Island, which—peopled by outcasts banished from Massachusetts for religious reasons—it viewed as a pestilence at its border. Thus Massachusetts claimed jurisdiction, without any legal authority, over what is now Cranston, south of Providence, and in 1643 it seized the present Warwick by force of arms, its soldiers marching through Providence.

By then England was fighting a civil war, king against Parliament. English Puritans, whose support Massachusetts still needed, aligned with the legislators. That made Parliament the only power that could stop Massachusetts’ imperial expansion. Williams sailed into that English caldron both to procure a legal charter from Parliament and to convince England of the rightness of his ideas.

Both tasks seemed impossible. Williams had to persuade Parliament to allow Rhode Island to divorce church and state. Yet Parliament was then no more receptive to that idea than was Massachusetts. Indeed, the civil war was being fought largely over state control of the Church of England, and European intellectual tradition then rejected religious freedom. As the historian Henry Lea observed in 1887, “universal public opinion from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century” demanded death for heretics. By 1643, hundreds of thousands of Christians had been slaughtered by other Christians because of the way they worshiped Christ. The historian W. K. Jordan noted, “No voice had as yet been raised in Parliament for a toleration of all Protestant groups,” never mind Catholics, who were considered heretical traitors. Both king and Parliament wanted “a national Church which would permit of no dissent.”

But Williams, both relentless and charming, advanced his arguments with passion, persistence and logic. Even his opponent Robert Baillie commented on his “great sincerity,” called “his disposition...without fault.” Williams also drew upon his many connections—including such men as his old friend Oliver Cromwell—pushing his views in the lobbies of Parliament, in taverns, in the great homes and palaces of London. He did anything to win favor, even securing a winter supply of firewood for London, cut off from its normal coal supplies by the war.

Most important, in early February 1644 he published a pamphlet—public debates then deployed pamphlets like artillery—in which he tried to make his readers live through his experiences, make them understand the reasons for his differences with Massachusetts, make them see the colony’s hypocrisy. The people of the Bay had left England to escape having to conform. Yet in Massachusetts anyone who tried to “set up any other Church and Worship”—including Presbyterian, then favored by most of Parliament—were “not permit[ted]...to live and breath in the same Aire and Common-weale together, which was my case.”

Williams described the true church as a magnificent garden, unsullied and pure, resonant of Eden. The world he described as “the Wilderness,” a word with personal resonance for him. Then he used for the first time a phrase he would use again, a phrase that although not commonly attributed to him has echoed through American history. “[W]hen they have opened a gap in the hedge or wall of Separation between the Garden of the Church and the Wildernes of the world,” he warned, “God hathe ever broke down the wall it selfe, removed the Candlestick, & c. and made his Garden a Wildernesse.”

He was saying that mixing church and state corrupted the church, that when one mixes religion and politics, one gets politics. Then and there, in London amid civil war, he argued for what he began calling “Soul Libertie.” Baillie noted with dismay, “Mr. Williams has drawn a great number [of followers] after him.”

Williams had one final argument on his side. Rhode Island could be a test, an experiment. It was safely isolated from England; if it was granted a charter and allowed an experiment in soul liberty, all England could watch the results.

On March 14, 1644, Parliament’s Committee on Foreign Plantations granted Williams his charter.

The committee could have imposed a governor or defined the government. Instead, it authorized a democracy, giving the colonists “full Powre & Authority to Governe & rule themselves...by such a form of Civil Government, as by voluntary consent of all, or the greater Part of them shall find most suteable” so long as its laws “be conformable to the Laws of England, so far as the Nature and Constitution of the place will admit.”

Even more extraordinary, the committee left all decisions about religion to the “greater Part”—the majority—knowing the majority would keep the state out of matters of worship. Soul liberty now had official sanction.

Williams had created the freest society in the Western world. But he had only begun.

For months Williams worked fe­verishly to complete his masterpiece. He titled it *The Bloudy Tenent, of Persecution, for cause of Conscience, Discussed, in A Conference betweene Truth and Peace*. It was one of the most comprehensive treatises about the freedom of religion ever written. The 400-page book clearly reflected the influence of both Bacon’s views on the scientific method and Coke’s views on liberty, and he cited Bacon and then Coke in the opening pages. The combination led Williams to divorce the material world from the spiritual world, and to draw conclusions about politics that led him to formulate a strikingly modern, democratic theory of the state.

Williams’ main purpose was to prove, “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 Antichristian consciences and worships, bee granted to all men in all Nations and Countries.” Over hundreds of pages he lays out his case, expanding upon his view that the state will inevitably corrupt the church, rebutting Scriptural arguments for intolerance with Scriptural arguments for tolerance.

Then he countered the almost universally held view that governments received their authority from God, and that in the material world God favored those who were godly and punished those who were not. If it were that simple, then why did He subject Job to such an ordeal? And Williams noted that at that very moment in European conflicts, Catholics had “victory and dominion.” If “success be the measure,” then the evidence proved that God had chosen Catholics over Protestants.

Always a Calvinist, Williams rejected that possibility. He went on to reject the idea that God lent His authority to government. Instead, Williams made what in the 17th century was a revolutionary claim: “I infer that the sovereign, original, and foundation of civil power lies in the people.” The governments they establish, he wrote, “have no more power, nor for no longer time, than the civil power or people consenting and agreeing shall betrust them with.”

No member of Parliament, even while waging war against the king, went that far. Nor did Winthrop, who called democracy a “manifest breach of the 5th commandment” and insisted that, though elected governor, he still had “our authority from God.”

*The Bloudy Tenent* was published in July 1644 to stunned outrage. Even those who had paid a heavy price for their own religious views were outraged. Parliament ordered that all copies of the book be burned. Both houses listened to a preacher condemn it but warn: “The shell is sometimes thrown into the fire, when the kernel is eaten as a sweet morsel.”

Williams had left England for Providence before then—even before his book had come off the press. This time he did not cross the Atlantic in flight; he crossed in triumph. His return marked a kind of defiance, a turning of his back on London and the rank he had achieved there. It was an assertion of his own freedom. In Rhode Island a man could be free. Williams would abandon neither the plantation nor the concept he had created. Meanwhile, not all copies of his book were burned, and a new edition soon appeared; its kernel would prove sweeter and sweeter.

Although Roger Williams is not a household name, academics have made him one of the most studied figures of pre-Revolutionary America. Among them, as among his contemporaries, he has been controversial.

Some do not recognize Williams as achieving much of anything because, they say, his success in Rhode Island was isolated. Others have argued that Williams’ justifications for religious freedom derived too much from Scripture, and are the weaker for it. “Williams was no forerunner of the Enlightenment of Jefferson,” the historian Emil Oberholzer Jr. asserted in 1956. “When Jefferson advocated religious liberty, he did it as a child of the Enlightenment; his motive was political and social. With Williams, the child of a theological age, the motive was wholly religious.”

Others have taken the opposite view. Vernon Parrington, a leading historian in the first half of the 20th century, called him “primarily a political philosopher rather than a theologian” and said his theory of the commonwealth “must be reckoned the richest contribution of Puritanism to American thought.” Even Harvard’s Perry Miller, who placed Williams entirely in the religious sphere, admired him as “an explorer into the dark places, the very nature of freedom.” And Yale’s Edmund Morgan, arguably America’s leading colonial historian, noted that Williams “wrote most often, most effectively, and most significantly about civil government” and “put human society in new perspective; and he demolished, for anyone who accepted his premises, some of the assumptions that encumbered the statesmen of his day and still haunt our own.”

Williams did in fact shape other colonies, directly and indirectly. After the Restoration of the crown, King Charles II confirmed Rhode Island’s charter, explicitly stating no one was to be “molested, punished, disquieted, or called in question, for any differences in opinion, in matters of religion.” Such language on religious freedom was written into the concession of land for New Jersey. Similar guarantees appeared in the charter of Carolina, even as that document established the Anglican Church there.

More important was Williams’ impact on thought. He served as the first exemplar to all those Americans who would later confront power. He also largely shaped the debate in England, influencing such men as John Milton and particularly John Locke—whose work Jefferson, James Madison and other architects of the U.S. Constitution studied closely. W. K. Jordan, in his classic multivolume study of religious toleration, called Williams’ “carefully reasoned argument for the complete dissociation of Church and State...the most important contribution made during the century in this significant area of political thought.”

Roger Williams was not a man out of time. He belonged to the 17th century and to Puritans in that century. Yet he was also one of the most remarkable men of his or any century. With absolute faith in the literal truth of the Bible and in his interpretation of that truth, with absolute confidence in his ability to convince others of the truth of his convictions, he nonetheless believed it “monstrous” to compel conformity to his or anyone else’s beliefs.

Having fought to allow all to worship as they pleased, in the end Williams—like his friends John Milton and Oliver Cromwell—worshiped at no church; he concluded that God’s will was better discerned by individuals than by institutions. He died in Providence in 1683, at about 80 years of age. His enemies called him a “firebrand.” They feared the conflagration that free thought might ignite. They feared the chaos and uncertainty of freedom, and they feared the loneliness of it. Williams embraced all that. For he knew that was the price of freedom.