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# Roger Williams

1603-1683

Denver C. Snuffer, Jr.  
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Born and educated in London, Roger Williams went from Anglican to Puritan when he concluded the church was corrupt and false. It was dangerous to hold unorthodox views in England. Alexander Leighton published a book that was critical of the Anglican church and was punished with prison for life, fined ten thousand pounds, degraded from his ministry, whipped, pilloried, his ears cut off, his nose slit and his face branded with a hot iron. This intolerance of religious beliefs and cruel punishment for expressing them influenced Williams throughout his life.

He moved to the English Colonies in America in 1631 where he became a Reform Baptist, later a Free Will Baptist and ultimately founded the First Baptist Church of Providence.

Williams was an abolitionist and organized the first attempt to prohibit slavery in the British American Colonies. He was also an advocate for separation of church from state. His ideas percolated among colonists and led to the First Amendment to the US Constitution. He wrote, "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." His words were echoed by Thomas Jefferson in the letter to the Danbury Baptist Church which repeated the words "wall of separation" between church and state. Jefferson's Danbury letter has been cited in several US Supreme Court decisions as if it were part of the First Amendment.

Williams founded the first place in modern history where citizenship and religion were separate. His society also adopted majoritarian democracy. These ideals took root and directly influenced the American Revolution a century later.

His search for pure religion led him to eventually separate from any organized church and, from 1639 onward he waited for Christ to send a new apostle to reestablish an original, pure and authoritative church. He carefully studied religious societies and history and came to the conclusion that every denomination was flawed. Each church was corrupt, though they differed in their flaws and virtues. He was persuaded that Christianity had departed from the truth early in history and had been corrupt ever since. He wrote, "Christianity fell asleep in the bosom of Constantine, and the laps and bosoms of those Emperors who professed the name of Christ." This sober reflection led to his conviction that freedom of conscience was necessary to allow every soul to search for and accept all truth they could find. He declared, "There is no regularly constituted church of Christ on earth, nor any person qualified to administer any church ordinances; nor can there be until new apostles are sent by the Great Head of the Church for whose coming I am seeking."

Williams thought the British treatment of American Indians was inequitable, and urged the land be purchased from the Indians rather than taken from them. This view caused conflict between him and the colonial authorities. He was convicted in 1635 of sedition and heresy and banished from Salem.

Despite his conflict with colonial leaders, he became a trusted friend by several native tribes in New England, even negotiating the end of conflicts between Indians and Rhode Island for nearly forty years. Twice he allowed himself to be taken hostage (1645 and again in 1671) to guarantee the return of an Indian leader summoned to court.

Williams has grown in influence over time, with many of his revolutionary ideas becoming commonplace generations later. He helped to create an American society that welcomes diverse religious views and protects freedom of conscience.

Although he did not believe the Christian churches preserved the original, he nevertheless practiced Christianity. He summarized what should be done briefly: "the two first principles and foundations of true religion, or worship of the true God in Christ, are repentance from dead works, and faith towards God, before the doctrine of baptism or washing, and the laying on of hands, which contain the ordinances and practices of worship."