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DEMOCRACY & DIVERSITY
A PROJECT OF INTERFAITH ALLIANCE

Voices of Reason Roger Williams (1603-1683)

Since the nineteenth century, Americans have enshrined Roger Williams as a symbol of liberty of individual conscience and toleration of racial and religious differences, an apostle of civil and spiritual freedom. Paradoxically, Williams's liberal inclusiveness was based on his own strict adherence to the doctrine of separatism. He was a friend to the Narragansett Indians and defender of religious dissenters because he was a devout Separatist Puritan, whose political ideas were founded on his belief that Christianity must be free from the "foul embrace" of civil authority.

Williams grew up in London, a center of Separatist activity. With the patronage of Sir Edward Coke, who enrolled him in Cambridge in 1623, Williams was able to complete a B.A. in 1627 and begin an M.A. Having "forsaken the university" for Puritanism, he became a chaplain in 1629. On December 10, 1630, Williams became part of the Great Migration when an estimated 20,000 Puritan immigrants flooded into New England to escape the oppression of King Charles and Anglican Archbishop Laud.

His unorthodoxy started trouble almost as soon as the Puritans arrived in February 1631. Called to be the minister of Boston's First Church, he told the community he "*durst not officiate to an unseparated people.*" He insisted that they separate and repent worshipping with the Church of England. Also, he denounced government officials for punishing violations of the Sabbath, arguing that they had no authority to enforce the first four Commandments, thus beginning a battle with the Puritan leaders over separation of church and state. Moving first to Plymouth and then to Salem, he continued to preach three extreme positions: (1) the Puritans should become Separatists (position that endangered the Massachusetts Bay Company charter and the relative freedom it granted); (2) the charter was invalid because Christian kings had no right to heathen [Indian] lands; and (3) the civil magistrates had no jurisdiction over matters of conscience and soul; only material and social matters (a position that undermined the Puritan oligarchy [rule by a few]). The governor and other colonial officials saw the dangerous implications of Williams's positions, and on July 8, 1635, he was indicted for divisiveness and heresy [religious beliefs opposed to the accepted teachings], then sentenced to banishment on October 9. To avoid deportation, Williams fled south to an Indian settlement.

He purchased land from the Narragansetts and founded Providence, where he devoted himself to creating a heavenly city on earth. Exiles followed him, including Anne Hutchinson and religious minorities of all kinds from Quakers to Jews. For most of his life he held offices, continuing to fight for Indian rights and his religious principles.

Adapted from: Author profile pages of the Heath Anthology of American Literature, (5th edition), Paul Lauter, editor, Houghton Mifflin Company. Profile prepared by Raymond Dolle, Indiana State University, and Renee Bergland, Simmons College.

Full profile available at: http://college.hmco.com/english/lauter/heath/4e/students/author-pages/colonial/williams_ro.html

Roger Williams's most famous letter is "To the Town of Providence" (January 1655), written to settle a controversy that divided the town over religious freedom and civil restraint. While defending a government's right to require civil obedience, he also shows that religious liberty does not lead to anarchy.

To the Town of Providence 1665

That ever I speak or write a title, that tends to such an infinite liberty of conscience, is a mistake, and which I have ever disclaimed and abhorred. To prevent such mistakes, I shall at present only propose this case: There goes a ship to sea, with many hundreds of souls in one ship, whose weal and woe is common, and is a true picture of a commonwealth, or a human combination or society. It hath fallen out sometimes, that both Papists [Catholics] and Protestants, Jews, or Turks, may be embarked in one ship; upon which supposal I affirm, that all the liberty of conscience, that ever I pleaded for, turns upon these two hinges—that none of the Papists, Protestants, Jews or Turks be forced to come to ship's prayers or worship, nor compelled from their own particular prayers or worship, if they practice any. I further add, that I never denied, that notwithstanding this liberty, the command of this ship's course, yea, and also command that justice, peace, and sobriety be kept and practiced. Both among the seamen and all the passenger. If any seamen refuse to perform services, or passengers to pass their freight; if any refuse to help, in person or purse, towards the common charges or defense; if any refuse to obey the common laws and orders of the ship concerning their common peace or preservation; if any shall mutiny and rise up against their commanders and officers; if any should preach or write that there ought to be no commanders or officers, because all are equal in Christ, therefore no masters nor officers, no laws or orders, nor corrections nor punishments; I say, I never denied, but in such cases, whatever is pretended, the commander or commanders may judge, resist, compel, and punish such transgressors, according to their deserts and merits. This if seriously and honestly minded, may, if it so pleases the Father of Lights, let in some light to such as willingly shut not their eyes.

*I remain studious of your common peace and liberty.
Roger Williams*

Source: Chapter One of Letters of a Nation: A Collection of Extraordinary American Letters, Edited by Andrew Carroll, Kodansha International as posted on the WEB site of The New York Times at <http://www.nytimes.com/books/first/c/carroll-letters.html>

Directions: Be prepared to discuss the following questions:

1. Describe the person and historical context of the individual who is promoting the idea of religious liberty.
2. What arguments does the individual make for religious liberty?
3. What limits, if any, does this person place on the practice of religious liberty?