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The Williams Way: Why Roger Williams' Philosophy of Religious Liberty Remains Imperative Today

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Abstract

To travel the road of religious freedom, a society requires firm guardrails. To the left of the road looms the cliff of "state suppression of religion." To the right looms the cliff of "state establishment of religion." During the life of Roger Williams (1603?-1683), the problem in the American colonies was the latter, the inextricable entanglement of religion and civil authority. Known as "The New England Way" in Williams' colony of Massachusetts Bay, its main tenet of governance was that social stability required religious uniformity. Williams could not disagree more, embarking on a life's mission to proclaim that government possesses no power over spiritual affairs, and that it was in fact religious *liberty*, not uniformity, that produced lasting social stability. One might call that "The Williams Way," as he became the original architect of the American road to religious freedom, and of those indispensable guardrails, with later figures like Jefferson and Madison codifying similar parameters in the Bill of Rights. After describing the backstory of Williams' upbringing, emigration to America, and banishment for his radical ideology, this article argues that The Williams Way of religious freedom—the narrow road between state establishment and state suppression of religion—is every bit as imperative today as it was 400 years ago, when Roger Williams first forged it.

Keywords

Roger Williams, Religious Freedom, Separation of Church and State, Supreme Court

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INTRODUCTION: THE WILLIAMS WAY

To travel the road of religious freedom, a society requires firm guardrails. To the left of the road looms the cliff of “state suppression of religion.” To the right looms the cliff of “state establishment of religion.” The former is associated with names like Nero, Hitler, Stalin, Mao, and the Kim dynasty; the latter with Constantine, popes of the Middle Ages, the Crusades, “Bloody Mary,” witch trials, and ayatollahs. The former seeks to quash religious authority through conformity; the latter seeks to quash religious heresy through conformity. In both paradigms there is tyranny, with liberty of conscience the invariable victim.

During the life of Roger Williams (1603?-1683), the problem in the American colonies was “establishment,” the inextricable entanglement of religion and civil authority. It had been that way ever since the first colonizers set foot in The New World a century earlier. As Williams added his footprints to Massachusetts in 1631, he stumbled repeatedly over “The New England Way,” a governance approach whose main tenet was that “social stability required religious uniformity.”¹ Williams could not disagree more, embarking on a life’s mission to proclaim that government possesses no power over spiritual affairs, and that it was in fact religious *liberty*, not uniformity, that produced lasting social stability.²

For mnemonic parallelism, one might call that “The Williams Way,” as he became the original architect of that road to religious freedom, and of those indispensable guardrails, with later figures like Jefferson and Madison codifying similar parameters in the Bill of Rights. After describing the backstory of Williams’ upbringing, emigration to America, and banishment for his radical ideology, this article argues that The Williams Way of religious freedom—the narrow road between state establishment and state suppression of religion—is every bit as imperative today as it was 400 years ago, when Roger Williams first forged it.

RAISED AMID RELIGIOUS RIVALRY

In 1603,³ the world into which Roger Williams was born was one of religious animosity, often violence. The schism between Rome and London was still fresh and ferocious, with Henry VIII having reinvented Catholicism as the divorce-friendly “Church of England.” English Catholics bore the brunt of it all, routinely

¹ Timothy Hall. *Separating Church from State: Roger Williams and Religious Liberty* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 72.

² *Ibid.* 86.

³ This date is an estimated birth year for Roger Williams, since his birth records were destroyed in The Great Fire of London, in 1666.

hunted down by Henry and then his scion successor, Edward VI. Queen Mary I, a Catholic, followed Edward not just on the British throne, but also in his murderous methods, burning at the stake nearly 300 Protestants in retaliation,⁴ earning her the dubious title from Protestant history writers as “Bloody Mary.”

But even within the Church of England there was dissent and division, and as a result, more death. Many wanted a Reformation-focused church, a truly Protestant version of the church in England. This “purer” version, the Puritans would say, had no trappings of the Mass or Catholic tradition. A spin-off of the Puritans, calling themselves “Baptists,” went further, insisting that baptism had to be volitional.

All these reformers were targeted by the state-church—fined, imprisoned, or worse. Many Puritans fled to Holland and then to America to practice their faith, away from bishops and sheriffs. Some Baptists, including their ringleader, Henry Barrow, were hanged for the sedition and heresy of deviating from Church of England dictates, like not attending mandatory Anglican services.

This was what normalcy entailed for young Roger Williams. According to one historian, during those years in England, “heresy could be more fearful than treason” and theological precision mattered more than science.⁵ So growing up, Roger Williams would have witnessed persecution and even execution over heresy. Moreover, in his teen years, England’s Thirty Years’ War began, “with religion in the early years as the crucial factor.”⁶

Though Williams had been born into a middle-class, Puritan family in London, university educated at Cambridge, and apprenticed under Sir Edward Coke, arguably the greatest English jurist of his day, through it all Williams’ mind had been marinated in a society where fights over faith were the *modus operandi*, culminating in never-ending turmoil. Is it any wonder that the foundation of Williams’ philosophy would eventually be that persecution for cause of conscience was the “bloody tenant” that robbed the world of peace?⁷

That is jumping ahead a bit, though. First, a brief look at Williams’ emigration to America, where he would experience much turmoil of his own.

EMIGRATION, ALTERCATION, AND EXCOMMUNICATION

⁴ John Edwards. *Mary I: England’s Catholic Queen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 254.

⁵ Edwin S Gaustad. *Liberty of Conscience: Roger Williams in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 8.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Hall, *Separating Church from State*, 86.

In 1620, as every American schoolchild knows, the Pilgrims sailed from England to Plymouth, Massachusetts aboard the Mayflower. In finer detail, unbeknownst to grade-schoolers, those first Pilgrims had changed their name from Puritans and actually set out for Virginia, but blew off course. After their harrowing journey, they had had enough travel and chose to stay in Massachusetts. Calling their new home “Plymouth,” which was the port of England from which the Mayflower sailed, they settled in for a difficult and deadly winter.

A decade later, thousands had followed their route to what was then called Massachusetts Bay Colony. Among that wave of immigrants was Roger Williams, a newly-ordained pastor in the Church of England and a newly-married husband to Mary. Docking in Boston in February 1631, it was hardly a glamorous arrival. Disease was claiming the lives of settlers by the hundreds in Massachusetts.⁸ To make matters worse, Williams declined an attractive, high-visibility job pastoring a Puritan church in Boston. His reason? It lacked integrity for people to pledge loyalty to the Church of England but then try to “purify” it. Rather, a clean break was required. The better fit church for him would be 15 miles northeast in Salem.

But there Williams gained even more notoriety. Because he insisted in his sermons that the commandments were matters for *individual conscience*, not for the sheriff, the Boston leadership, still miffed about Williams’ embarrassing rejection of their pastoral position, pressured the Salem leadership to terminate Williams’ employment. Frustrated, he relocated again, now 40 miles south to Plymouth to take an assistant pastor job. As it turned out, though, Williams’ unorthodox assertions alienated enough people in Plymouth that he had to return to Salem for yet a third pastoral job.⁹

Worried that Salem would become a hotbed of separatism under Williams’ influence, the Puritan leadership in Boston—again, these were loyalists to the Church of England who were trying to remake the Church to be less Catholic—had seen enough. Four years of Williams bouncing around Massachusetts, sowing seeds of discontent and derision, finally landed Williams in court where he was convicted in October of 1635 of spreading “newe & dangerous opinions”¹⁰ and given six weeks to leave the colony, provided he quit dissenting during that time. When Williams refused to remain silent, for this was a matter of conscience and calling, a magistrate ordered that Williams be sent back to London as soon as possible. But with the ironic assistance of Massachusetts Governor John Winthrop, curiously friendly with Williams throughout these tumultuous years,

⁸ Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience*, 24.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁰ Henry S. Burrage. “Why Was Roger Williams Banished?” *The American Journal of Theology* 5, no. 1 (January 1901): 1-17, 3.

Williams was alerted to his pending capture and escaped the colony to the headwaters of Narragansett Bay.¹¹

CREATING A COLONY OF CONSCIENCE

The Puritans fled England to escape ecclesiastical persecution, but ironically, now they had inflicted it on Roger Williams. However, Williams was not alone in being harassed for conscience sake. Nor were the 13 Massachusetts Bay families who joined Williams in his newly-incorporated town of Providence (named, of course, for the providence of God).¹² People throughout New England, throughout the colonies, throughout the world, and indeed throughout history had suffered the same indignities to a lesser or greater extent. Religious liberty—genuine freedom of conscience in spiritual matters—had been elusive since Constantine issued the Edict of Milan in 313, hopelessly entangling church and state ever since.

In fact, it had been more than elusive. Religious liberty had been practically non-existent in the western world, and it would remain that way until the ratification of the First Amendment in 1791, except for enclaves of freedom here and there. Providence, and its eventual surrounding colony of “Rhode Island and Providence Plantations” (still the official name of the state to this day), was the first of those enclaves. And Roger Williams, the founder of the town and colony, is universally recognized as the first American advocate for that freedom.¹³

It was *that* innovation which got him banished from Massachusetts Bay Colony, and it would be the centerpiece of his life’s work. Finally empowered to bifurcate church from state as the leader of a town, Williams’ and cronies drew up 12 “Articles of Agreement” for the charter of Providence in 1638. Second among these articles was the simple but revolutionary statement: “We agree ... (to) hold forth liberty of conscience.”¹⁴ What exactly did that mean? Williams’ writings, one especially, hold the key to understanding it, as well as to applying this transformational idea today.

¹¹ Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience*, 45.

¹² Specifically, Roger Williams’ name “Providence” comes from “for God’s merciful providence to me in my distress.” Henry Gannett. *The Origin of Certain Place Names in the United States*, Second Edition (Washington DC: US Geological Survey, 1905).

¹³ In fact, Williams seemingly coined the metaphor of a “wall” of separation of church and state, so often credited to Thomas Jefferson. Williams’ specific framing was there should be a “hedge or wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world,” according to Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience*, 207.

¹⁴ The complete line is: “We agree, as formerly hath been the liberties of the Town, so still hold forth liberty of conscience.” Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience*, 49.

LIBERTY OF CONSCIENCE: *THE BLOODY TENENT*

It was his treatise, his magnum opus, his articulation of the axioms that resound to this day. With striking courage and candor, Williams' 1644 publication of *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience* threw down the gauntlet in America and England. His thesis—what would be a 50-year thesis for Roger Williams—was that government possesses no power over spiritual affairs.¹⁵ In fact, he argued, persecution for cause of conscience was the “bloody tenet” (i.e., the bloody tenet) that robbed the world of peace, since religious conscience will persevere despite oppression, escalating the conflict.¹⁶

Modeling that escalation, Williams proffered an inflammatory metaphor in *The Bloody Tenent*, comparing religious persecution to “spiritual rape,” since it forced the beliefs of one upon another. The alternative? Complete and unfettered liberty of conscience. When it comes to the “warring principles of liberty and license,” Williams wrote, “. . .the poorest peasant must be able to disdain the service of the highest prince” in spiritual matters.¹⁷

Williams did not want others just to take his word for it, though. He wanted them to see that these were *scriptural* truths. As “a man committed to liberty of conscience out of deep religious conviction,”¹⁸ Williams built his entire his system of religious liberty on a biblical foundation,¹⁹ not on enlightenment ideals or mere pragmatism.

The most illuminating biblical passage in this regard was the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matt. 13:24-30), the story of an enemy sowing tares (weeds) throughout a freshly-planted field, and the land owner instructing the servants to let the wheat and tares grow together, rather than weeding the field mid-season. They would separate them at the end of the season. Though the parable's meaning was much debated at the time, for Williams “[t]he parable is clear: leave the wheat and tares until the harvest, when God's judgment will be made known”²⁰ By way of application, that meant let the believers and non-believers live and work together, even worship together, until God decides in the end who is worthy to be gathered into his barn of eternity.

This was the essence of religious liberty, which in pithiest terms, was simply the “freedom to be ruled by God.”²¹ And Williams' *Bloody Tenent* unabashedly named the primary obstacle: State persecution of individuals because

¹⁵ Hall, *Separating Church from State*, 86.

¹⁶ This stood in sharp contrast to John Cotton's perspective, a perspective dominating the era, that a state church is necessary to ensure civil and moral order of society.

¹⁷ Hall, *Separating Church from State*, 86, 103.

¹⁸ Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience*, x.

¹⁹ Hall, *Separating Church from State*, 9.

²⁰ Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience*, 77.

²¹ Hall, *Separating Church from State*, 11.

of their religious conscience. Nothing is more absurd, Williams wrote, than “the setting up of civil powers and officers to judge the conviction of men’s souls.”²² Such a statement was radical for the day, though axiomatic today, indicating just how far ahead of its time *The Bloody Tenent* may have been.

THE RESULT: A HAVEN FOR DISSENTERS AND A MODEL FOR THE KING

“The *Bloody Tenent* called for true freedom of religion and absolute separation of church and state. . . . Williams certainly knew of such calls going back to at least Arnold of Brescia, who was burned at the stake in Rome in 1155 for insisting upon it.”²³ Fortunately, the Massachusetts Bay leadership was not so barbarically-inclined when it came to Roger Williams (though it did execute 20 alleged witches in Salem). Rather, his banishment to the bay of Narragansett inaugurated a chain of events, culminating in a haven for dissenters.

And what a haven it would become. Cotton Mather, the Harvard-educated Puritan clergyman, complained that in Rhode Island one could find “Antinomians, Anabaptists, Antisabbatarians, Arminians, Socinians, Quakers, Ranters—everything in the world but Roman Catholics and real Christians.”²⁴ Baptists, whose belief system and worship practices were illegal in Massachusetts, and who were even publicly whipped there into the 1680s, also found refuge in Rhode Island, with the first Baptist church in America being established in Newport with the assistance of Roger Williams. Quakers, too, settled there in large numbers starting in the 1650s, despite Williams’ strong disagreement with their extra-biblical, personal experiences of receiving God’s revelation. In a testimony to tolerance, Williams chose to debate the Quaker leadership rather than ban them from the colony,²⁵ even permitting the migratory inertia to yield a Quaker successor to Williams as colony president in 1657, and then as its first governor in 1663.²⁶

Truly, it was a colony like no other, though William Penn carried forward the legacy in Pennsylvania in the late 17th century. During the same era, New

²² Edwin S. Gaustad and Leigh Schmidt. *The Religious History of America: The Heart of the American Story from Colonial Times to Today*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperOne, 2002), 66.

²³ John M. Barry. *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul: Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, (New York: Penguin, 2012), 316.

²⁴ Gaustad and Schmidt, *The Religious History of America*, 70.

²⁵ According to Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul*, 383: “Roger Williams may have despised the Quakers as much as he did Massachusetts clergy and magistrates, but he sought no law to constrain them, much less did he seek to have them killed. Instead, he debated them.”

²⁶ This Quaker successor was Benedict Arnold, whose namesake great-grandson would become a traitor to the American cause a century later.

Jersey, Delaware and the Carolinas also broadly embraced liberty of conscience.²⁷ In part, this was due to King Charles II's new language for colonial charters, incorporating the experimental ideas articulated by Roger Williams himself. The 1663 Rhode Island charter, which became a template for subsequent colonies' charters, included these words:

“No person within said colony ... shall be any wise molested, punished, disquieted, or called into question, for any differences of opinion in matters of religion, and ... that every person ... may freely and fully have and enjoy his ... own judgments and consciences, in matters of religious concernments...”²⁸

If that were not enough, the charter went on to say “A most flourishing civil state may stand and best be maintained ... with a full liberty in religious commitments,”²⁹ a complete reversal of the theory that civil order required religious uniformity. Williams' legacy of liberty had now been codified by the King. But his influence over religious freedom would extend far beyond land charters.

THE WILLIAMS WAY OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

It is essential to recognize, unlike commentators who engage in eisegetical and revisionist analysis of history, that church-state separation in the United States was originally crafted to *protect* religion and religious people from the state, rather than to keep religion in check. The truth is that “the First Amendment religion clauses had almost no genesis in hostility or skepticism toward religion. On the contrary...the First Amendment was the product of religious enthusiasm more than anything else.”³⁰

That stands to reason since Roger Williams, a Calvinist evangelical, is the cornerstone of that question in America. Church-state separation in the colonies commenced with him facing down government officials in clerical garb, and then facing the consequences for his impudence. And it is why no less an historian than Edwin Gaustad can conclude with confidence that Williams “would have approved of both of the (First Amendment) religion clauses—‘the Establishment clause’ telling government that when it tried to help religion, it only hurt; and ‘the Free Exercise clause’ telling government to keep its clumsy hands as far as possible from religious conscience.”³¹

²⁷ Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience*, 194.

²⁸ Hall, *Separating Church from State*, 102.

²⁹ Gaustad and Schmidt, *The Religious History of America*, 67.

³⁰ Hall, *Separating Church from State*, 2.

³¹ Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience*, xi.

As briefly introduced at the front end of this article, the metaphor of religious freedom as a “narrow road” may be helpful here. To the left of the road is the cliff of state suppression of religion, with its meager individual freedoms. To the right is the cliff of state establishment of religion, also with insufficient freedoms (except for those who happen to agree with the state-church mandates). Tyranny greases each slippery slope, making recovery so challenging once a society breaches the road’s guardrails.

It was this tyranny, whether from the left or the right, Williams despised to its core. Such was the mortal enemy of liberty of conscience, *a God-given right of every human being*. That was The Williams Way, a way that indirectly informed the Bill of Rights and U.S. public policy ever since on the nettlesome issue of religious freedom. And that *is* The Williams Way to this day, a pristine but precarious road that the nation continues to traverse, scraping the guardrails too often and occasionally breaking through them. It is to that issue we last turn.

THE WILLIAMS WAY REMAINS IMPERATIVE TODAY

Religion issues rarely reached United States Supreme Court before 1940. However, due in large part to the influence of modernism and pluralism, “religion cases came to be an almost daily diet (for the Court), with those cases increasing in both frequency and difficulty in succeeding decades.”³²

Well, maybe not a “daily diet,” but the High Court’s docket the past eight decades certainly reveals a steady one. The Justices have been tasked repeatedly with clarifying and fortifying the First Amendment parameters of no establishment of religion and no prohibition of free exercise. As such, their work evidences the continuing need for Roger Williams’ pioneering insights, especially during the past 30 years when free exercise has come under such assault. The following annotated list of major Court decisions since 1940 bears witness to just how imperative those insights remain.

SUPREME COURT DECISIONS LIMITING RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION

- *Minersville School District v. Gobitis*, 310 US 586 (1940). Public schools may mandate saluting the American flag and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, despite any objections on religious grounds. An 8-1 decision, later overturned by *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*, 319 US 624 (1943).
- *Engel v. Vitale*, 370 US 421 (1962): State-sponsored prayer in public school violates the Establishment Clause, even if prayer is voluntary. An 8-1 decision.

³² Gaustad and Schmidt, *The Religious History of America*, 349.

- *Abington School District v. Schempp*, 374 US 203 (1963). School-sponsored Bible reading and recitation of The Lord's Prayer is unconstitutional establishment of religion. An 8-1 decision.
- *TWA v. Hardison*, 432 US 63 (1977): An employer does not have to bear more than a *de minimus* (minimal) cost to accommodate employee requests to avoid Sabbath work. A 7-2 decision.
- *Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 US 578 (1987): A law requiring the teaching of "creation science" in any public school where "evolutionary science" is taught violates the Establishment Clause because it advanced a specific religion. A 7-2 decision.
- *Employment Division v. Smith*, 494 US 872 (1990): Generally applicable laws that do not target specific religious practices are not a violation of the Free Exercise Clause. A 6-3 decision.
- *Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2000): Student-led prayer at a public school football game violates the Establishment Clause. A 6-3 decision.

SUPREME COURT DECISIONS PROTECTING RELIGIOUS EXPRESSION

- *Everson v. Board of Education of Ewing*, 330 US 1 (1947): Reimbursing parents of private school children for school transportation costs does not violate the Establishment Clause. A 5-4 decision.
- *McGowan v. Maryland*, 366 US 420 (1961): "Blue Laws" that restrict conducting business on Sundays do not violate the Establishment Clause. Similarly, in *Braunfeld v. Brown*, 366 US 599 (1961), the Court found that Blue Laws did not violate the free exercise of Jewish business owners. A 6-3 decision.
- *Sherbert v. Verner*, 374 US 398 (1963): The government must demonstrate a compelling interest and a narrowly-tailored law to restrict free exercise of religion. A 7-2 decision. This test was eliminated in *Employment Division v. Smith*, 494 US 872 (1990).
- *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 US 205 (1972): Amish children cannot be compelled to attend school after the eighth grade, since the parents' free exercise rights outweigh the state's interest in education. A 6-1 decision.
- *Mueller v. Allen*, 463 US 388 (1983): A state tax deduction that includes expenses for private school does not violate the Establishment Clause. A 5-4 decision.
- *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668 (1984). A holiday display on public property that included a crèche (manger scene) does not violate the Establishment Clause. A 5-4 decision.

- *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores*, 573 US 682 (2014): A federal mandate to include contraception in employer benefit packages violates the free exercise rights of business owners in privately-held corporations. A 5-4 decision.
- *Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission*, 584 US ____ (2018): The state must be religiously-neutral when evaluating claims involving free exercise of religion. A 7-2 decision.
- *Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn v. Cuomo*, 592 US ____ (2020): Covid restrictions barring attendance at religious services violate the Free Exercise Clause, when no such restrictions exist for businesses in the same neighborhoods. A 5-4 decision.
- *Fulton v. City of Philadelphia*, 593 US ____ (2021): Philadelphia violated the Free Exercise Clause when it refused to contract with Catholic Social Services (CSS) for foster care placement (CSS did not place children in same-sex households or with unmarried parents). A 9-0 decision.
- *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*, 597 US ____ (2022): Termination of a high school football coach for kneeling in prayer on the field after games violates the Free Exercise Clause. A 6-3 decision.

A BRIEF ANALYSIS: FAITH UNDER FIRE

Never in the history of the United States has the nation achieved broad consensus about how to reconcile liberty versus establishment.³³ This sampling of cases above surely testifies to that lack of consensus. Moreover, the sample hints at what the statistics clearly show: The U.S. Supreme Court heard more religion cases in the 1970s and again in the 1980s than it had in the 150-year period from 1790-1940.³⁴ With pluralism comes litigation over religious issues.

Another observation about the sample: Cases involving free exercise of religion appear to be accelerating in recent decades, a natural result of the government at all levels narrowing religious rights, narrowing the boundaries of free exercise, narrowing the legitimacy of faith. As the case inventory shows, the Supreme Court is putting the brakes on such aggressive secularization, reaffirming liberty of conscience (e.g., the cases of *Hobby Lobby*, *Masterpiece Cakeshop*, *Cuomo*, *Fulton*, and *Kennedy*).³⁵

³³ Hall, *Separating Church from State*, 8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁵ Adding to this are the plethora of lower court, state court, and administrative court cases addressing related issues. One of the more recent issues to emerge involves public school system employees objecting, on free exercise grounds, to the mandatory use of “preferred pronouns” for students. See *Cross v Loudon County School Board* (Virginia Supreme Court, 2021) and *Meriwether v. The Trustees of Shawnee State University* (6th Circuit U.S. Appellate Court, 2022). In both cases the court found for the employee.

Given all the vacillation, and given the mounting pressure on free exercise, it seems axiomatic that the theories of Roger Williams are not merely for a bygone era, when dictators reigned from London to Boston, whether in crowns or vestments. Society remains vulnerable to tyranny, now from the statists on the left more than the clergy on the right. Some may dispute that latter conclusion, of course, but regardless where the threat resides at present, this much is inarguable: Roger Williams' philosophy of religious liberty is as imperative today as it was 400 years ago.

CONCLUSION

Freedom of conscience, particularly in the area of religious belief, remains the legacy and lesson of Roger Williams. In Williams' day, it was under assault by the church itself, leveraging the power of the state with which it was entangled to enforce its dogma. In the modern day, it is under assault by the secular state, suppressing faith and freedom to advance a pluralistic and postmodern worldview. In any day it is not just wrong, but immoral.

So said Roger Williams. It has been the aspiration of this article to show that he was an American pioneer of such liberty, insisting on the transcendent, God-given right of people to be free from tyranny of the state or the church. Moreover, this article has highlighted some of the contemporary efforts to undermine the very principles for which Williams stood, the very principles that have beset societies for centuries, arguably millennia. Powerful currents of anti-religious animus in America are now manifest as sweeping laws, regulations, judicial opinions, executive orders, corporate policies and other strictures that quash religious conscience and activity. As a result, the United States is showing signs of falling into the same trap—or sliding down the same cliffs, to extend the earlier metaphor—as it did in colonial times, and as other nations and empires have throughout history. The guardrails on the road to religious freedom require continual repair and reinforcement.

Continual study as well. Scholars would be wise to invest heavily in examining how the timeless insights of Williams apply today. Politicians, too, like the legislators in Massachusetts who eventually saw fit to expunge Williams' 1635 exile sentence—in 1936!³⁶ Albeit 300 years late, they recognized the unique discernment of this voice crying in the wilderness, of this rogue named Roger. If the rest of the country can do the same, future generations will surely be better off for it.

³⁶ Harold John Ockenga. *Our Protestant Heritage: A Series of Sermons* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1938), 112.

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