

HAPPY 405TH BIRTHDAY, ROGER WILLIAMS

By Nick Gier

Religion cannot be true which needs instruments of violence to uphold it.

--Roger Williams

God needeth not the help of a material sword of steel
to assist the sword of the Spirit in the affairs of conscience.

--Roger Williams

Conscience is the most sacred of all property.

--James Madison



NARRAGANSETT INDIANS GRANT RHODE ISLAND TO ROGER WILLIAMS

On December 21st 405 years ago, Roger Williams was born in London to a prosperous merchant household. He was a brilliant student at Cambridge, excelling in languages, the classics, and theology. He quickly learned Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French and Dutch. Williams taught John Milton Dutch in return for Hebrew lessons from the great poet.

The first turning point in Williams' life was the day that he witnessed the mutilation of a Puritan. During his time in the pillory, this alleged "Sower of Sedition" lost both his ears and his nose. The letters "SS" were burned into his forehead and he spent the rest of life in prison.

Williams decided that only America would offer him and his wife the freedom they needed for their spiritual lives. In 1631 they landed in Boston only to find that the Christians there had not separated themselves sufficiently from the Church of England. More distressing, however, was the fact that the Bay Colony Puritans were persecuting non-conformists just as badly as the English were.

Williams believed that civil authorities had no right to enforce any religious law or dictate any particular religious belief whatsoever. He also extended this legal protection to atheists as well. In a famous simile, he maintained that compelling conversion was like a man who takes his wife to a "forced bed." Insisting that people believe as you do constitutes "soul rape."

Williams also charged that the colonists had stolen Indian land without payment or negotiation. He rejected John Winthrop's position that as long as the Indians had not mixed their labor with the land—John Locke's principle of private property—they had forfeited their right to it. Although Williams admitted that the Indians were nomads, they were still "very exact and punctual in the bounds of their lands, belonging to this or that prince or people."

In 1635 the Boston General Court banished Williams for his "dangerous opinions," and he lived for a while among the Indians, learning several of their languages and writing a book about them. He praised their "natural virtue," which he set in stark contrast to the "savage Christians" of Boston.

In 1658 fifteen Portuguese Jews were warmly welcomed in Rhode Island, where Williams had obtained a charter to found a colony based on full religious liberty. The Jews built the first synagogue in America and lived in peace with Baptists and Quakers who had sought refuge there. (Jews in England did not obtain

full civil rights until 1858.) Although he did believe in peaceful conversion of the Indians and other nonbelievers, Williams declared that "we must necessarily disclaim our desires and hopes of the Jew's conversion to Christ."

In 1802 Thomas Jefferson wrote a letter to the Danbury, Connecticut Baptists, who were complaining about religious persecution. His famous statement about "building a wall of separation between church and state" was directly related to the Constitution's prohibition of the "establishment of religion" and "free exercise thereof."

Jefferson was evidently unaware that Williams had used the exact same language of "separation of church and state," but Williams held that the wall was permeable in one essential respect. For Williams Christians did not have to check their deeply held beliefs at the voting booth. All that was required was that they suspend their bigotry and ideas of religious exclusion.

The political sphere should not be morally neutral ground, as some radical secularists appear to believe. Classical liberals such as John Adams meant it to be a place of both liberty and virtue, because the former without the latter is mere license. Williams recognized, just as the Apostle Paul did, that all human beings have the moral law "written on their hearts," and their conscience "bears witness" to all their deeds (Romans 2:15) The fact that one does not need religion to be moral is a lesson that all religious fanatics need to learn.

In agreement with the Quakers, Williams refused to swear any civil oaths in the name of God. His main reason—that this would violate the conscience of atheists—revealed an incredible generosity of spirit on his part. For him religious liberty meant not only the freedom to believe but also the choice not to believe.

Williams believed that conscience is the "most precious and invaluable jewel." At Cambridge Williams had read the Stoics and he evidently disagreed with their view that conscience was indestructible. For example, the Roman Stoic Epictetus was a slave and he claimed that no matter how many times he was

chained and beaten, he preserved the purity and freedom of his soul. The true slave was his master, who was completely controlled by his vices and passions.

University of Chicago philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who has written some of the best commentary on Williams' books, says that he saw conscience as a "delicate, vulnerable, living thing" that could be destroyed by persecution of any kind. A government decree against those of a certain religious persuasion can, as Nussbaum says, "harm the soul in its very capacity to strive, deforming and weakening it. . . . Persecution is therefore a terrible error, one of the worst there can be."

Although he probably did not read Williams' work, James Madison is definitely following his lead when he declared that "conscience is our most sacred property." Freedom of conscience goes far beyond religion itself. It involves the right to pursue the truth wherever that search may take us. It is, for example, the basis for the academic freedom that makes the modern university the most successful beacon of truth in the world today.

All of Williams' books were published in England and that, plus the fact that they are very difficult to read, meant that his fame was more due to his brave actions in New England rather than his writings. His most famous work *The Bloody Tenant of Persecution*, however, contains a poignant dialogue between Truth and Peace that is easier to follow.

Peace is troubled by the fact that some fervent seekers of Truth always seem to disturb the natural harmony of humankind. Truth realizes that if one would concentrate less on possessing Truth and more on the search for Truth and respect all others in that pursuit, Peace would be far less molested.

At the end of the dialogue, Truth and Peace greet the arrival of their sister Patience, "whose desired company is as needful as it is delightful." Truth and Peace will need her counsel because it will be a long while before "it is evident before the whole world that the doctrine of persecution for the cause of conscience is most lamentably contrary to the doctrine of Christ Jesus the Prince of Peace."

It is significant to note that Williams thought that the Indians that he loved and lived among were the most patient people he had ever met.

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. I'm indebted to Martha Nussbaum's article in *The New Republic* (September 10, 2008).