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# BASICS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ROGER WILLIAMS (1604?-1683) AND THE CONCEPT OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Review  
Article

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## Keywords

*Religious freedom,  
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## Abstract

*The problem of religious freedom can be studied from various perspectives. This kind of freedom can be complete, or limited. Roger Williams proposed complete religious freedom, which would extend to all Christian denominations, but also to non-Christian religions. This happened in a time when such perspectives were inconceivable by the state and the Church. Williams believes that church and state should be separate, but the state has the right to punish any individual or religious group, on the grounds of threatening the civil peace. However, the state has no right to dictate what and in whom must the citizens believe. The focus of the paper is to present the basic ideas of Williams' concept of religious freedom and to present their relevance today.*

## INTRODUCTION

The problem of religion freedom can be viewed from at least two general perspectives: of those who are religious and those who are not. This is an oversimplification, which does no justice to the subject and to the debates that ensue. The reason is that persecution does not come only from the secular side or the non-religious side. The church has been an efficient persecution of those outside the church or those who belonged to a different denomination. It was quite often that the church/es persecuted even those who were from the same denomination. Later in church history, the ecclesiastical influence began to lose its grip, while the secular power grew in power and influence. The tables turned on the church, its role in society was diminished, and it was no longer seen as a force of social development, in any of its constitutive elements. The paper does not aim at presenting the events which prove how the church or the state developed and justified any form of persecution. Instead, it will present the basics of religious freedom, as they were presented by Roger Williams in his writing "The Bloody Tenent of Persecution, for cause of Conscience, discussed, in a Conference between Truth and Peace", printed in 1644, in London. The second purpose of the paper aims at analysing whether these principles are valid for today's tensions between the secular and the religious.

## THE CONTEXT AND THE CHARACTER

In a recent debate in the Romanian religious and secular environment concerning the definition of the family, the Coalition for the Family invited the presidents of the Romanian political parties to state their position on the issue of the definition of the family. The various points of view, which at the time of writing this article, were still ongoing, brought to light the principle of religious freedom, which was interpreted as a radical break between state and church. "Radical" refers to the fact that even the dialogue between church (through its representatives, the pastors, priests, elders, or bishops) and state/politics should be ceased. The idea underlying this radical separation was the calling or the mission of the church is not to set or change the agenda of the state, but to focus on other things, with much higher moral value. The point is that the religious environment, through the churches, and the political sphere, interpreted religious freedom in various forms. One of these characters was Roger Williams (1604?-1683). In short, Williams was born in London, was educated in Cambridge, and was a strong supporter of

Puritan theology, him being, of course, a Puritan. He witnessed some of the early Puritan migrations from England to continental Europe, and then to the American Colonies. The reason for their departure was the persecution enacted in England, but the state, against the Puritans, among others. He left for the colonies later, in 1630 and reached Boston harbour in 1631. By this time, in England, the Baptists had already begun to write about religious freedom, which was almost from the very beginning an absolute religious freedom (Williams & Cotton, 1848, p. v).

The Baptists asked the state to offer religious freedom for all Christian denominations. It might have been easier for them, had they stopped here with the request. They did not. They asked for religious freedom for Judaism, Islam, and even atheism. This was a radical request, and a dangerous one. One could understand religious freedom for Christians, but religious freedom for all people, regardless of their faith, was inconceivable (Mcbeth, 1987, pp. 98-113). The problem of absolute religious freedom, as was that of limited religious freedom (for some of the Christian denominations) was that the state did not know and could not know on whom to rely, in case of war, for example. Anabaptist perspectives on religious freedom and the church's relationship with the state were that they would not vow allegiance to the king or to the state, or any other created being, for that matter, but only to God. Anyone who desired to embrace the Anabaptist faith, had to quit any civil or state positions, or one should not consider working for the state. This attitude towards the state did not go unnoticed. Repercussions soon began, and Anabaptists, together with other religious movements, were persecuted (Estep, 1996, p. 261). Imprisonment, torture, confiscation of property and wealth, and in some cases even death by execution, were the elements of persecution, initiated either by the magistrate, or by Church officials (Estep, 1996, p. 75).

This was the religious environment from which Roger Williams tried to escape by reaching the New Continent. The situation in the American colonies should have been different since the former persecuted were now the shapers of the new colonial governments and the builders of the new constitutions (Williams & Cotton, 1848, p. 11). It was supposed to be a place where the persecuted were free to believe whatever their conscience dictated, a place of complete religious freedom. It proved not to be. Williams was forced to move from one church to the other because of his preaching and ministry. He argued in favour of religious freedom and for the state to stay out of matters of religion. However, he never wanted to cancel the role of the government in civil matters.

The government must protect civil peace, and in order to achieve this, it must be aware of any and all elements that could disrupt it (Williams & Cotton, 1848, p. 21). The church was not supposed to safeguard the law breakers, simply because they belonged to a certain religious group, and they could certainly not do such an abomination on account that God's justice would settle the matter. Instead, Williams presented a state which judges correctly and fairly, one that would stay strong in the face of any threat to civil peace, and would make sure that any and all law breakers would be dealt with properly. In case a criminal was part of a religious group, his or her punishment could not be influenced by religious adhesion (Williams & Cotton, 1848, p. 79).

Despite all difficulties, Roger Williams was true to his idea of religious freedom to the end. The churches that he ministered in had a tense relationship with him and with the authorities. Some wanted him to be their pastor, even if the civil authorities imposed upon the church not to elect him – which was against the laws that the very same government had implemented. Others asked him to travel and take up the ministry in new regions. Everywhere he went, Williams' idea of state and church separation seemed impossible to implement, even if he had a precise and detailed role for the authorities. In the end, Williams set up a new colony altogether: Providence Plantation. He hoped that here people would enjoy the liberties he advocated so often during his life. In time, after his death, Williams' influence became so strong, that local governments took up his ideas and used them to inspire the writing of the Constitution of the United States of America.

#### **THE TWELVE ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM**

The principle of religious freedom never denies the need for dialogue between religion and the political sphere. By arguing that the state has no right to dictate or impose what people ought to believe, the principle of religious freedom does not deny the need for a constant interaction between the two spheres. The purpose of the dialogue is to avoid abuse on both sides. Williams sends his letter not to ministers, not to the clergy, but to the “High Court of Parliament, (as the result of their Discourse) these, (amongst other Passages) of highest consideration” (Williams & Cotton, 1848).

When Williams began his arguments in favour of freedom of religion, his first principle was that all talks and debates must consider Christ as a Prince of Peace (Williams & Cotton, 1848, p. 1). Unlike parts of history have shown, namely that the church was able to be a highly efficient political player, that it could persecute non-believers and believers

alike, and it did all this by using God and the safeguarding of His honour as an excuse, Williams believes that the true Christ is one of Peace. If this is the basis of his theology, there is not one justifiable war, in the history of Christendom. War itself cannot be justified on account of protecting God's honour or His kingdom. It cannot be justified for protecting the church, as an institution, or the members of the church. Williams is by no means an ideological pacifist (Wilson & Lyman, 1905, pp. 25–29). He does understand that the world is corrupt and tensions run high in political circles, but he writes only with regards to the relationship between state and church. There is a relationship and there is a dialogue.

For his first argument, Williams describes the wars of religion as justified by those who started them on the grounds that are acceptable as sacrifice to Christ. Williams points out that wars spill the blood of men, therefore they spill the very life of men. Such an abomination cannot be acceptable to Christ (Williams & Cotton, 1848, p. 1), for he is the Prince of Peace, not the Prince or God of War. One of the arguments that should be abandoned is that war is acceptable to Christ. “Right doctrine” is not to be used as an argument, because the doctrine itself teaches about Christ as the foundation of peace, not of the promoter of war. Williams does not hold Catholics in high regard, because he calls them Papists. However, this is not used as an excuse for hate. His different theological perspective is not used to promote or to justify hate. Not agreeing on theological matters is a normal aspect of everyday church life (Wilson & Lyman, 1905, p. 81). This is not a proper justification for hatred and waging war against the other camp.

His second argument in the debate over the issue of religious freedom, refers to the use of Scripture. Williams presents a series of Bible verses and arguments that are connected to these, in order to present his position (Williams & Cotton, 1848, p. 1). It is a logical move on his part, because, as a Christian, he refers to the foundational book of all Christendom. In the middle of the 17th century the tensions between Catholicism and Protestantism, but also within Protestantism itself, which had to deal with the emergence of a great number of sects and denominations, made the life of the churches quite harsh. This was coupled with an almost never-ending chain of wars. All denominations appealed to the Bible and interpreted them in various ways. Theological debates ensued and tensions rose.

Because all churches used the Bible to pass their judgments and ideas, Williams turns to the same set of books, in order to present a case which goes against all the others (Russell-Smith & White, 1911, p. 15). His arguments came blatantly against all forms of religious oppression and persecution, but he uses the very same verses that were used by

others to enact the oppression (Williams & Cotton, 1848, p. 1).

The third argument is to analyse ideas produced by theologians such as Calvin, Beza, and Cotton. To these he couples the ministers from the Church of England, who produced a system of theological doctrines, which they used in order to pursue the persecution against those who were of different faiths (Williams & Cotton, 1848, p. 1).

Williams argued that theologians are not to be considered without flaw, even if their contribution to theological developments are fundamental. Despite his harsh and mature dialogue with John Cotton, Williams assures his readers, as well as Cotton, that his words are without any trace of hatred and evil intent (Williams & Cotton, 1848, p. 367). There cannot be any kind of dialog, when the premise which starts the entire process is hatred and bigotry. Agreeing on certain matters does not mean hatred, but it does mean that strong opinions need strong arguments to effect a change. Ignoring history itself, the history of dogma, the history of ideas and any kind of dialog based on them, means that there is a methodological error. Such errors can only lead to ineffective dialog, which leads to problematic results. In order to avoid such errors, one finds that Williams offered a well-informed set of arguments to some of the most important theologians, whom had differing points of view (Williams & Cotton, 1848, p. 29). He may not agree with them, but he did take into consideration and he took the study of their ideas with utmost care. The fact that Williams respects his opponents is clearly stated in the manner in which he presents his arguments. Williams met with great opposition during his lifetime, and this did not make him lose heart, rather made him even more focused on developing his doctrine of religious freedom. The idea of martyrdom was seen as matter of honour (Russell-Smith & White, 1911, p. 75), though Williams did not seek it out.

The fourth argument is related to the gravity of the reason for which persecutions are enacted. For William's there are spiritual consequences for every earthly action. He goes back to the Bible, the text he considers fundamental for the understanding of this idea, and argues that the souls that lie under the altar, in the book of Revelations, are the souls of the persecuted (Williams & Cotton, 1848, p. 1). Therefore, he appeals to the spiritual sensitivities of those who favour persecution against other faiths, and tries to jot their senses into seeing the bigger picture. It is also a moral issue, because the value of life is so great, for Williams, that he places such a great accent on the problem of the afterlife. Persecution includes the death of the persecuted, and death is symbolised by the spilt blood. There can be, however, loss of life even in spite of some trying to loosen their moral stance (Hanserd Knollys Society & Underhill, 1846, p. xvii). Taking

a person's life, and spilling their blood, means that the gravity of the deed excels the realm of this life. The consequences extend to the afterlife. He strongly supports this idea, since he values life, both of this world, as well as the next.

Williams reaches an argument which relates to the authority of the civil state. He clearly delineates the attributes between state and church. In Williams' opinion, the state must not become the defender of the spiritual realm, in which the Church lives (Williams & Cotton, 1848, p. 1). The functions of the state are those of judgment, government, and defence. Williams is clear on that the state cannot exercise any of the three in the life of the church. The state cannot judge the matters of the spiritual realm. It cannot govern over any of the matters of the church and, in the end, it cannot defend the church from any of the matters that could affect it. This opinion came in strong opposition with the situation of the European Protestantism, where the church and the state were entwined. Their collaboration was notoriously efficient (Hanserd Knollys Society & Underhill, 1846, p. 91). The state even depended on the aid of the church. The result was the birth of the state church, in which the state was even allowed to name the ministers. Williams tried to avoid the negative consequences of this collaboration, by arguing in favour of a radically different system.

The church and the conscience of each human being must be free. Conscience is of utmost important for any man, because the only being that has any right to judge, govern, and defend the conscience of man, is God. Starting from this idea, Williams proposes a system in which all men are free to believe whatever they want, without having the state impose its will, which will happen eventually (Hanserd Knollys Society & Underhill, 1846, p. xxiv). Therefore, Williams argues that the conscience must remain free, while the state must refrain to legislate in any matter of the spirit. The state, however, must remain the element that creates the political environment in which freedom of religion can develop. The point that Williams makes is that the state must remain in the civil realm, but this means that it can and should make sure that civil peace is unaffected by individuals and church organizations alike. Therefore, Williams does believe that the state can impose its will on the church, but it should not (Williams & Cotton, 1848, p. 1).

The sixth argument was ahead of its time with almost 300 years. Williams proposes a religious freedom so wide and all encompassing, that it made the civil governments of his time turn against it with full force. Generally, the Baptists were the first to think about freedom of religion for both Christian and non-Christian. A religious freedom which applied only to Christian denominations was not something new. However, a freedom which

applied to any “Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or anti-Christian consciences and worships” (Williams & Cotton, 1848, p. 2) was unbearable in Williams’ time. This idea came in the context of a long-lasting collaboration between state and church. Kings believed they would lose their influence and power if such a freedom would be put into place.

Williams argues that religious freedom ought to be granted to all and they should be given the right to speak their mind and worship as they pleased. However, the ever-present idea of the state that must not interfere with worship, but which out to ensure civil peace, is to be found here, as well. Williams believed that all those who are non-Christians should be countered with a sword, but it was not the sword of the state. Williams refers to the sword of God, which is his word, the Bible. When he argues in favour of this, he plainly supports freedom of Christian missions and of evangelization. In other words, by this argument he says the state must allow Christians to interact theologically with the non-Christian and even anti-Christian religions. Christianity must have the freedom to counter any argument that comes its way. Obviously, this also means that all the other denominations and non-Christian religions must have the same right to present their perspectives (Ruffini, 1912, p. 2). In a society, which was strongly religious, Williams presents the case of a freedom of conscience that had never existed before, in an organized political structure.

Israel has always had a privileged status in Christianity. For a part of Christianity, it was the land chosen by God, it received the covenant, and it was the country of Jesus Christ. For others, it was a land of perdition, an example of gain and loss, perhaps one of the most vivid examples of what can happen if a believer gives up on God (Williams & Cotton, 1848, p. 2). For the time when Williams lived, Israel was considered by those with whom he corresponded as a special or privileged state. It was used for various purposes, from illustrating the divine benevolence, to how a state should be organized. Williams argues that in the debates about religious freedom Israel should be considered as any other state. He presented his case in order to preserve the place of God and Scripture, and not allow his fellow theologians depend on any visible political state. His entire argument rests on this idea, as well. He not only advises people against lifting such a place to a higher status, but almost forbids using it as an example. Each country must find its own path, and example from the past are to be used wisely, not blindly copied.

The eighth argument is one of the most important ones, but it argues in favour of diversity of religion, of thought, of conscience, of worship, and of any other kind (Williams & Cotton, 1848, p. 2). This type of argument does not sit well with states, and Williams looks back at what history had to offer.

Uniformity aided by the state ended in civil war. Williams warns against what the desire for control could do to people. The state and the church are in a dynamic relationship, one does not tread on the other, but both make sure that by doing everything in their power, they preserve peace.

Williams turns back to the moral aspect of the issue and uniformity will inevitably to war, which will turn into bloodshed, and the loss of innocent lives. In all wars, conscience is annulled and for Williams it means the persecution of Christ himself, but in the believers. His argument is painfully true, because of the proofs that history has provided on the many wars that ravaged Europe and the world. The Crusades, for example, coupled with the Inquisition, the Religious Wars, and the persecution of the Anabaptists, are but a few of the events that happened also because the religious opinions of the persecuted were different than those of the persecutors (Ruffini, 1912, pp. 240–241). Problems arise because of the need for control of some leaders, either religious or political. Local communities play a role in the grand scheme of war and persecution, and yet education does not seem to trigger a new path that would allow for a free conscience and diversity of faiths. As Williams writes, sooner or later, efforts to suppress one or the others conscience will lead to civil unrest.

The ninth argument is somewhat problematic, at least for some people, but when analysed, it favours a theology which does not force Christianity upon Jews (Williams & Cotton, 1848, p. 2). In the time of Williams, efforts were made the various Protestant movements to mission and evangelize the Jewish people throughout Europe. Williams is as blunt as ever: there is no need for any special treatment of the Jews. They are to be meet on theological grounds in the same way as any non-Christian. The hopes nurtured by some of his peers lead to an idea which seemed hopeful for some, but according to Williams, it was a waste of time. The Jews would not convert in great numbers to Christianity. Therefore, they are not to be treated preferentially, either by the church or the state. They need to be left in peace, as all other religions. The tenth argument take up the theme of religious uniformity. At this point, Williams makes a rather startling argument, by considering uniformity a denial of the incarnation of Christ (Williams & Cotton, 1848, p. 2). Traditional Christian theology presents Jesus Christ as risen from the dead. Before he makes this conclusion, Williams describes a forced religious uniformity in a country or a state, as a mixture of the civil and the religious realms. As he mentioned before, the two realms overlap in the lives of the citizens, but they must be completely separated (Gibbons, 1889, pp. 97–98). The civil has nothing to do with the religious, it can only assure the freedom of the religious conscience. Confounding the two realms would lead to a series

of issues and tensions, which could be prevented. Enforced religious uniformity goes against the principles of Christianity and civility. Neither would benefit from the freedom Williams talks about, if a government would impose a certain kind of religion on all the citizens. Williams is unsympathetic to such a mistake and believes that the foundational principle of Christianity is trampled under feet, namely the Christ has come in the flesh. This is an interesting perspective on behalf of Williams, because one might not think of religious freedom as something which has anything to do with the incarnation of Christ. Yet, the incarnation is about diversity, as Christ claimed to have come to all nations, not only to Israel. Also, Christ never forced his teachings on anyone. Therefore, if Christ never forced his ideas on anyone, neither should the state (Williams & Cotton, 1848, p. 2). It is a matter of supporting diversity, not uniformity.

The eleventh argument has a social and economic feel. Williams continues his arguments about religious freedom and diversity of worship, as they would be in the favour of the both state and citizens, because it would provide "firm and lasting peace" (Williams & Cotton, 1848, p. 2). Such a benefit would provide economic gains and profit, because the citizens would be allowed to worship as they please, therefore they would be inclined to pursue their business in peace. A country needs commerce and trade. Such elements work best in an environment of civil peace. This peace would be provided also by religious freedom (Mullins, 1913, p. 61). However, there is one form of uniformity, with which Williams does agree, namely the uniformity of civil obedience. No citizen should hide behind a religious movement or use it as an excuse to escape the civil authorities when a crime has been committed. Also, Williams believes that all citizens are equal before the law of the land, therefore they are fully responsible and accountable for their actions. Religion cannot and should not be allowed to be used as a means to escape or cover crimes (Williams & Cotton, 1848, p. 2).

Having said that Williams ends his twelve arguments by addressing the civil authorities, which, most likely, take the part of one of the religions, and argues that civility and Christianity can flourish in a land where religious freedom is permitted (Williams & Cotton, 1848, p. 2). Even if the authorities were Christian, and a great number of the citizens were of other religions, civil peace and civility, together with the prosperity of Christianity, would flourish precisely because religious freedom exists.

There will always be threats that come from either religious or any other sources, but the state and the authorities should have all the means at their disposal to deal with the matter. However, regardless of how severe the threat may be,

religious freedom and freedom of conscience are paramount for the well-being of the state.

## CONCLUSIONS

Religious freedom and freedom of conscience have had a rich and meaningful history. It was a history of abuse and privilege, power and decay, but they always had both supporters and accusers. One of the most well-known supporters was Roger Williams. He developed his arguments in the midst of persecution, after turning from his Puritan views to the Baptist views. He never agreed with the idea of religious uniformity and the implication of the state into the spiritual affairs of the church.

He developed his arguments in the hopes that they would be enacted by local governments. He immigrated to the American Colonies in order to pursue his theological ideals. Once he arrived he began to preach religious freedom and practised it in the life of his community. Later he established a new colony, which was an example, together with its legislation for American Constitution.

The idea of Roger Williams is valuable today, because the issue of the relationship between state and religion is still present. The states are secular, and religion plays a less important role, at least politically, than in previous ages. However, the morals preached by religion found concrete manifestations in social care, legislation, and a general progress of society.

It is obvious, even to the average reader, that there was violence, wrongdoing, and abuse on the side of the church, as well as that of the state. Both institutions used the Bible and God as a shield to justify their actions. Williams is valuable because he manages to prove that the Bible, the sacred book of Christianity, does not allow, nor does it endorse or support any kind of violence against any man. The foundation of Christianity, the pivot on which the entire construct rests, Jesus Christ, is, as Williams describes him, a Prince of Peace, therefore, any Christian who truly desires to live in accordance with the life and deeds of Christ, must become keeper of peace.

The argument can go in many directions, but when Williams proposes a society without religious uniformity, but only unanimous uniformity to uphold peace and submit to the laws of the state, then religious freedom for all denominations, Christian or non-Christian, and an immediate ceasing of persecution on grounds of conscience, he proposes an entirely new social and political construct. There had never been such radical requests: religious freedom, but with a devotion towards one's country and people. These ideas of Williams were experiments. Had they been fulfilled, society might have looked differently.

This is not a quantifiable result, because it did not happen.

Regardless of whether such a society will ever exist, Williams sets the foundation of his system in the Bible. A thorough study of this writing is necessary in order to understand what it says, exactly, and what it implies for the time when it was written and our times. Certainly, Williams did not favour religious freedom on frivolous and weak arguments. Instead he presents a thorough study of the problem, and coupled with them, he urges people to keep the peace and wait to reap the benefits.

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