ROGER WILLIAMS BIOGRAPHY

Religious Turmoil in England

Born in London in 1603, Roger Williams grew up in an era of religious conflict and persecution. By the time he had completed his university studies, Roger Williams had already embraced the dangerous idea of freedom of worship.

Williams became an outspoken and controversial Puritan minister. Like many of those who came to Plymouth Colony in the 1620s and '30s, he was a Separatist, who believed that Puritans must break with the Church of England. His Separatism as well as his unorthodox ideas on freedom of worship got him into trouble with church officials, and he fled England to avoid arrest.

Williams arrives in America

Arriving in Boston in 1630, Roger Williams was warmly received as a "godly minister." But word soon spread of his radical ideas, and he moved on to Plymouth, which was more hospitable than Boston to Separatists. After only two years there, he accepted a call to a church in Salem; as soon as he was back in the Bay Colony, his troubles began to multiply.

Thoughts on Religion and Authority

Having been both a witness to and a victim of religious persecution, Roger Williams believed that most of the wars in the world were the result of religious conflict. He advocated total religious toleration, even as other Puritan ministers preached "Tis Satan's policy, to plead for an indefinite and boundless toleration." Unlike most Massachusetts ministers, Williams did not believe that the Bible demanded punishment of religious heretics. His interpretation of scripture made him a serious threat to the authority of a colonial society that depended on the Bible as a life guide.

Radical Religious Ideas for Puritan New England

Although his Salem congregation embraced his teachings, the ministers and magistrates in the colonial capital did not. Williams' ideas grew even more radical. He argued that "all religious sects had the right to claim equal protection from the laws, and that the civil magistrates had no right to restrain the consciences of men or to interfere with their modes of worship or religious belief."

He criticized the Massachusetts Bay clergy for intolerance and autocracy in matters of church governance. He urged his congregation to break openly with the Church of England. When the Puritan authorities in Boston condemned Williams' views as "erroneous and very dangerous," he called on his Salem church to break from all other colonial churches.

Williams lashes out against the treatment of the Indians

Roger Williams' religious views were not the only unusual thing about him. He was one of the few Englishmen in the New World to sympathize with and respect the native population. He proposed that the Indians were the legitimate owners of the land, and that colonists should acquire property by purchasing it from the native people. This view challenged the system under which the British king had granted land in North America to his subjects and stirred resentment among the rulers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Puritan authorities fight back

In 1635, Puritan minister Roger Williams was found guilty of spreading "newe & dangerous opinions" and banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Before leaving England in 1630, Williams had seen heretics whipped, imprisoned, and burned at the stake. He called for religious freedom, a serious threat to the social order, and avoided arrest only by fleeing to Boston. Once in Massachusetts, he began preaching religious tolerance. The colony's leaders agreed with the English authorities that this was nothing less than "Satan's Policy." They denounced his views and considered forcing him out of the colony.

Williams flees Massachusetts Bay

In October he was ordered to quit the colony within six weeks, but permission was presently granted for him to remain until spring. It was then reported that many people in Salem, "taken with an apprehension of his godliness," went to his house for religious instruction, and that they contemplated leaving Massachusetts and founding a colony upon Narragansett Bay, in which the principle of religious toleration should be strictly upheld. To prevent this movement, it was decided to send Williams back to England.

He was again summoned to Boston, but refused to obey the summons, whereupon the magistrates sent to Salem a warrant for his arrest. He suspected what was coming, and left his home just before the officers arrived.

He took refuge with the Narragansett Indians, whose chiefs sold land to him and his followers. They established a new settlement and named it Providence, in thanksgiving to God.

Providence is “unique”

A few years after Roger Williams established Providence, he founded the first Baptist church in America there. Providence was open to people of all faiths, and Baptists, Quakers, and Jews found a home in the colony. Williams remained a friend to the Indians, and did not try to convert them to Christianity. He worked as a farmer, Indian trader, and civil magistrate.

Roger Williams had the gift of languages. He had acquired familiarity with Latin, Greek, Dutch and French early in his life. When visiting the Indians, Williams worked on a dictionary, entitled A Key into the Language of America (1643), which he hoped would serve future apostles who would travel in the wilderness to convert the Indians. Williams learned their language and used his knowledge to make peace between the Indians. Once he even protected the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Returning to England

In 1643 Williams went to England to secure a charter for Providence. The colony was threatened by the other New England colonies. Williams got the charter in 1644. While in England, Williams published several books and pamphlets. He urged Parliament not to establish a national church, Congregational or Presbyterian. He argued for religious toleration. A church, he proclaimed, which in Christ's name persecutes people of different faiths and denies them the right to live in the community, is anti-Christian.

Roger Williams returned to America several years later and died at Providence in April 1683 at the age of eighty-four.

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1.   Why did Williams leave England to come to America?
2.   Once in America, he lived in Boston.  He later left Boston. Why?
3.   Was Williams really a Puritan or was he a Separatist?
4.   Why did he leave Plymouth?
5.   In Salem, Williams began to share his views about the origins of wars thoughout the world.  What did he fee was the cause of these conflicts?
6.   Williams also shared his views about the relationship between the free worship of religion and the function of the state.  Describe his view of how the two should exist.
7.   What were his views about how Indians were treated?
8.   What did the authorities mean by "Satan's Policy?"
9.   How did Williams avoid being sent back to England?
10.  List several ways in which Providence was "unique."
11.  How did Williams use his skills to keep peace with the Indians?
12.  Why did Williams return to England?