

November 1988

Religious Liberty and Creative Breakthroughs in American Politics: Roger Williams and James Madison

Neal Riemer

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops>



Part of the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Riemer, Neal (1988) "Religious Liberty and Creative Breakthroughs in American Politics: Roger Williams and James Madison," *Journal of Political Science*: Vol. 16 : No. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops/vol16/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Politics at CCU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Political Science by an authorized editor of CCU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact commons@coastal.edu.

Religious Liberty and Creative Breakthroughs in American Politics: Roger Williams and James Madison

NEAL RIEMER
Drew University

What is the relationship between the idea of religious liberty and creative breakthroughs in American politics? My thesis is that the idea of religious liberty led to the first creative breakthrough in American politics in the theory and practice of Roger Williams, and that the idea played an important part in the second creative breakthrough in American politics in the theory and practice of James Madison; moreover, I contend that future breakthroughs in American politics will continue to draw fruitfully from concepts, problems, and activities in the religious domain.

What is meant by the concept of “creative breakthrough” and of “politics”? A *Creative breakthrough in politics* refers to a significantly fruitful resolution of a major problem in connection with one or more of the major interrelated tasks of the discipline of political science.¹

In connection with the breakthroughs to be examined in this article I shall, initially, identify the problem that called for a breakthrough; secondly, articulate the theory that addressed itself to the problem; thirdly, highlight the breakthroughs in their ethical, empirical, and prudential dimensions; and, finally, highlight the central or significant role that key religious ideas played in the breakthrough.

1. Roger Williams and the Breakthrough to Religious Liberty

The troubling problem that faced Williams in seventeenth century America had been agitating Western thought and practice since at least the advent of Christianity, and it had become more acute with the Protestant Reformation: Is it possible to reconcile the dominant ideal of religious orthodoxy and political order *with* the facts of religious diversity, religious persecution, and political conflict? The facts of religious and political life underscored the realities of disagreement (primarily but not exclusively between Catholics and Protestants, and also between Protestants and Protestants) on who possessed the one true faith. The facts of religious and political life also underscored religious and political warfare rooted significantly, if not solely, in such religious disagreement.²

At the risk of making Williams' position more coherent and modern than it was, let me develop his related arguments (1) on behalf of religious liberty, and (2) on behalf of separation of church and state.³

Williams makes a religious and moral argument *and* an historical and expedient argument on behalf of religious liberty. Williams' religious and moral argument consists of two main points: first, persecution is contrary to the spirit, teaching, and deeds of Jesus; and, second, persecution is hypocritical.

Williams argues that persecution is contrary to the spiritual nature of Christ's Gospel and Kingdom. Is it not anomalous, Williams deftly

points out, for Christians—in the name of Christ, the Prince of Peace—to persecute, to wield the sword, to spill blood, to divide person against person? Christ himself indicated that disbelievers must be allowed to live in this world, that their punishment would come in the next. People should come to God freely, not because of fear of earthly persecution, punishment, and coercion. Rape of the soul—Williams' vivid image for religious persecution—is incompatible with God's message that people be drawn freely to divinity. Enforced uniformity, Williams holds, ravishes conscience and violates Christ's message.

Williams uses a famous New Testament parable—the parable of the wheat and the weeds (tares) in Matthew 13—to drive home his argument. The weeds (that is, the unregenerate, the impure, the faithless) may grow unmolested among the wheat (the elect) until harvest time—that is, death. Why? Because the wheat may be endangered by plucking (persecuting) the weeds. At harvest time (Judgment Day) the weeds can safely be gathered and burned; that is, at the time of judgment day, punishment can safely be meted out. God's battles in this world, Williams insists, must be fought with God's weapons—God's words—not with swords and prisons, not with persecution and civil disabilities.

A policy of persecution is malicious, vicious, and counter-productive; moreover, persecution is hypocritical. Individuals should not be forced to believe what their consciences forbid them to believe or to support a church (and beliefs) their consciences do not endorse. In an imperfect world how can we, Williams asks rhetorically, say we are godly and, therefore, have the right to persecute the ungodly who adhere conscientiously to their own beliefs?

In his historical and expedient argument Williams maintains that religious persecution undermines civil peace, law, and order, as well as results in grave injury to true believers. He notes the alternating persecutions of Protestants by Catholics, Catholics by Protestants, and Protestants by Protestants. He contends that enforced religious conformity destroys the very prerequisites of civilized society, or true civility—law, order, peace, respect—as well as injures true believers. He also emphasizes that persecution for cause of conscience has not, in fact, produced the alleged “good” sought by the persecutors. Religious uniformity has not been achieved. “Disbelievers” persist. True believers, moreover, are clearly martyred; and civility is clearly damaged. On the other hand, Williams argues on the basis of the historical record that religious liberty is compatible with the teachings of Jesus and with true civility. This point is more fully developed in Williams' argument on behalf of separation of church and state.

Oddly, from a modern point of view, Williams' argument is rooted in the conviction that only one church-state (biblical Israel) ever possessed the legitimate power to persecute unbelievers. The key question for Williams in the seventeenth century thus becomes this: What is the proper conception of church and state since Israel and Christ?

The church, Williams argues, is spiritual in nature. It is concerned with souls. The weapons for its rightful defense must also be spiritual. worldly props, he maintains, would undermine the church. Therefore,

a spiritual church can make no use of a secular state for its spiritual purposes. God, he writes, has not "appointed the civil sword" as a "remedy" for the sores of His Body and His Church.⁴ The church must be understood as a corporation with an independent existence. Dissent and division within the church need not endanger the peace of the political community.

The state is self-sufficient and has peace as its objective. The state is different in essence from the church. The state existed before corporations or associations and will remain when they are gone. The state does not need the church in order to preserve peace and order. The political community does not require enforced religious conformity for its continuance. The prince, civil magistrate, or state has limited responsibilities: to preserve peace and order in the political community. Religious uniformity is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for such peace and order. Indeed, when the civil magistrate persecutes for cause of conscience, he undermines peace and order. The sword and the prison should not, must not, be used to enforce the alleged one true religious faith. In brief, matters of religion are to be left to the individual and to God. The practice of religious faith is not to be a matter of concern to the civil magistrate. Religion is to be placed beyond the power of the state.

The most creative breakthroughs are breakthroughs along several fronts—ethical, empirical, and prudential—and are well illustrated by Williams' religious and political philosophy. Ethically, Williams articulates an admirable philosophy of politics, of how we *ought* to live together. He affirms a philosophy of people of different religious faiths living together—freely, happily, harmoniously, civilly, orderly, peacefully, prosperously—in the same political community. For Williams, in practice, this community is to be a democratic political community. Religious freedom, the separation of church and state, a democratic and constitutional polity—these are for Williams preferred and crucial values. They become more strongly established in political American practice in the late eighteenth century (with help from philosopher-statesmen such as James Madison) and provide the basis of expanded notions of basic rights and republican rule, and thus serve to ensure a more generous democratic and constitutional regime.

Empirically, Williams articulates a new hypothesis, which would be a cornerstone for his "lively experiment" in what is later to be called Rhode Island, and which will (as already noted above) be subsequently tested more fully in the United States. The new hypothesis was this: that in the United States people of different religious faiths—enjoying religious liberty—can in fact live together without the evil effects that some feared (incivility, immorality, disrespect for law and order, war); that in fact religious persecution is the great enemy of society, of harmony, of peace, and of prosperity.

Prudentially, Williams makes the judgment that it is wise to ensure religious liberty and to separate church and state. He does so by calling attention to the ill-effects, hypocrisy, and illogic of persecution; by acting to limit the abusive power of state in religious matters; and by establishing legitimate domains of operation for church and state.

Williams, an orthodox Puritan in essentials, does not deny that

there is only one true faith; but he does emphatically reject the proposition that it is the duty of the ruler of the state to maintain the one true faith. And he clearly rejects the conventional wisdom at key points. Those adhering to the conventional wisdom could only believe that Williams' ethical recommendation on behalf of religious liberty is outrageous; that his empirical proposition that religious liberty and political peace are compatible is false; and that his prudential judgment that religious liberty and separation of church and state are wise is absurd. However, when the decision on behalf of religious liberty is tested, it works. In time religious liberty becomes enshrined in the First Amendment as a cardinal and admired value. Religious liberty serves in fact to advance social harmony. Both religious liberty and separation of church and state function to protect against the abuse of religious and political power. The way to democratic and constitutional pluralism is open.

Let me now turn to James Madison and note how he articulates in his theory of the extensive republic the second great breakthrough in American politics. This breakthrough, I will argue, owes a great debt to Madison's fundamental commitment to religious liberty and separation of church and state, and to his cardinal insight about the link between a multiplicity of religious sects and freedom.

2. James Madison and the Breakthrough to the "Extensive Republic"

The problem facing Madison and thoughtful Americans in 1787 was this: Is just republican government in a large state possible? Republican thinkers in America were struggling to avoid being impaled on either horn of a dilemma: either a despotic empire as a necessity of government in a large state; or faction, injustice, and weakness as the inevitable outcome in a confederate republic with major power residing in the thirteen American states!

The problem was not only theoretical but practical. Patrick Henry and other anti-federalists—arguing that republican government is possible only in a small political community—opposed the new constitution of 1787 and the stronger government it created. They could not lift their sights beyond the loose political confederation of the Articles of Confederation. Alexander Hamilton and John Adams and other advocates of "high toned" government maintained—before the adoption of the new constitution—that only an Empire, or a strong central government on the British model, could hold together a political community as large as the new American nation. Confederations, they insisted, were notoriously weak and unstable, plagued by faction, and detrimental to the interests of justice and the common good. Madison's great contribution was to demonstrate that the conventional wisdom—the testimony of history and previous political theory—was wrong.⁵

Madison believed that a strengthened federal republic would enable the nation to cope with matters of national concern and yet would leave ample powers—and freedom—to the people in the several states. The new federalism would thus affirm: a unique division of powers between nation and states; key constitutional prohibitions on both the nation and the states; the direct operation of federal law on the

individuals of the nation; a pragmatic and experimental federal system relying for its success upon a national consensus, a representative system, separation of powers, a resourceful presidency, and such organs as the Supreme Court. Madison argued decisively (and here we come to the heart of his empirical theory of the extensive republic) that the multiplicity, diversity, and conflict of factional interests, plus their larger sphere of operations, would diminish the possibility of factional agreement and unified factional action. Federalism would limit the spread of factional mischief, and make it difficult for a factional majority to achieve power. What we today call pluralism would facilitate, not hinder, the pursuit of the common good. Madison sought in 1787, then in 1789, in the 1790s, and finally in the 1820s and early 1830s, to make his theory relevant to the central challenge of reconciling liberty and large size. His approach called for a keen analysis of the danger facing republican government, political debate, popular or party protest, and a willingness to use radical constitutional means to secure necessary change.

Madison's devotion to religious liberty strengthened both his devotion to constitutionalism and to federalism. This devotion enabled him to see that the same principle—of the salutary consequences of the multiplicity of sects—that operated to ensure religious liberty might also operate (now as the multiplicity of political, economic, and social interests) to ensure civil freedom. Human wit could, indeed, perceive that pluralistic diversity might advance freedom without interfering with civil decorum and harmony. As early as 1785 Madison had recognized that only a coalition between religious sects could endanger our religious rights.⁶ Madison's *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments* (1785) testifies to his early great defense of religious liberty. His success in defeating such assessments was in no small measure to be attributed to the reality of the beginnings of religious pluralism in his native Virginia. In 1787 Madison again expressed his worry about a religious sect forming a majority and using its power to oppress other sects. And he noted that civil as well as religious rights could be endangered by an oppressive majority. To Madison the multiplicity of religious sects guarded against such oppression. In the Virginia Ratifying Convention of 1788 Madison drove home his point clearly and vigorously. "If there were a majority of one sect, a bill of rights would be poor protection for liberty. Happily for the states, they enjoy the utmost freedom of religion. This freedom arises from that multiplicity of sects, which pervades America, and which is the best and only security for religious liberty in any society. For where there is such a variety of sects, there cannot be a majority of any one sect to oppress and persecute the rest."⁷ This idea, I am arguing, was in Madison's mind before, during, and after the writing of the Constitution. So, too, I am suggesting, was the link between religious plurality and freedom, on one hand, *and* economic, political, and social plurality and freedom on the other. It was an easy step from the value of religious plurality for freedom to one of Madison's cardinal ideas—an idea central to his creative breakthrough in 1787—that the multiplicity and diversity of political, economic, and social interests would similarly constitute a safeguard for political freedom.

Thus Madison's religious convictions carried over into the political arena. Again, the concern for religious freedom would strike another great blow for democratic and consitutional government in American politics.

3. Conclusion

It is I believe no accident that key religious ideas—particularly the ideas of religious liberty, separation of church and state, religious pluralism—have played such a prominent part in creative breakthroughs in American politics. Moreover, if we look to other reform movements in American history and politics—anti-slavery, women's suffrage, peace, economic reform, anti-discrimination—we can detect a comparably prominent religious role. Similarly, as we contemplate current and future problems we may well conclude that key religious ideas will play a prominent part in our efforts to deal with them. This, I would suggest, is bound to be the case because of the intimate connection between key religious ideas and a more prophetic politics. In taking key religious ideas seriously—belief in the Divine, in freedom of conscience, in covenant, in commandments—people in politics take seriously the gap between religious values and existential reality. They are, moreover, sensitized to probe both the reasons for such gaps and what might be done to bridge them. Genuinely creative breakthroughs in politics are rare, but the two examples treated in this essay (and the links between religious ideas and other reform movements hinted at above) suggest that religious liberty and other key religious ideas will play a significant role in future breakthroughs in American politics.

FOOTNOTES

¹See here Neal Riemer, *The Future of the Democratic Revolution: Toward a More Prophetic Politics* (New York: Praeger, 1984); and Neal Riemer, *Political Science: An Introduction to Politics* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

²See Neal Riemer, *The Democratic Experiment* (Princeton, N.J.: Van Nostrand, 1968, Chapter 2, "Puritan American: Roger Williams and the Puritan Fathers."

³See here Riemer, *The Democratic Experiment*, and also Irwin H. Polishook, *Roger Williams, John Cotton and Religious Freedom* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), and William Lee Miller, *The First Liberty: Religion and the American Republic* (New York: Knopf, 1986).

⁴Roger Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience* (1644) in Perry Miller, *Roger Williams: His Contribution to the American Tradition* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), p. 184.

⁵See Neal Riemer, *James Madison: Creating the American Consitution* (Wash., D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1986).

⁶See Riemer, *James Madison*, p. 105.

⁷*Ibid.*