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No Quarter: Roger Williams, modern America, and the quest to understand and coexist

On a snowy January day, a man sets off into the wilderness. He does not know where he is going, but he has his strength, his resolve and his conviction. His name is Roger Williams, and the year is 1636. An outcast of his time, Roger Williams is today memorialized throughout the state of Rhode Island, gracing parks, hospitals and in one unique case, a fine institution of higher education. The traditions of multicultural and ethnic diversity that he established have survived, and continue to light the state's political and social path. Outside of Rhode Island, schoolchildren around the country are taught of his idealistic bravery, and resolve in his beliefs. They are told stories of his trek into the wilderness, and the founding of a city whose path was lit by the foreseeing care and guidance of God himself: Providence. In his own time, he dedicated his life to a perpetual quest to understand the world around him, and to educate those around him on the concept of coexistence. Yet, the eternal tragedy of the philosopher is that he preaches the truth to those are not ready for it. As a man of action, he was not widely loved, or even respected, but his lifelong struggle against the antiquities of his time benefit us over 300 years after his death. Today, he is remembered for his work concerning religious toleration, individual rights, and pacifism, as well as his early advocacy for the separation of church and state. The ideals of Roger Williams were ones that set him centuries ahead of his contemporaries, and demonstrated a standard of morality unparalleled in the unequivocally chaotic period that was the exploration and colonization of the New World. Through analysis of his major beliefs, in conjunction with modern sociopolitical issues, one can use his beliefs as a code of moral guidance to which all may hold themselves in the new American quest to understand and coexist.

Roger Williams was born in London sometime between the years of 1603 and 1606. The parish which contained his birth records was destroyed during the Great London Fire of 1666,

and took with it any exact record of his date of birthⁱ, among many other precious documents. Consequently, most historians fittingly choose to place his year of birth in 1603 to coincide with the coronation of King James I, and the beginning of the Puritanical conflicts that would come to define his lifeⁱⁱ. As the son of a tailor, Roger Williams enjoyed a more comfortable childhood than most other children of the time, if only marginally. An inquisitive child, he attended grammar school from a young age, and eventually got a job taking shorthand notes for Sir Edward Coke, Chief Justice of the King's Bench, a position he was offered after the nobleman noticed him taking notes on a sermon in churchⁱⁱⁱ. Through his tutelage under Sir Coke, Williams was able to attend private school, and with the help of some scholarships, graduated from Cambridge University in 1627^{iv}. By this time, he could speak French and Dutch near fluently, and was able to read and speak Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, all of which can be found in his writing.

After breaking off his friendship with Sir Coke over religious disagreements, Roger Williams left for the New World in December of 1630^v. Upon his arrival in Boston, he quickly established himself as both a religious and political firebrand. Having come to the Massachusetts Bay Colony with the intention of practicing freely, he refused to compromise on his Puritanical ideals. He was of the mind that one's beliefs must always be forthrightly expressed, regardless of the privileges, money, or public standing it may cost him. After leaving Boston, he spent several years preaching in Plymouth, after which he went to Salem. There, his radical separatist rhetoric began to draw attention, and with it, ecclesiastical scrutiny^{vi}. His outlandish ideas consistently put him at odds with the religious authorities governing the Massachusetts Bay Colony, whom he harangued to the point of wrath. Over a period of several years, Roger Williams established five primary grievances against the colony, and its theocratic government.

First, he demanded the colony's immediate withdrawal from the Anglican Church, deeming it to be corrupt and unfit for practice, particularly for governmental purposes^{vii}. This tied into his second grievance, by which he argued that the church should be separate from the state. Williams criticized the colony for its combination of the two, and protested the colony's use of the Bible as a code of law^{viii}. In his third altercation, he asserted that the colonial charters issued by the King were invalid, for they took the Americas by right of discovery. Roger Williams could be argued as an early believer in individual rights. Thus, he believed that all government established through consent of its citizens was valid, through the concept of divine and natural law, prevalent among contemporary political philosophers. This meant that all land held by the crown, in truth, belonged to the Native Americans. For his fourth, and perhaps least controversial complaint, he objected to the use of oaths when swearing allegiance. To him, it was improper to take an oath in the name of God for any purpose other than sacred worship^{ix}. His fifth and final primary objection actually came after his banishment. When word of his eviction from the colony came, several local churches attempted to protest, only to have their letters suppressed by the Anglican government. This led him, even in the face of deportation, to assert in a letter to Boston that Puritan churches have a right to direct, uninterrupted communication^x. Rather unsurprisingly, Roger Williams's presence was deemed intolerable in the eyes of the church. In October, 1635, he was indefinitely banished from the colony of Massachusetts^{xi}.

So, on January 15th, 1635, Roger Williams and a few brave companions set out into the wilderness with the intention of starting a new colony. That winter was harsh, and there exist few records as to how Williams and his party survived^{xii}. What is known is that when the snows cleared in mid-April of that year, the small band of lost theologians crossed the Seekonk River in a small canoe, and made their first contact with the Narragansett Indians who lived there^{xiii}. It

was here that he established a settlement that stood for every value for which he was banished.

Primarily, he established and maintained that all branches of Christianity would be tolerated, and that the church would never interfere with state affairs. To further uphold the ideals for which he'd been banished, Roger Williams and his companions bought the land upon which they settled from the Narragansett^{xiv}. With this, Williams established the first colony in the New World that, in his eyes, had the full approval and care of God. To name it, he chose a word that reflected the very essence of its higher guidance. And so, in 1636, the city of Providence was born.

As the years passed, and word spread of this new land of tolerance, the small colony began to grow. Over the next several years, settlements cropped up in what is now known as Warwick, Portsmouth, and Newport. As they grew, questions of the burgeoning colony's legitimacy arose, leading Roger Williams to sail from New Amsterdam (still being banned from entering Massachusetts) for England in 1643^{xv}. Arriving in the midst of the Puritanical turmoil of the English Civil War, Williams was able to use his background as a Puritan, now an asset, to obtain a colonial charter. He arrived back home in September of 1644, bringing with him the creation of the colony of Rhode Island, free to govern itself for all time.

Under his leadership, the colony of Rhode Island flourished, becoming the first colony to accept Quakers, Jews, and carry a general guarantee of religious freedom in its colonial charter. Needless to say, such concepts were unprecedented, and not without conflict. Roger Williams would spend the next 15 years of his life constantly traveling back and forth between Providence, Newport, Warwick, and England, resolving sectarian disputes, as well as conflicts with local natives. He retired from public life in 1657, and settled down in Providence where he remained active in local government^{xvi}. He spent his later years lame and crippled, and after the destruction

of Providence during King Philip's War, found himself homeless. He spent the last 8 years of his life living with his son, until passing away in 1683, 80 years since James I came down from Scotland and took the throne. His life was one of service, yet as many loyal servants, he found himself undervalued by the men of his time. In his time, he enjoyed little fame, and even less wealth. His death was honored by a parade through Providence, and a militia salute at his grave. Besides from that, there are no memorials from the time, no portraits or clues to his appearance^{xvii}. He survives in the hearts and minds of the people of Rhode Island, and in the vast collection of writing he left behind.

While many lament the lack of recognition he received in his life, history has not forgotten him. Today, Roger Williams is more than a man. Those who are remembered transcend their own identity and come to embody a set of ideals, morals that can be recalled in times of need. While the man died, the theologian survived, a faceless man to whom many owe their freedom, and moral fiber. In the 300 years since his death, historians have debated the true root of his beliefs. Some have described him as an early liberal, a product of an age of great political speculation combined with a mind centuries ahead of his contemporaries. Those who would choose to analyze him politically would say his, "religion [was] issued in political theory rather than theological dogma^{xviii}," while those who analyze him religiously claim that, "his principle of religious liberty [was] derived both formally and emotionally from his sense of what was due to God^{xix}." While the latter of the two is generally accepted as his primary *raison d'etre*, as the French say, Roger Williams should be analyzed from a wider perspective than religion alone. While his faith, Puritanism in particular, played a large role in the development of his beliefs, such radical ideas were not borne exclusively of religious conviction. They stem from something larger. At heart, religion aside, Roger Williams was a rationalist. This fundamental trait extends

both into the theological and political aspects of his character. While such pieties are commonplace in the hearts of modern man, history has shown us that such was not the case in the colonial world. For one reason or another, he was blessed with the mind of one who, “lived and dreamed in a future he was not to see, impatient to bring to men a heaven they were unready for^{xx}.”

In order to truly comprehend the magnitude of his sagacity, it is essential to analyze each of Rogers beliefs not only from a historical perspective, but from a modern perspective. Historical analysis is a fine tool of evaluation, but when one places the beliefs of Roger Williams in a modern context, the profoundly progressive nature of his ideas becomes a lens through which one can analyze socio-political issues. In doing so, the pertinence of his philosophy is not only apparent, but demonstrates how those ideas still exist in modern society, and govern rational thought 300 years after his passing.

One of the principle causes Roger Williams advocated for throughout his life was pacifism. For all of his great talents, Williams distinguished himself time and time again as a skilled negotiator. In fact, some historians credit him with winning the Pequot War of 1637 before it had even begun. While tensions rose, Roger met with the Narragansett Indians of Rhode Island, and convinced them to remain neutral in what was largely a conflict between the English and the Pequot^{xxi}. Had the Narragansett sided with the Pequot, the entirety of the New England colonies may have been wiped out, as they almost were in King Philip’s War 40 years later. However, while he was anti-war, Roger Williams was not anti-defense. Over the course of his governance, the colony enacted several reactionary defense measures, such as the construction of inland barricades and earthworks during King Philip’s War, or the construction of a fort on Stamper’s Hill near Providence in response to local conflicts between Native American tribes^{xxii}.

How then would he react to the Cold War, and the use of nuclear missiles as deterrents?

Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, American foreign policy was based on the use of these weapons of mass destruction as methods of preserving the peace. One could make the argument that these weapons were means to an end, aimed at the ultimate prevention of nuclear escalation. Faced with this situation, Roger Williams, in all likelihood, would have advocated for peace. Keeping in line with his Puritan beliefs, he would assert that choosing the lesser of two evils, such as nuclear proliferation versus nuclear war, is still choosing evil. His Puritanical beliefs would compel him to advocate purity of heart, and to seek peace and openness between the United States and the Soviet Union.

This point about the Cold War raises another important question. Roger Williams held a firm belief that the state and the will of the people were one and the same^{xxiii}. His conviction lay in a Puritanical belief of government by mutual consent of the governed^{xxiv}. A conviction, one might add, that precedes the writings of John Locke and Thomas Hobbes by several decades. A modern parallel could be found in the ongoing Ukrainian Civil War. The overthrowing of Yanukovych was a popularly-led uprising. Yet, there are those who claim that the new government is unrepresentative of the ethnic Russian population within Ukraine. Thus, it has lost the consent of the people of This raises questions on the legitimacy of Vladimir Putin as Russian sovereign, in his deliberate suppression of Ukrainian nationalism. It was his conviction that no citizen can permit the state to interfere with the civil affairs of another^{xxv}. This means Roger would vocally support the Ukrainian nationalists in their struggle against pro-Russian separatists. He asserted in his writings that while a country's rulers are agents of God, their power comes from the people. By extension, when popular support of that government falters, it is within the natural rights of its citizens to overthrow, and install a government better to their fitting. Such

ideals predate Locke's writings on the social contract, and may have influenced not only Locke, but Thomas Jefferson himself.

Now, when considering foreign policy from the perspective of Roger Williams, things become complicated. To compare the foreign relations of the 1600's to the foreign relations of today would be a pointless undertaking simply as a function of the political evolution of society. Above all, he asserted that all states have an equal rights in international affairs. This idea stems from his overarching theme of equality. How would such a worldview translate into modern social issues? True, there are historical considerations to take into account, but more often than not, these issues are matters of personal belief and principle, aspects of his character that Roger Williams made a point of voraciously upholding. Particularly, he held a strong belief in individual rights, which included support for a woman's liberty of conscience^{xxvi}. Yet, when faced with abortion, would he uphold a woman's choice to follow her own ethical conviction? Or would his religious views conflict too severely? Contrary to popular belief, he would most likely side with pro-choice. Williams was a staunch Christian. There is no denying that. However, as a diplomat, he strove to keep his personal beliefs out of his work; for example, allowing Quakers to live in Rhode Island. Despite a loathing of their practice that would often lead him to several-day-long debates with its practitioners, he still allowed them to coexist peacefully^{xxvii}. Such would be the case with his stance on abortion. It would go against every one of his personal beliefs, but he would cast that aside in the interest of the preservation of individual rights.

In studying the life of the great patriarch of Rhode Island, it is impossible not to be in awe of the man. Despite scarce documentation of his life, his ideals manage to inspire the young and old centuries after his death. As one author put it, "Who could fail to be thrilled by the nonconformist who hurled defiance at the oligarchy, founded his own colony on a radical

separation of church and state, did his best to thrust the Englishmen in England up the same enlightened path, and lived to boast, among the wrecked hopes of the revolutionary generation, that nowhere on earth was such liberty enjoyed as in Rhode Island^{xxviii}?” There have been few times in history where oppression has been met with such idealistic vindication. His life was a perpetual struggle to understand the world around him, and to coexist along those placed beside him. What arose from this was a long list of profoundly different ideas that are still applicable today. As time goes on, humanity continues to place reason above all else in the governance of domestic and foreign affairs. As society progresses, the standards of morality and tolerance established by a theological outcast will only increase in relevance. In life, each and every man and woman has their own journey to undertake, but the quest to understand each other and coexist peacefully is a goal humanity as a whole must share. When all is said and done, our roads will inevitably lead to the same place. The only thing to decide is what one will search for along the way, a notion that Roger Williams realized and accepted early on in life. His was the search for truth, and above all, he knew that, “having bought truth dear, we must not sell it cheap, not the least grain of it for the whole world.”

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- ⁱ Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Master Roger Williams* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957), 10.
- ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 3
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 43
- ^{iv} *Ibid*, 71
- ^v Rhode Island Committee for the Humanities, *The Legacy of Roger Williams*(n.p.: n.p., 1983), 7.
- ^{vi} *Ibid*, 8
- ^{vii} *Ibid*
- ^{viii} Michael Burgan, *Roger Williams: Founder of Rhode Island* (Minneapolis, MN: Compass Point Book, 2006), 46.
- ^{ix} *Ibid*, 44
- ^x Rhode Island Committee for the Humanities, *The Legacy of Roger*, 8.
- ^{xi} Burgan, *Roger Williams: Founder of Rhode*, 48.
- ^{xii} Winslow, *Master Roger Williams*, 126.
- ^{xiii} *Ibid*, 129
- ^{xiv} Rhode Island Committee for the Humanities, *The Legacy of Roger*, 9.
- ^{xv} Burgan, *Roger Williams: Founder of Rhode*, 64.
- ^{xvi} Rhode Island Committee for the Humanities, *The Legacy of Roger*, 13.
- ^{xvii} *Ibid*, 14
- ^{xviii} Vernon Louis Parrington, *The Colonial Mind: 1620-1800*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, *Main Currents in American Thought* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1954), 65.
- ^{xix} Alan Simpson, "How Democratic Was Roger Williams?," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (January 1956): 55.
- ^{xx} Parrington, *The Colonial Mind: 1620-1800*, 62.
- ^{xxi} Rhode Island Committee for the Humanities, *The Legacy of Roger*, 10.
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- ^{xxiii} James E. Ernst, *The Political Thought of Roger Williams* (Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1966), 31.
- ^{xxiv} Rhode Island Committee for the Humanities, *The Legacy of Roger*, 23.
- ^{xxv} Ernst, *The Political Thought of Roger*, 92.
- ^{xxvi} *Ibid*, 59
- ^{xxvii} Rhode Island Committee for the Humanities, *The Legacy of Roger*, 16-7
- ^{xxviii} Simpson, "How Democratic Was Roger," 53.