

Roger Williams and the Jews

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The question of whether or not Roger Williams advocated full and complete equality for all has been discussed by a number of persons and no satisfactory conclusions have been reached. The major part of Williams' writings have been in readily available form since they were printed by the Narragansett Club in 1866-74,¹ yet nothing definitive has been written to show whether or not Williams actually believed in equal rights for all. The gist of Williams' political thought may be readily found in the work of James E. Ernst.²

There is no reason to go into Williams' political theory in this short note; his political ideas may be readily determined by reading the work by Ernst cited above. Williams' concept of sovereignty, of the origin and necessity of government, etc., are of considerable importance for American history, but they have been sufficiently discussed in print to make them available to any interested reader. This note will, therefore, be limited to materials either directly related to Williams' statements regarding the rights of persons holding beliefs different from his own, or, to occasional utterances which may be covert indications of limitations emotionally held to and not expressed in his direct statements of principle.

DIRECT STATEMENTS

It must first be said that Williams was a definite and positive advocate of religious liberty. In his famous parable of the ship at sea, he said,

It hath fallen out sometimes, that both papists and protestants, Jews and Turks, may be embarked upon one ship; upon which supposal I affirm, that all the liberty of conscience, that I ever pleaded for, turns upon these two hinges — that none of the papists, protestants, Jews, or Turks, be forced to come to the ship's prayers or worship, nor be compelled from their own particular prayers or worship.³

The last lines of the above quotation beginning with "that none" and extending to the end of the quotation constitute a clear and unequivocal statement of religious liberty. He also said,

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INTERIOR OF JESHUATH ISRAEL SYNAGOGUE, NEWPORT, 1763

I acknowledge that to molest any person, Jew or Gentile, for either professing doctrine, or practicing worship meerly religious or spiritual, it is to persecute him, and such a person (whatever his doctrine or practice be true or false) suffereth persecution for conscience.⁴

It is interesting to note that this was not a mere political principle with Williams but was also based in his conception of the nature of Christianity. In the *Bloudy Tenent of Persecution for the Cause of Conscience*, he said,

It is the will and command of God, that (since the coming of his Sonne the Lord Jesus) a permission of the most *Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or Antichristian consciences* and worships, bee granted to all *men* in all *Nations* and countries . . . God requireth not an *uniformity* of *Religion* to be *inacted* and *inforced* in any *civil state*: which *uniformity* . . . denies the principles of Christianity and civility. . . .⁵

Note the words "to all *men* in all *Nations*"; these point the way to the materials which follow. There is considerable evidence to show that Williams did not believe that all religions were equally valuable. He seems, only, to have believed in the equal rights of men to practice their respective religions. That is, Williams was a political liberal in religious matters, but he was not a religious liberal.

STATEMENTS INDICATING THE SUPERIORITY OF CHRISTIANITY

He spoke, on several occasions, in a manner definitely derogatory to religions other than Christianity. On one occasion he said,

I conclude, that these are sinners of another nature, *Idolators, False-worshippers, Anti-christians*, who . . . must be let alone and permitted in the world to grow and fill up the measure of their sinnes, after the image of him that hath sowed them [Satan], until the great harvest shall make the difference.⁶

Thus it may be seen that he expected, at least the idolators, false worshippers, and followers of the Antichrist (whoever these two latter groups may have been), to be treated as tares for the burning in the great harvest which was to come at the end of time. Further proof that he considered Christianity superior to any other religion may be seen in the following passage:

Doth not that persecutor which hunts or persecuteth a Turke, a Jew, a Pagan, an Antichristian . . . hould a greater Errour, than any of the foure, because he hardens such Consciencs in their Errours by his persecution. . . .⁷

That not all religions were of equal worth to Williams may be seen from his occasional references to the value of missionary work. In the *Bloudy Tenent of Persecution for the Cause of Conscience*, he said,

As if because the briars, thornes and thistles may not bee in the Garden of the Church, therefore they must all be pluckt up out of the Wildernesse, whereas he that is a Briar, that is a Jew, a Turke, a Pagan, an anti-Christian today, may be (when the word of the Lord Runs freely) a member of Jesus Christ tomorrow out of the wilde Olive, and planted into the true.⁸

The reference "to a Jew, a Turke, a Pagan," as "briars" makes it clear that he did not consider Judaism and Mohammedanism as being on the same plane with Christianity.

He also said that persecution was "Opposite to the Jewes Conversion to Christ, by not permitting them a civill life or being."⁹

The quotations under the heading "Direct Statements" make it very clear that William believed in *civil* equality, that is, freedom of worship and equality before the courts. The writer has, however, searched in vain for a single word in Williams' writings concerning political rights, that is, the franchise, the right of holding office, and the right to sit upon a jury. There does not seem to be anything regarding Williams' beliefs regarding political rights either for the Christian majority or for any of the various minority groups.

It is possible that some scrap of information unknown to the present writer may be turned up in the near future which may force a change of opinion, but it appears today that one of three things must have been true. First, Williams may not have been interested in political rights as such; second, he may have felt that political rights were inseparable from civil rights, or, finally, he may have, in his own mind, reserved political rights to his own Protestant Christian group. His mention of the Jews (among others) as thorns and briars and his expressed desire for their conversion to Christianity may be indicative that he would not have given them political rights for fear they would take advantage of the franchise to take away his own hard won liberties, as the Protestants did in Catholic-founded Maryland. It must be stressed, however, that this is only a conjecture, and cannot be proved by quotation from Williams' works.

NOTES

¹Roger Williams, *Collected Works*, edited by members of the Narragansett Club (6 vols., Providence, Rhode Island: The Narragansett Club, 1866-74). Hereinafter referred to as *N.C.P.*, with the volume and page numbers.

²James E. Ernst, *The Political Thought of Roger Williams* (Seattle, Washington, 1929), 229 pp., with bibliography.

³Letter, *To the Town of Providence* (1655), *N.C.P.*, VI, 278ff.

⁴*Bloody Tenent of Persecution for the Cause of Conscience*, *N.C.P.* III, 94.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 1f

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 109.

⁷*Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, *N.C.P.*, IV, 474.

⁸*N.C.P.*, III, 94.

⁹*Querries Propounded to the Five Holland Ministers, and the Scotch Commissioners*, *N.C.P.*, II, 34ff.