

2001

Separating Church and State: Roger Williams and Religious Liberty

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Recommended Citation

Kurt T. Lash, *Separating Church and State: Roger Williams and Religious Liberty*, 16 J.L. & Religion 569 (2001) (book review).

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SEPARATING CHURCH AND STATE: ROGER WILLIAMS AND RELIGIOUS LIBERTY.
By Timothy L. Hall. Champaign, Ill.: University of Illinois Press 1998. Pp.
206. \$19.95. ISBN: 0-252-06664-2.

Roger Williams was a religious bigot. He never met a church pure enough for his brand of Puritanism, and he never found a congregation worthy enough to have him as its pastor. After alienating every potential ally and provoking every critic, Williams was forced to flee to the wilds of Narragansett Bay in present-day Rhode Island. There, he preached to his remaining congregation—his family—and supported laws prohibiting men from wearing long hair.

In Timothy Hall's illuminating book, the reader is confronted with a flesh and blood Roger Williams who is rather different from the modern myth. Although Williams is often portrayed as the patron American saint of religious toleration and church-state separation, it turns out that Williams himself could not tolerate any Christian church of his day and preached schism wherever he went. The beauty of Hall's book is his explanation of how a man enthralled by such religious dogmatism could articulate such a robust theory of religious freedom. Hall's account is an eye-opener for anyone who presumes that religious intolerance necessarily flows from religious sectarianism.

When Roger Williams arrived in Massachusetts Bay, he was immediately offered the prestigious position of minister of the Puritan Church of Boston. He promptly turned it down. To Williams, the Boston Church had insufficiently severed its ties with the Papist Church of England. As he put it, "I dared not officiate to an unseparated people, as upon examination and conference, I found them to be." (18) Thus began Williams' life-long journey as a committed Separatist: not an advocate of separating church and state, but a follower of the Pauline injunction: "Wherefore, come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you." (19) (2 *Cor* 6:17, KJV).

The Puritans had their own disagreements with the Church of England; they objected to that Church's continued use of an episcopal hierarchy and rituals that smacked of Roman theology. Despite these objections, however, the Puritans continued to have contact with the mother church and they occasionally received Puritan clergy who had preached in the parish churches of England. To Williams, this was

intolerable. The Church of England was corrupt because it did not limit its membership to those who had publicly embraced the faith (“visible saints”). Those who preached in a corrupt church themselves became corrupt, and, essentially, became carriers of spiritual apostasy when they crossed the ocean to preach in New England.

Eventually, Williams joined the more rigorously doctrinaire Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony. Once again, however, his views on religious taint brought him into conflict with the Pilgrims who apparently also were willing to receive preachers from England. When the Pilgrims rejected Williams’ demands that no such preachers be allowed back in the colony until they had repented of their English dalliances, Williams abandoned the colony and settled in Salem. There, he preached his brand of separatist reform—including denunciation of the church in Salem—until the Massachusetts Bay authorities booted him out.

The irony, of course, is that Williams was following Puritan separatism to its logical conclusion. After all, the Puritans’ journey to America was prompted by their desire to separate themselves from the tainted Church of England. As Williams put it, “what is it that which Mr. Cotton and so many hundreds fearing God in New England walk in, but a way of separation?” (22) Indeed, the Puritans rejected the English Church’s hierarchical form of government (a vestige of the Roman past) and instead founded essentially autonomous churches—the “congregations” that were the bedrock of New England congregationalism. Unlike Williams, however, the Puritans saw no reason to formally break with the Church of England; they believed the English church could be reformed, and that reform could take place by working from within.

Williams, however, saw no hope for reforming the English Church, and he despaired of finding an untainted congregation in America. With brutal logic, Williams concluded that, since all churches were tainted, all ordinations proceeding from such churches were invalid, including his own. Following his separatist principles to the end, Williams ended his life in solipsistic isolation. As Williams’ theological opponent John Cotton put it:

Time was, when of all Christian churches, the churches of New England were accounted, and professed by him [Williams], to be the most pure: and of all the churches in New England, Salem (where himself was teacher) to be the most pure. But when the churches of New England took just offense at sundry of his proceedings, he first renounced communion with them all: and

because the church of Salem refused to join with him in such a groundless censure, he then renounced communion with Salem also. And then fell off from his ministry, and then from all church-fellowship, and then from his baptism, (and was himself baptized again) and then from the Lord's Supper, and from all ordinances of Christ dispensed in any church-way, till God shall stir up himself, or some new apostle to recover, and restore all the ordinances, and churches of Christ out of the ruins of Antichristian apostacy. (25, 26)

According to Hall, "Williams had followed his Separatist impulses as far as they would lead him—and they had led him to renounce fellowship with every church in the world." (27)

This radical rejection of the slightest deviation from his own brand of religious orthodoxy makes Roger Williams a curious spokesman for religious toleration. But spokesman he is and Hall's presentation of this seeming contradiction is the highlight of the book. Because this advocate of religious toleration was eventually banished by the Massachusetts Puritans, the common assumption is that Williams must have been an open-minded ecumenist, while the Puritans must have been close-minded sectarians. In fact, it was the Puritans who were ecumenical, at least in comparison to Williams. After all, the Puritans were willing to maintain ties with the Anglican Church and they permitted non-believers to attend church services, if not participate in church ordinances. Williams, on the other hand, condemned such associations as corrupting the true church of God. According to Hall, "Williams was relentlessly intolerant when it came to matters of worship and sharply distinguished between 'toleration in the Church,' which he abhorred, and 'toleration in the world,' which he championed." (29)

Nor was Williams' toleration for faiths outside the church based on some kind of latitudinarian theology: Williams was supremely confident that his was the true faith, that non-believers should be proselytized, and that those who failed to embrace the true way would suffer judgment at the hands of God. Nevertheless, Williams believed there was no way believers could avoid associating with non-believers outside the Church, and such associations were permissible so long as they did not involve "polluted acts of spiritual worship." (31) Williams thus opposed a variety of civil laws that forced believers and unbelievers into acts of "unholy fellowship," including compelled church attendance and oath taking (both at trial and as a requisite to holding public office). Such laws, Williams believed, compelled believers to attend a corrupt church, forced nonbelievers into acts of rank hypocrisy, and made all people

participants in sacrilegious public ceremonies. The idea that the civil government could punish people for disobeying such laws was the “bloody tenent of persecution for cause of conscience” against which Williams fought throughout his life.

Williams’ views placed him on a collision course with the Puritans in two major ways. First of all, there was the problem of political reality. Radical separation from the Church of England would likely invoke the wrath of that Church’s head, Charles I. Secondly, and more fundamentally, Puritans could not accept Williams’ insistence that the legitimate coercive power of the government extended only to outward acts and not to inward belief. Puritans believed that God had brought them across the ocean just as He had brought the Israelites through the Red Sea. And just as God had handed down the Ten Commandments to his chosen people at Sinai, so the Puritans believed it was their duty to enforce those religious obligations in America so that God’s favor might continue to sustain them in this new wilderness.

In the end, the combined weight of theological concerns, the threat of civil disorder, and the political risks of challenging the legitimacy of the Church of England, proved too much for the Massachusetts Puritans. After fruitless attempts to get Williams to repent (or at least quiet down), in 1635 the authorities banished Williams from Massachusetts. That banishment, Hall tells us in a nice aside, lasted until 1936, when the Massachusetts legislature passed a bill revoking the 300-year-old decree.

The lessons to be drawn from the unique life and thought of Roger Williams are worth many books and Hall’s is a welcome addition to the literature. Particularly insightful are Hall’s suggestions that the roots of religious liberty are not found in bland ecumenical pronouncements that “we all really believe the same thing,” but in voices of believers who take liberty seriously precisely because they take their faith so seriously. When Thomas Jefferson says that it makes no difference to him whether there be “one god or twenty gods,” one wonders whether the man really understood religion, and religious belief, at all. On the other hand, when Roger Williams objects to civil persecution because it “shuts and bars out the gracious prophecies and promises and discoveries of the most glorious Sun of Righteousness, Jesus Christ,” and is “lamentably guilty of his most precious blood, shed in the blood of so many hundred thousands of his poor servants by the civil powers of the world” (Appendix at 180, cited from “The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody”), here is a man who will broach no compromise on the rights of conscience precisely because he can broach no compromise in his own faith.

Hall's book falters somewhat when it tries to make Williams "relevant" to current controversies regarding the proper interpretation of the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses. Although not expressly labeling his approach as originalist, Hall nevertheless suggests that voices like Williams' informed the adoption of the religion clauses, and that we should consider his views at least as much as those of Jefferson in our modern interpretation of the First Amendment. In particular, Hall challenges the traditional scholarly view that Williams was against religious exemptions from otherwise generally applicable laws. Hall's argument here is tenuous: In one of Williams' most famous passages, he uses the analogy of passengers on an ocean voyage to describe the freedoms and duties of religious believers. After affirming the liberty of all on board to worship and pray according to their own beliefs, Williams then states "if any refuse to obey the common laws and orders of the ship, concerning their common peace or preservation . . . I say, I never denied, but in such cases, whatever is pretended, the commander or commanders may judge, resist, compel, and punish such transgressors, according to their deserts and merits." (108) This is not the stuff from which a theory of religious exemptions can easily be made.

Hall attempts to minimize the significance of this passage by pointing to other writings in which Williams seemed to suggest that sometimes secular law unduly abridges religious liberty. However, in this reviewer's eyes at least, there are some historical hurdles that Hall does not persuasively overcome. In the end, Williams said very little on the subject of exemptions. When he expressly wrote about them, he was against them (see above). Even if one accepts the claim that Williams was in favor of religious exemptions, by Hall's own account, Williams' writings were universally ignored for a hundred years after his death. There is no evidence that Williams' views on religious exemptions played any role in the adoption of the First Amendment. In fact, there is no express evidence that the framers even considered the issue of exemptions when they drafted the First Amendment, much less relied on a unique reading of Williams' writings.

But Hall doesn't need to make Williams' views relevant to modern free exercise controversies to make his life worth reconsidering or this book worth reading. Beyond the narrow doctrinal debate of religious exemptions is the broader struggle to understand the role of the religious prophet in the formation of public policy. Here, Hall adds an important figure to the gallery of heroes of religious liberty: The Separatist Tolerationist. As Hall puts it:

Williams and the Separatists who arose following the Great Awakening remind us that we must deny to ecumenical impulses any right to a smug place of preeminence in the history of religious freedom in America. Separationists have frequently been on what we would now designate the side of the angels in important disputes, and the more ecumenically spirited have championed causes that now smack of intolerance. (161)

Well said. Well done.

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