

### III. ЗАМОНАВИЙ НАЗАРИЙ ТАДҚИҚОТЛАР ВА ҚАРАШЛАР

#### *Modern Conceptual Studies & Views*

#### *Современные концептуальные исследования и взгляды*

## THE ESSENCE OF EXCEPTIONALISM: ROGER WILLIAMS AND THE BIRTH OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN AMERICA

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“Whether we like it or not, we recognize religious freedom as a  
permanent U.S. national interest.”

— Senior Communist official, Vietnam, 2005<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** *The core of American "exceptionalism"—religious freedom—is sometimes overlooked in the broad definition used today. In fact, it's likely that the majority of people, including policymakers, do not immediately or directly link exceptionalism to religious freedom. The majority, most likely, would describe exceptionalism in terms of Ronald Reagan's idea of America as a "shining city on a hill."*

**Keywords:** *Exceptionalism, America, religious freedom, Massachusetts colonists, Roger Williams, Ronald Reagan, Republican National Convention, Puritanism, Quakers, Civil War*

The observation above offered an insight like no other. Frankly, I did not believe it when I heard it. It was as strategic and succinct a statement as I have ever heard about America. Religious freedom was not a value but an interest. Religious freedom was not a distant memory of founding mythology—and thus indelible to the American identity domestically; it was practically essential to the expression and extension of that identity abroad. It was an exceptional statement.

The general brand of American “exceptionalism” invoked today tends to leave out the essence of American exceptionalism: religious freedom. Indeed, most citizens and policymakers probably do not directly or quickly associate religious freedom with exceptionalism at all. More likely, most would summarize

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<sup>2</sup> See Seiple, "Religious Freedom and Reconciliation in Vietnam."

exceptionalism by referencing Ronald Reagan's vision of America as a "shining city on a hill."

But the image of America as a "shining city on a hill" is neither historically accurate nor particularly exceptional. In fact, the phrase refers to Massachusetts colonists who persecuted those who did not conform to their belief and behavior system, just as they had been persecuted for not conforming to the religious system in England.

This unexceptional example of people privileging their own religious freedom over that of others did, however, shape a man who fervently believed in religious freedom, both as a function of his faith and as a matter of good governance—namely, Roger Williams, who was banished from Massachusetts in 1636 and who founded Rhode Island later that same year.

For Williams, religious freedom was not only the right thing to do; it was in the self-interest of both society and state. Over the course of 27 years (1636–63), Roger Williams worked in Rhode Island from the "bottom-up" (grassroots) to socialize the idea of religious freedom among citizens, and from the "top-down" (government) to institutionalize that idea into the law. In doing so, he also established the essence of America's enduring exceptionalism: liberty of conscience for every citizen, given of God, protected and promoted by the state.

### **Ronald Reagan and the American Myth**

Ronald Reagan first referenced the "city upon a hill" on January 25, 1974, at the first annual Conservative Political Action Conference.<sup>3</sup> Almost six years later, the Great Communicator would add the word "shining" to this phrase in his November 13, 1979 announcement that he was running for president.<sup>4</sup> Reagan used the phrase "shining city on a hill" again in his 1984 acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention.<sup>5</sup> And perhaps most famously, he referenced a "shining city upon a hill" in his January 11, 1989 farewell address as he envisioned an America of "harmony" and "peace."<sup>6</sup>

Today the phrase is so ubiquitous that it seems in poor taste to point out that John Winthrop—whom President Reagan was quoting—did not use the word

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<sup>3</sup> See Reagan, "City Upon a Hill."

<sup>4</sup> See Reagan, "Announcement for Presidential Candidacy."

<sup>5</sup> See Reagan, "Remarks Accepting the Presidential Nomination."

<sup>6</sup> See Reagan, "Farewell Address."

“shining.” Winthrop did not because he was quoting Jesus Christ in Matthew 5:14, following the Sermon on the Mount. In this scripture, Jesus encourages his followers to be in and for the world, but not of it—a visible and practical testimony to his commands and purpose. Winthrop’s exhortation to his fellow Puritan Protestants as they set sail for Massachusetts in March of 1630, therefore, was this: They sailed to create a new city where the Christian faith (as they understood it) could be freely practiced.

As John Barry rightly notes, however, the centerpiece of Winthrop’s famous address was not Matthew 5:14, but 2 Samuel 7:10: “And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore.”<sup>7</sup> Winthrop sought a New Jerusalem in the New World. But in some key respects, New England would nevertheless prove to be much like Old England in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

### **Do unto Others as Was Done unto You**

When King James assumed the throne of England in 1603 (the presumed year of Roger Williams’ birth), he sought the conformity of his Protestant subjects. Initially, James allowed those of “painful consciences” limited participation in the activities of the Church of England. But his goal was to root out a Puritanism that found the Church of England too Catholic. James promised to “harrie them out of this land, or else do worse, only hang them, that’s all.”<sup>8</sup>

Once harried, John Winthrop was quite clear in what he sought: “a place of Cohabitation and Consortship under a due form of Government both civil and ecclesiastical.”<sup>9</sup> As one Massachusetts minister put it, the colony would “endeavor after Theocracy as near as might be to what which was the glory of Israel.”<sup>10</sup> If it was good enough for Mosaic law and the Old Testament, it was good enough for the Puritans.

What this meant practically for governance was another matter. Just like the Israelites, the Puritans struggled to treat those who did not believe as they did as “native born Israelites” (Leviticus 19:34, Ezekiel 47:22). Pagans, Jews, and atheists could be allowed, the preacher John Mather reasoned, as long as they did

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<sup>7</sup> Barry, Roger Williams, 121.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 17

<sup>9</sup> Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience*, 23

<sup>10</sup> Barry, Roger Williams, 169.

not “openly blaspheme the God of heaven, & draw away Christians to Atheism, or Judaism.” Their dissent from the majority culture must be done “privately or inoffensively.”<sup>11</sup>

It should come as no surprise then that Massachusetts outlawed Baptists, hung Quakers, and executed witches. All were outside the norm of the Puritan definition of Christianity.

According to Barry, “Liberty, in the view of Winthrop and his fellow magistrates, in the view of Massachusetts clergy, and in the view of Massachusetts freemen, was the liberty to live a life which the magistrates defined as good and godly ... This was freedom to choose, but to choose only one way, Winthrop’s way, the magistrates’ way, God’s way.”<sup>12</sup> In addition to insisting on this narrow form of religious liberty, Massachusetts’ leaders questioned the principle of democratic rule. Winthrop thought that “Democracy is, amongst most civil nations, accounted the meanest and worst form of government ... a manifest breach of the 5th commandment [honor thy father and mother]” that “history records” as of the “least continuance and fullest of troubles.”<sup>13</sup>

On January 11, 1636 (precisely 353 years before Ronald Reagan’s farewell address etched “shining city upon a hill” into the Republican lexicon), the Boston magistrates gathered to consider the constant irritation of the nonconformist Roger Williams. After rejecting execution, they decided to banish him to England (where execution was likely).<sup>14</sup> Winthrop, to his great credit, warned his Christian brother. Williams fled into a snow storm, eventually settling among his Indian friends at the headwaters of Narragansett Bay (where he paid them for the land on which he lived).

He called the place Providence because he “made covenant of peaceable neighborhood with the sachems [leaders] and natives round about us” and had “a sense of God’s merciful providence unto me in my distress.” Williams hoped the new colony might provide “shelter for persons distressed for conscience.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Do unto Others as You Would Have Them Do unto You**

What had so distressed Williams that the Massachusetts magistrates had

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<sup>11</sup> Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience*, 100, 121.

<sup>12</sup> Barry, *Roger Williams*, 261.

<sup>13</sup> As quoted in Barry, *Roger Williams*, 334

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 208–9.

<sup>15</sup> As quoted in *ibid.*, 220.

become so distressed about him? In a word: Injustice, perpetrated by Christians in the name of Christ. Williams did not think people should take an oath, swearing by God and thus bringing God into the political realm.<sup>16</sup> He particularly did not appreciate how ecclesial leaders decided for each citizen how the Ten Commandments should be lived out in the public square, and therefore what constituted blasphemy.<sup>17</sup> And Williams was against giving tax money to ministers: “No one should be bound to maintain a worship against his own consent.”<sup>18</sup>

Equally fundamental was how Christians treated non-Christians, who were also made in the image of God. Williams insisted, “Nature knows no difference between Europeans and Americans in blood, birth, bodies, &c., God having of one blood made all mankind.”<sup>19</sup> Williams believed that the European kings did not have the right to give away (take) what was not theirs in the first place. He decried “[t]he sinne of the Pattents [granting of colonies in the new world], wherein Christian Kings (socalld) are investe with Right by virtue of the Christianitie, to take and give away the Lands and Countries of other men.”<sup>20</sup>

Williams believed strongly that there was a difference between faith and religion, between Christianity and Christendom, between Jesus and the Pharisees. Edwin Gaustad explains, “To have dominant cultures or powerful nations determine the religion of a powerless people was to learn absolutely nothing from the history of the ancient or the European world ... England, like all of Europe, was an instance of Christendom, not of Christianity.”<sup>21</sup>

Countering these imperial patterns, Williams refused to share his faith with the native Indians until he learned their language. How else could he show them the ultimate respect, except by speaking of Christ in a manner that would speak to their heart? “He believed that one could not become a Christian without a full understanding of what Christianity meant, and he refrained from any efforts to convert Indians until his fluency in their language was adequate to explain Christ’s message.”<sup>22</sup>

In other words, one’s neighbor was Williams’ starting point of reference, not oneself. This perspective was the difference between faith and religion,

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16 Ibid., 192

17 Ibid., 187.

18 Ibid., 193.

19 Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience*, 28.

20 Barry, *Roger Williams*, 188.

21 Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience*, 30–1.

22 Barry, *Roger Williams*, 157.

Christianity and Christendom. In similar fashion, Williams understood this to be the difference between Jesus and the Pharisees. The latter lived a holy life according to the commands of Moses, awaiting the return of the Messiah. Yet they were so fixated on their religious rules that they were unable to understand Jesus as the Messiah. And so, like Jesus, Williams was especially perturbed by members of the religious establishment who worshipped their own piety and civil order rather than following the commands of Christ. As Jesus said to the Pharisees in John 5:45–7: “But do not think I will accuse you before the Father. Your accuser is Moses, on whom your hopes are set. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me. But since you do not believe what he wrote, how are you going to believe what I say?” Williams “felt that this was where Massachusetts, like England, made its mistake: seeing in Moses rather than Jesus the true model.”<sup>23</sup>

Williams believed that Jesus’ command to love one’s neighbor was the true model, and this motivated him to found Providence: “to hold forth Liberty of Conscience.”<sup>24</sup> And this goal extended beyond Providence. He believed “that Liberty of Conscience should be maintained” throughout the colonies.<sup>25</sup> Tolerance was not enough. True “Liberty of Conscience” had to be extended to all: “Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or Antichristian.” It was impermissible to infringe on the “consciences of the Jews, nor the consciences of the Turks or Papists, or Pagans.”<sup>26</sup> To do so was “soul-rape.”<sup>27</sup> “Persecution for the Cause of Conscience” was “against the Doctrine of Jesus Christ.”<sup>28</sup> As Edwin Gaustad concludes, “To put it simply, the Christian church does not persecute. Therefore, the church that persecutes is not Christian.”<sup>29</sup>

### **It is in Your Own Self-Interest**

The irony of Roger Williams’ experience was twofold. On the one hand, he shared most of the same core Christian doctrines as the Puritans, but was banished for his different conclusions about the practice of those beliefs. On the other hand, he did not share the same religious beliefs as the Indians, but was able to build

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23 Gaustad, Roger Williams, 77.

24 Gaustad, Liberty of Conscience, 49.

25 Barry, Roger Williams, 362.

26 Gaustad, Liberty of Conscience, 96

27 Barry, Roger Williams, 109.

28 Ibid., 323.

29 Gaustad, Roger Williams, 97.

relationships and live among them precisely because of his theological conclusions about the practice of neighborly love and the importance of religious freedom for all.

What truly makes Roger Williams unique, however, was his capacity to integrate and institutionalize such bottom-up experiences into the top-down structures and interests of the state. In other words, while Roger Williams' views regarding religious liberty were clearly the exception in 17th-century New England, his revolutionary genius was to institutionalize them from the top-down—that is, in law, through two colonial charters (1644 and 1663). Fortunately these principles would eventually become the norm for the US Constitution and its interpretation.

Williams understood the link between religious freedom and security.<sup>30</sup> For example, when the free towns of the emerging Rhode Island colony bickered with one another—to the point of disunity—Williams would write and remind them that they had “such peace, such security, such liberties for the Soule and Body as were nevere enjoyed by any English men, nor any in the world.”<sup>31</sup> “Such peace, such security” was the direct result of a faith so strong that it was not threatened by different theologies or other faiths, and therefore it did not need to impose itself on others.

There were never any trials or executions of witches in Rhode Island, as in Massachusetts. Nor did Rhode Island ever hang any of its Quaker residents, as happened in Massachusetts. Williams despised the Quakers because they “preached not Christ Jesus but Themselves.”<sup>32</sup> Yet he encouraged their presence and publicly debated their beliefs. “Liberty of Conscience” did not mean privatized belief, but something the public square had to welcome with great civility. Otherwise, citizens might demonize those who did not believe as the majority did.

Put differently, civility was also about stability. This basic principle was reflected in the 1663 colonial charter that finally established Rhode Island as its own entity:

They have freely declared, that it is much on their hearts ... to hold forth a livlie experiment, that a most flourishing civill state may stand and best bee

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30 For more on the religion–security relationship, see C. Seiple, Hoover, and Otis, *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Security*, and Seiple and Hoover, *Religion and Security*.

31 Barry, Roger Williams, 363.

32 Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience*, 183.

maintained ... with a full libertie in religious concernements; and that true piety rightly grounded upon gospel principles, will give the best and greatest security to sovereignty, and will lay in the hearts of men the strongest obligation to true loyalty.<sup>33</sup>

People who felt free to exercise the essence of their identity—their faith—were less likely to agitate against the state and therefore were more loyal to it. Of course, Williams was able to institutionalize such an argument because he dared to return to England, twice, to fight for his convictions. During both trips, he made his case to influential friends—among whom were Oliver Cromwell and John Milton—and published his thinking about the American Indians, parliamentary politics, and the terrible irony of the Christian who persecutes. The public listened, and two different kings agreed enough to grant two charters.

It is no accident that Rhode Island College, later known as Brown University, would establish its charter in 1764 along the same lines as the colonial charter: There “shall never be admitted any religious tests; but, on the contrary, all the members hereof shall forever enjoy full, free, absolute, and uninterrupted liberty of conscience.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Exceptional Legacy**

Roger Williams’ legacy reflects both conviction and strategy. He was not afraid to work out the implications of his faith, based on his understanding of the New Testament. He was not afraid to express his beliefs publicly, even when he was clearly in the minority and his life was threatened.

Living out those beliefs, however, meant respecting every human as made in the image of God. As such, each human had the inherent conscience to freely choose to (not) worship God as he or she saw fit. The only requirement was to do so peaceably—as fellow citizens under the rule of law—respecting others whose liberty of conscience resulted in different convictions.

This capacity was not only the right thing to do; it was in the self-interest of both the society and the state. Mere tolerance would not suffice. Mutual respect, out of respect for God the Creator, was more likely to result in the civility and stability necessary for a society to flourish.

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<sup>33</sup> See Charter of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 1663.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 202.

Williams institutionalized this experience from the top-down through the colonial charters, in part, because he had lived it from the bottom-up, especially with the Indians. He respected them so much that he learned their language and built lasting relationships with their leaders—relationships that would literally save his life when the ecclesial order banned him from the theocracy of Massachusetts.

The life of Roger Williams is not only an exceptional model of cross-cultural engagement; it is an enduring model of how best to maintain both society and state. Said one New Amsterdam minister of Rhode Island, “We suppose they went to rhod island, for that is the receptacle of all sorts of riff-raff people, and is nothing else than the sewer (latrina) of New England. ... We suppose they will settle there, as they are not tolerated in any other place. ... All the cranks of Newe England retire thither.”<sup>35</sup> What a compliment! Of course, the true compliment is imitation. Roger Williams’ words and actions would influence other colonial charters, John Locke, and the founding fathers of the United States.

Later, on the eve of the Civil War, Brown University’s president, Francis Wayland, would summarize it best: “There are some men whose monuments are everywhere, who are known as wide as civilization.” Roger Williams was such a man because he fought not for his own liberty but “liberty for humanity.”<sup>36</sup> Today the United States is not a Christian state. It is not a Christian state because it was founded by a Christian “nation”—a group of Christians like Roger Williams who were so strong in their faith that they were not threatened by and therefore did not need to put down another’s. The result was a mature public square capable of both civility and stability, because society and state understood that it was their common responsibility to steward such incredible liberty.

This capacity for true liberty of conscience—for true religious freedom—is the essence of American exceptionalism. Religious freedom is therefore not a bipartisan issue; it is a nonpartisan issue. It is integral to an American experience that does not merely tolerate and assimilate different religious identities. It celebrates and integrates them while maintaining the essence of their identity and encouraging all to exercise that identity peaceably in the public square.

On September 17, 1644—precisely 143 years before the Constitution of the

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<sup>35</sup> Barry, Roger Williams, 254.

<sup>36</sup> Gaustad, Liberty of Conscience, 213.

United States was ratified—Roger Williams anchored his ship off the coast of Massachusetts, bringing with him Rhode Island's first charter. This document established the colony's boundaries and therefore a place in which this liberty-of-conscience experiment might continue. He was quickly asked to leave Massachusetts.<sup>37</sup> It would take yet another colonial charter in 1663 to ensure that this "livlie experiment" would become "a most flourishing civill state."

May we have the same extraordinary diligence in maintaining the essence of American exceptionalism.

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37 Barry, Roger Williams, 342.