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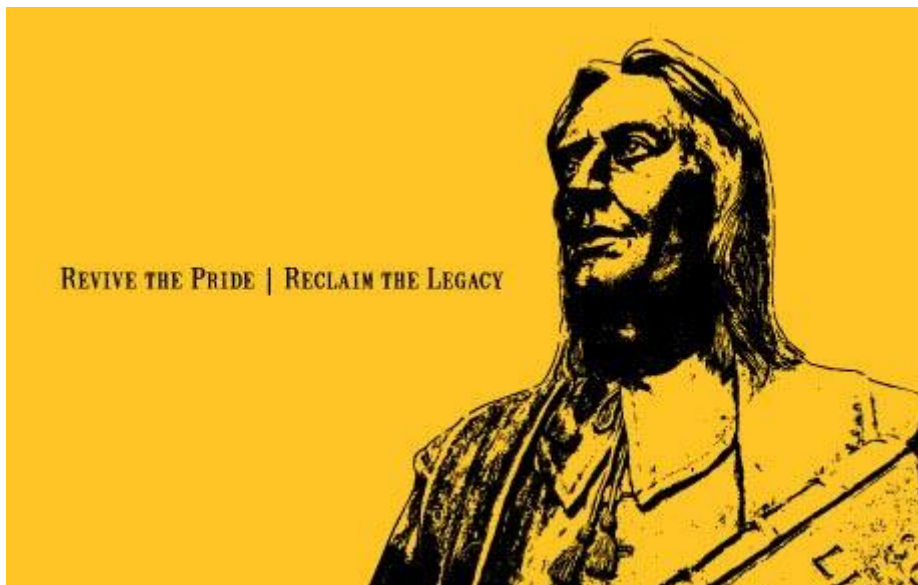
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The Experts Weigh In: Why You Should Pay Attention to Roger

History and legal experts debate the merits of Roger Williams's work and legacy



December 3, 2013 | Jill Rodrigues '05

BRISTOL, R.I. – Imagine facing this choice: abandon your family and flee for your life into the New England winter wilderness with nothing more than a compass and a bit of corn paste, or surrender to captors who will bore a hole through your tongue, cut off your ears and starve you to death in a medieval jail cell. Twice in his lifetime, Roger Williams evaded oppressors bent on silencing his outspoken advocacy for religious toleration and individual freedoms.

In 1635, his native England hunted him down for contradicting the Crown, but Roger escaped with his family across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World. However, the deeply religious minister found no shelter among the Massachusetts Puritans who prohibited Roger from expressing his belief that government has no right to compel a person to worship in *any* manner – that the individual must choose whether (and how) to worship at all.

Charged with “dangerous opinions” by Massachusetts’ authorities, Roger was banished from civilized society, and forced to disappear into the wilderness or face extradition to England where he faced a slow, cold death from starvation in a jail cell. Confronted with this choice, Roger hastily fled into the winter night. For 14 weeks, he marched through knee-deep snow before reaching salvation – the Pokanoket tribe who fed and sheltered him through the winter near the head of Mount Hope Bay.

In every established civilization, Roger encountered persecution. His attempts to lift the discourse with radical, enlightened views – or at least preach as he and his followers desired – were repeatedly crushed by those in power until he and a small like-minded group founded Providence, R.I., under a government that removed religion from citizenship and opened its doors to the outcasts of New England – the Baptists, Quakers, Puritans, and even Atheists who were shunned as well as hanged for their nonconformist beliefs. Their society – the first true democracy in the modern world that gave each household an equal vote – nurtured the ideals of religious liberty, true independence of thought and freedom of speech that would take root in American soil.

Roger’s views weren’t always popular, but they *were* revolutionary and found their way into the Bill of Rights and the U.S. Constitution nearly a century after his death. In a salute to this true American Original – and, some historians argue, a forgotten Founding Father – the University has launched [Pay Attention to Roger](#), a campaign to revive the legacy and the pride of claiming Roger Williams as its namesake. And as RWU joins the State of Rhode Island in celebrating the [350th anniversary of the 1663 Rhode Island Colonial Charter](#), experts and enthusiasts of Roger’s work have visited the University to honor his legacy and the home to his Lively Experiment.

Fresh off the heels of a feature story heralding “[The Renaissance of Roger Williams](#),” here are 10 reasons to continue to debate the merits of Roger’s ideas and reconsider his role in shaping American history from a bestselling author to a legal expert and colonial historians who have kept Roger’s legacy alive in the public discourse:

- “He was the first to say that the government was a creature of the citizenry rather than the idea of the divine right of kings, which is sort of the adverse of that. Even those in Parliament who were going against the king never went that far. Even as they’re chopping the king’s head off, they never went so far as to stipulate that the power belongs to citizens. That’s a pretty original thought. There are a lot of people who came close to it or came up to that edge, but nobody went over that edge. And Roger went over that edge.”
– John M. Barry, author of *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul*
- “If you want any further evidence that the whole point of this country is separation of church and state, take a look at the first three words of the Constitution. You text – what does it mean when you put the caps lock on? You’re shouting! Those first three words are written 10 times bigger than anything else in the document, in blacker letters than anything else. It’s not, ‘Congress, by the grace of God, give the people these rights. It’s ‘We the people are telling the *government what it can do.*’

So the foundation of civil power lies in 'We the people.'

– John McNiff, Roger Williams National Memorial

- “He is unafraid to back down from his ideas, wherever they may lead him. He stays true to his ideas in the face of opposition.”
– Charlotte Carrington, Assistant Professor of History at Roger Williams University
- “Roger’s concept of church and state undermined *the whole concept* of Western civilization. No place else did you have separation of church and state, separation of citizenship from religion. In Providence, there’s no connection to citizenship in religion. You did not have to have a religion at all to be a free man in Providence, and that was the first place it was tried.”
– J. Stanley Lemons, Rhode Island College professor emeritus of history
- “Roger Williams was a traditionalist, and he believed in order. And whatever type of government that did exist – as long as it didn’t interfere with soul liberty, with freedom of conscious – then that government, if it maintained order and was a fair and just government, was satisfactory to him. I think too much has been made about Roger Williams, the irrepressible Democrat, but never was enough made about Roger Williams, the individual who believed in soul liberty and its corollary, the separation of church and state.”
– Patrick Conley, historian
- “We might say he was one of the people who represented the libertarian frame of mind that’s so powerful in this country and so puzzling to people who come from other legal cultures. The idea of a man’s home is his castle – the government has no place in determining what you do with your property. People who want to go live off by themselves and have no government – you don’t see that sort of phenomenon in European cultures. And so I think we might also say that he tapped into this vein of stubborn independence that’s a big part of the American culture. It has its place in the law but I think it has a larger place in how we view government – the fundamental way that government is not there to tell us what to do; the government is there to make us free.”
– David Logan, Dean of the Roger Williams University School of Law
- “It is interesting that the two clauses in the First Amendment that deal with religion embrace the two clauses that Roger Williams stood for – there will be no establishment of a (national) church and there will be free exercise of religion. Now I can’t say if the people who wrote that – James Madison, in particular – had read Roger Williams and knew these were his two principles. But this is his legacy, in part, that he is a prophet of religious liberty. And if the world would embrace that there would be far fewer bombings in Boston or in Baghdad, where people are killing each other because they are a different religion or a different denomination in the same religion.”

– J. Stanley Lemons, Rhode Island College professor emeritus of history

- “The fact that people can argue about religion today and its role in society goes back to Roger. The fact that you can question it goes back to Roger. The fact that we can have a lively debate about religion goes back to Roger – and to not be scared to death that you will be punished for what you believe goes back to Roger.”

– John McNiff, Roger Williams National Memorial

- “What is Roger Williams’s lasting legacy? That’s the amazing thing about him. We’ve got legal historians, political historians, economic historians, intellectual historians (in Rhode Island) and he means something different to each of us. And because of the complex figure that he is, we all get to delve into him to such great depth about these different ways of looking at him and his impact.”

– Morgan Grefe, executive director of the Rhode Island Historical Society

- “Because there are Jews, because there are Buddhists, because there are Christians like me that don’t want even the Episcopalian governor telling me what to believe or do. I think everybody has a responsibility – we have rights and one day we’re going to lookup and they’ll be gone. And it isn’t going to be the Catholic Bishop that took them away from us. It is going to be our inaction, our inability to teach children and ourselves that we should have freedom of religion, that nobody should tell us what to believe. So I’m asking everybody to pay attention to Roger.”

– Ray Rickman, historian

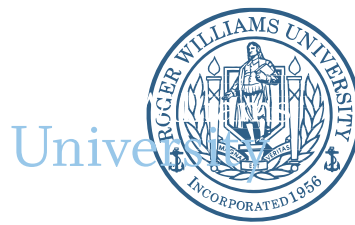
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