

Massachusetts Bay and Rhode Island

TWO MODELS OF RELIGIOUS LIBERTY



The idea of religious liberty meant different things to different groups of settlers. To the people of Massachusetts Bay, religious liberty included the ability to establish their own religious communities and exclude those who did not share their beliefs. Rhode Island was founded not on religious uniformity, but on the principle of freedom of conscience for all individuals.

JOHN WINTHROP

In the 1630s, over 20,000 Puritans left England for Massachusetts. The Puritans believed that the Anglican Church (the established religion in England) had become corrupted by Catholic influence. They journeyed to the new world to create a model society which they hoped would inspire the reform of the Anglican Church.

John Winthrop, a lawyer by training, was the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, which was centered in Boston and Cambridge. To Winthrop, religious liberty meant the ability to establish and nurture an independent religious community that would inspire change in the Anglican Church. In his sermon *A Model of Christian Charity* (1630), Winthrop explained that the purpose of the Massachusetts Bay settlement would be “to improve our lives to do more service to the Lord.” In all matters, the colonists would be guided by their understanding of biblical precepts.

Winthrop explained why heretics should not be welcomed in the colony. Because the residents of the colony had joined together voluntarily, he wrote in 1637, “then no man has right to come into us, etc., without our consent.” This was because the colony had a right to self-preservation: “If we are bound to keep off whatsoever appears to tend to our ruin or damage, then we may lawfully refuse to receive such whose dispositions suit not with ours and whose society we know will be hurtful to us...” Religious liberty meant that the colony could not be forced to

accept into residence people who did not fully accept their moral code and whose beliefs or behavior would dilute the religious character of the community.

THE MASSACHUSETTS BODY OF LIBERTIES

The Massachusetts Body of Liberties, written by Cambridge-educated lawyer and Puritan minister Nathaniel Ward in 1641, was one of the first codes of law in New England. Citing biblical passages as justification in many places, the Body of Liberties provided due process protections (including bans on double jeopardy and “inhumane, barbarous or cruel” punishment) and set the death penalty for those who committed witchcraft, blasphemy, homosexuality, adultery, murder, treason, and worship of “any other god, but the lord god.” A half dozen or more of the “liberties” or rights in the Massachusetts Body of Liberties found their way into the U.S. Bill of Rights of 1791.

The Body of Liberties defined religious rights for Christians: “All the people of god within this Jurisdiction who are not in a church way, and be orthodox in judgment and not scandalous in life, shall have full liberty to gather themselves into a Church Estate. Provided they do it in a Christian way, with due observation of the rules of Christ revealed in his word.” Churches were free to elect their own officers, “provided they be able, pious and orthodox.” The Colony would also have a monthly Christian conference to prevent “error and offense” and “for the maintenance and exercise of brotherly communion.” In this way, the Puritans maintained uniformity of belief and practice.

ROGER WILLIAMS

Winthrop welcomed Roger Williams when Williams arrived in Massachusetts Bay from London

in 1631. Williams was a former Anglican Minister. He left England because of his controversial opinions, and his beliefs continued to make him controversial in Massachusetts. Williams had become a separatist—he did not wish to reform the Anglican Church; he wanted to break free of it. This went against the express purpose of the Massachusetts Bay Colony which was to inspire a reform of the Anglican Church.

But Williams did not stop there. Williams asserted that religious belief could not be enforced, and that people of all faiths should receive the same protection from government. Williams was expelled from Salem, then Plymouth, and then Boston, and was eventually banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony entirely for spreading “new and dangerous opinions” [heresy].

Williams fled southwest and established a settlement. He named it Providence, which means God’s guidance or care. The Providence Agreement (1637) limited the authority of government to matters “only in civil things.” With this act, Williams helped establish the first place in modern history where civil government and religion were totally separate.

In the 1640s, Williams and his associate John Clarke returned to England to secure a Charter for the colony, now called Rhode Island and Providence Plantations. While Williams was there he wrote his most famous book, *The Bloudy Tenet of Persecution for Cause of Conscience* (1644). In it, he asserted, “All civil states with their officers of justice [are] essentially civil, and therefore not judges, governors, or defenders of the Spiritual, or Christian, State and worship....”

RHODE ISLAND

In 1663, King Charles II granted a charter to Rhode Island which designated no established faith and allowed full freedom of conscience for all. The Charter read in part: “[The colonists of Rhode Island] have freely declared, that it is much on their hearts (if they may be permitted), to hold forth a lively experiment, that a most flourishing civil state may stand and best be maintained... with a full liberty in religious concernments...”

The King further declared in the Charter “that no person... shall be anyway molested, punished, disquieted, or called in question, for any differences in opinion in matters of religion, and does not actually disturb the civil peace of our said colony; but that all and every person and persons may... freely and fully have and enjoy his and their own judgments and consciences, in matters of religious concernments....”

While Williams was not the first person to call for church-state separation and freedom of worship for all, Rhode Island was the first place in modern history where such separation was put into practice. The colony was a haven that welcomed people not tolerated elsewhere—Quakers, Jews, and others. The Jewish families who arrived in Rhode Island in 1658 had full freedom for the first time anywhere in the colonies.

Over the next two centuries, the colonies and, later, the states, would move away from the model of religious freedom defined by the Massachusetts Bay Colony toward the religious pluralism of Rhode Island.

critical
THINKING

1. What were John Winthrop's contributions to the Massachusetts Bay Colony?
2. What was the relationship between religion and government in Massachusetts Bay?
3. Why was Roger Williams a controversial figure in Massachusetts Bay?
4. What was the relationship between religion and government in the colony of Rhode Island?
5. Why do you think the King referred to Rhode Island as a "lively experiment" in the colony's Charter?