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 concerns...”

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 concerns....”

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?
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CLUB PLANS

Directions: Answer the following questions with your group members.

1. What is the name of your club? ______________________________________________

2. How will you work with the school? List three or four specific things you will do.
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3. How will you choose new student members? List three or four qualities you will look for.
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REFORMERS’ PLANS

Directions: Review the ways you wish to reform your assigned club and decide how you will make your case to join.

Reforming Football Club
You believe football is too violent a sport and should be banned from schools. The injury statistics have convinced you that you are correct. If adults want to assume the risk of playing, then they can make that decision, but minor children should not be allowed to play. In order to bring about your goal of ending the playing of football in schools, you decide to join the football club.

Reforming Music Club
You believe that music encourages dangerous lifestyles and all music except classical melodies should be banned from school. Violent lyrics, injuries at concerts, and the number of musicians who have died from drug-related incidents have convinced you that you are correct. In order to bring about your goal of banning all music except classical in schools, you decide to join the music club.

Reforming Literature Club
You believe that almost all books (except certain morality-based stories) should be banned from schools. Books that include magical characters like witches, wizards, vampires, or werewolves, are very damaging to the minds of young children. In order to bring about your goal of ending the stocking of library shelves with these dangerous books, you decide to join the literature club.

Reforming Computer Club
You believe that computers are unhealthy for young people. Obesity statistics and high rates of social isolation have convinced you that you are correct. Kids should play outside and exercise rather than sit in front of a screen all day, and schools have an obligation to promote healthy lifestyles. Computers also provide access to immoral materials. In order to bring about your goal of banning computers from schools, you decide to join the computer club.
Herein are four things to be propounded; first the persons, secondly, the work, thirdly the end, fourthly the means. [1]

First, for the persons. We are a company professing ourselves fellow members of Christ. ... [2]

Secondly for the work we have in hand. It is by a mutual consent, through a special overvaluing providence and a more than an ordinary approbation of the churches of Christ, to seek out a place of cohabitation and consortship under a due form of government both civil and ecclesiastical. In such cases as this, the care of the public must oversway all private respects, by which, not only conscience, but mere civil policy, doth bind us. [3]

Thirdly, the end is to improve our lives to do more service to the Lord; the comfort and increase of the body of Christ, whereof we are members, that ourselves and posterity may be the better preserved from the common corruptions of this evil world, to serve the Lord and work out our salvation under the power and purity of his holy ordinances. [4]

Fourthly, for the means whereby this must be effected.... we must love one another with a pure heart fervently. We must bear one another's burdens. We must not look only on our own things, but also on the things of our brethren. ...[5]

[When God gives a special commission He looks to have it strictly observed in every article. ...Thus stands the cause between God and us. We are entered into covenant with Him for this work. ...[6]

For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the ways of God, and all professors for God's sake. We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going. [7]

1. Winthrop explains the who, what, why, and how of the colony. Put these in your own words.
   - Who are they? [2]
   - What are they going to do? [3]
   - Why will they do it [4]
   - How will they achieve their goals? [5]

2. What is the overarching goal of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, according to Winthrop? [6]

3. According to Winthrop, what is at stake in their success or failure? [7]
Roger Williams

From *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution, for the Cause of Conscience, Discussed in a Conference Between Truth and Peace*, 1644

The doctrine of persecution for cause of conscience, is proved guilty of all the blood of the souls crying for vengeance under the altar. … [1]

All civil states, with their officers of justice, in their respective constitutions and administrations, are proved essentially civil, and therefore not judges, governors, or defenders of the spiritual, or Christian, state and worship. … [2]

It is the will and command of God that, since the coming of his Son the Lord Jesus, a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or anti-christian consciences and worships be granted to all men in all nations and countries: and they are only to be fought against with that sword which is only, in soul matters, able to conquer: to wit, the sword of God's Spirit, the word of God. … [3]

God requires not an uniformity of religion to be enacted and enforced in any civil state; which enforced uniformity, sooner or later, is the greatest occasion of civil war, ravishing of conscience, persecution of Christ Jesus in his servants, and of the hypocrisy and destruction of millions of souls. … [4]

An enforced uniformity of religion throughout a nation or civil state, confounds the civil and religious, denies the principles of Christianity and civility, and that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. … [5]

Lastly, true civility and Christianity may both flourish in a state or kingdom, notwithstanding the permission of … contrary consciences, either of Jew or Gentile. [6]

**discussion questions**

1. What does Roger Williams mean by “persecution for cause of conscience”? [1]
2. What relationship does Williams call for between civil authorities and religious matters? [2]
3. What justifications does Williams give for his advocacy of freedom for all individual consciences? [3, 4, 5, and 6]
Directions: Complete the Venn Diagram to compare and contrast the colonies of Massachusetts Bay and Rhode Island. While you fill in your diagram, consider the colonies’ purposes, definitions of religious liberty, and other ideas you believe are important.