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Roger Williams,
Apostle of Religious Bigotry

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Roger Williams, Apostle of Religious Bigotry

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AS the time of the tercentennial observance of the landing of the Pilgrims of St. Mary's draws near, it is to be expected that prejudiced minds will give expression to dissent from the view that there is really any occasion for commemoration. Already some of this dissent has come to the surface in the public press in communications to the editors. The reason for all this is simple. George Calvert, the first Lord Baltimore who planned the colony of Maryland and obtained its liberties, and his sons, Cecilius Calvert, the second Lord Baltimore, who at the death of his father carried on his plans and Leonard Calvert who led the voyage of the Ark and the Dove, were Roman Catholics and so was the redoubtable Thomas Cornwaleys, the Miles Standish of Maryland, who played an important role in the early assemblies that made history. Then, too, the Father Andrew White, the spiritual adviser of the Lords Baltimore, who drafted the famous "Declaratio Coloniae" outlining the plans and purposes of the new colony, first and foremost of which was to "sow the seeds of religion and piety" and who saw the fields of Maryland as "white for the harvest" was a Jesuit priest, as were his co-missionaries, Fathers Altham and Gervase who came with him to Maryland on the Ark and the Dove. So it is not at all surprising that attempts should be made to minimize the historical significance of the founding of Mary-

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land and to detract it every way possible from the approaching tercentennial observance.

I

It so happens that there is reliable and unbiased non-Catholic authority to support the claim made in the preamble of the resolution of the Assembly of Maryland creating the tercentennial commission that the Pilgrims of St. Mary's who made their first landing on St. Clement's Island in the Chesapeake Bay on March 25, 1634, "established a free representative government providing for the first time in history, separation of church and state and securing to the people of Maryland religious toleration and the right to worship according to the dictates of their own consciences."

Just two hundred years after the landing of the Maryland pilgrims the New England historian George Bancroft wrote these words:¹

Calvert (Lord Baltimore) deserves to be ranked among the most wise and benevolent law-givers of all ages. He was the first in the history of the Christian world to seek for religious security and peace by the practice of justice and not by the exercise of power; to plan the establishment of popular institutions with the enjoyment of liberty of conscience; to advance the career of civilization by recognizing the rightful equality of all Christian sects. The asylum of Papists was the spot where in a remote corner of the world on the banks of rivers which yet had hardly been explored, the mild forbearance of a proprietary adopted religious freedom as the basis of the state.

These words of Bancroft have found their way into few histories but although his words may not have been frequently quoted or his conclusions generally accepted by non-Catholic historians they have never been seriously questioned or suc-

¹Vol. I. (18th Edition), p. 244. This passage is found in no less than twenty-four editions of Bancroft's History and until 1872. It is omitted in the abridged editions of 1876 and 1883 but other passages in the abridged editions indicate that there was no radical change in the historian's views as to Maryland liberties.

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cessfully controverted for they are based on historical facts.

Too much attention and importance has been given to the so-called Maryland "Toleration Act of 1649." Religious liberty was not established under this act but only recognized and protected. Religious liberty and a fuller measure of it came over on the Ark and the Dove in the letters of instructions given by the second Lord Baltimore to the voyagers before they sailed. They were told to be "silent upon all occasions of discourse concerning matters of religion."² This was wonderful advice for the day and time and it was very easy to understand, for it simply meant that each man, when it came to the matter of religion, was to "mind his own business." This would have been excellent advice for the Puritans who had already come to New England. Previous to the sailing of the Ark and the Dove Lord Baltimore had submitted several questions to the Provincial of the Jesuit mission in England and in one of the answers to his questions is found the comment that conversion should not be forced.³ Freedom from persecution, a cessation of enforced conformity and silence on all "occasions of discourse concerning matters of religion" were quite enough in that day not only to establish religious toleration but also to bring about a very practical sort of religious liberty.

Notwithstanding all this we are now told that Roger Williams was the real "Apostle of Religious Liberty in America" and that his glory must not be dimmed by Lord Baltimore and the Pilgrims of St. Mary's. The priority claimed for Williams is based largely upon the fact that he came to America in 1631, some three years before the voyage of the Ark and the Dove. The date of his coming, however, has no real relative importance, for when he came he was as

²Hall, *Narratives of Early Maryland*, p. 16.

³Johnson, *Foundations of Maryland*, pp. 24-30.

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narrow and bigoted as were any of the Puritans of his day. As a matter of fact a strong and bitter religious prejudice dominated his whole life, and bigotry remained with him until the end of his days. He gave expressions to opinions which one of his biographers said "are as yet by no means easy of full comprehension" and these opinions showed at first no leaning toward the idea of religious liberty, but indicated on the contrary an avowed spirit of intolerance.

He was a most pronounced dissenter from the Church of England. On his arrival at Boston he refused to join the Boston Church because its members had not publicly repented for their former communion with the English Church. He would have nothing to do with any church that held communion with or gave recognition to the established Church of the Mother Country or even allowed its members while visiting in England to attend Anglican worship. To hold any communion with "her of England" he held to be a heinous sin. He called upon the churches of the colony to disclaim the Church of England as "no church at all" and when they did not do so he called upon his own church in Salem to renounce all communion with its neighbor churches as they were full of "the pollution of anti-Christ."

He preached sermons against the use of all ceremonies and symbols claiming they came from Popery and would lead to a false religion. He influenced Endicott to give his famous show of bigotry when the latter with his sword cut from the military colors the cross of St. George because it was an idolatrous and popish sign. He denounced the resident's oath of allegiance on the ground that it was blasphemous to administer such an oath to an unregenerate person claiming this was having communion with a wicked man in the worship of God. He even went so far as to urge his people not to pray with unregenerates although they might be members of their

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own families. To his congregation at Salem he preached the duty of women to wear veils in church and because his wife was one of the women who refused to obey this order and went to church veilles, he refused to join her in the family devotions. One of the strange vagaries of his mind was reflected in his attitude on the question of baptism. He was persuaded to believe that his infant baptism was worthless so he was re-baptized. Then he discovered that the baptism of the man who baptized him was worthless, so he decided that there was no man living having authority to baptize and that there was no true Church anywhere.⁴

II

It was not until 1635, over a year after the landing of the Pilgrims of St. Mary's, that there is any evidence of his attitude on the question of religious liberty, for it was in that year that he openly expressed his opposition to compulsory church attendance. Here was a gleam of light but it was only a gleam which the clouds of bigotry and intolerance soon obscured. It was not by reason of his stand on this question, however, that he was banished from Massachusetts. He was brought to trial in October, 1635 for "divers new and dangerous opinions," four in number: the first that the magistrates ought not to punish for a breach of the first table of the law; second, that an oath ought not to be tendered to an unregenerate man; third, that no man should pray with an unregenerate, although that person be wife, child, etc.; and fourth, that a man ought not to give thanks after sacrament nor after meat. Williams had also taken a stand on public questions that were calculated to cause trouble from the home government. He denounced the King as a blasphemer for daring to call Europe Christendom and preached against the royal charter as a sinful

⁴Schneider, *The Puritan Mind*, p. 56.

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instrument of oppression and insisted that it be publicly forfeited, that the colonists should not claim title through royal grant, and that all lands be purchased from the Indians. This did not prevent him later, however, from accepting a royal grant in Rhode Island.

There has been much dispute as to whether Williams was banished for his political or his religious opinions. The evidence seems to support the former view. Dr. Joseph Hopkins Twichell in his "Life of John Winthrop" in the "Makers of America" series says of Williams' banishment:⁵

He is often spoken of as the victim of religious bigotry. He was nothing of the sort. In his general onslaught on the errors prevailing around him—and to his view little else did prevail—he fell foul of the charter. This he went up and down declaring it to be an instrument of no validity whatsoever, a royal thief's conveyance of property that was none of his, not worth the paper it was written on; that all titles based on it were wholly spurious and to hold them otherwise a crime. As for himself he would not, by becoming a freeman, partake the iniquity. The outraged government of course commanded him to stop that kind of talk or it would be the worse for him. For a wonder—it was his only moment of weakness—he promised to do so. But he was not able to keep his word. His violent and tumultuous carriage against the charter was resumed and maintained with exhaustive pertinacity. From time to time he added fresh aggravations, for example he proclaimed that the magistrates in tendering the oath of loyalty to the commonwealth were guilty of causing God's name to be taken in vain. Plainly he was a man impossible to put up with in the circumstances.

Charles Deane, vice-president of the Massachusetts Historical Society in Winsor's "Narrative and Critical History of America" says⁶ that "Williams was banished from Massachusetts principally for political reasons. His peculiar opinions relating to soul liberty were not fully developed until after he had taken up his residence in Rhode Island."

⁵P. 134.

⁶Vol. III, p. 336.

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It was long after his banishment that Roger Williams set up a form of religious liberty in Rhode Island. In 1644, he returned from England with the royal charter which was to "hold forth a lively experiment that a most flourishing civil state may stand and best be maintained with a full liberty of religious concernments."

Henry Martin Dexter, one-time editor of the *Congregationalist*, says: "I find no proof that Williams at the time of his residence in Massachusetts had advanced to the holding of the full doctrine of liberty of conscience which he afterwards avowed and subsequently modified." The same writer also states that "the claim that Mr. Williams was in any sense the originator or first promulgator of the modern doctrine of liberty of conscience though often made is wholly without foundation."

The real question goes deeper than this and is not concerned chiefly with dates, laws or charters. Real religious liberty is born of the spirit and is not created by law alone. It is, indeed, the very spirit of God revealed in the lives of men who have caught the vision of the Divine and translated it in terms of human conduct. The spirit of religious liberty first came to America in the Ark and the Dove and that spirit so guided the Pilgrims of St. Mary's that they first brought to our shores the message of peace and good will among all Christians and first gave sanctuary on American soil to all the persecuted and the oppressed.

In "The Puritan Mind," Professor Henry Wallace Schneider has given a new understanding of Roger Williams which is a departure from the traditional view of his biographers. It would seem after reading Professor Schneider that Williams did not establish religious liberty in Rhode Island so

⁷Dexter, As to Roger Williams, p. 86, note 318.

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much as he created religious anarchy. "Rhode Island," he says, "thus became a refuge for all sorts of religious misfits,"⁸ or, as Cotton Mather expressed it at the time:⁹

It has become a colluvies of Antinomians, Familists, Anabaptists, Anti-Sabbatarians, Arminians, Socinians, Quakers, Ranters, everything in the world but Roman Catholicks, and real Christians, tho of the latter I hope there have been more than of the former among them; so that if a man lost his religion, he might find it at the general muster of opinionists! The former generation of Rhode Islanders is now generally gone off the stage . . . the rising generation, confounded by the contradictions in religion among their parents, are under horrible temptations and under some unhappy tendencies to be of no religion at all.

There was no sanctuary in Rhode Island for Roman Catholics in the days of Roger Williams. As late as 1680, Peleg Sanford, governor of the province, reported to the Board of Trade in England that "as for Papists we know of none amongst us."¹⁰ There was a good reason why there were no Catholics in Rhode Island at this time. They were not wanted. Historians of the State have had a hard time trying to explain away a law that was apparently passed in 1664 expressly excluding Roman Catholics from the franchise. It is claimed that the exception is not in the original laws which are in manuscript but was inserted by a revision committee. The exception is in no less than five printed revisions of the laws and each of these revisions were submitted to and approved by the Assembly. It was not repealed until 1783. One apologist says that it really makes no difference even if this law was originally adopted as no harm was done, there being no Catholics in the colony at the time, and another says that the franchise had really nothing to do with religious

⁸P. 56.

⁹Mather, *Magnalia*, Bk. VII, Ch. III, sec. 12.

¹⁰I Arnold's *History of Rhode Island*, p. 490.

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liberty. One of the reasons given for the belief that this exception was not put into the law as early as 1664 is that to discriminate against Catholics would be "totally at variance with the antecedents of Roger Williams" and with his expressed opinions on religious liberty. As will be subsequently shown this discrimination is quite consistent with Williams' anti-Catholic antecedents and with his bitter hatred of the Church of Rome.

Although outwardly tolerant, Roger Williams at heart was a confirmed bigot. This is revealed in his letters, pamphlets and disputations, of which there are many. He was a born fighter and wherever he went there was a large-sized chip on his shoulder. Dr. Twichell said that he was "the genius of social incompatibility. Everywhere he lingered there forthwith sprang up strife and in an acute form. The community in which he sojourned he invariably set by the ears and embroiled with its neighbors."¹¹ Grahame, Scotch historian, characterizes Williams as a¹²

stubborn Brownist, keen, unpliant, illiberal, unforbearing and passionate, seasoning evil with good and error with truth. He began to vent from the pulpit which he had gained by his substantial piety and fervid zeal, a singular medley of notions, some wildly speculative, some boldly opposed to the constitutions of civil society.

Grahame says that Williams not only withdrew from the society of his wife because she would not yield to his whims but also had nothing to do with his children because he counted them "unregenerate."

III

He was hopelessly controversial. John Fiske says that there was scarcely any subject upon which he did not wrangle. Little sympathy would he have had for the advice given by

¹¹Twichell, John Winthrop, p. 132.

¹²Colonial History of the United States, Vol. I, p. 166.

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the young Lord Baltimore "to be silent on all occasions of discourse concerning matters of religion." The Quakers were given sanctuary in Rhode Island but it was not a peaceful sanctuary. Although he would allow no one else to molest the Quakers in the exercise of their religion, he molested them by a challenge to an acrimonious debate and disturbed the peace which they sought and had reason to believe they would have in this haven of refuge. He did not try to force his own opinions upon them by laws but he did attempt to do so by words. He tried to make them see the errors of their way of thinking by a barrage of controversy that lasted four days and four nights. His challenge to George Fox, the Quaker leader, rings like a challenge to a prize fight. Accompanying the challenge were fourteen propositions which he boasted he would maintain in public "against all comers." It is small wonder that the Quaker Wenlock Christison left Rhode Island for Maryland where he found a happy and peaceful home and named it "The End of Controversie." George Fox also visited Maryland and was allowed to preach without let or hindrance, was never challenged to a debate and in his diary records that the leading men of the colony listened to him with respect, and that he was received everywhere with reverence.

Williams controversy with the Quakers throws more light on his true nature than does any other incident in his life. The debates began in the Quaker meeting house at Newport and lasted three days and nights and then were adjourned to Providence where they terminated after another day, with the usual result, producing no effect, as one biographer says, other "than to exasperate the friends of both parties and set them still more violently against each other."¹³ The debates were scenes of tumult and disorder and attracted large crowds of

¹³Gammel's *Roger Williams*, Vol. IV, *Spark's Biographies*, p. 189.

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spectators who cheered and jeered in turn. There was no moderator or umpire and he who could talk the loudest and the longest could convince himself that his views had prevailed. In this way Williams satisfied himself that he had won the debate. To celebrate his victory Williams wrote out all that he said in the debate, and probably more too, which he had printed in pamphlet form and labeled "George Fox Digged out of his Burrows." It was unfortunate for him and his reputation as "The Apostle of Religious Liberty in America" that he chose to triumphantly broadcast to posterity his vile and violent utterances in this debate rather than to suffer them to be buried in the eclipse of a verbal controversy of which there would otherwise have been no record. A reprint of "George Fox Digged out of His Burrows" contains some three hundred pages and may be found in volume five of the publications of the Narragansett Club, first series. Anyone having any preconceived notions as to the liberality, tolerance and forbearance of Roger Williams will only have to read a few pages of this volume to suffer a rude shock.

Williams' biographers have mostly ignored this written evidence of their idol's bigotry. Gammell, one of the earlier biographers, however, does say that the pamphlet "was distinguished by a bitterness and severity of language unequaled in any of his other writings"¹⁴ and the most recent biographer, Emily Easton, offers some apology for her idol's fall from grace when she says:¹⁵

The rehearsal, however, of the long and tedious argument is as tiresome and profitless as the original debate must have been. In his conduct of it, he is constantly guilty of the same faults with which he accuses his adversaries. The violent railing language is the contradiction of the gentle spirit of tolerance that has formerly characterized him, the Apostle of Religious Liberty. "George Fox Digged out of his Burrows" and a "New England Fire Brand

¹⁴Ibid., p. 190.

¹⁵Roger Williams, Prophet and Pioneer, p. 358.

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Quenched" are not adapted to general reading in modern times nor do they add to the greatness of Roger Williams.

This biographer is very mild and merciful when she says that these writings are not adapted to general reading and do not add to the greatness of Roger Williams. The truth of the matter is that his own evidence left to posterity is sufficiently damning to forever blast the hopes of his admirers and apologists that there can be retained for him the title of "The Apostle of Religious Liberty in America."

IV

Williams' hatred of the Quakers was only exceeded by his hatred of Catholics upon whom he bestowed all the venom of which his nature was capable. Quakers and Catholics he placed in the same category and consigned them both to the lake "that burns with fire and brimstone." "The foundation both of the Papists and Quakers," he wrote, "is laid deep upon the sand of rotten nature." Their fastings, penances, alms, prayers, and sufferings are but "the dung of men and beasts," and other filthy things which are quite unprintable, although they are embalmed in the archives of the Narragansett Club. This and what follows are good samples of the stream of slime that flows through the whole attack. "I did say," he writes, "that as the W—— of Rome deceived whole towns, cities and kingdoms with her glorious trimmings and her Golden Cup, so that the Painted Quaker (as a drunken w——) should follow the drunken W—— of Rome for the obtaining of (the smoke of a tobacco pipe) the riches and honour of this world." The peaceful Quakers he looks upon as potential bloodthirsty murderers, for he says if "their spirit should ever get a sword" he would not place them above drinking the blood of all their enemies "as the Papists are justly charged with drinking the blood of the saints." First

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he combines the Catholics and Quakers in a diabolical conspiracy and then he links together the Pope and the Quakers as "horrible revilers, slanderers and cursers of the righteous." His parting fling at the venerable George Fox is to compare him with a "filthy sow" that "wallows in the mud and dung-hill of mystical filthiness."¹⁶

Williams was seventy-three years of age when he debated with the Quakers and lest it be claimed that he may have been in his dotage and that his language does not reflect his real sentiments and opinions of earlier years, attention must be called to a letter which he wrote some twelve years previous (1660) to the kindly John Winthrop. Dipping his pen in the same venom and filth that he used in 1672 he expressed to his friend the fond hope ("cordial") that the Catholic Church, to which he applies the same vile epithet bestowed upon it in the controversy with the Quakers, "will shortly appear so extremely loathsome in her drunkenness and bestiality that her bewitched paramours will tear her flesh and burn her with fire unqueanchable."¹⁷ And this from the man of whom his last biographer says possessed "the gentle spirit of tolerance"!

It is to be borne in mind that these words were written in coolness and deliberation and are not words spoken in the heat and haste of debate and they reflect the inner convictions and deep-set prejudices of the man who is held up in American history as the personification of Christian love and charity. Some excuse might be offered for Williams in indulging in filthy invectives and imprecations of hate in the excitement of a spirited oral controversy but what possible excuse can be offered when in the quiet and seclusion of his study he wrote the letter to Winthrop and later deliberately and laboriously

¹⁶Publications of Narragansett Club, 1st series, Vol. 5, pp. 235, 262-4, 433-501.

¹⁷Ibid., Vol. 6, pp. 307-311.

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wrote out for publication every vile epithet of which in his frenzy of bigotry he could conceive to hurl at Catholic and Quaker alike? It may be said for him that he was but "a child of the age in which he lived" and simply made use of weapons in the form of language that were used by others who played the role of religious reformers in his day and before his day. This may all be true but when this is said for him thereupon the mantle of a prophet or an apostle of the modern spirit of religious freedom falls from him. What a marked contrast there is between him and the Lords Baltimore who went beyond what was expected by the standards and conventions of their day and were tolerant in a day of intolerance and kindly and charitable towards their fellow men when bigotry and hatred were enthroned. Both they and the Pilgrims of St. Mary's who laid the foundations of early Maryland were not unmindful of the commandment to "love thy neighbor as thyself" to which the Founder of Rhode Island gave little heed.

No word indicating the slightest dislike of or prejudice toward those not of their faith ever came from the lips or pen of the first Lord Baltimore or his son. Only once did the former refer to Protestants after his change of faith and that was when he wrote to his friend Wentworth, the Earl of Strafford, "we Papists want not charity towards you Protestants, whatever the less understanding part of the world may think of us."¹⁸ The only reference made by the second Lord Baltimore to those not of his faith was in the letter of instructions where he cautions the Catholics "to suffer no scandal nor offense to be given to any of the Protestants" and to treat them with all "the mildness and favor that justice will permit."¹⁹

¹⁸August 12, 1630. Cf. Wilhelm's *Sir George Calvert*, p. 161.

¹⁹Hall, *Narratives of Early Maryland*, p. 16.

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Today the claim is being made that the honor for introducing religious liberty into the New World rightfully belongs not to the founders of Maryland but to Roger Williams whose figure has always loomed disproportionately large in American history, quite overshadowing the Lords Baltimore, the Pilgrims of St. Mary's and the saintly Father White, "the Apostle of Maryland," and their beneficent influence on our early colonial history. It is quite proper at this time that Roger Williams should be judged as he was quite willing to be judged in his own day when he submitted his evidence before the bar of public opinion and that is by his own words. He deliberately and exultingly drew aside the curtain and exposed to the view of posterity the venom and hatred that were in his mind and heart. Accordingly, fair judgment in this day can only bestow upon him the title of "The Apostle of Religious Bigotry."

