A Pioneer of Religious Toleration.

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THE great struggle for complete liberty of conscience and toleration in religion has been a very long and costly one, and is not even yet fully won. It is well, therefore, that we should remember the arduous and conspicuous part in it which was taken by one of its earliest pioneers of whom too little is known to-day, although he most unselfishly sacrificed his whole life for this sacred cause.

Roger Williams was not the first Englishman to advocate religious toleration, but he was the first, against fierce opposition, to put his principles into practice. Sir Thomas More in his 'Utopia' had preached toleration in theory, but in practice, he openly encouraged the persecution of the Reformers. Thomas Helwys, the first to form a Baptist congregation in England, had, as early as 1612, declared that the King could only demand civil obedience "for men's religion to God is betwixt God and themselves, the king shall not answer for it." The Pilgrim Fathers sailed to America in 1620 to secure liberty of conscience for their own worship, but they were not altogether prepared to grant to others what they had secured at such sacrifice themselves. An impartial review of history reveals the fact that no religious party had at this time adopted, or at least understood properly, the principle of full and complete liberty of worship. Even the plea made by the 'Separatists' for liberty of conscience, was based as much on their difficult circumstances as on their conscientious convictions. We have definite evidence of this in the case of the Pilgrim Fathers of New Plymouth, for they expelled the Puritan divine, Lyford, for endeavouring to form a Church Prayer Book party in their infant Colony. Similarly the Puritan Colonists of New England, having gained freedom from the persecution of the English bishops, persecuted equally severely all who would not accept the rigid and harsh discipline of their theocratic government—"always tender of their own consciences, they were unyielding towards the religious beliefs of others." In 1656, the four United Colonies, including New Plymouth, passed a law punishing Quakers with stripes, and imprisonment with hard labour, and adjudging all defenders of their tenets to fine, imprisonment or exile. Massachusetts Colony even resorted to hanging.

As late as 1657, Plymouth Colony declared that "full liberty of conscience was prejudicial, if not destructive to Civil and Church Societies." In England, a similar persecuting spirit was not lacking since the Independent divine, John Owen, the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford, ordered two Quaker women to be flogged for exhorting a congregation after the Service. Cromwell, who loudly proclaimed his belief in liberty of conscience, denied it to Prelatists and Papists, and humorously declared to the Governor of a surrendered Irish garrison—"As to what you say concerning liberty of conscience, I meddle not with any man's conscience, but if you mean by liberty

of conscience, liberty to exercise the Mass, I judge it expedient to use plain dealing with you, and to tell you that, where the Parliament of England have rule, that will not be allowed of."

We must therefore sorrowfully admit that early in the XVIIth century with but few exceptions, the championship of religious toleration was regarded as a mark of heresy or sedition. But we should also remember that this persecution of those who dared to oppose an authorised or State form of Faith, was a relic or "*damnosa hereditas*" of the Middle Ages, which, even though in a modified form, survived the Reformation Movement. Thus Calvin acquiesced in the burning of Servetus, as did also Cranmer in that of the Unitarian Joan Bocher, while Arian heretics like Bartholomew Legatt and Wightman were executed as late as 1611. Thus, while it took at least two generations before persecuted Puritans and Separatists acted on the implications of the equal priesthood of all believers, which they preached, it is all the more remarkable that Roger Williams, as early as 1631, had fearlessly affirmed that the "civil magistrate has no right to restrain or direct the consciences of men, and that anything short of unlimited toleration for all religious systems is detestable persecution." In all his future chequered and varied career, and in spite of many hardships and much opposition, especially to his censorious and often dangerous views, Williams was absolutely consistent in advocating and carrying out this enlightened principle. He was certainly an unwearied apostle and pioneer of full religious liberty.

Very little is known of his early life and upbringing, and even his parentage and date of birth are disputed. One view is that he was born in Wales in 1599, another that he was an Englishman, born in London, and a son of a merchant tailor. It has also been asserted that he was of gentle origin and born in Cornwall in 1602, although one of his biographers declares that he was not born till 1607. In any case we know that he secured the interest of the great lawyer, Sir Edward Coke, who entered him as a scholar of Charter House in 1621, and sent him to Pembroke College, Cambridge, in 1623 where he graduated B.A. in 1626. He was evidently then ordained, and became Chaplain to Sir W. M. Otes in Essex, but he very soon espoused advanced Puritan views, and opposed the Church liturgy and ceremonies, and on conscientious grounds refused the offer of two livings—"my conscience" he declares, "was persuaded against the National Church and the ceremonies and Bishops." Wishing to escape persecution he then accepted a call to work in New England, and he sailed with his wife, Mary, from Bristol in December, 1630, and arrived in America in February, 1631, where he was welcomed by Governor Winthrop as "a godly minister." We must bear in mind that these Massachusetts Colonists, whom Williams now joined, although strongly opposed to many of the Church ceremonies, still professed affectionate loyalty to their 'dear Mother', 'the Church of England', and blessed God for the spiritual 'parentage and education' which "they had sucked from her breasts." Neither they nor the Pilgrim Fathers had any quarrel with the doctrinal teaching of the Church. John Robinson, the much loved Pastor of these 'Separatist' exiles, declared that "to the Confession of Faith published in the name of the Church of England, and to every article thereof, we do with the Reformed

Churches where we live, and also elsewhere, assent wholly." The New England Puritans were strong Calvinists, and established their Colony on a strict ecclesiastical basis. John Cotton, their spiritual leader, declared that "It is better that the Commonwealth be fashioned to the setting forth of God's house, which is His Church, than to accommodate the Church frame to the Civil State." Members had to satisfy the Church as to their faith and doctrine, and only such members could be freemen of the City and Colony, and this ecclesiastical stranglehold remained in force till 1684. In fact, the intolerant persecuting methods of this New England Church, were equally severe with those of Laud and the Anglican bishops which had caused this Puritan emigration. They "whipped, mutilated and banished" any who dared to oppose them or assert their rights of conscience. It was not therefore surprising that Williams could not long remain happy as a minister of a Boston Church of this type. He already held 'Separatist' views, and so he regarded his congregation as an "unseparated" people because they refused to declare their repentance for having had communion with the Church of England, and they also allowed the Civil authorities to punish for spiritual censures. He therefore accepted an invitation to act as Assistant minister to a Salem church, which had just turned 'separatist'. But the Boston Council objected to this 'heretical' preacher of toleration remaining in their midst, and so Williams migrated to the Pilgrim Fathers' Colony of New Plymouth, where he was received with respect by Governor Bradford, and he became an Asssistant pastor in the Church there and for two years supported himself by manual labour, and it was here that his eldest daughter was born. He also made friends with the neighbouring Indian chiefs with a view to evangelistic work amongst them—"My soul's desire" he affirmed, "was to do the natives good." But he soon alarmed and alienated the Plymouth Colony by declaring that the Crown had no right to grant them a Charter for their land, since it belonged properly to the Indians. They were therefore much relieved when Williams accepted an invitation to return to the Salem church. Here he advanced extreme views, maintaining that those considered as 'unregenerate' could not pray or even take an oath of fidelity to the Civil government, and that no godly person could have any communion with them, and that other Boston churches who did not accept these censorious views were "anti-Christian." Singularly he did not regard his strenuous advocacy of full religious toleration as incompatible with these harsh, uncharitable opinions. As the Salem Church was not prepared to go to such extremes, Williams created a serious schism, by gathering round him a few like-minded fanatics to whom he ministered in his own house. As he also denied the authority of the Colony's Royal Patent, the Massachusetts Council banished him as a disturber of the peace, and even tried to get him shipped home to England. He had further angered them by denouncing the Church of England as anti-Christian and by denying the authority of the Civil Power over consciences in its order to make attendance at public worship compulsory. Williams managed to escape into the 'wilderness', and for a time endured a very perilous and unhappy exile. At length, with a few companions, he settled beyond the reach of the Boston

authorities at Providence, Rhode Island, with his family and a few followers, and here he founded a new Colony and purchased the lands from the Indian chiefs, thus satisfying his sensitive conscience concerning the justness of his title to them. He divided these lands with his twelve fellow exiles and very soon other refugees from Massachusetts and England joined them, and the Colony became a 'Cave of Adullam' for a difficult company of 'cranks' and 'disturbers of the peace' in other Colonies. As Williams declared later, he desired that the new Colony "might be a shelter for persons distressed for conscience" and evidently his wish was fully realised! His friendship with the Indians proved of great service to all the Colonies, as he was able, at great personal risk, to frustrate the design of a league of Indian tribes to destroy the Colonists. Later on he was not as successful, and a tribe of warlike Pequods attacked the Colonies, but were in the end defeated and wiped out, except for a few women and children who were sent as slaves to Boston. As Governor of the infant colony of Rhode Island, Williams had a difficult and uphill struggle, since Massachusetts refused all trade and intercourse with it, and in 1643 all the four Colonies formed a federation of the "United Colonies of New England" which deliberately excluded Rhode Island. Williams started a Separatist Church in Providence and adopted Baptist views, and thus established the first Baptist Church in America. He got himself and others re-baptized, but even this definite change did not satisfy his uneasy and exacting conscience. After four months, he resigned his charge, declaring that he could not accept any established form of Creed, because it might restrict individual liberty of conscience. He then doubted the validity of his own recent baptism as well as the Apostolic authority of all Orders, and called himself a 'Seeker'. It seems probable that he relinquished these extreme fanatical views later on, and although he allowed full liberty of conscience to others, his own peculiar conscientious inhibitions must have sadly marred his fellowship with other Christians. In 1643, Williams paid a special visit to England to secure a Charter for the new Rhode Island Colony. His mission was no easy one as the Civil War was at its height; but he had influential friends, including Cromwell, Sir Harry Vane and John Milton. At length, after nearly two years, he succeeded. While in England, he wrote a challenging treatise denouncing "The Bloody Doctrine of Persecution for the Cause of Conscience," which so angered the presbyterian House of Commons that they ordered it to be burned. In his crusade for complete liberty of conscience, Williams was far ahead of his generation, as even the Independents regarded it as 'rank heresy leading to anarchy and chaos', while Milton in his 'Areopagitica' wished for the complete extirpation of Roman Catholics. It was therefore all the more remarkable that just 300 years ago, in 1644, Williams secured a Charter expressly providing for liberty of conscience. It is a memorable date in the history of Christian civilisation. It provided for a Civil government, the executive power resting in an annually elected President, and four assistants who could punish all who transgressed the accepted Code of laws, and then it stated that "all men may walk as their conscience persuade them, every one in the name of his God. And let the saints of the most High walk in this

Colony without molestation, in the name of Jehovah their God for ever and ever."

The principles set forth in the Rhode Island Charter allowing government by popular consent, freedom of conscience, speech and of the press anticipated the later democratic principles enunciated in the American Declaration of Independence. It was not surprising that this striking success was specially obnoxious to the Massachusetts Colony, and it endeavoured to suppress and persecute this infant Settlement. Some of their leading members were arrested and taken to Boston, where they were brutally treated as 'Anabaptists." On the other hand, the numbers of disgruntled and anarchic refugees in Rhode Island hindered the establishment of a stable and organised form of government there, and Williams had no easy task to maintain order and prevent open strife. Quarrels between the different towns continued, and an unsuccessful attempt was made to get the island of Rhode Island included as a member of the new England federation. At length, in 1650, Williams journeyed again to England to prevent the sinister designs of William Coddington, one of the Colony's magistrates, to get himself appointed Governor for life of Rhode Island and Connecticut. In 1652, an Order in Council annulled Coddington's commission, and directed the warring towns to unite under the Rhode Island Charter. This Order, accompanied by a strong Appeal made by the Home Government, brought about a much needed reconciliation and soon after Williams was elected President of the Colony, and again his personal intervention saved the Colonies from an Indian War.

Williams allowed the Jews to settle in the Colony, and granted them full civil rights and, much as he detested the tenets of the Quakers, he allowed them also to settle there in 1656, although they were fiercely persecuted as 'heretic vagabonds and enemies of both Church and State' by the other Colonies. Such liberal actions proved the truth of his assertion that "I desire not liberty to myself which I would not freely and impartially weigh out to all consciences of the world besides." But in recording the brutal treatment meted out to the Quakers, it is only fair to notice their fanatical excesses which naturally aroused the anger and indignation of the Puritans. Naked Quaker women, in a frenzied state, paraded the streets and entered the churches, interrupting the services to denounce the Puritans and their teaching, as well as the Governor and the magistrates. As a consequence many were branded, whipped and imprisoned, while three men and one woman were hanged. Rhode Island, however, refused to join the other Colonies in passing severe laws against them, and in 1663 it secured a new Charter from Charles II granting full religious liberty to all who did not disturb the civil peace. It was a unique Charter for those intolerant days. Roger Williams remained a member of the Rhode Island Government till 1677, when he voluntarily retired. He was disheartened by the constant strife between the Colonies disputing about their respective territories, and he uttered words which are as true to-day as they were in 1670, when he asked, "What are all the contentions and wars of this world about, generally, but for greater dishes and bowls of porridge." Williams had found time to do a certain amount of missionary work amongst the Indians, but in 1675 a bitter and desolating war broke out between them and the

Colonies. Twelve towns were utterly destroyed, and over a thousand inhabitants killed. Williams himself, although advanced in years, acted as a Captain of Militia. He had no ambition to seek power or honours or wealth, and in his old age he gave away his lands and property to those in need and became dependent on his children, and he died quite poor in March, 1684. In his long, eventful and arduous career, Williams encountered much opposition and persecution, but the Colony which he founded appreciated and recognised his real worth. As early as 1654 it declared that " from its first beginning you have been a noble and true friend to an outcast and despised people ; we have ever reaped the sweet fruits of your constant loving kindnesses and favour. We have long been free from the iron yoke of wolfish bishops. —We have not felt the new chains of Presbyterian tyrants, nor in this Colony have been consumed by the over zealous fire of the so-called godly Christian magistrates. We have long drunk of the cup of as great liberties as any people we can hear of under heaven."

Even those who found Williams impossible to work with realised his consistent advocacy of his high ideals. Governor Bradford of New Plymouth bore testimony that " he was a godly man and zealous, having many precious parts, but very unsettled in judgment." He admits that Williams soon fell into " strange opinions and practices ", and he prayed the Lord " to show him his errors and reduce him into the way of truth, and give him a settled judgment and constancy in the same." He was a man of good education and could read French, Dutch, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, and, as we have seen, he was, in an intolerant age, an intrepid and unwavering advocate of toleration and a firm upholder of justice and liberty. There is real justification in his inclusion in the Geneva Reformation Monument as one of its five foremost leaders, and his great labours for civil and religious liberty are suitably recognised by a statue to his memory in Washington.

As Englishmen we have felt for centuries that freedom and religious toleration are as established as the air we breathe, but the present gigantic struggle against totalitarian dictatorship, with its denial of full religious freedom in several lands, should warn us that we may still have to fight to preserve this precious heritage, and that the price of freedom of conscience, as well as of truth, is eternal vigilance. Evidently President Roosevelt recognised this when he included 'freedom to worship God of every person in his own way " in his " Four Freedoms." We do well therefore to recall the very real debt that we owe to the unflinching and heroic pioneers in this sacred crusade. We must look to ourselves that we lose not the treasure which they wrought at such great cost, but that " we receive a full reward."