

## 12. Roger Williams, Letter to the Town of Providence (1655)

Source: *Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, eds., The Puritans (2 vols.: New York, 1963), vol. 1, p. 225.*

Roger Williams, the son of a London merchant, studied at Cambridge University and emigrated to New England in 1631. He is considered one of the founders of the principle of religious toleration. Williams was banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony after preaching that the colonists must not occupy Indian land without first purchasing it, and that the government had no right to punish individuals for their religious beliefs. He went on to found the community of Providence, Rhode Island. After traveling to England and returning to Providence in 1654, he found it torn by dissension, with some settlers refusing to accept civil authority at all. Williams published the following letter, explaining his view of the extent and limits of liberty. He made it clear that while no one should be forced to follow any particular religious belief, this did not lessen the requirement that all members of a community must obey the "masters and officers" in charge of civil matters.

THAT EVER I SHOULD SPEAK OR write a tittle, that tends to . . . an infinite liberty of conscience, is a mistake, and which I have ever disclaimed and abhorred. To prevent such mistakes, I shall at present only propose this case: There goes many a ship to sea, with many hundred souls in one ship, whose weal or woe is common, and is a true picture of a commonwealth, or a human combination or society. It hath fallen out sometimes, that both papists and Protestants, Jews and Turks [Muslims], may be embarked in one ship; upon which supposal I affirm, that all the liberty of conscience, that ever I pleaded for, turns upon these two hinges—that none of the papists, Protestants, Jews, or Turks, be forced to come to the ship's prayers or worship, nor compelled from their own particular prayers or worship, if they practice any. I further add, that I never denied, that notwithstanding this liberty, the commander of this ship ought to command the ship's

course, yea, and also command that justice, peace and sobriety, be kept and practiced, both among the seamen and all the passengers. If any of the seamen refuse to perform their services, or passengers to pay their freight; if any refuse to help, in person or purse, towards the common charges or defense; if any refuse to obey the common laws and orders of the ship, concerning their common peace or preservation; if any shall mutiny and rise up against their commanders and officers; if any should preach or write that there ought to be no commanders or officers, because all are equal in Christ, therefore no masters nor officers, no laws nor orders, nor corrections nor punishments;—I say, I never denied, but in such cases, whatever is pretended, the commander or commanders may judge, resist, compel and punish such transgressors, according to their deserts and merits. This if seriously and honestly minded, may, if it so please the Father of lights, let in some light to such as willingly shut not their eyes.

ROGER WILLIAMS

### Questions

1. In what ways does Williams place limits on liberty?
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of Williams's analogy between civil society and a group of people aboard a ship?

## 13. The Levellers, The Agreement of the People Presented to the Council of the Army (1647)

Source: *The Agreement of the People Presented to the Council of the Army (London, 1647).*

During the 1640s, the battle for political supremacy in England between the Stuart monarchs James I and Charles I and Parliament culminated in civil war, the temporary overthrow of the monarchy, and, in 1649, the execution