

## Blast from the Past: Roger Williams

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 6, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

For us, [Roger] Williams is important above all as a conversation partner whose humane insights can inform our own divisive debates. Three aspects of his thought deserve our attention. First, he developed a distinctive and impassioned view of conscience as a seat of emotion, imagination, and ethical choice through which each person seeks meaning in his or her own way. Conscience, for Williams, is the source of our equality, and it is worthy of equal respect wherever it is found. Political principles, he argued, must be based on that equal respect. Second, Williams believed that equal respect for conscience entails protecting an extensive sphere of freedom around the individual, and that this protection must be impartial, imposing no orthodoxy. To impose orthodoxy upon the striving conscience is nothing less than what Williams, in a memorable and repeated image, calls "Soul rape." And third, Williams maintained that a civil peace among people who differ in religion requires a moral consensus that is itself impartial, giving the ascendancy to no creed more than any other. Such a consensus is available because there is a part of the moral sphere that we can share while differing in ultimate religious commitments. Williams dramatized this idea by making his major work, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, which appeared in 1644, a "conference" or dialogue between two friends called Truth and Peace, in which Truth acknowledges the importance of reaching an ethically grounded accommodation, for political purposes, with people whom one believes to be in error.

Martha C. Nussbaum, in her *New Republic* review of a collection of Roger Williams' works. All of the ideas here are central to our understanding of American ideas of religious liberty, yet I wonder how good a job we do, as a culture, of seeing Truth and Peace as friends. It is something to think about as we bask in the afterglow of the fireworks on the Fourth.

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