

## Interview

# John M. Barry, scholar and writer

By Stephen L. Petranek

Q

Is Roger Williams the overlooked hero of the freedoms we cherish?

Williams was a devout Puritan minister, not a secularist. But he knew that when you mix religion and politics, you get politics. He wanted to avoid what he had seen in England

*John M. Barry dropped out of graduate school in history to become a football coach, eventually rising to assistant coach at Tulane University. He quit coaching to write, first as a freelance journalist in Washington, D. C., where he contributed to The Washington Post Magazine, then as a book author. In 1998 his book, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America*, won the Francis Parkman Prize for the year's best book on American history. His 2004 book, *The Great Influenza: The Story of the Deadliest Pandemic in History*, was named outstanding book of the year by the National Academy of Sciences. Barry's latest, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul: Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty*, explores how America came to embrace two ideas unique among nations: the separation of religion from government, and government that is controlled by citizens.*



**The Puritans you describe seem like control freaks. Were they that rigid?**

Yes. They were Puritanical. But they were human too. They had sex. They had a sense of humor. They were in some ways pretty bawdy. But the standards to which they held themselves were high, not unlike conservative Christians today.

**What happened if you chose not to go to church on Sunday?**

At first you would be fined. It could add up to a lot of money if you continued. You could be flogged, conceivably mutilated, even imprisoned.

**Didn't the Puritans leave England to escape that sort of intolerance?**

One of the reasons they left England was to escape forced prayer, forced in the sense they had to use the *Book of Common Prayer*. As soon as they arrived, they imposed forced prayer on everyone.

**And they never saw the irony in that?**

No. They believed that they had found the right way to Christ, and that it was sinful to allow anyone to live in error, and therefore they had to impose their way or they were both committing a sin themselves and allowing others to continue in sin. Roger Williams, a linguist who had read the Bible in many languages, was astounded that these people were so convinced that their interpretation was correct and that every other interpretation of Scripture anywhere in the world was incorrect. He was well educated. Williams saw that it was impossible for a human to unerringly interpret Scripture. That was part of the reasoning behind his belief in freedom of religion.

### **How unique was his belief in separation of church and state?**

He was extremely unusual. He wasn't the first person to call for it. The Anabaptists had been doing that for some time because they were persecuted. But Williams was not persecuted at first. He was given the opportunity to be a member of the absolute top echelon of Puritan leadership. More importantly, he was the first to call for real freedom of religion and link it to political freedom.

### **What else was unique about Williams' views?**

When he insisted on freedom of religion, he included Catholics—even though Catholics were thought to report to their own king, the pope, and they had plotted repeatedly against English royals. When philosopher John Locke, who was very influenced by Williams, wrote his essay on tolerance, he did not extend toleration to Catholics. Williams also tolerated atheists. That was absolutely extraordinary. If you compare the founding document for Providence to the founding document of every other settlement in the Americas, whether in South America or Latin America or North America, every single one references God, and most of them say that the colony is founded to advance Christian worship. In Williams' founding document for Providence, Rhode Island, there is no mention of God whatsoever, anywhere. And this from a devout Calvinist, a Puritan minister. The U.S. Constitution is similarly unlike all the constitutions or charters of all the colonies, except for Rhode Island, because all of them talk about God, and it has no mention of God anywhere.

### **What other concepts did Williams give us?**

At the time there was the almost universally held idea that government received its authority from God.

Williams broke from that. He thought that God should have nothing to do with government. Instead, he believed that government was entirely dependent for its power and authority upon its citizens instead of God. That was extraordinary then.

### **Did Williams influence Franklin, Jefferson and Madison?**

Williams was not a forgotten figure 150 years later. Everyone knew his views. His impact was deep.

### **Was he a hero?**

I would certainly call him a hero. He stood up for what he believed in, in the face of enormous pressure, even at risk to his life.

## **'The Constitution has no mention of God anywhere'**

### **Williams originated many of the ideas that made the United States different. Why isn't he more of an icon?**

Because he was booted out of Massachusetts and viewed by them as a problem. It has often been said that history is largely written by the victors. The Massachusetts view of him has permeated our understanding of the early history of the United States.

### **Why isn't Rhode Island seen as more important?**

Power and money. Rhode Island is small. Had Williams made a home in an area that became larger or more important, then I think his impact would have been more widely recognized. Not many people realize that Rhode Island declared its independence from Great Britain on May 4, 1776, two months before any other colony.

### **What do you mean by saying colonists "feared the chaos of freedom, and they feared the loneliness of it"?**

When you are free, you're alone. The Puritans believed God had a fixed place for everyone in society, everyone had a calling. Society was orderly and predestined by God. Puritans were about community and conformity. Williams believed that although God was always present, the world is pretty chaotic, and you are on your own. That was very disturbing to a Puritan. I think, frankly, it's still disturbing to most people today.

### **Are we still struggling with church and state issues?**

Yes. People are trying to insist we're a Christian nation. Newt Gingrich says a secular state is "a nightmare." There is not a year that goes by where there is not some lawsuit about whether you can pray at a public ceremony. The Supreme Court has been clear, but that doesn't stop lawsuits. The only time Congress actually acted on this issue was in the first U.S. treaty—with Tripoli in 1797. That treaty, which passed the Senate overwhelmingly, explicitly says that we are not a Christian nation.

### **Why is it so dangerous to say we are?**

There's a close bond between freedom of religion and freedom itself. Ultimately, if you're going to have freedom, you have to have freedom of thought. You just have to. And if you have freedom of thought, you have to have the freedom to express that thought—otherwise it's pointless if you have to be silent. Freedom of thought is intimately connected to freedom of religion. They are fruit of the same tree. You cannot have freedom without freedom of religion.