

“When the Word of the Lord Runs Freely”: Roger Williams and Evangelical Toleration*

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I. Introduction

The 1663 royal charter that confirmed the small, coastal territory purchased by Roger Williams from the Narragansett Indians as “the English Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations” has long been hailed as a high point in the history of religious toleration.¹ The hypothesis to be tested in this “livelie experiment”—that a society might survive, even flourish, while granting its members “full liberty in religious concernments”—at the time represented the cutting edge of early modern tolerationist theory and practice. Citizens of Rhode Island were not simply permitted to dissent from a state-supported church or to hold heterodox opinions in private. Rather, the charter granted colonists an unprecedented “free exercise and enjoyment of all their civil and religious rights” regardless of religion, in a society with no established church at all.²

The success of the experiment in “Rogues Island” was far from guaranteed. Neighbors complained that its policy of toleration had made the colony a “receptacle for all sorts of riff-raff,” “the sewers (*latrina*) of New England.”³ Yet despite these uncertain beginnings, generations of scholars have pointed to Rhode Island—and its founder, Roger Williams—as pioneers in a distinctively *American* liberal tradition with the principle of toleration at its core.⁴ Today, Williams’s reputation as the “First Founder” has never been more secure.⁵ One recent monograph credits him with “the creation of the American soul,” while Martha Nussbaum puts Williams forward as an exemplar of “America’s tradition of religious equality,” a figure whose life and works embody ideas of fairness and respect that “continue to be central to the best work in recent political philosophy in the Western tradition.”⁶

While Williams offers the rare example of a political thinker who successfully put his theories into practice, according to his modern-day revivers he also offers something more: an inclusive, proto-multicultural vision of a tolerating society ahead of its time and far beyond that of other early modern thinkers. John Locke's seminal *Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689) excluded Catholics and atheists from toleration in a way reminiscent of medieval *tolerantia*—a limited policy of permission towards “acknowledged evils” like sewage, prostitutes, and Jews. By contrast, Williams's 1644 manifesto, *The Bloody Tenent*, declared “a *permission* of the most *Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or Antichristian* [i.e. Catholic] *consciences and worships* [for] *all men in all Nations and Countries*” to be “the will and command of *God*.”⁷ In this visionary openness to diversity both in religious beliefs and practices, his admirers suggest, Williams's extraordinary friendship with the Narragansett played a formative role.⁸

Yet these celebrations of Williams and Rhode Island as bearers of an early modern toleration in tune with modern cultural pluralism have obscured the *evangelical* core of his toleration arguments and the lively experiment they inspired. The Rhode Island Charter commended Williams and other settlers by name for “godly edifying themselves, and one another, in the holy Christian faith and worship, as they were persuaded,” while also diligently attending to the “conversion of the poor ignorant Indian natives...to the sincere profession and obedience of the same.” Twenty years earlier in *The Bloody Tenent*, Williams made the evangelical foundations of his toleration explicit: “He that is a *Briar*, that is, a *Jew*, a *Turke*, a *Pagan*, [or] an *Antichristian* today, may be (when the Word of the *Lord* runs freely) a member of *Jesus Christ* to morrow.”⁹

These passages in the *Bloody Tenent* and Rhode Island Charter provide paradigmatic statements of what I call *evangelical toleration*.¹⁰ In each, religious liberty is intimately linked

with evangelism, which provides both a justification for and an object of toleration. The phrase “evangelical toleration” may strike many readers as an oxymoron. After all, tolerance today is often associated with equal respect and esteem for others, as well as for their diverse beliefs and ways of life. On this view, evangelism is a potential source of *intolerance* directly opposed to diversity in its efforts to convert others to one—indeed, one’s own—faith. The Massachusetts Bay Charter’s statement that evangelizing Indians was the “principall Ende of the Plantacion” has thus bolstered its modern reputation as the persecuting society *par excellence*, while the Rhode Island Charter’s similar call for “the conversion of the poor ignorant Natives” has been largely ignored.¹¹

Recent accounts of Williams have likewise avoided the conceptual complexity and centrality of his robust evangelism to his theory of toleration. They have sought to establish Williams’s tolerationist credentials instead on a purported lack of conversionary zeal, especially toward Native Americans. Nussbaum thus insists that “despite his fervent Christian beliefs, there is no record that he ever tried to convert any of them.”¹² Underlying such claims is an assumption, derived from modern sensibilities, that Williams’s commitment to liberty of conscience can be taken seriously if and only if it issued in respect for the contrary religious commitments of others. Had he been an ardent evangelist, this latter-day logic goes, he could hardly have been tolerant.

This desire to distance Williams from a proselytizing spirit and missionary expectations commonly associated with persecution is highly misleading. Worse, it risks occluding some of the most fascinating and useful elements of his vision of toleration for the present. The idiosyncratic ideas about evangelism that Williams developed in the course of his evangelical efforts among American “Pagans” and Protestants alike fundamentally shaped his toleration

project. The first section below demonstrates that, despite persistent scholarly claims to the contrary, Williams conversed regularly with Native Americans about God, the Word, and damnation. His objections to competing Puritan missionary efforts did not arise from opposition to evangelism among the Americans as such, but from a conviction that free conversation and critical exchange were the only effective and legitimate means of propagating the Gospel and “preparing” others’ souls for repentance. The recent discovery of a hitherto unknown tract by Williams on infant baptism written late in life suggests that his views on Indian evangelization remained consistent, and that he preached *and* practiced this agonistic form of evangelism to the very end.¹³

The second and third sections demonstrate that this distinctive evangelical approach also had profound ethical and institutional consequences for Williams’s views on toleration, both as an individual and a public endeavor. A tolerant society in which “the Word of the Lord runs freely” must allow, even encourage, religious competition and controversy among its members. This would require not only institutional protections for religious conscience, but also a culture of free and conscientious expression that would lead, in turn, to robust and continuous disagreement between individuals about religion. The nascent connection between religious freedom and free speech implicit in Williams’s evangelical toleration brought him into conflict with other radical Protestants in New and Old England, including the Quakers, whose similar commitment to exercising their evangelical liberty tested the limits of his toleration.

The evangelical thrust of Williams’s life and works, I will argue, is his most significant contribution to a distinctively American tradition of religious liberty. Although he is most often remembered for promoting a “wall of separation” between church and state, it was this commitment to evangelical liberty that informed the broader and arguably more influential

understanding of “free exercise” enshrined in the Rhode Island Charter and later forwarded by sectarian Protestants in the eighteenth century. It suggests that the dual commitment to religious freedom and free speech characteristic of America’s “First Amendment Faith” might be less self-evident—and less secular—in its origins than many imagine.¹⁴

II. Witnessing in the Wilderness

Historians of toleration have long read the *Bloudy Tenent* in isolation, as a charming, if overly theological, first draft of Locke’s *Letter*.¹⁵ Yet to understand its arguments fully one must look beyond its reputation as one of the great defenses of religious freedom in the West to its more immediate context, including Williams’s personal experiences of radical diversity in the New World, as well as the complicated political circumstances surrounding its publication.¹⁶ *The Bloudy Tenent* was, after all, only one of the many pamphlets Williams published in London while trying to secure a patent for his fledgling colony. The first, *A Key Into the Language of America* (1643) appeared immediately after his arrival, and on the surface it had little to do with toleration. Williams’s study of Narragansett language and culture offered a conversation manual and phrasebook illustrated by detailed descriptions of American life that captivated English audiences. Parliament was also impressed. In granting Williams his patent, the Committee for Foreign Plantations cited his “great industry and travail in his printed Indian Labours,” *not* his views on the liberty of conscience.¹⁷ *The Bloudy Tenent* was published only after his departure, whereupon the same Parliament ordered it be publicly burned.

Williams’s decision to frame the *Key* as a handbook for evangelization may explain its relatively warm reception. The preface proclaimed that “a man may, by this *helpe*, converse with *thousands* of *Natives* all over the *Countrey*.”¹⁸ As evidence that “such converse” with the

Americans might, in time, lead to the spread of “*civilitie*” and “*Christianitie*” among them, Williams cited his own role in the conversion of a Pequot warrior named Wequash recently reported in another pamphlet, *New England’s First Fruits* (1643).¹⁹ His own desire to convert the Americans was clear. The suggestions by some historians that after an early period of “evangelical optimism,” Williams simply “gave up” on his missionary endeavors is based not on the *Key*, but Williams’s follow-up work on Indian affairs, *Christenings Make Not Christians* (1645).²⁰

Although it was written around the same time as the *Key*, Williams delayed *Christenings*’ publication (as he did the *Bloudy Tenent*) until after his departure from England. The delay suggests that Williams anticipated a similarly negative reaction, and it is not difficult to see why.²¹ *Christenings* threw cold water on the evangelical enthusiasm stoked by his previous work. He explained that although it had been “easie for my selfe, long ere this, to have brought many thousands of these Natives, yea the whole country, to a far greater Antichristian conversion than ever was yet heard of in *America*,” he refrained. “Antichristian” was a popular Protestant epithet for Catholics, as well as any religious displays or ceremonies viewed as “outward,” hypocritical, and insincere. Hence, on Williams’s view, the great conversions undertaken by Jesuit missionaries in the New World were really the “subversion of the soules of Millions.”²²

Williams’s emphasis on evangelical restraint in *Christenings* was not, as it is often presented, a reversal of his earlier opinions or a rejection of evangelization. Rather, the reservations he expressed in that work reflected his long-standing beliefs about the stringent requirements of a true conversion and millenarian scruples about apostolic succession.²³ *Christenings* expanded upon Williams’s claim in the *Key* that he “could easily have brought the [Americans]” to observe the Sabbath, “but that I was perswaded, and am, that Gods way is first

to turne a soule from its Idolls, both of heart, worship, and conversation, before it is capable of worship to the true and living God.”²⁴

Williams was concerned that the missionary programs called for by his fellow Englishmen, like those of the Jesuits in Canada and South America, would neglect this essential first step of *preparation*—that is, the turning of the soul from false worship to repentance. As he put it in the *Key*: “The two first Principles and Foundations of true Religion...are Repentance from dead workes, and Faith towards God...the want of which I conceive, is the bane of million soules in England and all other Nations [brought] to Baptisme and fellowship.”²⁵ When organized Puritan missionary efforts commenced in Massachusetts shortly after his return, Williams feared they would condemn Indian proselytes to the same fate.

John Eliot, minister of the “unseparated” Puritan congregation at Roxbury, which maintained formal ties to the Anglican Church, led Puritan efforts to convert the local native population.²⁶ Eliot’s missionary program began in earnest in 1646 with the preaching of regular sermons to local tribes in his best approximation of Algonquin, followed by the composition of a catechism and a translation of the New Testament into the same. He also established fourteen “Praying Towns” in which Indian proselytes were catechized and “civilized” before baptism and, eventually, forming their own congregations. To Williams, Eliot’s method of civilization and Christianization was anathema. Any “conversions” resulting from this program of mere doctrinal instruction and external conformity—not to mention any churches established in the metaphorical “wilderness” before Christ’s return—must be “outward,” “Antichristian,” and inevitably false. Eliot’s “Praying Indians” might receive baptism and adopt congregational church government, but without adequate preparation such ordinances would only serve as obstacles to their true conversion, which must take place “by the free proclaiming or preaching

of Repentance & forgiveness of sins” issuing in a “turning of the whole man from the power of *Sathan* unto God.”²⁷

Williams cautioned against attributing the work of God’s grace to human effort, yet he still thought that individual Christians had an important role to play in evangelization. His skepticism regarding proselytism undertaken by the ministers of existing (and inherently false) churches did not absolve the true saints from their duty of preparing others’ souls by “calling of his *people* more and more out of the *Babel of confused Worships, Ministries, &c.* and the finishing of their Testimony against the *Beast*.”²⁸ In stark contrast to Eliot’s Indian catechism, evangelism for Williams was a largely *negative* affair consisting of witnessing against the spiritual errors of others.²⁹ Williams had displayed this evangelical impulse to witness upon arriving in New England in 1631, much to his fellow Puritans’ chagrin. And yet, the Massachusetts authorities tolerated Williams and his public denunciations of their manifold sins for several years before they banished him and inadvertently launched him on his unlikely career as a transatlantic champion of toleration.³⁰

Williams described himself in these early years as “a faithfull Watchman on the walls to sound the Trumpet” against “publike sins.”³¹ His participation in the myriad religious and political pamphlet wars that raged in England in the 1640s and ’50s was a continuation of this “purgative testimony” in a different medium.³² In *Christenings*, his audience and main target were the “unconverted and *unchristian Christians*” of England, who had “no more of Christ then [sic] the name.” They labeled the Americans “heathens,” yet not “knowing [themselves] what it is to come by true Regeneration within” were the true “*Heathens or Gentiles*.”³³ The same unapologetically controversial approach characterized his many conversations with the Narragansett reported in the *Key* about “the Creation of the World, and mans Estate, and in

particular theirs also,” which he described, significantly, as a “preparatory Mercy to their Soules.”³⁴

With Americans and Englishmen alike, Williams was indefatigable in “fighting the fight of faith” in which he evidently pulled no punches.³⁵ The *Key*’s preface recounted how he had acquainted Wequash “with the *Condition of all mankind, & his Own in particular,*” especially “How *Man* fell from *God*, and his present *Enmity* against *God*, and the *wrath of God* against *Him* untill *Repentance*.”³⁶ Likewise, the dialogue about damnation included in the chapter on religion provided English readers with helpful vocabulary to expand upon this theme: “*Friend, when you die you perish everlastingly. You are everlastingly undone. God is angry with you. He will destroy you. For your many Gods. The whole world shall ere long be burnt.*”³⁷ In response to the native question, “What then will become of us?,” Williams replied, “*God commandeth. That all men now repent.*”³⁸

Williams took his duty to spread news of the “written word of God” and counteract the deceiving words of false evangelists—especially that “grievous wolf,” John Eliot—very seriously.³⁹ In this, his Indian dialogues and controversial pamphlets were of a piece. As we shall see, the same focus on preparation and conversion defined Williams’s evangelical approach to toleration.

III. Evangelical Toleration

For modern readers, the radical scope of Williams’s toleration represents its most appealing feature. Yet it was precisely this aspect that so scandalized his contemporaries. Unlike

John Milton or Locke, Williams argued that even Catholics must be tolerated alongside Protestants, Jews, Muslims, and Native Americans.⁴⁰ For him, this list had an immediacy informed by personal experience. In addition to his dealings with American “Pagans,” he claimed to have “converse[d] with some *Turks, Jews, Papists* and all sorts of *Protestants*” alike “from my Childhood” and “by Books to know the *Affairs and Religions* of all *Countries*.”⁴¹ The importance of knowledge about other (especially non-Christian) cultures was a persistent theme in his toleration writings, and he pursued it to the end of his life.

Recent efforts among Williams’s partisans to place his life-long interest in other religions at the heart of his openness to radical diversity are thus well-placed. Yet this globalizing push makes their studied *disinterest* in the evangelical arguments underlying this inclusiveness all the more striking. To deny Williams’s evangelical efforts and expectations is to fundamentally misunderstand his vision of a tolerant society as one that not only permitted religious diversity, but also promoted robust religious conversation and controversy. “If regenerate and truly repenting English thus come forth from the unregenerate and unrepenting, how would...good meanes [be] practiced toward the convincing and saving of [their] soules”⁴² In *The Hireling Ministry None of Christ’s* (1652)—a work that undermined the legitimacy of Eliot’s mission and that of an ordained and state-supported clergy more generally—Williams boasted of his own informal “labour in *Europe, in America, with English, with Barbarians, yea and also I have longed after some trading with the Jewes themselves*.”⁴³

The argument that toleration and proselytism were complementary was more than just rhetorical window-dressing; it shaped Williams’s understanding of the former as both an individual and institutional obligation. To see this, one must first notice how Williams himself practiced toleration. While refusing to interrupt the Narragansetts’ “Divell” worship, he was

forthright in expressing his disapproval of their polytheism and “argued with them about their Fire-God.”⁴⁴ Similarly, he routinely used the epithet “Anti-Christian” to refer to Catholics, a slur that even Locke would eschew. In an elegant cross-cutting of aversions in the *Key*, he explained Native American ritual feasting to his English audience by comparing it with Catholics’ idolatrous celebration of Christmas, “a Feast, especially in Winter, for then (as the Turke faith of the Christian, rather the Antichristian,) they run mad once a yeare.”⁴⁵

For Williams, toleration thus had a sharp critical edge. The protection of free exercise of religion and free expression must go hand in hand as two essential elements of the liberty of conscience. Together, they afforded individuals the freedom to live, worship, and go to Hell in their own fashion, along with the freedom to converse, engage, and criticize. Unlike the medieval proponents of *tolerantia*, Williams did not espouse an attitude of mere indifference or grudging forbearance. Evangelical toleration required instead that the tolerated be actively *included* and *engaged* in social life in order to ensure their “*civill converse* and *conversation*” with godly evangelists like Williams.⁴⁶ To deny a “Civill life or being” to nonbelievers would be to exclude them from the “preparatory mercies” of evangelical conversation and controversy, the best—indeed, the only—means of “propagating and spreading of the Gospel” available to saints in the wilderness.⁴⁷ This agonistic evangelism was a messy, unconstrained, and altogether uncertain enterprise that depended upon conversations rather than catechisms. The evangelized must be left to judge for themselves, “according to their *Indian* or *American consciences*, for other *consciences* it cannot be supposed they should have.”⁴⁸

Williams’s insistence that critical conversation was the core of toleration can be seen not only in his endless public controversies, but also in his decision to frame *The Bloody Tenent* and its sequel, *The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody* (1652), as dialogues between Truth and Peace.

The *Key* reveals that he extended this dialogical approach to non-Christians as well. After hearing of the creation of Eve from Adam's rib his Narragansett interlocutors responded with a story of their own.⁴⁹ When he talked to them about Hellfire, they talked back—and he listened. To his assertion that “*English-men, Dutch men, and you [Americans] and all the world, when they die...that know not this God...goe to Hell or the Deepe [and] shall ever lament,*” the Americans responded, “*Who told you so?*”

Williams's answer—“*Gods Booke or Writing*”—acknowledged that his own word was inadequate, and he noted this critical questioning with approval.⁵⁰ On several occasions, he commended the Americans for their “Berean Civilitie,” a reference to the Acts of the Apostles and St. Paul's flight from persecution in Thessalonica to Berea, where the inhabitants “received the Word with all readiness of mind, and searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things were so. Therefore many of them believed” (Acts 17:10-12 KJV). Williams held the “noble” Bereans as exemplars of civility both in taking in the exiled evangelists and participating actively in their own evangelization. The parallel to Williams's own exile and evangelical conversation among the Narragansett underlying this recurrent scriptural allusion was unmistakable.⁵¹

Williams believed that the Americans, like the Bereans before them, must be prepared for conversion by judging for themselves with their “American consciences” and engaging critically with Scripture. Evangelization and toleration were thickly entwined. Upon his second return to London in 1651, Williams carried a petition from the Narragansett to “the high Sachims of England”—i.e., Parliament—“that they might not be forced from their Religion.” This plea for toleration was necessitated, he explained, by the “dayly visit[at]ions” and “Threatenings” they received “by Indians that came from Massachusetts, that if they would not pray they should be destroyed by war.”⁵² Williams feared the spiritual and civil damage Eliot's Indian proselytes

might do if permitted to intimidate the unrepentant Narragansett into false conversions. He, too, desired “the glorious conversion of the Indians in New England” and pursued the same “by his own Lights.” But warfare and evangelism would ever be at odds; *toleration* was the key to true conversion because it created the civic conditions most conducive to it.

Far from being a proto-multiculturalist handbook, the *Key* modeled an engaged and dialogical toleration that was evangelical in nature and in which criticism and controversy flowing both ways. The only dialogue in the text in which Williams did not participate took the form of an overheard conversation between the Narragansett sachim, Miantonomo, and a “Qunnihiticut Indian,” who complained that the Englishman’s teachings about damnation contradicted what “Our fathers have told us, that our soules goes to the *Southwest*.” The sachim’s reply and the ensuing exchange are suggestive:

But how doe you know your selfe...did you ever see a soule goe thither? The Natiue [sic] replied; when did he (naming my selfe) see a soule goes to Heaven or Hell? The *Sachim*...replied[:] He hath books and writings, and one which God himselfe made, concerning mens soules, and therefore *may* well know more than wee that have none, but take all upon trust from our forefathers.⁵³

While Williams sought to convince his auditors of the superiority of Scripture as a standard of knowledge, the dialogue highlighted the imperative that they vent their objections freely and come to “the Word” without coercion. To do this, they first needed to know of its existence and repent of their former errors. This, in turn, depended upon a double freedom: of the saints to witness *and* of the evangelized to respond.

Williams was under no illusion about the strain that continuous controversy about religion would place upon members of a tolerating society and the affective bonds between them.

His intimate acquaintance with civil and spiritual discord in Rhode Island precluded any wishful thinking that these fundamental disagreements might become sources of solidarity. The attitude of engagement and inclusion his evangelical toleration required demanded a complicated balance of spiritual criticism and civil acceptance, and this ethic needed to be supplemented by institutional arrangements designed to ensure the free flowing of the Word among the “Briars” of the wilderness, despite the upset and alienation that might follow. If true conversions depended upon “the free proclaiming or preaching of Repentance and forgiveness,” a society devoted to evangelical toleration needed to secure its members’ evangelical liberty above all.

IV. Evangelical Liberty

The most famous institutional innovation associated with Roger Williams remains the “wall of separation” between church and state first described in *Mr Cottons Letter Lately Printed* (1644) and later realized in the Rhode Island Charter’s unprecedented disestablishment of religion. But next to disestablishment, Williams’s commitment to liberating men’s tongues in religious matters was by far the most radical feature of his toleration. As portrayed in *The Bloody Tenent*, toleration had two, distinct requirements: first, the “permission of the most *Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or Antichristian consciences and worships*” and second, “that they are onely to be *fought* against with that *Sword* which is only (in *Soule matters*) *able to conquer*: to wit, the *Sword of God’s Spirit, the Word of God.*”⁵⁴ In order for this spiritual warfare to proceed, evangelistic activities must receive the same “free exercise and enjoyment” as any other form of worship.

This provision for evangelical liberty as a freedom to proselytize and admonish others for their spiritual errors drew on a long-standing Christian metaphor of the two swords frequently

employed in Williams's writings. The first sword was a sword of law and legal punishment belonging to the civil magistrate. The second was "the *sword of Gods Spirit*, expressly said to be the *Word of God*."⁵⁵ Applied in the cause of conversion, the former became an instrument of persecution resulting in a "steelie hardness" of their hearts and a "prison of unbeleefe...[un]to eternity"; the sword of speech, by contrast, softened and rendered "more humane and mercifull the eare and heart."⁵⁶ For Williams, the two swords were fundamentally different in kind and needed to be kept separate. While the first was justly wielded by the state in "civil" matters, the second sword was carried in the mouths of Christ's servants. They needed space to swing freely.⁵⁷

Still, it should be noted that Williams did maintain the need for legal restrictions on seditious and libelous speech, as did other contemporary advocates of the liberty of conscience such as John Milton (*Areopagitica*, 1644). But unlike Milton, Williams denied the magistrate's right to punish blasphemy. As a violation of the first table of the Decalogue, which outlined men's duties to God alone, blasphemy was beyond the magistrate's purview. Moreover, *The Bloody Tenent* pointed out that civil laws directed against uncivil tongues or "vehement" evangelism were covert forms of persecution that impeded "the sword of God's Spirit" in its most important work.⁵⁸

When a kingdome or state, towne or family, lyes and lives in the guilt of false God, false Christ, false worship,: no wonder if sore eyes be troubled at the appearance of the light, be it never so sweet...if persons sleepe loving to sleepe be troubled at the noise of shrill (though silver) alarums.⁵⁹

Accordingly, laws targeting evangelism or robust religious disagreement as uncivil would, in fact, preclude “all true preaching of the Gospell or glad newes,” which was properly done in a “*immoveable, constant, and resolved*” way.⁶⁰

Two episodes from Williams’s career most clearly illustrate his determination to put evangelical liberty into practice—first, his objections to the so-called “Humble Proposals” of 1652, and second, his public debate with several Quakers in 1673. Presented to the Rump Parliament as a template for disciplining “the propagation of the Gospel” and reforming the Church of England, the Humble Proposals called for the licensing of preachers through a combination of civil “approval” and ecclesiastical ordination.⁶¹ This provision for increasing civil oversight over the state-supported ministry deeply offended Williams, who attacked the Proposals in several pamphlets published during his second return to London. The licensing provision—not to mention a national church as such—violated his principle of separation while also placing unacceptable limitations on the essential evangelistic activities of preaching and teaching, competing for converts, and gathering churches. Unlike his fellow Puritans in Parliament, Williams viewed the propagation of the gospel as a duty not only of the ministry, but of *all* Christians. Hence, he sought to extend the privilege of evangelical liberty beyond professional clerics to ensure the unimpeded witnessing of the true saints—wherever and whenever they appeared.⁶²

In his endorsement of lay or “mechanick” preaching, Williams contributed to an erosion of the distinction between clergy and laity that represented one of the most striking spiritual and social developments of England’s civil war years. This dismantling of religious hierarchies was vividly illustrated by the emergence of many new sects inclined to egalitarian “enthusiasm” and decidedly uncivil forms of evangelism. Foremost among these were the Quakers, who suffered

horrible persecution both in New and Old England. Many sought refuge in Rhode Island, and Williams's ongoing struggles with the Quakers in his colony challenged his commitment to putting these radical ideas about evangelical liberty into practice.

Today, the Quakers are best known as early and stalwart defenders of the liberty of conscience, with William Penn's colony of Pennsylvania the chief competitor to Williams's Rhode Island as the New World's haven for dissent. What is often downplayed, however, is the behavior that made the early Quakers so shocking in the first place. Not only would they refuse to "doff and don" their hats; their doctrine of the "Inner Light" also demanded that they witness for their faith by engaging in behaviors deliberately offensive to political order and social mores. They were notorious for going naked in public and interrupting church services by shouting down the minister, banging pots and demanding to know "by what authority" the minister preached.⁶³

Williams viewed the Quakers' extreme spiritual egalitarianism and conscientious incivility as serious threats to his lively experiment. Specifically, he argued that their use of "grievous" and "insulting" language against their spiritual opponents—justified by the inspiration of the Inner Light—demonstrated "by principle and practice, that there are no men to be respected in the World but themselves as being Gods and Christs."⁶⁴ This antinomian partiality and pride, he argued, violated the "Bond of *Civility*" essential to the viability of a tolerating society.⁶⁵ Given his own penchant for uncompromising public criticism of others' sins, the temptation to deny the Quaker's their evangelical liberty might seem to betray more sensitivity—and less tolerance—toward beliefs and practices than he so rigorously advocated for himself.

Whether one finds Williams's arguments persuasive or not, his failure to follow through on his suggestion that "a due and moderate restraint and punishing of their incivilities" might be "a Duty and Command of God" is revealing.⁶⁶ Laws banning religious insult were enacted in other English colonies committed to toleration, including Pennsylvania and Maryland.⁶⁷ Rhode Island remained an exception, and though he complained about it heartily, Williams never followed through in prosecuting the Quakers for their evangelical incivility. Instead, he challenged several of their leading members to a public debate later described in his anti-Quaker polemic, *George Fox Digg'd Out His Burrowes* (1676), the only work by Williams to be published in the New World during his lifetime. Due to his advanced age and poor health, Williams sometimes had to be carried into the venue. Still, he spent three days trying to convince his Quaker opponents of their theological errors. This debate, and Williams's determination to publish the results, represents a fitting vindication of his principles, and his colony would remain a notorious safe haven for Quakers—as well as Jews, Turks, and Infidels well into the eighteenth century.

V. Conclusion

In the "latrine" of Rhode Island, the riff-raff and castoffs of the colonial periphery came together to conduct a lively, if unlikely, experiment to test whether Williams's vision of radical inclusion and unconstrained evangelical liberty could long endure. That it did presents a direct challenge to Jean Jacques Rousseau's contention that "it is impossible to live at peace with those we regard as damned."⁶⁸ Indeed, the concern to save others from damnation undergirded the unprecedented scope of toleration and other institutional innovations pioneered in Williams's colony. Everyone, Williams insisted, must have the right as well as duty to bear witness for their

beliefs while engaging—and castigating—others concerning theirs. After all, “He that is a briar, that is, a Jew, a Turke, a Pagan, [or] an Anti-Christian today, may be... a member of Jesus Christ tomorrow”—but if and only if “the Word of the Lord runs *freely*.”

The rejection of restrictions on evangelical speech in favor of unconstrained conversation and controversy with the unregenerate first articulated in *The Bloody Tenent* represents one of Williams’s most radical—and perhaps influential—contributions to the distinctive development of religious freedom in America. In treating constant witness, unlicensed preaching, and sectarian competition as essential elements of free exercise, Williams posited a connection between the liberty of conscience and broader freedoms of expression and association often taken for granted today. The essential compatibility of religious freedom with free speech is a fundamental tenet of a “First Amendment Faith.” This helps explain why the laws banning hate speech and religious insult advocated under the banner of “tolerance” in other Western democracies seem so problematic, even fundamentally at odds with the American constitutional order.⁶⁹

Williams’s insistence on a universal evangelical liberty is in stark contrast with the many other historical theories and practices of toleration in which the permission of religious difference was assumed to depend on restricting proselytism and competition between sects. Evangelical liberty was taken up by some radical Protestants—including the Quakers that Williams loathed⁷⁰—yet this nascent connection between religious freedom and free expression was explicitly rejected by most other early modern tolerationists, who viewed the enthusiastic witnessing and uncivil preaching of sectarians as obstacles, rather than inducements, to coexistence.

When viewed in this light, Williams's exceptional evangelical toleration presents an early version of the American polity's unique and somewhat paradoxical combination of religious disestablishment and a religiously charged public sphere. It is surely misleading to imply a direct line of descent from the Rhode Island charter to the First Amendment, or to credit Williams with the creation of an "American tradition" of religious liberty as recent scholarship has done. Still, the counterintuitive idea that religious toleration entails disestablishment, sectarian competition, and individual rights of conscience can be at least partly traced to the relative density of competing strands of evangelical Protestantism in British America, of which Williams was only one extreme example.

One need not read Roger Williams as a prophet of modern civil libertarianism to see that those scholars who portray him as a secular liberal or proto-multiculturalist today have categorically misunderstood one of the central themes of his life and works. Justifying toleration as a partner to evangelism, as he did, is far different from the respect or recognition of other faiths they and others associate with tolerance. Yet, for that very reason it can underwrite a commitment to diversity and fundamental disagreement that does not rely on blithe certainties or pious wishes for solidarity. In an age of deep diversity and increasing religious and political polarization, Williams's evangelical insights into the dynamics of believing and belonging are more important than ever—although not, perhaps, in the way his modern revivers might hope.

NOTES

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¹ “Charter of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations – July 15th, 1663,” *The Avalon Project*, Yale Law School, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/ri04.asp (accessed March 30, 2014).

² See John Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in England, 1558-1689* (London: Longman, 2000), 207-8, and Perez Zagorin, *How the Idea of Religious Toleration Came to the West* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), 196-208.

³ *Documents of the Senate of the State of New York*, vol. 14 (New York State Legislature, 1902), 400

⁴ Duncan Bell, “What is Liberalism?” *Political Theory* (forthcoming).

⁵ For recent popularizing works, see John Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul: Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty* (New York: Viking, 2012), James C. Davis, *On Religious Liberty: Selections from the Works of Roger Williams*, ed. (Cambridge: Belknap, 2008) and *In Defense of Civility: How Religion Can Unite America on Seven Moral Issues that Divide Us* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010); and Martha Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience: In Defense of America’s Tradition of Religious Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 2008) and *The New Religious Intolerance: Overcoming the Politics of Fear in an Anxious Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

⁶ Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience*, 57.

⁷ Istvan Bejczy, “*Tolerantia*: A Medieval Concept,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58 (1997), 365-384. Roger Williams, *Bloudy Tenent of Persecution* [1644], in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, vol 3. (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), 3.

⁸ “Williams’s experience of finding integrity, dignity, and goodness outside the parameters of orthodoxy surely shaped his evolving view of conscience.” Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience*, 47. See also Jonathan Beecher Field, “A Key for the Gate: Roger Williams, Parliament, and Providence,” *The New England Quarterly* 80 (2007), 353-382; Jessica R. Stern, “A Key into *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*: Roger Williams, the Pequot War, and the Origins of Toleration in America,” *Early American Studies* (Fall 2011), 576-616.

⁹ Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*, 95.

¹⁰ By “evangelical,” I do not mean Protestant arguments about the voluntary nature of belief, but rather the activity of evangelism, for which “evangelistic” might be a better term.

¹¹ “The Charter of Massachusetts Bay – 1629,” *The Avalon Project*, Yale Law School, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/mass03.asp (accessed March 30th, 2014).

¹² Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience*, 54. According to Perry Miller, “because” Williams was free from missionary care, he “could treat the Indian culture with respect.” Miller, *Roger Williams: His Contribution to the American Tradition* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953), 49-52.

¹³ In 2012, researchers at Brown University managed to “crack the code” and decipher a previously unreadable treatise by Williams written in shorthand in the margins of another book. Written sometime between 1679 and 1683 and entitled “A Brief Reply to a Short Book Written by John Eliot,” it refuted Eliot’s criticisms of an English Baptist, John Norcot, on infant baptism. See Linford Fisher and Lucas Mason-Brown, “By ‘Treachery and Seduction’: Indian Baptism and Conversion in the Roger Williams Code,” *William & Mary Quarterly* 71 (2014), 175-202.

¹⁴ Jeremy Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 29.

- ¹⁵ “Locke’s major contribution may have been to reduce the rambling, lengthy, and incoherent exposition of the New England ‘firebrand’ to orderly, abbreviated, and coherent form.” Winthrop S. Hudson, “John Locke: Heir of Puritan Political Theorists,” in George Hunt and John T. McNeill, eds., *Calvinism and the Political Order* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), [108-129], 117-118. See also, Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience*, 41 and Barry, *Roger Williams*, 392.
- ¹⁶ See Teresa M. Bejan, “‘The Bond of Civility’: Roger Williams on Toleration and its Limits,” *History of European Ideas* 37 (2011), 607-626; Field, “A Key for the Gate,” Stern, “A Key into *The Bloody Tenent*.”
- ¹⁷ Quoted in Field, “A Key to the Gate,” 376. The patent Williams ultimately secured from Parliament in 1643 likewise justified its grant with reference to the colonists’ efforts to settle near and befriend the Narragansett as laying “a sure foundation of happiness to all America.” “A Patent for Providence Plantations – March 14th, 1643,” *The Avalon Project*, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/17th_century/ri03.asp (accessed March 30, 2014).
- ¹⁸ Roger Williams, *A Key Into the Language of America* [1643] in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, vol 1, 80.
- ¹⁹ *A Key*, 86.
- ²⁰ Fisher and Mason-Brown, “Treachery and Seduction,” 180. See also Richard Cogley, *John Eliot’s Mission to the Indians before King Philip’s War* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1999), 16; Field, “A Key for the Gate”; and Stern, “A Key into the *Bloody Tenent*,” 596.
- ²¹ Field, “A Key for the Gate,” 374.
- ²² Roger Williams, *Christenings Make Not Christians* [1645], in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, vol 7, 36-7.
- ²³ Williams believed that the divinely authenticated form of the church had been lost and would be recovered only at Christ’s return. All existing churches were therefore tainted by centuries of “converse” with the unregenerate. See W. Clark Gilpin, *The Millenarian Piety of Roger Williams* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 127.
- ²⁴ *A Key*, 220-221.
- ²⁵ *Ibid*, 221.
- ²⁶ Williams’s millenarian eschatology dictated that the apostolic succession had been interrupted since the conversion of Constantine, hence missionaries like Eliot who gathered churches did so without a proper commission and “sending” from Christ. Eliot’s nickname, “The Apostle to the Indians” must have particularly rankled.
- ²⁷ *Christenings*, 39. The treatise decoded by Fisher and Mason-Brown confirms that the “first grounding to prepare one’s soul before conversion” remained central to Williams’s views on Indian evangelization. He accused Eliot of having “prepared” his proselytes “in error”: “They might speak [or] do some[thing] as they are taught,” but “surely we be cautious of such conversions.” Quoted in Fisher and Mason-Browne, “Treachery and Seduction,” 202).
- ²⁸ Roger Williams, *The Hireling Ministry None of Christs* [1652], in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, vol 7, 168-9.
- ²⁹ *Bloody Tenent*, 59.
- ³⁰ Williams called the Massachusetts charter a “national sin” and offended his fellow religious refugees at every opportunity by accusing them of spiritual uncleanness. He was called repeatedly before the assembly before finally being exiled in 1635. The decision to deport him to England was due to his unwillingness to stop preaching his heterodox opinions to others.

- ³¹ Roger Williams, *Mr. Cotton's Letter, Examined and Answered* [1644] in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, vol 1, 321.
- ³² Gilpin, *Millenarian Piety*, 96, 150.
- ³³ *Christenings*,
- ³⁴ *A Key*, 215.
- ³⁵ *Bloudy Tenent*, 59.
- ³⁶ *Ibid*, 86-87.
- ³⁷ *Ibid*, 221. The Narragansett translation is omitted.
- ³⁸ *Ibid*, 221.
- ³⁹ Quoted in Fisher and Mason-Browne, "By Treachery and Seduction," 195.
- ⁴⁰ Nussbaum mistakenly assumes that "antichristian" was a reference to atheists rather than a popular Protestant pejorative for Catholics. Nussbaum, "The First Founder: the American Revolution of Roger Williams," *The New Republic* (Sep. 2008), <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/books/the-first-founder> (accessed March 30, 2014). Williams never mentioned atheists directly; nevertheless, his failure to explicitly *exclude* them from toleration placed him at the far edge of the radical fringe.
- ⁴¹ Roger Williams, "To the People Called Quakers," *George Fox Digg'd out his Burrowes* [1676] in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, vol 5, i. Although we know little about his life before his removal to Massachusetts, many of these conversations—as well as his knowledge of Dutch and his mastery of shorthand—would have stemmed from his upbringing as the son of a merchant tailor in London.
- ⁴² Williams, *Mr Cottons Letter*, 362.
- ⁴³ *Hireling Ministry*, 168. Ordained as an Anglican minister, Williams renounced the ministry and continued to preach informally. His final surviving letter reports his efforts to solicit Eliot's help in publishing a collection of his sermons. "To Governor Simon Bradstreet, 6 May 1682," *Correspondence*, ii.777.
- ⁴⁴ *A Key*, 217.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 211.
- ⁴⁶ *Bloudy Tenent*, 117.
- ⁴⁷ *Bloudy Tenent*, 94; *Hireling Ministry*, 150.
- ⁴⁸ *Bloudy Tenent*, 354, 250.
- ⁴⁹ *A Key*, 210. "They will say, Wee never heard of this before: and then...relate how they have it from their Fathers, that *Kautantowwit* made one man and woman of a stone, which disliking, he broke in pieces, and made another man and woman of a Tree, which were the Fountaines of all mankind." *Key*, 217-218.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 218-219. Throughout, he stressed the Bible's inherent attraction for the Americans: "They have no Clothes, Bookes, nor Letters...and therefore are easily perswaded that the God that made English men is a greater God, because Hee hath so richly endowed the English above themselves." *A Key*, 83.
- ⁵¹ Williams, "Letter to Mrs. Anne Sadleir, ca. Winter 1652/53," *Correspondence*, i.375.
- ⁵² Williams was frustrated by attempts by Eliot and his allies in London to "publikely brand" the Narragansett as "refusing to pray and be converted." Williams, "Letter to the General Court of Massachusetts Bay, 5 Oct. 1654" in *Correspondence*, ii.409-10.
- ⁵³ *Ibid*, 219-220. My emphasis.
- ⁵⁴ *Bloudy Tenent*, 3.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 160.

⁵⁶ Williams, *The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody* [1652] in *The Complete Writing of Roger Williams*, vol 4, 496; *Bloudy Tenent*, 148; *Mr Cottons Letter*, 316.

⁵⁷ *Yet More Bloody*, 229.

⁵⁸ *Bloudy Tenent*, 160.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 74, 79-80.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 75-77.

⁶¹ Gilpin, *Millenarian Piety*, 139. The system of “Triers” and “Ejectors” adopted as part of the Cromwellian church settlement put this proposal into practice. Jeffrey Collins, “The Church Settlement of Oliver Cromwell,” *History* 83 (2002), 18-40.

⁶² Gilpin, *Millenarian Piety*, 84.

⁶³ In one memorable case, a Quaker man took off his pants and prostrated himself on the communion table. It is difficult to distinguish between accurate reports of the Quakers’ conduct and the spurious accusations of their opponents. Alexandra Walsham, *Charitable Hatred: Tolerance and Intolerance in England, 1500-1700* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 144.

⁶⁴ *George Fox*, 306-7.

⁶⁵ *Bloudy Tenent*, 74.

⁶⁶ *George Fox*, 307.

⁶⁷ The Maryland Toleration Act (1649), Great Law of Pennsylvania (1682), and the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina (1669) all included religious insult provisions.

⁶⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), iv.8.34.

⁶⁹ Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech*, 29.

⁷⁰ According to the Quaker leader George Fox, liberty of conscience demanded the “universal liberty for what people soever...let him be Jew, or Papist, or Turk, or Heathen, or Protestant, or what soever, or such as worship sun or moon or stocks and stones, let them have liberty where every one may...have free liberty to speak forth his mind and judgement.” Quoted in Gilpin, *Millenarian Piety*, 55.