

Evangelical Toleration

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Abstract

This article recovers “evangelical toleration” as a neglected tradition in early modern political thought with important consequences for contemporary political theory and practice. Many political theorists dismiss the prudential arguments made by “proto-liberal” thinkers like Roger Williams or John Locke in favor of toleration as a necessary precondition for evangelism and conversion as intolerant, unacceptably instrumental, and inessential to their deeper theories. By contrast, critics of liberalism treat them as smoking gun evidence for an imperial and civilizing mission underlying liberal toleration. I argue that both sides underestimate evangelical toleration’s genealogical and theoretical importance. Not only were evangelical considerations essential in shaping the particular institutions associated with toleration in England and America, the varieties of evangelical toleration represented by Williams and Locke shed significant light on the very different institutions—and *intuitions*—governing the expression of religious difference in liberal democracies today.

Keywords: toleration, freedom of speech, John Locke, Roger Williams, liberalism

I. Introduction

In 1655, an embassy of Dutch Jews led by Rabbi Menassah ben Israel traveled to London to meet with the Commonwealth's new Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell. The informal "readmission" of Jews—who had been expelled from England by royal edict in 1290—resulting from the Whitehall conference was once hailed as a high point in the history of toleration. Yet in recent years, scholars have increasingly challenged the progressive nature of this event, both in its substance and its motivation (Kaplan 2007; Katznelson 2010; Walsham 2006). "Toleration" in this case, as in many others, did not entail religious freedom or civic equality; Jews in England were granted legal residency and permitted to worship privately, but citizenship, public worship, and the printing of anything that "opposeth the Christian religion" remained off the cards. As for its motivation, Edward Whalley's twofold argument was fairly representative: the Jews "will bring in much wealth into this Commonwealth: and where wee both pray for theyre conversion and beleeeve it shal be, I knowe not why wee shold deny the means" (quoted in Marshall 2006, 381-2).

In challenging traditional Whig narratives about the "rise of toleration" in early modern England as the inexorable progress of liberal enlightenment, political theorists and historians have rightly stressed that toleration did not emerge in this period as a yes-or-no proposition of principled pluralism. Rather, the heterogeneous "horizontal" social practices and "vertical" institutional arrangements that developed for the peaceful accommodation of religious diversity were more often defended as prudential, second-best or halfway measures for the sake of greater goods (Williams and Waldron 2008). In the case of Readmission, these goods were not only *politique* and economic, but explicitly evangelical: the apocalyptic expectations of English

Protestants dictated that the time for the Jews' conversion was nigh and carefully circumscribed toleration a necessary means to that end.

Such arguments in favor of Jewish Readmission offer a prime example of what I call “evangelical toleration.” By this, I do not mean simply theological (particularly Protestant) arguments about the voluntary nature of faith or the irrationality of coercion in the cause of conversion. Mark Goldie, from whom I take the phrase, uses it in this more general way to describe a constellation of theological arguments for toleration in the seventeenth century.¹ Rather, I mean the argument that toleration is a necessary precondition for individuals to preach and propagate the Gospel and so convert others to it. This is a very old Christian argument, although it is not unique to Christianity, and it achieved new power and prominence in the early modern toleration debates to which political theorists—despite the best efforts of revisionist historians—continue to trace the origins of liberal political thought and institutions (e.g., Rawls 1996).

Given this, theorists' relative disinterest in these evangelical arguments is striking, if not particularly surprising.² No doubt to many readers, “evangelical toleration” will sound like a contradiction in terms. For those on the receiving end, evangelism can often feel like an

¹ He outlines this more expansive “evangelical toleration” and its importance for early modern tolerationism in the latter half of his co-authored essay with Richard Popkin (Goldie and Popkin 2006).

² Despite theorists' growing interest in the plural practices and prudential justifications of early modern toleration over the past two decades, evangelical toleration has been consistently ignored. See for example Forst (2013), Mendus (1988), Murphy (1997), Sabl (2008), Williams and Waldron (2008), and Walzer (1997).

inherently *intolerant* activity and, as a justification for toleration, singularly unpersuasive—more like a veiled threat. On this view, evangelical toleration reflects, at best, a conditional commitment to diversity for the sake of future uniformity; at worst, it relies upon and perpetuates a form of verbal persecution that is itself a violation of the *negative* religious freedom of others. Still, other readers will likely have an equally strong reaction in the opposite direction. For them, evangelism will represent a straightforward case of free expression and evangelical competition an example of the sort of robust disagreement and contestation that is the lifeblood of liberal democracy.

The strong and conflicting intuitions that many readers, including many self-professed liberals, have about the place of evangelism in a tolerant society is itself strong evidence that evangelical toleration deserves much closer attention than it has hitherto received. Accordingly, this article will explore this tradition and the importance of evangelical arguments and expectations for two seventeenth-century thinkers, in particular. Roger Williams and John Locke are commonly cited as foundational figures in a distinctive, Anglo-American tradition of liberalism with the principle of religious toleration at its core. Although scholars often gesture towards the vaguely “Protestant” assumptions underlying liberal toleration and the separation of church and state and individual rights with which these thinkers are associated (Mahmood 2009; Waldron 2003), I will demonstrate that Williams and Locke’s projects were shaped by specifically *evangelical* considerations and, moreover, that these considerations also led their projects to diverge in important, but neglected ways.

Williams developed his doggedly controversial and often combative approach to evangelism in the course of his interactions with the American Indians and other Protestant sectarians in New England and Old. In founding Rhode Island, he faced the concrete challenge

of creating a new kind of civil society in the wilderness, one committed to protecting its members' evangelical liberty, as well as the heated and often highly uncivil wars of words it inspired. In contrast with Williams's *polemical* approach to evangelism, Locke's was *eirenic*—that is, oriented towards peace, conciliation, and consensus.³ His life-long concerns about the dangers of “ill usage” and “unreasonable” zeal in evangelical competition left a lasting impression on his theory of toleration. Specifically, they informed his positive vision of a tolerant society as one characterized by “reasonable” evangelism that would encourage citizens to cultivate indifference towards their differences, affirm an underlying agreement on the “fundamentals” of faith, and so put an end to religious wars of words entirely.

Given the importance of evangelical toleration for both thinkers, one might wonder why it has not received more scholarly attention. Where these arguments have been acknowledged, political theorists often draw attention to them as part and parcel of a historicizing maneuver meant to consign these early “liberals” to the antiquarian dustbin by distancing them from the ostensibly secular argumentation of a more enlightened age (e.g. Dunn 1969). On the other hand, for critics of liberal toleration they represent a smoking gun—undeniable evidence of a fundamental, disqualifying intolerance and civilizational imperialism at the heart of the liberal project (Brown 2008; Mahmood 2009; Scherer 2013). The favored alternative among commentators concerned to defend liberal toleration and the continued salience of figures like Locke and Williams seems to be to hold their noses and dismiss these arguments as inessential to the deeper theories, so much lip service to Christian principles when the real motivating principles or interests (of state, self, etc.) lay elsewhere (Forst 2013; Nussbaum 2008).

³ Both terms derive from ancient Greek; “eirenic” from the Greek for peace and “polemic” for war.

Underlying all of these responses seems to be an unspoken agreement with Rousseau, that “it is impossible to live in peace with people one believes to be damned” (Rousseau 1997, 151). Yet this article will challenge this assumption and demonstrate that the differences between the theories of evangelical toleration recovered here have unappreciated historical and normative significance. Far from being antiquarian, when it comes to understanding the often very different institutions and *intuitions* governing the expression of religious difference in modern liberal democracies—including pressing questions about the place of blasphemy and religious insult in tolerant societies—the rival traditions of evangelical toleration developed by Locke and Williams speak volumes. Indeed, the conclusion will argue that, beyond its genealogical significance, Williams’s “paradoxical” form of polemical yet inclusive evangelical toleration presents an attractive alternative to Locke’s eirenic but exclusionary reasonableness as an approach to difference and disagreement today—not only for religious citizens, but for everyone.

II. Evangelism and Toleration

Before turning to the varieties of evangelical toleration found in Williams and Locke and their potential for the present, it is necessary to say a bit more about the origins of this tradition in early modern political thought, as well as its two key terms—evangelism and toleration—both of which may give modern readers pause.

Political theorists often treat evangelism as synonymous with proselytism, a term which carries pronounced pejorative connotations (Robeck 1996). Both words derive from Greek and describe practices forged in the early days of Christianity. Evangelism—from *euangelion* meaning “good message”—describes the act of preaching or promulgating the good news of the Gospel, while proselytism—from the Greek for “come towards”—describes the practice of

making or attempting to make converts, that is “newcomers” to God.⁴ Today, the latter often implies coercion, whether through threats, force, or material rewards, but for early Christians, an embattled minority lacking access to the levers of state power, there was no meaningful distinction. The Apostles, the original evangelists, spread the “good news” of the Gospel throughout the Hellenic world and beyond by preaching alone. With the conversion of Constantine however, Christians gained access to institutional sources of coercion previously unavailable and began to deploy them for pastoral ends.

St. Augustine pioneered and perfected the rationale for applying non-lethal coercion in the “correction” of heretics and apostates as part of the duty of religious and political elites to ensure the social conditions most conducive to *salus populi*, including their salvation (Goldie 1991). Yet while this Augustinian defense of pastoral persecution was highly influential for more than a millennium, it was also controversial. For its critics—especially early modern Protestant dissenters who saw themselves as the inheritors of primitive Christianity—evangelism was an essential duty belonging to all Christians, as a demonstration of one’s love for one’s neighbor in seeking his salvation. But proselytism, the practice of making of converts with the aid of coercion beyond the persuasive power of the Word of God, was a sin of pride through which one sacrificed another, body and soul, to one’s own self-love.

This distinction is often lost today, but for these early modern “evangelicals”—as for many modern believers—it was paramount (Fisher forthcoming). Nevertheless, as their critics pointed out, the words they employed in propagating the Word could be forceful, and these would-be evangelists often approached the line of verbal violence. Martin Luther had instructed

⁴ OED, “Evangelism, N.”; “Proselytism, N.” (2015). I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for helping me to clarify this distinction.

his followers that the Greek *evangel* could also mean “a shout” (Szabari 2006, 127), and many of the enthusiastic sects that later emerged followed his example. Still, for them, the non-coerciveness of evangelism in its reliance on words not swords was essential. True conversion was linked inextricably with “Christian liberty” or the liberty of conscience, which meant not the modern notion of a blanket freedom even for erroneous opinions, but rather the liberty of an individual, through evangelism and the gift of God’s grace, to assent voluntarily to religious truth and convert—literally, “turn”—towards God. Thus, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries neither principle—persuasive conversion or liberty of conscience—entailed toleration. Defenders of persecution followed Augustine in arguing that “benevolent harshness” could be an essential pastoral support by ensuring evangelists an audience and making errant consciences shut up and listen (Goldie 1991). Although force could not compel belief, it could pressure heretics and apostates to come to church, hear the sermon, and take communion in the hope that this feigned conformity might, in time, become sincere faith.⁵

For figures like Sebastian Castellio however, one of the earliest Protestant defenders of toleration, such arguments for pastoral persecution seemed clearly counter-productive and self-defeating. Yet, although Castellio is often heralded as a harbinger of enlightened humanism and skeptical modernity, he was also a pioneer in the tradition of evangelical toleration. In his most famous work, *Concerning Heretics* (1554), he lamented that Christians were not more “mindful of our office,” i.e. their evangelical duty of charity to save the souls of their fellow men. A truly mindful evangelist would not dedicate himself to condemning others as “heretics” and “infidels,” but to convincing them of the superior moral truth of Christianity:

⁵ The extent to which pastoral punishments—and what kind—could be used would become a sticking point in Locke’s debates with Proast in the later *Letters on Toleration*.

“Let not the Jews or Turks condemn the Christians, nor let the Christians condemn the Jews or Turks, but rather teach and win them by true religion, and let us, who are Christians, not condemn one another...Even though in some matters we disagree, yet should we consent together and forebear one another in love, which is the bond of peace, until we arrive at the unity of faith. But now, when we strive with hate and persecutions we go from bad to worse...since we are wholly taken up with condemnation, and the Gospel because of us is made a reproach unto the heathen” (Castellio 1965, 132-133).

His disappointment with his fellow Christians was palpable: “We rather degenerate into Turks and Jews than convert them into Christians” (133).

Modern readers inclined to view evangelical toleration as an oxymoron will note that the instrumental justification for toleration as a precondition for persuasive conversion offered by Castellio and later taken up by evangelical Protestants in the case of Readmission is a far cry from the positive affirmation of diversity with which tolerance is often linked today. Yet as a form of forbearance in the face of an acknowledged evil, this evangelical toleration is “tolerant” in a more traditional sense. In the Middle Ages, Catholic casuists defended *tolerantia* as a policy of limited permission appropriate to lesser evils, including non-Christian minorities, for the sake of avoiding greater ones (Bejczy 1997). The differential treatment of religious “outsiders” like Muslims and Jews, who could be tolerated, and deviant “insiders”—Christian heretics and schismatics—who could not, was key.⁶ The former were few and were more likely to be brought to Christianity with honey than gall. But the latter, as corrupt members of the body of Christ, carried with them a more intimate threat of spiritual pollution and hence must be “cut off” or reformed.

Being tolerated was thus fundamentally an *outsider* status, and one can see this medieval dynamic of inclusion and exclusion at work in Castellio’s argument. His was an evangelical toleration in which evangelism went one way only—from the true Christian to the false—while

⁶ For a good example of this distinction, see Aquinas (2002), 267-278.

denying the tolerated any reciprocal liberty. Similarly, in the debates about Jewish Readmission at Whitehall, this condition of non-evangelism was made explicit in the caveat that Jews not print anything that “opposeth” Christianity. Proponents argued that the evil of religious diversity in the Commonwealth should be endured for the sake of the greatest good, the salvation of both tolerator and tolerated. Yet toleration remained a provisional, inferior status granted to Jews as dependents and outsiders and distinguishing them from the recalcitrant religious insiders—in this case, Catholics and Protestant sectarians—who would not be tolerated, but either persecuted or fully included in civil and spiritual life.⁷

Here, one might be tempted to conclude that “evangelical toleration” is not an oxymoron at all, but a naked declaration of religious hatred, exclusion, and destruction deferred. In keeping with its medieval origins, to “tolerate” something—or someone—still carries an unmistakable whiff of contempt and exclusion at odds with the respect and “atmosphere of inclusiveness” many view as the *sine qua non* of tolerant society (Waldron 2012). Should the prudential calculus ever shift, the tolerated can never be certain that the tolerator would not prefer to eliminate the tolerated evil entirely. The discomfort palpable in recent historical treatments of Jewish Readmission reflects a similar intuition. As for political theorists, many share Stephen Carter’s anxiety that, if the idea that “Christians should tolerate Jews developed hand-in-glove with the notion that [they] should try to persuade them to come to Christ” and so “wipe them off

⁷ Of course, the distinction between insiders and outsiders was often subject to careful negotiation. For instance, the 1689 Act of Toleration excluded Catholics and Unitarians while affording Trinitarian Protestants a limited degree of “insider” status by suspending the penalties for non-attendance at an Anglican church. However, they were still excluded from holding office and enrolling at the Universities. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this example.

the face of the earth through conversion,” it would be better to dispense with the concept entirely (Carter 1993, 93-4).

Evangelical toleration would thus seem only to exacerbate the problems of instrumentalism and implicit intolerance identified by Rousseau and which political theorists attribute to other “merely” prudential arguments for toleration (Mendus et al. 1988). Like them, it seems too unstable and ethically minimal to meet the challenges of cooperation and coexistence under conditions of deep diversity, while at the same time introducing a source of creeping intolerance (evangelism) determined to undermine that diversity from within. Given this, the fact that evangelical toleration has been routinely ignored by theorists, even those determined to push back against the “moralizing tendency” of recent work on toleration and recover its plural practices and motivations, is not at all surprising (Zuolo 2013, 219). From the standpoint of modern political philosophy, the traditional evangelical arguments developed by Castellio and deployed by other Protestant authors in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are not only unsavory and unedifying, they are also philosophically uninteresting and, when it comes to how we should think about toleration today, entirely beside the point.

Underlying this rejection one can detect, once again, an unspoken agreement with Rousseau. Had the tradition of evangelical toleration been limited to the prudential justifications and asymmetrical conditions offered at Whitehall, these suspicions might be well-founded. Yet in drawing on the evangelical arguments pioneered by Castellio, seventeenth-century Williams and Locke also radically transformed them, from something “mere” into something more: an evangelical liberty that was not the exclusive privilege of the true Christian to make converts, but a universal right of all. The following sections will recover their sophisticated and competing conceptions of evangelical toleration as a constellation of ethical and institutional arrangements

by which those convinced of one another's damnation might nevertheless live together, compete for converts, and flourish.

III. Roger Williams and Evangelical Liberty

Roger Williams (c. 1603-1683), the founder of Rhode Island, has been enjoying something of a renaissance of late among political theorists who see him as a promising alternative to Locke as a “proto-liberal” theorist of toleration (Bejan 2011; Nussbaum 2008). After all, the 1663 “Charter of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations” enshrined two unprecedented policy innovations closely associated with liberal toleration—complete religious disestablishment and equal protection for all citizens in the “free exercise and enjoyment of all their civil and religious rights.” And while contemporaries like Milton and Locke balked at the idea of tolerating Catholics and atheists, Williams argued that Jews, “Turkes” (Muslims), “Pagans” (American Indians), and even “Anti-Christians”—that is, followers of the papal Anti-Christ—were equally entitled to toleration, as well as all Protestant sects.

Yet it is Williams's close relationship with the Narragansett Indians, who sheltered him after his banishment from Massachusetts Bay, and his impassioned calls for toleration on their behalf that have caught scholars' attention above all as evidence of an open-minded, even multicultural approach to toleration attractive today. Foremost is Martha Nussbaum, who presents Williams as an exemplar of ideals of fairness and respect that “continue to be central to the best work in recent political philosophy” from Kant to Rawls (Nussbaum 2008, 57). But in making Williams's relationship with the Narragansett central, she and others have deliberately

downplayed the extent to which Williams justified the radical scope of his toleration—including American “Pagans”—on explicitly evangelical grounds.⁸

Indeed, in his many toleration writings Williams adopted the same prudential reasoning employed by Castellio and later at Whitehall by arguing that all heretics and infidels should be tolerated, because all were potential converts. As he put it in his most famous toleration tract, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution* (1644), “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” (95). Whereas an earlier generation of scholars implicated Williams in the “missionary conquest” of America however, those concerned to celebrate him today as a multiculturalist *avant la lettre* ignore these arguments altogether. Nussbaum dismisses this “instrumental” reason as “a common Protestant argument in the period, one that Locke made central to his own case for toleration,” but insists that unlike Locke, “one cannot read Williams’s text...and doubt that [he] also thinks damage to conscience an intrinsic wrong” (Nussbaum 2008, 54). The further implication that evangelism as such is disrespectful and an unacceptable reason for toleration is clear from her insistence that his only motivation in conversing with the American Indians must have been “a respectful curiosity” about their customs (46-7). “Despite his fervent Christian beliefs, there is no record that he ever tried to convert any of them” (54).

Given Williams’s own detailed accounts of evangelizing the Americans, both in his published works and correspondence, this claim simply cannot be sustained. The Rhode Island Charter commended him and other colonists by name for diligently attending to the “conversion of the poor ignorant Indian natives” to “holy Christian faith and worship, as they were

⁸ For a detailed historical treatment of this issue and the salience of concerns about “evangelical liberty” to Williams’s toleration, see Bejan (2015).

persuaded” (Charter 1998). Yet her concerted efforts to downplay the evangelical core of Williams’s toleration project reflect the same subterranean discomfort evident in recent histories of Readmission. It seems that in order to make Williams palatable to modern audiences, one must deny against all evidence that his evangelical arguments reflected any interest in actually converting anyone. Yet this fundamentally misrepresents his toleration project. For Williams, the suggestion that toleration and evangelism went hand-in-hand was more than just an opportunistic, instrumental aside that can be written out. Williams’s participation in and re-imagination of the evangelical tradition inaugurated by Castellio had important consequences for his theory of toleration—both ethically, in the everyday practices and interactions of individuals, and institutionally, in the political and legal arrangements he believed liberty of conscience required.

To see this, it is necessary to look at how Williams himself practiced toleration towards American “Pagans” and English Protestants alike. His approach in both cases was unapologetically evangelistic, but unlike most of his contemporaries, Williams saw evangelism as an essentially critical and controversial affair. He believed that the true form of Christ’s worship had eluded Christians since the conversion of Constantine had tempted them with the powers of proselytism and persecution. Nevertheless, the “saints” could fulfill their charitable duty to evangelize by witnessing against that which was false in Christendom. In this commitment to a polemical form of evangelism Williams’s controversial religious and political pamphlets and the conversations described in his handbook of Narragansett language, *A Key Into the Language of America* (1643), were of a piece. The *Key* reported many dialogues with the Americans about “How Man fell from God, and his present Enmity against God, and the wrath of God against him until Repentance” (Williams 1963a, 86-87). The helpful dialogue about

damnation included in the chapter “Of Their Religion” expanded on 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 ere long be burnt*” (134). In response to the “profitable question,” “What then will become of us?” Williams replied: “*God commandeth. That all men now repent*” (138-9).

Pace Nussbaum then, Williams evidently took his duty to preach—forcefully—against errors and spread news of the “written word of God” quite seriously. Still, one might wonder whether in deploying the violent imagery of hellfire and eternal damnation he risked losing the evangelical high ground and lapsing into proselytism himself. Williams’s fellow Puritans in Massachusetts accused him of as much, and he was sensitive to the charge. He insisted that the words, not swords, of *civil* dialogue were the only legitimate means available to would-be evangelists—and in this, they might profit from the Americans’ example. Although Nussbaum and others cite Williams’s praise for the Americans as paragons of “Berean Civilitie” as further evidence of his disinterested appreciation for their culture, even this had evangelical significance. For Williams, the Americans resembled the “noble” and “gentle” Bereans, who sheltered St. Paul after he fled persecution in Thessalonica, not only in their hospitality toward an exiled evangelist, but in their willingness to listen critically and participate actively in evangelical conversation. The Bereans “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 insisted that like the Bereans before them, the Americans must be left at liberty to engage with Scripture and judge for themselves, “according to their *Indian* or *American* consciences, for other *consciences* it cannot be supposed they should have” (Williams [1644b],

354, 250). *A Key* reported how, after telling them about the creation of Adam and Eve, they responded with their own creation story in which the first men were created of stone, then wood (217). Moreover, when Williams talked Hellfire, the Narragansett talked back. 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,*” they responded, “*Who told you so?*”, and he noted their critical questioning about whether to accept his answer—“*Gods Booke or Writing*”—approvingly (218-9).

Here, the distinctive character of Williams’s universal evangelical toleration as a departure from the tradition inaugurated by Castellio comes more clearly into view. Ethically, toleration was clearly compatible with viewing others as potential converts and with *expressing* one’s negative judgments about them and their religion as well. As far as Williams was concerned, the Americans were “Divell”-worshippers and Catholics deserved the name of “Anti-Christians.” And yet he believed that American pagans, Catholic Anti-Christians, Jews, and “Turkes” should not only be grudgingly forbore, but actively engaged in civil, yet unmistakably evangelical, conversation. This mutual and occasionally antagonistic evangelism was a messy, unconstrained, and altogether uncertain affair in stark contrast with the organized efforts undertaken by his chief competitor in Indian affairs, John Eliot. Williams suspected that Eliot’s system of “civilizing” Indian proselytes in English-style “Praying towns” before “Christianizing” them introduced inappropriate forms of material and physical coercion more evident of proselytizing zeal than a truly evangelical care for their souls. Upon his second return to London in 1651, Williams carried a petition from the Narragansett to 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” (Williams 1988, ii.409-10).

Williams’s implication was clear: toleration was essential to true conversion in creating the social and political conditions under which evangelism, rather than proselytism, could proceed. Here, one can see that his distinctive ethical conception of toleration had profound institutional consequences as well. For a sufficiently evangelical conversation to take place, the informal freedom to worship privately as second-class citizens, as was the case for Jews in England after Readmission, was insufficient. Rather, toleration required that believers and non-believers alike be fully included in political and social life, hence the evangelical liberty to preach and propagate their own doctrine extended to all. He illustrated this point with the familiar metaphor of the Ship of State. In a tolerant society, “both Papists and Protestants, Jews and Turks, may be imbarqued into one Ship.” But as on a transatlantic crossing, all must be “suffered to breathe and walke upon the Deckes, in the ayre of civill liberty and conversation in the Ship of the commonwealth”—not “choaked and smothered” below (Williams [1644b], 204). Although the passengers might hate each other, they should make the most of their suffering: “in the lamentable shipwreck of mankind...next to the saving of your own souls...your task as Christians is to save the souls...of others” (87).

Although his most famous institutional innovation remains the “wall of separation” realized in the Rhode Island’s unprecedented disestablishment of religion, the radicalism of Williams’s position—enshrined in the Rhode Island charter as the “free exercise and enjoyment of [citizens’] civil and religious rights”—in contrast with restrictions routinely placed on tolerated minorities like the Jews at Whitehall cannot be overestimated. But Williams’s further emphasis on evangelism as an essential element of free exercise had equally radical implications.

Evangelical liberty—as a freedom to witness and admonish others for their spiritual errors—was crucial for the free flowing of the Word among the “Briars” of the wilderness. Toleration thus had two, distinct requirements: first, the “permission of the most *Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or Antichristian consciences and worships*” and second, “that they...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*” (Williams [1644b], 3). Williams’s crucial innovation here—and where he departs further from earlier evangelical tolerationists—was in seeing evangelism itself not only as an inducement *to*, but an object *of* toleration. More radical still, he insisted that this evangelical liberty belonged to all Christians and not just ordained and beneficed clergy. Through the idea of equal protection enshrined in the Rhode Island Charter, this evangelical liberty became a universal right belonging to non-Christians, too.

Nevertheless, Williams’s determination to put this unrestricted evangelical liberty into practice in Rhode Island—which became a “receptacle for all sorts of riff-raff” and religious refugees from New England—severely tested the limits of his toleration. Particularly obnoxious were the Quakers, who among the many enthusiastic Protestant sects had taken Luther’s reinterpretation of evangelism as a holy war of words most closely to heart. Williams complained that “their Tongues are the most cutting and bitter of any that I can hear of professing the Protestant Reformation, and it is certain, where the Tongue is so...they will be as bitter and cutting in Hand also, where God pleaseth to permit a Sword to fall into it” (Williams [1676], 207). But in a classic example of trying to combat uncivil speech with more speech, Williams challenged several leading Quakers to a public debate and published the results.

Moreover, Rhode Island never enacted a law banning religious insult of the kind adopted in Maryland, Carolina, and Pennsylvania.⁹

Forst (2013) calls the connection between Williams's "religious argumentative framework" and the radicalism of his toleration "paradoxical" (183), but this is wrong. This section has shown that its ethical and institutional character and evangelical outlook were intimately and logically connected.¹⁰ The success of Williams's "livelie experiment" of radical inclusion and unconstrained evangelical liberty in Rhode Island thus presents a direct challenge to Rousseau's suggestion that religious intolerance leads always to civil persecution. As a practice of individuals and of states, his evangelical toleration capitalized on the ethical minimalism of *tolerantia* while turning it inside out. Whereas early evangelical tolerationists had argued that religious outsiders should be tolerated so as one day to be brought inside the fold and embraced fully as fellow members of the body of Christ, Williams's polemical approach erased the distinction by turning *everyone* into outsiders and "Briars," Christians and non-Christians alike. In the end, it was this brilliant but counter-intuitive strategy that enabled him to create a new kind of community in the New England wilderness from altogether unlikely materials.

III. John Locke and Reasonable Evangelism

Williams's views on toleration are often lumped together with those of his younger and more famous contemporary, John Locke (1632-1704). Yet, as scholars have been increasingly

⁹ The 1649 Maryland Toleration Act, the 1682 Great Law of Pennsylvania, as well as the 1669 Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina all included religious insult provisions.

¹⁰ Nussbaum goes farther, claiming that Williams "nowhere alludes to [his religious] beliefs in arguing for liberty of conscience" (Nussbaum 2008, 43).

willing to acknowledge—particularly critics of the liberal toleration with which he is synonymous—Locke’s toleration, both as a private practice and a public policy, was also evangelical in important ways (Turner 2011; Matar 1993; De Roover and Balagangadhara 2008; Scherer 2013).

Locke argued consistently in *A Letter Concerning Toleration* that to embrace toleration was to follow Christ’s example and acknowledge words, not swords, as the only divinely sanctioned methods of spreading the Gospel, for “no man can be a Christian without Charity” and “that Faith which works, not by Force, but by Love.” Thus, in employing inapt methods, persecutors were guilty, among other things, of failing to “sincerely and heartily apply themselves to make other people Christians” (Locke [1689], 8). This evangelical instrumentalism became even stronger in the later *Letters*. While his inveterate Anglican critic Jonas Proast expressed shock at the “largeness of the toleration,” Locke gave an apt summation of the evangelical toleration tradition since Castellio: “we pray every day for their conversion [as is] our duty,” but it will “hardly be believed that we pray in earnest if we exclude them from the other ordinary and probably means of conversion; either by driving them from, or persecuting them when they are amongst us” (Locke [1690], 62).

Although Locke is sometimes accused of smuggling in Christian assumptions under the auspices of neutrality, he was evidently not a very able smuggler. Still, many scholars have been tempted to dismiss these evangelical arguments as rhetorical moves meant to embarrass the orthodox while doing very little work. In focusing exclusively on the rationalist, indifferentist or skeptical aspect of his thought however, one fails to appreciate the importance of Christian love in supplying the moral core of his toleration project, not to mention Locke’s personal interest—

and participation—in practical efforts in this direction.¹¹ Loving one’s neighbor meant one could not simply content oneself by allowing him to go to Hell in his own fashion. “The care of each man’s Salvation belongs only to himself,” but “affectionate Endeavours to reduce Men from Errors...are indeed the greatest Duty of a Christian.” Indeed, “anyone may employ as many Exhortations and Arguments as he pleases, towards the promoting of another man’s Salvation” (Locke [1689], 46).

Locke’s extension of evangelical conversation from a duty of Christians to a universal right of “anyone” is in stark contrast with the one-sidedness of traditional evangelical toleration. In this, he sounds a lot like Roger Williams, and yet closer examination reveals that his approach to “charitable Admonition” was quite different. Whereas Williams’s evangelism was polemic, Locke’s was eirenic and oriented towards peace and conciliation, not controversy. This difference can be explained in part by the different projects in which they were engaged. While Williams saw toleration as a means of *creating* community out of unlikely and uncooperative materials in the New World, writing from exile in the Netherlands Locke saw it as a way to maintain unity in the face of diversity in the Old. As he declared in a letter to his friend Philipp van Limborch commenting on his hopes for the Act of Toleration: “Men will always differ on religious questions and rival parties will continue to quarrel and wage war on each other” until “the establishment of equal liberty for all provides a bond of mutual charity by which all may be brought together into one body” (Locke 1976, iii.689).

¹¹ As Turner (2011) has shown, during his tenure as Secretary to the Lord Proprietors of Carolina (1669-1676) and later as a member of the Board of Trade (1696-1700), Locke approved and facilitated the kind of state-sponsored missionary efforts among the Americans decried by Williams.

Here, Locke's evangelical toleration was closer to that of Castellio, or even Augustine, in being motivated by a spirit of genuine inclusiveness in wanting to bring as many outsiders *in*—to the Commonwealth or into the Church of England—as possible. Locke had little patience for separatist scruples of “fanatics” like Williams. Any Christian who would deny that name to others was “truly the author and promoter of schism and division...and tears in pieces the church of Christ” (Locke 1692, 289). Despite his own considerable heterodoxy, Locke remained a communicating member of the Church of England throughout his life. This was not just a curious accident of his biography; it reflects a deeper outlook and understanding of what toleration as a practice of individuals coexisting under conditions of deep diversity requires.

Accordingly, while Williams and Locke both justified toleration evangelically, they understood its horizontal dimension as a first-person practice in vastly different ways. Although he described himself as an “Evangelical Christian,” Locke had little time for the bombastic, polemical excesses of “Papists” or “fanatics.”¹² He complained that many people who might easily have been brought into the Church “by friendly and Christian debates” and the “gentle methods of the Gospel made use of in private conversation” had nevertheless been kept out by such “ill and unfriendly treatment” and “railing from the pulpit” (Locke 1690, 86-7). People would be more likely to listen if complimented rather than insulted. Hence, to reap fully the benefits of “charitable admonition” and the “opposite arguings of men of parts,” one must not only listen to others and refrain from interruption, this should reflect a sincere “indifferency” to

¹² By this he meant: “[Those who] declare war on no one on account of difference of opinions...seeking truth alone, desire themselves and others to be convinced of it only by proofs and reasons; they are gentle to the errors of others, being not unmindful of their own weakness; forgiving human frailty and ignorance, and seeking forgiveness in turn” (Locke 1976, vi.495).

one's own opinions and a willingness to revise one's views (Locke 1996, 185-6). His lasting latitudinarian interest in emphasizing points of agreement as "fundamental" and deemphasizing disagreements as *adiaphora* or matters of indifference reflected the same reasonable, consensus-oriented, and persuasive approach.¹³

As with Williams, Locke's more robust understanding of ethical toleration had institutional consequences as well. Here, we can see that the familiar picture of "Lockean" toleration as the separation of church and state and a particular slate of individual conscience rights is misleading in key respects. While the *Letter* preached a theory of the "essential distinction" between civil and spiritual goods, laws, and government, in practice Locke was amenable to a national church and a state-supported ministry actively engaged in missionizing at home and abroad (Turner 2011). In contrast with Williams's system of the free and vigorous exercise of universal evangelical liberty leading to often highly uncivil wars of words, Locke's tolerant society would be one wherein members universally gave up their "implacable enmities" and "ill use" towards one another and recognized their indifferent differences as "several paths that are in the same road" while "diligently endeavor[ing] to allay and temper all that Heat and *unreasonable* averseness of Mind...[and] fiery Zeal for his own Sect" (Locke [1689], 27-8). This hope for concord led Locke to view the mutual anathemas characteristic of evangelical competition as violations of mutual charity and social unity. Although in his mature toleration

¹³ Locke's late work *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1694) was an exercise in latitudinarian theology in which Locke attempted to show that the fundamentals necessary to salvation were sufficiently minimal so that anyone who acknowledged Christ deserved the name of "Christian"—the similarity to Hobbes's own minimalist creed in *Leviathan* critics gleefully pointed out.

writings, he advocated a system of individual freedoms of (public) worship and association, one searches in vain for the principled commitment to evangelical liberty one finds in Williams.

Still, Locke's reasonable evangelism will likely sound more appealing to a modern audience than does Williams's enthusiastic, polemical approach. But here again, his evangelical toleration was actually closer to traditional arguments in making the toleration of diversity conditional on the recognition of a deeper, underlying unity—in this case an agreement on certain “fundamental” beliefs, including the existence of a Deity, the principle of toleration, and the Golden Rule. As a policy matter, then, Locke's evangelical toleration also had clear limits, which brought it closer to the traditional vision, as well. While Williams's toleration turned neighbors into strangers, Locke's preserved a strong distinction between those inside and those outside the pale. The relative difference, however, was no longer between fully included insiders (Christians) and tolerated outsiders (Jews and Turks), as it had been for Castellio and the evangelical defenders of Jewish Readmission. Rather, for Locke, the relevant distinction was between “reasonable” insiders who received all the rights and privileges he associated with toleration, and “unreasonable” outsiders who did not (cf. Fish 1997).

Locke's transformation of medieval *tolerantia* from an outsider into an insider status was thus more exclusionary, and yet no less radical than Williams's had been. In extending the pale of this more robust toleration as a system of full inclusion and affective belonging, Locke also sharpened the edge—leaving Catholics, atheists, and the intolerant, out in the cold. Williams, by contrast, included all of these groups. Although in calling for the toleration of “Antichristians” Williams was deploying a common Protestant epithet for Catholics, rather than atheists, as Nussbaum assumes (Nussbaum 2008), his principled opposition to civil oaths meant that they,

along with the Catholics of dual allegiances so feared by Locke, were tolerable as well.¹⁴ And although Williams was evidently mistaken in his suspicions of Quaker intolerance, he was more than comfortable tolerating other theologically intolerant Protestants like himself, even making nice with the persecutorial denizens of Massachusetts when the exigencies of the moment demanded (LaFantasie 1988, ii.464-70). For Locke, however, for whom oaths were essential, cohabiting on terms of equal liberty required a degree of social trust impossible beyond a fixed range of permissible difference in behavior and belief.¹⁵

Thus, while Locke's toleration became more liberal over time, it also became more limited. The *Letter's* infamous exclusions reflected this insistence on fundamental agreement and a reasonable, refined approach to evangelism as conditions of toleration that necessarily excluded some people and positions. By tempering their "unreasonable averseness of mind," he hoped that evangelical disagreements might *themselves* become sources of solidarity through which citizens recognized the fundamental commitments they shared, as well as the reasonableness and respectability of their disagreements. Locke's growing emphasis on the evangelical importance of toleration and Christian mission, both in theory and in practice, in his

¹⁴ Oaths were a serious business in the seventeenth century; their necessity to a stable social order was often adduced—including by Locke—as an argument against the toleration of Catholics and atheists, and they were used to ferret out radical Protestant sectarians like the Quakers, as well.

¹⁵ Forst (2013) characterizes Locke's insistence on a shared belief in a deity as a the *sine qua non* of social life as "Locke's Fear" and the main obstacle keeping his theory from meeting the bar of "mutual respect" (244).

later works thus reflected his belief in the importance of cultivating as well as *expanding* this consensus by making converts, and so re-enforcing these affective bonds.¹⁶

IV. Evangelical Toleration Today

Far from being theological window-dressing, then, or an unfortunate “blind spot” in otherwise attractive theories, evangelical hopes and endeavors were deeply imbricated in Williams and Locke’s toleration projects and strongly influenced the institutional and ethical forms they took.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the few scholars who take note of these arguments continue to dismiss them as merely prudential anachronistic holdovers from a theocratic age, “transitional” theories “typical of [their] time” but of blessedly little contemporary significance (Forst 2013, 185; Nussbaum 2008). Evangelical toleration may have been persuasive in a context where toleration was a matter of reconciling doctrinal disputes between European Christians, they suggest, but in our globalized world of multicultural—and secular—liberal democracies, this is no longer the case.

This article has sought to challenge such arguments and the reductive, secularizing assumptions on which they rest by recovering evangelical toleration as an important albeit forgotten tradition in early modern political thought. Still, one might wonder whether in placing high-profile “proto-liberals” like Locke and Williams at the center of this tradition simply

¹⁶ In addition to his interest—and occasional participation in—the ongoing missionary efforts of his countrymen in the New World, the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina justified its grant of religious liberty on explicitly evangelical grounds (Locke 1997, 178).

¹⁷ For the concept of “blind spots” in the history of toleration, see Laursen (2011).

confirms critics' suspicions of a disqualifying missionary intolerance at the core of liberal toleration. If these "patron saints of liberalism" were evangelical tolerationists, what are we?

Rather than writing off the entire tradition of liberal toleration as an imperial endeavor on the basis of its evangelical origins, the preceding sections demonstrate the importance of being attentive to the varieties of evangelical toleration in play. Here, we might see Locke and Williams as representing two, competing strands of evangelical tolerationism—one sectarian and polemical, the other ecumenical and eirenic—with lasting legacies for liberalism. Something of this legacy can be seen in the tension that continues to characterize liberal political theory and practice when it comes to how to address the various forms of verbal violence that trouble us today. Whether they come in the form of proposals to prohibit blasphemy and religious insult by law, or to establish speech codes, trigger warnings, or safe spaces on college campuses, attempts to eradicate the wars of words characteristic of tolerant societies inspire vastly different reactions among self-proclaimed liberals. Those in favor argue, like Locke, that the members of tolerant societies should be committed to reasonable and civil modes of public discourse that emphasize points of commonality and downplay divisions so as to foster a deeper culture of inclusion and mutual respect. Others, like Williams, see these forms of uncivil speech as the inevitable and tolerable byproducts of the rowdy, agonistic evangelical competition at the heart of liberal democracy in which the freedom to condemn—and offend—others is sacrosanct.

Genealogically speaking, the kind of evangelical toleration associated with radical sectarians like Roger Williams sheds light on a strong conceptual and institutional connection between religious freedom and free speech intuitive to many liberals—especially in America, where it constitutes the first "fundamental" of our "First Amendment Faith" (Waldron 2012, 29). Yet this connection is hardly obvious or universal. Historically, as in the case of Jewish

Readmission, toleration has more often been accompanied by restrictions on evangelical activity than not.¹⁸ The liberal connection between religious freedom and free speech—and the priority of these freedoms in America in particular—is thus a curiosity to be explained. The contrasting emphases placed on the protection of evangelical controversy by Williams and Locke suggest that Americans’ peculiar form of “free speech fundamentalism” owes something to the relative density of competing strands of sectarian Protestantism in the American colonies, and to evangelicals like Williams who were unwilling—or in conscience, unable—to bite their tongues or hold their peace.

This genealogical observation arguably has contemporary normative significance. The different theories of evangelical toleration developed by Williams and Locke thus provide examples of religious reasons that can be offered to believing Christians not simply for tolerating others, but for endorsing the specific slate of conscience rights—not only of speech, but also exercise and assembly—associated with religious freedom in liberal democracies besides.¹⁹ An evangelical toleration that affirms liberal institutions must rest on a particular theology of conversion, true, but it is one that can perhaps be argued for from *within* many religious traditions, including proselytizing faiths other than Christianity.²⁰ While these comments are

¹⁸ Consider also the treatment of Jehovah’s Witnesses and Europe or headscarves as “ostentatious” religious signs in France, Turkey, and Quebec.

¹⁹ The arguments made by Sala (2013) from a contemporary theoretical perspective in favor of the liberal commitments of “unreasonable” evangelistic Christians are supported by empirical work as well (e.g. Woodberry 2012).

²⁰ For an attempt to do something along these lines on the basis of the Islamic idea of *da’wa*, see March (2009).

necessarily speculative, ruling out such questions on the grounds that evangelical arguments are invariably “Protestant” or “Protestantizing” will not do. Such arguments are not exclusive to Protestant Christianity, nor is “Protestantism” a homogeneous monolith. Whether Protestants in early modern England espoused evangelical toleration—and what kind—depended on their particular theologies of mission and conversion. This suggests that toleration, in the early modern period or today, never rests on uncontroversial secular assumptions—it requires theological work as well. The salience of evangelical arguments to a citizenry altogether less tolerant and secular than political theorists might hope should not be underestimated.

Still, one might grant the genealogical significance of evangelical toleration and its power in explaining certain divergences within contemporary liberalism without accepting the further claim that theorists should approach these early modern arguments as alive and possibly attractive for the present. Valuing one’s co-citizens primarily as “briars”—i.e. as potential converts—as Williams did, seems to show a striking lack of respect for their conscientious strivings and moral personhood, to say the least. And indeed, despite a growing consensus in favor of including religious arguments in democratic deliberation, even those theorists most open to them balk when it comes to evangelism, which they associate with an imperialistic exclusivism incompatible with mutual respect (Nedelsky 2006, 112). The tendency to recast all evangelism as proselytism noted above thus undermines its pretensions to persuasiveness and insinuates that evangelical toleration—even more so than the similarly instrumental secular arguments from peace and public order—falls afoul of the principle of reciprocity essential to

deliberation, both in not being universally shareable and in relying on an asymmetry in openness to persuasion (Urbinati 2014; Forst 2013, 185).²¹

Yet this distinction between unacceptably “instrumental” evangelism and acceptably “principled” persuasion seems clearly overdrawn. Both proceed by reasoning on the basis of core moral commitments or first principles which are not themselves open to negotiation and which one believes to be *true* and hopes, one day, will be universally shared. Here, would-be evangelists appear to have the edge on consistency in actually practicing what they preach. Instead of insulating themselves among the like-minded, they act on their commitments by talking to those with whom they fundamentally disagree on a regular basis and doing the unglamorous and unpleasant work of trying to convince them that they are wrong. The same cannot usually be said of scholars who reproach evangelicals for being “unreasonable” and closed-minded and congratulate themselves on their own willingness to revise their views while conversing exclusively with those who already agree with them. Then again, if open-mindedness were a genuine prerequisite of dialogue, who would bother? Evangelism—more so than deliberation or persuasion—more aptly describes much of what the citizens of modern liberal democracies actually *do* in the public sphere. When political disagreements begin to look more

²¹ For a compelling rejoinder to the reciprocity argument when it comes to the role of religious arguments and citizens in democratic deliberation in general through an appeal to a “systemic” rather than a “dyadic” model of persuasion, see Hertzberg (2014). Interestingly, this critique of evangelism as a violation of reciprocity is itself evidence of the salience of early modern evangelical toleration—and its critics. Hobbes criticized evangelism as “unwanted counsel” and described all missionary activity in *Leviathan* as a violation of the Golden Rule (Hobbes 2012, ii.456).

like proselytizing than public reasoning, one wonders whether a truly evangelical commitment to competing for converts, rather than preaching to the converted, might well be a good thing.

Here, Williams's "paradoxical" and polemical evangelical toleration—and the engaged, inclusive, and contestatory ethic it inspired—is deserving of attention as a potentially attractive approach to difference and disagreement not only for religious citizens, but for everyone. Unlike Locke, who theorized toleration from a safe distance, Williams confronted the challenge of constructing and governing a tolerant society first-hand. In the process, he was forced to acknowledge a harsh reality with which many theorists remain uncomfortable: namely, that familiarity with those from whom we differ on the "fundamentals," in politics as in religion, is more likely to breed contempt than its opposite.

Williams and Locke's respective "blind spots"—Quakers, on the one hand, and the "unreasonable" on the other—like their divergent approaches to evangelism, owe much to these different perspectives. It is little wonder, then, that Locke's is so widely shared among political theorists, who approach toleration in a similarly aspirational and eirenic way. But Williams knew well from experience that a tolerant society cannot pick and choose its materials and remain "tolerant" for long. He was under no illusion that constant contact with those we believe to be culpably in error on the fundamentals would bring us to respect them more. Nevertheless, he saw, too, that constant evangelical engagement with the damned could, perhaps, keep us from *demonizing* them in the way that cloaking oneself in the righteous certainty of the like-minded certainly will.

While Locke's eirenic ideal of inclusiveness and of embracing the Other as a friend and brother is no doubt attractive, the alternative to holding those whom we believe to be culpably in error at arm's length is more often pushing them overboard. If we can appreciate Williams's

alternative vision, as I think we should, we should also be prepared to take its evangelical sources seriously, especially insofar as they challenge our assumptions about what it means to be “tolerant” today.

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