

ROGER WILLIAMS'S CONTRIBUTION TO RELIGIOUS LIBERTY AND BAPTISTS: A Reassessment

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Alone with his young family and suffering from illness, the pastor faced a horrific choice. It was January. A blizzard swept toward his home. He had to decide quickly between judicial death by the persecuting courts in his home country, or natural death by exposure in the wilderness outside his door. The year was 1636, and European civilization on the Atlantic coast of America consisted of a tiny number of widely scattered colonies.

The newest colony, which included Boston and Salem, was founded by the Massachusetts Bay Company. The Salem church's pastor had tested the utter limits of the Puritan hierarchy's patience. His theological commitments to Christ, pure worship, impartial justice, and liberty of conscience pushed the government to answer his challenge to their social order. Though peopled by nonconformists fleeing religious oppression, Massachusetts chose traditional hierarchy over radical truth.

Roger Williams faced the future alone but for God. This essay reassesses the thought of this maverick theologian. What, if anything, can he say about religious liberty for our day? Christian nationalism is on the rise in America again,¹ and some Baptists find it inviting.² A reassessment is overdue. Like Williams then, Baptists now face a choice. We may end up alone but for God. Yet truth must be pursued, even when magistrates and ministers fulminate.

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¹Stephen Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Canon Press, 2022); Tim Alberta, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory: American Evangelicals in an Age of Extremism* (Harper, 2023).

²Albert Mohler, "What Is Missing from Our Constitutional Order? Our Government Should Acknowledge Christianity," *Christ Over All* (<https://christovertall.com/article/concise/what-is-missing-from-our-constitutional-order-our-government-should-acknowledge-christianity/>, 2024).

"I HAVE SEEN THE FACE OF GOD"

On the one hand, Williams faced the prospect of arrest and deportation to England, where he would be cast into prison as a radical Puritan. Archbishop William Laud was using both the High Commission, an enhanced ecclesiastical court, and the Star Chamber, a plenipotentiary royal court, to corral his politico-religious opposition. Problematic Puritans were being imprisoned, impoverished, and mutilated under Laud's church-state regime.³ Those committed to prison often quickly perished.

Early modern prisons, with their cramped conditions, lack of basic provisions, and unchecked communicable diseases, brought early death to many helpless inhabitants. The congregation of one religious prisoner complained to a government committee about conditions in Newgate. Their petition ignored, Thomas Helwys, the first pastor of the first Baptist church in England, perished.⁴ Williams grew up near Newgate and worshiped in the parish church of Holy Sepulchre, which adjoined that prison. Holy Sepulchre's former members included John Rogers, the first Protestant martyred by Mary, and John Smith, famously saved by the American woman Pocahontas. Williams knew too well of his likely fate if extradited.

On the other hand, he could leave his wife and child in their warm home and flee into the night. His tracks would be covered by the snow, immediately preserving his life, but the cold might kill him. A mercenary, Captain John Underhill, was leading troops toward his door with a warrant. A London-bound ship awaited the fugitive. Graciously, John Winthrop, sometime governor of Massachusetts, sent a private warning to Williams. While Winthrop disagreed with the pastor, he did not wish to see him die. But the author of the famous "City on a Hill" sermon offered little hope for life. The chances of an Englishman surviving alone in winter in this strange land, where many others recently perished, were slim.⁵

Williams decided to risk the frozen wilderness rather than "London's prototype of hell."⁶ He ran for his life. He later wrote that he did "not know what Bread or Bed did meane" for more than three months. This devout Christian ran for his life, praying for divine guidance. Comparing his perilous ordeal with that of Jacob wrestling the angel of the Lord at Peniel,

³Take as an example Laud's prosecution of William Prynne, whose ears were sawed off. Hugh Trevor-Roper, *Archbishop Laud, 1573-1645*, 2nd ed. (London: Orion, 2000), 159-66

⁴Joe Early Jr., *The Life and Writings of Thomas Helwys* (Mercer University Press, 2009), 44-45.

⁵Francis J. Bremer, *John Winthrop: America's Forgotten Founding Father* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 251.

⁶Stephen Halliday, *Newgate: London's Prototype of Hell* (London: Sutton, 2008), xi-xiv, 1-36.

he said it thoroughly transformed him: “I have seen the face of God.”⁷

Cut off from kith and kin, still subject to arrest, Williams fled the territory. He asked the natives for permission to live. The interior of the continent was populated by men and women whose lands were increasingly claimed by European colonists. His own advocacy for the basic rights of the Americans was one of four issues which caused great offense to the state-church authorities. The charges against Williams during his banishment trial included:

First, that we have not our land by patent from the King, but that the natives are the true owners of it, and that we ought to repent of such a receiving it by patent. Secondly, that it is not lawful to call a wicked person to swear, to pray, as being actions of God’s Worship. Thirdly, that it is not lawful to hear any of the ministers of the parish assemblies in England. Fourthly, that the civil magistrate’s power extends only to the bodies and goods, and outward state of men.⁸

Winthrop explained these charges in his journal. First, Williams denied a Christian prince could convey land owned by others. This pierced the economic heart of the colonial enterprise. Second, he objected to government courts requiring people to swear in the name of the Lord. Coerced oaths caused unbelievers to blaspheme God by prompting them “to take the name of the Lord in vain.”⁹ The third charge derived from the free church principle that state churches ought not be recognized, for they persecute the gathered saints.¹⁰ The fourth charge had profound implications for religion and politics. Williams believed the true church, a holy institution, was given a spiritual purpose with spiritual means and officers to meet it. The church must be kept separate from the civil government with its civil purposes, civil officers, and civil means.

⁷John M. Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul: Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty* (Viking, 2012), 214.

⁸Theodore P. Greene, ed., *Roger Williams and the Massachusetts Magistrates: Readings Selected by the Department of American Studies, Amherst College* (Boston: Heath, 1964), 4.

⁹Greene, *Roger Williams and the Massachusetts Magistrates*, 2; Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul*, 191-92.

¹⁰He judged the setting up of state religion to be “Antichrist.” Roger Williams, *The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody* (1652), in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, 7 vols. (Russell and Russell, 1963) [hereinafter *CWRW*], 4:58.

DOUBLY POIGNANT

After fleeing into the frigid wilderness and finding God, Williams made his way south, into the lands of the Wampanoag. They allowed him to settle among them. Their generosity signaled the origin of a new colony. The chief of the tribe gave Williams land from his heart, though the persecuted pastor tried to pay for it. That land is now known as Rhode Island. Giving praise to God for his survival and this gift, Williams named his small community, "Providence." In 1639, he became a founding member of its Baptist church, the first on the American continent.

John Cotton, the pastor of Boston's congregational church, began writing letters to the exile. One found its way through an Indian messenger that first year. Cotton was surprised Williams survived. The historian John Barry said the Puritan's letter was "marvelously taunting." Cotton told Williams that if he had "perished' among the 'Barbarians ... your bloode had been on your owne head; it was your sinne to procure it, and your sorrow to suffer it."¹¹ Cotton was either a master of cold comfort or upset the refugee eluded justice. It was likely the latter, for several prominent laymen reported that Cotton led the effort to banish Williams.¹²

The double pathos of this significant moment in both human and Christian history ought not be missed. In the first place, we must realize the Christian ideal of universal liberty of conscience was given room to flourish by the present of a pagan prince. Formal religious liberty depends for its birthplace upon the American Indian. The chief may have granted it for that purpose. Williams wrote that the Americans "have a modest Religious perswasion not to disturb any man, either themselves, Dutch, English, or any in their Conscience, and therefore say, Aquiewopwaūwash. Aquiewopwaūwock. *Peace, hold your peace.*"¹³

This pagan gift should prevent presumptions that Christian ethical practices are better. The evidence for high morals among peoples in other religions must be admitted. Williams often highlighted instances in which American virtue showed itself superior to England and Europe.¹⁴ God speaks to every conscience and grants common grace to whom he will. God alone must be honored for any good in this world. And Christians would be wise to appreciate those through whom his grace comes.

¹¹Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul*, 214.

¹²Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul*, 205.

¹³Williams, *A Key into the Language of America* (London, 1643), in *CWRW*, 1:153.

¹⁴Williams, *A Key into the Language of America*, 158, 165.

The second pathos of this event was manifested in the person of John Cotton. New England's leading theologian was providentially granted his role. Cotton affirmed liberty of conscience, for he had felt pressure from Laud. However, he granted a strictly limited liberty. Cotton distinguished "conscience rightly informed" from "erroneous and blind conscience." The former may not be persecuted, but the latter may, "after admonition once or twice." Cotton also held to theological triage. "Things of lesser moment" are allowed, but heretics, due to their "boisterous and arrogant spirit," may "justly be punished."¹⁵

Cotton and Williams defended their positions, sending missives back and forth in letters and publications over many years. Cotton's hypocrisy, to which he was personally blind, served as a whetstone. Upon that stone Williams sharpened the first freedom of the American worldview. Religious liberty, held by Baptists before and after Williams, derives from Scripture and reason. Williams used it to cut through the fog of Christian nationalism in his day.

THE INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT

It may be helpful to rehearse the intellectual context in which he developed. Williams's ideas were crafted with reference to radical religion, law and politics, and the English Civil War.

RADICAL RELIGION

The authorities of Massachusetts were so impressed by Williams upon his arrival in the colony that they offered him the pastorate of the Boston church. Williams could not in good conscience accept it, for he disliked their fellowship with the spiritually bankrupt Church of England. Following the logic of Baptists, Williams concluded Scripture required true believers to separate from false believers. The text which prompted Cotton's defense of persecution was written by John Murton, a General Baptist and "close prisoner in Newgate." Williams took the "Scriptures and Reasons" of Murton against persecution and sent them to Cotton.¹⁶

¹⁵"The Answer of Mr. John Cotton, of Boston, in New England, to the Aforesaid Arguments against the Persecution for Cause of Conscience, Professedly Maintaining Persecution for Cause of Conscience," in Roger Williams, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience*, ed. Richard Groves (Mercer University Press, 2011) [hereinafter *Bloody Tenent*], 19-20.

¹⁶"Scriptures and Reasons, Written Long Since by a Witness of Jesus Christ, Close Prisoner in Newgate, Against Persecution in Cause of Conscience, and Sent Some While Since to Mr. Cotton by a Friend, Who Thus Wrote," in Williams, *Bloody Tenent*, 11-18.

Murton's argument for religious liberty,¹⁷ thus provided the structure for their enlarging debate.

Murton came out of the General Baptist movement transplanted to English soil by Thomas Helwys. In 1612, Helwys published a provocative text shaped by precise eschatology and personalist anthropology. *The Mystery of Iniquity* advocated Baptist ecclesiology as alone faithful and argued religious liberty should be universal. Helwys wrote a pointed note on the flyleaf to King James I. It landed its brave author in Newgate Prison.¹⁸ Helwys was the first person in England to argue that religious freedom, not mere toleration, should be legally recognized. His powerful idea outlasted his persecuted body. Williams embraced his idea and made it stick.

Williams knew all too well what could happen not just to a Puritan but to a Separatist like himself. The first two Stuart monarchs despised the Puritans, as much as Elizabeth, last of the Tudors, had. All three saw the radicals, which included Separatists and Anabaptists, as the worst. Arrested radicals were often executed after or allowed to die in prison in the latter part of the English Reformation.¹⁹ Their ideas and practices were just too egalitarian to suffer.

LAW AND POLITICS

Williams was a religious radical with a unique legal education, having served as personal clerk to England's chief justice. Sir Edward Coke was the greatest legal commentator in British history and a real thorn in the side of James I and Charles I. Coke later sponsored Williams to attend Cambridge University. But first Williams learned from Coke, watching his mentor navigate the mercurial and bloody-minded politics of the court.

The early Stuarts created "*the divine right of kings*" from "*the Elizabethan world picture*." They believed God ordained a "great chain of being" and a strict social order. They presumed kings should rule over both the bodies and the souls of their subjects.²⁰ They ruled souls through the bishops they

¹⁷John Murton, *A Most Humble Supplication of the King's Majesty's Loyal Subjects* (1620), in Edward Bean Underhill, ed., *Tracts on Liberty of Conscience, 1614-1661* (Hanserd Knollys Society, 1848), 214-25.

¹⁸Yarnell, "We Believe with the Heart and with the Mouth Confess": The Engaged Piety of the Early General Baptists," *Baptist Quarterly* 44 (2011): 36-58.

¹⁹Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Later Reformation in England, 1547-1603*, 2nd ed. (Palgrave, 2001), 127-34.

²⁰John Neville Figgis, *The Divine Right of Kings* (Cambridge University Press, 1915); Arthur A. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Harvard University Press,

appointed. James believed religious power should be integrated with secular power, and that both derive through him. He expressed this integration negatively: “No bishop, no king.”

Members of Parliament, who could levy taxes, and common law judges, who made legal rulings, alone stood in the way of the kings grasping equality with God. The Stuarts believed in *rex supra lex*,²¹ but Edward Coke believed in *lex supra rex*. Coke, who was compared to Luther, restrained the king with the British constitution. That constitution began taking statutory form with the medieval Magna Charta’s recognition of some personal legal rights. Coke used Magna Charta and common law precedent to expand those rights. Both as a judge in the highest courts of the land and as a leading MP, Coke repeatedly placed the law above the king. With uncanny courage and great skill, he reminded the reluctant monarchs of the superiority of law. He extolled the British constitution’s guarantee of private property against the monarchy, and he defended consciences against episcopal efforts to bind them with *ex officio* oaths.²²

Coke led the Puritans in Parliament to upend Charles’s plans for taxes and brought Charles to sign the Petition of Right checking royal power. One of three documents in the British constitution, Winston Churchill deemed Coke’s Petition of Right “the main foundation of English freedom.”²³ Roger Williams worked with Coke in these same years. Later, in his first trip back to London after his banishment, the student continued his mentor’s project to preserve the people’s legal rights.

CIVIL WAR

However, Williams went beyond Coke in his work with the Civil War-era parliaments. Coke allowed for bishops; Williams gladly saw them go. Coke worked with the Puritans; Williams worked with radicals against Puritan MPs and Westminster divines. Williams wrote his most well-known theological works to sway London toward religious liberty.

1936); E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (Penguin, 1943); David Wootton, *Divine Right and Democracy: An Anthology of Political Writing in Stuart England* (Penguin, 1986).

²¹Johann P. Somerville, ed., *King James VI and I: Political Writings* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), xv-xxviii.

²²Christopher Hill, *Intellectual Origins of the English Reformation Revisited* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 201-36.

²³“The Petition of Right” (1628), in Paul L. Hughes and Robert F. Fries, eds., *Crown and Parliament in Tudor-Stuart England: A Documentary Constitutional History, 1485-1714* (Putnam, 1959), 200-2; Winston Leonard Spencer Churchill, *History of the English Speaking Peoples* (Barnes & Noble, 1995), 172.

One member of parliament, named for the Separatist pastor Praisegod Barebones, was dominated by religious radicals that the now deceased Coke would have balked at helping.²⁴

Through his government contacts, Williams obtained a unique charter for the colony of Rhode Island. It enshrined religious liberty, the first such constitutional document in world history. One of his powerful radical friends was Sir Henry Vane. Vane helped Williams gain protection for his colony from the continuing aggressions of Massachusetts Bay. The Puritans in the bay worried that Rhode Island would shelter radicals.²⁵ They banished Anne Hutchison for her unlicensed preaching. They put to death Mary Dyer as a Quaker.²⁶ And they flogged Obadiah Holmes for being boldly Baptist. Holmes's case sent Williams back to London a second time.²⁷

Another friend was Oliver Cromwell, who led the effort to remove Charles as head of England by removing his bodily head. Cromwell became the effective head of England through the Protectorate established by the last of the Civil War parliaments.²⁸ Cromwell favored religious liberty. Such powerful friends proved helpful to Dissenters, at least until the Stuart monarchy was restored. Cromwell's grandson married the grandson of William Kiffen, the long-lived protector of the English Baptist movement in England. Their offspring continued to fight for religious liberty, two great grandsons dying in the Monmouth Rebellion, a precursor to the Glorious Revolution.²⁹

THE CONTRIBUTION OF ROGER WILLIAMS TO RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

How shall we describe Williams's doctrine of religious liberty? Before restating it in a systematic way, we offer three preliminary notes.

Firstly, Williams was not an Enlightenment philosopher writing with primary appeal to reason and experience. He was active well before John Locke, whose writings inspired Enlightenment politicians like Thomas

²⁴Jonathan Healey, *The Blazing World: A New History of Revolutionary England, 1603-1689* (Knopf, 2023), 280-89.

²⁵Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul*, 257-312, 360-63.

²⁶Robert J. Allison, *A Short History of Boston* (Carlisle: Applewood), 15-17.

²⁷Williams, *The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody* (1652), in *CWRW*, 4:52-53.

²⁸Anna Keay, *The Restless Republic: Britain without a Crown* (HarperCollins, 2022).

²⁹Larry Kreitzer, *William Kiffen and his World (Part 2)* (Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2012), 290-93; Alfred W. Light, *Bunhill Fields*, 2nd ed. (Stoke-on-Trent: Tentmaker, 2003), 1:94-100.

Jefferson. Locke published his two great treatises on toleration after the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Williams published his first great treatise, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution, for Cause of Conscience*, in 1644. Williams's second great treatise, *The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, was published in 1652.

While Locke was a professed Christian, contributing a famous phrase to our *Baptist Faith and Message*, he spoke primarily from the perspective of the human mind. Conversely, Williams spoke primarily as a theologian. While Locke loosened government control over religion, he limited toleration. Williams, to the contrary, extended religious liberty. Locke defended freedom abstractly from relative safety in the Netherlands; Williams spoke concretely from within the furnace of Puritan persecution.³⁰ But Williams also appealed to “reason” and “experience.”³¹ He protected liberty of conscience in all cultures by grounding it in general revelation.

Secondly, Williams was by no means a systematic writer. He wrote from within the cultural crucible even as he focused on the eternal and the worldly contents of the gold refined therein. The shape of his argument came from Murton and Cotton. Williams responded, according to the custom of the day, argument by argument. As a result, his major writings on religious liberty flow neither narratively nor systematically. He must be read contextually, and his theological gold must be separated from his opponent's dross.

Thirdly, like Edmund S. Morgan, I once doubted Williams was helpful. However, like Morgan, I have also come to see his profound genius. Morgan, a social historian, rightly described Williams as a “most original” and “powerful thinker,” possessing “courage” and “zeal” with a “fertile mind.” Morgan repackaged the general thought of Williams, making it accessible, because “his ideas exhibit an intricate and beautiful symmetry.”³² Below, I repackage Williams's doctrine of liberty of conscience in the form of systematic theology.

The precious jewel of religious liberty polished by Williams had eight facets: the divine authority of Jesus Christ, general revelation, one Lord over every conscience, the priority of New Testament revelation, truth as

³⁰Yarnell, *John Locke's 'Letters of Gold': Universal Priesthood and t*; *idem*, “The Baptists and John Locke,” in *the English Dissenting Theologians, 1688-1789* (Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2017); Thomas S. Kidd, Paul D. Miller, and Andrew T. Walker, eds., *Baptist Political Theology* (B&H Academic, 2023), 97-122.

³¹Williams, *Bloody Tenent*, 6.

³²Edmund S. Morgan, *Roger Williams: Church and State*, 2nd ed. (Norton, 2006), x-xi, xiii.

the highest authority, distinguishing the church, the eschatology of Jesus, and the present social order.

THE DIVINE AUTHORITY OF JESUS CHRIST

First, Roger Williams operated from the perspective of the express divine authority of Jesus Christ. The opening summary of *The Bloody Tenent* began by observing the persecution of consciences was “not required nor accepted by Jesus Christ the Prince of Peace.”³³ Similarly, the General Baptist document he quoted verbatim, at length, and as an authority for his own position began by exalting “the doctrine of Jesus Christ, the king of kings.”³⁴ Williams then said “the sum of all true preaching of the gospel” is “that God anointed Jesus to be the sole King and Governor of all the Israel of God in spiritual and soul causes.”³⁵ Christ alone is Lord and has personal authority over every conscience as well as the church and the state.

Williams was aware of how men attempt to compromise Christ's sole headship. He blasted those who arrogate their own rule by using the name of Christ in vain. Magistrates certainly must punish those who break the civil peace, yet their remit ends there. “But, to see all his subjects Christians, to keep such church or Christians in the purity of worship, and see them do their duty, this belongs to the head of the body, Christ Jesus, and such spiritual officers as he has to this purpose deputed, whose right it is according to the true pattern.” Magistrates who claim Christ's rule over the state are “usurpers,” not righteous like David.³⁶

In 1644, he challenged the Presbyterian divines in the Westminster Assembly for presuming they might speak for Christ. He dismissed their appeal to the state churches of France, the Netherlands, Scotland, or New England. Instead, they should have consulted and obeyed Christ, our “Wonderful Counselor.” Christ wants believers to work “according to his last will and testament.” Only from his New Testament can we “highly exalt the name of the Son of God.” Only by honoring Christ and using his means can men “provide for the peace of this distressed state, engage the souls of all that fear God,” and “further the salvation of thousands.”³⁷

³³This precis begins systematically but then becomes a laundry list of arguments. Williams, *Bloody Tenent*, 3. Underhill titled it a “Syllabus of the Work.” Groves, “Preface,” in Williams, *Bloody Tenent*, ix.

³⁴Williams, *Bloody Tenent*, 11.

³⁵Williams, *Bloody Tenent*, 41-42.

³⁶Williams, *Bloody Tenent*, 75-76.

³⁷Williams, “Queries of Highest Consideration” (1644), in James Calvin Davis, ed., *On Religious Liberty: Selections from the Works of Roger Williams* (Harvard University Press, 2008), 75.

GENERAL REVELATION

Second, Williams believed in divine revelation. He addressed God's revelation of himself in its general and special ways. He said God reveals himself generally to everyone, including pagans. To the Americans God disclosed both that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him. They experience God's operations of guilt and of praise in their consciences.³⁸ Pagans adopt religious forms, precisely because of God's convicting work. They understand the difference between good and evil, and of human failure to do good. Alas, however, they make their own prophets, priests, and kings, and rely upon their good works to save them.³⁹

The Americans also recognized the soul went to a place like heaven or like hell after death.⁴⁰ Williams used these generally available truths as an opportunity to share the special revelation of God in Christ. He hoped for the salvation of the Americans, but he was not yet willing to institute Christian forms of worship among them, even at their request. True faith and repentance are required before Christian worship is proper.⁴¹

As mentioned, Williams discovered the Americans held to a form of liberty of conscience. This was further demonstration that persecution is contrary to God's will for humanity. Persecution violates not only the special revelation of God in Christ recorded in Holy Scripture. It also violates general revelation. Coercion is "opposite to the very tender bowels of humanity (how much more of Christianity!)"⁴² Williams appealed not only to Scripture but also to reason and experience. The Enlightenment philosophers who later pursued religious liberty followed the trail blazed for them by this radical Christian.

ONE LORD OVER EVERY CONSCIENCE

Third, the presence of God to every human being, through his revelation of his will to their personal consciences, shaped Williams's approach to humanity, personal rights, and society. From Scripture, Williams learned that God spoke with great authority through the conscience (Rom. 2:14-16). He honored the soul and conscience in every human being, knowing that human beings form beliefs and perform actions in response to God's voice.

³⁸Williams, *A Key into the Language of America*, 147-48.

³⁹Williams, *A Key into the Language of America*, 151-53.

⁴⁰Williams, *A Key into the Language of America*, 154, 159-60.

⁴¹Williams, *A Key into the Language of America*, 155-57, 160.

⁴²Williams, "Queries of Highest Consideration," 83.

For Williams, “Personal belief . . . resides at the core of human identity; it is an inalienable dimension of who we are that cannot be externally compelled to become something different than it is.”⁴³ The human soul is “so precious,” like “an invaluable jewel,” and Christ is its only judge. Christ alone can establish “spiritual judicature,” and he has given that responsibility to his church. The church exercises its responsibility through preaching the Word, which is the sword of the Spirit. When it comes to judgment of a conscience, “Such a sentence no civil judge can pass, such a death no civil sword can inflict.”⁴⁴

Williams wanted to see people worship God truly, but true worship occurs as the conscience works freely.⁴⁵ The spiritual transformation of the human conscience from believing falsely to believing truly in Christ comes only through the Word and the Spirit working upon the human will. A change in faith cannot be forced. True faith is voluntary. The church must be formed “voluntary” and dissolved “voluntary.”⁴⁶ Moreover, true faith will carry its own cross. It certainly does not impose crosses upon other consciences.⁴⁷

He warned Puritan politicians and Presbyterian divines to stop trying to establish religion by coercing consciences. His rhetoric waxed immortal when he placed the sole Lordship of Christ over every conscience and the preciousness of the human conscience in opposition to Christian nationalism. Religious coercion is a “bloody act of violence to the consciences of others.” If Parliament were to establish religion, it will have “committed a greater rape than if they had forced or ravished all the bodies of the women in the world.”⁴⁸

Having tossed that inflammatory barb at both houses, he left London before his most famous book was published. *The Bloody Tenent* sold out fast, prompting new editions. Declamations flew from Puritans in Parliament and Presbyterians in Westminster.⁴⁹ Parliament ordered his book burned publicly. The pyre for Williams’s *magnum opus* was built in Smithfield, a

⁴³James Calvin Davis, *The Moral Theology of Roger Williams: Christian Conviction and Public Ethics* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 53.

⁴⁴Williams, *Bloody Tenent*, 73.

⁴⁵Williams, *Bloody Tenent*, 47.

⁴⁶Williams, *The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, in *CWRW*, 4:74.

⁴⁷Williams, *Bloody Tenent*, 48.

⁴⁸Williams, *Bloody Tenent*, 7.

⁴⁹Even Prynne, although mutilated by Laud’s High Commission, failed to see the truth of Williams’s claims. Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul*, 337.

stone's throw from his old home, just down the street from Newgate.⁵⁰ This gory display of Christian nationalism provided the background against which his doctrine of soul liberty shined.

Even when consciences are persuaded toward Christian truth, Williams understood people would still believe various errors and still act sinfully. "It is no new thing for godly, and eminently godly men to perform ungodly actions; nor for ungodly persons to act what in itself is good and righteous."⁵¹ Repeatedly, Williams showed how professed Christians fell into gross error, from Constantine in Byzantium to Cotton in Boston. Christians have no reason to claim they alone know how to live well, nor may they claim perfection.

The state must, therefore, be open to plural religions and different churches. The only way that social covenants can come into existence and work correctly, if imperfectly, is through respectful dialogue of souls listening to their consciences. This dialogue is open to all, no matter their religion. Williams embraced the natural law tradition developed through Aquinas and Calvin. He believed that, although it could be "refined," knowledge of God's general moral law was "common to all mankind."⁵² Divine revelation in the conscience was moving toward full historical expression.

THE PRIORITY OF NEW TESTAMENT REVELATION

Fourth, Williams believed God reveals himself through his special revelation of Scripture, and that Christ reveals his will for his church in the New Testament. Williams wanted to see others saved, so he used Scripture to speak God's Word to them. He also distinguished between the revelations of Moses and Christ. He dismissed the assumption that the nations of the British Isles or the American continent might somehow be equated with Israel. "And is this not a reviving of Moses, and the sanctifying of a new Land of Canaan, of which we hear nothing in the Testament of Christ Jesus, nor of any other holy nation but the particular Church of Christ (1 Peter 2:9)?"⁵³

The only way the Bible can be used to support persecution is by instituting the ancient pattern of Moses. Drawing on the Christological typology

⁵⁰Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul*, 320, 337-38.

⁵¹Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*, 111.

⁵²Williams, *The Examiner Defended, In a Fair and Sober Answer* (1652), in *CWRW*, 7:241.

⁵³Williams, "Queries of Highest Consideration," 77.

of the book of Hebrews, Williams responded, “Moses’ shadows vanished at the coming of the Lord Jesus. Such a shadow [of persecution] is directly opposite to the very testament and coming of the Lord Jesus; opposite to the nature of a Christian church, the only holy nation and Israel of God” (Heb. 8:5; 10:1).⁵⁴ In other words, after Christ came, the way God works in the world shifted from a civil government within one nation to a spiritual government scattered among all nations. “The state of the land of Israel, the kings and people thereof, in peace and war, is proved figurative and ceremonial, and no pattern or precedent for any kingdom or civil state in the world to follow.”⁵⁵

TRUTH AS THE HIGHEST AUTHORITY

Fifth, Williams believed every authority to act must justify itself in truth. Authority is grounded in God. And every authority is given to Christ (Matt. 28:19), who is truth itself (John 14:6). One of the two dialogue partners in his *Bloody* books was “Truth.” Williams remembered well a lesson he learned from Coke about the necessity of questioning even monarchical claims to authority. “Truth” said to “Peace,” the other dialogue partner, “Well spoke that famous Elizabeth to her famous attorney, Sir Edward Coke: ‘Mr. Attorney, go on as you have begun, and still plead, not *pro Domina Regina*, but *pro Domina Veritate*.’” England’s most glorious queen, conversant in Latin, French, Italian, and Polish, instructed her attorney to pursue the authority of truth above the authority of the crown.

Coke passed on that critical lesson of grounding authority in truth to Williams. After suffering in the wilderness for his conscience, Williams never flinched from asking the authority question. He always voiced that which no megalomaniac wants to hear but which every public leader must answer, “By what authority?” With such boldness, it is no wonder the Massachusetts Puritans found him infuriating. After failing to imprison him, to rebut him, and to strangle his colony, later Puritans resorted to insulting him and obliquely defending Cotton.⁵⁶

DISTINGUISHING THE CHURCH

Sixth, Williams separated the church from the city or nation in which it lived, and the church from the clergy. He noted often that the churches of

⁵⁴Williams, “Queries of Highest Consideration,” 83.

⁵⁵Williams, *Bloody Tenent*, 3.

⁵⁶A. W. McClure, *John Cotton: Patriarch of New England*, ed. Nate Pickowicz (H&E, 2019), 88-89.

the New Testament were not identical with any of its cities. The churches of that day were different from the cities, and the horrific persecution believers suffered settled that fact. He distinguished city covenants from church covenants, and recognized that one's flourishing depended not on the other. "Thus in the city of Smyrna was the city itself or civil estate one thing, the spiritual or religious state of Smyrna another; the church of Christ in Smyrna distinct from them both. And the Synagogue of the Jews, ... distinct from all these."⁵⁷

Williams provided a litany of texts to show how Christ established his church separate from any nation. The church must never ask the civil sword to do its work. The state was established "to execute vengeance" against civil criminals with a "civil sword." Jesus told his disciples, when they were in a vengeful mood against their Master's detractors, "I came not to destroy men's lives but to save them." The "Lamb of God" told Peter to put his physical weapon down, "for all who take sword shall perish by the sword." He later told Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world; if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight that I should not be delivered." Rather than crusading soldiers, Jesus called his followers to become cross-bearing servants: "If any man will follow me, let him take up his cross." Paul agreed, "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus must suffer persecution."⁵⁸

Williams was also jealous to preserve the church from clergy speaking without authorization. He recalled how the other New England ministers formed a tribunal and interfered in his own congregation.⁵⁹ He blasted the Westminster "assembly" of divines for presuming it could use that sacred name. "Pray you tell us where Christ Jesus has given you power to assume and appropriate such a title to yourselves, which seems in Scripture to be common to all the children of God?"⁶⁰ Williams did not suffer clerical arrogance to presume to speak for Christ or his church without express warrant. He obviously learned from Coke to question where every claim for human authority derived.

He advocated both a notional and a real separation between the church and the nation. The church is marked by its fidelity to the words and ways of Christ. It serves the world and preaches the Word. It suffers persecution;

⁵⁷Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*, 40.

⁵⁸Williams cites Rom. 13; Matt. 26; John 18:36; and 2 Tim. 4. Williams, "Queries of Highest Consideration," 79.

⁵⁹Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul*, 191, 199-202.

⁶⁰Williams, "Queries of Highest Consideration," 76.

it never offers persecution. The actions of the church are nonviolent: "The Word and prayer are those two great services of God."⁶¹ The instruments of the church and the state are different, just as the goals of the church and the state are different. The state bears the physical sword; the church bears the spiritual sword.

In a most powerful passage in *Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, Williams implied Cotton and the Puritans advocated persecution because they rejected the cross Christ gave them. "But the Truth is, this mingling of the church and the world together, and their orders and societies together, doth plainly discover, that such churches were never called out from the world, and that this is only a secret policy of the flesh and blood, to get protection from the world, and so to keep (with some little stilling of conscience) from the cross or gallows of Jesus Christ."⁶²

Scripture teaches that "persecution is the common and ordinary portion of the Saints under the Gospel, though that cup be infinitely sweetend also to them that drink of it with Christ Jesus."⁶³ When Christians suffer, they suffer in Christ; when Christians are persecuted, Christ is persecuted. The Lamb and his disciples don't persecute.

THE ESCHATOLOGY OF JESUS AND THE PRESENT SOCIAL ORDER

Seventeenth-century English society was immersed in eschatology. Many believers felt led to oppose the Antichrist by imposing God's will on society. Radical groups from the Ranters to Fifth Monarchists supposed their agendas most "godly." The religious stage was set for a militant revolution.⁶⁴ In the New World, "The founders of the Massachusetts Bay Company intended to erect in England a 'bulwark against the kingdom of Antichrist.'" Increase Mather, Cotton's grandson, "believed that religious toleration would open the door to Antichrist."⁶⁵

Williams was caught up in eschatology, too, and he subjected the civil order to the coming eschatological judgment of Christ. However, his approach to society differed from Puritan enthusiasm. Williams often spoke of "the Lamb," but unlike the religious militants, he focused on its

⁶¹Williams, *Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, 66.

⁶²Williams, *Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, 74-75.

⁶³Williams, *Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, 75.

⁶⁴Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (Penguin, 1975).

⁶⁵Christopher Hill, *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England* (Verso, 1990), 183-84.

pacifistic sense. He began his dialogue with this reminder from Truth:

Patience, sweet Peace, these heavens and earth are growing old, and shall be changed like a garment. They shall melt away, and be burnt up with all the works that are therein; and the Most High Eternal Creator shall gloriously create new heavens and new earth, wherein dwells righteousness. Our kisses then shall have their endless date of pure and sweetest joys. Till then both you and I must hope, and wait, and bear the fury of the dragon's wrath, whose monstrous lies and furies shall with himself be cast into the lake of fire, the second death.⁶⁶

Williams wanted to separate the church from the state to provide space for religious dissenters preparing for Christ's return. He believed an agreed social order of some type remained necessary and privately encouraged citizens in his territory to refrain "pretending conscience."⁶⁷ On the one hand, he refused to engage in religious militarism. On the other hand, he refused to forsake society. He encouraged the citizens of Providence to be responsible. And he called upon the Quakers to protect not only their own consciences but those of others.⁶⁸

While Williams looked at this present world with sobriety, the New England Puritans gave vent to eschatological enthusiasm. They wanted "to make society a godly kingdom."⁶⁹ Winthrop wrote his great sermon while he sailed with well-financed emigrants intent upon establishing an ideal "Citty upon a Hill." More than offering inspiration, Winthrop as governor was defining a "Covenant with God."⁷⁰ His social covenant provided a rhetorical flourish for future American presidents, but it was utopian, hierarchical, and intolerant in its day.

Winthrop's first sentence disclosed his faith in a hierarchy that must be embraced, though he admitted it was based in general revelation. Nonetheless, it bound consciences. "God Almightye in his most holie and wise providence hath soe disposed of the Condicion of mankinde, as

⁶⁶Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*, 28.

⁶⁷Davis, "Roger Williams," in Kidd, Miller, and Walker, eds., *Baptist Political Theology*, 88-92.

⁶⁸Edwin S. Gaustad, *Roger Williams* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 106-8.

⁶⁹Francis J. Bremer, *Puritanism: A Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2009), 3.

⁷⁰John Winthrop, "Christian Charitie. A Modell Hereof." in Edmund S. Morgan, ed., *Puritan Political Ideas 1558-1794* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), 91-92.

in all times some must be rich some poore, some high and eminent in power and dignitie; others meane and in subjection.”⁷¹ Speculations about human authority and subjection undergirded Puritan political theology.

Winthrop said God was establishing this social order in the New World for three reasons. First, the preservation of the whole community and the glory of God depended upon his “ordering of all these differences.” Second, the “worke of his Spirit” would be seen in restraining the wickedness of any who rebelled. Third, everyone must submit to this order, that “they might be all knit more nearly together in the Bond of brotherly affection.”⁷²

His delineation of the membership and governance of this new commonwealth explains why he and Williams parted ways. First, Winthrop said the members of the utopian commonwealth of Massachusetts must all be professed Christians. Second, they must live “under a due forme of Government both civil and ecclesiasticall.” Third, displaying his utopianism, he said his government’s end was to preserve the people from the corruptions of the world. Fourth, the way to utopia was through “Conformity.”⁷³

Winthrop ended with two longlasting ideas which brought harm not only to Williams, but to all dissenters. First, Winthrop said their covenant was the will of God. Channeling Moses, Winthrop located the articles of the covenant among God’s commandments, ordinances, and laws. The modern Christian nationalist tendency to locate the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution of the United States with Scripture, finds precedent here. Second, Winthrop offered an early example of the quintessential American heresy of the prosperity gospel. He argued that violating the social covenant in any way would bring curses, but obeying it would bring “a blessing upon us in all our ways.”⁷⁴

Williams’s view of civil order was neither naïve nor enthusiastic. He knew the sinfulness of humanity. He could rehearse the ways in which the intolerant governments of England, from Henry VIII to Charles I, persecuted Christians. He remembered how hundreds of thousands died in the religiously inspired devastations of the Thirty Years War. He personally witnessed kings, parliaments, preachers, assemblies, and colonial

⁷¹Winthrop, “Christian Charitie,” 76.

⁷²Winthrop, “Christian Charitie,” 76-77.

⁷³Winthrop, “Christian Charitie,” 90-91.

⁷⁴Winthrop, “Christian Charitie,” 92-93.

governments violate the will of God, usurp Christ's authority, and persecute Christ in his members.⁷⁵ His own life was only preserved by divine providence through a pagan conscience. Williams understood the present misery and misconduct of all human beings, whether they professed faith or not. He was no utopian.

The most hotly contested biblical passage in the Williams–Cotton debate concerned the future, at least according to Williams. Following the persecuting hermeneutic that originated with Augustine and continued through Calvin, Cotton read Matthew 13 as realized eschatology. But in his personal exegesis of the parable of the wheat and tares, the Lord located the bodily judgment of unbelievers in the world at the end of the age and appointed angels his executors (Matt. 13:37-43). Augustine, Calvin, and Cotton minimized Christ's hermeneutic and conflated world with church, final judgment with excommunication, and angels with magistrates. Williams repeatedly took Cotton to the exegetical woodshed for perverting God's own eschatology.⁷⁶

Williams knew this age was not the kingdom. Those primarily interested in building cities on little hills should recall the heavenly city being prepared in glory. Rather than fashioning false utopias here, he viewed this life as a journey. "When life seemed hard and thoughts grew dark, it was time, Williams wrote, to remember that we are on this earth, 'like passengers on a ship,' making our way to a heavenly home. If defeated now, we shall be victorious then; if despised and persecuted now, we shall be crowned and treated as royalty then." True believers hope for a "never-ending harvest of inconceivable joys" then, not now.⁷⁷

ROGER WILLIAMS AMONG THE BAPTISTS

Baptists have long claimed both Roger Williams and his arguments for liberty of conscience and the separation of church and state as their own. The first extensive biography of Williams was written by an American Baptist, James D. Knowles, in 1834.⁷⁸ The most recent defense of the Baptist doctrine of religious liberty, which honored Williams first among

⁷⁵Gaustad, *Roger Williams*, 105.

⁷⁶On Augustine and Calvin, see Yarnell, "The Development of Religious Liberty: A Survey of its Progress and Challenges in Christian History," *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 6.1 (Spring 2009): 119-38. On Cotton, see Williams, *The Bloody Tenent*, 55-59; idem, *The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, 114-30.

⁷⁷Gaustad, *Roger Williams*, 109.

⁷⁸Knowles, *Memoir of Roger Williams*, in Greene, ed., *Roger Williams and the Massachusetts Magistrates*, 23-25.

individual Particular Baptists, was written by a British Baptist, Ryan Burton King, in 2024.⁷⁹ Williams was honored with the first individual chapter in the groundbreaking volume of essays, *Baptist Political Theology*. That chapter asserted that “few thinkers are more important to *Baptist political theology* than Williams” and that his commitment was “formative for later generations of Baptist thinkers.”⁸⁰ John Leland, Isaac Backus, George W. Truett, among other Baptist theologians, developed their arguments from Williams.

Williams borrowed his central arguments for liberty of conscience from the General Baptist John Murton. In his *Humble Supplication*, Murton assigned interpretation of Scripture to all those who received the Spirit of God. Clergy, councils, and magistrates often erred, as seen in their resort to antichristian persecution.⁸¹ Williams pulled Murton’s next four chapters verbatim. First, Murton and Williams argued from the commands of Christ in Scripture. Second, they appealed to the statements and policies of “famous princes.” Third, they cited theologians from the early church to the Reformation. Fourth, they showed how religious liberty does not harm but assists the commonwealth.⁸²

Williams was a founding member of the first Baptist church gathered on the American continent. While he did not stay a member, concerned about their authority to baptize, he worked closely with Baptists. Williams traveled with John Clarke, the pastor of the second Baptist church in America,⁸³ and with the Quakers, William and Mary Dyer, to London to defend religious liberty, driven there by Cotton’s bloody claim that denying infant baptism was a capital offense.⁸⁴ Williams prepared a presentation copy of his second great work, *Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, inscribing the flyleaf, “For his honoured and beloved John Clarke, an eminent witness of Christ Jesus, ag’st ye bloodie Doctrine of persecution, etc.” Clarke’s copy made its way into the library of Isaac Backus, who gave it to Brown University. That copy was used for the scholarly edition of Williams’s complete writings.⁸⁵

⁷⁹King, *Every Man’s Conscience: Early English Baptists and the Fight for Religious Liberty* (H&E Academic, 2024), 53-57.

⁸⁰Davis, “Roger Williams,” 73.

⁸¹Murton, *Humble Supplication*, 189-214.

⁸²Cf. Williams, *Bloody Tenent*, 11-18; Murton, *Humble Supplication*, 214-25.

⁸³David W. Bebbington, *Baptists through the Centuries: A History of a Global People* (Baylor University Press, 2010), 49.

⁸⁴Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul*, 355.

⁸⁵Williams, *Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, ix.

Williams was not only helpful in advancing the liberty of every conscience and the institutional separation of church and state. Williams also treasured the voluntary principle of religion. Walter Shurden and Bill Brackney considered the voluntary principle foundational for a believer's church identity. Shurden said voluntarism "impacts three basic Baptist principles." First, "God left each individual free to affirm Christ as Lord of life." Second, in Baptist churches, "Christians voluntarily covenant together with others who have trusted Christ as Lord of their lives, and, under God's Spirit, create together a local believer's church." And third, "in terms of the state, the voluntary principle in religion shaped Baptists into ardent advocates of liberty of conscience, including freedom of religion, freedom for religion, and freedom from religion."⁸⁶

In his 1976 lectures on religious liberty, the one person to whom James Leo Garrett Jr., dean of Southern Baptist theologians, paid greatest attention was Roger Williams.⁸⁷ "Williams's two monumental treatises constituted ... 'a veritable Summa on freedom of conscience and on the nature of the powers of the state.'"⁸⁸ Garrett argued at length that Baptists must continue to fight for religious liberty.⁸⁹ In 2005, Edwin S. Gaustad wrote, "Americans in the twenty-first century may have some difficulty accepting the idea that one had to fight valiantly and fearlessly, for religious liberty."⁹⁰ He credited Williams for winning this great battle for us.

Alas, four centuries after Williams, a half century after Garrett, and two decades after Gaustad, aggressive "Christian" nationalism again threatens human liberty. True Baptists must join Roger Williams in the war for truth, expecting no peace from persecutors.

⁸⁶Walter Shurden, "Series Foreword," in Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*, xiv-xv. Cf. William H. Brackney, ed., *The Believers Church: A Voluntary Church* (Pandora, 1998).

⁸⁷Garrett, "Day-Higginbotham Lectures, Part 2," in Wyman Lewis Richardson, ed., *The Collected Writings of James Leo Garrett Jr. 1950-2015*, vol. 7: Church, State, and Religious Liberty (Wipf and Stock, 2023), 98-109.

⁸⁸Garrett, "Day-Higginbotham Lectures, Part 2," 109.

⁸⁹Garrett, "Day-Higginbotham Lectures, Part 3," 123-36. See the reprint of that lecture, originally published in this journal in 1976, in the seventh article in this issue of the journal.

⁹⁰Gaustad, *Roger Williams*, 86.