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Indicting Christendom: Roger Williams from the Wilderness

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INDICTING CHRISTENDOM: ROGER WILLIAMS
FROM THE WILDERNESS

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Thomas L. Anderson
2001
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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Christopher Grasso
To my Mother and Father
*Who afforded me boundless educational opportunities.*
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ABSTRACT

One of the explicit purposes of the English colonization of America was the proselytization of the American Indians. Roger Williams, a Puritan Separatist expelled from Massachusetts Bay for his unyielding insistence upon pure worship, found refuge among the Narragansett Indians of Rhode Island. He had earlier commenced learning the Narragansett tongue, and having established peaceful co-existence with the Narragansetts he seemed to be in a position better than any English colonist for the propagation of Protestant Christianity. Williams, however, refused to start Christian churches among the Indians and did not make any sort of missionary effort at all.

Williams’s reasons for his restraint are found in his deeply held religious convictions and the political insights to which those convictions led him. His original concern for pure worship was the foundation for all his political actions and protests. After his exile from Massachusetts, Williams turned to an already established tradition of Separatist thought that led him to develop a particular method of linking the Old and New Testaments. This method was based on typology, which employs the stories and events of Jesus’ life to illuminate the spiritual, rather than historical, meaning of Old Testament Scripture.

Williams concluded that God’s chosen nation of Israel was unique in history, manifesting in the physical and historical world truths that God more clearly revealed through Christ as spiritual and eternal. As such, Williams held that individuals, not nations, were chosen by God for salvation; all people, regardless of race, stood on equal footing before God as sinners in need of redemption. The nations of Christendom, not understanding that the church-state model of the Old Testament was a physical manifestation of a spiritual reality, often assumed the powers of Israel for themselves and upheld orthodoxy with the civil sword. This combination of the civil and the religious spheres made spiritual “truth” subject to the whims of the civil magistrate, which used its power to persecute dissenters.

Ultimately, Williams’s reasons for restraint in missionary activities stemmed from his conviction that no true church existed on earth into which the Indians might be brought, and that he had no “apostolic sending” to plant churches among the nations untouched by the Gospel. He believed that the church had been so corrupted by its bloody association with the civil state and the Roman Catholic Church that only after Christ’s return would true ministers obtain a “sending” from Christ himself to make disciples of all nations. Williams refused to bring the Indians of New England into what he considered a bloody chasing after political power that used Christian missions as one justification for their actions. The Indians were the spiritual equals of the English, but Williams felt that he had no true church to offer them. This was important since Williams considered participation in pure worship an integral part of Christian life. Together, Williams’s separatism, vision of church and civil history through a typological reading of Scripture, and his expectation of Christ’s coming millennium from which pure worship would be restored, combined to restrain his missionary activity among the Narragansett Indians.
INDICTING CHRISTENDOM
INTRODUCTION

In 1629 John Winthrop led the Puritan “Great Migration” to America because he speculated that “judgment is comminge” upon England and that “God hathe provided this place [New England] to be a refuge for manye, whom he meanes to save out of the general destruction.” English “fountains of learninge and Relig[ion]” he described as “corrupt” and “evil,” distorting even the purest religious minds. The New World, Winthrop thought, offered a few godly men an opportunity to trade the “wealth and prosperitye” of their lives in England for the “harde and meane” conditions of life in the New World, but with the hardship would come the opportunity to worship in a community free from English sins and institutional evils.¹

So when his first contingent of settlers grew weary and discouraged aboard the Arbella, Winthrop offered encouragement with a hint of castigation. In his most famous sermon, “A Model of Christian Charitie,” Winthrop emphasized both the importance of each settler to the formation of a community “knitt together by this bond of love,” and the “speciall overruleing providence” that had borne the venture. The community subordinated individuals to a “due form of Government both civill and ecclesiasticall,” so they might “encrease the body of christe,” and be “preserved from the common corruption of this evill world.” While not explicitly stating that the colonists were a contemporary manifestation of Jehovah’s Israel, Winthrop made the parallel with “we are

entered into Covenant with him for this worke. . . [and he] will expect a strickt performance of the Articles contained in it." Failure would bring the Lord to "breake out in wrathe against us and our posterity," but success in upholding the Covenant would make them a "city upon a hill," a new standard for Christian community. The future of the community and the sanctity of the Covenant lay in the hands of each individual.2

A Cambridge-educated minister named Roger Williams sailed with his young wife to join the glorious experiment in late 1630. While Williams left no record of his earliest expectations of Massachusetts Bay, his refusal to assume the teacher appointment at the settlers' Boston church because he wished "not to officiate to an unseparated people" indicated that what he found did not suit his vision of what New England should be. As if Williams's affront to the Boston church were not enough to cause tension between him and the authorities, he also declared that the civil magistrate did not have the power to punish sins of conscience. Immediately, it was clear that Williams agreed with Winthrop's 1629 condemnation of corrupt English ecclesiastical institutions, but the vision presented aboard the Arbella indicated an important shift in his friend's perspective and goals. Williams could not assent to Winthrop's assertion that the path to "unity of the spirit in the bond of peace," was through a civil government dedicated to the preservation of religious uniformity. Williams insisted on mutually exclusive spheres of spiritual and civil authority, questioning the very core of the American experiment. For this, the authorities considered Williams a prideful individual unwilling to sacrifice his

own goals for the goals of the community.³

Williams disagreed. His initial insistence on the necessity of congregations strictly separated from the Church of England and free from civil interference remained the central concern of his career in New England. To his mind, the hypocrisy of fleeing corruption in England without officially denouncing and separating from it was choosing the path of least resistance, and once he concluded that the Massachusetts establishment was unwilling to face the implications of its own ideas he would make a career of turning their own theological weapons against them. The Massachusetts General Court banished Williams from Massachusetts in 1635 after it became clear that he questioned the foundations of the Bay’s authority, and because his seeds of dissension had found fertile ground in Salem.

The attempt to silence him failed. Williams considered his civil banishment indisputable evidence that the Puritan experiment had gone hopelessly wrong, relying as it did on the civil sword to maintain spiritual order, and it only radicalized him further. After his banishment and while struggling to maintain Rhode Island, Williams gradually applied typological and millenarian thought, both modes of discourse familiar to the seventeenth-century New England Puritans, to his original separatist framework. Williams’s ability and willingness to turn the establishment’s legitimizing rhetoric into indictments of what he considered the colonists’ unchristian pride was what made him so dangerous and the Massachusetts leadership so wary of him.

Williams's doctrine of strict separation for the sake of pure worship remained the focal point of his career even though his methods of incriminating the Massachusetts establishment became more complex, and his peripheral concerns shifted as his environment dictated. As a means of developing his separatist views, he read various English separatists who used typology to defend religious toleration. Typology was a common Christian method of connecting the events of the Old Testament to the ideas found in the New Testament, but some Puritans thought that it amounted to literary criticism and could lead to unorthodox readings of the Bible. Williams was just one theologian and minister who used typology, but he used it to unorthodox ends. Specifically, he began to think about the meaning of national covenants within New Testament exegesis, and developed a typological critique of English ideas about Old and New England's place in history.

Williams lived precariously between two peoples, the English colonists and the Narragansett Indians. No English colonist knew the Indians better than Williams (who, uniquely in New England in the 1630s, had made mastering the Narragansett language a priority), and no colonist had a better reputation among them for honesty and fairness. Thus, upon his exile from Massachusetts and his 1636 settlement at Narragansett Bay by contract with the Narragansetts, Williams should have been in a fine position, as he had put it in 1632, to "intend what I long after, the natives Soules." But he never launched missions to the Indians, and when Williams started publishing in 1643 he made it clear that he had not yet turned, nor did he intend to turn, Indian souls to God by establishing

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⁴RW to John Winthrop, between July and December 1632, in LaFantasie, Correspondence, 1:8.
Indian churches in Rhode Island. Williams's most original and perhaps most radical contribution to seventeenth-century American thought was the notion that in the eyes of God, the unregenerate "savage" Indian and the "civilized" but unregenerate Englishman of "Christendom" stood on equal footing. God covenanted with individuals, not nations. For the English to assume that they were privy to a national or any other kind of corporate covenant with God, as Williams deduced from their behavior they must have believed, missed the point of Christ's abolition of Israel's Old Covenant of law and his introduction of the universal New Covenant of grace.

But if Williams insisted that God no longer showed favor toward cultures or nations but made all men equal in matters of salvation, it might be all the more baffling as to why Williams did not offer Christianity to individual Indians. They were, he argued, no more "heathen" than an Englishman who refused to submit himself to God's truth, and could therefore attain salvation in Christ just as an Englishman could. This seeming contradiction makes sense only in light of Williams's millenarian concept of his own place in God's unfolding history. Williams perceived himself, like Christ and many prophets before Christ, as a gadfly rejected by his own self-righteous people. From his exile, he wished to prophesy to his own people and expose to them their error. He thought of his exile in historic proportions, and he considered it his place to be a living example of the effects of persecution. As for the Indians, he loved them and did discuss spiritual matters with them on an individual basis, but he argued that he did not have an "apostolic sending" to gather true churches on earth. By an "apostolic sending," he meant that God's mouthpiece to the nations must be able to trace his or her commission
to Christ’s anointing of Peter as head of the true Church on earth. All missionaries, Williams argued, needed to trace their mission back to this original sending. This was impossible since the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church had destroyed any real connection to this primitive Church, and in fact blasphemed the name of Christ as European imperialism masqueraded as religious zeal. Only upon his return would Christ gather the few true Christians together from the earthly kingdom of Anti-Christ, reassemble them into a true church and authorize them to go forth and convert the nations.

It should not be surprising, then, that by the end of his life Williams doubted the purity of any church gathering, even gatherings that met his earlier Separatist criteria, and took to worship only with his wife.

Through typology and millenarian expectations, Williams came full circle to his original concern for church purity. While he might have drawn many Indians into the outward practice of Christianity, if that practice were not accompanied by true repentance and understanding of Christ the worship would be sinful just as the worship of those unwilling to separate from the Church of England was sinful. When God’s time for the conversion of the Indians arrived, his instrument would know it from the mouth of Christ himself, or at least from Christ’s anointed apostles. Until then, Williams considered it his highest priority to minister to those who knew God’s truth but refused to practice it, however difficult it might have been.

Williams’s behavior among the Narragansetts, then, derived from a combination of his typological reading of Scripture and his sense of personal mission to bring the English to understand their error. Separatism without his typology did not bring him to
these conclusions, but when his brand of typology informed his separatism and combined with his millenarianism, his path was set. His naturally tolerant disposition and the fact that the Narragansetts explicitly condemned attempts to set up churches among them may have played a part in his behavior, but the story of Williams’s life shows that he consistently acted according to the dictates of his conscience. The nuances of Williams’s theological thinking and the power of his convictions hold the key to explaining his unusually Puritan mind. Williams’s evangelistic restraint might be understood only in light of his theological development, which evolved through his ideological battle with Massachusetts. After he condemned Christendom’s pride in itself as a new manifestation of Israel, he decided that the Indians were best left outside Europe’s bloody civil conspiracy until Christ’s return.
CHAPTER I

PREMISES AND EXILE

Even though Williams’s mind was of a theological and not a political bent, he never explicated his theology at length because he directed his attention toward the more pressing task of combating the civil persecution of conscience. Still, the corpus of his writings reveal how he understood the spiritual relationship, or covenant, between God and his elect. In this respect he remained throughout his life an orthodox Calvinist, at least in terms of his soteriology, like most Massachusetts Bay Puritans. All people, Puritans believed, were separated from God by the impassable gulf of man’s natural depravity, created for all humankind when Adam and Eve willfully broke God’s initial covenant of works. Puritans further understood that no person could by his own will negotiate the chasm of sin that separated one from God; only through God’s new covenant of grace, freely given by God to his elect through faith, could the sinner cross from eternal death in Adam’s sin to God’s eternal life. Williams understood humankind’s natural condition in these terms. All of his religious writings acknowledged humankind’s natural sinfulness by emphasizing the cosmic differences between one who remained in that depraved state and one within whom God worked salvation. This was the central feature of his thinking.5

5 Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1939), 3-34. In one of his earliest surviving letters, Williams affirmed his belief in Calvinist predestination: “The Lord will doe what he will with his owne. He owes you no mercy. Exod. 33:19. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious and will shew mercy to whome I will shew mercy.”
The Puritan's task was to recognize God stirring within one's soul and to maintain a vigilant inward piety, expressed through outward worship, as God completed the work of salvation. Puritans understood salvation as a mystical journey that started when the subject of grace heard the preached Word and recognized their sinful depravity. The sinner passed through distinct stages of personal humiliation and repentance until, finally, the Holy Spirit renewed the Christian's soul, and eventually bestowed assurance of God's grace. In 1652 Williams explained, as had hundreds of Puritans before and after him, his conception of the sanctification process in *Experiments of Spiritual Life and Health*. He prepared it for his ailing wife as a guide for identifying, experiencing, and maintaining the work of God within her. Williams addressed the divine mystery wherein "God worketh freely in us to doe and to will of his owne good pleasure, that yet he is pleased to command us to work out our owne Salvation with Feare and Trembling." Williams focused most of his attention on how the truly regenerate Christian could discern the work of the Spirit by comparing the experiences of saints to that of the hypocrites, who

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6 Harry Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 38-43. Stout explains that the “agitations” of the soul started with the “humiliation” caused by the saint’s discovery, upon hearing the Word, of their sinful condition. Stricken with guilt, the saint attempted to ease the pain of the humiliation through pious works, but this striving only made the inevitable failures more unbearable because the saint understood the impossibility of pleasing God through works and personal strength. This led the contrite soul to view works as “dunge and drosse,” and the work of the Spirit could then begin within a soul that grasped the reality of God’s grace. Only then would good works take on any meaning, for good works proceeded from the saint’s gratitude for grace.
try to feign evidence of salvation. For example, while hypocrites might "satisfie themselves with any formal performance" of religion, a true child of God experiences a "vehement hunger and longing after the Ordinance of the word preached." The essence of each experiment is that the child of God cannot help but find the greatest joy in giving glory to God in patient worship, and that false Christians attend to religious practice to fill their spiritual emptiness but quickly lose faith when their demands are unmet. Joy overwhelms the spiritual life of those who humble themselves before God; hypocrites only humble themselves as a dog is humbled before the master, not as a child acknowledges the disciplining hand of a loving father. All people, Williams wrote, are born with a self-adoring pride and a hunger for glory, and only the Christian who felt the object of that pride shift from one’s self to the glory of God had experienced conversion. The experience of Christian faith was an all-consuming personal transformation, for Williams and all Puritans.7

Given the unremarkable orthodoxy of Williams’s *Experiments in Spiritual Life and Health*, a reading of Williams’s other works reveal that his main point of contention was not over the essentials of grace, faith, and salvation but instead over the civil implications of Puritan theology. To Williams (and to all Puritans), the corrupt and sinful things of Earth and the pure things of Heaven were utterly separate and opposed. The attention Williams paid to the nature and experience of the “hypocrites” functioned not only as a foil to the nature and experience of the Christian but represented how the saints’

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eternal worship could be polluted by the world's temporal filth. Williams believed that any church aspiring to approach pure worship needed to limit its fellowship to those people who identified the workings of grace within themselves and kept church membership to like individuals. Further, the insincere worship of the unregenerate not only corrupted the worship of the saints but heaped greater wrath upon the blaspheming hypocrite. To Williams's mind, maintaining pure worship through strictly Separatist churches was imperative. This formed the fundamental premise on which he built. Non-separating Puritans disagreed with Williams because they thought that outward practice of religion by the unregenerate did not add to their sin and at least helped police the morals of the community. Williams and his countrymen both desired to establish a society replicating the vision of first-century Christians, but they had incompatible conceptions of what that vision demanded of them.

While Williams did not explicitly follow any distinct method of biblical interpretation before he began publishing in 1643, his earliest actions in Boston and Salem indicate that he insisted upon distinctly separate spheres of church and state the main goals for Christians to pursue. The conclusions about church purity that Williams

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8 One of the main reasons for the initial Puritan migration to America was social opposition among mainstream Anglicans to Puritans in England. While the professed task of the American Puritans was to construct a model of the first-century Church as they understood it, the memory of what the unfriendly English did to their attempts to create in England a "city upon a hill" remained strong. It is easy to see why John Cotton and most rank-and-file Puritans wished to maintain a civil culture hospitable to their theological convictions. They knew that their mission was doomed if Williams or anyone else succeeded in throwing this civil foundation into question. On the other hand, Williams often reminded the establishment that only a short time before they themselves had been persecuted.

9 Specifically, Williams questioned the civil magistrate's practice of punishing breaches of the purely spiritual "first table," the English assertion that James I possessed the authority to issue a patent for Indian land by virtue of his Christianity, and the practice of rendering to all citizens, regenerate or not, a religious oath of submission to the civil magistrates. See John Winthrop, History of New England from
reached between 1631 and 1635 that preceded his banishment remained constant throughout his life. That only some of his letters survive and some of his earliest treatises were condemned and burned make tracing Williams’s intellectual development difficult. Still, the writings that do survive and other’s reactions to those works show that Williams built his political ideology upon a foundational concern for pure worship.

Soon after his arrival in Massachusetts Bay, these ideas led him to subversive political positions and, his contemporaries noted, he was not afraid to confront those with whom he disagreed. After Williams refused the Boston church post, he stayed briefly in Salem where he preached and caused more trouble for Bay authorities. He then headed to the Separatist town of Plymouth, beyond the reach of Bay authority. Governor William Bradford recorded that Williams, “a man godly and zealous, having many precious parts but very unsettled in judgement,” arrived in Plymouth and was admitted into fellowship with the church. While Williams did not accept any position in the church leadership, he did occasionally preach to the congregation, by whom his teaching was “well approved.” In 1633, however, Governor Bradford wrote that Williams had fallen into “strange opinions, and from opinion to practice,” in the wake of which he left the Plymouth church and headed again to Salem, which lay within Bay jurisdiction.

In 1633 from Salem, Williams first threw the whole colony’s theological


10Winthrop, History, 1: 49-50, 63. See LaFantasie, Correspondence, 1: 12-23.

foundations into question. Williams sent Governor John Winthrop a substantial treatise (which does not survive) in which he argued that King James I had no Christian authority to grant the Indians' land to the colonists, and that to claim such authority was blasphemy. Williams maintained that King James’s use of his Christianity as a justification for appropriating land amounted to usurpation; it was an action that used religious rhetoric for a decidedly non-religious, in fact, sinful, purpose. The King had no authority to secure possession of land that was not his to give; the land belonged to the Indians by natural right (not civil right, and in England natural right as yet had a shaky legal foundation) and permission for its use therefore belonged to them and not King James. The solution, then, was that the colonists should return the patent to England and work out an agreement of peaceful cohabitation with the Indians.12

John Cotton would later (probably immediately following Williams’s banishment in 1635-36) write a letter to Williams recounting the Massachusetts General Court’s January 1634 defense of the patent, albeit on grounds different from those Williams had attacked. It was not a matter of civil authority using Christianity to “take possession of the Countrey by murther of the Natives, or by robbery,” Cotton recalled, but it was rather a matter of natural law. The land was empty because “a little before our coming, God had by pestilence and other contagious diseases, swept away many thousands of the Natives, who had inhabited the Bay of Massachusetts, for which the Patent was granted.” By the natural law doctrine of Vacuum Domicilium, empty land could be claimed by any man who set to work it. The few Indians that remained, Cotton argued, were glad to see the

12 LaFantasie, in Correspondence, 1:104-05, Editorial note.
English because they could offer them protection from the Narragansett (ironically, Williams’s friends and English allies in the Pequot War). To this an unsatisfied Williams had replied that although the Indians had not “subdued” the country in a European sense, they utilized the land for their subsistence. Further, Williams argued that unimproved land owned by noblemen in England was protected by law, and under the same principle the Indians could challenge the propriety of the English invasion. Still, the rest of the tract indicated that Williams was not interested in debating nuances of natural law but the theological point that Europe was in no way a “Christian world,” and that the behavior of European monarchs regarding lands they considered “heathen” proceeded from unwarranted pride in their status as Christians. In recounting the January 1634 dialogue concerning the patent, Cotton did not indicate that the General Court had in any way addressed Williams’s specific, theological condemnation of the patent. They could only defend it as necessary to the security of “the fundamentall State, and Government of the Countrey,” which, of course, it was.  

As an assistant to the pastor in Salem, Williams assumed the leadership of a growing Separatist faction in the church there and the authorities grew alarmed that some inhabitants of Salem appeared inclined to follow him. This was potentially dangerous not just because he advocated a renunciation of the patent, but also because Salem’s leaders

13 John Cotton, *Master John Cotton’s Answer to Master Roger Williams* [London, 1644], in *Complete Writings*, 2:44-47. An account of the events surrounding the treatise can be found in Winthrop, *History*, 1:122. Williams wrote the treatise for the perusal of only a few men, perhaps because he was just starting to work out the implications that his Separatism held for matters beyond his original concern for pure worship. Still, Williams not only equated the Indians and the English in terms of property rights, but he equated the English with other European monarchs, intentionally striking at the English notion of its own divine favor.
might attempt to make independent arrangements with the Indians for the extension of
Salem territory. To prevent this, the Massachusetts General Court passed a law in March
1634 that affirmed Bay jurisdiction over all territorial extensions.14

In order to maintain its hold over the contentious colonists in Salem, the Bay
authorities had to pull Williams's power out from beneath him. This was done by
bringing the rest of the leadership to denounce Williams. In January 1634 John Winthrop
wrote to John Endicott of Salem, a church leader who had recently sympathized with
some of Williams's teachings at Salem against the charter and the "Christian" authority
of kings. Winthrop thought that Williams's work "exceeds all that I ever have read (of so
serious an argument) in figures and flourishes," and that if Williams would "allow not
allegories" he must deny the truth of his arguments. It was less typology itself of which
Winthrop warned Endicott, but Williams's typological conclusions that Old Testament
events were not meant as the unfolding of a divine history but rather as mystical symbols
for the truth of the New Testament. Reading the Old Testament in this way gave more
liberty to the reader than orthodox Puritans could afford to allow, and Endicott would
eventually concede his allegiance to the authorities and denounce Williams.15

But Williams would allow for "allegories," and when his theological ideas
reached maturity he would rely on them heavily. For the moment in 1634 and 1635,
though, he might not have been entirely certain. When confronted by the General Court
in January 1634, he retracted his statements against the patent, but preached against it

14 Francis Jennings, The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest
(New York: W.W.Norton, 1975), 139-42.

15 John Winthrop to John Endicott, 3 Jan. 1634, in La Fantasie, Correspondence, 1: 15.
again in November. This time, however, some church members in Salem (on Endicott’s orders) removed part of the red cross in the English flag because the pope had bestowed it upon the king of England and it therefore represented a remnant of Catholicism. Williams was only implicitly linked to the incident by virtue of his leadership at Salem, but Bay officials became increasingly nervous about behavior that might anger the mother country, since there were some in England who would gladly revoke the colonial charter (as Williams seemed ready to demand himself, having drafted a letter to King Charles I explicating the sinfulness of the charter). Worse, there was disagreement among even the establishment in Boston regarding the propriety of the cross on the flag, but they agreed that such rash behavior was indicative of a dangerous radicalism growing around Williams.

Massachusetts Bay magistrates, “upon hearing of some Episcopall, and malignant practices against the Countrey,” had in March 1634 offered a loyalty oath to the citizens of the Bay colony as a precondition to the assumption of civil authority. Williams objected to the civil oath and in April 1635 declared that it was “a part of Gods worship, and many of the people being carnall it was not meet to put upon them an Oath, which was an act of Gods worship.” The oath, grounded as it was on religious principles, was therefore an act of public worship. If the oath were forced upon an unbeliever or a hypocrite, it made a mockery of religion and increased God’s wrath toward the sinner. This challenge squared with his original call for church purity, and again in mid-1635 Williams condemned the churches of Massachusetts Bay for compromising their principles by tolerating the “antichristian pollution” brought by members unrepentant of
former associations with the Church of England. Toleration, Williams thought, belonged always in the state but never in the church. By 1635, Williams was ready to stand by his Separatist ideals and publicly demanded that his conclusions be heeded. By this point, he had at least started to believe that the national church-state model of Old Israel (which the Bay magistrates implicitly emulated by upholding orthodoxy in the civil state) no longer suited God’s chosen. He preached this at Salem, but he had not yet written the theological case for his political views other than his contentions concerning the patent and that continued fellowship with the Anglican Church contaminated pure worship.16

This strict Separatism was enough to throw New England into crisis in 1635. Williams eventually demanded that Salem withdraw communion from the polluted churches, but Williams gradually lost support in Salem after Bay authorities began to coerce them by denying them permission to expand their boundaries to Marblehead Neck. Williams removed himself from fellowship at Salem, but he soon found greater problems with Massachusetts Bay magistrates. The Massachusetts General Court banished Williams in October 1635 when he refused to recant on his four principal opinions. He continued to question the authority of an English king to issue a grant for land not within his realm, he argued that unregenerate citizens should not be tendered religious oaths by the civil authority, he insisted that New England churches separate completely from

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16 Winthrop, History, 1: 147, 198; “Cotton’s Answer to Roger Williams” in Complete Writings, 2: 13; The English sense of its status as a chosen nation (and the limits of this) will be discussed throughout this paper, but here it might be useful to recall that most of models for civil organization in the Bible are drawn from the Old Testament. Jesus and the disciples said very little about statecraft, and Paul wrote only a handful of statements. Cotton and the establishment’s argument revolved around Old Testament passages and the fact that the omission of explicitly political dialogue in the New Testament left the principles of Jewish political authority toward conscience intact.
"unclean" churches, and he protested that civil authorities should not be permitted to punish breaches of purely spiritual religious commandments, or the first four commandments.  

Far from silencing him as the Massachusetts authorities had hoped, Williams’s banishment led him to refine his conclusions on the political implications of Separatism. Since (as Williams saw it) Massachusetts Bay had banished Williams for matters of his conscience, the major focus of his work shifted from a singular concern for church purity to an inquiry into the extent of civil authority. He concluded that civil authority derived from “the people,” but since “the people” and “the elect” were not one and the same, “the people” had no legitimate authority in any matter of conscience for anyone. When Williams set his mind to this problem, he had an established European Separatist tradition from which to draw arguments that justified religious toleration.

Early Separatist writers Robert Browne and Robert Harrison condemned the Church of England as a false church as early as the 1580s and then called for professing Christians to leave it. It was the duty of God’s people, they wrote, to “remove themselves from these and all other abominations, [and] not to joyne hands with open wickedness, but to keep ourselves unspotted therof.” Later Separatist writers of the 1580s such as Henry Ainsworth began to use typology to unify the events of the Old Testament with the

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17See Winthrop, History, 1: 198-204; Roger Williams, Mr. Cotton’s Letter Lately Printed Examined and Answered [London 1644], in Complete Writings 1: 324.

18Williams most fully developed this point in The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution. He said that if one were to make “the people” guardians over conscience one could easily imagine, with a shift in the balance of power, the Indians dictating to the Christians what to believe. See Williams, Complete Writings, 3: 249-52.
new revelations of the New Testament, but he concerned himself little with the religious functions of the state. Still, Ainsworth had injected typology into a developing Separatist tradition. John Robinson, an English Separatist writing in the early seventeenth century, did allow for the civil repression of public idolatry but also made a case that the civil power of Jewish monarchs was not a precedent for modern rulers. The Separatist tradition laid the foundation not only for the necessity of strict separation, but also for the use of typology in interpreting for the present the history of Israel. Williams would rely heavily upon and extend Robinson’s arguments.19

Since Williams proceeded from an original concern for strict separatism, it makes sense that he would have returned to the Separatist tradition as he worked to set up a government in Rhode Island that would protect the autonomy of individual consciences and churches. But it was not until after Williams’s exile that he started to build his argument for toleration around Robinson’s assertion that the fusion of religious and civil law in the Hebrew tradition was not a mandate for modern magistrates. With a July 1637 letter to John Winthrop, Williams included a short work that “enlarged the differences between Israel and all other states.” Although the work is lost, the very fact that he found the time to write it among “a multitude of barbarous distractions” indicates the issue’s primacy in his thought. The letter also indicated that Williams considered this

19 Richard Reinitz, “The Typological Argument for Religious Toleration: The Separatist Tradition and Roger Williams,” *Early American Literature*, 5 (Spring 1970): 74-110. Reinitz maintains that Williams had access to these works in an edited reader of Separatist works, which is further evidence that he developed his typological critique of New England civil practices from secondary sources available to him and not, as Perry Miller maintains, from a wholly original method of exegesis. Also, when English Separatist writers wrote of the history of modern Israel, they meant not a visible state or body of people but rather the invisible church of the Elect. See Perry Miller, *Roger Williams: His Contribution to the American Tradition* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merill, 1953), 27-32.
point to be at the root of Massachusetts’s errors: “I know that your misguidings are great and lamentable, and as the further you pass in your way, and the further you have to come back, and the end of one vexation, will be but the beginning of another, till Conscience be permitted (though Erronious) to be free amongst you.” To what extent Williams had developed his typological method is unclear, but he had reached the conclusion that his typology would later explicate: The historical nation of Israel was unique among civil states in its combination of civil and religious authority, and any state that tried to duplicate it tried in vain, and in sin.20

The importance of the new criticisms that Williams developed after his banishment (and the extent to which the Massachusetts establishment would have considered them threatening) depends upon how astutely Williams read the establishment’s motivations and goals. If the New England Puritans considered themselves privy to a unique covenant in the same way that the Old Testament Israelites considered themselves a uniquely covenanted people whose civil government and

20RW to John Winthrop, 21 July 1637, in La Fantasie, Correspondence, 1:106. Since the center of Williams’s thought shifted from matters of religious purity to the origin and extent of civil authority, it is easy to see why some historians have interpreted Williams as mainly a political thinker. James Ernst wrote, “Roger Williams desired to establish a state that would assure each man political, religious and economic liberty. His theory of the state was the product of an extensive survey of the cause, continuation and decline of states and governments of the past.” James Ernst, The Political Thought of Roger Williams (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1966), 29. In the same vein, Samuel Brockunier wrote that Williams had battled for a “wider franchise and popular government justified by a radical theory of the rights of man.” Samuel Brockunier, The Irrepressible Democrat, Roger Williams (New York: The Ronald Press, 1940), vi. These views, at least in terms of emphasis, are incorrect. Williams turned to political questions only after it became clear to him that the over extension of civil power was largely responsible for the antichristian pollution of the churches. Williams did study under Lord Coke at Cambridge, but Williams’s writings do not leave any evidence of an “extensive survey” of political history. Likewise, he left no evidence of any keen interest in the various strands of political radicalism or rights theory that developed in England during his lifetime. Williams addressed one specific political question, the extent of civil authority concerning matters of conscience, because he felt that civil authority was standing in the way of religious purity. He addressed political questions only insofar as they affected his central religious concerns.
national mission derived directly from Jehovah, then Williams represented a grave threat to the society. Basing his case largely on John Winthrop’s seminal “A Modell of Christian Charitie,” Perry Miller argued this view, which has become the “standard” view of the New England Puritans. The Puritans “believed firmly in the covenant,” and saw in their voyage from England, which had “abandoned the covenant,” to the wilderness of New England as “an essential maneuver in the drama of Christendom.” The rational and deliberate nature of the mission had been sealed by the explicit commitment of migration, and the responsibility for the covenant lay upon each of the “New Israelites.” If Williams convinced the colonists that the “federal covenant” theology around which they had built their society could no longer be applied to the visible world, then the foundation for any civil authority in spiritual matters would soon be destroyed and the floodgates opened to a deluge of spiritual corruption.

This world view centered on covenant theology and a divine “errand into the wilderness” may not, however, have been as self-evident to the founding generation of American Puritans as Miller maintained. Theodore Bozeman points out that Miller does not produce any texts other than Winthrop’s sermon from 1629-40 to show that the Puritans had a defined “forward-looking conscience,” and this one text is not enough to

21 Of course, for the Massachusetts Puritans to maintain that they were a contemporary manifestation of Israel, they would have to use a form of typology in applying the Old Testament story of the persecuted and exiled Hebrews as a prefiguration of themselves. The difference between this approach and Williams’s use of typology was that while the establishment used typology to show the unity of history and God’s consistent treatment of his chosen people, Williams used typology to disassociate Israel from all other states.

maintain that the founding generation of American Puritans was "moved by a world rendering purpose." Rather, the first American Puritans were motivated more by the need to escape the rottenness of England than a mission to create a New Israel, and the evidence suggests instead that the explicit and overriding reasons for the migrations were exilic and based on a drive for religious self-determination.23

Williams surely embraced these exilic goals and this probably best explains his initial enthusiasm for the New England congregations; he felt he was leaving a hopelessly corrupted land for the opportunity to reconstruct pure religious institutions without outside interference. When he arrived in Boston, he was dismayed to find that it was no exile at all but rather a "geographical evasion of the issue" because New England's architects had an unprecedented opportunity to condemn the Anglican Church and formally denounce church institutions that tolerated corrupt practices and an unregenerate membership, but they did not. These non-separating Congregationalists considered the move to New England a profound statement against the Anglican Church, but Williams and other Separatist voices demanded more than this practical separation. They required a denunciation of impure worship in word and practice and asked church members to repent of their former associations with the impure Church of England. In any case, Williams criticized Bay Puritans not for their rhetoric since their rhetoric made few explicit affirmations that they considered themselves privy to a national covenant that mirrored Old Israel's; Williams criticized non-separation because to his mind the Puritans

acted as if they had a corporate covenant with God like Old Israel's. The reaction that Williams provoked is good evidence that the mainline Puritans did consider themselves privy to a corporate covenant, even if they did not think that covenant to be fully national. Their rhetoric makes clear that they believed God covenanted with communities as well as individuals. Williams seems to have agreed that God covenanted with purified religious communities, but he rejected his countrymen's idea that this covenant could also manifest itself in the civil state.24

But even if the Puritans of the Great Migration did not see themselves as the manifestation of a New Israel with a divine mission, along with their countrymen they still viewed England as privy to a national covenant with God, and themselves, away from the religious turmoil of Europe, as the best hope for the completion of the English Reformation. Edmund Morgan maintains that Englishmen more generally viewed themselves as an elect people cast by God in a role to parallel that of the Jews, and many Puritans in fact hoped to return to England and aid in its spiritual restoration once they had established a church polity consistent with the structure of the earliest Christians; they hoped to turn a chosen nation and its national church from its wayward path. This doctrine of a modern elect nation and England's place in history is the main point that

24For a view opposing Bozeman, see Edmund Morgan, Roger Williams: The Church and the State (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), 25; Philip Gura, A Glimpse of Sion's Glory: Puritan Radicalism in New England (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), chs. 2 and 6. In The New England Mind, Miller does produce copious texts from the second generation of American Puritans berating their failure to live up to earlier expectations of their "Errand." Miller maintains that the later lamentations of the commonwealth's decline illustrated the earlier expectations, and in fact considered the concept of divine mission to be so understood by the earliest Puritans that it needed no explicit affirmation in written texts and sermons. Bozeman counters this with persuasive evidence that very few of the migrants to New England who did take the time to document their reasons for heading west mentioned what they hoped to do, but most explicitly mentioned what they wished to avoid. To read a "divine mission" into the earliest Puritan mind is in his view anachronistic.
Williams would come to reject through typology, and so his condemnation of the New England Way was also an explicit condemnation of what non-separatist Puritans considered the only hope for England’s redemption.25

If Williams had been alone in reading the Bible typologically, his arguments concerning Israel’s uniqueness might have been dismissed as a lone eccentric’s attempts to prove discredited ideas. But as Sacvan Bercovitch points out, typology was not unique to Williams among early New England Puritans (or Christian Reformers more generally), but was a common means of infusing the historical stories of the Old Testament with Christian meaning under the New Covenant. Williams and his contemporaries agreed that the Bible as a whole was the revealed Word of God, and that taken together the stories of the Old and New Testaments revealed the unfolding of God’s providential will. Puritans believed that God directed history according to his foreordained plan, and the events that God inspired the writers of the Old and New Testaments to record formed a systematic picture of history. Since Protestants considered the ministry and sacrifice of Christ the point to which the Old Testament stories and prophecies were ultimately directed, ministers used typology to explain how Christ’s life revealed the true significance of Old Testament events, individuals, or images. To the Jewish mind, the story of Jehovah’s command to Abraham to sacrifice his only son to God represented the faithful obedience of the first patriarch. To a Christian thinking typologically, the story prefigured the sacrifice of God’s only son to the human race, reversing the roles but

25Bozeman, *Ancient Lives*, 82-98; Morgan, *Roger Williams*, 6-10. Non-separating Puritans still believed that the Church of England, though it was corrupted from the inside by various remnants of Catholicism, could still be purified from within if the devout showed the way.
illustrating in human terms the love that God must have for his fallen people. This, of course, could only be seen after Christ, the Word made flesh, appeared. Ministers used this method to impart the interconnected meaning of biblical stories to their congregations, and for these unifying ends typology was acceptable and useful.\textsuperscript{26}

Through a different approach to typology, Williams isolated a strain of disunity between the two testaments. Williams sought to show how Christ furthered the work of Old Testament prophets, who themselves often indicted the civil injustice of Old Israel, by emphasizing how Christ's revelations reformulated the spiritual relationship between God and His children. Williams used Christ's critique of Jewish Pharisees, which exposed their legalism and their pride in the Jews' status as God's chosen nation. According to Williams, Christ himself had repudiated the civil structures of Old Israel. Williams argued that the leaders of New England sought to imitate this outmoded model, if not explicitly at least implicitly through enforcing religious orthodoxy with the civil sword. By continuing to follow a model of civil government based on the repudiated idea that physical nations could embody the will of God in the civil magistrate, Williams thought that the Massachusetts establishment had failed to recognize that Christ divested nations of election even as he invested individuals with the same. By this Williams meant that the chosen nation of the Old Testament allegorically represented the Elect of the New Covenant. "To make the Shadowes of the Old Testament and the Substance or Body of

\textsuperscript{26}See Harry Stout, \textit{The New England Soul}, 45; Sacvan Bercovitch, "Typology in Puritan New England: The Williams-Cotton Controversy Reassessed," \textit{American Quarterly} 19 (1967): 166-91. Bercovitch persuasively revises Perry Miller's insight that what made Williams so subversive was his use of typology. Bercovitch shows that many Puritans used typology; Miller should have shown how the more orthodox Puritans used typology and then how Williams used it differently to attack their assumptions.
the New,” Williams wrote, “is to confound and mingle Heaven and Earth together, for the Law was ceremonial and figurative.”27

In their biblical interpretations, this was the main point of contention between the governors of Massachusetts Bay and Williams: they considered, at least in part, Old Israel a divinely-ordained model for just civil government in a godly society and themselves its heirs, while he considered Old Israel’s intertwined spiritual and political authority a ceremonial model forever abolished by Christ. Most dangerous of all, Williams used orthodox—though to most minds fanatical and over-extended—theological methods to arrive at these conclusions; he struck at the theological foundations of the Puritan experiment in America, and English claims to divine favor, without slipping into methodological heresy. The very identity of Englishmen and the ever-evolving mission of the Puritan experiment in America, was at stake. Only after Williams’s banishment, however, would he refine and present his theologically informed political theory and thereby expose what he considered the inner contradictions of English religious thought. This opportunity would be handed to him by John Cotton.28


28Miller, Roger Williams, 32-38. Miller isolates Williams’s typology as the main element of subversiveness in his thought. For his part, John Cotton defended his position that Williams was not being punished for his conscience but rather for sinning against his own conscience, and he avoided an explicit refutation of Williams’s specific use of typology. The civil sword was employed in the Old Testament, Cotton held, and never abrogated in the New. Miller’s interpretation of the controversy was useful in that it rescued Williams from a misreading by earlier historians that Williams was primarily a political thinker. More instructive, however, is Sacvan Bercovitch’s assessment of the controversy in which Bercovitch shows that, contrary to Miller’s assertion that the rank and file Puritans “eschewed” typology, the real controversy between Williams and Cotton stemmed from incompatible versions of typology. Williams, The Bloudy Tenent Yet More Bloudy, Complete Works, 4: 450.
In early 1636, soon after Massachusetts Bay banished Roger Williams for his open questioning of Bay authority, John Cotton wrote to Williams attempting both to interpret for him the cause of his banishment and to justify Massachusetts's actions toward him. The letter was printed (without Cotton's or Williams's consent) and it catalyzed a long and sometimes harsh debate between the two men that focused on how to maintain pure worship, the extent to which a society could be "Christian," and the political implications thereof. For his part, Cotton maintained that Williams was banished not for conscience but because his "corrupt doctrines" tended "to the disturbance both of the civill and holy peace." Williams was free to believe as he wished (no authority can dictate what a man holds in his heart), but he was not free to bring others to question civil authority. These "corrupt doctrines," as Williams pointed out in his reply, Cotton did not expressly delineate. Rather, in his attempt to bring Williams to a "more serious sight of your sin," Cotton explored more generally the main obstacle (besides Williams's excessive pride) that had brought Williams to be "turned off from fellowship with us." Williams had maintained that the New England churches were impure because they had admitted men unrepentant of former association with "Anti-Christian" churches in England. Cotton

29 Glenn LaFantasie notes that neither Williams nor Cotton claimed responsibility for the printing of Cotton's personal letter, but that Williams's "readiness with a reply raises a good deal of suspicion about the part he may have played in releasing Cotton's letter to the public." LaFantasie, Correspondence, 1: 32. The letter was published in 1643, opening an intense nine-year debate between the two men.
argued that it was not necessary, as Williams had held, for the visible saints to “bewaile so much of their former pollutions,” but that the New England churches had reformed their practices was “as good as repentance.” At the base of things, Cotton thought that Williams demanded impractical and imprudent purity from the already extraordinary efforts of the American Puritans.30

While Cotton found Williams’s critique of the practical compromises made by the New England churches to stand on tertiary matters, Williams considered them fundamental. In his 1644 reply to Cotton’s 1636 letter, he indicated that his civil banishment did not solve any of Massachusetts’s problems but was yet a further indictment of the colonists’ spiritual meandering. To Cotton’s insistence that he banished himself from the churches of New England “resolved to continue in those evils,” Williams assented, but he denied that by voluntarily leaving the fellowship of the churches he might be lawfully banished from the civil state. “Why should he call this a banishment from the Churches,” he wrote, “except he silently confess that the frame or

30 John Cotton to RW, early 1636, in LaFantasie, Correspondence, 1: 33-44. While Cotton considered Williams’s theology eccentric, he did not consider him heretical. Williams’s “corrupt doctrines” revolved solely around his insistence upon separation, not his soteriology of grace and redemption. The finer points of their theology would emerge in the ensuing debate, but for now the political dangers associated with uncompromising separation from corruption at home formed the basis of contention. Non-Separatist New England colonists still considered themselves members of the Church of England and privy to the divine favor they thought God had bestowed upon that nation and its church, and they knew that the English theocracy (to which they looked for protection) would look unfavorably upon colonies that condemned the national church. As I explained in chapter 1, the New World had given non-separating Puritans like John Cotton and John Winthrop a way out of the problems that Puritans saw within the Church of England: they could form spiritually pure (as far as worship was concerned), congregationally governed churches in the New World while maintaining institutional loyalty to the churches that bred them. To denounce formally the practices of the Church of England by refusing to admit colonists unrepentant of worshipping there would implicitly be a denunciation of the crown, and during the religiously charged decades of the early seventeenth century in England this would have been suicide for the fledgling New England colonies. Williams, perhaps recognizing the practical difficulties behind his demands but clearly unmoved by them, considered this avowed compromise of principle an evasion of the issue at hand. See Morgan, Roger Williams, 23-25.
constitution of their Churches is but implicitly National (which they yet professe against)
for otherwise why was I not yet permitted to live in the world or Common weale, except
for that the Common weale and the Church is but one.” His point was that the church
can issue spiritual censure for spiritual transgressions, and the state could issue censure
for civil transgressions, but it was not in the state’s province to issue censure for spiritual
transgressions. Williams maintained that when the “human invention” of the state co­
opted the authority to decide “holy things of God” and enforce its will, “truth” depended
not on the force of ideas but on the power of the sword, which lay in the hands of sinful
men and not God. As much of his work would emphasize, a man who professed belief
as a duty of citizenship blasphemed God’s name, and any institution that contributed to
this sin ignored Christ’s profession that salvation came not by power but by spirit. A
nation that wielded its civil power to procure professions of faith was no better than the
Roman Church, which Puritans universally agreed represented the power of Anti-Christ.

In this, Williams’s first attempt to show Cotton how the affairs of the civil state
and the workings of God’s spiritual kingdom were utterly separate, he used typology to
illustrate his point. God revealed himself through the history of “the Church of the Jews
under the Old Testament in the type, and the Church of the Christians under the Antitype,
both separate from the world.” The Jewish people, highly conscious of their status as a

31 Williams, Mr. Cotton’s Letter Examined and Answered, in Complete Writings, 1: 324-25. The
answer was printed in 1644, but was probably composed before that. This work was probably written over
time after he received the letter from Cotton, for the ideas contained within it do not have the scope of the
ideas within the Bloudy Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience, also printed in 1644.

32 Ibid. 1:370.

33 Ibid. 1:387.
chosen people and of their place in history, maintained certain traditions (such as circumcision) that constantly reminded them of their separate status and unique destiny. The Jews thought that this destiny would be fulfilled in the form of a deliverer from the line of their mighty King David, who would lead them back into their homeland and establish a strong kingdom to protect their nation. For this reason they needed to carefully maintain their cultural identity, even as they were scattered among the political nations and despised by other cultures. Christians believed that the Jews had been mistaken to think that their deliverance would be from political oppression because, as Christ made clear, the deliverance was instead from the oppression of humankind’s sinful nature. Men could understand the history of the Jews, which provided a temporal illustration for the workings of an eternal plan. But after Christ made this clear, it was the responsibility of men to understand that what once had been cast in terms of politics and chosen, scattered nations was now cast in terms of spirit and chosen, scattered individuals. The church of the first Christians finally understood that God’s chosen would forever live among all nations, just as Israel had done; they would forever be different and consciously separate from all others, just as Israel had been; but this distinction would be spiritual and not material, as Israel had failed to understand. The world-wide, spiritual community of Christians formed a mirror image of the Jewish community and needed to translate the temporal separation of the Jews into a spiritual separation of themselves. Christians needed to become conscious of their status as a chosen, spiritual people.

Williams illustrated this by casting the world as a wilderness and the church as an
enclosed garden. Both the Old Testament Jews (materially and culturally) and the early Christians (spiritually) resided in the garden, where God placed the “candlestick of his truth.” The key point of the illustration is that the inhabitants of the garden needed to remain vigilant in maintaining the wall of separation between the garden and the wilderness. When God’s people failed to do this during the Roman apostacy, “God hath ever broke down the wall it selfe, removed the Candlestick, &c. and made his Garden a Wilderness, as at this day.”

And while all men live in the same civil wilderness, if ever there would be a garden again (i.e. an institutional church of the sort to which American Puritans paid lip service) it would require an uncompromising commitment by Christians to permit only those people displaying clear signs of God’s grace working within them to enter it. Cotton and the religious establishment in Old and New England had things backwards. Rather than using spiritual scrutiny to keep the garden pure, they used civil power to maintain the appearance of purity. Williams finished his argument by challenging Cotton to consider that “if the Lord Jesus were himself in Old or New England, what Church, what Ministry, what Worship, what Government he would set up, and what persecution he would practice toward them that would not receive Him?”

Williams’s public reply to Cotton’s private letter was a caricature of the New England Way, and Cotton responded that Williams had been banished not for his conscience but for the “turbulent holding of [his] opinions.” Cotton and mainstream Puritans did have theological, and not just politically expedient, reasons for considering

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34 Ibid. 1:392.

35 Ibid. 1: 396.
themselves a covenanted community. As Cotton had written Williams in his 1636 letter, since the New England Puritans had reformed English religious practice, there was no need to explicitly separate from the Anglican Church. The New Testament as well as the Old contained directions for the formation of Christian community, and Cotton pointed out that Paul urged Christian communities to accept the weak in faith, accepting even those who ate meat sacrificed to idols. Williams, in Cotton’s mind, demanded that the church community dismiss all members who did not live up to an almost unattainable level of purity and discounted the fact that it was the church community itself that provided the support for individuals to reach the kind of spirituality that Williams demanded of all as a membership prerequisite. Cotton believed that the New England community could accept parallels between their own experience and Israel’s without insisting that New England was a modern manifestation of Israel. Williams, however, pointed out that the establishment had used Old Testament precedent as a license for civil action, and hoped to prove that their acceptance of that precedent was in error. Williams’s actions were guided by his understanding of the New England Way, despite the fact that his understanding was hyperbolic.

This answer to John Cotton’s letter only foreshadowed Williams’s more comprehensive statement of the political and ethical imperatives of Christian teaching. In 1644, he enlarged his commentary on Christ’s abolition of the national church, but his masterpiece, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience*, shifted some of his emphasis from theoretical issues to a thorough condemnation of the violent political history of the Christian world. Not only were the theologically-derived political
assumptions of Christendom scripturally indefensible human inventions, Williams thought, but they led to behavior that ran directly contrary to the peaceful message of Christ.

Here Williams’s use of typology was crucial. In order to show that the coercion of conscience through civil power was illegitimate, he had to show exactly how the “State of the Land of Israel, the Kings and people thereof in Peace & War, is proved figurative and ceremoniall, and no patterne nor precedent for any Kingdom or civill state in the world to follow.” Nations that failed to understand this, he wrote, caused the “greatest occasion of civill Warre, ravishing of conscience, persecution of Christ Jesus in his servants, and the hypocrisie and destruction of millions of souls.” Williams argued that bloody civil persecution in the name of Christ actually hurt prospects for the conversion of pagans, and by proceeding according to the religious nation-state model of Old Israel, modern states denied that Christ had actually come and uncovered the spiritual meaning of Old Testament history and stories.36

After Christ’s resurrection the religious nation-state of Israel was dissolved, and left in its place was a spiritual Israel, the invisible and scattered community of believers in Christ. Since this new nation could not be collected into one place, it could not undertake the functions of a nation-state. Wrote Williams:

The Nationall typicall State-Church of the Jewes necessarily called for such weapons: but the particular Churches of Christ in all parts of the World, consisting of Jewes or Gentiles, is powerfully able by the sword of the Sword of the Spirit to defend itself, and offend Men or Devils, although the State or Kingdome (wherein such a Church of Christ are

36Ibid. 3:3-4.
gathered) have neither carnall speare nor sword, &c. as once it was in the Nationall Church of the Land of Canaan.37

To imagine that Christendom could be concentrated into a civil state amounted to utter nonsense, at least to Williams. Thus, the spiritual community of Christians was the Antitype of the nation-state Israel. Christ was the only executive power over his New, invisible, Israel.38

The explicit national church in England and the implicit national church in New England were then in reality impotent in spiritual matters. Their only capability was to coerce “externall exercise of their Nationall Worship,” because it remained impossible to “compell whole Nations to true Repentance and Regeneration, without which the Worship and holy Name of God is prophaned and blasphemed.”39 It could be no surprise, then, that it is Moses and the Prophets, never Christ, to whom “both Protestants and Papists” look for justification of “holy wars.” Both the Protestants and the Catholics conceive that they kill in the name of Truth, though the killing itself makes clear that Truth is nowhere to be found between them. The only acceptable combat is to fight the fight of faith, with “Spirituall Artillery.”40 With the abolition of temporal Israel, all religiously-oriented violence amounts to Christ being crucified all over again. Through the history of that illusory Christendom, powerful religious conservatives, nervous about


38 Ibid. 3: 197-205. The work is so copious and utterly repetitive that the argument must be summarized rather than quoted at length.

39 Ibid. 3: 202.

40 Ibid. 3:59.
losing their influence over the people, resorted to the bloody civil sword to silence dissent; it was to err in the manner that the Pharisees erred when they crucified Christ for his teachings. Banishment from Massachusetts represented to Williams the latest in a long line of dissenters, including the Old Testament prophets and Christ himself, to fall victim to a civil sword wrongly thrust. Since that day, “the Apostacie of Antichrist, the Christian World, (so called) hath swallowed up Christianity.”

All of this is the biblical evidence for Williams’s most important premise that the spiritual and the physical are utterly distinct, and from this he attempted to prove that the battles of the spiritual cannot be fought in the physical realm; they must be fought in the far more difficult spiritual arena. Christ’s calling pertained to individuals, not nations or communities, and therefore the nature of the true church is “not local (as some have said) . . . but Spirituall, and mystically to come out from her sins and Abominations.”

Williams meant that there was no corporate locale that had special favor with God, for “literall Babell and Jerusalem have now no difference.” Since the spiritual and physical realms are separate by nature and individuals rather than communities possessed spirit, Williams considered the attempt to impose the appearance of spiritual homogeneity in the name of civil peace a spiritual assault.

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41 Ibid. 3: 89. That Williams calls “the Christian World” in its entirety the “Apostacie of Antichrist” is an intentional co-mingling of non-Separating Protestants and Roman Catholics into the same field. The Bloudy Tenent is written partly as a dialogue between Truth and Peace. While the truth of Christ should rightfully be at one with principles of peace, they had long been estranged. The dialogue takes place upon a chance meeting, presumably in the person of Roger Williams. Near the beginning of the dialogue, Peace laments how rarely Peace and Truth converge. Truth replies that God commands that peace be kept at all costs, and that Christians should take up civil arms only “to defend the innocent, and rescue the oppressed from the violent.” But here, Truth explains that men have two sorts of force at their disposal, civil force and soul force, which is referred to above as “spirituall artillery.”

42 Ibid. 3: 65-66.
Having established the distinction between the spiritual and the physical, Williams set forth his contention that New Testament teachings expressly altered established religious assumptions by spiritualizing what had been visible and physical, and by transferring authority from established powers to individual conscience. Jesus, executed by the civil magistrate for claiming to be a king, claimed not to be a temporal king of an earthly kingdom, but rather an eternal king of a spiritual dominion. The people failed to understand this distinction, but Christ’s defiance even of death at the hands of the mighty Romans proves to the Christian that, as “Gods people since the coming of the King of Israel have openly and continually professed that no Civill Magistrate, no King nor Caesar have any power over the Soules or Consciences of their Subjects. . . but. . . themselves. . . are bound to subject their owne soules to the Ministry and Church.”

Williams concluded that he was not of an arrogant spirit in refusing to submit to civil coercion in matters of conscience, as Cotton accused him, but rather that he maintained the proper wall of separation between the wilderness and the garden as commanded by Christ. Weeds outside a garden cannot choke the plants within. This line of argument applied to the spiritual world only. But in the physical world, the whole of the world had become a wilderness, mixing the plants and the weeds together everywhere. He articulated this through a long and detailed discussion of Jesus’ parable of the tares (Matthew 13), in which he argued that as long as any weed in the wilderness of the world did not disturb the civil peace, the civil magistrate must allow those weeds to

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43 Ibid. 3:76.

44 Ibid. 3: 198.
remain, lest the magistrate uproot spiritually sanctified plants (like Roger Williams) and violently blaspheme Christ’s name.

In nearly every passage in the *Blody Tenent*, Williams works to clarify the distinction between the spiritual and the physical, and in those terms to clarify his typological interpretation of Israel. As Abraham represented the physical seed of physical Israel, Christ represented the spiritual seed of spiritual Israel. The physical separation of Israel prefigured the spiritual separation of Christians, but after the distinction was clear all nations became alike in God’s sight. Civil control of religion leads not to truth, as some have maintained, but to the “turnings of religion,” as the prevailing winds of Christendom, including England, shift about. All of this amounts to “play in spiritual things” as the civil magistrates replay the role of the soldiers who crucified Jesus through the persecution and banishment of dissenters.\(^{45}\) As Williams summarized his thoughts to John Endicott in 1651, “‘Tis impossible for any man to maintain their Christ by the Sword and maintain a true Christ!”\(^{46}\)

In Williams’s next major work, *The Blody Tenent Yet More Blody* (1652), he did little but expand on his thesis in *The Blody Tenent ad tedium*. The work should be viewed for what it is, a response to John Cotton’s rejoinder to *The Blody Tenent*. To Cotton’s repeated charges that Williams possessed an “arrogant spirit” unmindful of truth, Williams explained that Cotton was the theologically proud one since he persecuted

\(^{45}\)ibid. 3: 325-26, 374-75.

\(^{46}\)RW to John Endicott, Aug. or Sept. 1651, in LaFantasie, *Correspondence* 1: 344.
dissenters and thus assumed his own infallibility in spiritual matters.\textsuperscript{47} Mostly Williams expanded on the need for tolerance and peace in the civil state alongside careful scrutiny of church members since hypocrisy "will leaven the whole lumpe, and render the garden and spouse of Christ a filthy dunghill."\textsuperscript{48} In this sense, Williams considered hypocrisy more dangerous to the Christian church than pagans living alongside Christians, because hypocrites could at least masquerade as bearers of truth and thereby deceive some of the faithful. To Cotton’s point that Old Testament precedent showed that God punished idolatry, Williams replied that if Cotton and the New England establishment were to seek to learn from Old Testament precedents, they would be mindful of exactly what sort of behavior brought God’s wrath: wrath came upon covenanted people not when they tolerated false prophets but rather when they persecuted the true servants and saints among them.\textsuperscript{49} The problem of infection applied to the church and spirit, not the state and the body.

Accordingly, Williams persisted in asking Cotton when he would “witness against a Nationall Church and cease to mingle Heaven and Earth, the church and the worldly state together?”\textsuperscript{50} Cotton never forthrightly addressed Williams’s main point, that the establishment was wrongly applying to a modern state powers that God bestowed upon


\textsuperscript{48}\textit{Ibid.} 4: 122.


\textsuperscript{50}\textit{Ibid.} 4: 403.
Old Testament monarchs specifically to illustrate in the physical world the workings of the spiritual world, and Williams would not let that go unnoticed. Perhaps Cotton did not address the contention because the Puritans did not actually consider themselves the architects of a New Jerusalem, as Williams accused; perhaps Cotton lacked a systematic defense to prove that the practices of Old Testament statecraft were in force, for all he maintained was that what had been established in the Old Testament and not specifically abolished in the New Testament remained in force; perhaps he did not wish to delve into typology as deeply as Williams had and thereby reveal that typology could serve two, and perhaps many, ends.

Whatever Cotton's reasons for skirting the issue, Williams's indictment of the English stemmed from a more comprehensive sense, drawn from both his personal experience with the English and from a historical survey of Christendom, that Christendom preferred its "Common Trinitie of the World, (profit, praeferment [,] pleasure)" to the true and peaceful principles of Christianity. In fact, the English had made a deity of land as the Spanish had made a deity of gold in the New World51 The pursuit of these things ultimately led down the path of violence and, when connected to Christ, blasphemy. From noble principles but partly to satisfy their lust for land, the colonists worked to "civilize" and then Christianize the Indians of New England. Worst of all, this plunder of the world and the murder of countless "heathens," had all been done in Christ's name.

For Williams's part, he decided sometime after his exile from Massachusetts that

51RW to John Winthrop Jr., 28 May 1664, in LaFantasie, Correspondence, 2:528.
he would not participate in this injustice. He gradually combined his ideas concerning pure worship, his revulsion against the perversion of spiritual principles toward political ends, and his expectations of the coming millennial reign of Christ. Together, these ideas brought him to behave in very particular ways toward the Narragansetts. All cultures have ideals, but when those ideals are challenged, the mettle of a culture is exposed; the same may be true of individuals. Williams proved that his criticism of his culture’s ideals was not only aberrant and counter-cultural, but that he was willing to stand by his own convictions even when it meant almost complete isolation from his own people, including many of his former friends.
CHAPTER III
SHEEP AND WOLVES

Bringing the Gospel to the American Indians was an avowed purpose of the Puritan experiment in America. John Winthrop wrote in 1629 before leaving for America that “It wilbe . . . of great Consequence to carrie the Gospell into those partes of the world, and to rayse a bullwarke against the kingdom of Antichrist” that the Jesuits endeavored to spread. The conversion of the Indians would add to the glories of the “city upon a hill.” Accordingly the Puritans initially considered the Indians less a threat and more as an opportunity for the community’s extension. Before they could reap the Indian souls, however, the English knew they had to “reduce” the Indians’ “savagery” to “civilization.” Religious conversion required a transformation of a whole system of thinking and living, and the English had long been confident that the educable Indians, once they understood the benefits of English civilization, could be “brought to civilitie and the imbracing of true religion.”

Before his most serious troubles with his own countrymen, Williams displayed an

52 Winthrop, “General Observations,” in Winthrop Papers 2:114-15. Bozeman agrees with and cites these exilic motives, Ancient Lives, 95; Alden T. Vaughan, New England Frontier: Puritans and Indians, 1620-1675 3rd ed. (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1995), 18-19; James Axtell, The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985),135-36. Axtell explains that the English wished to “reduce them to civilitie” rather than “raise” them (as one might intuitively think since they saw civilization as a higher form of existence than savagery) because the English needed to supply the Indians with three qualities: order, industry and manners. To reduce them was in a sense to tame their original sin of pride, to bring their instincts and passions under control. Thomas Hariot, A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia [1588], in David B. Quinn and Alison M. Quinn, eds., Virginia Voyages from Hakluyt (London, 1973), 68.
evangelistic zeal typical of the Puritan settlers, expressing hope that “the Lord please to graunt my desires, that I may intend what I long after, the natives Soules.” To commence this work, Williams had in 1634 and early 1635 visited the Indians at Narragansett Bay in an attempt to learn their tongue. Fortunately for him, he established cordial relations with them. After he was banished from Massachusetts in October 1635, he fled Massachusetts being “sorely tost (in a bitter Winter Season) not knowing what Bread or Bed did meane.” In contrast to his experience in Massachusetts, Williams found friends and refuge at Narragansett Bay and there established Providence. The Narragansetts, Williams wrote, “are remarkably free and courteous, to invite all strangers in.” The friendly greeting he received, “What cheer, Netop!” suggests that Williams’s arrival was more of a homecoming than an intrusion. Williams’s writings say little about Indian missions at this juncture, probably because he was preoccupied with establishing a viable colony and mediating a tenuous alliance between his Narragansett friends and his English countrymen against the Pequots.

Williams’s behavior among the Indians was immediately a marked contrast to general English policy. He apparently purchased a small tract of land during this initial visits, for after his exile from Massachusetts, Narragansett sachems Canonicus and Miantonomi confirmed this in a deed to Williams, written in 1637: “having two years

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53RW to John Winthrop, between July and Dec. 1632, in LaFantasie, Correspondence, 1: 8.

54RW to Major John Mason and Governor Thomas Prenc, 22 June 1670, in LaFantasie, Correspondence. 2: 611

55Roger Williams, A Key Into the Language of America (London 1643), in Complete Writings, 1:36.
since sold unto Roger Williams ye lands and meadowes . . . doe now by these presents, 
establish and confirme ye bounds.” Williams acknowledged the previous purchase of the
land and affirmed that his residence in the land was conditional upon the approval of the
Indians:

Be it knowne to all men, that I, Roger Williams, of the Towne of Providence, in the
Narragansett Bay, in New England, having in the yeare one thousand six hundred
thirtie foure and in the yeare one thousand six hundred thirtie five, had severall
treaties with Connnanicusse and Miantonomo, the chief sachems of the Narragansetts. .
. provided that I satisfied the Indians there inhabiting.

Williams explained that the purchase was “not by monies nor payment but by language,
acquaintence, and favour with the natives.” Practicing what he had preached before his
banishment, Williams occupied the land from the Narragansetts by mutual consent
because he believed that the English had usurped Indian lands by royal patent. By 1638,
Williams had learned the Narragansett language, he had helped negotiate a tenuous peace
between the English and the Indians (the Pequots having been quelled), and his young
colony had survived its first critical years. Accordingly, Williams was then in a position
better than any Englishman to begin the construction of the “bullwarke against the
kingdom of Antichrist” in Rhode Island.

Far from raising a “bulwarke” against the Catholics, Williams had started down
an intellectual path that would lead him to maintain that there was little difference
between the Puritans and the Catholics. For the moment in 1638, Williams still
considered the conversion of the Indians a possibility, as he wrote to John Winthrop in

56Deed from Canonicus and Miantonomi to Roger Williams, March 1637 and Confirmatory Deed
of Roger Williams . . . , (March 1637), in John Russell Bartlett, ed., Records of the Colony of Rhode Island
February:

Sir I hope shortly to send you good newes of great hopes the Lord hath sprung up in mine Eye of many a poore Indian soule enquiring after God. I have convinced hundreths at home and abroad that in point of Religion they are all wandering etc. ... But I hope the time is not long that Some shall truly blesse the God of Heaven that ever they saw the face of English men.\(^5\)

The most unfortunate part of the arrangement, as Williams wrote less than two months later, was that the English were not up to the task.

\[...\] if no course be taken the name of that God of Truth whome we all profess to honour will suffer not a litle, it being an ordinary and common thing with our neighbors if they apprehended any shew of breach of promise in my selfe thus to object: doe you know God and will you lye?\(^5\)

Williams had already related to Winthrop the Narragansetts' misgivings concerning English integrity, and that this concern made the Indians doubt English religious sincerity. As early as 1637, Canonicus worried that the English were less than trustworthy. The sachem claimed that “they could relate many particulars, wherein the English had broken (since these wars) their promises, etc.” The alliance during the Pequot War had overshadowed relations with the English in 1637, and for sake of military unity the Narragansetts “would not contend with their friends” during the hostilities. But afterward, Canonicus told Williams that if the Englishman would “speake true, if hee meane truly, then shall I goe to my grave in peace, and hope that the English and my posteritie shall live in love and peace together.” When Williams assured Canonicus of the trustworthiness of the English colonists, Canonicus “tooke a sticke and broke it into ten pieces, and related ten instances (laying downe a sticke to every instance)\(^5\)

\(^5\)RW to John Winthrop, 28 Feb.1638, in LaFantasie, Correspondence, 1: 146.

\(^5\)RW to John Winthrop, 16 April 1638, in ibid. 1:150.
which gave him cause to feare."\(^59\) Williams already felt that the English perpetuated hypocrisy in tolerating less than pure worship; now their duplicity in Indian relations threatened to bear more eternal consequences.

Mutual distrust between the English and the Narragansetts worsened for several years. The English worried that the Narragansetts had conspired with the Mohawks to eliminate the colonists, and the Narragansetts worried that the English had a mind to usurp Narragansett land, since it was not protected by a royal patent. Faced with unpredictable Indian activity, the English colonists in Massachusetts, Plymouth, Connecticut, and New Haven formed an extralegal union in May 1643 called the United Colonies of New England to effect their goals of subduing the autonomy of both the subversive English in Rhode Island and the Narragansett Indians.\(^60\) Alarmed at the sudden expansionist temper of Connecticut and Massachusetts and now in need of a patent, Roger Williams hurried back to England to legitimize Rhode Island, leaving the Narragansett sachems to fend for themselves. When he arrived in London in 1643, he published his first formal thoughts on Indian conversions. While no extant evidence might trace how (or even if) the changing political landscape influenced Williams’s thinking on the question of Indian conversions, the critique of the English that emerged in *A Key Into the Language of America* and *Christenings Make not Christians* showed that his thoughts on the matter had evolved significantly since 1638.

\(^59\) RW to Governor John Winthrop, 20 Aug. 1637, in *ibid.* 1: 112. See also RW to Gov. John Winthrop, 10 May 1637, in *ibid.* 1: 78. "The Narragansetts are at present doubtfull of Realitie of all our Promises." Williams, *Key*, in *Complete Writings* , 1: 85.

\(^60\) Elisha Potter, *Early History of Narragansett* (Providence, 1835), 37. LaFantasie, *Correspondence*, 1: 217, Editorial Note.
The shift in Williams's thinking indicated less a fundamental shift in his theology and more a diminished hope that a pure church on Earth was possible until the millennial reign of Christ. Even after his expulsion from Massachusetts, Williams harbored some hope that *bona fide* Indian conversions and full membership in true churches were possible. Williams thought that the Indians would be converted, for he noticed "no small preparation in the hearts of Multitudes of them," and he readily discussed spiritual issues with them. But he made no attempt to convert them, for reasons he would explain most clearly in *Christenings Make not Christians*. In any case, he left Indian conversion, which he was certain would happen in time, in the hands of God and apostles with a true "sending" rather than himself. "I know not with how little Knowledge and Grace of Christ the Lord may save, and therefore neither will despair, nor report much."

Williams wished to contribute to Christians' knowledge of the Indian language and thereby to facilitate the spread of "civilitie" and the Gospel "in the Lord's holy season." But in the meantime he strove to bring reflection to the English Christian whose behavior was in many ways shamed by the gentle demeanor of the "savages."

Williams argued in the *Key* that the Indians were often morally superior to their Christian neighbors, just as Christ used examples from Gentile culture to underscore the shortcomings of chosen Israel. Indians displayed a general civility and courtesy for one

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61 Williams, *Key, Complete Writings*, 1: 85.

62 *Ibid.* 1: 80, 85. This issue of true apostolic sending is presented in *Christenings* and will be covered below.

63 During the time of Jesus, a Gentile was considered anyone who was a non-Jew, or otherwise outside of God's covenant with Israel. Jews, conceiving themselves chosen by God, looked down upon Gentiles, but the teachings of Jesus often used examples of Gentile goodness to contrast Jewish excesses in
another and strangers, as Williams discovered so decisively during the earliest months of 1636:

The courteous Pagan shall condemne
Uncourteous Englishmen,
Who live like Foxes, Beares and Wolves,
Or Lyon in his Den.

Let none sing blessings to their soules,
For that they Courteous are:
The wild Barbarians with no more
Then Nature, goe so farre:

If Natures Sons both wild and tame,
Humane and Courteous be:
How ill becomes it Sonnes of God
To want Humanity?64

Englishmen banished into the wilderness a man whose theology they could not tolerate; Indians saved a complete stranger from the same, demonstrating a “heart sensible of kindness.”65 In similar fashion, Christ thought it more praiseworthy to do the good work of the Lord among men than to observe spiritual laws.66 If the Puritans hoped to convert the Indians to Christianity, the moral superiority of the religion should be demonstrated by “Justice and Mercy,” in Winthrop’s words. It was difficult for a pious society to assert its mercy when it banished its own and usurped the lands of others.67 To the observer, it observing the Law of Moses. For a well known example, see Luke 10:30-35 (The Good Samaritan).

64 Williams, Key, Complete Writings, 1: 98-99.

65 Ibid., 1:96.

66 The examples of Christ declaring that the laws of love supercede religious and customary laws are nearly endless, but perhaps the clearest example is found in Matthew 12:1-14. Here, Christ explained the superiority of doing good on the Sabbath to mere observance of custom.

67 Williams explicitly calls the notion that Christians have a right to heathen land “sinful.” see Key, in Complete Writings, 1:180. He also wrote in his observations regarding Indian trading:
seemed a very strange religion indeed.

Williams was not uncritical of the Indians, whom he dubbed "barbarians," but he consistently turned his critique of the Indians back upon the English. Speaking of Indian cannibalism, Williams noted that "This people are the terour of their neighbor Natives," but quickly added "yet these Rebells, the Sonne of God may in time subdue." Still, the community spirit of these people was remarkable, and he thought it "a strange truth that a man shall generally finde more free entertainment and refreshing amongst these Barbarians than amongst thousands that call themselves Christians." If behavior is a window to the soul, then the alleged Christians of New England had much to learn from the pagans they wished to convert.

Superior behavior and merciful customs of the Indians were not the strongest ground for Williams’s criticism of the English. Williams’s most potent argument was demonstrating the spiritual equality of the two races. "God having of one blood made all mankind," and civilized European and savage Indian were therefore equally subject to sin. There was no distinction between men save one, and that was individual regeneration in Christ:

Boast not proud English, of thy birth and blood,

Oft I have heard these Indians say,
These English will deceive us,
Of all that is ours, our land and our lives.
In th' end they will bereave us.
(Key, 1:159)

68 Ibid. 1:102.

69 Ibid. 1:106.

70 Williams, The Blody Tenent Yet More Blody, Complete Writings, 4: 493
Thy brother Indian is by birth as Good.
Of one blood God made Him, and Thee & All,
As wise and faire, as strong, as personall.

By nature wrath’s his portion, thine no more
Till Grace his soule and thine in Christ restore
Make sure they second birth, else thou shalt see
Heaven open to Indians wild, but shut to thee.\textsuperscript{71}

The mere suggestion that God viewed the Indian on equal footing with his covenanted English would shock most Puritans, but this was Williams’s purpose. The Lord chooses not nations but people, Williams argued; woe to the Puritan who sinned with pride in his “chosen” English and Puritan heritage, or pretended that civility was to be equated with Christianity. The English see the glory of the Lord, “Yet how few prise his Light?”

\begin{quote}
...what doome is theirs that see, 
not onely Natures light; 
But Sun of Righteousnesse, yet chose 
To live in Darkest Night?\textsuperscript{72}
\end{quote}

Stinging critiques of the English as contrasted with the Indians can be found throughout the \textit{Key}. Williams even challenged the Englishman’s image of the Indian as a bloodthirsty brute: “Their Warres are farre lesse bloudy, and devouring than the cruell Warres of Europe.” Still further, the murders God’s children inflicted on one another were endless; while the “savages” could be expected to behave like savages, the alleged Christians are as bloodthirsty, if not more so:

The Indians count of Men as Dogs, 
It is no Wonder then:

\textsuperscript{71} Williams, \textit{Key, Complete Writings}, 1: 141.

\textsuperscript{72} \textit{Ibid.} 1:151, 155. Williams wrote that all men do indeed see the God-head and eternal power in nature; how much worse is the punishment for the man who understands the explicit Truth as revealed in the Bible in addition to Nature, and yet chooses to ignore this eternal light?
They tear out one another's throats!
But now that English men,

That boast themselves God's Children, and
Members of Christ to be,
That they should break out in flames.
Sure 'tis a mystery!\textsuperscript{73}

Nearly every verse observation stood as an indictment, direct or indirect, of the civilized
and "Christian" nation in America and England. The observations regarding Indian
religion, then, promised to be especially pertinent to Williams's evangelism of the
Christians; they did not disappoint.

In the section on religion, Williams laid out his thoughts on repentance and
conversion to Christianity; once again, his thoughts focused on a contrast between the
eventual conversion of the Indians, for which he hoped, and the impure Christianity of
New England and Europe. He related an incident of a young man and a sachem who
discussed the religious differences between the white man and the Indian, which led the
Indians to consider observing the Englishman's seventh day of worship. "I could easily
have brought the Country to [this]," Williams wrote. However, he remained convinced
that such religious observances (such as baptism) should not occur until a true conversion
had been made, when a man turned from idols and repented of sin. Such religious
observances, argued Williams, were "dead works." The want of true repentance and the
civilly-enforced appearance of absent faith was, as Williams conceived of it, "the bane of
million of soules in England, and all other Nations professing to be Christian Nations
who are brought by public authority to Baptisme and fellowship with God Ordinances of

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{Ibid.} 1:181-83.
worship, before the saving worke of Repentance, and a true turning to God. As Williams had argued elsewhere, Israel’s religious nation-state was not the blueprint for modern Christian society but the antithesis. Any society that meddled in matters of religion, beyond maintaining an environment where the individual could commune with God without interference from or coercion by a political or religious establishment, impeded the work of God within the individual. Since the only thing that really mattered in terms of salvation was the repentance and faith of the individual, there could be no such thing as Christendom. There were only Christians.

This distinction formed the crux of Williams’s arguments against coercive implementation of the Christian religion among the Indians or among any people. This distinction also became the primary objection of the Puritan establishment in Massachusetts to Williams’s methods and evangelistic restraint among the pagan Indians. John Cotton thought that Williams sinned enormously by neglecting the salvation of the Indians, especially if he had as much influence among them as he claimed. Williams “might have brought on, not only to an anti-christian conversion (such as he maketh the conversion of the common sort of Christians in the Protestant churches) but to a sincere conversion unto Christ Jesus. But I confess... his own corrupt principles, (his own, I say, not ours) it seemeth have detained him from putting forth his hand to the Lord’s plough in so large a field.” Surely proselytizing the Indians would lead to some insincere conversions, as Williams would put it, but that was not the responsibility of the bearer of Christ’s good news; the responsibility of the Christian was to obey the Lord’s command

74 Ibid. 1: 220-21.
to bring about as many Christian conversions as the Lord willed.\textsuperscript{75}

To avoid bloody persecutions and blaspheming, Williams sought to implement his view of Christ's solutions among the Indians. It "cannot be denied," he wrote, that the Indians worshiped "Devils, as all false worship is," but forcing Christianity on them would never cure their unbelief. Only the sovereign hand of God could bring the non-Christian into the realm of spiritual Christendom. And by the same rule, not only Indians but "Countrymen, French, Dutch . . . &c. Should also be permitted in their Worships, if correspondent in civil obedience."\textsuperscript{76} Calling the Indians (as a nation) to practice Christianity while they surely remained without understanding and in the errors of their previous religion amounted to an attempt to purchase redemption with "dead workes." Conversion among Indians would occur individually, but the "Conversion of Nations" would happen only as God permitted, and Williams thought that would occur only after "the seaven plagues of the seaven Angells be fulfilled."\textsuperscript{77}

This concern with timing occurs throughout Williams's work because he, like many other Puritans, considered the coming millennial reign of Christ imminent. His millennial expectations in fact drove much of his concern for pure worship and his restraint in Indian missions. After spending time in Providence in theological and historical reading and reflection he concluded that Rome had so infected the church that it had forfeited Christ's apostolic commission, and that could only be undone upon Christ's


\textsuperscript{76}Williams, \textit{The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution}, in Complete Writings, 3:102.

\textsuperscript{77}Williams, \textit{The Bloudy Tenent Yet More Bloudy}, in Complete Writings, 4: 218.
sending new apostles to restore the church. Eventually, this led Williams down a path of extreme religious isolation since he soon rejected the validity of any church covenant, including congregational ones. This concept illuminates the extent to which Williams thought of the Christian life as comprised of individuals scattered in a wilderness, as he said in so many of his writings. More to the point, any personal conversion had to be worked by God himself since no more apostles existed who could do that work.78

Of course, even if Williams believed that the conversion of the nations would only occur after Christ reinstated the apostolic mission, he could have offered individual Narragansetts Christianity since he believed that salvation was an individual rather than community matter. As his Key makes clear, Williams did discuss spiritual matters with his Indian friends and he pleaded ignorance in Christenings as to how much knowledge an individual needed for regeneration in Christ. For all of his typological systems and lamentations that he had not a pure church to offer the Indians, he did not articulate this doctrine stating the need for a new commission from Christ until after he had been living among the Narragansetts for at least two years. For their part, the Narragansetts fiercely resisted outside attempts to convert them; Williams himself brought their case to Oliver Cromwell, to whom the Narragansetts had subjected themselves in hope that they might find protection from the evangelistic zeal of Massachusetts. Williams may have known that to try his hand would not only be futile but could endanger his cohabitation with the Narragansetts, based as it was on their continued assent to his presence. Perhaps Williams

78W. Clark Gilpin, The Millenarian Piety of Roger Williams (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 52-60. Gilpin’s insights are particularly useful in recognizing the elements of millenarianism in Williams’s work.
did spin his intellectual system to justify his restraint and, in turn, to further illustrate to the English their sins as they encouraged praying Indians to harass the Narragansetts into conversion, or else “be destroyed by war.” This coercion of conscience could lead either to bloodshed or blasphemy, both of which Williams had crusaded against during his whole public life. He had faith that God could perform a work of grace in whomever God chose, and he had coherent theological arguments and political imperatives to protect the Narragansetts’ spiritual autonomy. In the meantime, he could use growing Narragansett mistrust of the English as further evidence of English spiritual wanderings, all the while claiming that matters of individual Narragansett souls were out of his hands.79

The conversion of the Indian nations, Williams maintained, had to wait for the apostolic restoration and the rebuilding of the apostolic ministry so that the conversions might be worked according to the “first pattern” when “the times of ignorance are over.” He tried to explain that true religion could neither be forced by the state nor combined with existing religious beliefs, and Williams understood the difficulty of supplanting an entire way of life with any success. Williams provided his readers with a vivid illustration. Forced love, like that of a “Spouse forced into bed,” was no love at all; “all men, yea the very Indians” agreed with this. How much worse, then, is forced worship? Religious rape has bloodied the so-called “Christian world” and has brought great sin down upon the people who have raped in the name of service to Christ.80 Williams

79RW to Mass. Gen Court Oct. 5 1654, in LaFantasie, Correspondence, 2:410.
80Williams, Christenings Make Not Christians (London, 1645), in Complete Writings, 7: 38.
wished to halt, at least as far as he was capable, the disgrace being done to his God all over the world. His only solace was that soon Christ would “[compell] by the mighty persuasions of his Messengers” the restoration of that first pattern of salvation. These messengers will proclaim and hearers will experience a “turning of the whole man from Satan to God,” as he described in *Experiments in Spirituall Life and Health*. Next, and significantly for Williams, the “turned man” would join in worship with the true churches planted by the messengers, one of which he was not. He added for emphasis, “the prophets are deep concerning this.”81

A turning of the nations, however, was not possible under the present conditions of Christianity, which Williams believed consisted of an international struggle among civil powers jockeying for political advantage in the tumultuous waters of “Christian” Europe and America. Most of the individuals within “Christendom” remained unregenerate and hypocritical in worship, so to call the Indians “heathen” while not applying the same name to unregenerate but civilized whites was inappropriate. Tracing the origin of the word “heathen,” Williams noted that proper usage of the word necessitated its application to all people outside the grace of Christ.82 Europeans defined Christendom as “so far as the Popes Christenings have reached to,” and set in opposition the “Christian” (civilized, as the European thinks) and the “heathen” (uncivilized) naked American, whom the teachings have yet to absorb. Christianity was used, and thereby

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81 *Ibid.* 7: 39-40. Williams writes, after giving some concrete reasons for his evangelistic restraint, that he was “without (through the mercy of God) abundant and constant thoughts about a true Commission for such an Embassie and Ministry,” and that even with great strength and ambition, “without a Word, Warrant and Commission, for matter and manner from God himselfe,” missionary activity is illegitimate.

profaned, as a political tool employed to subdue uncivilized nations into submission and civilization. By reducing the uncivilized peoples to civility, imperial powers neutralized the threat that “ravenous heathens” posed to their political power. Used in this way, Christianity concerned itself only with its external effects; it required conformity only in external behavior, and neglected that which remained within the individual. This Christendom was to Williams’s mind no Christendom.

In this grand, international drama in which the name and sacrifice of Christ was profaned and exploited for the maintenance of the rich and the powerful, the Indians of America remained untouched. It was true, wrote Williams, that the Indians’ sins against God remained unredeemed, but they sinned not against the Gospel, which had not shone among them. Europeans did sin against the Gospel whenever the Gospel was used toward unjust ends, or when the man who understood God’s truth turned his back on it. Williams wanted to spare the Indians the false sense of assurance that accompanied external conversion in this power conspiracy among the nations. “I answer,” Williams wrote, “woe be it to me, if I call light darknesse or darknesse light; woe be it to me if I call that conversion unto God, which is indeed subversion of the soules of Millions in Christendome, from one false worship to another, and the prophanation of the holy name of God.” Williams was admitting his own fallibility here, and he asked his countrymen to admit the same. His admission is one window into Williams’s mind because he faced the implications that his ideas held for his own soul. If he himself was deceived, he would not take any other soul down with him by coercing religious conversion.  

\[83\] Ibid. 7: 37.
Christenings Make Not Christians makes clear what A Key into the Language of America first proposed regarding the conversion of the Indians; Christianity existed not in nations but within individuals. Attempts to establish Christianity in nations were not only futile but wrong because the establishment produced false, external worship uncharacteristic of the true condition of the worshiping heart. First of all, Williams wished to protect the name of the Lord from blaspheming worship of unregenerate men and warring missionaries. He reminded the English “how greatly the name of God is concerned in all this,” and asked them to consider how that name would be preserved between the clashing of the “glorious conversion of the Indians in New England” and the “unnecessary wars and cruel destruction of the Indians of New England.”84 His refusal to set up churches among the Indians, while he did wish to spare them a part in this obvious international hypocrisy, stemmed mainly from his concern for purity of worship and his conviction that pure worship would only be restored in the imminent millennium. By learning the language of the Indians, “in their filthy, Smoakie holes,”85 Williams believed he prepared the path for apostles who would one day use Williams’s legacy to bring the Indians into the spiritual Kingdom of God. This was as far as he in good conscience was able to go.

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84 RW to the General Court of Massachusetts Bay, 5 Oct. 1654, in LaFantasie, ed. Correspondence. 2: 410.

85 RW to an Assembly of Commissioners, 17 Nov. 1677, in ibid. 2:750-52.
CONCLUSION

Perhaps what made Roger Williams so dangerous that Massachusetts had to banish him was that he openly personified the darkest tensions and contradictions inherent within Puritanism. The city on a hill was to be, according to John Winthrop, where the Lord would exercise His graces in the regenerate, whether rich or poor; faith, gentleness and temperance would rule; and the rich and poor would walk together toward justice and mercy. These hopes and values Williams surely embraced, but Winthrop included a second quality: the community was to be the support of the church, bound by conscience and “Civill pollicy.” “Conformity,” wrote Winthrop, would effect “the end wee aim at.” In sum, it would be Williams’s open and “turbulent” objection to this principle of religious conformity that would lead to his exile. Even though his objections were rooted, as Edmund Morgan has put it, in “Puritanism spiraling toward its outer limits,” if he had been permitted to remain he would have encouraged less pious doubters to upset the civil balance and undermine the goals of the community.

Ultimately, every Puritan knew that they would stand alone before God, and this accountability brought the Puritans to intense self-doubt and anguish concerning their own spiritual adequacy. Williams envisioned a society that would support every person in the body, leaving one free to prepare, or not to prepare, the self for that solitary stand before God in spirit. What made Williams so remarkable was his ability to ask hard questions and to render his answers in action. He never claimed a stranglehold on truth, as indicated by his once high but gradually diminished hopes of finding a pure church
existing on earth and by his outright admission of fallibility in *Christenings Make Not Christians*. He was subversive not because he was uncertain but because he admitted he was uncertain, knew that others were uncertain, and demanded that they be permitted to be uncertain. But even without certainty he trusted himself to go where his mind directed, and he would submit only to a government that supported the solitary individual. He understood that no vision of a perfect society that is based on spiritual or intellectual conformity could flourish; in fact, he came to doubt the possibility of spiritual community altogether and went without church fellowship for the latter third of his life.

That I have characterized Williams as an uncertain man should not be taken as evidence that he refrained from attempting Indian conversions out of religiously or culturally relativistic ideals. The thought that any number of truths (or paths to truth) could have equal validity would not have occurred to him. If there was one thing he could be sure about, it was that absolute truth did exist. Humankind's duty was to earnestly seek that truth, even though one knew the impossibility of expressing it exactly right because his reason was his only tool; even when illuminated by Scripture, human reason was still shadowed by sin. Despite the consequences of sin and the uncertainties inherent in living the life of a seeker, the seeking individual still had to live by his own lights. This is what Roger Williams fundamentally tried to do.

Williams asserted that "civilization" was not equal to Christianity, but this was not to say that civilization was not superior to the Indians' "savagery." He believed that the Indians needed to be brought into civility so their faculties of reason might be trained to grasp the truths of the holy Scriptures. His attacks were on the self-assured
complacency of the Englishman or the European who equated civilization with divine favor. It was altogether possible, he wanted England to know, that God could just as easily perform a work of grace in a “savage” Indian as in a “civilized” European. Civilization was of no value in matters of salvation, which to Williams was the ultimate matter.

So for his part, Roger Williams endured the pain of isolation from his countrymen and eventually from the world. Aristotle wrote that “the polis exists by nature and is prior to the individual,” meaning that only in a society of his fellows can the individual truly live and thrive. Williams recognized the need for community and accordingly wrote John Endicott in 1651 that “the truth is. . . that banishing is a kind of Death, as some. . .have said it.”86 When that community demanded too high a price and co-opted the individual, (Williams phrased it “conscience. . . is indeed the man”) the individual must strike out alone and bear that civil death.87 He befriended the Indians, and protected their autonomy as best he could from encroaching Englishmen, not because he romanticized them or was convinced of their superiority, but because he respected their individuality and their right to search for truth within their society, even if he thought them lost.

In his various critiques of English society, Williams made one important point with some of his simplest words, “Love covereth a multitude of sins.” Jesus, Williams thought, never intended for his followers to construct a city that attempted to replicate Israel, they should instead have loved one another through the wilderness of life in an

86 Aristotle, Politics 1, c. ii, 14; RW to John Endicott, Aug.-Sept. 1651, in LaFantasie, Correspondence, 1: 345.

87 Williams, Bloudy Tenent Yet More Bloudy, in Complete Writings, 4:401.
imperfect civil society that so enticed man to personal gain and glory. Williams gradually realized that his quest for a true church within a society that protected conscience was in the pre-millennial reign of Anti-Christ elusive and perhaps impossible. But through his deep faith he continued his Sisyphean quest for spiritual purity on earth as if it were ultimately possible, believing that he would see the day when apostolic ministers minted new saints and gathered them from the wilderness. Until then, Roger Williams struggled alone with his God.
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