‘TO HOPE, AND TO WAIT’: ROGER WILLIAMS AND THE ESCHATOLOGICAL ROOTS OF TOLERATION

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Abstract: Despite a recent renewed focus on the historical and theological justifications for toleration, few scholars have examined the positive uses of eschatological rhetoric in fueling a commitment to religious liberty. The early modern thinker Roger Williams, however, advanced a distinctly eschatological conception of church-state relations to defend the practice of religious toleration in Rhode Island. Drawing on works by Thomas Helwys and John Murton, Williams articulates a millenarian ethos of toleration characterized by patience and hope. This important, though neglected, dimension of Williams’s political theology sheds light on the relationship between apocalypticism, eschatology, and religious toleration.

I

Introduction

At a time when the future of liberal toleration may appear shaky, it is increasingly attractive to revisit the works of those who have successfully practiced toleration in challenging circumstances. Roger Williams, the founder of the first explicitly tolerationist colony in North America, has deservedly drawn attention as a valuable guide to practicing toleration against seemingly-insurmountable odds. A London-born, Cambridge-educated protestant clergyman who immigrated to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1631, Williams quickly made a name for himself as both talented preacher and impassioned dissenter. Williams’s short tenure among

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the Massachusetts Puritans was tumultuous, as he and his Separatist followers disputed the legitimacy of colonial land claims and dissented from laws enforcing strict religious and doctrinal conformity. Following his expulsion from Massachusetts in the winter of 1635-1636, he established the colony of Providence Plantations (later to become 'Rhode Island and Providence Plantations'), enshrining within its government a capacious regime of toleration. Though life in the fledgling colony was difficult (and public discourse often fractious), Williams persisted in his vindication of toleration, authoring a number of theological and polemical texts defending the liberty of conscience or 'soule freedom' and the separation of church and state from the assaults of his Puritan, Anglican, and Catholic opponents.

Although numerous studies have examined Williams's theory of toleration, a surprisingly large number have neglected the explicitly theological character of his political thought. Eager to claim the prescient Williams for the liberal tradition, historian V.L. Parrington argued in the early twentieth-century that Williams was 'primarily a political philosopher rather than a theologian,' and 'a confirmed individualist' who prefigured later developments in the liberal tradition of Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson.[2] Parrington's student James Ernst furthered this secularized interpretation, arguing that Williams's conclusions were drawn from natural-rights liberalism and that 'Christianity, as such, made no contribution to [Williams's] political theory.'[3] More recently, popular historian John M. Barry has

[2] V. L. Parrington, *Main Currents in American Thought* (New York, 1927), vol. 1, p. 66.
[3] J. Ernst, *Roger Williams, New England Firebrand* (New York, 1932) p. 436

focused on the influence of Francis Bacon and the English jurist Sir Edward Coke on Williams, while philosopher Martha Nussbaum has characterized him as a sort of Kantian or proto-Rawlsian thinker and the founder of a new model of secular liberalism.[4] Indeed, unlike John Locke, who 'argues from Protestant premises most of the time,' Nussbaum suggests that Williams articulates 'an independent ethical argument for his political principles,' abstracted from the particularities of his own religious beliefs.[5]

While such interpretations are convenient for liberal and secular historiography, they fail to do justice to Williams's life work, which is inseparable from his theological commitments as a Calvinistic, Reformed, and Protestant Separatist theologian. As H. Richard Niebuhr wrote, 'Despite the modern tendency to interpret Roger Williams as primarily a political thinker, it seems impossible that one should read his writings without understanding that he … was first of all a churchman.'[6] Niebuhr was not alone in resisting the secularizing impulse in interpreting Williams's work: Perry Miller, Sacvan Bercovitch, Edwin Gaustad, W. Clark Gilpin, John Coffey, and Edmund Morgan each foregrounded the theological aspects of Williams's political thought, with Morgan insisting that historians must recognize that 'Williams belonged to the seventeenth century, to Puritanism and to separatism.'[7] More recently, Oxford political theorist Teresa Bejan has criticized

[4] J. M. Barry, *Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul: Church, State, and the Birth of Liberty.* (New York, 2012); Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience,* pp. 56-58; 76-82.
[5] Nussbaum, 'The First Founder', *New Republic*, 10 September (2008).
[6] H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York, 1959). p. 69.
[7] E.S. Morgan, *Roger Williams: The Church and the State* (New York, 2007). p. 142. See also P. Miller, *Roger Williams: His Contribution to the American Tradition* (New York, 1953); S. Bercovitch, 'Typology in Puritan New England: The Williams-Cotton Controversy Reassessed,' *American Quarterly* 19 ((1967), pp. 166-191; E. Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience: Roger Williams*

revisionist interpretations of Williams's work, writing that 'scholars inspired by the breadth and liberality of Williams's toleration like to portray him as a kind of enlightened proto-liberal running around the New England wilderness.'[8] Rather than adopting 'this approach which wrests thinkers from their historical context and congratulates them for being ahead of their time,' she writes, we must recognize early modern proponents of toleration such as Williams not as 'the ecumenical mainliners of modern experience but rather righteous schismatics and enthusiastic evangelicals who were unwilling—or in conscience unable—to hold their tongues or keep their peace.'[9] Williams's doctrine of toleration, Bejan concludes, was the product of 'a decidedly hot, evangelical, and schismatic vein' of English Calvinism.[10]

Though scholars have come to appreciate the theological components of Williams's political thought, widespread disagreement persists as to the precise components of his theology that inspired his defense of toleration. For Perry Miller, the answer lay in Williams's use of typology, his figurative reading of Biblical history that secured a privileged place for freedom of religion.[11] According to James Byrd, it was his specific manner of biblical interpretation that necessitated his practical conclusions.[12] J.C. Davis attributes Williams's tolerationism to his 'incarnational' theology and Christological ethic within a confessional Reformed

in America (King of Prussia, PA, 1999); J. Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England 1588-1689* (London, 2000); W. C. Gilpin, *The Millenarian Piety of Roger Williams* (Chicago, 1979).

[8] T. Bejan, *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration* (Cambridge MA, 2017). p. 54.

[9] Bejan, *Mere Civility*. pp. 17-18.

[10] Bejan, *Mere Civility*. p. 53.

[11] P. Miller, *Roger Williams: His Contribution to the American Tradition* (New York, 1953)

[12] J. Byrd, *The Challenges of Roger Williams: Religious Liberty, Violent Persecution, and the Bible* (Macon, 2002).

Protestant frame.[13] There is something to each of these accounts. At a minimum, in contrast to the assumptions of Parrington, Ernst, and Nussbaum, it seems abundantly clear that Williams was a devout believer and learned theologian whose ideals were far from those of modern rationalistic liberalism. Moreover, it is evident that while working from a set of distinctly non-liberal and explicitly theological principles, he successfully formulated and defended a theory of toleration that outstripped the canonical liberal and proto-liberal theories of his time. Williams's example challenges common assumptions about the relationship between devout religious faith and toleration.[14]

The theological dimension of Williams's political thought is perhaps most clearly seen in his extensive use of vivid millenarian eschatological themes, rhetoric, and symbolism to support an extensive regime of religious toleration. His use of such symbolism is unsurprising, given the distinctly eschatological flavor of

[13] J.C. Davis, *The Moral Theology of Roger Williams: Christian Conviction and Public Ethics* (Louisville, 2004/2013).

[14] The turn towards a theologically-sensitive analysis of Williams's political thought follows a broader renewal of interest in the theological dimensions of historical defenses of toleration, as seen in M. Schwartzman, 'The Relevance of Locke's Religious Arguments for Toleration,' *Political Theory* 33 (5) (2005), pp. 678-705); J. De Roover and S.N. Balagangadhara, 'John Locke, Christian Liberty, and the Predicament of Liberal Toleration.' *Political Theory* 36 (4) pp. 523-549; K. Swan, 'Legal Toleration for Belief and Behaviour' *History of Political Thought* 31 (1) (2010) pp. 87-106; J. Parkin and T. Stanton, *Natural Law and Toleration in the Early Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2013); T. M. Bejan, 'Locke on Toleration, (In)Civility and the Quest for Concord.' *History of Political Thought* 37 (3) (2016) pp. 556-587; A. Murphy, *Conscience and Community: Revisiting Toleration and Religious Dissent in Early Modern England and America.* (University Park, PA, 2001); A. Murphy, *Liberty, Conscience, and Toleration; The Political Thought of William Penn* (New York: 2018); A. Murphy, *William Penn: a Life* (New York, 2019); R. L. Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom.* (New Haven, 2019). These studies, in large part, respond to common accounts that emphasize the role of rationalistic, skeptical, and largely secular philosophies in the formation of modern religious toleration: for example C. L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers, second edition* (New Haven, CT, 2003); E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1951); P. Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* in two volumes (New York, 1966-1969); W.K. Jordan, *The Development of Religious Toleration in England* in four volumes (Cambridge, MA, 1932-1940); D. Lacorne, *The Limits of Tolerance: Enlightenment Values and Religious Fanaticism*, trans. C. Jon Delogu and Robin Emlein. (New York: 2019).

much of early modern Protestant thought. Neither has Williams's use of eschatology entirely escaped scholarly notice. Teresa Bejan, for one, makes reference to the role his thinking about the end times played in shaping both his ecclesiology, and his hopes for the conversion of unbelievers.[15] In an excellent though too brief discussion, J.C. Davis asserts that Williams 'rejected the infusion of eschatological significance into civil structures' and attributes his theory of religious liberty in part to the interplay between eschatology and his 'incarnational' puritan theology.[16] In *The Millenarian Piety of Roger Williams,* W. Clark Gilpin similarly emphasizes the connection between Williams's millenarianism and his ecclesiology, showing how his view that only the return of Christ could create a renewed and godly church necessitated the separation of church and state.[17] Even in the most insightful of studies, however, scholars have largely overlooked or only gestured towards the significance of eschatology to William's theory of toleration—representing a serious gap in our understanding of his political theology.

Throughout the seventeenth century—and indeed, since—apocalyptic rhetoric has demonstrated an enormous capacity to motivate radical social and political change. In Williams's own time, millenarian arguments were commonly used to justify state control of religious doctrine, as in the Massachusetts Bay Colony where Puritans fleeing Anglican persecution established their own civil-

[15] See Bejan, ''When the Word of the Lord Runs Freely': Roger Williams and Evangelical Toleration' in *The Lively Experiment: The Story of Religious Toleration in America, from Roger Williams to the Present,* eds. C. Beneke and C. Grenda (Washington, D.C., 2015), and Bejan, *Mere Civility*, passim.
[16] Davis, *The Moral Theology of Roger Williams.* pp 40-45.
[17] W. C. Gilpin, *The Millenarian Piety of Roger Williams*. pp. 107-113.

religious state in anticipation of the imminent millennial kingdom. Rather than defending religious establishment and the persecution of dissenters in pursuit of eschatological fulfilment, however, a growing number of lay theologians and political thinkers began to develop eschatological arguments for the separation of church and state. Drawing on the pioneering works of Thomas Helwys and John Murton and responding to the millenarian abuses of his contemporaries, Williams found in apocalyptic time the mandate that believers must exercise patience towards unbelievers, leaving them to live in the world 'until the harvest.' Similarly, in his view the millennium—a future perfected earthly kingdom ruled by Christ and the saints—proved a source of eschatological hope that eased the burdens of suffering and toleration alike. Together, these under-considered features of Williams's millenarian eschatology provide the key impetus and encouragement necessary for believers to persist in the difficult practice of toleration.

II

The Politics of the Millennium

Few concepts have so thoroughly seized the imagination of the devout since the time of Christ as the idea of the 'millennium'—an irenic, thousand-year kingdom at the end of the world, where the faithful rule alongside God on earth. From the fall of Rome until the late medieval period, Christian theology regarding the end times was dominated by the writings of St. Augustine of Hippo, who interpreted the eschatological promises of the Bible allegorically rather than literally. In the twelfth century, however, the apocalyptic interpretations of the Italian priest Joachim of Fiore gave voice to latent chiliasm and provided an outline

for the radical transformation of society in light of the impending end of the world. Radicalized eschatological visions led many early modern groups—from the followers of Savonarola in Florence to the Hussites and Taborites of Bohemia—to adopt radical political programs and (often) harness violence for the purpose of ushering in a millennial future. In a particularly infamous case, a radical sect of German Anabaptists identified the Westphalian city of Münster as 'the New Jerusalem' and in 1534 staged a violent seizure of the town's resources. For the next year, the rebellion's leadership communalized property, made Anabaptist rites and worship compulsory, and radically transformed the institutions and laws of Münster. Although the city was retaken some eighteen months later, and the rebellion's leaders summarily executed, the spectre of Münster's radical millenarian violence lived long in the European imagination.

Whereas millenarianism was primarily confined to fringe cults and extremist sects during the medieval period, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw millenarian sentiments spread like wildfire among even the most magisterial Protestant reformers. The 1560 Geneva Bible described its readers as 'them that love the coming of Christ Jesus our Lord,' and the editorial notes of subsequent editions clearly articulated a prophetic and millenarian vision applicable to European society broadly.[18] John Foxe, the Marian Exiles, and Bishop James Ussher all contributed to the popularization of millenarian views in English Protestant theology. A 'millenarian frenzy' overtook British public culture during the early seventeenth century; by the English Civil War, it was not so much a

[18] *The Bible and Holy Scriptures Conteyned in the Olde and Newe Testament* (Geneva, 1560).

question of *whether* you were a millenarian as it was a question of *what kind* of millenarian you were.[19]

As in most periods of apocalyptic fervor, the social and political tumult of the Civil War gave ample opportunity for the misuse of millenarian rhetoric. In a 1641 exegesis of Revelation 19:6, the Puritan Thomas Goodwin wrote of the impending collapse of worldly kingdoms, and the duty of believers in tearing down their fortresses: 'Let *Babylon* fall, let *Jerusalem* rise, and *Christ* reigne in his glory; this is the voice of all the Saints this day … *Blessed is he that dasheth the Brats of* Babylon *against the stones:* Blessed is hee that hath any hand in pulling down *Babylon*.'[20] The aim of Goodwin's exegetical 'exercise,' he admits, was to explain 'how we are to further' the destruction of Babylon and the establishment of Christ's reign. This theme is repeated in a fast-day sermon delivered by Stephen Marshall before Parliament the following year: 'If this worke be to revenge Gods Church against *Babylon*, he is a *blessed man that takes and dashes the little ones against the stones.*'[21] From the Westminster Assembly and Long Parliament to the followers of Cromwell and the Fifth Monarchy Men, eschatology was, without fail, used to justify partisan political wrangling. At the same time that Puritans justified violent resistance to the Monarch and prelacy on eschatological grounds, they used

[19] For an excellent outline of the main contours of protestant millenarianism and eschatological rhetoric, see C. Gribben, *The Puritan Millennium: Literature and Theology, 1550-1682* (2nd Edition). (Colorado Springs, 2008) and C. Hill, *Antichrist in Seventeenth-Century England* (London, 1990).

[20] T. Goodwin, *A Glimpse of Sion's Glory; Or, the Churches Beautie Specified* (London, 1641). There remains some dispute regarding the authorship of this anonymously-published tract. It has widely been attributed to Goodwin, however, including by the Presbyterian divine Robert Baillie in his *A Dissuasive from the Errours of the Time* (London, 1645), pp. 79-80.

[21] S. Marshall, *Meroz Cursed, or, A Sermon Preached to the Honourable House of Commons, at their late Solemn Fast, Febr. 23, 1641* (London, 1641).

fear of apocalyptic violence to justify excluding nonconformists from toleration. Numerous tracts and pamphlets attempted to connect the nascent English Baptist congregations with the horrors of Anabaptist Münster, with some success.[22] The central task of the English Baptists became distancing themselves from the continental Anabaptists and disavowing their radical political agenda.[23]

To many contemporary scholars—like their early modern counterparts—millenarian eschatology appears prone to the spiritual and political anarchism that marked the experience of Münster. Beginning with Norman Cohn's *The Pursuit of the Millennium,* a long line of studies have shown how millenarian doctrines often become ascendant during periods of social and political upheaval, crystallizing the hopes of the downtrodden and disadvantaged in a coherent political agenda.[24] These studies have continued to cast doubt on the possibilities of political millenarianism, instead drawing direct connections between it and outbreaks of popular violence. On these readings, millenarian or apocalypse-infused movements may threaten the stability of the polis—whether it be a medieval monarchy or contemporary pluralistic liberal society.[25] Today it remains conventional academic wisdom that

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[22] Particularly notable among such publications are the anonymous pamphlets *A Warning for England, especially for London; in the famous History of the frantick Anabaptists, their wild Preachings and Practices in Germany* (London, 1642) and *A Short history of the Anabaptists of high and low Germany* (London, 1642), as well as Thomas Bakewell's 1644 *A Confutation of the Anabaptists, and all others who affect not civill government* (London, 1644).

[23] The 1644 *First London Confession of Faith*, a doctrinal statement endorsed by the representatives of Calvinistic English Baptist congregations, identifies itself as the work of 'those Churches which are commonly (though falsly) called Anabaptists.'

[24] N. Cohn, *In Search of the Millennium: Revolutionary Messianism in Medieval and Reformation Europe and Its Bearing on Modern Totalitarian Movements* (New York, 1969); W. Lamont, *Godly Rule: Politics and Religion, 1603-1660* (London, 1969); M. Reeves, *Joachim of Fiore and the Prophetic Future* (New York, 1977); G.H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation (3rd ed)* (Kirksville, Mo., 1995); B. McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1998); R. Landes, *Heaven on Earth: The Varieties of Millennial Experience* (Oxford, 2001).

[25] For a non-exhaustive sampling of those who see millenarianism as either confirmed or potential threat, see E. Voegelin, *Science, Politics, and Gnosticism* (Wilmington, 2004); M. Barkun, *Disaster*

the gripping millenary visions of radical religion have a dangerous tendency to produce the bitter fruits of intolerance and violence.[26]

Such accounts of the political implications of millenarianism often err in their failure to fully recognize important differences across eschatological doctrines. Christian eschatology is not monolithic, nor is it easily simplified. Given the enduring relevance of eschatology to politics, the literature is replete with attempts to provide taxonomies of eschatological fervor. Not all popular millenarian movements, however, require the reordering and purification of society through ritualized violence like that of Münster. Many remain adamantly personal rather than political in nature—focusing on the spiritual significance of the millennium in the lives of believers. Others still draw political inspiration from the millennium, while distancing themselves from the shocking abuses of revolutionary chiliasm. Accordingly, some scholars are more sanguine regarding the possibilities of millennial politics. The German theologian Jürgen Moltmann for one has offered a helpful schema in differentiating forms of political millenarianism. According to Moltmann, the disastrous millenarian politics described by Cohn and others stem from an impulse that seeks radical social transformation in pursuit of the

and the Millennium (New Haven, 1974); M. Barkun, ed, *Millennialism and* Violence (London, 1996); J. F. Rinehart, *Revolution and the Millennium: China, Mexico, and Iran.* (Westport, CT., and London, 1997); T. Robbins and S. J. Palmer, eds., *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements*. (London: 1997); J. Walliss, 'Understanding Contemporary Millenarian Violence' *Religion Compass*, 1 (4) (2007); J. M. Bale, *The Darkest Sides of Politics, II*. (London, 2017); P. de Villiers, 'The dangerous role of politics in modern millennial movements.' *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 75 (3) (2019).

[26] See B. Brummett, *Contemporary Apocalyptic Rhetoric* (New York, 1991); S. D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial* Rhetoric (New York, 1994); F. J. Baumgartner, *Longing for the End: A History of Millennialism in Western Civilization* (New York, 1999); M. Barkun, 'Afterword: Millennial violence in contemporary America' in C. Wessinger, ed., *Millennialism, Persecution and Violence: Historical Cases* (Syracuse, NY, 2000), pp. 352-363.

millennium—a conviction he terms *historical millenarianism*, as exemplified by Münster. Yet there is an alternative to this activist eschatology. Rather than seeking to establish the kingdom of God on earth through radical social change, Moltmann suggests, *eschatological millenarianism* projects the expectation of a reign of the saints into a future beyond human reach.[27] Eschatological millenarianism, he writes, underpins an ethos of 'hope in resistance, in suffering, and in the exiles of this world.'[28] Taken as a blueprint for revolutionary transformation, millenarian politics may lead to catastrophic violence, but 'incorporated in eschatology' and projected into the future, it 'gives strength to survive and to resist.'[29]

Moltmann's distinction between *historical* and *eschatological* millenarianism proves useful in examining the millenarian ideologies of the early modern period, shifting the focus of analysis towards the role that the millennium plays in motivating political imagination, and in turn, political action. A certain type of eschatological politics, appropriately bounded and restrained, may actually produce valuable goods, including, in Glenn Tinder's words, 'an intellectual summit from which the realities and imperatives of man's political situation can be viewed comprehensively.'[30] But even then, apocalypticism is not without risk. In a well-received recent monograph, Alison McQueen outlines both the promise and peril of apocalyptic rhetoric. According to McQueen, apocalyptic rhetoric can

[27] J. Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology* (Minneapolis, 1996). p. 192.
[28] Moltmann, *The Coming of God*. p. 192.
[29] Moltmann, *The Coming of God*. p. 192.
[30] G. Tinder, 'Eschatology and Politics,' *The Review of Politics* 27 (3) (1965), also S. H. Webb, 'Eschatology and Politics' in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, ed. J. W. Walls. (Oxford, 2007). pp. 503-505; R. D. Moore, 'Till Every Foe is Vanquished: Emerging Sociopolitical Implications of Progressive Dispensational Eschatology,' in *Looking into the Future: Evangelical Studies in Eschatology*, ed. D. W. Baker (Grand Rapids, MI, 2001).

contextualize political, social, or natural disaster, and provide moral clarity for those who live in difficult times. At the same time, however, it can breed disillusioned withdrawal from public affairs or unrestrained violent extremism.[31] Thus some eschatological thinkers, McQueen argues, may attempt a strategy of 'redirection,' 'drawing on the rhetorical and imaginative resources of apocalypticism to combat its enthusiastic excesses.'[32] The great threat of apocalyptic narrative, however, is that in promising a future beyond conflict, it threatens the end of politics. McQueen cautions against leaving powerful apocalyptic rhetoric unalloyed, and argues for the necessity of a 'tragic' sensibility, which is sensitive to the limits of both human action and political arrangements.[33]

Moltmann, Tinder, and McQueen are alike in recognizing the political potential inherent in the vivid imagery and rhetoric of eschatology, as well as the threat of intolerant radicalism. Few, however, have explicitly considered the connection between millenarian ideologies and the early modern genesis of religious toleration. The millenarian arguments for toleration, where they exist, are often interpreted in light of evangelical hopes of worldwide conversion (as in Richard Popkin's 'benign egalitarian millenarianism').[34] There is, however, a rich and under-examined history of millenarian arguments for toleration, including in the works of Roger Williams. It was amid the apocalyptic frenzy of the English

[31] A. McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times* (Cambridge, 2018). *Passim.*
[32] McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times.* p. 14.
[33] McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*. pp. 196-199.
[34] R. Popkin, 'Millenarianism and Tolerance' in H. E. Bödeker, C. Donato, and P. Reill, eds., *Discourses of Tolerance & Intolerance in the European Enlightenment* (Toronto, 2008). One scholar who has charted a different connection between millenarianism and toleration is M. Ostling, in 'Be kind to the Antichrist: Millenarianism and religious tolerance in the Edict of Pskov,' *Studies in Religion* 30 (3-4) (2001). pp. 261-276.

Civil War that Williams completed and published his best-known defense of toleration, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience*, which is replete with eschatological rhetoric. Yet Williams's millenarianism was decidedly at odds with the equally millenarian politics of John Cotton, the Westminster Assembly, and the anti-tolerationism polemicists of the time. Unlike these contemporaries, Williams deftly avoided the tendency to assume that Christ's kingdom on earth could be ushered in by decisive human action, thereby eschewing the political and eschatological violence of other theories. Instead, rather than providing millenarian justifications for religious establishment and suppression of dissent, Williams articulated a patient and hopeful political eschatology that exemplifies what Moltmann terms 'eschatological millenarianism.' By seizing millenarian rhetoric and redirecting the powerful hopes of eschatological optimism, Williams constructed a justification for the patient exercise of toleration as manifested in both 'soule freedom' and the disestablishment of religion. By placing the millennium beyond the reach of human action, Williams avoids the threat of immanentization and violence. However, by retaining the millennium as an image of the restored church beyond Christ's *parousia,* he also offers hope to the faithful as they pursue civil peace within society. In doing so, Williams manages to tie millenarian themes to the support of toleration, while avoiding the most dangerous dimensions of apocalyptic ideology.

III

Millenarian Precursors to the Thought of Roger Williams

Williams's use of eschatology in defense of toleration places him in sharp contrast with the harshly intolerant historical millenarianism of Münster and Westminster alike. Williams was not alone, however, in his tolerationist rejection of this impulse. Some decades before, the early Baptist thinkers Thomas Helwys and John Murton had begun to pioneer a distinctive eschatological understanding of church-state relations that would necessitate a clear separation between civil and spiritual affairs. While one must be careful not to overly identify Williams with the fledgling Baptist movement he separated from, it is clear that he owed a great intellectual debt to these eschatological precursors.[35] In developing a robustly eschatological political theology, Williams drew heavily on the works of Helwys and Murton, deriving a clear conception of the 'two swords' of ecclesial and civil power, along with a conviction that religious persecution is the work of Antichrist rather than Christ. On this foundation, however, Williams built his fully developed eschatological millenarianism, offering unique grounds for the practice of toleration. First, he envisioned a world wherein the 'garden of the church' was set apart from the wilderness of the world by a 'hedge of separation,' offering a potent

[35] It is markedly difficult to place Williams within a single theological or philosophical tradition. Just as quickly as some historians claim him for secular liberalism, other writers identify Williams with the growing Baptist theological tradition, referencing his role in founding the first Baptist church in America and his continued rejection of infant baptism. Still others, observing that Williams quickly abandoned the Baptist church he established and never again belonged to a formal ecclesiastical assembly, characterize him as a 'seeker.' While Williams shares some traits with each of these groups, none of these definitions capture the complexity of Williams's legacy. The difficulty of identifying Williams with a single denomination has, rather than discouraging such efforts, fomented myriad contradicting characterizations. Amid this interpretive confusion, one fact seems clear: Roger Williams was Roger Williams—a 'righteous schismatic,' as Bejan terms him, a Reformed Protestant theologian whose idiosyncrasies separated him from others; a thinker who drew inspiration from a wide variety of sources, just as he has, in turn, inspired a wide array of thinkers.

metaphor for the disestablishment of religion.[36] Second, his ecclesiology redefined popular expectations about the nature of the kingdom of God and the expected return of Christ. Though the church and the world exist in an intermixed state, Christ will one day return to judge unbelievers and reestablish the pure worship of the church, restoring the 'hedge of separation' between it and the wilderness of the world. While these features of his political thought are generally well-understood, few recognize the degree to which they are the product of Williams's eschatological convictions and his critical engagement with the millenarian theologies of his time.[37] Drawing on and extending the millenarian writings of Helwys and Murton, Williams developed an eschatological vision that demands the toleration of unbelief until Christ's return, and articulates the need for patience and hope as Christ's 'witnesses in sack-cloth' strive for peace on earth.[38]

'The Antichrist's Kingdom'

Thomas Helwys is an unlikely hero in the history of early modern toleration. A lay leader of the Gainesborough-Scrooby Separatist congregation in England, Helwys helped engineer the congregation's move to Holland in the first years of the seventeenth century, and there authored one of the first Baptist confessions of

[36] For a helpful discussion of the far-reaching political implications of Williams's theory, see J. N. Rakove, *Beyond Belief, Beyond Conscience: The Radical Significance of the Free Exercise of Religion* (New York, 2020).
[37] The neglect of these dimensions of Williams's thought have led several scholars to overstate his originality. Despite the isolation of his fledgling colony, Williams did not write—or think—in a vacuum. There is ample evidence that he drew deeply from a wide array of theological and historical sources, both ancient and contemporary, as he developed his mature political theology.
[38] R. *Williams, The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience* (1644) (Hereafter *Bloudy Tenent*) in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams* Vol. 3 (New York, 1963). p. 57.

faith.[39] While many in the congregation eventually emigrated to North America, Helwys instead chose to return to England, bearing the manuscript for a treatise entitled *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity*. The treatise, which contains one of the most outspoken defenses of religious liberty in the early modern period, would continue to exert influence on English dissenters—Williams included—for decades following its 1612 publication. As Gilpin explains, Williams's theory of toleration 'resulted from religious development which existentially reiterated the line of argument' in Helwys's *Mystery of Iniquity*.[40]

Helwys wasted no time in invoking eschatological themes. The *Mystery of Iniquity* begins with the suggestion that the apocalyptic prophecies of Scripture foretell events now taking place in history—specifically, the reign of Antichrist. The religious intolerance and domination of the Roman Catholic Church is both apocalyptic and Antichristian—for 'who does not know and see that this prophecy [regarding the 'Man of Sin'] is fulfilled in that Romish mystery of iniquity.'[41] The central feature of Antichrist's reign is civil interference in matters of conscience. 'The man of sin,' Helwys writes, 'will have a kingdom where there shall be mighty power and authority over another's conscience, appointing and compelling men

[39] A.D. Rich, 'Thomas Helwys' First Confession of Faith 1610', *Baptist Quarterly*, 43 (4), (2009), pp. 235-241.
[40] Gilpin, *The Millenarian Piety of Roger Williams*. p. 54. Helwys is also discussed (albeit briefly) in J. Coffey, *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England, 1558-1689* (London, 2000) and R. L. Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom* (New Haven, 2019).
[41] T. Helwys and R. Groves, *A Short Declaration of the Mystery of Iniquity, (1611/1612)* (Macon, 1998). (Hereafter *The Mystery of Iniquity*) p. 12. Helwys' somewhat tortured prose occasionally requires deciphering. Here, 'The Man of Sin' refers to an eschatological figure mentioned in 2 Thessalonians 2 and commonly identified in Christian theology as the 'Antichrist,' or an apocalyptic character who opposes Christ throughout history. Helwys follows many other Protestant theologians in identifying the Papacy as the Antichrist. The phrase 'mystery of iniquity' is derived from the same passage. Additionally, the adjective 'Romish' is used to describe things having to do with the Roman Catholic Church.

how they shall worship their God, and to imprison, to banish, and to cause to die them that resist.'[42] Helwys proposes an antidote to persecutory domination over conscience, in the form of clearly delineated realms for the exercise of spiritual and temporal power. Following language commonly used among both Protestants and Roman Catholics to describe church-state relations, Helwys writes that 'an earthly sword is ordained of God only for an earthly power, and a spiritual sword for a spiritual power.'[43] Accordingly, the 'earthly sword' of the state may only be used to punish offenses against the earthly power, while spiritual transgressions may only be punished by the spiritual weapons of the church, such as church discipline or excommunication. Whereas many medieval thinkers affirmed the unity of the two 'swords' in one governing body, Helwys insists on their separation. In the spiritual realm of faith, 'the kingdom of Christ, which is heavenly and endures forever,' believers voluntarily live as the subjects of Christ their king.[44] On earth, however, 'no sword of [civil] justice [is] at all required or permitted to smite any for refusing Christ.'[45]

According to Helwys, civil authority must be strictly limited to punishing civil wrongs. The monarch's power, he explains, is only for 'the well-governing and ruling of a king's state and kingdom, which is worldly and must fade away.'[46] Helwys echoes this conviction in an inscription written in the frontispiece of a copy

[42] Helwys and Groves, *The Mystery of Iniquity*. p. 23.
[43] Helwys and Groves, *The Mystery of Iniquity*. p. 35. The doctrine of the 'two swords' in Roman Catholicism dates to the 1302 papal bull *Unam Sanctam*, in which Pope Boniface VIII posited the authority of the church's 'spiritual' sword over and above the state's wielding of the 'temporal' sword of civil authority within a single 'kingdom.' Helwys adopts Roman Catholic phrasing for distinctly Protestant purposes.
[44] Helwys and Groves, *The Mystery of Iniquity*. pp. 38-39.
[45] Helwys and Groves, *The Mystery of Iniquity*. p. 39.
[46] Helwys and Groves, *The Mystery of Iniquity*. p. 39.

of *The Mystery of Iniquity*, which he personally dispatched to King James I, an impertinence that secured for him lodging in the Tower of London: 'The king is a mortall man and not God, therefore [he] has no power over the immortal soules of his subjects.'[47] Here he is likely referencing James I's speech of 21 March 1610, where the King defended the traditional theory of absolute monarchic authority, reiterating that 'Kings are not onely Gods Lieutenants upon earth and set upon Gods throne, but even by God himself they are called Gods.'[48] Against James's absolutism (and his hope to leave a legacy of a unified kingdom and religion in Great Britain) Helwys goes on to limit the authority of the king to civil affairs only. Notably, his argument does not advocate the supremacy of the secular: instead, the civil kingdom is subordinate to the spiritual kingdom of Christ, where the King of England and the pauper are fellow-citizens. Thus, Helwys's separation between the secular and spiritual realms guarantees the freedom of the church from political interference and corruption, presaging Williams's plea for a 'hedge of separation' between church and state.

Those who breach this separation risk grave spiritual harm. 'What greater evil can be committed against Christ?' asks Helwys, than to allow temporal powers to infringe upon his spiritual kingdom? This usurpation of Christ's right to rule his church is, he contends, the fulfilment of apocalyptic prophecy. 'Therein lies the depth of the mystery of iniquity of the man of sin,' he explains, 'in taking wholly from him [Christ] his power, and yet professing his name.'[49] Earthly monarchs who

[47] Helwys and Groves, *The Mystery of Iniquity*. Frontispiece, reproduced in facsimile.
[48] J. P. Sommerville, ed. *King James VI and I: Political Writings* (Cambridge, 1994). 181.
[49] Helwys and Groves, *The Mystery of Iniquity*. p. 53.

profess Christianity, yet wield civil power to punish purely spiritual errors reveal themselves to be Antichristian. In a bitter twist, he goes on to argue, those who aim to establish the kingdom of Christ on earth usurp Christ's own throne.

Helwys's use of apocalyptic rhetoric raises the stakes of religious and political dispute, by identifying his ideological opponents as the servants of Antichrist. However, his fiery rhetoric does not exclude the possibility of tolerating even the 'anti-Christian' adherents of Roman Catholicism and the Church of England. So long as those who err spiritually do not violate just civil laws, he continues, 'let them be heretics, Turkes, Jews, or whatsoever, it appertains not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.'[50] Though Helwys asserts that Catholicism is 'dangerously opposite to the Kingdom of Christ,' he nevertheless insists that the civil authority bears the same amount of authority over the Catholic conscience as the Baptist—'none at all.'[51] In so arguing, Helwys goes further than many proponents of a limited toleration. As Robert Louis Wilken writes, Helwys's work was 'not simply a defense of the rights of Christian nonconformists' but a principled argument respecting the value and importance of conscience to all people, regardless of their faith.[52]

Helwys's groundbreaking argument for toleration, despite its apocalyptic rhetoric, does not explicitly outline a future millennium. However, his identification of the Roman Catholic Church and the Church of England as the first

[50] Helwys and Groves, *The Mystery of Iniquity*. p. 53. Here 'Turkes' is a term generically used to refer to Muslims, due to the expansion of the Ottoman Empire into Eastern Europe in the century prior.
[51] Helwys and Groves, *The Mystery of Iniquity*. p. 53.
[52] R. L. Wilken, *Liberty in the Things of God: The Christian Origins of Religious Freedom*. (New Haven, 2019), p. 141.

and second 'Beasts' of Revelation firmly situates his vision of the church within an apocalyptic period of persecution prior to the second coming. In the interim, Helwys notes 'a true pattern' wherein 'the people of God are persecuted when the civil power does judge the cause of their faith and profession in their religion to God.'[53] Rather than seizing power to reform the contrary-minded, the faithful are exhorted by Christ's example to 'instruct with meekness, and by preaching the word, seek their conversion, with all longsuffering, and not to destroy them by severe punishments.'[54] In short, the church must not win souls by coercion, but instead demonstrate patience and longsuffering as it seeks to win souls with words—a rule that 'shall never be disannulled or made void while the heavens and the earth endure.'[55]

'Until the Harvest'

This last theme of eschatological patience—of waiting in the world 'while the heavens and the earth endure'—is more fully elaborated in the writings of Helwys's protégé John Murton. Specifically, eschatological patience forms the crux of Murton's *A Most Humble Supplication to the Kings Majesties*, written in invisible ink during Murton's confinement in Newgate Prison and smuggled out by a sympathizer for publication in 1621. The tract eventually made its way to New England, attracting the attention of John Cotton, Williams's most prominent critic in Boston, and then Williams himself. Murton's influence on Williams is clear: the

[53] Helwys and Groves, *The Mystery of Iniquity*. p. 58.
[54] Helwys and Groves, *The Mystery of Iniquity*. p. 58.
[55] Helwys and Groves, *The Mystery of Iniquity*. pp. 58-59.

Humble Supplication, along with Cotton's response to it, are reprinted in the first section of *The Bloudy Tenent,* together with Williams's extensive comments on both documents.[56] Like his teacher Helwys, Murton repeats the claim that coercive political rule over conscience is 'not of Christ, but of Anti-christ' and that political rulers who compel faith 'sit in the consciences of men, where Christ should sit.'[57] Similarly, Murton suggests that the compulsion of conscience is a usurpation of Christ's rightful authority over spiritual matters, and persecuting politicians 'uphold the Beast, and fight against the Lambe.'[58] The persecution of any person 'onely for cause of conscience,' then, is contrary to Christ's example and teaching.[59]

Murton makes extensive reference to the parable of the wheat and the tares related in the gospel of Matthew.[60] In this parable, Jesus describes faithful believers as wheat planted in a field while unbelievers grow up alongside them as tares—weeds that look similar to wheat until maturity. Murton instructs both ecclesiastical and civil governments that they must 'doe as God directeth you in his Word, that cannot lie: *Let the wheat and tares grow together in the world until the Harvest*.'[61] Significantly, he argues that the parable teaches that 'repentance must continually

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[56] The circumstances of the document's writing are used to great rhetorical effect by Williams. Murton's defense of toleration is 'written with milk' (his invisible ink of choice)—'spiritually *white*, pure and innocent … soft, meeke, peaceable and gentle, tending both to the *peace* of *Soules*, and the *peace* of *States* and Kingdomes.' Cotton's answer, defending persecution for cause of conscience, is 'returned in *bloud*.' (Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*. pp. 61-62).

[57] J. Murton, *A Most Humble Supplication to the Kings Majesties*. (1621). (Hereafter *Humble Supplication*). pp. 2.

[58] Murton, *Humble Supplication*. p. 34.

[59] Murton, *Humble Supplication.* p. 4.

[60] Matthew 13:24-30. The word translated commonly as "tare" or "weed" is taken to refer to darnel ryegrass (*lolium temulentum*), a common weed that may be difficult to distinguish from wheat until mature.

[61] Murton, *Humble Supplication*, p. 4.

be waited for' and that 'the worldly weapons, of earthly Kingdome cannot accomplish the things of Christ's Kingdome.'[62]

Murton interprets the parable to bolster Helwys's main arguments: that the civil authority possesses no rightful authority over spiritual affairs ('the kings of Nations have no command at all to destroy the bodies of the contrarie minded, they are forbidden to plucke up the tares.'), and that the church's primary duty is to display patience towards unbelievers while spreading the gospel through peaceful evangelism.[63] Even those who are avowed unbelievers must be tolerated, as no one is beyond the possibility of reform or salvation. Yet neither Helwys nor Murton equivocate about the coming judgment of God. Punishment for unbelief is not within the rightful purview of earthly institutions, but is a matter of divine prerogative, deferred 'untill the end of this world.'[64] In the meantime, Murton suggests, 'the servants of the Lord must not strive, but *be gentle towards all men, Suffering the evill instructing them with meeknesse that are contrary minded.*'[65]

The millennial turn in early modern politics introduced new challenges for those who, like Helwys and Murton, articulate defenses of toleration from eschatological principles. Many branches of Protestantism, following the historical millenarian tendency, sought to use the power of civil government to protect the purity of Christian doctrine, establish a state-sanctioned church, and censor blasphemous or heretical works—all in pursuit of creating the conditions necessary

[62] Murton, *Humble Supplication*. p. 24.
[63] Murton, *Humble Supplication.* p. 34.
[64] Murton, *Humble Supplication*. p. 23.
[65] Murton, *Humble Supplication*. pp. 23-24.

for the foundation of the millennial kingdom.[66] Despite their eschatological language, however, neither Helwys nor Murton focus on the political character of a future millennial kingdom. To these writers, the millennium is a spiritual matter, under the domain of—and to be established by—Christ rather than civil authority. Judgment and spiritual rule—the primary features of Christ's millennial return—are solely the purview of Christ and will only be precipitated by Christ's *parousia*.

While some millenarians used eschatological tropes to support expansive state power, others—like the continental Anabaptists—drew a radical revolutionary agenda from millenarian eschatology. Helwys, who himself had met with continental Anabaptists in Holland, found it necessary to combat claims that efforts to promote religious toleration were thinly-veiled attempts to weaken state authority and foment revolution. In this regard, he makes reference to many historical instances of toleration, concluding that 'difference in religion could never be proved sedition against the state.'[67] Murton likewise devotes an entire section of his *Humble Supplication* to making the historical and theoretical argument that toleration is not antithetical to the peace of the state. More saliently, both thinkers make it abundantly clear that they do not request any exemption from the normal civil authority of the state, instead stating that 'we onely desire that God might have that which is his, which is the heart and soule, in that worship which hee requireth.'[68] The freedom of conscience does not negate the just authority of civil

[66] Further evidence of the historical millenarian tendency of the Presbyterian movement during the Westminster Assembly may be seen in George Gillespie's *A Sermon Preached Before the Honourable House of Commons at Their Late Solemn Fast* (London, 1644).
[67] Helwys and Groves, *The Mystery of Iniquity*. p. 62.
[68] Murton, *Humble Supplication*. p. 4.

authorities in civil matters, Murton concludes, and those who fail to pay due obedience in civil matters are to 'beare their burden' and may be punished.[69] Thus both Helwys and Murton cement the distinction between civil and spiritual authority on earth, without negating the rightful jurisdiction of either. By carefully adjudicating between civil and spiritual authorities, Helwys and Murton distance themselves from the radical millenarians who would see the two authorities combined.

IV

The Eschatological Toleration of Roger Williams

Roger Williams's political theory of religious liberty represents, in a number of ways, a continuation and critical reevaluation of a thread of political theology developed in the earlier works of Helwys and Murton. In *The Bloudy Tenent* and other works, Williams elevates a shared appeal to eschatology that provides a compelling framework for the practice of religious toleration. His eschatological millenarianism jointly offers powerful motivation for the practice and sustenance of religious toleration, while demanding not only toleration, but a clear disestablishment of religion.

Fittingly, given his commitment to toleration, Williams lived a life marked by what today could be called civil discourse. Aside from *A Key Into the Languages of America* (itself the product of a stay with the Narragansett people), most of his prominent works take the form of direct, specific, and public responses to correspondence from his critics and ideological opponents. The discursive aspect

[69] Murton, *Humble Supplication*. p. 4.

of his intellectual life is seen clearly in *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*, where three separate yet interlocking discourses come together. First, Williams is responding to correspondence from the Boston Congregationalist John Cotton, his most faithful critic. This correspondence is nested within a larger dialogue, where Williams defends and extends the arguments contained in Murton's *Humble Supplication* against Cotton's charges. In doing so, he demonstrates his intellectual indebtedness to Murton's thesis while rearticulating key parts of his argument to respond to new challenges to the theory of toleration. Finally, *The Bloudy Tenent* itself is written as a dialogue between two fictive characters named Truth and Peace. The relationship between Truth and Peace frames the fundamental puzzle of faith and politics.

Truth and Peace, Williams suggests, are often placed at odds in politics—as is demonstrated in the spurious claim that religious toleration threatens the peace of the civil state. The 'most sober' of witnesses to Truth, he writes, are accused of being enemies of the peace, '*contentious, turbulent, seditious*.'[70] While Helwys and Murton defended toleration from the charge that it foments civil unrest, Williams goes further in concluding that the tension between truth and peace can, in fact, only be resolved by religious toleration. The arguments offered in Murton's *Humble Supplication*, he writes, offer a solution to the problem of '*Nations* and Peoples slaughtering each other for their several respective Religions and Consciences,' by reconciling Truth and Peace in the near term and foreshadowing their eventual and permanent reunification in the long run, when 'the most high

[70] R. *Williams, The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience* (1644) (Hereafter *Bloudy Tenent*) in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams* Vol. 3 (New York, 1963). p. 58.

Eternall Creatour, shall gloriously create *New Heavens* and *New Earth*.'[71] The unusual pairing of eschatological hope and the separation of church and state holds the key to securing civil and religious peace on earth.

The connection between these principles is made clear by Williams's use of an agricultural analogy. Whereas Murton introduced the parable of the wheat and the tares as an analogue to toleration, Williams relates this toleration directly to final things—specifically, the Last Judgment. Rather than propound an enlightened relativism, he remained confident that unbelievers would be condemned to eternal perdition. However, physical punishment for spiritual error is solely the prerogative of God, and so the tares must be left in the field until Christ returns to harvest his crop. Rather than forestall Christ's right to sit in judgment, toleration must be extended 'so long as till the Angels the *Reapers* come to reape the Harvest in the end of the *world*.'[72] The deferment of God's judgment not only helps ensure that faithful believers are not punished mistakenly, but permits the future reconciliation of unbelievers to the Gospel. As Murton wrote some years earlier, if unbelievers who 'come [to Christ] not at the first', are destroyed by civil authority for their unbelief, 'then should they never come, but be prevented.'[73] Williams likewise suggests that unbelievers must be tolerated in the present (notwithstanding their future condemnation by a righteous God), for 'he that is a *Briar*, that is, a *Jew*, a *Turke*, a *Pagan*, an *Anti-christian* to day, may be (when the Word of the Lord runs

[71] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*. pp. 62; 56.
[72] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*. p. 100.
[73] Murton, *Humble Supplication*. p. 24.

freely) a member of *Jesus Christ* to morrow cut out of the wilde *Olive*, and planted into the true.'[74]

Williams's refusal to collapse the eschatological future into the present is essential to his theory of toleration, as the distance between the present and the *parousia* provides the necessary space for the practice of toleration. According to Gilpin, Williams believed the church to exist in 'the wilderness condition,' a sort of spiritual wasteland in which apostacy is common and faithfulness rare.[75] Yet, as an association of believers, the church may reside in a cultivated garden that is—or ought to be—separated from the wilderness by a 'hedge of separation.' Carefully weeded and tended by the Holy Spirit and ecclesial powers, a church-garden with an intact hedge may be kept relatively pure and free of heretics, schismatics, unbelievers, and worldly influence, casting out those '*Antichristian idolators, extortioners, covetous,* &c. … the *obstinate* in sinne.' Even so, they may only be punished with spiritual weapons and 'many degrees of gentle *admonition* in *private* and *publique*, as the case requires.'[76] However, the internal self-discipline of the church cannot extend to the world outside its orders: 'If the weeds be kept out of the *Garden* of the *Church*,' he writes, 'the Roses and Lilies therein will flourish, notwithstanding that weeds abound in the *Field* of the *Civill State*.'[77] Although Williams permits faithful churches to discipline and even exclude from membership those who do not affirm the Gospel, he rebuts the idea that 'because

[74] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent.* p. 95. Here Williams alludes to the doctrine of Gentiles being 'grafted in' to the 'Tree of David', as outlined by the Apostle Paul in Romans chapter 11.
[75] Gilpin, *The Millenarian Piety of Roger Williams*. p. 133.
[76] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*. p. 109-110.
[77] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*. p. 187.

briars, *thornes*, and *thistles* may not be in the *Garden* of the *Church*, therefore they must all bee pluckt up out of the *Wildernesse*.'[78] The ecclesial power of the church over purely spiritual error, like the civil authority of the state over civil issues, is 'not suspended unto the coming of the *Angels*.'[79]

Williams ardently desired purity in the church. At the same time, he believed that many Christian leaders had by 'unknowing zeale' repeatedly torn down the hedge of protection that prevents the wilderness from overcoming the church. In 'maintaining their *Religion* by the materiall [civil] Sword … by degrees the *Gardens* of the *Churches* of *Saints* were turned into the *Wildernesse* of whole *Nations*, until the *whole World* became *Christian* or *Christendome*.'[80] Williams repeats in a new metaphor Helwys's concern that well-meaning Christian leaders, by seeking to establish the Kingdom of God through force, rob Christ of his Kingdom. Throughout history, Williams suggests, Christians have been successful in spreading 'Christendome'—with little care given to the corrupting influence that temporal power poses to the spiritual health of the church. When the church attempted to make the whole field of the world into a garden, it removed the boundary that made it distinct from the fields of the world. When Christians 'opened a gap between the Garden of the Church and the Wilderness of the world,' God responded in wrath and 'broke down the wall it selfe, removed the Candlestick, &c. and made his Garden a Wildernesse, as at this day.'[81]

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[78] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*. p. 95.
[79] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*. p. 110.
[80] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*. p. 184.
[81] Williams, *Mr. Cotton's Letter Lately Printed, Examined, and Answered.* (Hereafter *Mr. Cotton's Letter … Examined*) in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams* (1654) (New York, 1963). p. 392. Williams here references the letter to the church of Ephesus in Revelation 2, where God threatens to 'remove thy candlestick' if the church does not repent of their sin in leaving their 'first love.'

While Williams admitted the existence of both faithful witnesses and small assemblies of true believers dispersed throughout the wilderness, he doubted the purity (and apostolic authority) of all extant denominations—an ecclesial suspicion that led him to separate first from the Anglican communion, and later from the Baptist church in Providence. Scattered throughout the wilderness and intermingled with the world, Christians are bound to display patience towards unbelievers. Like Helwys and Murton, Williams warns Christians to expect persecution, but to 'follow and be like [Christ] in doing, in Suffring.'[82] In fact, the posture of the church towards persecution distinguishes faithful from false Christians: 'It be a *marke* of the *Christian Church* to bee *persecuted*,' he writes, 'and of the *Antichristian* or false *Church* to persecute.'[83] The church's pursuit of comfort in the arms of temporal power has exhibited a corrosive effect on faith. As Williams reminds John Cotton, it was 'downe beds of *ease*,' rather than frigid prison cells, that led to the spiritual collapse of Christianity.[84]

Despite these warnings, Williams knew that not all Christians would resist the urge to wield civil power over spiritual matters. Some might hope to 'expell that fog or mist of Errour, Heresie, Blasphemy, (as is supposed) with Swords and Guns.'[85] However, the very nature of saving faith precludes civil coercion. Punishment cannot produce faith, but only 'a carnall repentance' and a false show

Williams makes liberal use of the 2nd and 3rd chapters of Revelation, unlike Murton and Helwys. The Christian church in history has, like the Ephesian church of Revelation 2, abandoned their first love in preferring civil power to spiritual purity.

[82] Williams, *Mr. Cottons's Letter … Examined.* p. 317.
[83] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent.* p. 191.
[84] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent.* p. 187.
[85] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*. p. 81.

of hypocritical piety—the very things that destroyed the purity of the church.[86] As Williams concludes, 'tis Light alone, even Light from the bright Sunne of Righteousnesse, which is able, in the soules and consciences of men to dispel and scatter such fogges and darknesse.'[87] Until God 'open[s] the eyes of blind sinners, their soules shall lie fast asleep.'[88] As true faith is conditioned on the spiritual intervention of God, Christians who hope to see true Christianity spread only have recourse to the methods of '*Martyrs* or *Witnesses*, standing before the *Lord*, and testifying his holy *Truth* during all the *Reign* of the *Beast*.'[89]

Williams's account of the church's history since its first medieval dalliances with Antichristian methods is decidedly dismal. The practice of patience—both in suffering and in refraining from persecuting unbelievers—seems difficult in the trials and challenges of the wilderness condition. However, Williams articulates a clear hope in the second coming of Christ, who will 'restore his Garden and Paradice again,' reaping a harvest of faithful believers who would in turn reign alongside him in a world of perfected worship, justice, and peace.[90] Only then, at the time of his return, will Christ restore the hedge of protection between church and state and transplant 'all that shall be saved out of the world … unto his Church or Garden.'[91] Then, the faithful shall 'See him [Christ], raigne with him, eternally admire him, and enjoy him when he shortly comes.'[92] It follows that patience is

[86] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent.* p. 138.
[87] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*. p. 81.
[88] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*. p. 138.
[89] R. Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent Yet More Bloudy*, in *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams* (New York, 1963). p. 383.
[90] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent.* pp. 187; 184.
[91] Williams, *Mr. Cotton's Letter … Examined*. p. 392.
[92] Williams, *Mr. Cotton's Letter … Examined*. p. 318.

enabled and emboldened by hope in Christ's return and subsequent restoration of pure worship. Lest one forget the tenor of Williams's conviction, however, he suggests that Christians possess a 'consolation' in suffering and patience: when the angelic reapers take in the harvest, they will 'binde them [the tares] into *bundles*, and cast them into the *everlasting burnings*.'[93] As Christ returns in judgment and establishes his kingdom on earth, the Antichrist and all who follow him will 'drink of the Wine of the *wrath of God*.'[94] Christians are able—and required—to display toleration precisely because they know that God will one day sit in judgment over unbelievers. John Coffey summarizes this peculiar turn in the thought of Helwys and Williams, writing of how 'God's tolerance would one day run out, but that of the saints must not. Their God may have been no liberal, but they themselves had to be.'[95]

To those with modern sensibilities, it is tempting to explain Williams's fiery rhetoric as only incidental to his theory of toleration, claiming instead that modern conceptions of equality and respect are the foundation of Williams's toleration, and that his theological commitments are merely the trappings of his time and culture. However, it is precisely these theological convictions that underpin Williams's commitment to religious liberty. Rather than seizing political power to impose spiritual conformity on unbelievers, Williams believed that even those he considered his spiritual opposites must be tolerated until the end of the world: 'the

[93] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*. p. 104. Here Williams directly follows the explanation of the parable in Matthew 13:30; 36-43 which clearly states that heaven-sent angels will bring in the harvest, not earthly actors.
[94] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*. p. 113.
[95] Coffey, 'Puritanism and Liberty,' p. 981.

patience of *God* is, and the *patience* of *Men* ought to be exercised towards them.'[96] He underscores the critical role of patience in the final sentences of *The Bloudy Tenent*, as Truth and Peace are finally joined by a third figure, 'Our Sister *Patience*, whose desired company is as needful as delightfull.'[97] In the practice of toleration, patience is desired, delightful, and absolutely necessary. The commitment to patience, more than anything, distinguishes the eschatological millenarianism of Williams from the chiliasm of the Radical Reformation. Rather than attempting to immanentize the *eschaton* or establish the millennial kingdom by force, toleration is secured by the firm belief that the domain of conscience is fundamentally and irrevocably separated from the rightful scope of political authority, as well as by the conviction that eschatological fulfilment and restoration is to be established by divine intervention alone. Then, at Christ's *parousia*, shall the kingdom of God come in material as well as spiritual form. This eschatological hope underpins Williams's account of toleration, for only one who is certain that weeds will not finally choke out the true crop can commit to leaving them untouched until the harvest. As Truth opines, Christ will one day return in triumph and judgment, but 'till then, both *Thou* and *I* must hope, and wait.'[98] To hope and to wait are the key duties of the faithful believer in the wilderness of the world—and each are undergirded by a confidence that one day, hopes will be fulfilled and patience rewarded. The psychic burdens of toleration are eased by hope in a future rectification of current wrongs.

[96] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent.* p. 119.
[97] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*. pp. 424-425.
[98] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*. p. 392.

Finally, Williams outlines the proper relationship between church and state in the 'wilderness condition' of the pre-*parousia* world. Here, he makes demands that extend far beyond mere toleration. Echoing Helwys and Murton's distinction between rightful civil and spiritual authorities, Williams says that believers ought not to 'be *restrained* from the *true*, or *constrained* to *false Worship*, and yet without *breach* of the Civill or *Citie-peace*.'[99] While the hedge remains broken down and the church lies intermingled with the world, '*Gods people* may lawfully converse and cohabit in *Cities, Townes*, &c.' and may strive alongside unbelievers to fulfil the duties of citizenship.[100] The 'Kingdome of *God* below,' the visible church, 'must necessarily be mingled and have converse' with the civil world 'unlesse she will goe out of the *World* (before *Christ Jesus* her *Lord* and *Husband* send for her home into the Heavens…'[101] Rather than seeking to establish a mere *permission* of dissenting worship within a society that still privileges a specific denomination, Williams clearly separates the two kingdoms. '*Jerusalem* from above is not materiall and Earthly, but Spirituall,' he writes, emphasizing the spiritual nature of the Kingdom of Christ. By contrast, '*Materiall Jerusalem* is not more the *Lords* citie then *Jericho, Ninivie,* or *Babell*.'[102] The doctrine that the spiritual and civil states—'the *Church* and *Commonweale*'—are intimately connected is 'a witty, yet a most dangerous *Fiction* of the *Father* of *Lies*.'[103] This lie, 'that *old dreame* of *Jew* and *Gentile*, that the *Crowne* of *Jesus* will consist of outward *material gold,* and his

[99] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*. p. 72.
[100] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*. pp. 104; 142.
[101] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*. pp. 107; 174-175.
[102] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*. p. 320.
[103] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*. p. 333.

Sword be made of *iron* or *steele*' is 'the overturning and rooting up the very *foundation* and *roots* of all true *Christianity.*'[104] Williams's primary concern lies with the purity of the church and its worship, and the corruption entailed by excessive entanglement in civil affairs.

The divorce between civil and spiritual authority, made complete in Williams's theory, requires more than mere toleration or permission—it demands the disestablishment of religion entirely, and the restoration of a hedge or wall of separation between the church and the state.[105] Williams's unique position in New England permitted him to extend this argument further than either Helwys or Murton, who operated within the context of an established church in England. Believers, according to Williams, ought to 'Pray for the *peace* of the *City*,' which may be defined in entirely material terms, distinct from the interior peace of the community of faith.[106] Within the earthly city, the '*Church* or *company* of *worshippers* … is like unto a Body or Colledge of *Physitians* in a *Citie*; like unto a *Corporation*, *Society,* or *Company* of *East-Indie* or *Turkie-Merchants.*'[107] Just like any other secular organization, the church may police its own boundaries, doctrines, and membership. However, its authority does not—and cannot—extend to civil affairs. At the same time, the civil authority has no authority over spiritual affairs, and may only pursue the maintenance of the civil peace. The redemptive arc of

[104] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*. p. 81.
[105] I do not intend to fully flesh out a description of the ethical and institutional demands of Williams's *practice* of toleration—topics that have been expertly addressed by James Calvin Davis and Teresa Bejan, among others. Instead, I aim to elucidate a specific set of reasons and motivations *for* this practice of toleration. See helpful discussions in T. Bejan, *Mere Civility*; J.C. Davis, *The Moral Theology of Roger Williams*; J. N. Rakove, *Beyond Belief, Beyond Conscience: The Radical Significance of the Free Exercise of Religion* (New York, 2020).
[106] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*. p. 72.
[107] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*. p. 73.

Williams's eschatology is primarily a spiritual affair; Williams grants no grand eschatological meaning to the form of civil government and imagines a millennium more spiritual than material. So long as the domains of civil and spiritual life remain distinctly separate in the interim, believers and unbelievers may live together in civil peace.

V

Conclusion

Roger Williams's principled defense of religious toleration prefigured many later developments in the theory of toleration, liberty of conscience, and church-state relations. However, it has been too easy for scholars to neglect the distinctive theological arguments that led to his conclusions, instead anachronistically interpreting his thought in terms of later developments in liberal political theory. Yet it was Williams's eschatological interpretation of world history, built on the earlier contributions of John Murton and Thomas Helwys, that formed the foundation for his expansive theory of toleration and underpinned the confident practice of religious toleration in Rhode Island and Providence Plantations. By tracing these themes and influences throughout his work, we can come to appreciate the unique role that millenarianism played in his own account of toleration. The centrality of eschatological millenarianism within Williams's practice of toleration should caution us against those who seek to adopt his tolerationist conclusions without sharing his unwavering commitment to patience and hope. We may find that Williams's defense of toleration is less secure when rebuilt on different

footings. Further, Williams's eschatological defense of toleration broadens our understanding of the political implications of millenarianism in early modern political thought—and today. Williams, like Murton and Helwys before him, offered a compelling alternative to the apocalyptically-charged anti-tolerationist rhetoric of his time—a case study in eschatology turned to tolerationist ends. In reinterpreting and redirecting the millenarian rhetoric of the day—'fighting apocalypse with apocalypse,' to borrow McQueen's phrase—Williams combatted the most pernicious dimensions of apocalypticism in trans-Atlantic Protestant politics while retaining the powerful imagery of the millennium and *parousia*.[108]

Williams's political thought deserves close analysis from those who, like him, aspire to practice toleration despite challenging circumstances. However, his reliance on eschatology may seem to limit his usefulness. As Glenn Tinder noted a half-century ago, many today 'find it impossible, even if desirable, to accept the kind of religious presuppositions which … [Christian eschatology] entails.'[109] Moreover, the potential for abuse of millenarian rhetoric—as evidenced by so many of Williams's contemporaries—may caution us against reviving a thoroughly eschatological conception of political life. Perhaps eschatological toleration, like Williams, belongs to the Separatists and the seventeenth century.

These concerns are not easily dismissed. I venture to suggest, however, that Williams's eschatological theory of toleration is of more than mere antiquarian interest. Despite the secularization of the modern world, religious faith—even of the millenarian sort—remains deeply influential. Even by conservative estimates,

[108] McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times*. p. 14.
[109] Tinder, 'Eschatology and Politics.' p. 313.

there are hundreds of millions of people in the world who continue to affirm explicitly Christian eschatological doctrines. Of those, a significant number expect Christ's return to be imminent.[110] This is to say nothing of non-Christian religions that have their own eschatological doctrines.[111] Eschatological rhetoric, too, remains common, from the obvious (such as the unfortunately-common assertions that President Barack Obama was the Antichrist) to the veiled (the secular apocalypses of nuclear holocaust, climate change, and automation). Indeed, our own times are not so unlike those in the past; much like Williams, we live in a world steeped in eschatological politics. By the same token, just as Helwys, Murton, and Williams transformed the eschatological politics of their own day in order to promote religious toleration, we are capable of transforming the eschatological politics of our own in less totalistic and repressive directions.

On this account, Williams's strategy of eschatological redirection may remain relevant to the politics of today. Yet caution is still warranted, for as McQueen writes, 'the very features that make apocalypticism politically seductive also render it politically unstable'[112] Eschatology lends a distinctive moral clarity to political conflict, threatening to consume established political order within a

[110] A 2010 Pew Research Center survey found that nearly half of self-identified Christians in the United States believed that Christ would return by the year 2050. https://www.pewforum.org/2013/03/26/us-christians-views-on-the-return-of-christ/. A different Pew survey finds that nearly 80 percent of U.S. Christians believe that Christ will return to earth in triumph https://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/11/2009/04/religion-politics-06.pdf. While these numbers represent trends within American Christianity, they are broadly indicative of the continued relevance of eschatology in American—and world—religion and politics.

[111] For instance, a 2012 Pew publication finds that a significant number of the followers of Islam in South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa believe that the return of the Mahdi is imminent. https://www.pewforum.org/2012/08/09/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-executive-summary/.

[112] McQueen, p. 193.

Manichaean struggle between the self-identified forces of good and evil.[113] While it may be possible to redirect apocalypticism, McQueen outlines three likely outcomes for such a strategy: 'full throated embrace of the apocalyptic worldview' leading to violence; withdrawal from politics; or defeatist resignation to the fate of the world.[114] Williams, however, largely avoids each of these errors, placing the compelling themes of apocalyptic conflict and millenarian hope within an eschatological narrative that demands patience of believers as they remain in the 'wilderness condition' of the world. However, this patience is paired with a clear hope; a promise that God will not allow sins and injustice to go unpunished forever. If eschatology is to produce toleration, both patience and hope are necessary. Without the demands of patience, eschatological hopes easily lead to apocalyptic frenzy; conversely, patience without hope seems unlikely to motivate anything more than pessimistic withdrawal from political life. Williams's eschatological millenarianism opens the possibility that patience and hope can combine to produce a firm commitment to a broad and inclusive conception of toleration. Whereas McQueen primarily considers the role of apocalyptic fear in provoking action to confront imminent existential crises, Williams's eschatological hope demands toleration in order to maintain peace.[115] According to McQueen, 'the apocalyptic imaginary holds out the seductive promise that difference, disagreement, and conflict can be eliminated.'[116] For Williams, however, eschatological

[113] McQueen, p. 193.
[114] McQueen, p. 204.
[115] McQueen, pp. 199-205; Williams, *Bloudy Tenent* pp. 56; 62; 424-425.
[116] McQueen, p. 194.

millenarianism offered the ethical framework necessary to tolerate difference, disagreement, and conflict 'so long as till the … the end of the *world*.'[117]

While Williams's account of toleration may remain convincing on its own terms to those who affirm some version of traditional Christian eschatology, it is more difficult to extend his insights to secular political ideologies. For Williams, much relies on the juxtaposition of patience and hope. Believers are confident that things will 'turn out' in the end, and so may forbear error even when things appear to be turning out poorly. Absent from much of the secular apocalyptic rhetoric of today is this redeeming feature of Williams's eschatological defense of toleration: the conviction that there will be a righting of wrongs, a final judgment, or a positive conclusion to our shared history—in a word, hope. Absent too is an attitude of assurance that good will win, and that the trials of this world will give way to a better future. The primary secular apocalypses of today (from rising tides to rising socioeconomic inequality) may stoke fear and unrest, but they do not warrant much hope, and seem unlikely to produce tolerationist ends. Indeed, the patience and hope that characterize Williams's approach to toleration are difficult to maintain amid the problems of our modern world. Still, it may be possible to find or make a place for these virtues in our contemporary political thought. Roger Williams, writing amid the tumultuous apocalyptic politics of the seventeenth century, provided compelling theoretical and practical grounds for a patient and hopeful practice of toleration despite many challenges. We would do well, amid the tumultuous politics

[117] Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*. p. 100.

of our own time, to muster up a little more patience and hope and so sustain our own commitment to toleration.