

Roger Williams: Delinquent Saint

The Religious Odyssey of the Providence Prophet

INTRODUCTION

FEW colonial figures have won more laurels in the past century than Roger Williams. No doubt he has deserved more glowing tributes than his own generation of writers were inclined to offer since they treated him "as a fanatical heresiarch in religion and a factious disturber of the State."¹ But by the nineteenth century the "new look" antiquated such a portrait and the founder of Rhode Island came into his own as the "pioneer of modern individualism and modern federalism" and modern theology heralded him as one of "the foremost liberals of his day."²

With the new accent of the times on democracy and secularism Roger Williams was readily labelled as a political thinker and "social architect" of an age that could not appreciate his advanced views. In the eyes of "moderns" he appeared as a rational statesman in an irrational age. "The gods it would seem, were pleased to have their jest with Roger Williams by sending him to earth before his time."³ When his "time" finally arrived and his ideas won popular acclaim it became a simple matter to idealize the colonial forerunner of such modern views.

The following monograph is an attempt to analyse Williams' caste of mind within the theological framework of his day and not as a "prototype" or "symbol" of things to come. What metamorphosis, if any, occurred in his religious views? What does Williams, himself, say on the big issues—the issues of church and State; freedom and authority; the sovereignty of God and the freedom of man?

I

ENGLISH ROOTS

Little is known of Roger Williams' early life to indicate the religious faith and experience of his childhood. The date and place of his birth are not even authoritatively recorded since the parish records of St. Sepulchre, along with St. Sepulchre, went up in smoke in the Great Fire of London in 1666. Recent scholarship considers London, 1603, as the most probable place and date

of his arrival into the home of James Williams, a merchant tailor.⁴ Williams himself is uncharacteristically silent on his childhood. The lone comment that he makes in his writings on the religious life of his family was a letter written to Governor John Winthrop in which he lamented the fact that he had been "persecuted even in and out of my father's home these 20 years."⁵

Under the patronage of Sir Edward Coke, another member of St. Sepulchre's parish, Williams was sent to Charterhouse School in 1621 and from there to Pembroke College, Cambridge, the alma mater of his patron. Here Williams began the study of law—his patron's profession—before shifting to theology. In 1627 he subscribed to the three articles of orthodoxy demanded by the king of all candidates for the degree of Bachelor of Arts and took the orders of the Church of England.⁶ After two years of graduate study in theology he accepted the position of chaplain in the household of Sir William Masham in Essex. Here he made many significant contacts with the great Puritan families and preachers of the area and before the year was out his religious convictions swung heavily to the Puritan point of view and its criticism of the established form of service. While riding to Sempringham with two fellow-ministers, John Cotton and Thomas Hooker, he "presented his arguments from Scripture, why he durst not join with them in their use of the Common Prayer."⁷

Meanwhile Archbishop Laud and Thomas Wentworth were making life miserable for the Puritans in an attempt either to bring them to heel or to harry them out of the land. Williams, however, was not to be intimidated and he refused to relinquish his separatist teachings and conform to the High Church format of worship. His refusal meant turning down two remunerative appointments at a time when his recent marriage made earthly rewards particularly appealing. "God knows," he declared, "what gain and preferments I have refused in universities, city, country, and court, in Old England . . . to keep my soul undefiled on this point."⁸

Although never summoned to appear before Laud or his court, Williams considered it only a matter of time before he would be silenced. He later wrote the daughter of Sir Edward Coke that "it was as bitter as death to me when Bishop Laud pursued me out of this land, and my conscience was persuaded against the national church and ceremonies."⁹ On December 1st, 1630, Williams and his wife sailed from Bristol for New England and its Puritan haven. Here he anticipated that his convictions on separation from the national church would bear fruit unmolested and he would be able to minister to a separated people.

II

THE MASSACHUSETTS INTERLUDE

(1) *New England Orthodoxy*

When Williams landed at Boston he found a church and community somewhat different to that portrayed in the Puritan travel folders in England. He observed in Massachusetts Bay that "an English opposition had become a New England oligarchy"¹⁰ and the Lords Bishops of Old England merely had been exchanged for the Lord Brethren who regulated the life of Massachusetts Bay in the same way that their hated counterparts did in the old country. When the Puritans claimed that they were governed by the "consent of the people" they actually meant the consent of those of like ideas and faith.¹¹ One still had to be right to have rights. This Puritan community and church polity was based on two distinctive features—the Covenant and the Communion of Saints. The first feature was the resurrection of the Old Testament covenant between God and the people of Israel. This covenant did not die with the Israelites of the Old Testament, but continued as the contract between God and His people in Massachusetts Bay.¹²

The second cornerstone of the New England ecclesiastical polity disturbed Williams as much as the first when he observed that the Puritans failed to practise what they preached. The postulate of a "community of saints" would be a "true church" of the elect with "only persons giving evidence that they were redeemed by Christ unto holiness" qualifying for membership.¹³ No longer could a geographical parish prove satisfactory. No longer could the tares be ingrained with the wheat, and yet in practice the Puritans in New England appeared far more anxious to preserve the unity of the universal church than to limit church membership to proven saints. Hooker openly affirmed this view "that the faithful Congregation in England are true Churches: and therefore it is sinful to separate from them as no Churches."¹⁴

Massachusetts saw several strategic reasons for not legally living up to its dictum of separation. To avoid interference from the mother country and its Anglican Church, New England Puritans found a nominal loyalty to the Anglican communion a convenient rebuttal to any charges of disloyalty. As a result an "elaborate casuistry" developed in the colony although congregationalism was the ultimate goal of its church members.¹⁵ Nor did the Puritans want to do away with the idea of a state church. Although they were a protesting minority in England, they gave full allegi-

ance to the principle under which the Church and State cooperated with one another in England. Such a system was transplanted across the Atlantic and found ample nourishment in the religious climate of Massachusetts.

On February 5th, 1631, Governor Winthrop welcomed Roger Williams as a distinguished addition to the budding settlement on Massachusetts Bay and the warm personality of Williams readily attracted friends and respect. The Governor of Plymouth Plantation considered him "very unsettled in judgment" but "godly and zealous" in his manner of life.¹⁶ Even those from whom he differed esteemed his friendship for "he was most likeable—sincere to the core, and of a rich, glowing, peculiarly affectionate nature."¹⁷

Lacking ministers the Boston church unanimously chose Williams as their teacher, but he refused the honour when he discovered that the Boston church was still in communion with the Church of England and supported the practice of permitting magistrates to punish any breach of the First Table (the duties of man to God). Apparently Williams' separatist views had not been dampened by the Atlantic crossing and his disappointment over the Boston relationship made his stay in Boston of short duration. "I conscientiously refused their offer," declared Williams, "and withdrew to Plymouth because I durst not officiate to an un-separated people."¹⁸

(2) *Dissent and Dissension*

After a few months in Salem as assistant to Mr. Skelton, the minister, he moved to Plymouth where separation was professed by the Pilgrims. Here Williams anticipated finding a religious climate close to his own convictions. During his stay in Plymouth Williams made no protest over the Pilgrims' lack of tolerance for those outside the fold although separation of church and state was no more advocated in Plymouth than in Massachusetts Bay; he was far more concerned with separation from the Church of England. "His teaching was well approved," Governor Bradford remarked in 1633, "until he began to fall into some strange opinions and from opinions to practice."¹⁹ These opinions appear to be his condemnation of their sporadic application of separatism. Williams was greatly distressed to observe that, although they professed separation, they communicated with Old England parishes whenever convenient.²⁰

In the autumn of 1633 he left Plymouth and a lively dispute behind him to return to the church at Salem. Brewster, the elder at Plymouth, was happy to see the "disputer" leave lest he should

"run the same course of rigid separation and Anabaptistry which Mr. [John] Smith, the Se-Baptist, at Amsterdam, had done."²¹ Williams received a warm welcome upon his return to Salem and on August 2nd, 1634, he became teacher of the church "shortly after the death of the minister Skelton."²²

At Salem Williams made his most determined effort to enforce a rigid separation by his members. He broke off communion not only with the English Church, but with the Bay churches as well and "neither admitted, nor permitted any church members but such as rejected all communion with the parish assemblies."²³ In this venture he was a leader without a following for his church members were not particularly anxious to cut off all fellowship with other churches. When this attempt failed Williams withdrew from communion with his own church and with even his own wife for their laxity in avoiding the "ways of the world," although he continued to preach to a few members who gathered in his home.²⁴ This separation was by no means the prelude to religious latitudinarianism or subjectivism. With John Robinson he, too, condemned "separation from their True church . . . and whosoever separates from the body, the church, separates from the head, Christ."²⁵ Convinced that his views were right Williams did not spare his criticism of different views and practices. His sermon on September 27th, 1634, on the eleven public sins of the Bay would hardly be cited for its tone of moderation and tolerance.

In observing Williams' rigid separatism and the theological context of his thinking any efforts to equate his views with those of Jefferson's seem out of character. Whereas the latter considered theology incidental Williams "was pious with a fervour and passion" far beyond his contemporaries.²⁶ At Salem he refused to permit his conception of spiritual purity to be diluted with earthly compromise. In failing to accept an accommodation to worldly realities as permissible, and in censoring those who did, Williams soon found himself "separated" from Massachusetts in a way that he had not fully anticipated.

When Williams could not exact the degree of separation from his church that he anticipated he separated from its fellowship and claimed the right to serve God beyond the pale of an "unseparated company."²⁷ Such opinions as Williams now held so strongly were bound to conflict with the church-state relationship of the Colony and the Bay leaders were not long in taking action to protect their political system and vested interests. On December 27th, 1635, Governor Winthrop's *Journal* recorded the three charges brought against Williams, but not one charge bothered to question his essential orthodoxy.²⁸ When the impetuous temperament and zeal of Williams failed to keep its peace on the areas charged the court summoned him again on May 8th, 1635. Again the court

considered him in error and he and the Salem church were warned "to consider these things till the next general court, or else expect the sentence."²⁹ The sentence was soon to follow.

The banishment of Roger Williams has been subject to numerous interpretations and diagnoses. Yet when one examines the grounds given by the major figures involved in the banishment the degree of agreement is striking. Williams claimed he was banished for publicly declaring that (1) the Patent, or royal charter, from the king was not valid because the Indians were the true owners of the land and therefore the king had no right to give away their land, (2) a wicked person had no Christian right to take an oath before a magistrate, (3) it was not lawful for a Christian to hear any of the ministers of the Church of England, and (4) the power of the civil magistrate extended only to the bodies and goods and outward state of men and not to his inner beliefs.³⁰

In Cotton's *Answer to Roger Williams* only two grounds for banishment are mentioned—"his violent and tumultuous carriage against the Patent" and his "vehement opposition to the Oath of Fidelity."³¹ Both men mention the Patent as the foremost grievance and neither plays up religious heresy or the view on the magistracy as the major issue. Actually Williams placed no special stress on the rôle of the magistracy throughout his whole discussion of the banishment.³² Conversely, Cotton explicitly stated in his *Answer to Roger Williams* that the exile was not banished for his theological doctrines. "I did not alledge that place of Scriptures, as a ground upon which the court proceeded to his Banishment," he wrote, although he adds puckishly that it may well have been "a reason which provoked the Lord to move the Court to proceed against Mr. Williams."³³

In October the final verdict of the court was pronounced after neither the Court nor the Puritan divine, Thomas Hooker, found it possible "to reduce him from his errors."³⁴ No doubt the preaching of Williams against the validity of their title to the land touched a sensitive spot among the lay and clerical elite of the Bay who had "added 57,214 acres to their holdings by special grant."³⁵ Coupled with this was a demand for religious separation from England that the Puritan leaders considered politically unfeasible. Lacking John Cotton's flexibility between principle and practice Williams carried his Puritan "communion of saints" to its ultimate conclusion in every phase of life—from not giving oaths to the unregenerate to refusing to eat with an unseparated person, even though a member of his own family. Such a position appeared to be too literal and rigid to the Puritan leaders, and yet it also may have been the logical and consistent deduction from the Puritans' own principle of the "communion of saints."³⁶

III

THE PROVIDENCE PROPHET

(1) *The Anabaptist Vision*

The verdict of the Bay court was deportation to England. Only by fleeing into the wilderness and living among his friends, the Indians, did Williams escape the decree. A year later (1636) his banishment resulted in the founding of Providence Plantations. No covenant or civil code preceded Williams in this new settlement; here free rein could be given to the religious and political ideals that demanded his hasty flight from Salem. And yet, in his first years at Providence, no church was formally established. Williams makes no attempt to explain this situation. Whether there were too many diverse opinions in the colony to agree on a church, too few settlers, or lack of time and interest in the new community remains an unanswered question. Williams did hold religious meetings in private homes, but the first church was not formed until an influx of Anabaptists arrived in 1638.

Prominent among these Anabaptist exiles from Massachusetts were Ezekiel Halliman and Mrs. Richard Scott—a sister-in-law of Anne Hutchinson, another of the victims of Puritan banishment. Beyond Williams' conviction that women must be veiled in church³⁷ he had not previously advocated any distinctive Anabaptist views. His views on separation from the national church were held by the Anabaptists, but not only by the Anabaptists. Attracted to the sect in Providence he was publicly baptized by Halliman in 1639 and then, in turn, he baptized Halliman and ten other adults by immersion.³⁸ This event is commonly claimed to be the formation of the first Baptist church in America and such a claim may be defended theologically, and even historically, even if Williams was certainly unaware of any such plan or purpose at the time. But some American Baptist apologists have not been content to stop here and Williams was soon wrapped in a Baptist mantle to become their patron saint of colonial history, who lifted the "Baptist standard in the chain of Baptists from John the Baptist to the present."³⁹ Such sweeping claims for Williams appear somewhat tarnished by Williams' voluntary abdication of his Baptist throne only three or four months after his "election." Although no rejection of such basic doctrines as salvation, the deity of Christ, original sin, or the final judgment appear, Williams began to question his rebaptism. Not because his adherence to "any creed restricted his individualism in matters of belief" as one writer suggests,⁴⁰ but because he had "satisfaction neither in the authority by which it [baptism] is done, nor in the manner [mode]" even though he admitted that the Anabaptist practice "comes nearer the first practice of our great Founder Christ Jesus,

than other practices of religion do."⁴¹ Williams felt that he could not derive authority for his rebaptism except through apostolic succession, and this was no longer possible, he believed, as the ministers of England, being apostate, were incapable of continuing the authority of the apostles.⁴²

(2) *The Delinquent Saint*

With the shift from "close communion to preaching and praying with all"⁴³ Williams' spiritual pilgrimage reached its final stage; but in rejecting the Baptist mantle he did not thereby become "the John the Baptist of New England Transcendentalism" as Ernst would have us believe.⁴⁴ The final stage of Williams' spiritual quest is commonly defined as that of "seekerism." In this way, Richman claimed, Williams "came as near as his age would permit . . . to being an agnostic"—a believer in the certainty of uncertainty.⁴⁵ The verdict could not be more wrong.

In the sense of anticipating "the Church of the Future" Williams was a Seeker,⁴⁶ but the term is a misnomer, if, by the term "Seeker," one suggests a tolerance of all routes to heaven, a forerunner of transcendentalism,⁴⁷ a religious liberal or a rejection of "orthodox" doctrine such as that for which Seeker Legate was burned at the stake.⁴⁸ Nor did the majority of the "political left" in England espouse this spiritual Crusoe as a champion of their cause. Certainly Straus' claim that Williams brought "into the confusion of the [English] Civil War a complete political programme and a theory of State and rights of men that won immediate support of the Independents and Sectaries"⁴⁹ is wishful thinking indeed—to Williams and his contemporaries at least.

Although the insistence upon an uncorrupted apostolic succession and separation from all church groups made it literally impossible for him to identify himself with any "visible Church," he had few quarrels with institution of the Church. He admitted to George Fox "that if my soul could find rest in joining unto any of the Churches professing Christ Jesus now extant, I would readily and gladly do it."⁵⁰

In his religious odyssey through Anabaptism to "voluntaryism" Williams' separatism and fundamental orthodoxy remained constant from Bristol to Providence. He merely became more, rather than less, dogmatic and single-minded in his convictions. By 1645 his writings indicate that pessimism of human nature coupled with a vibrant confidence in God explain his concept of the temporality of this life. All life is as grass, observed Williams, for "we spring up in our turn and speedily wither."⁵¹ While both the Puritans and Williams anticipated the establishment of Christ's Kingdom, the Puritans thought that the magistrate could help the cause along by regulating morals until Christ returned. To Williams this civil

community was too worldly to even consider applying a Christian veneer. From such a premise stem the by-products of his political and religious liberty.

(3) *Roger Williams — A Reappraisal*

In his writings—usually dashed off in a white heat—Williams' theological framework is readily observed. Nowhere does he offer a systematic framework to provide us with a simple picture of his theology for his religious ideas were not simple to grasp in all their typological allegories. He talked in Biblical terms and parables, but his premises were clear. The principle of Christian "separation" from the "world" remained constant although the application altered at Providence. It was still "absolutely necessary" for a Christian to come out from the false church and ministry before "he can be united to the true Israel"—the Church of Christ.^{51b} But no longer did Williams preach a literal, physical separation from the worldly churches since he deemed it humanly impossible to discern the "wheat" from the "tares." Human nature in New England, he observed, was no better than human nature in Old England. How can Mr. Cotton believe, he asks, that the "coming out of Babel is local and material?" Is New England the parallel of Judea and Canaan, and Old England a "type" of "Sodom and Egypt?"⁵² The very same question might have been asked of Williams when he had lived at Salem and had preached such a doctrine himself.

Thus, to Williams, Massachusetts had misinterpreted its separation as geographical rather than spiritual and was therefore really no better than the church in England. Nor is any tone of moderation to be found in his indictment of their errors. Williams asserted that he felt like "Lot among the Sodomites" while at Salem for "amongst all the people of God, wherefore scattered about Babel's banks, either in Rome or England your case [Massachusetts] is the worse by far."⁵³ Actually, said Williams, Christians were "mingled amongst the Babylonians" and were to be found in every society; otherwise thousands of Christians would not have a chance of salvation :

If Mr. Cotton maintain the true church of Christ to consist of the true matter of holy persons called out from the world and that also neither national, provincial nor diocesan churches are of Christ's institution: how many thousands of God's people of all sorts, clergy and laity, will they find . . . captivated in such national, provincial, and diocesan churches." . . . [for] . . . "until of late years how many of God's people knew any other church than the diocesan church of dead stones or timber?"⁵⁴

In revising his earlier literalist stand Williams regretted that the New England ministry (as well as he, himself, in earlier days) attacked the Book of Common Prayers. He reminded Cotton that the latter had supported the prayers when they were together in England. At that time Williams had chided Cotton and Hooker for their support of the Prayer Book. Now he lamented the fact that they had followed his example in attacking the Book. The fundamental thing was not the Prayer Book, he wrote, but to see that one did not sin against their conscience or persecute for the "sake of conscience."⁵⁵ Throughout *The Bloody Tenent* religious persecution is vigorously condemned since persecution liquidated both erroneous and true consciences and only God was able to separate the one from the other. The Christian was not to mount the judgment seat of Pilate for the follower of Christ was promised only a "cross" and not a sceptre and the grace of God was not evidenced when the persecuted became the persecutors.⁵⁶

From such religious premises stemmed the postulates of religious and political freedom. The former was considered an ethic of Christ's and the latter was an incidental by-product of his preoccupation with the former. "To Williams the State was purely a civil and not a divine institution, external in its administration, internal in the minds of men, and wholly unconcerned with spiritual affairs."⁵⁷ In his rejection of the divine origin of government and the dual rôle of the magistrate in enforcing both tablets of the law Williams was in obvious disagreement with Massachusetts. He lamented the intermixing of the magistrates' rôle with Christ's in the efforts of the Puritans to manufacture saints for he firmly believed that the Church and State revolved in two distinct orbits. But in New England he observed that they were "like Hippocrates twins, they are born together, grow up together, laugh together, weep together, sicken and die together."⁵⁸ Williams did not oppose the office of the magistracy; he was no Antimonian, but he considered the rôle of the magistrate to be limited to its "proper" sphere—preserving "civil peace and order."⁵⁹

His position on the magistracy and the true church was the outcome of his passionate religious conviction that refused to equate the Christian church with that of any visible institution. For Williams the Puritan "covenant" with God was dead. No country, he argued, could claim preferential treatment from God with the corollary of spiritual interference in political affairs as Israel did in the Old Testament. The National Church "explicit as in Old England, or implicit as in New"⁶⁰ was therefore an anachronism that no amount of religious resuscitation could restore. Such a view of the State was strongly suspect in the seventeenth century and in this, as in his spiritual separation from the world, he was indeed a lonely prophet, but a Biblical "Jeremiah" more than a

prophet of the modern age or a forerunner of the Enlightenment. He believed that the New Testament repudiated and undid the Old Testament covenant between "Yahweh" and Israel for "Moses' shadows vanished at the coming of the Lord Jesus" and with His coming vanished Israel—the "only Holy Nation."⁶¹ The Puritans were in error, he disclaimed, because they were trying to force the "type" of the Old Testament to fit their society and such an accommodation was purely of man and not of God. Holiness was no longer a national, but a personal affair.

Williams arrived at the conclusion that all existing churches derived their authority from earlier ministries each hopelessly corrupt for "there were no churches since those founded by the apostles and the evangelists, nor could there be any, nor any pastors ordained, nor seals administered but by such." The true church, he prophesied, would only be restored when "new apostles" in a new age "recover and restore all ordinances and churches of Christ out of the ruins of the Anti-Christian apostate."⁶² In the meantime the only ministry that counted was that of prophecy. The prophetic ministers were not to dwell in solitude but were to fellowship with those who believe "in but one God, one Lord, one Spirit, one Baptism, one Body, etc."⁶³ In awaiting the true church and in expecting a new and apostolic ministry Williams was perhaps a seeker, but there was no latitude offered as to what beliefs were essential to true seeking; these were spelled out in detail.

Prophecy and typology abound in Williams' view of the Church and reading of history far beyond that considered proper in Puritan circles. Not only did he use a theological context to explain all religious views, but he also couched his every-day greetings and problems in Biblical forms and allegories. Frequently he ended his numerous Biblical quotations with "etc." which points up the religious orientation of the age when even the Governor was expected to be able to finish any Bible verse by memory. Throughout his writings life is viewed as but the vestibule to the grand finale of history—the imminent second coming of Christ—when the Church shall be taken up to glory and three and a half years of tribulation (the "reign of the Beast") shall ensue before Satan is finally vanquished.⁶⁴

All too frequently fringe differences between Williams and the Puritans blurred their essential agreement in theology. When writing John Cotton or John Winthrop Williams would pass over the large area of religious agreement to major on a minor difference. But when the roots of his theology were questioned by the Quakers he rose up in holy horror to declaim his essential orthodoxy in *George Fox Digg'd Out of his Burrowes*. Such a defence prompted Cotton Mather to admit that "against the Quakers he afterwards maintained the main principles of the Protestant re-

ligion with much vigour" and may well have the "root of the matter" in him.⁶⁵ Actually Williams' most readable and delightful work, *Experiments of Spiritual Life and Health*, could easily have been mistaken for the writings of Cotton Mather or Thomas Hooker as far as the devotional nature and religious orthodoxy of the work is concerned.

Not until 1644 did Williams explicitly state the doctrines he deemed necessary to profess a "belief in Jesus Christ." The very fact that he failed to do so at an earlier date would suggest that his doctrinal position was not seriously questioned in Massachusetts Bay. In *The Bloody Tenent* the doctrines of repentance, faith in God, Baptism, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the soul and body, and eternal judgment are proposed as basic "spiritual foundations."⁶⁶ Few Puritans would have found any bones of contention in such doctrines.

With a lack of charity typical of the polemic writings of his time Williams classed the Quakers, along with the Manicheans and Roman Catholics, as "Antichrists"⁶⁷ fallen away from the faith. He condemned Fox for denying "any visible Church of Christ" adding that, in addition to the ministration of angels and spirits, God also expected Christians "to sit still and listen to immediate Teachings"⁶⁸—something that Williams himself had trouble following.

No free will crept into Williams' theology to discredit his Calvinistic orthodoxy. The claim that the founder of Rhode Island was also "the Arminius of New England Orthodoxy" would have angered the man who castigated the "Arminian Popish doctrine of Freewill" as a "whorish" doctrine.⁶⁹ For him "God's sheep are safe . . . [for] none fall into the ditch on the blind Pharisee's back but such as were ordained to that condemnation."⁷⁰ Coupled with his predestination was a belief in original sin that grew stronger as the years passed and as he anticipated leaving this evil world—this habitation of "Belial."^{70b}

Williams' faith in the Bible and the literal truth of its message never wavered. For him the Scriptures were the "Pens of Heaven writing" in the same way that God's own fingers had penned the law on Mount Sinai. Such a mountain-top experience had never been duplicated in the theocracy of New England; therefore the New England government could claim no holy contract.⁷¹ Nor were any sceptic's views expressed in 1680 when "the blazing herald from heaven (a comet) prompted Williams to proclaim the dire judgment it was prophesying. The only escape was to make one's peace with God before it was too late for this was a sign of the times."⁷²

The civic and political life of Rhode Island was indeed richer because of Roger Williams' contribution to its development, but

one needs to exercise caution before carrying the torch of his "democratic" and "levelling" influence too far.⁷³ Williams bluntly objected to George Fox's idea that women could be preachers since public leadership was not their God-given rôle.⁷⁴ Nor did he even discuss the possibility of religious equality between church members for that would restrict God's grace in the granting of gifts and limit His election—a substantial inequality in itself. So "if we are searching for sources of influence upon Williams' political thought, we must look for some other source of inspiration."^{74b}

In many a dispute "animosities frequently are greatest where differences are least"⁷⁵ and Williams' writings would indicate that he agreed more than he disagreed with the fundamentals of Puritan theology. Differences existed to be sure and his unorthodox application of the principles were sharply disputed so that if he was a true "saint" he was also a troublesome one to the Puritans, but these differences appear incidental to a "larger community of outlook and identity of aim."⁷⁶

Daniel Neal points out that if Williams "had never dabbled in Divinity" he may well have been "esteemed a great and useful man" by the very Puritan society which was infuriated by his "eccentricity."⁷⁷ But Williams could not help dabbling for this was the centre of life to him and any other purpose in life but to "know Christ" he desired only "to count as loss."⁷⁸ In his religious odyssey from Anglican to Puritan to Separatist to Baptist to Seeker there were certain constants that varied little. As early as 1629 Williams had taken his stand on separation based on a Puritan theology. Although this form of separation varied and the prophetic element bordered on the eccentric his essential Biblicism was never questioned by his contemporaries. It is out of this religious conservatism that his political liberalism followed as a consequence for his frames of reference and motivation were always religious. Ernst reverses this order to claim that "his theory of religious liberty came . . . out of his unique theory of the individual and the State."⁷⁹

Actually his "unique theory" of the State was not too complimentary to democracy for "he did not look forward to a free society as the goal of human endeavour; instead he looked down on it, in pity and sorrow, seeing in freedom only a preliminary requirement for the Christian pilgrimage."⁸⁰ A free church in a free society was therefore merely a means to an end, an end that would produce the environment most conducive to the goal of his life—the quest for God unencumbered by man's coercion of the soul. In a political sense the "Providence prophet" was indeed ahead of his times, but in his motivation and goal he was very much bound to the theological temper and orientation of his age.

In keeping with his age whatever Williams believed, he believed absolutely. There was no place for compromise or moderation in the realm of theology for each religious doctrine was considered by its followers, or follower, to have a corner on the truth. Williams was no exception. What he believed he preached with no quarter given. His impetuous and fiery nature only aggravated his flair for disputes and when he touched a sensitive Puritan nerve more heat than light was usually generated in the ensuing polemics. In such heated controversies Cotton Mather's observation that Williams was like a "windmill . . . whirling around with extraordinary violence" indicated why he had little trouble setting "a whole town on fire" with his ideas.⁸¹

And yet, no doubt, he would have considered himself a failure if he had not suffered for his views for his strict observance of Biblical writings also included the command "if they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you."⁸² For Williams the dictum of Luther still held true—"Suffering, Suffering, Cross, Cross, is the Christian Right—that and nothing else."⁸³ In many ways Williams was a most other-worldly New Englander—a pilgrim on a pilgrimage and this firm cornerstone of spirituality determined his political ideals and practices. As he viewed the encroaching world of the "antichrist" he saw it only as the dark before the dawn—a fleeting prelude to eternity—when the shadow of life would vanish and the dream would be finished.⁸⁴ His New Jerusalem was not in Rhode Island for this life could not compare with his eternal destiny.

In his own words Williams poignantly penned his disillusionment with this world and his anticipation of the world to come :

What are these leaves and flowers and smoke and shadows of earthly things, about which we poor fools and children disquiet ourselves in vain? Alas, what is all the scuffling of this world for, but come will you smoke it? What are all the contentions and wars of the world about, generally, but for greater dishes and bowls of porridge? . . . All these are but sublunaries, temporaries and trivials. Eternity, O Eternity! is our business.⁸⁵

NOTES

¹ James Davis Knowles, *Memoir of Roger Williams the founder of the state of Rhode Island* (Boston, 1834), p. ix.

² James Ernst, *The Political Thought of Roger Williams* (Seattle, 1929), pp. 205, 207.

³ Vernon Louis Parrington, *The Colonial Mind 1620-1800* (3 volume series: *Main Currents of American Thought*; New York, 1927), I, p. 62. Note Samuel Brockunier, *The Irrepressible Democrat Roger Williams* (New

York, 1940), pp. 284-289, for additional modern ideals that Williams "foreshadowed."

⁴ Brockunier, *The Irrepressible Democrat*, p. 4. This work is the best-documented presentation of the early life of Williams. Oscar S. Straus, *Roger Williams, The Pioneer of Religious Liberty* (New York, 1899), p. 346, and Emily Easton, *Roger Williams* (Boston, 1930), p. 14, agree with Brockunier's evidence; while other writers such as H. F. Udden, *The New England Theocracy* (Boston, 1858), p. 85, and David Masson, *Life of John Milton* (6 volumes; London, 1870), II, p. 560, support Wales as the place of his birth and the year 1599 and 1606 respectively.

⁵ Plymouth, 1632, *The Letters of Roger Williams, 1632-1682*, edited by James R. Bartlett (6 volumes; Narragansett Club Publications, Providence, 1874), VI, p. 2. Hereafter cited as *N.C.P.*

⁶ The three articles declared that (1) the king is the supreme governor of the realm in both things spiritual and things temporal, (2) the Book of Common Prayer may be lawfully used, and (3) the 39 Articles are agreeable to the Word of God, Easton, *Roger Williams*, p. 108.

⁷ Roger Williams, *The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody*, *N.C.P.*, IV, p. 12.

⁸ Roger Williams to John Winthrop, Jr., March 25th, 1671, *Letters, N.C.P.*, VI, p. 239.

⁹ Roger Williams to Mrs. Sadler, London, 1652, *ibid.*, VI, p. 239.

¹⁰ Brockunier, *Irrepressible Democrat*, p. 53.

¹¹ Charles M. Andrews, *The Colonial Period of American History* (4 volumes; New Haven, 1936), II, p. 106.

¹² Perry Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts* (Cambridge, 1933), p. 55.

¹³ Williston Walker, *A History of the Congregational Churches in the United States* (New York, 1894), p. 19.

¹⁴ Thomas Hooker, *The Way of the Churches of New England* (Old South Leaflets, Boston, n.d.), No. 55, pp. 8-9.

¹⁵ Winthrop Hudson in the introduction to Roger Williams' *Experiments of Spiritual Life and Health* (Philadelphia, 19??), p. 14.

¹⁶ William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647*, edited by Samuel E. Morison (New York, 1952), p. 257.

¹⁷ Masson, *Life of Milton*, II, p. 561.

¹⁸ Roger Williams to John Cotton, March 25th, 1671, *Letters, N.C.P.*, VI, p. 356.

¹⁹ Wm. Bradford, *Plymouth Plantation*, p. 257.

²⁰ Roger Williams to John Cotton, March 25th, 1671, *Letters, N.C.P.*, VI, p. 356.

²¹ John Cotton, *John Cotton's Answer to Roger Williams, N.C.P.*, II, p. 4.

²² Knowles, *Memoir of Roger Williams*, p. 61.

²³ John Cotton, *Answer to Roger Williams, N.C.P.*, II, p. 64.

²⁴ Roger Williams, *Experiments of Spiritual Life and Health*, p. 16.

²⁵ John Robinson, *Works of John Robinson*, edited by Robert Ashton (3 volumes; Boston, 1851), II, p. 259.

²⁶ Perry Miller and Thomas Johnson, *The Puritans* (New York, 1938), p. 186. Both Brockunier and Knowles suggest that Williams foreshadows Jefferson in his views on religious liberty.

²⁷ Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana* (2 volumes; Hartford, 1852), II, p. 497, and John Winthrop, *The History of New England from 1630 to 1649; Journal*, edited by James Savage (2 volumes; Boston, 1825), I, p. 166.

²⁸ Winthrop's *Journal*, I, p. 122.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, I, pp. 151, 162. Udden gives July 8th as the date of the second trial.

³⁰ Roger Williams, *Mr. Cotton's Letter Examined and Answered, N.C.P.*, I, pp. 4-5.

- ³¹ *N.C.P.*, II, pp. 27-29.
- ³² See *N.C.P.*, Vol. I.
- ³³ *N.C.P.*, II, p. 75.
- ³⁴ Roger Williams, *Mr. Cotton's Letter Examined*, *N.C.P.*, I, p. 5. Note also Henry Martyn Dexter, *As to Roger Williams and his banishment from Massachusetts Plantation* (Boston, 1876), pp. 45-54, and Winthrop's *Journal*, I, pp. 122-171, for an analysis and description of the trial.
- ³⁵ Brockunier, *Irrepressible Democrat*, pp. 53-54.
- ³⁶ See Daniel Neal, *The History of New England* (2 volumes; London, 1720), I, p. 141, and Winthrop's *Journal*, I, p. 162, for comments on his "singular notions."
- ³⁷ Thomas William Bicknell, *The History of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations* (4 volumes; New York, 1920), I, p. 136.
- ³⁸ Winthrop's *Journal*, I, p. 293.
- ³⁹ D. C. Haynes, *The Baptist Denomination* (New York, 1856), pp. 300-306. Note also Daniel C. Eddy, *Roger Williams and the Baptists* (Boston, 1861), p. 87, and J. M. Cramp, *Baptist History* (Philadelphia, 18??), pp. 46-62 for the extensive claims made for Williams in Baptist history.
- ⁴⁰ Straus, *Roger Williams*, p. 107.
- ⁴¹ Roger Williams to John Winthrop, December 10th, 1649, *Letters*, *N.C.P.*, VI, p. 188.
- ⁴² Winthrop's *Journal*, I, pp. 639 and 302. See also George Fox, *New England Firebrand Quenched* (Philadelphia, 1831), p. 247.
- ⁴³ Winthrop's *Journal*, I, p. 307.
- ⁴⁴ James Ernst, *Roger Williams—New England Firebrand* (New York, 1832), p. 207.
- ⁴⁵ Irving Berdine Richman, *Rhode Island, Its Making and its Meaning* (2 volumes; New York, 1908), I, p. 111.
- ⁴⁶ Masson, *Life of Milton*, III, p. 153.
- ⁴⁷ Ernst, *Roger Williams*, p. 491.
- ⁴⁸ Easton, *Roger Williams*, pp. 24-25.
- ⁴⁹ *Roger Williams*, pp. 278-279. Note Robert Baillie, *Letters and Journals*, edited by Robert Aiken (2 volumes; Edinburgh, 1775), II, p. 24.
- ⁵⁰ Roger Williams, *George Fox Digged Out of his burrowes*, *N.C.P.*, V, p. 103.
- ⁵¹ Roger Williams, "Christening Make Not Christians," *Rhode Island Historical Tracts*, No. 14 (Providence, 1880), p. 59.
- ^{51b} Roger Williams, *Mr. Cotton's Letter Examined and Answered*, 1644, edited by Edward Underhill (London, 1848), pp. 402 and 375.
- ⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 406.
- ⁵³ Roger Williams to John Winthrop, 1636 or 1637 (Old South Leaflets, No. 54, Boston, n.d.), pp. 5-6.
- ⁵⁴ Roger Williams, *The Bloody Tenent*, 1644, edited by Edward Underhill (London, 1848), pp. 40-41.
- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 53-66, and 160.
- ⁵⁷ Andrews, *The Colonial Period in American History*, II, p. 20.
- ⁵⁸ Roger Williams, *Bloody Tenent*, p. 286.
- ⁵⁹ Roger Williams, *Mr. Cotton's Letter Examined and Answered*, *N.C.P.*, I, p. 5.
- ⁶⁰ Roger Williams, *Bloody Tenent*, p. 169.
- ⁶¹ Roger Williams, *Queries Propounded to the five Holland ministers and the Scotch Commissioners*, *N.C.P.*, II, p. 35.
- ⁶² Roger Williams, *Experiments of Spiritual Life and Health*, p. 17.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.
- ⁶⁴ Roger Williams, *N.C.P.*, IV, pp. 44-48.
- ⁶⁵ Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, II, p. 499. Note also

Winthrop's *Journal*, I, p. 255.

⁶⁶ p. 40.

⁶⁷ Roger Williams, *George Fox Dugged Out of his burrowes, N.C.P.*, V, pp. 414, 177.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 101-102, 291.

⁶⁹ Roger Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent, N.C.P.*, III, p. 258. Wilbur Kitchener Jordan makes the Arminian claim for Williams in *The Development of Religious Toleration in England* (3 volumes; Cambridge, Mass., 1938), III, p. 477.

⁷⁰ Roger Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent, N.C.P.*, III, p. 97. See also pp. 115 and 298.

^{70b} *Ibid.*, pp. 331, 165.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 358.

⁷² Roger Williams to Daniel Abbott, January 15th, 1680, *N.C.P.*, VI, p. 403.

⁷³ See Brockunier, *Irrepressible Democrat*, p. 282, for a eulogy on Williams' "modern" contributions.

⁷⁴ Roger Williams, *N.C.P.*, V, pp. 361 and 134.

^{74b} Mauro Calamandrei, "Neglected Aspects of Roger Williams' Thought," *Church History*, Vol. XXI (Chicago, 1952), p. 246.

⁷⁵ Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (Charleston, 1811), p. 31.

⁷⁶ Winthrop Hudson, foreword to *Experiments of Spiritual Life and Health*, p. 20.

⁷⁷ *The History of New England*, p. 144.

⁷⁸ Roger Williams to John Winthrop, 1636, *Old South Leaflets*, No. 54, p. 4.

⁷⁹ Ernst, *The Political Thought of Roger Williams*, p. 25.

⁸⁰ Perry Miller, *Roger Williams: his contribution to the American tradition* (Indianapolis, 1953), p. 28.

⁸¹ *Magnalia Christi Americana*, II, p. 475.

⁸² John 15: 20, Williams, *N.C.P.*, III, p. 167.

⁸³ Cited in Walter Hobhouse, *The Church and the World in Idea and History* (London, 1910), p. 15.

⁸⁴ Roger Williams, *Experiments of Spiritual Life and Health*, p. 12.

⁸⁵ Roger Williams to John Winthrop, *N.C.P.*, VI, p. 388.

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