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Christianity of Conscience: Religion Over Politics in the Williams-Cotton Debate

Sophie Farthing
sfarthing1@liberty.edu

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Abstract

This research project examines Roger Williams's representation of the relationship between church and state as demonstrated in his controversy with the Massachusetts Bay Puritans, specifically in his pamphlet war with Boston minister John Cotton. Maintaining an emphasis on primary research, the essay explores Williams's and Cotton's writings on church-state relations and seeks to provide contextual analysis in light of religious, social, economic, and political influences. In addition, this essay briefly discusses well-known historiographical interpretations of Williams' position and of his significance to American religious and political thought, seeking to establish a synthesis of the evidence surrounding the debate and a clearer understanding of relevant historiography in order to demonstrate the unarguably Christian motivations for Williams's advocacy of Separatism.

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Abstract

This research project examines Roger Williams's representation of the relationship between church and state as demonstrated in his controversy with the Massachusetts Bay Puritans, specifically in his pamphlet war with Boston minister John Cotton. Maintaining an emphasis on primary research, the essay explores Williams's and Cotton's writings on church-state relations and seeks to provide contextual analysis in light of religious, social, economic, and political influences. In addition, this essay briefly discusses well-known historiographical interpretations of Williams' position and of his significance to American religious and political thought, seeking to establish a synthesis of the evidence surrounding the debate and a clearer understanding of relevant historiography in order to demonstrate the unarguably Christian motivations for Williams's advocacy of Separatism.

Summary of Debate and Historiography

In 1631, Roger Williams and his family arrived in the Massachusetts Bay Colony from England during the famous rule of Puritan governor John Winthrop. Soon after their arrival, Williams stirred up ecclesiastical opposition when he wrote to the magistrates complaining against their interference in church discipline. When Williams's Salem congregation supported his dissention, Massachusetts Bay authorities and ministers put him on trial, fearful that division would tear apart the colony. After the General Council banished Williams, he fled Massachusetts Bay and eventually founded the tiny plantation of Providence, Rhode Island, which became a haven for religious outcasts and refugees.

Separation from Massachusetts Bay did not end the controversy, however. Several years after Williams's flight, a letter to him by Puritan minister John Cotton was published anonymously, outlining Cotton's argument for civil punishment of church dissenters and defending Williams's banishment in Scriptural terms. Outraged, Williams published "Mr. Cotton's Letter Answered," contradicting Cotton with voluminous Scriptural support and arguing that the right to interpret the Bible individually according to conscience was essential to true Christianity. A series of pamphlets followed in which Williams and Cotton debated point by point the place of the church in the civil government and the moral issues surrounding persecution and the established church.

Historiographers debate the extent of the impact of Williams's arguments. At the time of the debate, the Massachusetts Bay Colony still refused to allow religious minorities such as Quakers and Baptists to worship, and Williams's own settlement at Providence was struggling to survive. However, the complex religious concerns that fueled this passionate controversy between two ardent Christians over church-state

separation reveal the religious dilemmas faced by early American colonists. Throughout Williams's writings, political concerns clearly take second place as he urges complete separation of church and state on biblical grounds in the name of Christianity.

Context and Influences of the Debate

Williams arrived in Massachusetts Bay in 1631 as a Separatist, which marked him as an extremist compared to mainstream Puritan standards who acknowledged that, while the established Church of England was corrupt, some of its members were in fact true Christians. In contrast, Separatists like Williams argued for complete separation from and disownment of the Church of England, an issue that would feature largely in Williams's later disagreement with John Cotton. In Williams's case, however, his debates with Cotton later revealed a commitment to personal Christian freedom equal to his dedication to church purity. Throughout, the debate proved to be rife with biblical references and terminology, and both Cotton and Williams argued in the name of Christian charity. Religious upheaval in England had driven both Puritans and Separatists to North American shores; the controversy over Christian doctrine and religious liberty, however, traveled with them. Of Williams, one author writes that "his sources for solutions were essentially religious,"¹ describing the gravity of the religious and civil dilemma for both Williams and Cotton and, by extension, the Massachusetts Bay authorities.

In his well-known journals, governor John Winthrop provides a glimpse of the complications surrounding Williams' trial, one of the main sources of contextual information since Williams's and Cotton's letters from that time have not survived.

¹ Jimmy D. Neff, "Roger Williams: Pious Puritan and Strict Separationist," *Journal of Church and State* 38, no. 3 (1996): 531.

Winthrop favorably references Williams's arrival in Nantasket in February of 1631.² However, his next mention of Williams reveals the unrest caused by his dissent as he notes that Boston had written to Salem protesting their choice of Williams as minister. According to Winthrop's entry of April 12, 1631, only a few months after Williams's arrival, "Mr. Williams had refused to join with the congregation at Boston because they would not make a public declaration of their repentance for having communion with the churches of England while they lived there, and besides had declared his opinion that the magistrate might not punish the breach of the Sabbath nor any other offence."³ Williams left to join the Plymouth Separatists soon after, but returned to Salem after a disagreement. Of course, the quarrel with authorities sprang up again in full force, especially when Williams argued that the colony was not founded on an appropriate contract with the natives,⁴ and eventually the General Council placed Williams on trial for his insubordination. Throughout Winthrop's documentation of the proceedings, he argues the Puritan position that Williams endangered the religious and civil order of the colony.

Winthrop's perspective is vital in an understanding of the Williams-Cotton debate because it illuminates the Puritan concerns behind Williams's banishment. From Williams's perspective, church separation from both corrupt church institutions and from civil authority was essential to Christian liberty; the Massachusetts Bay magistrates and ministers, however, combined a concern for church purity with determination to preserve the religious and civil order. For Cotton specifically, this resulted in a desire that

² John Winthrop, *The Journal of John Winthrop 1630-1649*, ed. Richard S. Dunn and Laetitia Yeandle, Abridged ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 34.

³ John Winthrop, *The Journal of John Winthrop 1630-1649*, 37.

⁴ John Winthrop, *The Journal of John Winthrop 1630-1649*, 61.

professor Jesper Rosenmeier “to bring... a community of loving Christians into existence,”⁵ combining Christian unity with social and civil peace. The combined influences of religious purity, religious unity, and fear of civil unrest would motivate Williams’s and Cotton’s argument long after Williams left Massachusetts Bay and nominal peace was restored.

The Pamphlet War

Several years after Williams’s banishment from Massachusetts Bay and his establishment of the Providence plantation in Rhode Island, a letter to him from John Cotton was anonymously published during his visit to England. In an move that would prove to be characteristic of him throughout the controversy, Williams published a lengthy response entitled “Mr. Cotton’s Letter Lately Printed, Examined, and Answered,” extensively quoting and refuting Cotton point by point. An edited, somewhat abridged version appears in James Calvin Davis’s anthology of Williams’s writings on religious freedom and underscores Williams’s concerns about the New England church government. Most notably, Williams uses Scriptural references and references to church history to defend Separatism and points out Cotton’s inconsistency in professing Christian love for Williams while consenting to his civil banishment. Williams points out the convolution of ecclesiastical and civil authority when he says of his banishment, “...to the particular that Mr. Cotton consented not, what need he, being not one of the civil court? But that he counseled it (and so consented), beside what other proof I might produce and what [he] himself here expresses, I shall produce a double and unanswerable

⁵ Jesper Rosenmeier, "The Teacher and the Witness: John Cotton and Roger Williams," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (1968): 411.

testimony.”⁶ To Williams, the interference of a minister in the affairs of the civil Council is tantamount to enforcing Christianity, completely contrary to the freedom of conscience promised in Christ. Further, he quotes Cotton’s argument that Williams should have rejoiced to leave a colony of churches that he considered impure: “What should the daughter of Zion do in Babel; why should she not hasten to flee from there?”⁷ Honorable though Cotton’s intentions may have been, Williams declares that such an argument contains “no less than dishonor to the name of God, danger to every civil state, a miserable comfort to myself, and contradiction with itself”⁸ since Cotton justifies civil banishment – into the American wilderness -- of anyone who disagrees with the established church doctrine. How can this foster a healthy community of Christian love, Williams asks?

Interestingly, Williams makes a similar argument more succinctly in “Queries of Highest Consideration,” an address to the Houses of Parliament in protest of their plan to create an "assembly of the divines" to form a national church under the direction of the civil government. He argues that their citation of Moses's law as an example of civil control of religion is invalid since a similar government is markedly absent from the New Testament. He writes, “...we ask whether the constitution of a national church can possibly be framed without a racking and tormenting of the souls, as well as of the bodies, of persons. For it seems not possible to fit it to every conscience; sooner shall one

⁶ Roger Williams, "Mr. Cotton's Letter Lately Printed," in *On Religious Liberty: Selections from the Works of Roger Williams*, comp. & ed. James Calvin Davis (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 50.

⁷ John Cotton, quoted in Roger Williams, “Mr. Cotton’s Letter Lately Printed,” 52.

⁸ Roger Williams, “Mr. Cotton’s Letter Lately Printed,” 52.

suit of apparel fit every body...”⁹ As in “Mr. Cotton’s Letter,” Williams argues against civil interference in religious liberty from a Christian standpoint, citing absence of biblical warrant and interpreting the Scriptural call for moral purity as a command to act according to one’s conscience in good faith before God.

Nothing if not thorough, Williams repeats similar arguments in another pamphlet addressed to John Cotton, titled *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience Discussed*. Perhaps Williams' most famous pamphlet, this document outlines his accusations against Cotton and his ideas on Separatism and persecution in more detail. In his "To Every Courteous Reader," Cotton explains his thesis: persecution of Christians with differing beliefs is a sin that mars the testimony of the body of Christ.¹⁰ He underscores the importance of showing Christian love to fellow believers and states that true religious freedom can never exist where individual Christians are forced to comply with church decrees (as he had experienced in the Massachusetts Bay Colony), since this violates the Scriptural command to search out the truth of the Bible for ourselves. Cotton, a less prolific participant in the debate, responded to this second document with *The Bloody Tenent, Washed and Made White in the Bloud of the Lambe*, adapting Williams’s title to his refutation. Here, Cotton states that he "renounces" persecution for conscience's sake despite Williams' accusations to the contrary. He further addresses Williams's call to Separatism by stating that the Church of England's errors in worship were not so grave as to require complete separation since God would

⁹ Roger Williams, "Queries of Highest Consideration," in *On Religious Liberty: Selections from the Works of Roger Williams*, comp. & ed. James Calvin Davis (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 78.

¹⁰ Roger Williams, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience Discussed: And, Mr. Cotton's Letter Examined and Answered*, ed. Edward Bean Underhill (London: J. Haddon, 1848), 7-8.

not reject their worship and references Scripture extensively to prove that the welfare and unity of the Church is essential to that of the Civil State. "If the Rejoycing [sic] of the Church be the glory of a Nation, surely the disturbing, and distracting, and dissolving of the Church, is the shame and Confusion of a Nation,"¹¹ he writes. From Cotton's perspective, Williams's banishment was and is a reasonable sentence supported by the necessity for the health and good standing of the Church in order to support the framework of society.

The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody was Williams's answer. Here, he again outlines his thesis that persecution for differences of religion is incompatible with biblical Christianity, beginning with a lengthy discourse between "Truth" and "Peace" in which the two agree together about the essentiality of religious freedom. "[A]ll violence to conscience turns upon these two hinges," he declares in the introductory address to Parliament, "first, of restraining from that worshipping of a god or gods which the consciences of men in their respective worships (all the world over) believe to be true; secondly, of constraining to the practicing or countenancing of that whereof their consciences are not persuaded."¹² Williams relies heavily upon reasoning in this pamphlet and points out Cotton's personal inconsistency; he references Cotton's admission that, were Cotton himself to be persecuted for his religious beliefs, he would neither consider it just nor yield to the pressure. Throughout, the essay reveals further

¹¹ John Cotton, *The Bloody Tenent, Washed and Made White in the Bloud of the Lambe* (London, 1647), 12.

¹² Roger Williams, "The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody," in *On Religious Liberty: Selections from the Works of Roger Williams*, comp. James Calvin Davis (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 169.

Williams' religious motivation and his perspective that liberty of conscience is inseparable from true Christianity.

Both Williams and Cotton applied meticulous biblical research and reference to their arguments and worked tirelessly to refute each other's arguments in exhaustive detail. However much they disagreed over persecution, church-state relations, and freedom of conscience, they at least agreed on the vital importance of truth and justice to the survival of both church and state. While Cotton would pass away before the debate could be continued, Williams would maintain his position on religious liberty throughout his life. For both, the legacy of their writings for America would wait a century or two to develop.

Historiographical Debate and Legacy

Both Englishmen, both Protestants, both Puritans, Williams and Cotton were familiar with the same theology and shared a passion for purity in the church. As we have seen, Williams's Separatist beliefs lead him to interpret Scripture with an emphasis on the freedom of each individual to worship God according to conscience. This necessarily required the civil government and the church to remain absolutely distinct. Cotton, on the other hand, attempted to synthesize church and government activity based on the social benefits of unified religion at the cost of freedom of conscience. Surprisingly, despite the unpopularity of Williams during his lifetime, American scholarly opinions of his significance have varied widely since the late 1800s. The three main historiographical camps – Romantic, Progressive, and Revisionist – interpret Williams' legacy along

different lines, and they also debate Williams's and Cotton's political and religious motivations.¹³

Romantic historiography often approaches the Williams-Cotton debate with specific assumptions about the Puritan culture of Massachusetts Bay. Romantics see America as a Christian nation founded by Christians on Christian principles. Thus, the orderly government of Massachusetts Bay, ruled according to careful interpretation of Scripture, becomes the pattern of a godly society; Christian America is the Puritans' legacy. In a 1968 article by Jesper Rosenmeier, member of the Department of English at Tufts University, his Romantic historiography emphasizes Cotton's concern for social justice, which prompted him to attempt to use religious influence for the betterment of society. In contrast, Williams's desire for complete separation resulted from his extremist belief that the evil of the world would poison the church by any form of contact. According to Rosenmeier, Cotton's eschatological understanding of Christ's rule resulted in an admirable attempt to maintain Christian involvement in the community. This certainly does justice to Williams's conclusion that the church should absolutely separate and grants Cotton's desire for social unity some much-needed understanding. However, Romantic historiography neglects the cultural background of the controversy. Williams' solution may have been extreme, but his concern – the Puritan government's obsessive control of colonial society – presented a contradiction to Christian values that Cotton failed to reconcile.

¹³ Of course, perspectives on such a specific topic necessarily overlap in some areas: Progressives and Revisionists both tend to read Williams's writings by the light of Jefferson's "church and state" letter as if it were Williams's own hand-written creed.

Like Romanticism, Progressive historiography explores Williams's and Cotton's religious devotion as the catalyst for their disagreement. Thus, Cotton's desire to preserve the church's political involvement is portrayed as centering around an overdeveloped concern for the unity of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. In his detailed monograph, *Liberty of Conscience: Roger Williams in America*, former University of California professor Edwin Gaustad represents Williams as an icon of American religious freedom. Gaustad argues that Williams' significance proceeds directly from his efforts to instigate greater religious freedom in America. While admitting that it is difficult to pin down Williams' legacy, Gaustad draws a direct correlation between Williams's writings and modern legislation in favor of absolute church-state separation. In opposition to Williams, Cotton is often portrayed as a controlling bigot who refused to recognize the diversity of the growing American people and the vital importance of church-state separation to the colonies' success. However, while the Progressive viewpoint accurately prioritizes Protestant Christianity as the main motivation behind the Williams-Cotton debate, it does not fully account for Williams's Separatist beliefs about the role of the Christian in society or recognize the unpopularity of his beliefs during and after his lifetime.

In contrast to Romantic and Progressive religious emphasis, Revisionist historians have often interpreted Williams's writings as more politically than religiously motivated. Revisionists typically underscore Williams's opinions on religious authority, which he believed should never interfere with the civil government. For example, English professor Nan Goodman takes an extreme Revisionist position when she seeks to refute the idea of Williams as a religious figure by pointing out his opposition to the established

Puritan church of New England. She also underscores the importance of Williams' belief in "common-law," which she portrays as the natural law, rather than one derived from a debatable higher source. However, Goodman's neglect of Williams's overwhelmingly Christian and Scriptural rhetoric results in an imbalanced interpretation of his religious values. While Williams's position was considered radical during his lifetime, exclusive emphasis on his "forward thinking" fails to consider the markedly Christian basis of his arguments. Williams's writings reveal a longing for purity of worship and liberty in Christ that is hardly consistent with the Revisionist portrait of a secular political innovator.

While all three historiographical perspectives provide some understanding of the Williams-Cotton controversy, a more thorough contextual analysis yields clearer results. We can appreciate the political significance of Williams's ideology as explored by the Revisionists while maintaining a balanced view of the weighty religious and theological concerns that influenced Williams's call for complete separation and Cotton's advocacy of ecclesiastical control. Well-known historians such as Paul Johnson¹⁴ and Edmund S. Morgan¹⁵ have presented historiography that recognizes the significance of Christianity as the primary motivation for Williams's Separatist beliefs. Throughout his pamphlets and letters, Williams demonstrates a consistent dedication to biblical accuracy and exhaustive Scriptural analysis. His concern for the purity of the church and the protection of the individual conscience clearly results from a strict devotion to Scripture; nowhere is

¹⁴ See Paul Johnson's *A History of the American People*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 41-3.

¹⁵ See Edmund S. Morgan's *Roger Williams: The Church and the State*, 1st ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967).

this more evident than in the theological arguments of the Williams-Cotton debate. While Williams may have proposed radical separation in contrast to Cotton's ecclesiastical control, his purpose was clear. "True civility and Christianity," Williams wrote, "may both flourish in a state or kingdom, notwithstanding the permission of divers [sic] and contrary consciences, either of Jew or Gentile."¹⁶ American historiographers have rightly recognized the relevance of Williams's beliefs to modern American church-state legislation. However, Williams's unshakeable commitment to the Gospel as a catalyst for spiritual purity and love remains a legacy largely unclaimed by the church, American or otherwise.

¹⁶ Roger Williams, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, 2.

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