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ROGER WILLIAMS: SEVENTEENTH CENTURY PURITAN

BY

Edward James Cody

A THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Faculty

of Lehigh University

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Master of Arts

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Abstract

Roger Williams: Seventeenth Century Puritan

by

Edward J. Cody

Roger Williams, founder of Rhode Island and rebel against the Puritan theocracy, has traditionally been viewed by historians as a progenitor of modern democratic institutions and practices. He is seen as a twentieth century thinker. His writings are received as political tracts couched in the rhetoric of theology, and his activity in Rhode Island is studied as an experiment in democracy. This thesis presents a different interpretation of the life and writing's of Roger Williams.

An examination of Williams's life and writings reveals that historians have created a figure admirable by the canons of modern liberalism, but only distantly related to historical fact. Like the New England Puritans, Roger Williams felt that religion was the core of man's existence. He shared their theocentric cosmology, and he agreed with them on a number of basic theological points. Both Williams and the New England Puritans were Calvinists, believing in justification by faith and the doctrine of the elect. They agreed that the Church of England was corrupt and should be reformed. They desired a return to primitive Christianity and an elimination

of ritual and hierarchy. They felt that a true Church was composed only of the regenerate, and that its organization was of a congregational nature.

Unlike the New England Puritans, however, Williams was an idealist, a perfectionist, a fanatic. Where the Puritans were willing to compromise, he was not. Hence, while they maintained a theoretical connection with the Church of England, he demanded strict separation. While the Puritans wished to circumscribe God's sovereignty within the humanly understandable and consistent norms of the covenant theory, Williams demanded that they stand alone and unaided before God.

Such perfectionism forced him to disassociate himself from the Massachusetts' churches, and led to his banishment from the colony. He became a seeker of religious truth, demanding toleration for all religions, until God reunited the world at the second coming. Ever aware of divine prerogatives he felt that any civil interference in spiritual affairs would be an affront to God. In his desire for toleration, he was defending God's right to direct man's spiritual affairs, not man's right to choose his own religious beliefs. Williams wanted each individual to be free to follow wherever God might lead.

Many of his contemporaries believed that he was wrong, but few questioned his sincerity. Only in later and less religious times did men come to feel that behind the rhetoric

of his theology there lurked the reality of political and social ideas. Only then did his writings become political tracts, and his colony of Rhode Island an experiment in democracy.

INTRODUCTION

Modern Historians and Roger Williams

"The gods, it would seem, were pleased to have their jest with Roger Williams by sending him to earth before his time."¹ So wrote Vernon L. Parrington in 1927, and so historians continued to write for many years. Parrington, an avowed supporter of the Progressive movement, was seeking the roots of liberalism in early American history.² Roger Williams, the rebel against the Puritan theocracy, which Parrington felt had no place in the tradition of American liberalism, emerged as "one of the notable democratic thinkers that the English race has produced."³ More concerned with politics than with theology, Parrington dismissed the religious aspects of Williams's thought. He asserted that Williams "is perhaps more adequately described as a Puritan intellectual who became a Christian freethinker, more concerned with social commonwealths than with theological dogmas."⁴

1 Vernon L. Parrington, Main Currents in American Thought, The Colonial Mind 1620 to 1800 (New York, 1954), I, 62.

2 Parrington admitted, "The point of view from which I have endeavored to evaluate the materials is liberal rather than conservative, Jeffersonian rather than Federalistic; and very likely in my search I have found what I went forth to find...." Ibid., p. vii.

3 Ibid., p. 66.

4 Ibid., p. 64.

James Ernst, a student under Parrington at the University of Washington, reinforced the view that Williams was essentially a political thinker far in advance of his age. In his doctoral dissertation, The Political Thought of Roger Williams, he asserted that, "the cast of his Williams's thought was social rather than theological."⁵ By interpreting Williams's writings as political tracts, he managed to rank Williams not only as the author of most of the fundamental principles of American democracy, but as the innovator of many modern political institutions and practices. In a full length biography, Roger Williams, New England Firebrand, published in 1932, Ernst continued this theme. His description of Williams conveys the tenor of the book: "Father of American democracy and apostle of the French Revolution and individual rights, he also sowed seeds that sprouted into the English Revolution of 1648."⁶

In 1940 Samuel Brockunier published The Irrepressible Democrat, Roger Williams. The title of this account reveals the author's point of view. Brockunier agreed with Parrington and Ernst that Williams had been born before his time, that he was "a forerunner of the eighteenth century enlightenment in America."⁷ In Brockunier's hands, however,

5 James Ernst, The Political Thought of Roger Williams (Seattle, 1929), p. 5.

6 James Ernst, Roger Williams, New England Firebrand (New York, 1932), p. 278.

7 Samuel Brockunier, The Irrepressible Democrat, Roger Williams (New York, 1940), p. 248.

Williams became even more modern. By emphasizing equalitarian aspects of Williams's thought and action, Brockunier transformed Williams, the seventeenth century colonist, into a progenitor of Jacksonian democracy.⁸ Williams, it would seem, had been firmly established as one of the founders of American democracy.

While this interpretation of Williams was emerging, however, the study of Puritanism had been undergoing a gradual but profound change. Kenneth B. Murdock, Samuel Eliot Morison, and Perry Miller had interpreted Puritanism on its own terms. Their histories attempted to reconstruct seventeenth century modes of thought and patterns of life, to present pictures of real Puritans, not of Puritans viewed through twentieth century prejudices.⁹ The stereotype of Puritan intolerance began to fade and a deeper appreciation of Puritan theology and culture developed.

This reinterpretation of Puritanism did not immediately alter the view that Williams was a founder of American democracy. Since he was out of the mainstream of Puritan development, he received only passing attention from the new breed of Puritan intellectual historians. They implied their disagreement with the prevailing interpretation of Williams, but it was left for Maure Calamandrei, writing in the reli-

8 Ibid., p. 116, passim.

9 A good discussion of these developments can be found in: Richard Schlatter, "The Puritan Strain," in John Higham, ed., The Reconstruction of American History (New York, 1962), pp. 25-45.

giously oriented periodical Church History, in 1952, to document the thesis "that rather than being a man of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment Roger Williams was a Puritan."¹⁰ Calamandrei emphasized that Williams was essentially a "seeker" of religious truth, and that his political ideas grew out of this seekerism."¹¹

In 1953, Perry Miller, writing for the "Makers of the American Tradition Series," declared, "I have long been persuaded that accounts written within the last century created a figure admirable by the canons of modern secular liberalism, but only distantly related to the actual Williams."¹² In a series of short essays interspersed with selections from Williams's writings, Miller demonstrated the essentially theological nature of Williams's typological approach to the Bible provided a key to understanding his thought and action.¹³

The emphasis placed by Calamandrei and Miller on Williams's religious preoccupation led to more direct attacks on the interpretation of Williams as a forerunner of democratic thought and practice. In 1956, Alan Simpson's article, "How Democratic Was Roger Williams?," appeared in the William and Mary Quarterly. Simpson asserted that Williams had

10 Mauro Calamandrei, "Neglected Aspects of Roger Williams Thought," Church History, XXL, 1952, 239.

11 Ibid., p. 243 ff.

12 Perry Miller, Roger Williams, His Contribution to the American Tradition (New York, 1953), p. xiii.

13 Ibid., p. 32, passim.

never developed a political philosophy, that his policies in Rhode Island were motivated by expediency and Christian love, and that he was not a founder of modern democracy.¹⁴

A more specific reinterpretation was made in 1965 by a theologian, LeRoy Moore, Jr. In his article, "Religious Liberty: Roger Williams and the Revolutionary Era," Moore compared Williams's attitude toward religious liberty with that of the founding fathers. "My point is," he wrote, "that the legal institutions of the United States rest upon Augustinian-Calvinistic but rationalistic presuppositions, not upon theocentric but anthropocentric grounds. The eclipse of Roger Williams underlies this."¹⁵ Moore maintained that Williams sought religious freedom because he feared that the state would interfere with religion. The founding fathers, on the other hand, wished to protect the state from the church, and, hence, they made no use of the ideas of Roger Williams.

This brief historiographical survey should reveal the necessity of a new and comprehensive examination of the life and thought of Roger Williams. It is hoped that the following pages will provide this, not only by bringing together the various threads of revisionist thought, but by offering further insight into the character of Williams's

14 Alan Simpson, "How Democratic Was Roger Williams?" William and Mary Quarterly, XIII, 1956, 58 ff.

15 LeRoy Moore, Jr., "Religious Liberty: Roger Williams and the Revolutionary Era," Church History, XXXIV, 1965, 72.

writings and actions. The topic will be approached from an intellectual point of view emphasizing Williams's thought as expressed in his writings. In order to set the stage for the main character, this study will begin with an analysis of the intellectual climate in early Puritan New England.

CHAPTER I

The Puritan Faith

On Thursday the tenth of June, 1630, John Winthrop exulted in the "fine fresh smell from shore."¹ After almost three months at sea, during which he and his fellow passengers had endured cramped quarters, poor food, monotony, and tempestuous weather, the sight and smell of land invigorated his spirits. Standing on the deck of the Arbella with the other future leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, he gazed at the virgin beauty of the New England coast. Here, at last, was the promised land, where they would build a "City upon a Hill" dedicated to the proper worship of God.²

Waiting impatiently for the tiny ship to drop anchor, this small group of Englishmen may well have reflected on the course of events which had brought them to the New World. Their memories ached with the exhaustion of struggle and the bitterness of failure. Aggressive men, mostly from middle class backgrounds, they had attempted to alter one of the central institutions of seventeenth century English society, the Church of England. Such an established institution, however, could not

1 John Winthrop, Winthrop's Journal in James Hosmer, ed., Original Narratives of Early American History (New York, 1903), I, 48.

2 Winthrop, A Modell of Christian Charity in Edmund S. Morgan, ed., The Founding of Massachusetts (New York, 1964), p. 203.

be radically changed in a short time. Because even in a religiously oriented age many men care more for the security of traditional practices than for theological truth, and because government and religion were intimately united in the seventeenth century, the Puritans met with determined opposition. Viewed as traitors, fanatics, and crack-pots, they were persecuted for their non-conformity.

Sometimes imprisoned, often fined, and always restricted in their activity, they decided to seek physical and spiritual freedom in America. On August 26, 1629, their leaders met at Cambridge, where they signed an agreement binding themselves to emigrate to the New World and to encourage others to do likewise. They acted for "God's glory and the churches good."³ They were determined that their religious idealism would not be eradicated by force, that they would find a place where it could be transformed into practical reality. Now after almost a year of working and planning, after vast expense, and physical hardship, the first eleven shiploads of settlers and provisions had arrived.

Though the past had brought hardship to these Puritan leaders, at least the future promised a measure of happiness. Convinced of the truth of their theological position, they expected God to look favorably upon them. This was a source of assurance and joy, but their joy was mixed with sorrow, for they were[®] equally convinced that the impiety

3 The Agreement at Cambridge, in Morgan, ed., Founding, p. 183.

of others would bring the wrath of God upon the world. They had come to build not only a model Christian community, but also a haven from the impending destruction. John Winthrop spoke of Massachusetts as God's refuge for many whom He means to save out of the general calamity."⁴ At least they were the chosen people. They would prosper and be saved if they followed God's commands and constructed their "City upon a Hill."

If the initial excitement of arriving at their destination had caused any of the Puritans to forget the difficulties which awaited them, their first contact with land placed them face to face with stark reality. They discovered that the small preliminary settlement, which had been established the year before at Salem, was "in a sad and unexpected condition, above 80 of them being dead the winter before, and many of those alive weak and sick...."⁵ Food supplies on hand were not sufficient to last two weeks. As the rest of the eleven-ship fleet arrived, it was discovered that a number of prospective settlers had died on the way and that substantial quantities of provisions had been lost. The lack of shelter, fresh vegetables, fruit, and other necessities caused many of those who had survived the arduous journey to succumb soon after their arrival. Of those who lived through those first few weeks, none knew "whose turn would be next."⁶

⁴ Winthrop, Reasons to be Considered and Objections with Answers, in Morgan, ed., Founding, p. 175.

⁵ Thomas Dudley to Lady Bridget, Countess of Lincoln, March 12, 1631, in Morgan, ed., Founding, p. 160.

⁶ William Hubbard, A General History of New England, in Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society (Boston, 1868), Second Series, V-VI, 132.

Discouraged but not disheartened, the Puritans persevered. Practically speaking they had to work or die, but it was more than personal survival that motivated them. Their enterprise was dedicated to God, the God of the Old Testament, stern, but just and ever sovereign. He was a God who expected success, but who would help only if they helped themselves. His ways were at times inscrutable. If he allowed sickness and death, there was a reason. They could not question; they could not waver; they must follow his voice and accomplish their assigned task. John Winthrop had warned in a sermon on the Arbella, "But if our hearts shall turn away so that we will not obey....we shall surely perish out of the good land whether we pass over this vast sea to possess it."⁷

The Puritan settlers knew exactly what God wanted. They agreed, as well as any group of people could possibly agree, on certain specific things which were necessary to insure God's approval. Basically, their mission in the New World was to establish a community in which the church conformed to the original dictates of Christ. They desired to return to the "First Ages of Christianity" which were the "Golden Ages."⁸ Their Church must be purified of all idolatrous ceremonies and practices, purged of a hierarchy, and open only to the regenerate. Organized on a congregational or local basis, it would stand as a model of purity for the rest of the world.

⁷ Winthrop, Modell of Christian Charity in Morgan, ed., Founding, p. 204.

⁸ Cotton Mather, Magnalia Christi Americana (London, 1702), "A General Introduction," par. 3.

So the Puritans worked on, building homes, clearing farms, planting crops. Their settlement spread along the banks of the Charles River, and as months passed more colonists arrived to join in the religious experiment. Churches were soon established at Charles-Town, Boston, and Roxbury. Within two years there were ^{seven} distinct churches in the settlement. In later years, Cotton Mather described them as "Golden Candelsticks, illustrated with a very sensible Presence of our Lord Jesus Christ among them."⁹

Now, Mather was somewhat biased. There were others who would surely have maintained that the "candelsticks" were badly tarnished. The New England Puritans for all their religious zeal were by no means perfectionists. More dedicated than many people but less scrupulous than some, they had reached a compromise position. Their place in the religious structure of the time was summed up well by William Hubbard, the official historian of the colony:

It must not be denied that they were offspring of the old Nonconformists, who yet always walked in a distinct path from the rigid Separatists, nor did they ever disown the Church of England to be a true Church, as retaining the essentials of faith and order.¹⁰

The Puritans had been dissatisfied with the Church of England, because they felt that it had failed to fully incorporate the principles of the Protestant Reformation. It was still ruled by a hierarchy and organized on a presbyterian basis. Its ministers continued to wear tradi-

⁹ Ibid., Bk. I., Ch. V., p. 23.

¹⁰ Hubbard, History of New England, p. 181.

tional vestments and its liturgy remained Roman Catholic in tone. The church buildings were still ornate and filled with what the Puritans believed were idolatrous images. Each congregation continued to admit unregenerate persons. Yet the New England Puritans had not separated from their mother church. They realized that perfection could not be attained in this world, and while they found the Church of England intolerably corrupt, they could not bring themselves to disown it. Their separation from it was physical rather than spiritual. They made this position clear in their farewell to England, entitled the

Humble Request:

...for we are not those that dream of perfection in this world; yet we desire you would be pleased to take notice of the principles, and body of our company, as those who esteem it our honor, to call the Church of England, from whence we rise, our dear mother.¹¹

Accepting the fact that evil existed and always would exist in the world, the New England Puritans realized that man's purpose was not to eradicate corruption, but to serve God as best he could amid such evil. They knew that they had not and would not attain perfection, that their churches could be improved. Even Cotton Mather admitted that these golden candelsticks could be "more perfect before God."¹² In short, the Puritans realized that their heavenly city was to be built in the world and that the world would demand a price.

11 The Humble Request (New York, 1911), p. 3.

12 Mather, Magnalia, "Introduction," par. 3.

What these settlers did hope to achieve completely was a practical working out of the "covenant" between God and man. Puritanism was originally a Calvinistic movement adhering strictly to the doctrine of predestination. However, the rigor of this position contained within itself the seeds of destruction for any religious movement. If man's free actions did not influence the possibility of his salvation, why should man act one way or another? The doctrine of the covenant was an attempt to provide man with a meaningful code of morality, while at the same time maintaining the absolute sovereignty of God.¹³

According to the covenant theory, God gave his saving grace to whomever he wished. This was the Covenant of Grace which, like all agreements, was two-sided. God, in his sovereign capacity, gave grace; man, in turn, had to respond by attempting to fulfill God's will. The very will of God, as inexorable and incomprehensible as it was, now became evident through the inculcation of grace. The covenant theory, therefore, was a theological attempt to make the absolutely sovereign and unfathomable God a more personal God, who could be understood by man and who would deal with him on a humanly comprehensible plane.

In the practical realm of everyday life, this meant that God would reward good actions and punish evil ones. God, of course, was still sovereign, determining who was to receive grace and consequently who was

13 The best and most complete analysis of the covenant theory can be found in: Perry Miller, The New England Mind, The Seventeenth Century (New York, 1939), 365-505. A shorter version of this analysis is in: Miller, "The Marrow of Puritan Divinity," Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts XXXII (1937), p. 247-300.

to be saved. A man who was fortunate enough to have been given grace became obliged by the terms of the compact to attempt to actualize that grace, to try to perform good actions and to avoid evil. Such a man would be saved for trying, not for succeeding. He would not be forced into salvation. A man who was not ordained by God as one of the elect never obtained the grace necessary to enable him to try, and hence he was damned for not trying nor for failing. In this way the sovereignty of God was preserved while at the same time man became efficaciously involved in the salvation process. Thomas Hooker explained this relationship in

A True Sight of Sin:

He that spills the Physick that should cure him, the meat that should nourish him, there is no remedy but he must needs dye, so that the Commission of sin makes only a separation from God, but obstinate resistance and continuance in it, maintains an infinit and everlasting distance between God and the soul: So that so long as the sinful resistance of thy soul continues; God cannot vouchsafe the Comforting and guiding presence of his grace; because its cross to the Covenant of Grace he hath made, which he will not deny, and his Oath which he will not alter.¹⁴

Thus the Puritan conception of the Covenant of Grace contained two irreconcilable notions: the absolute sovereignty of God and the possibility of efficacious human activity in gaining salvation. God was still the one who, in the words of Michael Wiggelsworth,

...may chuse, or else refuse,
all men to save or spill...¹⁵

Yet, if men performed good actions and avoided sin they could expect

¹⁴ Thomas Hooker, Application of Redemption (London, 1659), p. 59.

¹⁵ Michael Wiggelsworth, The Day of Doom, ed., Kenneth B. Murdock (New York, 1929), p. 21.

Christ to say:

These things do clear, and make appear
 their faith to be unfeigned,
 And that a part in my¹⁶ desert and purchase
 they have gained.

Like any good Puritan, Michael Wigglesworth saw no contradiction in these ideas. The Puritan compact allowed both to exist side by side. It solved Man's perennial problem of reconciling a moral code of "do's and don't's" with a God who determined for himself who was to be saved and who was to be damned. In effect the covenant theory was a compromise. It allowed for the imperfections of man and the world, and it preserved rational concepts while explaining a super-rational being. It certainly could not be defended as a purist approach to theology. It was, however, a necessary attempt at ordering a religion which had to exist in an impure world.

The covenant theory did not end with the Covenant of Grace. There were also the Church Covenant and the Civil Covenant. By these two covenants, the Covenant of Grace was transformed from a personal agreement with God to a social agreement among men and between God and the community as well. The Church Covenant was the visible union of the saints or of those who had received grace. Theoretically the Covenant of Grace and the Church Covenant were distinct. In practice they were considered inseparable. Witness the opening sentence of the Covenant of the Church of Salem:

16 Ibid., p. 22.

We covenant with our Lord, and one with another; and we do bind ourselves in the presence of God, to-walk together in all his ways, according as he is pleased to reveal himself unto us in his blessed word of truth; and do explicitly, in the name and fear of God, profess and protest to walk as followeth, through the power and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.¹⁷

The practices of confession and profession insured that only the regenerate or saints would be admitted to church membership. Men or women who wished to join the Church first had to convince the elders that, "they are true believers, that they have been wounded in their hearts for their original sinne, and actual transgressions..." After this confession of their past offenses and a statement of their changed attitude, they had to "pitch upon some promise of free grace in the Scripture, for the ground of their faith..."¹⁸ Then they had to demonstrate that they had a complete knowledge of Christian doctrine. Finally, the whole process had to be repeated in a public profession of faith before the entire congregation. This difficult process attempted to insure that only those who had been chosen by God to partake in the Covenant of Grace were allowed to partake of the Church Covenant.

In the case of the Civil Covenant it was impossible to exclude the unregenerate from membership. It was, however, possible to insure that the interests of the Church Covenant predominated. In theory, the Civil and Church Covenants were separate, but in practice they were united.

17 Quoted in Mather, Magnalia, Bk. I., Ch. V, p. 23.

18 Thomas Lechford, Plain Dealing or News from New England (London, 1642), p. 5. See also: pp. 4-9.

The civil power would be used to enforce the morality dictated by the church. The Cambridge Platform of 1648 made this practice official:

The end of the Magistrate's office, is not only the quiet and peaceable life of the subject, in matters of righteousness and honesty, but also in matters of godliness, yea of all godliness.

To this conveniently organized and sufficiently compromised brand of theology and social organization, the Puritans added the authority of the Bible. It was easy to find Biblical texts which sanctioned their views of morality and church organization, and in the history of the Jews and their Covenant with God, the Puritans discovered a striking parallel. Hence, they tended to emphasize the Old Testament, at times almost to the exclusion of the New. This lent a somewhat harsh and rugged quality to their particular brand of Christianity. Yet, although they hoped that the "God of Israell is among us,"²⁰ they did remain essentially Christian in their theology.

With their theological doctrine decided along the lines of the Covenant, the New England Puritans had but one concern - to put it into practice. They had no time to worry about the opinions of others; they were much too concerned with transforming their own conception into a working community, a reincarnation of the Covenant between God and his people, Israel. When they came to the New World, they left behind them the Puritan tendency to speculate and dispute in theological matters.

19 Quoted in Mather, Magnalia, Bk. V., Ch. I., P. 38.

20 Winthrop, Modell of Christian Charity, in Morgan, ed., Founding, p. 203.

They all agreed on the basic doctrines and they wanted only conformists among them. Anyone who came to join in their noble experiment must do so out of religious idealism, Thomas Dudley warned:

...if any came hither to plant for worldly ends that can live well at home, he committs an error...If any godly men, out of religious ends, will come over to help us in the goodwork we are about, I think they cannot dispose of²¹ themselves nor of their estates more to God's glory...

Orthodoxy was expected as a matter of course. And why not?

After all, theirs was the true faith. They were as positive of this as men could possibly be. Francis Higgenon emphatically stated, "...we have here the true religion and holy ordinances of Almighty God taught amongst us..." Knowing the truth was of great value in insuring success, Higgenon confidently concluded "...if God be with us who can be against us."²²

Since they had arrived at what they considered the best solution for this world, the Puritans saw no reason to distract themselves from the more practical task of building the "City upon a Hill." Everyone had to conform to their compromise religious position. Nathaniel Ward could well claim to be the "Herauld of New England," when he declared in The Simple Cobler of Aggawan that dissenters would have liberty to stay away from the Puritan colony.²³ "Experience will teach Churches and Christians,"

21 Thomas Dudley to Lady Bridget, Countess of Lincoln, March 22, 1631, in Morgan, ed., Founding, p. 165.

22 Francis Higgenon, New England's Plantation in Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society (Boston, 1806), Second Series, I, P. 124.

23. Nathaniel Ward, The Simple Cobler of Aggawan, ed., Lawrence C. Worth (New York, 1912), p. 3.

he maintained, "that it is for better to live in a state united, though somewhat corrupt, than in a state where of some part is incorrupt and all the rest divided." The New England Puritans would not tolerate dissent even if it attempted to purify their theological position. They were convinced that anything beyond their compromise was impractical idealism.

The very fact that the Puritans were men, depraved and fallen by nature, determined that their state and church would be somewhat corrupt. How could it be otherwise when, as Thomas Hooker declared, "we are all sinners, it is my infirmity....no man lives without faults and follies, the best have their failings, In many things we offend all."²⁵ Since the state and the church were composed of men, they would of necessity share in the faults of men. To expect to achieve perfection would be folly. The Puritans would only be as pure as the world allowed. Theirs was not a heavenly quest, it was an attempt to find a tenable compromise between worldliness and perfectionism.

As far as they planned to go, however, the Puritans strove for complete success. Since God ratified their agreement by granting them initial prosperity in the establishment of their community, they knew that he "would expect a strict performance of the articles contained in it."²⁶ Hence, they were required to work together in an attempt to establish a community dedicated to the continual and proper worship of God.

25. Hooker, Application of Redemption, p. 52.

26 Winthrop, Modell, in Morgan, ed., Founding, p. 203.

This meant that all the energy of the community would be geared to the establishment of purified congregational churches.

In order to construct such a united state, the Puritans employed the civil government to enforce conformity in religious affairs. With the practical unity of the Civil Covenant and the Church Covenant, they united the civil and spiritual institutions to maintain orthodoxy and expedite the construction of the "City upon a Hill." According to John Cotton, one of the most articulate supporters of the New England position, anyone who disagreed with accepted religious practices in any way sinned against his conscience.²⁷ Since the New England Puritans felt that they possessed religious truth, Cotton knew that such sinners, "may justly be censured by the church with excommunication, and by the civil sword also, in case they shall corrupt others to the perdition of their souls."²⁸ In short, the civil authority would work hand in hand with the religious establishment to insure that there was no deviation from accepted standards.

This unity of church and state was accepted as natural during the seventeenth century. In England or in the New World, any attempt to separate the two could not be accepted. Religion was such a central force in society that most people foresaw anarchy as the inevitable result of allowing numerous forms of worship. This is not to say that there were

27 John Cotton, Answer to Mr. Williams, in Publications of the Narragansett Club (Providence, 1866-1874), III, 41-43. These Publications contain the collected works of Roger Williams and relevant controversial material by John Cotton. They will hereafter be referred to as P.N.C.

28 Ibid., p. 51.

none who fought such a position. Individuals had always debated the wisdom of this idea, but the vast majority of people firmly believed in the unity of church and state. The New England Puritans with their doctrine of the covenant believed even more firmly.

In Massachusetts the civil leaders were as convinced as the spiritual leaders. Take, for example, Edward Johnson, the leading man in the town of Woburn. He advised his neighbors to choose their magistrates with care. They should be men "sound both in profession and confession, men fearing God and hating bribes..." Their authority should include jurisdiction over ecclesiastical as well as civil affairs. As orthodox Puritans they could "look to the rules of the first (table) also..." In other words they would enforce the first three commandments. Finally, the magistrate should be a man who would "put on Joshua's resolution, and courage, never to make league with any of ...seven sects."²⁹

What the Puritans had done was to freeze the evolution of religious speculation at one point. As non-conformists in England, they had allowed themselves the luxury of theological investigation. Once they came to the New World, however, they demanded that this cease. Having established a compromise theological position of the basis of the covenant, and reinforced it with their particular interpretation of the Bible, they were determined to transpose their ideas into an actual working community.

²⁹ Edward Johnson, Wonder Working Providence, in Franklin Jameson, ed., Original Narratives of Early American History, (New York, 1910), p. 30-31.

They never understood or accepted the possibility that anyone could disagree with them. God had ratified the covenant; they could not alter it. As far as they were concerned, they had arrived at the best solution for this world, and they would enforce it with the power of this world, the civil magistrate. They realized that their community was not totally pure in any sense, but they felt they had the true faith for men.

CHAPTER II

Too Saintly for the Saints

By February 1631, the Massachusetts Bay Colony had become a squalid but stable outpost in New England. Only the poorest settlers still lived in tents or dugout homes; the rest enjoyed the comparative luxury of small frame houses with thatched roofs. Food had not yet become abundant, but there was enough to live on. Scurvy and the biting cold of the New England winter still exacted their toll, but the specter of death was no longer supreme and ever present. The Puritans had survived. Their settlement had become a physical reality. Since they were convinced that it already constituted a sterling example of a spiritual community, they knew that they were well on their way to realizing a true "City upon a Hill."

On the eleventh of the month, the ship Lyon squirmed through the ice drifts of Nantasket Bay and anchored at Boston. The colony exploded in a joyous welcome. This was the first contact with England in almost a year. There would be letters from relatives and friends, news of events in the outside world, provisions to tide them through the winter and to cure the scurvy, perhaps even a relative or friend who had come to join the new community. A day of thanksgiving was proclaimed in honor of the ship's safe arrival. Feasting, drinking, and general revelry provided

a brief respite from the hardships of wilderness life.¹

Among those who came to Massachusetts on the Lyon was a young and "godly minister,"² Roger Williams. Driven from England by the persecutions of Bishop Laud, he found that his conscience "was persuaded against the national church and ceremonies and bishops" Unlike many of those who had preceded him, he had not come willingly. Leaving England was "bitter as death" to him, but his religious zeal overpowered any concern for worldly happiness.³ At least in Massachusetts he could worship properly, unsoiled by the corruption of the Anglican Church. Now that he had been forced to emigrate, he determined not to compromise in any way, to follow his conscience to the letter and thereby achieve perfection.

Born in London in 1603, the son of a middle class shopkeeper, Roger Williams had been reared on the orthodox tenets of the Anglican Church. A bright, ambitious youth, he learned short-hand while still in his early teens, and worked as a stenographer for Sir Edward Coke, Chief Justice of the King's Bench. He so impressed his employer that Coke provided for his education at the Charterhouse school, and at Pembroke Hall, Cambridge. At the time of his graduation from Pembroke in 1627, he had no qualms about subscribing to the thirty-nine articles of the Anglican Church, as he evidenced by signing the university "Subscription Book."⁴

1 Winthrop, Journal, I, 59.

2 Ibid., p. 57.

3 Roger Williams to Mrs. Sadlier, 1652, in P.N.C., VI, 239.

4 Ernst, Roger Williams, p. 32. For the early life of Williams see: Ibid., pp. 1-64; Brockunier, Irrepressible Democrat, pp. 1-50.

While studying for the ministry during the next two years, however, Williams became disenchanted with the Anglican Church. He became a Puritan and a Separatist. The reasons for this change in his religious attitude are unknown except for the fact that Cambridge was a center of Puritan dissent. Whether he underwent a conversion experience or arrived at his new outlook by less emotional means cannot be determined, but the completeness and finality of his rejection of the Church of England soon became obvious.

Early in 1629 he became chaplain in the household of Sir William Masham, a leading Puritan and a close friend of John Winthrop. Through Masham he became acquainted with many of the most prominent Puritans, and took a part in planning their emigration to Massachusetts. Though he did not join the initial group of emigrants, he continued to espouse their non-conformist doctrines in England. His zeal in this endeavor brought him to the attention of Bishop Laud, the champion of conformity in the Anglican Church. And so, he now found himself in the ice-choked harbor of Nantasket Bay about to join his fellow outcasts in the wilderness.

When he debarked from the Lyon, Williams was met by Governor Winthrop, an old and loyal friend. Having attended the meeting at Cambridge where the Puritans pledged themselves to come to the New World, Williams was well known to many of the most influential settlers. They viewed him as a man "of good account ...for a godly and zealous preacher."⁵ They were convinced that he would dedicate himself to their cause and

5 Hubbard, History, p. 202.

become a shining light of New England orthodoxy.

As chance would have it, the Reverend John Wilson, teacher of the Boston church, was returning to England in order to bring his wife to Massachusetts. The congregation demonstrated their faith in Williams by offering him this vacant position. It was a distinct honor for such a young man to be so called. The road to honor, prestige, and power opened before him. If he would support the New England position, Roger Williams would immediately become one of the leading figures in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. He would enjoy both material and spiritual preeminence.

Material preeminence, however, meant nothing to Williams. Even in an age when religious idealism played a key role in determining a man's actions, Williams was viewed by friends as "passionate and precipitate and divinely mad."⁶ For him, the things of this world were transitory. In comparison to spiritual values, they were "but as dung and dross."⁷ Spiritual preeminence, therefore, did constitute a goal worth seeking, but only in terms of personal sanctity. The position of teacher at the Boston Church meant nothing by itself. If it could serve as a means of increasing his personal holiness, Williams would accept it. If not, he would refuse.

An examination of the theological position of the Massachusetts Puritans convinced Williams that it would be detrimental to his soul to accept the office of teacher. Along with his Massachusetts counterparts,

⁶ Quoted in Ernst, Roger Williams, p. 60.

⁷ Williams to Major Mason, August 1651, in P.M.C., VI., 214.

Williams asserted that the true church consisted of, "holy persons called out from the world . . . , and that also neither national, provincial, nor diocesan churches are of Christ's institution."⁸ The colonists were satisfied with practicing this in the New World. Williams, however, demanded both theoretical and practical perfectionism. If a true church were to be established, it would not only have to purge itself of every unregenerate member, but also separate from churches whose organization was more than "a company of living stones."⁹ Since the Boston Church had not separated from the Church of England, Williams refused to associate himself with it. "I durst not," he declared, "officiate to an unseparated people as upon examination and conference I found them to be."¹⁰

In refusing the Boston offer, Williams was attempting to keep himself unsoiled by the "rubbish of anti-christian confusion and desolations,"¹¹ in which the New England Puritans were steeped by their theoretical association with the Church of England. He was following his separatist beliefs to the limit, not denying the validity of the New England position. It was not the form of worship that bothered him, but the fact that a connection with the unregenerate outside of the community was contaminating all. In short, Williams was demanding a perfect imple-

8 Roger Williams, The Bloody Tenent of Persecution, For Cause of Conscience, Discussed in a Conference Between Truth and Peace, in P.N.C., III, 66.

9 Ibid., pp. 66-67.

10 Williams, to John Cotton Jr., March 25, 1671, in P.N.C., VI, 356.

11 Williams, Bloody Tenent, in P.N.C., III, 67.

mentation of theological doctrine. Unlike his fellow settlers he was unwilling to compromise on the slightest detail of religion. From the start, he was too saintly for the saints.

Williams's refusal of the Boston offer undoubtedly shocked the Puritan colonists. After all, in England he had been an ardent advocate of their cause. Why should he refuse such an honor? Yet, if they had reflected carefully, they would have remembered that he had always been a little too zealous. As early as 1629 he had presented John Cotton and Thomas Hooker with arguments from scripture "why he durst not join with them in their use of Common Prayer."¹² Williams, the idealist, would not tolerate the slightest deviation from Puritan standards. Having been forced to leave England because of his theological beliefs, he would demand their perfect fulfillment in the New World. This attitude, alien as it was to the practical spirit of the New England experiment, would lead to further problems for the Massachusetts community.

In the excitement generated by Williams's refusal of the Boston offer, many people ignored his potentially dangerous assertion that the magistrate could not enforce the laws of the first table, or in modern terms, the first three commandments. Williams did not press the point, for as yet his own thought remained incomplete and uncertain. Such a position, however, was characteristic of an uncompromising belief

12 Roger Williams, The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody: By Mr. Cotton's Endeavor to Wash It White in the Blood of the Lambe, in P.N.C., IV., 65.

in the sovereignty of God¹³ - a notion alien to the compromise spirit of the compact. Williams was convinced that all men should, "embrace all the commands of God with delight." The magistrate was, therefore, superfluous. Since all men should follow these commands while "remembering their own unworthiness, vileness, and baseness in God's presence,"¹⁴ the magistrate became dangerous. As Williams saw it, the magistrate was like any other man and, therefore, incapable of deciding religious issues. Only God could direct such affairs. To the Puritan community, which under the compact theory demanded conformity in all things, such a position could easily mean destruction.

For the moment, at least, Williams remained simply an annoyance, not a threat. He left Boston for Salem, in whose more individualistic atmosphere he hoped to find an acceptable theological position. A persuasive and sincere man, capable of arousing enthusiasm in others, Williams quickly charmed John Endicott, leader of the Salem community. Williams was offered the position of teacher at the Salem church. However, the General Court of Massachusetts, ever watchful for signs of nonconformity, was apprehensive at this turn of events. The Court sent a letter to the Salem congregation "marvelling" at the fact that a man who had expressed such divergent opinions should be offered such a responsible

13 Williams's perfectionism would later manifest itself in a complete rejection of the compact theory. The seeds of this position can be seen here. The attitude of mind which this position represents is the same attitude which brought Williams to refuse the offer from the Boston Church, i.e., a refusal to compromise on any theological position. Williams would not sanction any human interference with the prerogatives of God, while the Puritans had circumscribed the divine will within humanly understandable bounds.

position.¹⁵ The letter produced its desired effect. The offer was withdrawn and Williams was soon on his way to the more separatist colony of Plymouth.

Here Williams found a truly congenial theological atmosphere, and for a time his soul remained at peace. Like all settlers, Williams tilled the soil to provide his food. On Sundays he spoke to the congregation propounding theological questions and offering his opinions on religious matters. He seems to have been well respected and quite free to speculate publicly concerning any area of theology. In 1632, the congregation voted to admit him to the church. "And his teaching was well approved," declared the grave and pious Governor Bradford, "for the benefit whereof I still bless God and am thankful even for his sharpest admonitions and reproofs...."¹⁶ Clearly, Williams continued to counsel a course of perfectionism. The Plymouth congregation, however, was evidently willing to listen and grateful for the inspiration.

Yet human nature is such that a man can bear with perfectionism only until he realizes that he never achieves nor even desires to achieve such an ideal state. Only the special individual called a fanatic by some, or perhaps a saint by others, persists in a quest for the perfect. The vast majority of mankind turns against such a person, pronounces his ideas strange and ridiculous, and proceeds either to ignore or attack

14 Roger Williams, Experiments of Spiritual Life and Health, ed., Winthrop S. Hudson (Philadelphia, 1951), pp. 66-69.

15 Winthrop, Journal, I, 61-62.

16 William Bradford, Of Plymouth Plantation, ed., Samuel Elliot Morison (New York, 1952), p. 257.

him. Eventually, even the seventeenth-century religious idealists who belonged to the Plymouth colony found the preaching of Roger Williams alien, unrealistic, and fanatical. Governor Bradford describes Williams's "fall into some strange opinions, and from opinions to practice, which caused some controversy between the church and him."¹⁷

The actual cause of this mutual dissatisfaction centered about the question of separatism. The Plymouth settlers had broken every practical and theoretical tie with the Church of England. However, when some of them had occasion to return to England, they attended services in the Anglican Church. For Williams this constituted a denial of religious principles. To his perfectionist mind, even such a social amenity was evil - evil not only for those who did it, but for every member of the Plymouth church. Williams was convinced that he was being corrupted by these indiscretions of his less scrupulous brethren. He insisted that they cease such activity. When they refused and termed his ideas "strange," he disassociated himself with them.¹⁸

Cotton Mather describes another controversy in which Williams became involved.¹⁹ Though we have no other mention of this incident, the attitude expressed is typical of Williams's thorough religious orientation. It appears that Williams objected to the use of the term "Good-

17 Ibid., p. 257.

18 See: Hubbard, History, p. 204.

19 Mather, Magnalia, Bk. II, Ch. IV, par. 10., p. 17.

man" as a title of address. He felt that this word could not be applied to the unregenerate and should be reserved only for the truly "good."

This attitude was, of course, rejected by the Plymouth settlers as fanatical. Fanatical it truly was, even by seventeenth-century standards.

For these reasons, Roger Williams left Plymouth in 1633. He returned to Salem where he joined the church. The members of the Salem congregation had not disavowed their connection with the Church of England, but they evidently approved of Williams's theological position, and he of theirs, for he was soon acting in the unofficial capacity of assistant to the pastor. This situation could only lead to controversy, and Williams soon embroiled himself in a series of disputes with the Puritan leaders. These incidents were essentially theological in nature and provide further evidence of Williams's perfectionist attitude.

While in Plymouth, Williams had expressed the opinion that the Massachusetts settlers had no right to the land they now inhabited. Now that he had returned to Salem, the General Court asked him to explain this idea. Williams presented a treatise he had written on the subject. Since this document has been lost, we can only partially reconstruct his arguments from second-hand sources. It seems clear, however, that Williams charged the King with a "solemn public lie, because in his patent he blessed God that he was the first Christian prince that had discovered this land." Williams went on to claim that the King and others were guilty of blasphemy for "calling Europe Christendom, or the Christian

world."²⁰

Convinced that the Anglican church did not constitute a true Christian faith, Williams knew that the King had no right to call himself a Christian or to refer to Europe, which was even more anti-Christian, as Christendom. He was sure that the misuse of such terms invalidated the charter and made the colonists guilty of stealing the land they now inhabited. Williams, however, did not strenuously support this position. He appears to have given a satisfactory explanation to the Court and the issue was forgotten, for the moment at least.²¹

With Roger Williams, very few issues could be settled so easily. His ever-demanding quest for perfection would drive him to great lengths, even concerning a matter of semantics. The present case was no exception. By the end of the next month the governor and his assistants were meeting to discuss his further statements concerning the patent. Williams had prepared a letter to be sent to the King informing His Majesty that he was, in fact, a "liar." He was telling his fellow settlers that they should return the patent or ship themselves back to England. Now, this perfectionism was going too far; it might well become dangerous to the colony. Thomas Dudley, who had just replaced John Winthrop as governor, wanted to deal severely with the upstart young minister. John Cotton and the other ministers, however, persuaded him that they should be allowed to acquaint Williams with his error before

20 Winthrop, Journal I, 116 - 117.

21 Ibid., p. 117.

any official action was taken. They were apparently successful for nothing was done and the question was not raised again for some time.²²

If Williams did, in fact, temporarily change his opinion on this point, he did not lose his zeal for the perfect performance of religious duty. Like any good New England Puritan he maintained that a congregational form of church organization was the only true form. In Massachusetts, while the liberty of each congregational church was theoretically maintained, in practice it was often denied.²³ To Williams's eye, the bi-weekly meetings of the various ministers to discuss "some question of the moment" constituted a decided threat to that measure of independence which did exist. He persuaded the pastor of the Salem Church, Samuel Skelton, to join him in opposing this policy for fear that "it might grow in time to a presbytery or superintendency, to the prejudice of the churches' liberties."²⁴ This criticism went unheeded. The Puritan leaders evidently decided to avoid the creation of a major issue by ignoring Williams and anyone who agreed with him.

This proved to be exceedingly difficult, for following these encounters Williams became embroiled in a continuous series of controversies. Some of them concerned matters of little real importance. For example, he preached that woman should not wear veils in church and that the papal style cross should be removed from the flag of the colony. In doing so he followed his usual pattern of pursuing religious principles

22 Ibid., p. 119

23 Take for example the pressure put on the Salem congregation in its dealings with Williams. Ibid., pp. 61-62; 155.

24 Ibid., p. 112.

to their ultimate, even if absurd, conclusions. Finding it virtually impossible to compromise with the world in the slightest, he discovered evil in the most innocent actions. Through it all, he clung to his principles with a tortuous and seemingly fanatical persistence. He desired to remake the world, rather than accept the slightest deviation from his perfectionist standards.

It was not long before this religious intoxication involved Williams in matters of a more meaningful nature. In 1634 the General Court had instituted the so called "freeman's oath." All those inhabitants of the colony who were not freemen were required to take it, thereby swearing to support the colony and its government against all enemies. This provided a convenient means of perpetuating the established order. Some people may have objected against this oath on political grounds, but it was Roger Williams, the religious perfectionist, who led the assault. Since an oath was an act of worship and since this oath would naturally be tendered to unregenerate persons, the name of God would be taken in vain. Because of this obvious sin, Williams demanded that the practice be abandoned.²⁵ He aroused sufficient public support to force the General Court to recall the oath. Whether it was primarily religion or politics that prompted people to agree with Williams is difficult to say, but it is clear that Williams's perfectionism had finally disrupted the smooth development of the Puritan commonwealth.

25 Ibid., p. 149; Cotton, Answer, P.N.C., III, 48.

In later years, Cotton Mather satirically likened the head of Williams' to a "windmill," which, spinning faster and faster, concocted a number of unorthodox opinions. The heat of the controversy thus engendered "set on fire ...a whole country in America."²⁶ Perhaps, this description contains some truth, for Williams now embarked on a career of defiance which led to his banishment. He began by reasserting his belief that the magistrate could not enforce the laws of the first table. The general acceptance of this idea would destroy the very essence of the Puritan experiment - absolute conformity in religious affairs. Williams would have supported conformity more ardently than anyone, if he were convinced that the proper form of worship existed in Massachusetts. Since he was convinced that it did not, however, he cared naught for the Puritan experiment. In fact, he feared that the magistrates would impose further erroneous religious ideas on the community.

The people of Salem apparently agreed with Williams, for when Samuel Skelton died in 1635, the congregation chose Williams to succeed him. The Salem community had always liked Williams. They knew that the Puritan leaders would not approve of their action, but they were sufficiently amenable to the doctrines he taught to risk naming him pastor. After all, Williams was calling for a strict enforcement of the religious ideas on which they all agreed. Their aim was to establish a community

²⁶ Mather, Magnalia, Bk. VII., Ch. II., p. 7.

based on sainthood, and Williams was obviously a "Saint." He certainly acted like one, constantly demanding perfection in any and all religious affairs. He must have been a charming man, for he swayed the majority of the Salem congregation despite the hostility of the authorities. He was literate, intelligent, zealous, personable, and he brought a message of purity for the Holy Commonwealth. What the Salem congregation failed to perceive at this point, was that this very message, which they so enthusiastically embraced, contained within itself the seeds of destruction for the entire Puritan experiment.

In July of 1635, the General Court met once again to discuss a growing list of charges against Roger Williams. Now, as pastor of an independent congregation, Williams could put more weight behind his defiant stand. An attack upon him might well be termed an attack upon the principle of congregationalism itself. The Court asked the other ministers to attend in order that they might give advice. The ministers' conclusions were hostile and strongly worded. They declared that his opinions were "erroneous and very dangerous, and the calling of him to office, at that time, was judged a great contempt of authority."²⁷ Williams was given until the next meeting of the Court to recant and give satisfaction. If he did not, the ministers would ask the civil magistrate to remove him from office.

²⁷ Winthrop, Journal, I., 154.

The Puritan experiment had reached a stage of crisis. In order to protect their compromise theological position, and in order to continue the practical task of establishing a working community based on the covenant theory, Williams had to be squelched. His perfectionism could only lead to dissent, and in Puritan New England there was no room for dissent. Among other things, Williams had denied the authority of magistrates. In so doing, he had taken the teeth out of the covenant system. Given the depraved nature of man, the inevitable result of such an action would be a splintering of the community. With the "eyes of the world upon them," the Puritan leaders could not tolerate this. The showdown had come. A defiant minister backed by a defiant congregation stood against the rest of Massachusetts. The Puritan experiment would stand or fall on the outcome.

At this critical juncture, Williams decided to express his religious perfectionism in a new form. Concluding that all of his previous criticisms had been correct, and observing that his demand for purity was being ignored, he asserted that all the churches of the Bay were "full of anti-christian pollution."²⁸ This being the case, he demanded that the Salem congregation renounce all communion with the other churches. Such an opinion, however, proved to be too radical even for his own congregation, which "openly disclaimed his errors,

28. Ibid., p. 162.

and wrote a humble submission to the magistrates...."²⁹

At the next meeting of the General Court, Williams appeared to defend his position. Thomas Hooker was appointed from among the other ministers to dispute with Williams in an attempt to show him his error. Hooker, however, faced an impossible task, for like most religious perfectionists, Williams remained convinced that he alone knew the truth. Obstinate and oblivious to worldly security, he stood in defiance of the entire colony. With the danger of opposition eliminated by the capitulation of the Salem congregation, the General Court imposed the sentence of banishment on Williams.

Originally, the Court gave Williams six weeks in which to depart from the jurisdiction of the colony. Since winter was upon the colonists, however, they delayed the sentence until spring, on the condition that Williams refrain from publicly asserting his ideas. The Puritan leaders failed to realize that worldly concerns never provided motivation to such an other-worldly individual. Williams soon aroused their anger by continuing to preach his unorthodox doctrines. Governor John Haynes and his assistants decided to send Williams back to England on a ship which happened to be waiting in Boston Harbor. They sent a group of soldiers to apprehend him and bring him back to Boston, but by the time they arrived Williams had departed.³⁰

29 Ibid., p. 163.

30 Ibid., p. 168.

So ended the career of Roger Williams in Massachusetts.

Unable to accept the compromise position of his fellow Puritans, he had attempted to reform their theology and religious practices. Like many idealists he was able to arouse significant support, but his continued quest for perfection eventually disenchanted all but his most ardent followers. Now, virtually alone, he had been forced into the wilderness. If he possessed sufficient strength, he might found a society in accordance with his own ideas. Yet his own ideas were actually negative. Sure that the Puritans failed to conform to the ideal of sainthood, he had not decided upon the true religious position. His task in the wilderness, therefore, would consist of more than survival. He would have to clarify his thought in order to continue his quest for religious perfection.

CHAPTER III

"Peniel, That Is, I Have Seen the Face of God."

"When I was unkindly and unchristianly, as I believe, driven from my house and land and wife and children," Roger Williams explained, "that ever honored Governor, Mr. Winthrop, privately wrote to me to steer my course to Naraganset Bay....encouraging me from the freeness of the place from any English claims or patents." Williams accepted this advice as "a hint and voice from God." Fleeing southward through the desolate cold of the New England wilderness, he arrived at this unclaimed territory. With five companions, he set to work building a rudimentary settlement, which he named Providence in thanksgiving for God's aid.¹

As the disenchanted and unbelieving from all over New England descended on the settlement, the small cluster of primitive homes rapidly expanded. Providence became the refuge for non-conformists, who could not find peace among their fellow non-conformists, the now orthodox Puritans. Since the town covenant prohibited any "restraining of the libertie of conscience,"² these men and women obtained freedom to wor-

1 Williams to Major Mason, June 22, 1670, in P.N.C., VI., 335.

2 Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England (Providence, 1856), I., 16.

ship in whatever way they saw fit. Even members of such generally despised sects as the Anabaptists and Quakers found a congenial home in the new settlement.

Though staunch Puritans viewed these developments with obvious disgust, Roger Williams found the unrestricted atmosphere exhilarating. In Providence, after all, no impediments existed to stifle his quest for religious perfection. He was free to espouse any doctrine, to practice any form of worship. Only one problem remained to be solved: Williams must clarify his religious position. With no authoritative religious establishment providing a basis from which to launch his quest, he could no longer rely on the negative instruments of criticism and dissent. His search for truth had to become positive. It would not be enough to delineate errors; now he was required to assert the full nature of truth as he saw it.

For Roger Williams, truth, in any full sense of the term, had always been elusive. For years he had been jumping from one idea to another, holding it for a time with a fanatical intransigence, but never arriving at any comprehensive and ordered system. To such a man, the intellectual atmosphere of Providence became a searching ground for religious truth. From the myriad theological views to which the settlers adhered, he could pick and choose those ideas which appealed to him. Perhaps in this manner he would finally attain spiritual peace.

Among the recently arrived settlers at Providence, there was a

Mrs. Scott, the sister of Anne Hutchinson and an ardent proselytizer for Anabaptism.³ Williams, open as he was to the possibility of a new religious insight, discussed theology with her. She soon convinced him that a rational choice on the part of the recipient constituted a prerequisite for the efficacious administration of any sacrament. Accordingly, he renounced his infant Baptism and had himself rebaptized by Ezekiel Holyman, one of the founders of the first Baptist church in America.⁴

This decision afforded Williams only temporary satisfaction, for his mind was in a state of turmoil. No matter where he looked he eventually found error. Driven on by his almost manic desire for perfection in religion, he was soon forced to renounce even his adult Baptism. Since he could not trace an unbroken line of ministerial authority back to the original apostles, he had concluded that "there was none upon Earth that could Administer Baptism."⁵

At this point Williams became utterly confused. Not knowing where to turn next, he decided to wait until, "God would raise up some apostolic power."⁶ Perfectionist that he was, however, he could not tolerate error even while he waited. So, he refused to communicate with anyone except his wife, lest he somehow be polluted by contact with the

3 Anne Hutchinson would soon be banished from Massachusetts Bay for preaching the doctrine of "inner light" or direct communication with God.

4 Winthrop, Journal, I., 297.

5 Mather, Magnalia, VIII, Ch. II, Sec. 6.

6 Winthrop, Journal, I., 308.

evil he saw everywhere about him. Such was the absurd but logical outgrowth of Williams's quest for purity, of his desire to abstract himself "with a holy violence from the dung heap of this earth."⁷

For a short time Williams tottered on the brink of self-destruction. He could have taken the final step, withdrawn completely into himself, abandoned all intercourse with the world about him. If he had, historians could dismiss him as an eccentric, a fanatic, a megalomaniac. But he did not. Out of the confusion in which he had become mired, he wrought a new outlook. Finding no way to escape the "dung heap," he accepted it. No longer would he worry about soiling himself in the world; he would "now preach and pray with all comers."⁸

In so drastically reversing his position, Williams had not forsaken his quest for religious perfection. He had, however, altered the terms of the quest. He began to seek that perfection which was yet to come, the revelation of the true faith, the unification of all christendom, the second coming of Christ himself. Realizing, apparently for the first time, that he had no clear and full perception of the divine will, his quest became a search for such knowledge. He would "morn daily, heavily, incessantly, till the Lord look down from Heaven, and bring all

7 Williams to John Winthrop, September 24, 1636 or 1637, in P.N.C., VI, 11.

8 Winthrop, Journal, I., 308.

his precious living stones into one New Jerusalem."⁹ Yet he was sure that this "New Jerusalem" would eventually come. Since the present offered nothing but confusion, Williams sought order in the future, thereby rationalizing the confusion and preserving his perfectionism at the same time. Soon after this change in outlook, he wrote to John Winthrop:

I also seek Jesus who was nailed to the gallows, I ask the way to the lost Zion,I long for the bright appearance of the Lord Jesus to consume the man of sinI rejoice in the hope thatthe way of the Lord Jesusshall be more plainly discovered to you and me.¹⁰

In emphasizing the New Testament Jesus rather than the Old Testament Father, Williams broke with Puritan practice. Calvinistic in outlook, the Puritans emphasized the omnipotence of Jehovah, a capricious, stern, and vengeful God. Though more solicitous of the divine will than many of his Puritan counterparts, Williams emphasized God's love and mercy as personified in Christ. He was a stricter Calvinist than those who adhered to the Puritan compromise and at the same time a more thorough-going Christian. He would do God's bidding not from fear, but in the hope that salvation would be his reward.

Williams's new position should not be confused with skeptical rationalism. Williams never denied that there would be a true church,

9 Williams to John Winthrop, September 24, 1636 or 1637, in P.N.C., VI, 10.

10 Ibid., p. 11 - 12.

never questioned man's ability to recognize such an institution, never doubted that Christ would eventually lead man to the perfect faith. He was not a skeptic, but a perfectionist, unable to find perfection in an imperfect world. He was not a rationalist questioning religion or equating one faith with another. He was a man filled with a sense of God, somehow compelled to reject the churches about him, but in darkness concerning the true faith. It was not skepticism or rationalism, but rather a sense of his own inadequacy before an ever sovereign God that enabled Williams to maintain throughout his life: "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, yea unto themselves who I now opposed."¹¹

Williams, however, never ceased to oppose every institutionalized religion. Though he would come to speak of Providence as the place wherein he could say, "Peniel, that is, I have seen the face of God,"¹² he apparently never discovered the divinely-appointed form of worship. How could he? Looking directly into the brilliant glory of God's visage, he must have been blinded to everything else. Supreme omnipotence he could readily discern, but the practical details of religion remained lost in the glare. So Williams spent the rest of his life as a seeker of religious truth, ever aware of God's power and ever watchful lest he infringe on

¹¹ Roger Williams, George Fox Digg'd Out of His Burrows, in P.N.C., V., 105.

¹² Williams to Major Mason, June 22, 1670, in P.N.C., VI., 335.

Divine prerogatives. It is little wonder that his quest went unrewarded.

Though he never discovered an organized religion to which he could personally adhere, Williams remained a deeply religious man. Everything he did, and everything he believed depended upon his perception of the Divine will, however limited this perception may have been. To understand his role in Providence, to comprehend his famous advocacy of religious toleration, in fact, to arrive at any historical appreciation of the man at all, it is necessary to examine his personal religious convictions in their mature state.

Once Williams had become a seeker of religious truth, his thought developed consistency. For years after his banishment, he spent long periods of time alone in the wilderness. There, in solitude, his seekerism reached maturity. He came to a full realization of his relationship to God and to the world. He did not construct a rigidly logical or formalized system, but rather arrived at what can probably best be described as a consistent attitude of mind, an attitude which influenced all aspects of his life, not just his theological ideas.

This attitude was so central to his life that it found expression in all of his writings. It can be found in his Key to the Language of America, in his voluminous debate over toleration with John Cotton, and in his argument with the Quakers. In all of these works, the ideas expressed were rooted in his personal religious convictions. There exists, however, an often ignored devotional tract which Williams wrote for his

wife when she was recovering from a serious illness, and which he later published in London in 1652. There he discussed the ideas which underlaid his other works. Experiments of Spiritual Life and Health, as this tract was entitled, therefore provides a starting point for an examination of his thought. It gives the frame of reference from which his other writings can be viewed most effectively.

For Williams, there was only one frame of reference from which to view the world. He was convinced that the true Christian's "apprehensions of God are always such as bring holy wonderment and amazement at the nature of incomprehensible God"¹³ Everywhere he looked, Williams observed the Divine hand directing the world. In light of God's irresistible power, his estimation of man's position in the universe was never exalted.

Consequently Williams placed continued emphasis on man's "unworthiness, vileness, and baseness in God's presence." As far as he was concerned, men should view themselves as nothing more than "beggars at God's door and dogs under his table."¹⁴ They were totally dependent, incapable of doing good or knowing the truth without assistance from God. Their only choice was total submission to "the excellency and sufficiency of God's most Holy Spirit."¹⁵ Williams argued that if we are true Christians, we

13 Williams, Experiments, p. 60.

14 Ibid., p. 66.

15 Ibid., p. 74

demonstrate strength in spiritual life, "when we lay down ourselves at the feet of God; when as a servant's will our wills are subdued to the Lord's will; when the Lord is become our self, when his ends are our ends, which give us content and pleasure although our selves (our ends) are lost and destroyed that we may find new ends and delights in God."¹⁶

Obviously, man could do nothing else; his submission to the will of God had to become total. Man could not presume to judge any situation or event by his own unaided reason. The true Christian, therefore, was characterized by "an humble acknowledgment of, and a submitting unto, the correcting and afflicting hand of God, in sicknesses, crosses, losses, etc."¹⁷ In Williams's view of life even such passive submission proved inadequate. It had to be augmented by active obedience to God's will. Every man should "without repining, grudging, or delaying obey commands most grievous to flesh and blood; against not only flesh and blood but against carnal reason; yea, against hope and faith itself"¹⁸

To obey the will of God it is, of course, necessary to know the will of God. Williams believed that the true Christian always "professed willingness to get more and more knowledge of this Heavenly Father, of his name, of his works, of his word, of his Christ, of his Spirit, his saints, and ordinances."¹⁹ As sources of such knowledge, the Bible and the Church

16 Ibid., p. 76.

17 Ibid., p. 53.

18 Ibid., p. 68.

19 Ibid., p. 49.

had been given by God as aids to man. Hence, Williams advocated "a vehement hunger and longing after the Word preached,"²⁰ and "a truewillingness and inclination to enjoy more and more of Christ Jesus in the society of his saints after his own appointment."²¹

Unlike the New England Puritans, however, Williams had not formed a compact with God. He had no way of making the "incomprehensible" God completely understandable. Constantly overawed by divine sovereignty, continually aware of his own inadequacy, he approached all forms of worship with trepidation, lest he infringe upon God's prerogatives. Under these circumstances, the true form of worship became difficult to discover. Williams compared this perplexity to that of a wife awaiting her husband:

Hence the spouse was both asleep and awake toward Christ Jesus. She was willing and unwilling to rise to open to Christ Jesus. Hence, she thinks she hears her husband's voice: "It is the voice of my beloved" (S. of Sol. 5:2). She thinks Christ is knocking at the door of her heart or her will, in such and such arguments, in such and such Scriptures, in such and such professions and professors, in such and such their sufferings, etc.²²

The wife, of course, knows her husband when she finally hears his voice. Williams was not so fortunate. He could hear God speaking to him only through secondary instruments. The clearest of these instruments, the Bible, was sufficiently imprecise to allow for numerous interpretations. How could Williams be sure which was correct? Quite simply, he never could be sure. Without a church to interpret the Bible, with no authority to

20 Ibid., p. 50.

21 Ibid., p. 55.

22 Ibid., p. 55.

give him assurance, he found himself alone before God. His only choice was to go directly to "God and Christ himself in the ministry and dispensation of the Word."²³

In other words Williams adopted a somewhat mystical approach to religion. He relied upon personal communion with God for direction. True children of God, he declared "resolve to give God no rest until they receive an answer, and, therefore, they also wait for his holy pleasure and leisure, and at last are satisfied with the Lord's holy pleasure and sentence, although it seem cross and bitter to flesh and blood."²⁴ Such an approach seldom yields systematically organized results. The practitioner grasps one or two ideas which somehow enable him to explain his difficulties and accept the existing situation. In Williams's case, a millennialistic view of the world was the outgrowth of his mystical or non-institutional approach to religion. Though the present was filled with confusion, the future second coming of Christ would eliminate all uncertainty. Not only that, but the millenium provided an explanation of the present confusion. "God's counsel touching the spiritual captivity and desolation must be fulfilled," Williams declared, "notwithstanding the strength of the affection of God's people in their mourning and weeping and lamenting after and contending for the truth of the spiritual enjoyment of their soul's beloved in all the means of his own holy appointments."²⁵

23 Ibid., p. 50

24 Ibid., p. 65.

25 Ibid., p. 73

Consequently, Williams resigned himself to doctrinal uncertainty. He discovered the grounds for piety in a striving to learn God's will and a resignation to abide by it once it had been found. Unlike the New England Puritans, who were convinced that they knew the truth, and who, therefore, demanded strict doctrinal conformity, Williams found himself at a loss to choose one dogma over another. Witness the uncertainty in the following statement,

When a soul can say uprightly in God's presence, I desire to knowhis will, although I am much ignorant; I desire to believe, though I find an unbelieving heart; I desire to be willing and able to suffer, though I find much fearfulness, etc., he is a true child of God.²⁶

This attitude of doctrinal uncertainty stemming from and intimately united with Williams's constant awareness of divine sovereignty formed the keystone of his mature religious position. Since he was unusually religious man, even by seventeenth-century standards, his religious attitudes are of central importance in understanding his public career. His famous debate over toleration with John Cotton would be incomprehensible without an awareness of the theological issues involved.

The origins of this argument can be traced to 1636. In that year Cotton had challenged Williams with a letter declaring the reasons for the latter's banishment and exhorting him to repent.²⁷ Williams

26 Ibid., p. 51.

27 See:., P.N.C., I., 285 - 313.

had not replied immediately. For seven years he was occupied in earning a living and attempting to keep order among the multitude of independently-minded settlers who continued to immigrate to Providence and the surrounding territory. Cotton's words, no doubt, festered in his mind, as he clarified his thought and waited for an opportunity to reply.

In 1643 Williams went to London to secure a charter for Rhode Island. He took the opportunity to publish a number of works. His Key to the Language of America was the first to appear. It brought him immediate fame, as a man who had lived with the savage Indians and survived to describe their language and customs. Then, through an all too convenient coincidence, Cotton's Letter of 1636 appeared on the English bookstands.²⁸ Williams now had an audience for his long awaited reply to Cotton. Mr. Cottons Letter Lately Printed, Examined and Answered was published in February 1644, followed in March by Williams's masterpiece, The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution, For Cause of Conscience, Discussed in a Conference Between Truth and Peace. Williams then returned to Rhode Island probably relieved that his long contemplated reply had finally been published.

John Cotton, of course, was by no means relieved when he became

28 Williams would have appeared foolish replying to an unpublished letter. It is most unlikely that Cotton would have published the letter, however, for there was nothing he could gain by so doing. It is possible, therefore, that Williams himself arranged for the publication of Cotton's letter. Cotton implied that such had been the case. See: Cotton, A Reply to Mr. Williams his Examination, in P.N.C. II., 9-10.

aware of Williams's writings. The English Civil War was not progressing the way he desired. It appeared that New England orthodoxy would not serve as a model for a reformed English Church.²⁹ The prestige of the "City upon a Hill" was steadily declining. Williams had made matters much worse by adding his voice to the rising clamor against the Bay colony. Furthermore, Cotton himself had been personally attacked. He had no choice but to answer. In 1647 his A Reply to Mr. Williams, His Examination, and his The Bloody Tenent, Washed, and Made White in the Bloud of the Lambe: Being Discussed and Discharged of Bloud-guiltiness by Just Defence were published in London.

It was not long before Williams obtained copies of Cotton's works. In an age which relished such debates, Williams stood out as a keen lover of argument. He could not let Cotton have the last word. Once again his opportunity for reply came when he travelled to London on colonial business. In 1652 he published The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody: By Mr. Cottons Endeavor to Wash It White in the Blood of the Lambe. The debate would have continued indefinitely had not Cotton's death put an end to it in that same year.

29 Perry Miller feels that this was the real aim of the New England Puritans. He ascribes the decline of Puritan theology to their failure to influence the outcome of the English Civil War. See: Miller, Errand Into the Wilderness (New York, 1964), pp. 1 - 15.

As the reader follows the argument through its increasingly lengthy and progressively more minute ramifications, he becomes aware that the personal religious attitude of each man actually forms the basis of the dispute. Cotton's intolerance rests on his assurance that he knows the truth, while Williams's toleration stems from his lack of such assurance. As a seeker of religious perfection, Williams demanded that every conscience be considered inviolable, so that truth might not be lost amidst error. As a practitioner of perfection, Cotton demanded that every conscience be **made to conform** to orthodox standards, so that truth might remain uncontaminated by error.

To support their arguments both men quoted the Bible copiously. As a good New England Puritan and a firm believer in the covenant theory, Cotton relied heavily on the authoritative tradition of the Old Testament. In his mind, the laws of God's chosen people, Israel, served as a model for the new Zion in the Wilderness, Massachusetts Bay. Cotton spoke confidently with the sanction of the whole community to back him up. Williams, for his part, rejected any authoritative approach to the Bible. "In vaine have English Parliaments permitted English Bibles in the poorest English houses, and the simplest man or woman to search the Scriptures," he declared, "if yet against the soules perswasion from the Scripture, they should be forcedto believe as the Church believes."³⁰ Since no Church was clearly sanctioned above all others by God, every man could

30 Williams, The Bloody Tenent, in P.N.C., III, 13.

interpret the Bible as he pleased.

Williams adopted a typological approach to the Bible. It was clearly evident from scripture that Christ had been sent to redeem the world. Since divine sovereignty was now exercised primarily through Christ, there existed an obvious break between the Old and New Testaments. The Bible did not constitute a continuous statement of revelation, as the Puritans believed; rather the Old Testament typified the New. Hence, for example, the theocratic state of Israel was simply a "type" of the new spiritual kingdom of Christ. The Old Testament could not be taken literally, for it was meaningful only in relation to Christ. To assume otherwise would be to infringe on Christ's prerogatives, for Christ no longer spoke to any one nation but "only to that spiritual Israel, the people and Church of God, in whose hearts of flesh he writes his Laws"³¹

³¹ Ibid., p. 358. Perry Miller feels that Williams's typological approach to the Bible was the "secret of his Separatism," and "the insight that guided him from his initial separation to the ultimate vision of the predicament of men and nations." There can be no doubt that typology was the methodological tool by which Williams forged his arguments. However, the arguments themselves reveal Williams's constant awareness of his dependence on God. Typology enabled Williams to construct imaginative allegorical defences of his position, but it did not account for his position. When Miller rests his analysis of Williams on typology, he fails to grasp the difference between Williams and the New England Puritans. This difference did find expression in Biblical interpretation, but it was rooted in conflicting views of man's ability to know God's will. See: Miller, Roger Williams: His Contribution to the American Tradition (Indianapolis, 1953), p. 32; cf. pp. 32 ff., 149 ff. It should also be noted that a typological approach to the Bible was inherent in the logic of Peter Ramus to which the Puritans adhered. Though the Puri-

Thus armed with differing religious outlooks and differing methods of interpreting the Bible, the two protagonists presented their cases. Cotton admitted that "it is not lawfull to persecute any for Conscience sake Rightly informed; for in persecuting such, Christ himself is persecuted in them." However, Cotton felt that he could judge whether a man was sincere or not. As far as he was concerned there was nothing mysterious about the law of God. The fundamental precepts of God's law concerning doctrine and worship were so clear that once a man was informed of them he would, if he was honest, be forced to give his assent. "And then if anyone persist," Cotton continued, "it is not out of Conscience, but against his ConscienceHe is subverted and sinneth, being condemned of Himself, that is, of his owne Conscience."³²

Such a person endangered the purity of society, and should be treated accordingly. Obviously, he should be excommunicated from the Church where only true believers or "living stones" could share membership. In Cotton's estimation he should also be punished by the civil authorities "to preserve others from dangerous and damnable infection."³³

tans attempted to control such an approach, they often found it quite difficult. As Perry Miller himself states: "There are many admonitions in the writings and sermons against 'wresting' a text, against finding conclusions which it will not support, but there is also no observation more frequent than 'Whatsoever is drawn out of the Scripture by just consequence and deduction, is as well the word of God, as that which is an expresse Commandment of Example in Scripture.' See Miller, New England Mind, p. 204; See also: pp. 111-206.

32 Cotton, The Answer of Mr. John Cotton of Boston in New England, To the Aforesaid Arguments Against Persecution for Cause of Conscience, in P.N.C., III., 42.

33 Ibid., p. 53.

New England, after all, was a "City upon a Hill." Every member of the community had to live up to orthodox standards. The failure of one weakened the whole. Just as the Jews had enforced the law of God through the civil authority, so too would the New Israel of Massachusetts Bay.

Roger Williams might have agreed, had the law of God been as clear to him as it was to Cotton. In his uncertainty, however, he demanded toleration. Until God established one united spiritual kingdom, man could not presume to act for Him. As all good Protestants agreed, faith was a gift of grace, without which man would never perceive truth. "It seems to be in high presumption," Williams asserted, "to suppose that together with a command restraining from, or constraining to worship, that God is also to be forced or commanded to give faith to open the heart to incline the will." To Williams such an attitude smacked of "that Arminian Popish doctrine of Free Will," and tended to downgrade the absolute sovereignty of God.³⁴

Civil enforcement of religious doctrine had been permissible in "that figurative state of the land of Cannan." Since the coming of Christ, however, the situation had altered. Williams asserted that "in the spiritual State or church of Christ," false worshippers could only be "spiritually put to death by the two edge sword of the power of the

34 Williams, The Bloody Tenent, in P.N.C., III, 258.

Lord Jesus."³⁵ If the civil magistrate, or any other man for that matter, was given such authority the result would be "to pull God, Christ and Spirit out of Heaven, and subject them unto naturall, sinfull inconsistent men, and so consequently to Satan himself."³⁶

As far as Williams was concerned only Christ could judge whether or not a man was sincere in his convictions. It was Christ, after all, who placed these convictions in the hearts of men. In this light Cotton's argument that a person who refused to see the truth sinned against his conscience became an attack upon Christ himself. Williams characterized this doctrine as a defense of soul-ravishment:

Indeed, what is this before the flaming eyes of Christ, but assome lustfull Ravisher deals with a beautifull Woman, first using all subtle Arguments and gentle perswasions, to allure unto their spirituall Lust and Filthinesse, and where the Conscience freely cannot yeeld to such Lust and Folly, then a forcing it by Penalties, Penall Laws, and Statutes?³⁷

Though Williams belonged to a church of the spirit, not to any institutionalized church, he did not doubt that God would one day unite all the faithfull into one true religion. Until this occurred true Christians might be found anywhere. As a body they formed the true church. Williams was just as concerned as Cotton about preserving this true church, though for the present, he saw it as a spiritual, not an earthly, institution. He described the church as a garden and the

35 Ibid., p. 116.

36 Ibid., p. 250.

37 Williams, The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody, in P.N.C., IV., 326.

world as a wilderness. In the Biblical state of Eden, there had been a wall of separation between the two. With original sin, however, "God hath ever broke down the wall itselfand made his Garden a Wildernesse, as at this day." If God were ever to reestablish the garden of the church, however, "it must of necessitie be walled in perculiar unto himselfe from the world, and all that shall be saved out of the world are to be transplantedand added unto his Church or Garden."³⁸

In the existing state of affairs, with the church consisting of all these who truly believed in Christ and attempted to follow His will, regardless of their doctrinal persuasion or church affiliation, toleration was a necessity. These men and women were in the Garden and a wall of separation should exist between them and the Wilderness, lest they be contaminated by the Wilderness. Since the true earthly church had not been clearly defined, every church should erect a wall about itself, so that whatever truth it possessed might be preserved. Free competition of ideas among various churches would allow truth to prevail and in no way harm the state. The state, however, might harm the church by enforcing error. In short, Williams was demanding separation of church and state so that the church might be protected from encroachments by the state.³⁹

38 Williams, Mr. Cottons Letter Lately Printed, Examined and Answered, in P.N.C., I., 392.

39 Williams, The Bloody Tenent, in P.N.C., III., 286.

He felt that every church possessed rights within the state. "The church or company of worshippers (whether true or false)," he said, "is like unto a body or college of physicians in a city; like unto a corporation, society" As such the church could pursue its business without interference from the state. The church was "essentially distinct" from the state. What happened to the church in no way influenced the state. Their ends were distinct - one seeking spiritual peace, the other civil peace.⁴⁰ In fact, Williams was concerned that the state could not fulfill its function without toleration, for in a world confused and inflamed about religion, "there is no other prudent, Christian way of preserving peace in the world, but by permission of differing consciences."⁴¹

For Williams the message of Christ was peace and love. Why were Christians persecuting one another? Had not Christ forbidden such conflict? Didn't he expressly tell his disciples to pray for those who persecuted them, to bless those who cursed them?⁴² Williams's God might be a God of love, but he was also just. Surely, he would punish those who violated his commands. Mystic that he was, Williams felt that God was using him to correct the world. Like a prophet of old, he warned of impending destruction.

My end is to prepare the Servants and Witnesses of Jesus
for that great and general and most dreadful slaughter
 of the witnesses which I cannot but humbly fear, and almost

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 73.

⁴¹ Williams to Major Mason, June 22, 1670, in P.N.C., VI, 347.

⁴² Williams, The Bloody Tenent, in P.N.C., III, 30

believe, is near approaching, and will be Ushered in, provoak'd and hastened by the proud security, worldly pomp, fleshly confidence and bloody violences of Gods own children, wofully exercised each against the other, and so rendered wofully ripe⁴³ for such a Universal and dreadful Storm and Tempest.

These were the words of a religious zealot, of a man totally lost in God. Because he was such a man, any attempt to explain Williams's advocacy of toleration on social or political grounds would prove inaccurate. Williams demanded toleration so that the Divine will would not be opposed in the world. For this reason, and this reason alone, he became involved in the controversy. There were no worldly reasons for his actions, for Williams disdained the world. As true Christians, he declared, we are "as passengers in a ship, willing and ready (when God will) to land and go ashore in our own country, to our own house and comforts in the heavens."⁴⁴

43 Williams, The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody, in P.N.C., IV., 26.

44 Williams, Experiments, p. 78.

CHAPTER IV

"The Children's Toys"

In the theocentric cosmology of Roger Williams, worldly desires, occupations, and concerns were considered unimportant. Indeed, such "transitory" things as earthly affairs ranked "as dung and drofs" when compared with the heavenly and eternal.¹ Man's duty in this world was to serve God, not to play with "the children's toys of land, meadows, cattle, government, etc."² Williams had no time for "this vain puff of this present life," because he believed that "our very life and being is but a swift, short passage from the bank of time to the other side or bank of a doleful eternity."³ For him, whatever related to salvation demanded unceasing attention, while everything else should be despised as "this world's trash."⁴

It is indeed surprising that such a man could be described as a "forerunner of the eighteenth century enlightenment in America,"⁵ and that his colony of Rhode Island could be viewed as a "social experiment"

1 Williams to Major Endicot, August 1651, in P.N.C., VI, 214.

2 Williams to Major Mason, June 22, 1670, in P.N.C., VI, 344.

3 Williams, Experiments, p. 102.

4 Ibid., p. 103.

5 Brockunier, Irrepressible Democrat, p. 284.

in democracy."⁶ What could he possibly have had in common with the deistic and materialistic outlook of the eighteenth century? What real concern could he have had for social questions and governmental forms? Yet until very recently historians habitually culled from his writings and from his political activity in Rhode Island evidence to show that he was, indeed, a man born before his time, a progenitor of modern democratic political theory and practice. The aim of this chapter will be to show that Williams acted consistently within a theocentric cosmology, that he was not a political theorist or a social innovator.

Certainly, there is little information in Williams's writings concerning his political philosophy. His statements on the nature and functions of government appear in what are essentially controversial religious tracts, notably The Bloody Tenent and The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody. He never wrote a purely political pamphlet and he never systematically expressed his political views. The only issue which might be considered political to which Williams devoted any extensive attention was that of separation of Church and state, and for him that was a purely religious concern.⁷

The statements he did make on political affairs were neither original nor precisely delineated. Consistent with his awareness of

6 Ernst, Roger Williams, p. ix.

7 Supra., p. 58-61.

the sovereignty of God, Williams declared, "a civil government is an ordinance of God."⁸ Such an ordinance was necessitated by the innate depravity of man. Its function was "to conserve the civil peace of people, so far as concerns their bodies and goods."⁹ Thus, government received its authority ultimately from God.

Like most Protestants of his day, however, Williams saw the autocratic implications in such a conception of the sanction of government, and desired to avoid them. He, therefore, continued, "But from this Grant I inferthat the Soverigne, oregonall and foundation of civill power lies in the people."¹⁰ Thus, while the authority for civil government stemmed directly from God, such authority was exercised mediatively through the people. It followed, therefore, that the people could form whatever type of government was best suited to their needs and desires.¹¹

Since the people formed the government, "It is evident that such governments as are by them erected and established, have no more power, nor for no longer time, than the civil power or people consenting and agreeing shall betrust them with."¹² Williams believed that the government simply became "the eyes and hands and instruments of the people."¹³ By implication, therefore, the people could alter the laws

8 Williams, Bloudy Tenent in P.N.C., III., 249. See also: p. 398.

9 Ibid., p. 249. See also: p. 161.

10 Ibid., p. 249.

11 Ibid., p. 161, 249, 354. Williams, The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody, in P.N.C. IV., 80, 487.

12 Williams, The Bloody Tenent, in P.N.C., III., 249. See also: p. 398.

13 Ibid., p. 355.

and even the government itself whenever they saw fit.

By implication any number of democratic principles could be derived from Williams's broadly outlined political opinions, but only by implication. The details remained decidedly vague, and more evidence would certainly be required before Williams could be viewed as a precursor of modern democratic notions. In fact he left a host of critical political questions unanswered. What did he mean when he referred to "the people?" How could they vindicate their rights under an abuse of justice? What, for that matter, were their rights? What was the nature of a right? What was the best form of government? What were the hard and fast limits to governmental power? Williams had not constructed a political philosophy at all; he had merely outlined a number of broad general principles.

It should also be noted that in dealing with such "children's toys" as political theory, Williams had an ulterior end in mind. All of his statements on government appear in the context of an attempt to reduce to absurdity the Puritan claim that the magistrate could deal with religious questions. Williams was showing that since the magistrate was responsible to the people, the church would "herself be subject to the changeable pleasures of the people of the World (which lies in wickedness, I John 5.) even in matters of Heavenly and Spiritual Nature."¹⁴

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 356.

Williams dealt with political theory only to defend the church against such intrusions by the wicked world. Fundamentally other-worldly in outlook, he lacked any true concern for worldly matters.

For a man who viewed politics with such disdain, Williams lead an exceedingly active political life. He was the founder of Rhode Island, took a large part in framing its laws, and served the colony in varying capacities throughout his life. His participation in such undertakings, however, did not mean that he acted for political purposes. He had no political ends in mind when he was banished, and he developed none as his colony grew. He was active in Rhode Island only because he wished to maintain the colony as a haven for the religiously persecuted.¹⁵

Williams believed that God had ordained Rhode Island for just such an end. He declared, "the most high and Holy Wife hath in his infinite wisdom, provided this country as a shelter for the poor and persecuted, according to their several persuasions."¹⁶ It was God's will, therefore, that Williams insure a continuous policy of religious toleration, and Williams was always solicitous of God's will. Beyond that, however, his political program took whatever form expediency dictated.

15 In 1638 Williams declared, "And having in a sense of God's merciful providence upon me in my distress, called the place Providence, I desired it might be for a shelter for persons distressed of conscience" Records of the Colony of Rhode Island, I, 22.

16 Williams to Major Mason, June 22, 1670, in P.N.C., VI, 344.

In a wilderness society, with a small population, expediency dictated a simple form of democracy. Accordingly, Williams and his associates originally met together to settle their common affairs. In a letter to John Winthrop, written shortly after the establishment of Providence, Williams described their form of government:

The condition of myself and those few families here planting with me, you know full well: we have no Patent: nor doth the face of Magistracy suit with our present concition. Hitherto, the masters of families have ordinarily met once a fortnight and consulted about our common peace, watch, and planting; and mutual consent have finished all matters with speed and peace.

It should be noted that even at this early stage, suffrage was limited to heads of families - a limitation which would be out of place for a progenitor of modern democratic practice, but one which was totally consistent with seventeenth-century ideas and practice.

Naturally, as the town of Providence grew into the colony of Rhode Island, a more complex form of government was required. In 1644, Williams obtained a royal charter for the union of Providence, Portsmouth, and Newport, and in 1647 he represented Providence at a convention in Portsmouth to establish the government of the colony. This assembly passed a number of "Acts and Orders" which codified the laws and established a representative government. The members were correct in asserting "that the forme of Government established in Providence Plantations is DEMOCRATICALL; that is to say, a Government held by ye free and voluntarie

17 Williams to John Winthrop, 1636 or 1637, in P.M.C., VI, 4.

consent of all, or the greater parte of the free Inhabitants."¹⁸ Inhabitants referred to landholders, but since almost everyone owned land, this property qualification did not significantly effect the extent of suffrage.

Certainly, Williams played a large part in formulating these "Acts and Orders." Are we, therefore, to conclude that he was an "Irrepressible Democrat?" Before we go so far, we should realize that Williams was acting out of expediency. Speaking for the town of Providence he had laid the groundwork on which "Acts and Orders" was produced:

Wee do voluntarily assent, and are freely willing to receive and to be governed by the Lawes of England, together with the way of the Administration of them, soe far as the nature and constitution of this Plantation will admit¹⁹

There was nothing revolutionary in this desire. Williams simply called for an adaptation of English representative principles to the colonial situation. He was by no means ahead of his time in doing that.

For the rest of his life, Williams was active in the political affairs of Rhode Island, not because he enjoyed playing with "children's toys," but because he wanted to show that a community divided on religious affairs could maintain civil peace. In Rhode Island this task demanded his constant attention, for the settlers were a quarrelsome, contentious, independent, and often greedy lot. On a number of occasions they threa-

¹⁸ Records of the Colony of Rhode Island, I., 156.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 147

tened to split the colony asunder.

In 1651, for example, when Williams travelled to England to have the charter of Rhode Island confirmed by Cromwell's government, the towns began fighting among themselves. By the time of his return in 1654, the colony had, in fact, been divided into four hostile camps.²⁰ Williams sent a letter to the town of Providence admonishing them for their part in the dispute and exhorting them to seek a reunion of the colony. In so urging his fellow settlers, he did not emphasize the need to preserve the colony because the democratic nature of its government was on trial before the world, rather "that grand cause of TRUTH AND FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE,"²¹ motivated his concern. For Williams the religious experiment was clearly of vital importance. Politics formed a secondary and dependent issue. Williams simply desired that the government maintain order so that men would be convinced that religious freedom was not synonymous with anarchy.

Rhode Island seemed to be the wrong place to prove such a point for no sooner had the colony been reunited, than a group of settlers began to claim that the principle of freedom of conscience prohibited the govern-

20 The towns of Providence, Newport, Warwick, and Portsmouth which originally formed Providence Plantations had reverted to an independent status due to the proprietary ambitions of William Coddington founder of Portsmouth. For a brief but clear history of the political developments in early Rhode Island see: Charles M. Andrews, Our Earliest Colonial Settlements (Ithica, 1962), pp. 86-112.

21 Williams to The Town of Providence, January 1655, in P.N.C., IV., 264.

ment from punishing lawbreakers. Williams, having just been elected President of the Colony, replied with his now famous metaphor of the ship of state. Once again, he revealed his conception that Rhode Island was the home of a religious, not a political experiment. He declared that liberty of conscience meant the freedom of each Christian or Jew on ship-board to hold their own services or to attend or absent themselves from the ship's services as they saw fit. This freedom, Williams emphasized, did not constitute license. The captain still commanded the ship, order was still essential to the proper functioning of the ship.

If any of the seamen refuse to perform their services, or passengers to pay their freight; if any refuse to help, in person or purse, towards the common charges or defence; if any refuse to obey the common laws and orders of the ship, concerning their common peace or preservation; if any shall mutiny and rise up against their commanders and officers; if any should preach or write that there ought to be no commander or officers; because all are equal in Christ, therefore no masters nor officers, no laws nor orders, nor corrections nor punishments; - I say, I never denied, but in such cases, whatever is pretended, the commander or commanders may judge, resist, compel and punish²² such transgressors, according to their deserts and merits.

What Williams wanted was religious liberty within an ordered society. Expediency dictated that the society in which he lived assume a democratic nature. If the situation had been different, there is no reason to believe that Williams would not have been **contented with another**

22 Williams to The Town of Providence, January 1655, in P.N.C., VI., 279.

form of government. He was a democrat only by accident, and his conception of democracy was less advanced than that of some of his contemporaries.²³

His only contribution to American political tradition was his conviction that diversity of religious opinion could exist within a stable society.

Williams, however, once declared, "I have been charged with folly for that freedom and liberty which I have always stood for; I say liberty and equality, both in land and government."²⁴ There is no reason to dispute this statement. However, too much has been made of it by historians. The magic of the word equality leads them to conclude that Williams desired to remove all class privilege from the political and economic spheres. They view him as an early personification of a Jacksonian democrat.

Williams, however, possessed none of the confidence in the abilities of the common man which characterized the Jacksonian approach to politics. He believed that the art of governing required special talents, that the common man "may be no wayes qualified."²⁵ Williams had no faith in the goodness, integrity, or wisdom of men in general. In fact he was prone to lament their vileness and baseness. There is no evidence that he disdained an aristocracy of birth or wealth. In fact, he attacked the Quakers because, among other things, they tended to reduce the level of "civility" in society.²⁶

24 Williams to The Town of Providence, August 1654, in P.N.C., VI., 263.

25 Williams, The Bloody Tenent, in P.N.C., III., 415.

26 Williams, George Fox Digg'd Out of His Burrows, in P.N.C., V., 5, passim.

A stronger case might be made for an interpretation of Williams as an economic equalitarian. In 1638 he divided the land around Providence, which he had purchased earlier from the Indians, among his fellow settlers, receiving thirty pounds in return. Williams renounced all further personal claims to these lands and agreed that anyone desiring to settle thereafter should pay thirty shillings to the town treasury for the privilege. The new settlers would then assume equal political rights with the original settlers.²⁷ One might argue, therefore, that in renouncing his proprietary privileges, Williams demonstrated a belief in economic equality.

The subsequent history of Williams's activity in Rhode Island adds weight to such an interpretation. As the colony grew the original settlers entrenched themselves as a privileged class. Williams opposed their pretensions on behalf of the poorer settlers. In instance after instance he demonstrated a keen awareness of social and economic justice and called upon the more powerful settlers to fulfill their obligations in this regard.²⁸

Even given these facts, however, Williams does not necessarily emerge as an exponent of equalitarianism in any form. After all, he classified land, meadows, and cattle along with government as "children's

27 Records of the Colony of Rhode Island, I., 22-24.

28 The best summary of the events involved can be found in Brockunier, Irrepressible Democrat, pp. 100-281. The interpretation set forth here, however, is decidedly different.

toys." He had no real theoretical interest in social or economic affairs and his political program never assumed levelling aspects. His land policy evidenced an unusually generous personal nature, but it was by no means an uncommon policy for early New England towns. As a good Christian, his sympathies were directed toward the poor, and this naturally lead him to espouse their cause. In so doing, however, he was practicing Christian charity not attempting to remake the social or economic order. "How much sweeter is the counsel of the Son of God," he declared, "to mind first the matters of his kingdomto be content with food and raiment; to mind not our own, but every man the things of another"²⁹

Williams's statement that he always stood for equality in land and government, therefore, should be viewed in light of this spirit of Christian love, for that was the spirit which permeated his life. To do this, of course, is to deny that he was a progenitor of modern political or social theories. Yet, to do this, is to view him for what he was: a religious zealot attempting to fulfill the will of God in all things.

Williams was so imbued with religious zeal that the affairs of this world were unimportant to him. In fact, an air of unreality surrounds any discussion of his political and social thought or activity. Such an analysis is of necessity a forced one, dealing with things which had no real meaning to him. Williams would have preferred to forget the world

²⁹ Williams to Major Mason, June 22, 1670, in P.N.C., VI., 344.

entirely, but circumstances forced him to become actively engaged in its continuous problems. Yet he always remained aloof from what he was doing, somehow above it all, striving for the heavenly, the other-worldly. "Alas! Sir," he wrote to Major Mason, "in calm midnight thoughts what are these leaves and flowers, and smoke and shadows, and dreams of earthly nothings, about which we poor fools and childrendisquiet ourselves in vain?"³⁰ Alas, Williams was really himself only in those "calm midnight thoughts."

30 Ibid., p. 343.

CONCLUSION

Roger Williams in His Time and Ours

Like the New England Puritans, Roger Williams felt that religion was the core of man's existence. For him and for them, man's relationship to God explained the meaning of life and in turn gave meaning to life. The study of this relationship through the Bible, history, and observation of the world was the primary duty of every individual, for this study revealed God's will, which had to be followed if a man was to attain salvation. It is not surprising that when Williams and the New England Puritans arrived at differing conclusions concerning this relationship, violent and acrimonious controversy ensued. With salvation hanging in the balance, how could it have been otherwise?

The banishment of Williams and his debate with John Cotton, however, have tended to obscure the basic similarities between his thought and that of his Puritan brethren. Not only did Williams share their theocentric cosmology, but he agreed with them on a number of basic theological points. Both Williams and the New England Puritans were Calvinists, believing in justification by faith and the doctrine of the elect. They agreed that the Church of England was corrupt and should be reformed. They de-

sired a return to primitive Christianity and an elimination of ritual and hierarchy. They felt that a true Church was composed only of "living stones" and that its organization was of a congregational nature.

Unlike the New England Puritans, however, Williams was an idealist, a perfectionist. Where the Puritans were willing to compromise, he was not. Hence, while they maintained a theoretical connection with the Church of England, he demanded strict separation. While the Puritans wished to circumscribe God's sovereignty within the humanly understandable and consistent norms of the covenant theory, Williams demanded that they stand alone and unaided before God.

Such perfectionism forced him to disassociate himself from the New England churches, and led to his banishment from the colony. He became a seeker of religious truth, demanding toleration for all religions, until God reunited the world at the second coming. Ever aware of divine prerogative, he felt that any civil interference in spiritual affairs would be an affront to God. In his desire for toleration, he was defending God's right to direct man's spiritual affairs, not man's right to choose his own religious beliefs. Williams wanted each individual to be free to follow wherever God might lead.

Even by seventeenth century standards, Roger Williams was a religious zealot. His uncompromising approach to theology made him appear "divinely mad." His fanaticism shocked even his pious contemporaries, and the zest with which he argued the Lord's cause became notorious. Yet,

his ardor was directed toward brotherly love, his fight was waged for peace. Williams looked forward to the New Testament promise of spiritual unity and personal happiness. In his quest for perfection he had rejected the Puritan emphasis on the stern and just Jehovah, for the promises of Christ's mercy and love.

Many of his contemporaries believed that he was wrong, but few questioned his sincerity. Only in later and less religious times, did men come to feel that behind the rhetoric of his theology there lurked the reality of political and social ideas. Only then did his writings become political tracts, and his colony of Rhode Island an experiment in democracy.

In the foregoing pages I have attempted to view Williams from a seventeenth-century perspective, to examine his life and writings in their proper context. This process may have made Williams less attractive to the modern reader, but it should not have made him less significant. Only by understanding the American heritage, not by fabricating it to fit our present aims, can we deal intelligently with modern America.

But what does Williams offer our secular age? Even his noble quest for religious liberty was predicated on principles we have rejected. What pragmatic value does a study of his life and writings offer? Let Williams answer. Let him propose an ideal we do have to be religious to share:

having bought Truth deare, we must not sell it cheape,
not the least graine of it for the whole World, no not
for the saving of Soules, though our owne most precious,

least of all for the bitter sweeting of a little
vanishing pleasure, for a little puffed of credit
and reputation from the changeable breath of uncer-
tain sons of men, for the broken bagges of Riches
on Eagles wings, for a dreame of these, any or all
of these which on our death-bed vanish and leave tor-
menting stings behind them"¹

¹ Williams, The Bloody Tenent, in P.N.C., III., 13. I have taken the liberty to modernize paragraphing and the placement of commas in the above quotation.

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