

ROGER WILLIAMS'S UNINTENTIONAL CONTRIBUTION TO THE CREATION OF AMERICAN CAPITALISM

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THE ARRIVAL OF THE PURITANS on the new continent was not to be an experiment in liberal government; these were Protestants, but not necessarily separatists. John Winthrop's sermon aboard the *Arrabella* informed the colonists, "The end is to improve our lives and doe more service to the Lord the comferte and encrease of the body of christe" (40). Winthrop goes on to describe the New England settlement, in terms that have been well-known since, as a "Citty upon a Hill," a place that would serve as both example and inspiration to the people living in a sometimes unpleasant Old England. Not long after making landfall, however, the puritans were faced with the daunting task of simply keeping themselves alive in the unfamiliar and howling wilderness. Economic scarcity was the rule right from the inception of the colony in Massachusetts, and in spite of their very earnest focus on spiritual matters, the puritans could not altogether neglect the natural, material world. Andrew Delbanco's comments on the impossibility of an analysis of religion and economics based on an "either/or" framework will serve as a useful foundation for inquiry; he asks, "[H]ow can these explanatory categories be brought together" (43)?

The government in Massachusetts Bay Colony—largely an extension of England's government—was fully intended to be a theocracy: there would be no clear distinction between the civil authorities and the higher-ups in the church. So it is not surprising that John Winthrop, preacher aboard the

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CITE THIS ARTICLE AS: Casey Pratt, "Roger Williams's Unintentional Contribution to the Creation of American Capitalism," *Libertarian Papers* 3, 17 (2011). ONLINE AT: libertarianpapers.org. THIS ARTICLE IS subject to a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License (creativecommons.org/licenses). Published by the Ludwig von Mises Institute.

Arrabella, oversaw the trial of Anne Hutchinson in the role of governor just a few years later. But Hutchinson's was not the first crisis of heresy in the new world. By the spring of 1631, a young reverend named Roger Williams was under scrutiny for suggesting that, because the Puritan church in Massachusetts was already separated in fact from the Church of England, it should consequently be legally separate as well (Rothbard 183). In a career-full of dissent to follow, Williams would argue that the state should not persecute "for cause of conscience," and that in order to keep the church pure, the state must be run separately. While it may be difficult to know with certainty the mind of Roger Williams, we can clearly see that in his writing—and even in his action—he began to open a space between the spiritual and the material. If his intentions are unclear, the result is not: in constructing the idea of a fully secular world distinct from religious life, Roger Williams took on the role of midwife in the birth of American capitalism. The purpose of this paper is to trace the development and inadvertent consequences of this essentially theological idea as it took shape in the colonial era.

Questioning the roots of capitalism is a favorite sport among historians and literary critics alike. Certainly the establishment of a trading colony by John Smith in Jamestown, Virginia may be nominated as the event responsible for introducing the concept of free-trade to the new world; but in the lasting religious/cultural influence of the puritans, a severe obstruction to the spread of capitalist economics through New England had taken root. As I will show, puritan settlers in New England, previous to Williams' influence, were effectively unanimous in their opposition to market economics. Further, one of the cornerstone arguments in this debate concerning origins is Max Weber's suggestion, which complicates matters, that there was something distinctly different in Protestantism that led to the onset of capitalism: namely, the belief that good works and productivity were evidence of the soul's being in a state of grace. In Weber's most famous book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the following comments are central to his portrait of the puritans: "The only way of living acceptably to God was not to surpass worldly morality in monastic asceticism, but solely through the fulfillment of the obligations imposed upon the individual by his position in the world. That was his calling" (80). We owe some of our modern ability to move beyond the seeming contradictions of Calvinist Protestantism and into a discussion of its effects to Weber's watershed study. After almost one hundred years, however, Weber's work seems somehow too conclusive. Too many difficult questions are raised about the vaguely defined "spirit of capitalism" and its relationship to the arrival of Protestantism. Perhaps we can leave Weber's conclusion in question, without altogether forgetting his very fruitful methodology. In his book on Roger Williams, John Garrett explains,

We are apt to think a religious man who enjoys the compromises and subtle chess of politics must be something of a hypocrite; or alternatively that politicians who talk religion must have something to hide. In the case of Williams, the politician and theologian are distinct but integrally united. (177)

In short, we cannot know whether Roger Williams was a hypocrite; instead we should seek to understand the intersections of his faith and politics, and perhaps we can see in this one man the dynamic that played itself out on the vastly broader stage of colonial New England.¹

In Bernard Bailyn's watershed work, *The New England Merchants*, he points out the most distinct overlap between the ethical and the economic. As the Puritans saw it, "Society was an organism functioning for the good of all its members," and as such, anyone whose private work "bore broadly on the welfare of others were called upon to exert a scrupulousness in their transactions commensurate with the temptation to sin." Bailyn continues, "Of all private occupations trade was morally the most dangerous" (20). The concept of the "just price" was not born out of Protestant theology; in fact the roots of the idea go all the way back to Aristotle and are fully developed in the Catholic writings of Thomas Aquinas. But in the centuries since Aquinas, little advance had been made in understanding the workings of markets.² The New England merchant worked under the following assumption:

Since proof of the diligence he applied in his calling was in the profits he made from precisely such exchanges, could a line be drawn between industry and avarice? The Puritans answered, as the Catholics for half a millennium, that it could, and they designated this line the "just price." (Bailyn 21)

¹ Of course, Native Americans had long traded (or "bartered") both intra- and inter-tribally, but this paper takes for granted that the puritan resistance to Native American culture obviated any possibility that Native American practices would find their way into Puritan practice, the legendary harvesting of corn notwithstanding. Consider John Winthrop's well-known admonition to settlers to "put a difference between Christians and others" as evidence that a justification for market economics would have to come "from within."

² Michel Foucault points out in *The Order of Things* that late medieval economic thought was almost restricted "to the problem of prices and that of the best monetary substance" (168). While the investigation of the relationship between prices and the various metal standards are significant, the absence of any discussion of value theory until Adam Smith and Ricardo approached the problem leaves the Puritans with an essentially Catholic understanding of trade.

As this “just price” was the foundation for political economy in the 17th century, it is here that we must begin in studying the work of Roger Williams as it relates to emergent capitalism. It is only with an understanding that prices were perceived as a moral issue that we can effectively deduce the often subtle implications of Williams’s theological writing.

Here we are confronted with a difficult methodological problem: how can we balance our more enlightened (or at least “modern”) understanding of economics with the Puritans’ perception of the market? More specifically, is it anachronistic and therefore of no use to try to evaluate what happened in the 17th century through the lens of 20th century economic analysis? To the extent that economics is studied as a science, it proposes theories that are said to be applicable in any historical epoch, regardless of whether or not the people of the given era are aware of the machinations of the market. Just as the rotation of the planets in the solar system was not contingent on Newton’s discovery of gravity, the fundamental discoveries of economics only describe a dynamic that is essentially inescapable wherever goods are exchanged. In his vast treatise, *History of Economic Analysis*, Joseph Schumpeter argues, “In writing economic history, there are indeed statements that should not be added at all unless properly substantiated by pieces of reasoning that belong to economic theory” (20). In the history of economic theory, beginning properly with Adam Smith, there can be seen two distinct approaches to economic analysis—one based in critique, the other in understanding.³ The modern critique of capitalism was inaugurated in the 18th and 19th centuries and was promulgated by, among others, Proudhon and Fourier. Most famous in this school, however, is the work of Marx and Engels whose collected works—both independently and collaboratively—represent the pinnacle of what may be called theoretical economic criticism.⁴

Modern economic theory began in 1871 with the independent and simultaneous discovery of the law of marginal utility by Austrian Carl Menger and Englishman William Stanley Jevons.⁵ Menger’s work in particular was the

³ The Austrians theorists, including both Max Weber and Ludwig Von Mises, are prone to using the German word *Verstehen* to describe this process of “understanding.” It connotes ethical neutrality, non-judgment.

⁴ There were attempts into the 20th century by men like Vilfredo Pareto and Enrico Barone to formulate alternative models to the market economy that were based in mathematical equilibrium analysis. These can be seen as part of the school of theoretical economic critique.

⁵ Menger’s work was titled *Principles of Economics*; Jevon’s was *Theory of Political Economy*. See T.W. Hutchison’s 1972 article, “The ‘Marginal Revolution’ and the Decline and Fall of English Classical Political Economy,” for a nice summary of the history of

fountainhead for a group of theorists known as the Austrian economists. Beginning with a dismantling of Marx's critique of capitalism, the Austrians—including most notably Ludwig Von Mises and F.A. Hayek—defended the market as the only rational and workable system of political economy. The hallmark of the Austrian method is to focus on *understanding* the laws of economic exchange without leveling judgment. With this short background in mind, I introduce a history of early America that has often been ignored by historians and literary critics; written by economist and historian, Murray Rothbard, the book is entitled *Conceived in Liberty*. Rothbard's book serves as a foundation for my own argument, and should be understood as a work with intrinsically heavy political biases. He writes, in his introduction, "My own basic perspective on the history of man, and *a fortiori* on the history of the United States, is to place central importance on the great conflict which is eternally waged between Liberty and Power" (9). It is in this historical perspective that we can best study Roger Williams and interrogate his thought, attempting not to critique his philosophy and his action, but to aim at understanding.

After citing a lengthy passage from what is arguably Williams's most famous work, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution, for the Cause of Conscience*, in which Williams argues that a people should be allowed to set up a government that tends to their civil (and not necessarily spiritual) needs, John Garrett makes an interesting assertion: "There is no *intended* platform here for manhood suffrage or secular libertarianism," he writes (182, italics mine). Yet Rothbard, finding in Williams a kind of representative thinking, unhesitatingly describes him variously as not only an "individualist" and "fearless logician," but also precisely as a libertarian (183). In fact these two readings of Roger Williams are not mutually exclusive. It is not accidental that Garrett includes the qualifying word "intended" as part of his description of Williams's philosophy. The result is a Roger Williams who unintentionally developed a strain of libertarianism in the colonies, in which the church and state would be separate, and therefore the bond between ethics and economics would be dissolved or severely weakened. In arguing against persecution for cause of conscience, Roger Williams was putting the concept of the "just price" on trial.

It was not that Roger Williams had some understanding of subjective value theory; he most certainly did not. The just price was as self-evident to him as it had been to both Catholics and Protestants for centuries. Williams

would have agreed that the merchants often belong among the “many thousands who love not the Lord Jesus Christ, and yet are and must be permitted in the World and Civill State, although they have no right to enter into the gates of Jerusalem the Church of God” (39). The philosophical move toward some form of classical liberalism in Williams’s work, as Perry Miller has suggested, “is not central: the question is the meaning of the Scripture” (104). In part, Miller is dead-on: Williams was not concerned with the sanctity of self-interest or with freeing the merchant class from its permanent suspicion. But the unintended consequences of Williams’s argument for separation have been rather poorly understood by both historians and literary critics. Williams writes, in his *Bloudy Tenent*, of the parable of the wheat and the tares, that the “toleration or permission of such (weeds) ought to continue till Doomes day, or the end of the world, as this Parable urgeth the Toleration; Let them alone until the Harvest” (42). Here Perry Miller is interested only in investigating the spiritual and typological aspects of Williams’s argument—the tares, the merchants, ought to be allowed to sin only because that is consistent with Biblical teaching. To overlook the final exhortation —“Let them alone”—and its political and economic significance, however, would be to miss a significant part of Williams’s unintentional contribution to American culture and history.

Anne Myles has pointed out that, in Williams’s view, “a church can only be holy when it is entirely spiritual, immune to any worldly taint transmitted through contact with unregenerate people” (135). For a staunch Biblicist like Williams, it would have been an undeniable fact that human beings are subject to a sin nature, and that their natural predilection is to do evil. Practically every action a man or woman takes in the material world tends in the direction of sin, and it is *in the interest of the church* to steer clear of any sinful activity. Consequently, writes Williams,

Some Generals of Armies, and Governours of Cities, Townes, &c. doe, and (as those former instances prove) lawfully permit some evill persons and practices: As for instance, in the civil State, Usury, for the preventing of a greater evill in the civill Body, as stealing, robbing, murthuring, perishing of the poore. (85)

This passage reflects a streak of utilitarianism that is based on logical deduction and practicality. It is not, of course, a good thing in Williams’s view to practice or partake in usury. But it is to be tolerated by the church because it may prevent greater and more widespread sin in the future. This ability to analyze events in the scope of worldly ends, even though it is based in the interest of the church and its parishioners, represents a significant breakthrough in Puritan ideology. And, in a very specific sense, Williams’s insistence that usury not be punished contributed significantly to the

beginning of economic growth in the New World. While the moralists were likely to focus on the “unjust” gains of the lenders, there was very little understanding of the benefits that came to the borrowers—money lending made capital available to new segments of the population.⁶

This kind of logical deduction in Williams’s writing lends itself to extrapolation. If he could tolerate such a sinful practice as usury because of its usefulness to the civil society, it follows that it matters of politics and economics in general, his ends will be consistently utilitarian—that is, if a certain legal structure allows for the safe separation of the church from the debased activity of the secular world, without doing harm to civilians, it should be employed. So even if we do not sympathize with Williams’s chosen end (the protection of the church), his internal logic is simple and consistent and, if followed through to its consequences, suggests a state that modern libertarians will recognize. At times, in fact, his thinking is so logical and clear as to call to mind the tendencies of the Enlightenment philosophers. For example, his analysis of the efficacy of the historical persecution for cause of conscience—a response to John Cotton’s argument that this persecution is sometimes justified—reads as follows:

I say againe (though I neither approve Queen Elizabeth or K. James in such their persecutions, yet) such as hold this Tenent of persecuting for Conscience, must also hold that Civill Magistrates are not essentially fitted and qualified for their function and office, except they can discern clearly the difference between such as are to be punished and persecuted, and such as are not (97).

In other words, unless Cotton (and others) are prepared to argue that we require omniscience of our civil authorities, the persecution for conscience is inevitably and inherently a flawed doctrine—both from a theological and a utilitarian perspective. As John Garrett argues, the necessary consequence of maintaining such a policy was “state-compelled hypocrisy” (186).

With an understanding of Roger Williams’s own methodology—his reasons for his radical philosophical assertions—we can undertake to analyze the political and social effects of his primarily theological advocacy. The utilitarian thinking can be seen as the “tare” in his overall garden, where the conservation of the pure church is the more prized “wheat.” However, in the long run of the development of the American socio-political culture, it is the utilitarianism that blossomed and was effectively “harvested” by the framers of the constitution more than 100 years later. Neal Riemer’s exploration of

⁶ Schumpeter makes this point in greater detail in his chapter on “Scholastic Sociology and Economics” in his *History of Economic Analysis* (103–104).

the link between Williams and the birth of the American republic demonstrates convincingly that the seeds of the Constitution were sown in Williams's separatist exhortations. He writes,

Religious liberty serves in fact to advance social harmony. Both religious liberty and separation of church and state function to protect against abuse of religious and political power. The way to democratic and constitutional pluralism is open (46).

In a more recent article, James Calvin Davis has identified the same dynamic between what he calls "civility" and the philosophy of Roger Williams. Davis reads Williams favorably, even by today's standards, and offers him as one of the originators of dialectic and discourse in the political history of America (692).⁷ Although Davis does not go too far in his assertions, he does almost forget that diversity was "tolerated," but not valued by Williams. In this regard we may be wise to identify at least one major difference between Williams and modern classical liberalism; where Williams saw tare, we might see wheat.

Whatever his personal feelings about diverse opinions and behavior (and he almost certainly did not see dissent as a strength in and of itself), Williams's public insistence on toleration was a remarkable turning point in American history. The difficulty lies in understanding the difference between Williams's personal feelings and his public advocacy. The turning point, then, is not in people's perceptions of dissenters—certainly they were still held in disdain—but in the civil response that would be imposed. Bernard Bailyn writes of the Puritans,

They assumed that there existed an ideal standard of valuation applicable to every situation. An unjust figure was the result not so much of the mechanical operation of an impersonal market as of some individual's gluttony. A just charge was one willingly paid by a person experienced in such matters and in need of the article but under no undue compulsion to buy. (21)

Interestingly, this assumption did not change as a result of the writing of Roger Williams. The idea of the "just price" has been around in various forms from the time of Aristotle, and still resonates with some political economists. However, what makes Williams's contribution so significant is

⁷ Cf., Anne Myles's 1993 article, "Arguments in Milk, Arguments in Blood: Roger Williams, Persecution, and the Discourse of the Witness." *Modern Philology* 91 (2) 1993: 133-60. Myles's argument anticipates James Calving Davis's by suggesting that the tone and even the structure (dialogue between Truth and Peace) of Williams's *Bloudy Tenent* create a space for true political dialectic.

that he seems willing to “tolerate” even unjust prices—perhaps because he foresees “preventing greater evil” in removing the church’s interference in economics, perhaps simply because he can not justifying the church dirtying its hands in such materialistic concerns.

In any case, this is where modern economic theory re-enters in the examination of Roger Williams. Regardless of his reasons for advocating tolerance, the effects of removing constraints on the market precipitated a remarkable shift in worldviews. Ludwig Von Mises explains a problem that Williams seemed to identify almost three hundred years earlier:

If righteousness is to be elevated to the position of the ultimate standard of economic action, one must unambiguously tell every actor what he should do, what prices he should ask, and what prices he should pay in each concrete case, and one must force—by recourse to an apparatus of violent compulsion and coercion—all those venturing to disobedience to comply with these orders. (1996, 729)

Mises’s argument is—as Williams’s was—that omniscience is required to run a centralized economy. The church was not eager to relinquish its monopoly on power, however, and insisted on continuing its interference in the market. Following the logic of Protestantism to its end, Williams forced the Salem church into a corner; his “calling upon Salem church to separate clearly from the other churches of the colony, as well as from the Church of England” was ultimately to ignite and strike at the heart of the puritan oligarchy (Rothbard 184). The trial of Anne Hutchinson would follow shortly thereafter, and soon Roger Williams had moved with some twenty families to establish a colony supporting religious tolerance in Providence. Cotton Mather summarized the effects of Roger Williams’s dissent: “There was a whole country in America like to be set on fire by the rapid motion of a windmill in the head of one particular man, Roger Williams” (qtd. in Rothbard, 186). As the theocracy broke down, predictably, economic activity increased.

Lacking direct communication with God (perhaps they shouldn’t have banished Anne Hutchinson!), the Massachusetts church, in trying to “plan” economic activity, was necessarily in an impossible situation.⁸ Of course, the

⁸ Foucault’s discussion of medieval economic theory in *The Order of Things* further supports the argument that economic calculation is impossible for central planners short of omniscience. After quoting a lengthy passage from Davanzatti concerning the gold standard and price-fixing, Foucault remarks, “This celestial and exhaustive calculation can be accomplished by none other than God” (173). More broadly applied to the entire scope of economic activity, this is the essence of the Austrian argument—first articulated

Massachusetts government was not fully centralized, so for a while the commonwealth was sustained, however inefficiently, despite the market interventions. By investigating the effects of the theocratic legislation through a lens of more modern economic theory, we might discover exactly how Roger Williams's different vision for the future contributed to changing the social, economic, and political branches of Rhode Island and eventually, at least indirectly, of America.

Regardless of the church's suspicion of trade, there were certain economic realities that could not be excommunicated or banished. Less than a decade after the great migration, the most fruitful enterprise in the New World—the fur trade—had begun to disappear. Murray Rothbard reveals the causes of the collapse: In 1627, finding itself already in debt to its English financiers, Plymouth effectively began granting monopolistic privilege to eight of its own ruling oligarchs (252). Within a few short years, one of New England's main arteries of commercial activity had collapsed under pressure from the government. Here a major question to be addressed and that is, "did the interventionist policy achieve its desired ends in this case?" While there may be some disagreement about their chosen ends—especially if a discussion of hypocrisy is permitted—it is clear that this could not be seen either as a moral or a material victory for the planners in Plymouth. Only when private and independent settlers moved into the interior of the continent and established their own trading posts was the flow of capital allowed to find its way back into the market (Bailyn 31).

How can we theorize this historical event and make sense of Roger Williams's place in the discussion? Ludwig Von Mises argues, in *Theory and History*, that David Ricardo's "theory of comparative costs" can provide us with an interpretation of events in any economic situation, as it is universally applicable. "Contrary to popular conceptions, (Ricardo's theory) does not say that free trade is good and protection bad. It merely demonstrates that protection is not a means to increase the supply of goods produced" (1969, 30). Bruce Bailyn is able to hint at the fundamental problem of the Plymouth

by Mises as early as 1920—that rational economic calculation is impossible under socialism. Cf., Birken, Lawrence. "Foucault, Marginalism, and the History of Economic Thought." *History of Political Economy* 22 (3) 1990: 557-569. Birken argues that Foucault glosses over the marginal revolution in an attempt to construct a coherent history, incorporating Menger and Jevons's work as part of "modern" economic thought. However, while Foucault's work may tend to lean left, his comment above concerning economic calculation reveals at least a basic understanding of the Austrian thesis. Birken is right to point out that "Foucault is indeed not so far from the explicit position of... the marginalists" (560).

fur trade without fully understanding the implications. He writes, “By charging excessive rates for trading goods... and particularly by putting up with a woefully inaccurate bookkeeping system, (the monopolists) dissipated the part of the profits that ought to have accrued to the Pilgrim merchants” (25). Because he does not define “excessive rates,” Bailyn seems to be contrasting the prices demanded by the monopolists against some objective standard—perhaps even the just price. The failure of the eight Plymouth monopolists was not a product of their immoral violation of fair pricing, but was a direct result of their trying to avert the forces of the market.

However, of course, the puritans did not have an understanding of the dynamics of the market, and were even likely to perceive the dissolution of the fur trade as a sign from God. Williams would not have been surprised by the collapse of the fur trade after the installation of the monopoly, but he would have attributed its failure to spiritual impurity and hypocrisy. In his *Bloudy Tenent*, we read, “...it is rare to finde a King, Prince, or Governour... who tread not in the steps of Herod the Fox, or Nero the Lyon” (93). Williams certainly would have held the same low expectations for the oligarchs of Plymouth, and would have urged the church to protect itself from the sin of the market, rather than trying to protect any particular segment of it. Puritan orthodoxy would have seen no reason to believe that the high civil magistrates could know the just price any better than the merchants could. Trade was not evil in itself, but it was highly suspected, because of the perception that there was a difference between industry and greed. Williams would have seen the separation, but argued that because the line between the two is unclear and slippery, the church should not put itself in a position to sin by trying to set the just price. While his ends were spiritual, the effect would have been to free capital from its artificial constraints. In the absence of price-fixing, and in the hands of William Pynchon, the fur trade would reintroduce itself as one of colonial America’s major industries.

The fur trade was not at all alone in its becoming a target of the church. Although the higher-ups saw themselves as trying to assist merchants in spiritual protection, the fact is that these interventions were economic disasters waiting to happen. One of the most interesting examples was the “maximum wage” controversy of the 1630s. Because labor in the New World was extremely scarce, workers could demand very high wages and expect to find compensation. The conservative Gov. Winthrop, however, was not willing to let economics run its course; perhaps he was trying to artificially keep capital in the hands of the few. In any case, he complained in 1633 that, “the scarcity of workmen had caused them to raise their wages to an excessive rate” (qtd. in Rothbard 254). Here again we are confronted with

that odd phrase: excessive rates. How was the governor able to recognize these rates as “excessive?” What would have been “just” rates? However he determined the proper cost of labor, Gov. Winthrop imposed a maximum wage control in Massachusetts and, just as raising minimum wage inevitably causes unemployment, setting maximum wage always leads to labor shortages.⁹ In addition to trying to fix wage rates, the confused Massachusetts oligarchy tried to respond by also fixing the cost of consumer goods—mostly notably corn, which was the “major monetary medium of the North” (Rothbard 256). Bernard Bailyn summarizes the debacle nicely: “still insisting on the theory of universally equitable wage- and price-levels,” the General Court was despairing of its own regulations (33). By 1635, the theocracy gave up the inefficient and largely unenforceable price and wage-fixing, but undertook a new and equally ineffective measure:

...under the cloak of a desire to “combat monopolizing,” the Massachusetts government created a legal monopoly of nine men—one from each of the existing towns—for purchasing any goods from incoming ships. This import monopoly was to board all the ships before anyone else, decide on the prices it would pay, and then buy the goods and limit itself to resale at a fixed five percent profit. (Rothbard 257)

In his discussion of the import monopoly, Bernard Bailyn focuses on the impossibility of enforcement, arguing that it would have been unrealistic to hope that the merchants would only sell to these nine buyers when others were willing to buy and perhaps even pay more (34). It must be understood that all of this—hypocritically or not—was part of the more general ideology that suggested that officials could “use the State’s means to make men worship rightly” (Garrett 191). We are likely, in retrospect, to assume that the officials were playing at market for their own gain, using the rhetoric of insistence on religious piety as their cover. But the powerful question formulated by Roger Williams was not “is there a just price,” but “by whom are these admonitions to be given” (*Bloudy Tenent* 33). In short, who is qualified to know the just price or the just wage in every situation?

In addition to the arguments noted above, Williams also believed that trade should be permitted with the Indians, and even that they should be free to practice religion according to their own consciences. He writes, in his *Bloudy Tenent*,

⁹ For a fuller treatment of the problem of labor and wage-rates, see Mises’s chapter in *Human Action* on “Wages” (592-598). He writes, “The determination of wage rates... can be achieved only on the market” (593).

To molest any person, Jew or Gentile, for either professing doctrine, or practicing worship meerly religious or spirituall, it is to persecute him, and such a person (whatever his doctrine or practice be true or false) suffereth persecution for cause of conscience. (19)

He goes on to demonstrate that, according to Biblical doctrine, the persecuting Christian, in the act of persecution, enters into spiritual error; only God has the power to separate the tares from the wheat (30). Trade with the Indians, then, would not be a spiritual ideal. The merchant class had been suspected of immorality for many hundreds of years. Instead, trade was simply a pragmatic way to avoid all-out war with the Natives, and Williams hoped that even if individual traders could not protect themselves from sin, the church itself did not belong in the picture.

History never plays out between single cause and single effect. It is difficult to assess any individual's role in the progress of history, and in the case of Roger Williams, because he was such a radical dissenter, it may be an even more impossible task to try to understand his influence. Certainly the Massachusetts Bay colony was not ready to incorporate his liberal exhortations into their plan for the New World. However, by the time the United States were revolting against Britain in the late 18th century, the doctrine of the separation of church and state was widely accepted and trade—while perhaps still suspected as immoral on some level—was not to be a concern of the church in any way. The U.S. Constitution certainly reflects more closely the ideas of Roger Williams than it does of John Cotton or John Winthrop; and yet, the lineage is difficult to trace.

Perhaps what is most interesting is that in some ways, the writing of Roger Williams can still speak to contemporary issues, and still offer alternative possibilities for the order of government. If, for example, we conclude that America's military engagements over the past decade are not entirely motivated by self-defense, we may find an effective argument for anti-adventurism in Williams. More importantly, Williams's vision for peaceful co-existence with other cultures, in which trade serves as the mediator, provides us with a very clear suggestion for a different method of international policy. In all likelihood, Roger Williams would have objected to recent efforts to reintroduce ethical and/or moral concerns into economic activity in American Politics.¹⁰ The question should be asked again, who will

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<http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1997/09/27/gore.campaigning/index.html>, Dec. 8, 2003. See for example both Republican efforts to construct a "compassionate conservatism" and the rhetoric from Democrats like former Presidential candidate, Rep. Dick Gephardt, who suggested in 2003, "I want trade to be capitalism with a moral face."

be qualified to “discerne clearly the difference between such as are to be punished and persecuted, and such as are not” (97). The Federal Reserve Chairman? The President? The anti-trust department? And what will their ethical standard be?

Finally, regardless of Williams’s sometimes-conflated spiritual and utilitarian motivations, his plan of action was clear and direct. Christians are to be “exhorted, not commanded” by the church, and the Gentiles and heretics are to be “left alone.” Perry Miller captured Williams’s position exactly when he wrote, “only the sword of the spirit should any longer have real effect. Mere government had better allow as much freedom as possible” (45). This “mere government,” by the fact that it was forced to deal with material and economic interests, and by the further fact that it lacked omniscience, was seen by Williams as an ugly necessity. It would have been a mistake for the holy church to get entangled in such earthly affairs. So Roger Williams’s deep respect for the church and his consistent adherence to the ideals of Puritanism led him to argue for a complete separation of church and state; the result, perhaps unintentional, was the birth of individual liberty.

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