

Religious Toleration and Ecclesiastical Independence in Revolutionary Britain, Bermuda and the Bahamas

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By the mid-seventeenth century, radical protestant tolerationists in Britain and the British Atlantic began to conceive of religious liberty as a civil liberty applicable to all subjects, in contrast to contemporary puritans who limited toleration to orthodox protestants. This essay seeks to explain why certain puritans, however small in number, came to adopt radical views on toleration in contrast to the religious mainstream in the Anglophone world. Drawing upon a longer history of ecclesiastical independence than considered in the existing scholarship on religious toleration, it identifies a hitherto unexplored relationship between ecclesiastical independence in England and the Atlantic World.

THE development of religious toleration in the west has long featured in early modern narratives. Nineteenth-century Whig historians previously traced a linear march from the religious belligerence of the sixteenth century towards the establishment of religious toleration in the late seventeenth century.¹ A special role was reserved for English puritans in this account as the champions of freedom. Under Charles I's aggressive enforcement of religious conformity during the 1620s, puritans migrated to New England by the thousands to flee from persecution in search of religious liberty. Following the outbreak of the English Civil Wars, the puritans likewise emerged as vocal advocates for liberty of conscience and the leading opposition to royalism and the established church.²

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¹W.K. Jordan, *Development of Religious Toleration* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1940).

²S.R. Gardiner, *The First Two Stuarts and the Puritan Revolution* (London: Longman, 1876); A.S.P. Woodhouse, ed., *Puritanism and Liberty* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1938); William Haller, *Liberty and Reformation in the Puritan Revolution* (New York: Columbia University, 1955).

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But in recent years historians have challenged this teleological narrative of religious toleration.³ For instance, they have drawn greater attention to continuities and to the cyclical nature of persecution and toleration. Toleration was more widespread in medieval society than previously acknowledged.⁴ Moreover, toleration in seventeenth-century England was limited in scope and remained underpinned by the same assumptions that drove magisterial coercion of religious uniformity, which if necessary, resorted to persecution and violence.⁵ On closer inspection, puritans appear to have been more interested in imposing a rigid religious uniformity for the godly than establishing a pluralistic society. Historians have subjected leading congregationalists in particular to rigorous revision. Whereas previous accounts tended to identify independent congregationalism with an agenda for broad religious toleration,⁶ congregational divines in the Westminster Assembly actually pursued a limited provision for their own “tender consciences.” Rather than promoting general religious toleration, their aim was to unite with mainstream orthodoxy puritans and distance themselves from sectarians.⁷ As the architects of the Cromwellian church in the 1650s, these congregationalists later devised a settlement under the protectorate with limited toleration, excluding “Popery [and] Prelacy” from public worship and proselytization. New England congregationalists likewise became more exercised over enforcing religious uniformity than promoting liberty of conscience in the

³In addition to challenging the inevitable rise of modern religious toleration, recent histories have focused on the social dynamics of religious co-existence in multi-confessional states, and the cultural interactions between people of diverse religious traditions within an official religious establishment such as the Church of England. For example, see Benjamin Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 2007), and Chris Beneke and Christopher S. Grenda, *The First Prejudice: Religious Tolerance and Intolerance in Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2011), chs. 3–6.

⁴Cary J. Nederman and J. C. Laursen, *Difference and Dissent: Theories of Toleration in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996); J.C. Laursen and Cary J. Nederman, *Beyond the Persecuting Society: Religious Toleration Before the Enlightenment* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998).

⁵For Walsham, Lake and Shagan, the language of toleration and persecution must be understood as being in a dialectical relationship that could be adapted for political, polemical and strategic purposes. Alexandra Walsham, *Charitable Hatred: Tolerance and Intolerance in England, 1500–1700* (Manchester: Manchester University, 2006), Peter Lake, “Anti-Popery: The Structure of a Prejudice” in *Conflict in Early Stuart England*, ed. Richard Cust and Ann Hughes (Harlow: Longman, 1989), and Ethan Shagan, *The Rule of Moderation: Violence, Religion and the Politics of Restraint in Early Modern England* (New York: University of Cambridge, 2011).

⁶Murray Tolmie, *Triumph of the Saints: The Separatist Churches of London, 1616–1649* (New York: University of Cambridge, 1977).

⁷Avihua Zakai, “Religious Toleration and Its Enemies: The Independent Divines and the Issue of Toleration During the English Civil War,” *Albion* 21, no. 1 (Spring 1989): 12. See also J.C. Davis, “Religion and the struggle for freedom in the English Revolution,” *Historical Journal* 35, no. 3 (September 1992), and Blair Worden, “Toleration and the Cromwellian Protectorate,” in *Persecution and Toleration*, ed. W.J. Sheils, SCH 21 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984).

Massachusetts Bay Colony.⁸ Puritan liberty was therefore the default position of the persecuted, which position soon reversed when the godly gained ascendancy. As the standard “loser’s creed,” it served as a means to an end, born out of a “strategy to ensure survival and to facilitate restoration to exclusive rule.”⁹

However, as John Coffey has pointed out, there nevertheless remained a vocal minority *among* the puritan ranks and separatist sects who argued vigorously for a wide religious toleration that extended beyond the godly.¹⁰ Indeed, Baptists have long stood out among early modern advocates for a wide religious toleration.¹¹ Although sectarians and Baptists were previously excluded from mainstream puritanism, more recent work on early Stuart dissent includes such sectaries on the grounds that the line between conservative and radical puritanism was often slippery and hard to fix.¹² In light of renewed focus on puritan radicalism in post-revisionist literature, a question that demands further explanation is why certain puritans, however small in number, came to adopt radical views on toleration. What prompted tolerationists to conceive of religious liberty as a civil liberty applicable to all subjects, in contrast to their more conservative contemporaries who limited toleration to the godly?¹³ Did such views simply develop out of the circumstance of persecution or practical coexistence with competing religious traditions? Were constitutional concerns ultimately of greater weight than religious arguments for liberty?¹⁴

⁸Jeffrey Collins, “The Church Settlement of Oliver Cromwell,” *History* 87, no. 285 (December 2002). Although the *Instrument of Government* protected those ‘differing in judgment from the doctrine, worship or discipline publicly held forth’, it provided that “this liberty be not extended to Popery or Prelacy.” Haller, *The Puritan Revolution*, 261. Avihu Zakai, “Orthodoxy in England and New England: Puritans and the Issue of Religious Toleration, 1640–1650,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 135, no. 3 (September 1991): 401–441.

⁹Andrew Pettegree, “The Politics of Toleration in the Free Netherlands, 1572–1620,” in *Tolerance and Intolerance in the European Reformation*, ed. Ole Peter Grell and Bob Scribner (New York: Cambridge University, 1996), 198. See also Walsham, *Charitable Hatred*, 3, 236.

¹⁰John Coffey “Puritanism and Liberty Revisited: The Case for Toleration in the English Revolution,” *Historical Journal* 41, no. 4 (December 1998): 961–985 and John Coffey, “Puritanism and Liberty” in *Persecution and Toleration in Protestant England, 1558–1689* (Harlow: Longman, 2000).

¹¹Coffey, “Puritanism and Liberty”; William G. McLoughlin, *New England Dissent, 1630–1833: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State*, 2 vols (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1971); B.R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1983).

¹²Peter Lake, *Boxmaker’s Revenge: “Orthodoxy,” “Heterodoxy” and the Politics of the Parish in Early Stuart London* (Manchester: Manchester University, 2001), David Como, *Blown by the Spirit: Puritanism and the Emergence of an Antinomian Underground in Pre-Civil-War England* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University, 2004).

¹³See Blair Worden’s discussion of how some congregationalists combined religious and civil liberty in the 1650s, which became prominent in Cromwell’s thought later in the Protectorate. Worden, “Oliver Cromwell and the Cause of Civil and Religious Liberty” in *England’s Wars of Religion, Revisited*, ed. Charles Prior and Glenn Burgess (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2011).

¹⁴This question has received renewed focus in Rachel Foxley’s work which has argued that contrary to previous readings of Oliver Cromwell’s thought, constitutional rather than religious

The importance of religious dissent in the development of broad toleration has received renewed emphasis. Blair Worden, for instance, noted that such views were adopted by those who departed from mainstream Calvinist doctrine.¹⁵ Building on these studies, this essay argues that independent ecclesiology also prompted radical puritans to argue for a wider religious toleration in the seventeenth century. Space does not permit an exploration of the relative weight that constitutional, social and other theological factors played.¹⁶ Nor does the following discuss the pragmatism and situation specific nature of the marginalized, which led to the radicalization of their views. Instead, this essay argues that notwithstanding these other factors, the ecclesiastical thought of independence held important implications for the reconceptualization of religious toleration. It seeks to do so by widening the scope of debate and extending it to the British Atlantic. Although New England remained the primary model for puritan colonization, one of the boldest attempts to experiment with broad religious toleration in the mid-seventeenth century took place in the British Atlantic on the Bermuda plantation and the Bahamas, which this essay will use as a case study.

This is not to restore a model of linear progression from a persecuting to a tolerant society. Nor is it to follow a recent trend in dividing congregationalists (or English protestants in general) into conservative or radical camps.¹⁷ As Alexandra Walsham has illustrated, persecution and toleration could often coexist or overlap in theory and practice in early modern English society.¹⁸ The following takes as its starting point the view that both tolerationist and magisterial tendencies existed in congregational thought. On the one hand, this essay argues that there was more overlap between independent tolerationists and conservative congregationalists in the mid-1640s than the latter were likely to admit. Nonetheless, whilst some came to conceive of religious liberty as a civil liberty, other congregationalists remained committed to a limited toleration and relatively conservative

principles played a greater role in his justification for limited toleration. Rachel Foxley, "Oliver Cromwell on Religion and Resistance" in *England's Wars of Religion, Revisited*, 209–230.

¹⁵Davis, "Religion and the struggle for freedom"; Worden, "Civil and Religious Liberty," 239. Worden here follows Hugh Trevor-Roper's view that Calvinism was anti-Enlightenment, whereas Arminianism was Erasmian, progressive and linked to toleration and liberty.

¹⁶For a fuller treatment of this see *Pre-Revolutionary Puritanism*, ed. Polly Ha et al. (New York: Oxford University, forthcoming).

¹⁷The following uses "independency" to refer to those who embraced the term as opposed to "congregationalists," such as the Dissenting Brethren, who rejected it. Although this essay draws attention to distinctions in their ecclesiology, it also explores points of overlap in their church polity. For a recent study highlighting the conservative as opposed to radical character of congregationalism see Hunter Powell, "The Dissenting Brethren and the Power of the Keys, 1640–1644" (PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2011).

¹⁸Alexandra Walsham, *Charitable Hatred*.

religious policy. This might suggest that the development of radical tolerationist views were ultimately pragmatic or only indirectly tied to views on church polity. However, there were important ecclesiological variations within congregationalism which make more sense of the seemingly contradictory impulses in revolutionary puritanism, and as a consequence, the competing accounts of puritanism and liberty in the mid-seventeenth century.

I. THE EARLY BERMUDAN CHURCH

In order to explore the development of independency and religious toleration in Bermuda by the mid-seventeenth century, it is first necessary to sketch the initial settlement and reformed character of the plantation in the early seventeenth century.¹⁹ The Somers-Gates expedition set out for Virginia in 1609, but famously shipwrecked in Bermuda. The Virginia Company soon established a permanent British plantation on the island in 1612 with fifty colonists arriving that year.²⁰ This preceded the rise of congregational thought in England and the mass puritan exodus to New England by nearly two decades. In 1624 the Virginia Company was replaced by Bermuda's own joint stock company comprised of investors in the island's tobacco trade. Governed by its shareholders in London, Bermuda was also organized locally by a governor and council. The islands were divided up into districts called "Tribes" which were named after the company's shareholders. The council's membership included overseers and ministers from each tribe along with the sheriff and secretary. The company based in London monitored government and trade in the island through regular correspondence with the governor and council.²¹

Despite its identification with the Church of England, the Bermudan church closely resembled the reformed churches on the continent.²² This was in part due to the remote location of the island and its partition into "tribes" which the Bermudans soon converted into a presbyterian order with ministers and overseers in each tribe. Soon after his arrival in 1619, Governor Nathaniel Butler introduced the presbyterian liturgy "used in the Ilands of Garnesey

¹⁹For a fuller discussion of the early settlement of Bermuda see Polly Ha, "Godly Globalization: British Calvinism in Bermuda," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 66, no. 3 (July 2015): 543–561.

²⁰Jean Kennedy, *Isle of devils: Bermuda under the Somers Island Company, 1609–1685* (London: Collins, 1971) chs. 1–2.

²¹J.H. Lefroy, *Memorials of the discovery and early settlement of the Bermudas or Somers Islands, 1515–1685*, (Hamilton: Bermuda Historical Society, 1981), I: 182–218.

²²This can be explained in part by the nature of the island itself, which resembled some of the characteristics of Geneva in its early reform both in the diversity and high influx of inhabitants and in its strategic location.

and Jarsye.”²³ Butler’s own account of this religious policy in his *History of the Bermudas* reveals the strategic nature of this move. While the liturgy agreed with the ministers on the island, it also had the tacit approval of James VI and I, already existing in “his maiesties dominions, and by him tollorated.”²⁴ Yet Butler was deliberate in introducing a reformed liturgy into the Bermudan church. Explicitly identifying with continental counterparts, he celebrated their liturgy being “one and the very same with that of the French protestants, those of the United Provinces, and even Geneva itself.”²⁵

However by the mid-seventeenth century, religious controversy on the plantation was sparked by the introduction of independent congregational ecclesiology. John Oxenbridge, who ministered in Bermuda between 1635 and 1641, was believed to have sowed the first seeds of congregationalism on the island and inspired Bermuda’s leading independent ministers.²⁶ These men included William Goulding, who became minister to the Warwick tribe in 1638, and Nathaniel White, who followed the year after as minister to the Southampton and Sandys churches. Four years later in 1643 White and Goulding had gathered a congregational church in Bermuda, co-opting the aged Patrick Copland to lead the independent party.

II. INDEPENDENTS ON RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

The rise of ecclesiastical independence in Bermuda scandalized conservative puritan contemporaries in Britain. Richard Baxter lamented the emergence of Bermudan independency, which “would make the Christian heart to bleed.”²⁷ Robert Baillie claimed that the New Englanders were responsible for introducing this novelty.²⁸ The broader breach of independency, according to Baillie, was not simply the division of the church in a particular plantation. Nor was it merely a crisis of the “Churches of a whole nation.” It was seen to bring destruction to churches “of the whole world.”²⁹ For the concept of the

²³Nathaniel Butler, *Historye of the Bermudaes or Summer Islands*, ed. J. H. Lefroy (London: Hackluyt Society, 1882), 171.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 171.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 172.

²⁶Babett Levy, “Early Puritanism in the Southern and Island Colonies,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 70, no. 1 (April 1960): 177.

²⁷Richard Baxter, *Mr Baxter’s vindication of the Church of England . . . taken out of his own writings (Defense of Love)* (London, 1682), 15.

²⁸“There were above 3000 people in the Isle, who had lived without all controversie . . . from their first planting till the yeare 1641, when . . . perswaded by some writs of the Brethren of New England . . . three of them entering in a Covenant, and thereby becoming a new Church, did perswade . . . some thirty or forty . . . to joyn with them in their new Church Covenant.” Robert Baillie, *A dissuasive from the errors of the time* (London: 1645) 112.

²⁹*Ibid.*

universal church was a working assumption in Bermudan ecclesiology for the first several decades of its settlement and remained a predominate idea through the mid-seventeenth century.

Despite its remote location and relative isolation, Bermuda belonged to a globalized godly society in the eyes of its contemporaries. Bermudans themselves continued to believe they were in league and federation with continental churches, even if not by formal institution.³⁰ Such federation directly followed from the view that they were part of a universal ecclesiastical society. This had been a working assumption in the thought of the magisterial protestant reformers. Although protestant reformers tended to stress catholicity through doctrinal continuity over institutional unity after their break with the Church of Rome, they nonetheless retained the belief in a single true church that was unlimited in its geographic scope.³¹ English Presbyterians equally remained committed to the concept of a universal visible church from their earliest emergence in the late sixteenth century onwards.³²

But central to early independent thought was the claim that a universal visible church did not appear in the New Testament. Henry Jacob argued in his earliest exposition of ecclesiastical independence that “under the Gospell Christ never instituted, nor had any one Universall visible church . . . which ordinarily was to exercise spirituall outward government, over all persons through the world professing Christianity.”³³ For Jacob, “only a Particular ordinary constant Congregation of Christians in Christes Testament is appointed and reckoned to be a visible Church.”³⁴ It followed that if the visible church was a particular congregation, no formal jurisdiction could be exercised beyond that body. Nathaniel White, defending independency in Bermuda likewise questioned, “Is there any so much as the least rumour of a Nationall Church in the new Testament, as there is in the old?”³⁵ Arguing that the only visible church in the New Testament was a particular congregation, White came to the view that “every particular Congregation

³⁰See Ha, “Godly Globalization.”

³¹They “uniformly affirmed that the visible church is itself catholic and ecumenical. Spread abroad throughout the earth, it professes a common faith and cherishes a common fellowship.” John T. McNeill, “The Church in Sixteenth-Century Reformed Theology,” *Journal of Religion* 22, no. 3 (July 1942): 268.

³²They stressed the universal nature of the visible church even more vigorously in the first half of the seventeenth century in response to the rise of independent congregational thought. Polly Ha, *English Presbyterianism 1590–1640* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2011), ch 3.

³³Henry Jacob, *A Confession and Protestation of the Faith of Certaine Christians in England* (Amsterdam: 1616), B2v.

³⁴Henry Jacob, *Reasons Taken Out of Gods Word*, Bv.

³⁵Nathaniel White, *Truth gloriously appearing from under the sad and sable cloud of oblique* (London: 1645), B2.

hath from Christ absolute power to exercise of and in itself every Ordinance of God.”³⁶

There was of course variation in presbyterian and congregational thought with mixed ecclesiological positions emerging on the nature of the visible church. This not only developed over the course of the first half of the seventeenth century, but became even more prominent in attempts to reach a new religious settlement in the mid-seventeenth century,³⁷ with some leading congregational spokesmen pursuing a national reformation of the church.³⁸ Yet, at the same time, other independents continued to hold to the view that the only visible church to appear in the New Testament was a particular congregation. This gradual split between congregationlists over the definition of the visible church held important implications for the question of toleration. On the one hand, congregational thinkers such as John Cotton, John Owen and the Dissenting Brethren in the Westminster Assembly continued to argue for a national reformation and church and sought to distinguish themselves from radical claims to religious liberty. They instead pursued a limited toleration for tender consciences among the godly. But for independents committed to the particular congregation as the sole New Testament model, the whole idea of a national church and the degree to which the civil magistrate should impose religious uniformity was thrown open into debate. “Above all,” John Coffey has argued, “radical tolerationists established their case on a contrast between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament Church.”³⁹ Indeed, puritan radicals were set apart from other continental tolerationists by “their conviction that the binding New Testament pattern undermined the very idea of national churches.”⁴⁰

Given that the Bermuda independents argued strenuously that the sole New Testament model for the church was a particular congregation, it is perhaps no surprise to find them included in William Prynne’s *Fresh Discovery of Some Prodigious New Wandring-Blasing Stars*, alongside outspoken tolerationists including John Lilburne, Henry Robinson and John Goodwin.⁴¹ Prynne’s *Fresh Discovery* appeared in 1645 to condemn Independents who rejected

³⁶Ibid., B.

³⁷For variation on the definition of the visible church before the mid-seventeenth century see Ha, *English Presbyterianism*, 67–73.

³⁸“In contrast to the separatists, who negated the concept of a national church, the Independents came to the Westminster Assembly, as did the Presbyterians, to reform the Church of England as a national church.” Zakai, “Religious Toleration and Its Enemies,” 9.

³⁹Coffey, “Puritanism and Liberty Revisited,” 971.

⁴⁰“Throughout their writings there was an insistent polemic against the applicability of the Israel model to contemporary nations. The church age, they asserted, was dramatically different to the age of Israel. ‘The Nationall Church of the Jewes cannot be a pattern for us now.’” Ibid., 972, 975.

⁴¹William Prynne, *A fresh discovery of some prodigious new wandring-blasing-stars, & firebrands, stiling themselves new-lights* (London: 1645).

the Presbyterianism of the Westminster Assembly and the recent publication of their *Directory for the Publique Worship of God*. It was of course common for polemicists such as Prynne and harsiographers such as Thomas Edwards to lump all radicals together. Nevertheless, it is worth considering how the Bermudans responded to Prynne's work and whether they themselves identified with other radicals in England. In response to Prynne's *Fresh Discovery*, White wrote his definitive statement outlining his congregational views in his *Truth gloriously appearing* in 1645. Having returned to London to plead for congregational liberty of conscience before Parliament, White signed his treatise from White Alley, London. Located just off of Coleman Street, White would have been within a stone's throw of John Goodwin's gathered church.⁴²

Not only was White based within the vicinity of one of London's leading radicals, but he directly appealed to Goodwin in his work. His first mention of Goodwin "as that reverend and worthy servant of the Lord" was in reference to Goodwin's *Theomachia*, which Prynne had targeted in his *Fresh Discovery* as a radical tolerationist work. White responded to Prynne's *Fresh Discovery* by deferring to Goodwin's judgment:

That, for any man to endeavor or attempt the suppression of any Doctrine, practice or way, that is from God, is to fight against God) They render themselves obnoxious to the wrath of God, who shall exercise any high handed opposition or contestation against any way, Doctrine or practice whatsoever, UNTIL they have proof upon proof, demonstration upon demonstration, evidence upon evidence, yea all the security that men in an ordinary way (at least) can have, that such ways or Doctrines only pretend God to be the author of them, and that in truth they are not at all from him.⁴³

White repeatedly argued against such pre-emptive judgments, further drawing from "that judicious Divine Mr John Goodwin." As Goodwin wrote in his *Innocency and Truth Triumphing Together*, "M. Prins conscience, with all his arguments doth not yet serve him peremptorily, or simply to condemn this way, as one of Christs own way."⁴⁴

Goodwin's case for the suspension of judgment was tied to his broader arguments for the autonomy of individual congregations. Both *Theomachia* and *Innocency and Truth* were written after Goodwin's gathered church became public knowledge in mid-1643, following which he "started to articulate a radical defence of religious toleration, one designed to undermine

⁴²White, *Truth gloriously appearing*.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 100.

⁴⁴John Goodwin, *Innocency and truth triumphing together* (London: 1645), 42; White, *Truth gloriously appearing*, 141.

the Presbyterian drive for uniformity.”⁴⁵ For instance, the passage cited by White from Goodwin’s *Innocency and Truth* is directly followed by Goodwin’s defense of the primitive nature of congregational government. Of course not all congregationist thought by the mid-seventeenth century was directly descendent from earlier Stuart exponents of independency. However, there is evidence that Goodwin drew from Henry Jacob in making his arguments for primitive congregationalism. This has gone unnoticed by historians. It is possible that this reference has been overlooked because it was via John Cann’s *Sion’s Prerogative* that Goodwin cited from Jacob’s *Reasons Taken out of God’s Word* “that the for the space of 200 or 300 yeeres after Christ, every visible church had power to exercise Ecclesiasticall Government, and all other Gods spirituall Ordinances (the means of salvation) in and for it self, immediatly from Christ.”⁴⁶

This reference to Jacob’s primitive congregationalism would have also been familiar to Nathaniel White. As mentioned above, the passage White cited from Goodwin is directly followed by Goodwin’s reference to Jacob’s argument.⁴⁷ Like Goodwin and Jacob, White’s independent ideology was based on congregational freedom from any authority or power (either ecclesiastical or secular) beyond the particular congregation. White begins his preface by explaining that independency “hath all its Dependence” on Christ. Independents were to some degree “dependent . . . upon men too . . . for advice and counsel; and accountable for our actions unto men also.” Nonetheless, they were “content” to be called independent “after a sort . . . that is, as it referres to man, or other Churches, or other subordination unto them in regard of Church Government, or power.”⁴⁸ Thus, White’s definition of the visible church held the same implications for congregational ecclesiastical independence: “Here is the great, and main difference (if I mistake not between the Classicall dependents, and the Congregationall Independents) the one holds dependencie upon men, upon Churches, in regard of Church government or power, the other holds none.”⁴⁹ Indeed, White turned the accusation of independence against the Presbyterians,

⁴⁵John Coffey, *John Goodwin and the Puritan Revolution: Religion and Intellectual Change in Seventeenth-Century England* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2006), 98.

⁴⁶Goodwin, *Innocency and truth*, 42. This reference to Henry Jacob’s *Reasons Taken out of God’s Word* was taken from John Cann’s *Syon’s prerogative royal* (Amsterdam: 1641), 28, 29. For Jacob the congregational nature of the visible church could only mean that each individual congregation exercised independent government. See Ha, “Ecclesiastical Independence and the Freedom of Consent” in *Freedom and the Construction of Europe*, ed. Quentin Skinner and Martin van Gelderen (New York: Cambridge University, 2013).

⁴⁷John Goodwin, *Innocency and truth triumphing together* (London, 1645), 42; White, *Truth gloriously appearing*, 141.

⁴⁸White, *Truth gloriously appearing*, 6.

⁴⁹Ibid.

arguing that they were ultimately guilty of the same charge when their system of appeal was pushed to its final level of judgment.⁵⁰

Did such congregational independence hold any implications for individual freedom? Blair Worden noted that the principle of consent (in politics and religion) lay behind broader claims for religious and civil liberty. The principle of consent in ecclesiastical independence likewise held important implications for religious toleration.⁵¹ Jacob's argument against the authoritative nature of conciliar decrees, for instance, was based on the principle of free consent, which was deemed a "weightier issue" by his adversaries even than the definition of the visible church, which "followeth by a necessarie consequence from it."⁵² When pressed by his critics, Jacob ultimately extended his defense for congregational liberty and the freedom of consent to the freedom of the individual. This not only applied to the freedom of individual conscience, but also the freedom of association. He argued for the freedom of individual choice in joining an alternate congregation and gathering together an ecclesiastical society.⁵³

John Goodwin's defense for congregational liberty was likewise related to his belief in the freedom of individual judgment in ecclesiastical matters. Just as Jacob denied that contemporary synods held any legitimate ecclesiastical authority, Goodwin mocked the presbyterian Thomas Edwards for regarding the Westminster Assembly as authoritative.⁵⁴ For Goodwin's "brand of Independency, with its stress on private judgment" was skeptical of the decrees of councils, affirming that "God had revealed his secrets to 'single persons, not Councells.'"⁵⁵ Nathaniel White likewise believed that the Westminster Assembly held no particular weight in itself.⁵⁶ Instead, they were "congregated by the power of the State" and therefore God had given no "special or particular promise to be present with them." White's view that the Assembly did not hold any inherent authority was based on an assumption that individual determination of ecclesiastical matters was authoritative. Writing in the personal pronoun, he deferred to his own judgment of the Assembly's decrees:

⁵⁰Whereas "particular Churches depend . . . on a Presbyterie, a Presbyterie on a Provinciaall Synod, and that on a Nationall: but on whom doth a Nationall Synod depend?" Ibid.

⁵¹Worden, "Civil and Religious Liberty," 240.

⁵²Polly Ha, "Ecclesiastical Independence"; Ha, *English Presbyterianism*, 77–79.

⁵³Ha, "Ecclesiastical Independence."

⁵⁴Ha, *English Presbyterianism*, 87–88. Rejecting any ecclesiastical authority beyond the particular congregation, Goodwin derided Thomas Edwards for "treating the decrees of the Westminster Assembly as oracles." Coffey, *John Goodwin*, 139.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶"I look upon them, not as a Nationall Presbytery of the Church in England." White, *Truth gloriously appearing*, 59.

Therefore I stand ready to embrace any light, that Christ shall please providentially to minister unto me by their hands; but tie myself by no means to their arbitrament, further then I see it to be according to the Word; for Christ never made them the Lords of my faith, no not if they were the Apostles themselves. [1 Peter 5:3]⁵⁷

What implications did such individual freedom in independent thought hold for religious toleration? How “did the Puritan Revolution come to align liberty in the state with liberty in religion?” For Worden, “once the claims of liberty in religion had been made for individual believers, parallels with the liberties of the subject came into view.” Such parallels between religious and civil liberty began to be drawn “not among the theologically more orthodox of the Congregationalist divines . . . but among such doctrinally experimental figures as Goodwin and John Milton and the Levellers William Walwyn and Richard Overton.”⁵⁸ Whilst the convergence of civil and religious liberty which resulted in broad religious toleration could certainly be found among those who were doctrinally experimental, it could also develop out of an independent ecclesiology without necessarily departing from mainstream Calvinist orthodoxy. It is noteworthy that the Assembly, even though “congregated by the power of the State” neither held any inherent bearing on individual congregations nor on the individual believer for White. Instead, he stressed the freedom of individual believers in their gathering to the congregational way, whereby they “grow up freely unto it, and freely act in it to mutual comfort and edification.”⁵⁹ White further assumed the translation of Christian liberty to civil liberty. Instead of turning to Parliament to secure godly reformation and preserve national orthodoxy, he instead appealed to Parliament to protect the “Rights and Liberties Christ hath . . . left the Saints as his last Legacy” that it “may not be taken away by the Secular power.”⁶⁰ It is no surprise that White’s concern to guard religious liberty from secular power led to the charge that he undermined Parliamentary authority as well as denying the royal supremacy.

Royal supremacy offers a test case for White’s view of the civil magistrate’s role in directing ecclesiastical affairs. The religious policy of the Bermuda plantation had been left relatively ambiguous in the Company’s charter,

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Worden, “Civil and Religious Liberty,” 239. For the relationship between religious toleration and the Levellers’ understanding of nature and grace see J.C. Davis, “The Levellers and Christianity,” in *Politics, Religions and the English Civil War*, ed. Brian Manning (London, 1973), and Rachel Foxley, “The Levellers: John Lilburne, Richard Overton, and William Walwyn” in *The Oxford Handbook of Literature and the English Revolution*, ed. Laura Knoppers (New York: Oxford University, 2012).

⁵⁹White, *Truth gloriously appearing*.

⁶⁰Ibid.

which simply called for the administration of “the oaths of supremacy and allegiance.”⁶¹ The oath of Supremacy asserted the crown’s authority over spirituals and affirmed the King’s as supreme governor of the Church of England. This had first been used by Henry VIII to establish autonomy from the Church of Rome and to secure the crown’s religious authority within England. However, it had long been put to various purposes throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁶² White likewise put an independent spin on supremacy. On the one hand he insisted that “we gladly acknowledge that the Kings Majesty is and ought to be supreme Governour, in all causes and over all persons, as well ecclesiasticall as civill.” However, White carefully qualified the king’s supremacy, arguing that he only acknowledged the King’s authority to be exercised “civilly not spiritually.” Stripping the supremacy of any spiritual authority, he argued that the King could not be “Authour, nor Minister of any ecclesiasticall thing, or things whatsoever. Not the Authour, for the Lord Christ is our Law-giver [Isaiah 33:22]. Not the Minister, for the Keyes were delivered by Christ (in regard of execution) to ecclesiasticall persons [Matthew 16:19].”⁶³ Yet White further denied the King any positive ecclesiastical authority or jurisdiction. He argued that the king exercised supremacy as “the Keeper and maintainer, by compulsive power negatively, of the whole state of Religion.”⁶⁴ Whilst more conservative congregationalists, such as the Dissenting Brethren in the Westminster Assembly, denied the civil magistrate spiritual authority, they nonetheless preserved a positive role for the magistrate to further reform.⁶⁵ Yet radical independents, such as Goodwin, argued against any positive authority exercised by the civil magistrate in matters spiritual:

So to nominate and appoint who shall have power to umpire in matters of conscience and of God, to determine what shall be preached, and what not, what shall be believed, and what not, is a branch of a greater root of power, then the exercise of the power that is committed unto others in this behalf.⁶⁶

⁶¹Ibid., 95–96.

⁶²Claire Cross, *The Royal Supremacy in the Elizabethan Church* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969), Ethan Shagan, *Popular Politics and the English Reformation* (New York: Cambridge University, 2003) ch. 1, and Jacqueline Rose, “Royal Ecclesiastical Supremacy and the Restoration Church,” *Historical Research* 80, no. 209 (August 2007): 324–345.

⁶³White, *Truth gloriously appearing*, 57.

⁶⁴Ibid., 57.

⁶⁵John Coffey, “The toleration controversy during the English Revolution” in *Religion in Revolutionary England*, ed. Christopher Durston and Judith Maltby (Manchester: Manchester University, 2007), 49–53.

⁶⁶Goodwin, *Theomachia, or the grand imprudence of men* (London: 1644) 50.

Like White, John Goodwin stressed that Christ alone was “authorized by God to be Law-giver himself unto his Churches and Saints” and thus it did not follow that “ever he invested any other with such a power.”⁶⁷

White’s plea for toleration was pushed after the summer of 1645 at a time when support for a limited liberty of conscience was gaining favour in Parliament. Sir Henry Vane was seeking to pack the Commons with “members favourable to the cause of toleration.”⁶⁸ Meanwhile Oliver Cromwell, representing the New Model Army after its victory at Naseby, was emerging as an advocate of liberty of conscience.⁶⁹ Despite the radical implications of White’s views, both Vane and Cromwell were among those who signed the Commons’ order granting the Bermudans “favour in the lybertye of their conscience” in October 1645.⁷⁰ That the independent Bermudans be freed from “all molestacon & troble . . . in the matters of Gods worhipp” was not to endorse complete religious toleration.⁷¹ For the Bermudan independents still remained within the godly circle of orthodoxy. That they agreed “in all the main articles of faith” with the New England churches and “differ[ed] not from them in any one substantiall” was evident in that the New England churches “g[a]ve us the right hand of fellowship.”⁷² White further denied being opposed to paedobaptism and “the efficacy of the ordinances dispenced by unworthy Ministers,” adding that “we denie not remission of sinnes to the lapsed, upon repentance.”⁷³ Indeed, their critics were quick to call into question their character rather than their theological views on soteriology or the trinity.⁷⁴

However, a few years later the Bermudans were successful in securing a far more radical provision to establish a colony in the Bahamas based on even broader religious toleration. In 1647 Parliament granted the former governor of the Bermuda colony, William Sayle, a charter to establish a colony in the Bahamas, in collaboration with the Bermuda independent ministers.⁷⁵ Based on the principle of liberty, they named it “Eleutheria,” the Greek word for freedom.⁷⁶ Indeed, the Broadside advertising the colonial venture promised that there would be no discrimination based on religious beliefs on the

⁶⁷Ibid., 50.

⁶⁸W.K. Jordan, *The development of religious toleration*, III: 65–67.

⁶⁹As Cromwell “told the Commons after the victory [at Naseby], a soldier who ‘ventures his life for the liberty of his country’ should be rewarded with the ‘liberty of his conscience’.” Worden, “Civil and Religious Liberty,” 241.

⁷⁰Lefroy, *Memorials*, I: 600; A.C. Hollis Hallett, *Bermuda under the Sommer Islands Company, 1612–1684: Civil Records* (Hamilton, Bermuda: Juniperhill Press, 2005) I: 268.

⁷¹Lefroy, *Memorials*, I: 600–601.

⁷²White, *Truth gloriously appearing*, 53.

⁷³Ibid., 52.

⁷⁴Prynne, *Fresh Discovery*.

⁷⁵Levy, “Early Puritanism,” 181.

⁷⁶Ibid.

plantation. For “the peace and happy progress of all Plantations, doth much depend upon . . . the equal distribution of justice, and respect to all persons, without faction or distinction, the certain knowledge and manifestation of every ones right and proprieties.”⁷⁷ On this basis, it ordered that all persons be received “into the said Plantation, notwithstanding any other difference of judgement, under whatsoever other names conveyed, walking with justice and sobriety, in their particular conversations, and living peaceably and quietly as Members of the Re-publick.”⁷⁸ Although the Broadside assumed that all colonists and servants were Christians, it excluded neither popery nor prelacy. Nor did it attempt to make any public statement of faith in order to patrol public error. Indeed, it exceeded the limits of toleration under the Cromwellian church settlement by prohibiting the civil magistrate from having any “cognisance of any matter which concerned religion,” leaving every individual to “his own opinion or religion, without control or question.”⁷⁹ Noting the “great inconveniences” which followed from uniformity and conformity “in matters of judgement and practice in all the things of Religion,” the colony was notable for the absence of “any word of maintaining or professing any religion or worship of God at all.”⁸⁰ Writing to John Winthrop as early as 1646, William Rener boasted that they had “procured a patent from Parlement, to settle on anye of those Ilands, or other in America with suche preuiledges, Immunityes, as hitherto (as is said) haue not bene graunted, both for soule and bodye.”⁸¹

Just as Nathaniel White had conceived of liberty of conscience as a civil liberty in Bermuda, he was likewise one of the leaders of the Bahamas colony based on the same principle of religious freedom.⁸² The Bahamas venture was ultimately short-lived due to divisions that emerged on shipboard, resulting in Sayle splitting the emigrants into two separate islands.⁸³ Lack of adequate provision was exacerbated by poor soil and the reluctance of others, including the New Englanders, to fully support the venture. Although most of the independents from the Bahamas, including White, had returned to Bermuda after only a few years, they returned having

⁷⁷Fulmer Mood, “A Broadside Advertising Eleuthera and the Bahama Islands London, 1647,” *The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, Publications*, XXXII (1937): 81–82.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 82–83.

⁷⁹John T. Hassam, *The Bahama Islands: Notes on an early attempt at colonization* (Cambridge, Mass: J. Wilson and son, 1899), 14.

⁸⁰Mood, “A Broadside,” 81. Hassam, *The Bahama Islands*, 14.

⁸¹*Winthrop Papers* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1947) 5: 73.

⁸²The independent minister William Goulding went even further by advocating freedom of trade. See his *Servants on horse-back: or, a free-people bestrided in their persons, and liberties, by worthless men* (London: 1648).

⁸³Hassam, *The Bahama Islands*, 14.

launched one of the boldest experiments with religious toleration in Britain and the British Atlantic world.⁸⁴

III. INDEPENDENT ECCLESIOLOGY REVISITED

Early independent thought, which rejected the idea of a national church, held radical implications for the freedom of the individual, which was not only ecclesiastical in nature, but could be conceived of as a basic civil liberty that extended beyond the godly. But despite such implications in independent thought, not all congregationalists came to the same conclusions about how far religious freedom should extend. In recent years historians have carefully distinguished between such radical strands of independent thought and more conservative congregationalists represented by leading New England divines and congregational spokesmen in the Westminster Assembly. The latter conservative tradition pursued a national reformation and sought to distinguish themselves from radical sectarians. Some also began to articulate a distinctive view on the power of the Keys in attempt to bridge congregational and presbyterian polities.⁸⁵ From one perspective, such attempts to accommodate diverse church polities represented in the Westminster Assembly should come as no surprise given their overriding aim to reach a settlement. As the congregationalist Philip Nye and the presbyterian Edmund Calamy agreed in 1641, “(for the advancing of the publike cause of a happy Reformation) neither side should Breach, Print, or dispute, or otherwise act against the other’s way.”⁸⁶ Renewed emphasis on such conciliatory practice is salutary, highlighting the perspective of the Dissenting Brethren rather than relying solely on polemical presbyterian accounts designed to drive a wedge between congregational and presbyterian polities and represent all congregational thinkers as the harbingers of heterodoxy.⁸⁷ However, equal caution must be exercised in altogether distancing the Dissenting Brethren from their more radical brethren. Independents such as Nathaniel White may have departed from the John Cotton and Dissenting Brethren coalition as he worked out the implications of congregationalism for individual liberty. But this did not necessarily mean that he radically departed from more conservative congregationalists theologically or on other points of ecclesiology.

⁸⁴Levy, “Early Puritanism,” 187.

⁸⁵Powell, “The Dissenting Brethren.”

⁸⁶Zakai, “Religious Toleration and Its Enemies,” 11.

⁸⁷Murray Tolmie reinforced contemporary presbyterian accounts such as Robert Ballie’s, which underplayed the differences between Congregationalists.

Notwithstanding White's references to John Goodwin, he identified Bermudan independency with a wider congregational tradition in England and New England. On the one hand White denied that they had simply replicated New England congregationalism—"For there is a great distance betwixt them and us."⁸⁸ But nonetheless he argued that they essentially came to the same position: "Tthe Lord was pleased by a gracious providence so to direct us, that we differ not from them in any one substantiall, as we have heard by those that have come unto us from them."⁸⁹ His response was, of course, predicated on the idea that they had framed their ecclesiology according to scripture, "through the good hand of God upon us [we] measured the patern of the house on the top of the moutains, as the Lord exhortheth us; and we have . . . made it according to the patern."⁹⁰ For White, independency in Bermuda was "the holiest and purest Church upon earth, next unto New England."⁹¹ Corresponding with the New England divines on their ecclesiastical polity, Copland suggested to John Winthrop "after you have perused them [the letters] you may imparte them to Mr. Dunster, Mr. Shepheard (that he may acquiante them with his father in law Mr. Hooker, Mr. Davenport, and other of our brethren with them, what are remote from Boston and Cambridge) your reverend Teacher Mr. Cotton and pastor Mr. Wilson."⁹² Having "drawen out a few passages" on "the way of the Churches in the New Testament" to send to Winthrop, Copland also mentioned that "brother white hath more at large written of our Troubles to your Teacher Mr. Cotton, or to your Pastor, Mr. Wilson, who I doubt not will imparte what he hath written your selfe, as you may be pleased to imparte to them and the rest of our reverend fathers and brethren with you."⁹³

Among the New England divines with whom the Bermudans consulted, their correspondence with Cotton in particular suggests they may have been familiar with more conservative congregationalists in England than John Goodwin, namely the Dissenting Brethren in the Westminster Assembly. As Hunter Powell has recently argued, Cotton and the Dissenting Brethren came to exposit a unique congregational position on church power and authority. This position essentially attempted to reach an ecclesiological accommodation between congregationalism and presbyterianism. In the face of hostile attempts by English Presbyterians to altogether discredit congregational polity, the

⁸⁸"We drew not our mould after the patern of the Churches of *New-England*." White, *Truth gloriously appearing*, 53.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*

⁹⁰*Ibid.*, 52.

⁹¹*Ibid.*, 65.

⁹²*Winthrop Papers*, 5: 184. See also Rachel Schnepfer, "Jonas Cast up at London: The Experience of New World Churches in Revolutionary England," (PhD dissertation, Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey 2010), 161.

⁹³*Winthrop Papers*, 5: 183.

Dissenting Brethren sought a middle way to build an alliance with Scottish Commissioners to strengthen their ground in the Westminster Assembly.

The first suggestion that the Bermudans may have drawn inspiration from the Dissenting Brethren, notwithstanding their views on toleration, can be found in the relationship between Bermuda's early congregational leader John Oxenbridge (who had since returned to England) and the Dissenting Brother William Bridge. Following his appointment to the Westminster Assembly in 1642, Bridge established his congregational church in 1643. In November the same year John Oxenbridge was appointed as Bridge's assistant minister. From Norwich, Bridge dispatched a catechism for use in Bermuda, which the independents used for instruction in the early formation of their church in 1643. Not only did Oxenbridge serve as assistant minister to William Bridge, but he ended his career as a successor of John Cotton and John Norton as minister of the First Church in Boston.⁹⁴ There is also evidence of the Bermudan independent minister William Goulding's ownership of "Mr Thos. Goodwins works" in Bermuda which he bequeathed to his wife in August 1648.⁹⁵

Closer evidence of an affinity between the Bermudan independents, Cotton and the Dissenting Brethren can be found in the printed literature spelling out their ecclesiological views. At the time that Oxenbridge served as assistant minister to William Bridge, there was "continued recognition of the uniqueness of Cotton's and the Apologists" position among other "independent divines," which became more public by 1644.⁹⁶ At this time the Dissenting Brethren published an edition of Cotton's *Keyes to the Kingdom* with a preface endorsing his work to propose a middle way between congregational and presbyterian polity. In this accommodated ecclesiology Cotton "re-organized the way the keys were defined and distributed," by making the distinction between "a key of power, or interest [given to the brethren]: and the key of authority and rule [given to church officers]."⁹⁷ The following year, the Dissenting Brethren further articulated their views in print, proposing this new middle way and objecting to the Presbyterian rule agreed upon by the Assembly. It was in the context of these debates over congregational polity in the Assembly that White's *Truth gloriously appearing* appeared.⁹⁸ By this time, White had returned to England in order to plead for religious toleration of his

⁹⁴Michael Winship, "John Oxenbridge", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁹⁵Lefroy, *Memorials*, I: 635.

⁹⁶Powell, "Dissenting Brethren," 247.

⁹⁷*Ibid.*, 142, 143–149. For the uniqueness of Cotton and the Dissenting Brethren's interpretation of the *Keyes*, see pg. 247.

⁹⁸For the immediate context leading up to this breach, see Hunter Powell, "The Dissenting Brethren," ch. 3.

Bermudan congregationalism to Parliament. It appears that White not only took the opportunity to respond to Prynne, and to draw from the work of self-proclaimed independents such as John Goodwin. He also closely engaged with the debates between the Presbyterians and congregationlists which were taking place among the Assembly divines. He even identified with the accommodated ecclesiology of the more conservative congregationlists, who rejected the smear of “independency.”

Indeed, White highly regarded the “dissenting brethren” as the “honourable House of Commons, and the Reverend Assembly . . . so stile those that are of the same judgement with us.” He further cited many of the same sources in defense of his ecclesiastical polity. Just as Cotton and the Dissenting Brethren made reference to William Fulke and William Whitaker, so too did White cite “Dr Fulk” and “Dr Whitaker” to affirm that “*The Keyes of the kingdome of heaven . . . be committed to the whole Church, and not to one person only.*”⁹⁹ Yet White also directly engaged with presbyterian and congregational debates in the Assembly, identifying with the Dissenting Brethren’s “*Reasons of the dissenting brethren against the three Propositions concerning Presbyteriall Government.*”¹⁰⁰ Given the uniqueness of Cotton’s and the Apologists’ position, it is striking that on the subject of church power, White recognized the same distinctions made by Cotton and the Apologists. White argued that the keys were given to the whole church, but made the crucial distinction between the power of the keys given to the whole church, and the authority to exercise that power, given to the elders of that church: “For the Keyes were delivered by Christ (in regard to execution) to ecclesiasticall persons [Mat. 16.19].”¹⁰¹ Power, according to White, was given by Christ, “partly to the body of the Church, in respect of the state or frame of it: but principally to the Presbytery, in respect of the order of administration of it.” White also made the same argument for congregational autonomy in its election of officers from this allocation of power by arguing that “The Church then by virtue of this authority derived unto it . . . hath power to chuse unto themselves a Pastour, and other Officers.”¹⁰²

White also wrote at length about the Church of Jerusalem, which had been central to ecclesiological debates in the Assembly. This discussion again reveals that White used the same arguments as the Dissenting Brethren against Presbyterian understanding of the Church of Jerusalem. According to the Presbyterians, the Church of Jerusalem was constituted by a plurality of congregations. This was evident by the multitude of believers in Jerusalem

⁹⁹White, *Truth gloriously appearing*, 30; Powell, 30, 38–39.

¹⁰⁰White, *Truth gloriously appearing*, 149.

¹⁰¹Ibid., 57.

¹⁰²Ibid., 117.

growing from 3000 to 8000, making it “impossible that they should meet together in one place.”¹⁰³ They further argued that there “were many Apostles, Prophets and teachers in those [primitive] Churches . . . and therefore many Churches.”¹⁰⁴ However, according to the Dissenting Brethren and White, “the Church of Jerusalem . . . was but one church, Acts 2.4.5.”¹⁰⁵ They argued that although there were many Apostles at Jerusalem, “yet they were not fixed pastours” and these were extraordinary times. They further argued that “it does not follow, that because there were many prophets and teachers in those great and populous Cities, that therefore there should be many Congregations.”¹⁰⁶ Bermudan independency closely followed the debates of the Westminster Assembly, echoing some of the latest interpretations of the Church of Jerusalem and Matthew 16:18 as worked out by more conservative congregationalists. Nonetheless, exegesis of particular passages such as those on the power of the keys did not become a defining point that necessarily meant agreement in other aspects of their ecclesiology.

To return to the initial questions posed at the beginning of this essay, why did some congregationalists come to adopt radical views on toleration in contrast to the religious mainstream? At first glance it might seem that what ultimately drove Bermudan independents and others such as John Goodwin to espouse broad toleration in contrast to their congregational counterparts was the circumstance of their persecution. In short, their call for liberty was a “loser’s creed.” However, a closer reading of their ecclesiology reveals that radical implications can be found in independent congregational ideology, even if such ideology did not necessarily lead all congregationalists to make novel claims to liberty. Rather than simply adopting a different view on religious and civil liberty for pragmatic purposes, radical independent thinkers could come to different conclusions based on their understanding of how the visible church was conceived in relation to the Old and New Testaments and how the freedom of individual congregations applied to the freedom of the individual. That congregationalists could come to such contrasting views on liberty, without necessarily diverging on other theological matters or on the subject of church power and authority, reveals the dynamic nature of their ecclesiology. Recent accounts have placed

¹⁰³Ibid., 131. *Answer of the Assembly unto Reasons by the Dissenting Brethren* (London: 1645), 15–18.

¹⁰⁴White, *Truth gloriously appearing*, 131. *Answer of the Assembly*, 22–24.

¹⁰⁵*Reasons of the Dissenting Brethren against the third proposition, concerning presbyterial government* (London: 1645), 22. February 1644 was the annotated date and edition cited by White.

¹⁰⁶White, *Truth gloriously appearing*, 132. That the arguments over ecclesiology in the Westminster Assembly found their way into White’s defense for independency is another example of how the British Atlantic world closely engaged with Revolutionary England. Carla Gardena Pestana, *The English Atlantic in the Age of Revolution, 1640–1661* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

renewed focus on the conservative character that shaped the Cromwellian church settlement. But rather than simply dismissing independents such as the Bermudans as anomalies, they are better understood as those among the godly who made puritanism revolutionary. The existence of both radical and magisterial impulses in congregational polity not only helps to make sense of internal debates among the godly, and the seemingly contradictory impulses in puritanism more generally, but also the instability of godly rule in the mid-seventeenth century.