

## PURITANISM AND LIBERTY REVISITED: THE CASE FOR TOLERATION IN THE ENGLISH REVOLUTION\*

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**ABSTRACT.** *In recent years historians have grown sceptical about attempts to trace connections between puritanism and liberty. Puritans, we are told, sought a godly society, not a pluralistic one. The new emphasis has been salutary, but it obscures the fact that a minority of zealous Protestants argued forcefully for the toleration of heresy, blasphemy, Catholicism, non-Christian religions, and even atheism. During the English revolution, a substantial number of Baptists, radical Independents, and Levellers insisted that the New Testament paradigm required the church to be a purely voluntary, non-coercive community in the midst of a pluralistic society governed by a 'merely civil' state. Although their position was not without its ambiguities, it constituted a startling break with the Constantinian assumptions of magisterial Protestantism.*

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### I

The claim that the puritan revolution saw the premature blooming of liberal ideas has fallen on hard times. Although it was championed by great English whig historians like Gardiner, and the distinguished American scholars Woodhouse and Haller, most recent analysis has judged it anachronistic. Blair Worden, for example, highlights how limited was the toleration granted by the Cromwellian regime, and reveals that by 'liberty of conscience' Cromwell and John Owen meant liberty for conscientious Protestants, not toleration for false religions. The real heroes of the story, Worden argues – following Trevor-Roper, Buckle, and Lecky – were those who cherished 'the old Erasmian spirit of religion: practical, rational, sceptical, tolerant'. Puritans turn out to be much like the fire-breathing Calvinists of popular caricature.<sup>1</sup> This picture is reinforced by William Lamont, who maintains that whereas good Calvinists like Cromwell and Roger Williams were 'not interested in wishy-washy nineteenth century concerns such as personal freedoms and equality', the Levellers were egalitarians precisely because they were not very good

\* The paper on which this article is based was originally presented at the Stuart seminar in Cambridge and at the modern British history seminar at Harvard. I am most grateful for the insightful comments of both audiences. The shortcomings that remain, of course, are my own responsibility.

<sup>1</sup> B. Worden, 'Toleration and the Cromwellian Protectorate', in W. J. Sheils, ed., *Persecution and toleration* (Oxford, 1984), pp. 199–233.

Calvinists.<sup>2</sup> Most recently, J. C. Davis has examined the conception of freedom held in the 1640s, and concluded that puritans longed for a godly rather than a liberal society, and sought not the freedom of the sinner, but the freedom of God Almighty.<sup>3</sup>

Much of this revisionist case is irrefutable and supplies an important corrective to naive assumptions about puritanism and liberty. But it also risks giving the misleading impression that the godly were only ever interested in working for their own liberty and the liberty of their God. Yet as this article aims to demonstrate, the 1640s saw a group of writers emerge from within the puritan community who argued passionately for the toleration of *false* religion. When we examine their argument for comprehensive religious toleration, moreover, we find that it arose from profoundly puritan impulses and pointed in the direction of a disestablished church in a non-confessional state. Although not without its ambiguities, the enthusiasm of these radical puritans for the liberty of all religions does seem a good deal more genuine than revisionist historians imply.<sup>4</sup>

## II

Before embarking on the main argument, it is perhaps necessary to discuss what we mean by the term ‘puritan’. Despite the reservations of some, puritanism continues to be a widely used category. Indeed, historians of early modern English religion seem increasingly convinced that the hotter sort of Protestants did form a distinctive religious culture, marked out by an intense zeal which inspired a ‘ceaseless round’ of ‘Bible-reading and Bible-study, sermon-attendance and sermon-gadding, fasting and whole-day sabbatarianism’.<sup>5</sup> Participants in this culture – those whom we call puritans – could be moderates close to the heart of the established church, Presbyterians, separatists, or even ‘seekers’ belonging to no church but awaiting God’s restoration of true forms. The puritan tolerationists discussed in this article include Baptists, radical Independents, seekers, and at least one member of the established church.

Up until 1640 almost all puritans had been advocates of persecution, believing that the magistrate had a religious duty to punish heresy, idolatry,

<sup>2</sup> W. Lamont, ‘Pamphleteering, the Protestant consensus and the English revolution’, in R. C. Richardson and G. M. Ridden, eds., *Freedom and the English revolution* (Manchester, 1986), pp. 72–92.

<sup>3</sup> J. C. Davis, ‘Religion and the struggle for freedom in the English revolution’, *Historical Journal*, 35 (1992), pp. 507–30.

<sup>4</sup> This article, therefore, both confirms and extends the argument of D. Wootton, ‘Leveller democracy and the puritan revolution’, in J. H. Burns and M. Goldie, eds., *The Cambridge history of political thought, 1450–1700* (Cambridge, 1991), ch. 14; and N. Carlin, ‘Toleration for Catholics in the puritan revolution’, in O. P. Grell and R. Scribner, eds., *Tolerance and intolerance in the European Reformation* (Cambridge, 1996), ch. 13.

<sup>5</sup> C. Durston and J. Eales, eds., *The culture of English puritanism* (London, 1996), p. 31, and *passim*. See also Peter Lake, *Anglicans and puritans? Presbyterianism and English conformist thought from Whitgift to Hooker* (London, 1988), pp. 4–7; *idem*, ‘Puritan identities’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 35 (1984), pp. 112–23; *idem*, ‘Defining puritanism: again?’, in F. Bremer, ed., *Puritanism: transatlantic perspectives on a seventeenth-century Anglo-American faith* (Boston, 1993), pp. 3–29.

and apostasy. The model here was that provided by Old Testament rulers, whose solemn responsibility before God to halt the spread of false religion was almost universally believed to apply to Christian magistrates too. It is true that some puritan divines, such as Richard Sibbes, emphasized the gentle character of New Testament Christianity, but they did not feel free to reject the belief of the magisterial Reformers concerning the state's duty to suppress religious error.<sup>6</sup>

After 1640, things seemed to change dramatically. Although orthodox Presbyterians continued to assert with increasing vehemence the duty of the magistrate to suppress idolatry, heresy, apostasy, and schism,<sup>7</sup> a great number of tracts were published by Independents and separatists calling for 'toleration' and 'liberty of conscience'. But as many historians have pointed out, the extent of toleration called for was often very limited indeed. The 1644 *Apologeticall narration* of the Independents in the Westminster Assembly, for example, called for the toleration of godly Protestants who could not agree with Presbyterianism, but it rejected outright the ruinous toleration of error and heresy. This set the tone for the majority of later Independent writing on the subject. Thomas Goodwin and Jeremiah Burroughs envisaged a toleration for the godly, not for those whose religion was plainly false and destructive. This conservative Independent view was shared by John Owen, who worked hard in the 1650s to get a list of fundamentals adopted as the basis of the English Church, dissent from which would be punished by the state. Quakers, Socinians, and other heretics would all have been prosecuted under this code.<sup>8</sup> Owen in his turn was close to Oliver Cromwell, and although Cromwell at times showed a remarkable breadth of sympathy towards heterodox figures, his basic position seems to have been similar to Owen's.<sup>9</sup>

Separatists were also opposed to the extension of toleration to those adhering to false religions. The first English separatists, Barrow and Greenwood, had both stated explicitly that blasphemy and idolatry should be punished by the magistrate. In the following decades many separatists – including men like Ainsworth and John Canne – continued to support magistratical action against false religion.<sup>10</sup> Even among the Baptists, who as we shall see were the most

<sup>6</sup> On Sibbes and puritan thought before 1640 see W. K. Jordan, *The development of religious toleration in England* (4 vols., London, 1932–40), I, pp. 239–99, and II, pp. 199–314.

<sup>7</sup> See for example, G. Gillespie, *Wholesome severity reconciled with Christian liberty* (1645); T. Edwards, *Gangraena* (1646); S. Rutherford, *A free disputation against pretended liberty of conscience* (1649). For an analysis of Rutherford's views see J. Coffey, *Politics, religion and the British revolutions: the mind of Samuel Rutherford* (Cambridge, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> See especially, A. Zakai, 'Religious toleration and its enemies: the Independent divines and the issue of toleration during the English Civil War', *Albion*, 21 (1989), pp. 1–33.

<sup>9</sup> On Owen and Cromwell, see Worden, 'Toleration and the Cromwellian Protectorate'. See also J. C. Davis's comments in response to Worden in J. Morrill, ed., *Oliver Cromwell and the English revolution* (Harlow, 1990), pp. 191–9, which reminds us not to underestimate the extent of Cromwell's tolerance.

<sup>10</sup> See S. Brachlow, *The communion of the saints: radical puritan and separatist ecclesiology, 1570–1625* (Oxford, 1988); T. Lyon, *The theory of religious liberty in England, 1603–39* (Cambridge, 1937), pp. 30–2, 77–108.

insistent advocates of radical toleration, there were some who wanted toleration limited to the godly. John Tombes, for example – who was probably the most learned and conservative Particular Baptist apologist – argued that the magistrate could require the worship of the Christian God and punish blasphemy and idolatry.<sup>11</sup>

The position enunciated by Tombes, Owen, and others was undoubtedly the majority one within puritanism even during the Interregnum. But there were a minority of radical puritans who broke decisively with the mainstream puritan view and maintained that religious toleration should be extended to all who did not endanger the civil peace and safety of the commonwealth. This view first emerged among the godly in the reign of James I, and its earliest proponents were General (or Arminian) Baptists. The practice of adult baptism first began within an English congregation exiled in the Netherlands under the leadership of John Smyth. Like many men of the 1640s, Smyth went through a prodigious number of religious incarnations; he began his career as a puritan within the Church of England, became an Independent, moved on to separatism, baptized himself, and finally joined the Waterlanders, a Dutch Mennonite sect. Although his 1610 Confession of Faith was published before he had joined the Mennonites, it reveals significant Anabaptist influences, not least in its comprehensive statement on freedom of religion: the magistrate, wrote Smyth, was ‘not to meddle with religion or matters of conscience’.<sup>12</sup>

Smyth’s congregation divided soon after this as a result of his increasing attraction to the theology of the Waterlanders, but the group which broke away was even more explicit about the extent of toleration which ought to be given to false religions. Its leader, Thomas Helwys, who returned to his homeland to establish the first English Baptist church, published his views in *A short declaration of the mystery of iniquity* (1612). Although Helwys differed from Smyth and the Mennonites in teaching that it was lawful for a Christian to hold the office of magistrate, he defined the duties of the magistrate in purely civil or secular terms. The king’s power, he wrote, ‘extendeth to all the goods and bodies of his servants’, but not to their spirits. It followed, according to Helwys, that toleration should be granted to all peaceable religions: ‘Let them be heretikes, Turcks, Jewes, or whatsoever it appertynes not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure.’<sup>13</sup>

Helwys’s tract marks the beginning of a radical tolerationist tradition among the godly in England, but until the 1640s he was followed only by other General Baptist leaders.<sup>14</sup> In 1614, Leonard Busher published *Religion’s peace*, in which he reiterated Helwys’s call for a general toleration of all religions: ‘the king and parliament may please to permit all sorts of Christians; yea, Jews,

<sup>11</sup> On Tombes see L. McBeth, *English Baptist literature on religious liberty to 1689* (New York, 1980), pp. 113–18. <sup>12</sup> W. J. McGlothlin, ed., *Baptist confessions of faith* (London, 1908), pp. 81–2.

<sup>13</sup> *The mystery of iniquity* (1612), p. 69.

<sup>14</sup> On these early General Baptist theorists see Lyon, *The theory of religious liberty in England*, pp. 109–43; Jordan, *The development of religious toleration in England*, II, pp. 258–314; McBeth, *English Baptist literature on religious liberty*, ch. 1; T. George, ‘Between pacifism and coercion: the English Baptist doctrine of religious toleration’, *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 58 (1984), pp. 30–49.

Turks, and pagans, so long as they are peaceable, and no malefactors'.<sup>15</sup> Then in 1620 John Murton's *An humble supplication to the kings majesty* argued once more that the king was 'lord and lawgiver to the bodies of his subjects', but that Christ alone was lord over conscience, so that 'no man ought to be compelled to a worship... by persecution', even were he to 'walk in falsehood'.<sup>16</sup>

Murton's tract proved to be the critical link to the 1640s, for it fell into the hands of the most important figure in the puritan tolerationist tradition, Roger Williams.<sup>17</sup> When Williams wrote the classic godly defence of comprehensive religious toleration, *The bloody tenent of persecution* (1644), he prefaced it with a copy of Murton's tract and a response to it written by the conservative New England puritan John Cotton. The rest of his book was a robust defence of the minority puritan position against the mainstream one represented by Cotton. Williams's thesis was summed up in one of the startling propositions with which he opened his book:

It is the will and command of God that, since the coming of his Son the Lord Jesus, a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or anti-christian consciences and worships be granted to all men in all nations and countries: and that they are only to be fought against with that sword which is only, in soul matters, able to conquer: to wit, the sword of God's Spirit, the word of God.<sup>18</sup>

This statement fell like a bombshell into mainstream puritan discourse. Parliament ordered that the book be burnt by the hand of the hangman, and over the course of the next decade it was attacked in over one hundred different pamphlets. When the conservative Presbyterian Thomas Edwards published the first part of his catalogue of heresies, *Gangraena*, early in 1646, he quoted this statement in full twice.<sup>19</sup>

But as Edwards knew, Williams was not an isolated eccentric.<sup>20</sup> His was simply the most powerful in a chorus of godly voices calling for the toleration of false religions. Prominent in this chorus were the General Baptists whose founders were the first to propagate radical tolerationist opinions among the godly in England. Edward Barber's one-page petition *To the kings most excellent majesty* (1641), for example, argued that even if the religion of the Baptists 'was

<sup>15</sup> Busher, *Religions peace, or a plea for liberty of conscience*, reprinted in E. B. Underhill, ed., *Tracts on liberty of conscience, 1614-1661* (London, 1846), p. 33.

<sup>16</sup> Reprinted in Underhill, ed., *Tracts*, pp. 212, 214.

<sup>17</sup> The literature on Williams is now considerable. The best modern study of his ideas is W. C. Gilpin, *The millenarian piety of Roger Williams* (Chicago, 1979), but E. Gaustad, *Liberty of conscience: Roger Williams in America* (Grand Rapids, 1991), serves as a useful introduction. An insightful recent treatment which compares Williams's defence of religious liberty with those of Jefferson and Madison is W. Miller, *The first liberty: religion and the American republic* (New York, 1985), pp. 151-224. For a full survey of work on Williams see R. D. Irwin, 'A man for all eras: the changing historical image of Roger Williams, 1630-1993', *Fides et Historia*, 26 (1994), pp. 6-23.

<sup>18</sup> Roger Williams, *The bloody tenent of persecution* [1644], ed. E. B. Underhill (London, 1848), p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Edwards, *Gangraena* (1646), 1, pp. 20, 122.

<sup>20</sup> American commentators on Williams have often written as if he was a lonely American genius. Two studies which try to fit him back into an English puritan context are H. Spurgin, *Roger Williams and puritan radicalism in the English separatist tradition* (Lewiston, NY, 1989), and more successfully Gilpin, *The millenarian piety of Roger Williams*.

as false as our adversaries pretend, yet were that no ground to take away our Lives or Estates'. 'No man', he maintained, 'ought to be forced in matters of Religion.' Another leading General Baptist, Henry Denne, who was active in the Leveller movement up until his desertion at Burford, also insisted that toleration should be extended to heretics if their doctrines presented no threat to the state. Papists, he suggested, should only be forced to abjure the doctrine that faith should not be kept with heretics; other doctrines and practices, such as transubstantiation and kneeling to the altar, did not stop one from being a good subject, and thus ought to be tolerated.<sup>21</sup> But the boldest General Baptist case for toleration was presented by Samuel Fisher in *Christianismus redivivus* (1655). Fisher deplored the fact that Protestants would exclude people of other faiths from citizenship and was convinced that heretics and Papists, 'heathens, Jews, Turks or Pagans', should be 'lawfully licensed to live in civil states, or in any Commonwealth under the Sun'. The magistrate should 'leave all men to worship God according to their severall ways', and concentrate on his real business – running the civil affairs of the state.<sup>22</sup> In *A brief confession or declaration of faith* (1660), no less than forty General Baptist leaders endorsed the same position. Article 24 echoed *The bloody tenent*: 'it is the will and mind of God (in these Gospel times) that all men should have the free liberty of their own Consciences in matters of Religion, or worship, without the least oppression, or persecution'.<sup>23</sup>

A number of Particular Baptists also provided backing for radical tolerationism, though it is likely that they were generally more conservative on the issue than their Arminian cousins.<sup>24</sup> The 1644 London *Confession of faith* is not explicit about the extent of toleration, and as we have noted above, leading Calvinistic Baptists like John Tombes were opposed to toleration for all religions. Yet there can be little doubt that Particular Baptists regarded radical tolerationism as a genuine intellectual option. Christopher Blackwood is a particularly interesting case in this regard, because he wavered between the limited tolerationism of the Westminster Independents and the radical tolerationism of Williams. In *The storming of Antichrist* (1644), Blackwood presented what appeared to be an argument against all persecution, and tentatively suggested that papists might 'be bornewith... in Protestant governments in point of religion'. But he then drew back, and implied that whilst differences over church order could be tolerated, error in fundamentals (such as that of the Socinians and papists) ought not to be permitted.<sup>25</sup> A year later,

<sup>21</sup> H. Denne, *The Quaker no Papist* (London, 1659), p. 17.

<sup>22</sup> S. Fisher, *Christianismus redivivus, Christendom both unchrist'ned and new christ'ned* (1655), pp. 533–51, quotations at pp. 534, 537.

<sup>23</sup> Reprinted in McGlothlin, ed., *Baptist confessions of faith*, p. 119.

<sup>24</sup> As Murray Tolmie demonstrates in *The triumph of the saints: the separate churches of London, 1616–1649* (Cambridge, 1977), the Particular Baptists' withdrawal of support from the Leveller movement in 1649 was crucial to the failure of that movement, and reflected the relative conservatism of the Baptist churches. Tolmie has less to say, however, about the General Baptists, and it is likely that men like Barber were more loyal to the Leveller cause than figures like Kiffin.

<sup>25</sup> C. Blackwood, *The storming of Antichrist* (1644), pp. 25, 29.

in a postscript to his *Apostolicall baptisme*, he wrote that he had no doubt about the rightness of ‘liberty of conscience to the different wayes of Brethren’; the tough question was ‘whether there be liberty to be granted to men of no conscience’. Did the magistrate have power to punish ‘grosse idolatry, and blasphemy against God, Christ, the Scriptures, and holinesse, and seducements of persons by corrupt doctrines in fundamentall points, when there is no violation of the publike peace’? The very fact that Blackwood was questioning the magistrate’s authority to punish these offences was remarkable – before the 1640s almost all English Protestants had taken it for granted that rulers had a duty to prosecute blasphemers and heretical teachers. And although Blackwood was reluctant to come down from the fence, he was hesitant about granting rulers such powers, since this would allow the prevailing party to tyrannize over its opponents on the pretext that they were blasphemers, idolaters, and seducers.<sup>26</sup>

Other Particular Baptists were unambiguous. Samuel Richardson, a close friend of John Lilburne, drew heavily on Roger Williams, and propounded sixty-nine questions to the supporters of persecution in the Westminster Assembly. ‘Corporall punishments’, he declared, ‘ought not to be inflicted upon such as hold Errors in Religion, and ... in matters of Religion, men ought not to be compelled, but have liberty and freedom.’<sup>27</sup> Another Baptist, John Vernon, who was an officer in the New Model Army, wrote that only the word of God, the sword of the Spirit, could be used to vanquish idolatry. ‘Jews, Heathens, or what ever Ignorants’ were to be allowed to inhabit, converse, and commerce in Christian nations, ‘without restraint upon religious Causes’.<sup>28</sup> Henry Danvers was equally emphatic about the comprehensiveness of religious toleration. Jews, blasphemers, and heretics were only to be opposed with sound doctrine, not civil penalties.<sup>29</sup> Richard Laurence pointed out that in the Apostles’ days, Christians had dwelt among ‘Heathens and Pagans, Turkes and Jews’ without persecuting or prosecuting them for their error; the clear implication was that a similar toleration should be granted by modern Christians too.<sup>30</sup> Another Particular Baptist and friend of Roger Williams, John Clark, wrote *Ill newes from New England* (1652) to tell of the persecution of Baptists by the Massachusetts Congregationalists, and put once more the case for the toleration of false religion. Even ‘the greatest Apostacies and Blasphemies’ were only to be dealt with by excommunication, not persecution.<sup>31</sup> Thomas Collier, the New Model Army chaplain, was equally clear. ‘It belongs not to man to punish Heresie, Blasphemy, Atheisme, non conformists, &c.’<sup>32</sup> The author of *Liberty of conscience asserted* (1649) also stood for the toleration of all religions: ‘the arguments by which I have prov’d man

<sup>26</sup> C. Blackwood, *Apostolicall baptisme* (1645), postscript.

<sup>27</sup> S. Richardson, *The necessity of toleration in matters of religion* (1647), title page.

<sup>28</sup> J. Vernon, *The swords abuse asserted* (1648), p. 13.

<sup>29</sup> H. Danvers, *Certain quaeries concerning liberty of conscience* (1649), pp. 1–5.

<sup>30</sup> R. Laurence, *The antichristian presbyter* (1646), p. 17.

<sup>31</sup> J. Clark, *Ill newes from New England* (1652), preface.

<sup>32</sup> T. Collier, *A generall epistle to the universall church of the first born* (1648), p. 78.

ought not to be persecuted for Religion, are in their nature so universall, that I dare confidently averre it to be unlawful to persecute any even upon account of Idolatry itself'. He was convinced that 'there is no Religion so inconsistent with the Civil Government of any Kingdom, State or Commonwealth, but that good lawes against breach of Peace, and due execution of them will render it sufficiently consistent'.<sup>33</sup>

Although the Baptist theorists mentioned above constituted the main body of radical tolerationist opinion, there were a number of other godly pamphleteers in the Interregnum who also moved well beyond the limited tolerationism of men like Owen. One of the most significant was the Independent pastor, John Goodwin, whose support for toleration became increasingly wide-ranging and emphatic as the 1640s progressed. By 1648 at the latest, Goodwin had become convinced that the Christian magistrate's legitimate authority extended no further than that of the pagan magistrate. Both could only lawfully punish crimes which were against the law of nature; they had no right to regulate the beliefs of their subjects on matters of religion.<sup>34</sup> Henry Robinson was another Independent who wrote repeatedly in favour of extensive religious toleration. Although his *Liberty of conscience* (1643) expressed reservations about the toleration of popery, 'by reason of their Idolatry', the bulk of its argument seemed to drive inexorably in the direction of toleration for Catholics, heretics, Muslims, Jews, and infidels. If these groups were not afforded toleration, Robinson asked, how could they ever be converted? Persecution for religion could never be justified.<sup>35</sup>

Anti-formalist puritans, such as John Saltmarsh, William Dell, and Henry Vane, also supported the toleration of false religions. Saltmarsh, like Williams, believed that the magistrate in the New Testament era could only punish actions which violated 'the Law of Nature or Nations'; they had no authority to punish heresies which involved 'misbeleefe of particular Scripture mysteries'. 'Reformation in blood, or by persecution', was 'but a dream of such that have slept long in Prelacy'.<sup>36</sup> Dell's famous sermon to parliament in 1646, *Right reformation*, also drew a sharp dichotomy between true reformation which was spiritual and false reformation which was carnal. Christ's disciples, he argued, must never employ civil power to advance the cause of the Gospel. Although Dell did not explicitly refer to non-Christian religions, his prohibition on the use of force in religion was so categorical that there can be little doubt that he supported the radical tolerationists.<sup>37</sup> Henry Vane was equally clear about the illegitimacy of magistratical 'intermeddling' in matters of religion. The magistrate could only regulate 'matters of outward practice, converse, and dealings in the things of this life between man and

<sup>33</sup> *Liberty of conscience asserted* (1649), p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> Goodwin's position is clearly explained in his contribution to the Whitehall debates (see Woodhouse, *Puritanism and liberty*, pp. 125–78); and in his *The triers [or tormentors] tried and cast* (1657).

<sup>35</sup> Robinson, *Liberty of conscience* (1643), pp. A4r, 14, 61.

<sup>36</sup> Saltmarsh, *Groanes for liberty* (1646), pp. 17–21; *An end of one controversie* (1646), p. 9.

<sup>37</sup> See W. Dell, *Select works* (London, 1773), pp. 105–43, 243–8.

man'.<sup>38</sup> In *Zeal examined* (1652), written at a time when John Owen was campaigning for the suppression of heretics, Vane argued at length that idolaters and heretics ought not to be punished for their religious beliefs and practices.<sup>39</sup>

One of Vane's greatest admirers was John Milton, who wrote a sonnet praising the young statesman for distinguishing and separating the civil power from the spiritual.<sup>40</sup> Milton fully supported the toleration campaigns of the 1640s and 1650s, and of all the puritan tolerationists he was to enjoy easily the greatest posthumous reputation among later liberals. Yet throughout his life, he was adamant that toleration should not be granted to Catholics. In *Areopagitica* in 1644, again in 1659, and finally in his last pamphlet of 1673, he repeated his belief that papists should be excluded from toleration because of their idolatry.<sup>41</sup> Most recent historians have seen this as utterly predictable given the depth of English anti-papery in the period. But actually Milton's intransigence on this point is profoundly puzzling, since his close friends Vane and Williams had both argued at length for the toleration of idolaters. In most respects Milton went along with his fellow puritan tolerationists, but with regard to the Catholic issue he was unwilling to follow the radical view through to its logical and startling conclusion.

The Leveller writers, however, were less reticent. Indeed, once we recognize the remarkable popularity of radical tolerationist views among the godly, particularly in London's sectarian congregations, the Leveller movement – with its fundamental commitment to religious toleration – begins to make more sense. Of the three major Leveller pamphleteers, after all, two belonged to separate churches; John Lilburne was a member of Edmund Rosier's separatist congregation, whilst Richard Overton belonged to Thomas Lambe's General Baptist church.<sup>42</sup> It is hardly surprising, therefore, to find both Lilburne and Overton reiterating the traditional Baptist arguments in favour of the toleration of all religions. Lilburne wrote that God alone was Lord over conscience, and that 'no Parliament, Councell, Synod, Emperour, King, nor Majestrate hath any spiritual authority or jurisdiction over this Kingdome'.<sup>43</sup> Overton, in *The arraignment of Mr Persecution* (1645), presented the same case. He recommended *The bloody tenent* and argued that 'Turckes, Jewes, Pagans, and Infidels' should all be allowed to live together in society.<sup>44</sup> The third

<sup>38</sup> Vane, *A healing question propounded* (1656), pp. 6–7.

<sup>39</sup> *Zeal examined*, dedication, pp. 1–27. The pamphlet is actually anonymous but for a defence of Vane's authorship see C. Polizotto, 'The campaign against "The Humble Proposals" of 1652', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 38 (1987), p. 578.

<sup>40</sup> See B. Worden, 'John Milton and Oliver Cromwell', in I. Gentles, J. Morrill and B. Worden, eds., *Soldiers, writers and statesmen of the English revolution* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 251–2.

<sup>41</sup> See *Areopagitica* (1644) and *A treatise of civil power in ecclesiastical causes* (1659), in M. W. Wallace, ed., *Milton's prose* (London, 1925), pp. 320, 426; and *Of true religion, haeresie, schism, toleration* (1673), pp. 9–10.

<sup>42</sup> See Tolmie, *The triumph of the saints*, pp. 147, 151. William Walwyn also had close contacts with the London congregations, but there is no evidence that he ever joined one.

<sup>43</sup> Lilburne, *A copie of a letter to Mr William Prinne* (1645), pp. 3–4.

<sup>44</sup> Overton, *The arraignment of Mr Persecution*, p. 22.

leading Leveller writer, William Walwyn, was not a sectarian but remained within his parish church. Yet Walwyn was deeply sympathetic toward the sects in the early 1640s, and his sermon *The power of love* (1643) bears all the hallmarks of puritan heart religion.<sup>45</sup> As early as 1641 Walwyn was calling for the toleration of ‘all professions whatsoever’, including Socinians and papists, whilst he later declared that even those ‘so far mis-informed as to deny a Deity, or the Scriptures’ should be tolerated.<sup>46</sup>

The closeness of the link between the Levellers and the radical sects on this question is further underlined by the Whitehall debates.<sup>47</sup> In December 1648 a group of preachers and soldiers gathered to debate the question: ‘Whether the magistrate have, or ought to have, any compulsive and restrictive powers in matters of religion’. The result was a straightforward confrontation between the two groups whom I have called conservative and radical tolerationists. Henry Ireton and Philip Nye argued that the magistrate still had a duty to punish blasphemy and idolatry, whilst John Goodwin, Thomas Collier, John Lilburne, and John Wildman maintained that he did not. The debate was a graphic illustration of a major divide which had arisen among the godly since 1640. Within eight years, the conviction that false religion should be tolerated had moved from being an eccentric opinion held by a handful of General Baptists to a genuine theological option embraced by a substantial minority within English puritanism.

Conservatives among the godly recognized this and were appalled. Robert Baillie wrote from London that ‘very many’ of the sectaries ‘are for a total libertie of all religions, and writes very plausible treatises for that end’. He referred particularly to Williams’s *Bloudy tenent* and to Goodwin’s *M.S. to A.S.* Goodwin, he claimed, was ‘openly for a full liberty of conscience to all sects, even Turks, Jews, Papists, and all to be more openly tolerate than [in Holland]. This way is very pleasant to very many here.’<sup>48</sup> Thomas Edwards also referred repeatedly to the works of Williams, Goodwin, and Walwyn in his major work of 1646. He highlighted the sea change that had taken place amongst the godly in just a few years: ‘Should any man seven yeers ago have said [that many would soon] be for Toleration of all Religions, Poperie, Blasphemie, Atheisme, it would have bin said, It cannot be.’

Who ever thought seven yeers ago he should have lived to have heard or seen such things preached and printed in England; all men then would have cryed out of such persons, Away with them, Away with them... if some of those godly ministers who were famous in their time should rise out of their graves and come now among us, as Mr Perkins,

<sup>45</sup> See L. Mulligan, ‘The religious roots of William Walwyn’s radicalism’, *Journal of Religious History*, 12 (1982), pp. 162–79, which suggests that Walwyn was ‘closer to the Puritan saint’ than many historians have allowed (p. 179).

<sup>46</sup> *The writings of William Walwyn*, ed. J. R. McMichael and B. Taft (Athens, GA, 1989), pp. 57–9, 164.

<sup>47</sup> Reprinted in Woodhouse, ed., *Puritanism and liberty*, pp. 125–78. For a useful assessment which recognizes the centrality of the biblical arguments, see C. Polizzotto, ‘Liberty of conscience and the Whitehall debates of 1648–9’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 26 (1975), pp. 69–82.

<sup>48</sup> R. Baillie, *Letters and journals* (3 vols., Edinburgh, 1841–2), II, pp. 211–12, 396–7, 180–1.

Greenham, Hildersham, Dr Preston, Dr Sibbs &c they would wonder to see things come to this passe in England, and to meet with such Books for Toleration of all Religions.<sup>49</sup>

What is particularly intriguing about this statement is that it assumes that radical tolerationist arguments had arisen from *within* the puritan tradition represented by Perkins, Greenham, and Sibbes. Both Edwards and Baillie were prepared to admit that those who pleaded for ‘a total libertie of all Religions’ had produced many ‘plausible Reasons’ for their case.<sup>50</sup> They were aware that the basic arguments of the radical tolerationists were derived not from outside sources but from within the tradition. It is to these arguments that we shall now turn.

### III

Like all good polemicists, radical tolerationists were willing to employ any argument they could think of to support their case. They claimed that toleration would lead to the kind of peace and prosperity seen in the Netherlands; that kings such as Edward VI and James I had endorsed the policy; that Luther had urged governments to deal only with civil matters; that evangelism among other religions would be made possible through toleration; that the magistrate could err in his judgement and accidentally persecute a godly person, and so on. Above all, however, radical tolerationists established their case on a contrast between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament Church.

It is important to recognize this because many historians tie tolerationism far too closely to Arminian theology.<sup>51</sup> Yet puritan tolerationists – Calvinists and Arminians alike – simply did not see the connection. Whatever their differences over predestination they employed the same arguments to support toleration, arguments turning on biblical hermeneutics. There was, after all, no logical or necessary reason why the acceptance of free-will theology should oblige one to accept liberty of conscience – the doctrine was quite compatible with traditional views on the duty or right of Christian magistrates to suppress religious dissent, as the case of the Laudians illustrate. The rise of Arminianism and the rise of toleration were not unconnected – both entailed a rejection of St Augustine’s authority – but their connection is less tight than is often assumed.

The debate over toleration turned on what the Bible taught about church and state, not on what it taught about free-will and predestination. The magisterial Reformation defence of religious coercion had rested foursquare on the analogy between ancient Israel and Christian nations. In the minds of

<sup>49</sup> *Gangraena*, I, p. 121. Using the statements of Baillie and Edwards as evidence is, of course, dangerous, since they had an interest in exaggerating their opponents’ errors. However, in the light of our survey of radical puritan literature their statements simply confirm what we already know.

<sup>50</sup> *Gangraena*, I, p. 124; Baillie, *Letters and journals*, II, pp. 211–12.

<sup>51</sup> This is especially true of Hugh Trevor-Roper who has promoted a simplistic dichotomy between a progressive Arminianism and a reactionary Calvinism. See for example ‘The religious origins of the Enlightenment’, in his *Religion, the Reformation and social change* (London, 1967), ch. 4. See also Worden, ‘Toleration and the Cromwellian Protectorate’, pp. 227–33; and Lamont, ‘Pamphleteering’, an argument corrected in his *Puritanism and historical controversy* (London, 1996), ch. 6.

Reformed theologians like Calvin and Zwingli, modern Protestant nations were to be united in one pure religion. The Christian community and the national population were to be coterminous, the kingdom was to be a church, Christianity was to be interwoven with territory. To ensure that this was achieved, the godly magistrate had to imitate his Old Testament counterpart by promoting true religion and prosecuting false. When Calvin and Beza published their defences of the execution of Servetus for anti-Trinitarian heresy, their argument rested on passages like Deuteronomy 13 which taught that false prophets were to be put to death.<sup>52</sup>

In the mid-seventeenth century, most puritans were still thinking about politics in exactly the same Old Testament terms. As Christopher Hill and many others have argued, it is hard to exaggerate the degree to which English puritans saw themselves as latter-day Israelites, fighting a holy war against idolatry and an apostate king.<sup>53</sup> The Old Testament taught them that it was the magistrate's duty to extirpate heresy and false religion. To argue that persecution for religion was evil, said Samuel Rutherford, was to imply that God in the Old Testament was too cruel.<sup>54</sup>

Radical tolerationists, however, begged to differ. As Thomas Edwards pointed out, none of them claimed that Old Testament Israel was wrong to punish idolaters and heretics.<sup>55</sup> But 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', maintained Henry Robinson.<sup>56</sup> Roger Williams agreed: 'Doubtless that Canaan land was not a pattern for all lands: It was a non-such, unparalleled, and unmatchable.'<sup>57</sup>

Such questioning of the paradigmatic nature of Israel's experience built on a long-running argument among Protestant theologians over how much of the Jewish law was binding in the church age. All orthodox Protestants agreed that the ceremonial law of Moses had been abrogated and many felt that the judicial law was also superseded by Christianity.<sup>58</sup> Radical tolerationists took this challenge to the Israel model a step further. Not only did they insist on the irrelevance of the Old Testament magistrate's role in suppressing false religion, they also argued that looking to the example of Israel led to completely erroneous ideas about the nature of the church. Because 'the Jewish church' was co-extensive with the Jewish nation, the magisterial reformers who followed the Israel model assumed that Protestant churches should also be national, state churches.

For radical tolerationists this was tantamount to Judaizing. Thomas Collier condemned those who said 'we must have nationall churches, we must have

<sup>52</sup> See J. W. Allen, *Political thought in the sixteenth century* (London, 1960 edn), pp. 87–8.

<sup>53</sup> C. Hill, *The English Bible* (London, 1993), ch. 14.

<sup>54</sup> Rutherford, *Due right of presbyteries* (1644), p. 357.

<sup>55</sup> Edwards, *Gangraena*, I, p. 222.

<sup>56</sup> Robinson, *Certaine briefe observations* (1644), p. 7.

<sup>57</sup> Williams, *Bloudy tenent*, p. 278.

<sup>58</sup> On this see P. Avis, 'Moses and the magistrate: a study in the rise of Protestant legalism', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 26 (1975), pp. 149–72.

infants baptised', simply on the grounds that 'the Jews were a nationall church, and their males were circumcised'. This was 'grosse legality', argued Collier, equivalent to denying that Christ had ever come to inaugurate a new dispensation. It blatantly set aside the New Testament pattern for the church and turned instead to an obsolete Jewish pattern. Now was the time, therefore, for the church to turn its back on Judaizing and return to the primitive model of the early Christian community.<sup>59</sup>

This was an argument which appealed deeply to the biblicist and primitivist cast of the puritan mind. Primitivism – the desire to restore an original pattern that has been lost – had always been one of the most powerful impulses of the puritan movement. Puritans were devoted to restoring the purity of the primitive church, a purity corrupted during the great popish apostasy, and now being recovered in a latter-day restoration.<sup>60</sup> Cartwright and the Presbyterians, for example, were convinced that they were restoring the true pattern of church government laid down for posterity in the Acts and the epistles. Traditionally, puritans had also been zealous for recovering the paradigm of ancient Israel's church and state. Radical tolerationists, however, regarded this form of Old Testament primitivism as a tragic Judaizing tendency which had been established in the church during the fourth century. When the Christian emperors had begun 'propounding to themselves the best patterns of the kings of Judah', argued Roger Williams, 'they lost the path and themselves'. To put it bluntly, 'Christianity fell asleep in the bosom of Constantine.'<sup>61</sup> The mission of Williams and other radical puritans was to wake the church up, to call it back to the patterns of the New Testament.

The New Testament church, of course, had been a counter-culture rather than an establishment; a suffering people, not a persecuting people; an *ecclesia* called out from among the nations, not a community coterminous with national populations. Radical tolerationists believed that these were not merely accidental properties of a primitive church which could not yet command magistratical support – they were of the essence of Christianity, vital hallmarks of the true church.

The gentleness and tolerance of the early Christians, after all, was clearly rooted in the teaching of Christ. Christ had been meek and lowly, persecuted but never persecuting, and he had taught his disciples to imitate him. They were to love their enemies, to turn the other cheek when they were struck, to do unto others what they would have done to themselves (Luke 6). When the disciples had wanted to call down fire on a Samaritan village, Jesus had rebuked them (Luke 9). The wheat and the tares – believers and unbelievers

<sup>59</sup> See Collier, *The exaltation of Christ* (1646), pp. 109, 93–6. The irony, of course, is that Collier's anti-Judaizing rhetoric was used to ground a commitment to toleration for Jews. Collier himself, like many radical tolerationists, was strongly philo-Semitic and an advocate of the Jews' readmission to England. See his *A brief answer to some of the objections and demurs made against the coming of the Jews in this common-wealth* (1655). See also D. Katz, *Philo-Semitism and the readmission of the Jews to England, 1603–1655* (Oxford, 1982), chs. 1 and 6.

<sup>60</sup> See in particular, T. D. Bozeman, *To live ancient lives: the primitivist dimension in puritanism* (Chapel Hill, 1988).

<sup>61</sup> *Bloudy tenent*, pp. 317, 154.

– were to be allowed to grow peacefully together in the field of the world until judgement day, when God himself would separate them and burn the tares (Matt. 13). And in his great commission to the disciples, Jesus had sent them into all nations to convert them by teaching his gospel (Matt. 28).<sup>62</sup> This, said the tolerationists, was ‘the last will and testament’ of Christ, and it provided no warrant whatsoever for the use of coercion to spread the gospel. ‘It is a sure word in divinity’, wrote Thomas Helwys, ‘that God loves not to plant his church by violence & bloodshed.’<sup>63</sup>

The practice and teaching of the early church showed that it understood this perfectly. ‘We never read’, wrote Leonard Busher, ‘nor ever shall read, that the apostolic church, or such as have derived their faith and discipline of her did ever persecute.’<sup>64</sup> The apostle Paul had taught consistently that the weapons of the Christian’s warfare were not carnal but spiritual (2 Cor. 10), and the only ‘artillery’ of which he ever spoke consisted of spiritual armaments like the sword of the Spirit and the shield of faith (Eph. 6). Paul had insisted that charity suffered long, and is kind’ (1 Cor. 13), and that the ‘servant of the Lord must not strive, but be gentle unto all men...in meekness instructing those that oppose’ (2 Tim. 2). Like Christ Paul urged the avoidance or excommunication of heretics, ‘but not one word of outward or corporal punishment’.<sup>65</sup> ‘Paul did war’, wrote Henry Robinson, ‘but not according to his flesh, he did not imprison, fine nor cut off eares, his weapons were only spirituall, the power and might of Jesus Christ.’<sup>66</sup>

The logical implication of this was that the English civil war could not be seen as a holy war fought for the sake of true religion. As Roger Williams declared, the ‘Lamb of God and Prince of Peace’ had given no warrant whatsoever in the New Testament ‘for the undertaking of a civil war for his sake’.<sup>67</sup> Edward Barber was even more direct. In his 1649 tract defending the Levellers’ *Agreement of the people*, he castigated Essex puritan divines like Stephen Marshall who had stirred people to fight the civil war by preaching on texts like ‘Curse ye Meroz’. They had acted as ‘Incendiaries’ Barber claimed, provoking the magistrate to shed ‘Innocent and Ignorant blood’.<sup>68</sup> If the civil war was to be justified at all, therefore, it had to be shown to be a just war, fought not to establish the new Jerusalem, but to defend the civil and religious liberties of the whole people of England. War might have allowed the godly greater freedom to preach the Word and instigate true spiritual reformation, but – as William Dell made clear – that reformation was not to be achieved by

<sup>62</sup> These texts occur repeatedly in the writings of radical tolerationists.

<sup>63</sup> Helwys, *Objections answered* (1615), preface. Ironically, Helwys was echoing a famous statement by James I, whose government was responsible for incarcerating the Baptist leader for his religious activities. <sup>64</sup> *Religions peace*, p. 45. <sup>65</sup> Dell, *Right reformation*, p. 137.

<sup>66</sup> *Liberty of conscience*, pp. 16–17.

<sup>67</sup> *Queries of the highest consideration* [1644], in *The complete writings of Roger Williams* (7 vols., New York, 1963), II, p. 26. Elsewhere, Williams wrote that ‘it pleased the God of heaven to go out with our Armies’, but he makes it clear that God did so because of their commitment to ‘soul-freedom’. The civil war was a holy war because – paradoxically – it was fought for a secular purpose, comprehensive religious toleration. See his *The examiner defended* [1652], in *Complete writings*, VII, pp. 205–6. <sup>68</sup> *An answer to the Essex watchmens watchword*, pp. 2–5.

force of arms. ‘Forceable reformation’, he wrote, ‘is unbeseeming the gospel: for the gospel is the gospel of peace, and not of force and fury.’<sup>69</sup>

Such assertions were not, of course, unique to the writers we are examining. Tolerationists right across early modern Europe and from many different religious and intellectual traditions argued exactly the same points, quoting the same New Testament texts over and over again. What set some radical puritans apart, however, was their conviction that the binding New Testament pattern undermined the very idea of national churches and Christian nations. The whole notion of Christian nations, they believed, ran contrary to the New Testament. ‘Where hath the God of heaven, in the gospel, separated whole nations or kingdoms, English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, &c, as a peculiar people and antitype of the people of Israel?’ asked Roger Williams.<sup>70</sup> The question was of course rhetorical, for the only holy nation spoken of in the New Testament was the church. And that church, according to Williams, was meant to be a private association of ‘volunteers’, ‘like unto a Body or College of Physitians in a Citie; like unto a Corporation, Society or Company of East Indie or Turkie merchants, or any other societie or company in London’.<sup>71</sup>

The problem with Christendom, therefore, lay in its attempt to ‘turn the world into a church’, thus obliterating the New Testament distinction between the two. Constantinians had failed to listen to Christ’s declaration that his kingdom was not of this world, and they had ignored Paul’s statement that the church had no business judging those outside. Instead, they had ‘dischurcht out of the world’ heretics and members of other religions, and they had even attempted to abolish the world itself by turning it into a church, thus polluting the pure godly community.<sup>72</sup> The mission of radical puritans was to untie the Constantinian knot and recover the distinction between church and world.

If this freed the church to model itself on the primitive pattern, it also freed the state from responsibility for religion. The state was not to meddle in religious matters. The magistrate’s task, according to Samuel Fisher, was simply ‘to give protection to men, as men, (living honestly, soberly and justly) without respect to their Religions, whether true or false’. Being a Christian ‘adds nothing to mens power as Magistrates’. Indeed, whether a magistrate was a Christian or a heathen was strictly irrelevant, so long as he carried out his duties impartially. Christians were to seek peace from government but they should not seek ‘preferment’, for when Christ’s disciples enjoyed preferential treatment ‘above their fellow subjects’ it ‘too often choaks the Church’.<sup>73</sup> Fisher was building on Williams’s assertion that the purposes of government were to be ‘merely civil... the defence of persons, estates, families, liberties of a city or civil state, and the suppressing of uncivil or injurious persons or actions’.<sup>74</sup> Since the church was no longer to provide the nation with a civil

<sup>69</sup> *Right reformation*, p. 131.

<sup>70</sup> Williams, *Bloudy tenent*, p. 279.

<sup>71</sup> Williams, *Bloudy tenent*, p. 46.

<sup>72</sup> A point made particularly strongly by Williams, *Bloudy tenent*, pp. 145, 155, and Richardson, *Necessity of toleration*, pp. 253–4.

<sup>73</sup> Fisher, *Christianismus redivivus*, p. 537.

<sup>74</sup> *Bloudy tenent*, p. 131.

religion, the nation was to be bound together by ‘the common principles of nature’, and the magistrate was only to punish infringements of natural law. In this way, people of ‘other worships or religions, Jews, Turks, or anti-christians’, could be ‘peaceable and quiet subjects, loving and helpful neighbours, fair and just dealers, true and loyal to the civil government’.<sup>75</sup>

This revolutionary vision of a multi-faith society united around a moral code discerned by natural reason ensured a very wide degree of toleration indeed. Disbelief in the Trinity and the Incarnation of Christ, for example, could not be punished since they were by no means obvious to the conscience by the light of nature. However, as Margaret Sommerville explains, there was still disagreement over the exact content of the light of nature. The traditional Thomist view, adopted both by John Goodwin and his Presbyterian critic, George Gillespie, was that the light of nature demonstrated that there was a God and that he ought to be worshipped.<sup>76</sup> For this reason, thought Goodwin, it was legitimate for the magistrate to punish atheism. In addition, the light of nature was widely held to prohibit sins such as adultery, drunkenness, and swearing, so that the magistrate could punish these too. Consequently, a magistrate basing his laws on the light of nature alone might not have been as tolerant as may at first appear. No atheism would have been permitted and all religions would have been tolerated only insofar as they did not encourage immorality.<sup>77</sup>

A number of radical tolerationists took the same view as Goodwin. It is significant that atheism is rarely included in their otherwise comprehensive lists of religions to be tolerated. What they had in mind was perhaps toleration of all religions but not of irreligion. Moreover, toleration did not extend to acts prohibited in the Second Table of the Ten Commandments, such as adultery, theft, and murder – the immorality of such acts was thought to be self-evident to any rational person. Radical tolerationists were not, therefore, premature advocates of the permissive society, and they rarely repudiated the puritan campaign for the reformation of manners. Richard Overton, for example, argued that ‘the suffering of Religions’ was no warrant ‘to be of no Religion, much less to publike prophanesne’. Since the magistrate could punish everything done against the light of nature, he was to ‘preserve publike modesty, comelines, and civility...so [the people’s] carriage and publike demeanours are to be rational and regular and comely, and not openly licentious, prophane, and blasphemous, contrary to common sense, reason and humanity’.<sup>78</sup> The enforcement of such a strict moral code obviously excluded certain religions from toleration. As Williams pointed out, sincere devotees of Moloch and Quetzalcoatl could not expect the state to turn a blind eye to their activities.<sup>79</sup> One might also assume that Williams’s ideal magistrate would

<sup>75</sup> *Bloudy tenent*, p. 112.

<sup>76</sup> See G. Gillespie, *The English popish ceremonies* [1637], in *Works* (2 vols., Edinburgh, 1846), 1, pp. 184–8.

<sup>77</sup> M. Sommerville, ‘Independent thought, 1603–49’ (Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge, 1981), ch. 5.

<sup>78</sup> *The arraignment of Mr Persecution*, pp. 32–3. For similar statements see Williams, *Bloudy tenent*, p. 79, and Fisher, *Christianismus redivivus*, p. 537.

<sup>79</sup> See *The examiner defended*, p. 243.

have been none too friendly towards the ‘flirty fishing’ of the early Children of God, the polygamy of the Mormons or the tantric sex of some Hindu mystics.

There was, however, a more minimalist way of thinking about the light of nature, which saw it as merely teaching the need for peace and safety among men. This implied that the only beliefs and practices punishable by the magistrate were those which presented a threat to the material well-being of society. As Sommerville points out, such a view was in line with the minimalist definitions of the light of nature given by Grotius, Selden, and Hobbes.<sup>80</sup> In his contribution to the Whitehall debates, John Wildman argued that since it was ‘not easily determinable what is sin by the light of nature’, it was best for the magistrate to err on the safe side and not prosecute things which were unclear. Thomas Collier, in the same debates, asserted that the Old Testament laws against both idolatry and adultery had been abrogated by Christ, and that now these sins could only be punished by excommunication.<sup>81</sup> Other radical tolerationists were not as explicit about the issue, but their continual assumption that the magistrate was only to be concerned with outward things, such as men’s bodies and goods, certainly implied a more minimal role for the state and freedom of worship for all religions.

#### IV

It should be fairly clear by now why radical tolerationists – not just Lilburne, Walwyn, and Overton but also Barber, Denne, Danvers, Vernon, Goodwin, and Saltmarsh – were willing to support the Leveller movement. The New Testament primitivism of the sects had made it possible to conceive of the church as a private, voluntary association, and of the state as an institution based on natural reason rather than revelation. The Levellers were committed to putting this ‘principle of segregation’ into practice by creating a secular political platform which could bind together a religiously pluralistic nation.<sup>82</sup>

However, the sects and the Levellers eventually fell out in the most acrimonious way.<sup>83</sup> Both sides felt betrayed. Particular Baptists especially had come to feel that Lilburne and others had drifted from their spiritual moorings.

<sup>80</sup> Sommerville, ‘Independent thought’, pp. 188–92.

<sup>81</sup> Woodhouse, ed., *Puritanism and liberty*, pp. 161, 164–5. By 1659, however, Collier was arguing that the law of nature taught the heathen to preserve the honour of their gods, and that the magistrate therefore had a duty to punish blasphemy, understood as ‘wicked speaking, or cursing either of God or man’. He still insisted on the separation of church and state, and argued passionately against persecuting people for their religious beliefs. See his *The decision and clearance* (1659), p. 15.

<sup>82</sup> The ‘principle of segregation’ was first highlighted by Woodhouse, *Puritanism and liberty*, pp. 57–9. Although criticized by J. C. Davis, ‘The Levellers and Christianity’, in B. Manning, ed., *Politics, religion and the English civil war* (London, 1973), pp. 225–50, Woodhouse’s claim that the secular approach of the Levellers grew out of the sectarian segregation of the spheres of nature and grace has been ably defended by Wootton, ‘Levellers democracy’, and I. Russell-Jones, ‘The relationship between theology and politics in the writings of John Lilburne, Richard Overton and William Walwyn’ (D.Phil. thesis, Oxford, 1987). Russell-Jones provides easily the most thorough discussion of the subject.

<sup>83</sup> See Tolmie, *The triumph of the saints*, ch. 8.

The godly Leveller leaders had become so focused on developing a just secular state that they had neglected the other side of the original project – the creation of a distinctive godly counter-culture. Their spiritual zeal had waned and their heretical ideas had grown.<sup>84</sup> Moreover, although God had raised up Cromwell as a champion of religious liberty, the Levellers were not satisfied. Instead of supporting him, they continued to propose their own highly risky and impractical constitutional strategies. Cromwell might not be perfect – radical tolerationists like Goodwin and Collier vigorously opposed some of the religious policies of the 1650s – but he was the best on offer.<sup>85</sup>

The Levellers, however, had equal reason to feel aggrieved. From their point of view, the sectarian leaders had become so obsessed with the fortunes of the saints that they had virtually forgotten the tolerationist commitment to create a state based on natural reason. Indeed, with the rise of their patron Cromwell, they had begun to have visions of themselves as great powers in the land. Any notion of the church as a suffering, non-violent community had gone out the window as they dreamt of godly rule and abandoned the good old cause.<sup>86</sup>

This was a thesis with a good deal of evidence to support it. For as the threat of Presbyterian persecution receded and the reality of Independent power grew, sectarians did indeed begin to think in terms of the rule of the saints. William Dell – who had drawn a very stark dichotomy between nature and grace, the civil and spiritual realms – also preached about a millennium when all such divisions would be dissolved by the triumph of Christ and his saints. Similarly, by 1648 Thomas Collier was proclaiming the imminence of the fall of Babylon and the saints rule on earth. Though at first men would balk at this, ‘yet in conclusion they shall all acknowledge God and submit, with joy’.<sup>87</sup> Religious pluralism was coming to an end. Tolerationist dichotomies were to be swallowed up by millennial holism. A naturalistic politics intended for a pluralistic society was to be replaced by a supernatural age in which dominion would be founded on grace and all men would worship the true God.<sup>88</sup>

It was this form of millenarian hope which eventually produced the theocratic Fifth Monarchist movement. By the early 1650s radical tolerationists and former Levellers like John Vernon and Henry Danvers had thrown in their lot with the Fifth Monarchists. It is likely that they saw no contradiction between their millenarianism and their tolerationism – they may have believed that only the rule of the godly would ensure the toleration of all religions.<sup>89</sup>

<sup>84</sup> See [John Price, *et al.*], *Walwyns wiles* [1649], in W. Haller and G. Davies, eds., *The Leveller tracts, 1647–1653* (New York, 1944), pp. 284–317. Russell-Jones, ‘The relationship between theology and politics’, pp. 249–55, argues that the sectarian leaders may well have been correct in their suspicions.

<sup>85</sup> Samuel Richardson, who supported Cromwell consistently, clearly regarded him with great affection as a heaven-sent deliverer. See his *Answer to the London ministers letter* (1648), sig. A2–A2v.

<sup>86</sup> See *The vanitie of the present churches* (1649), *The charity of churchmen* (1649), *Walwyns just defence* (1649), all to be found in Haller and Davies, eds., *Leveller tracts*.

<sup>87</sup> Collier, *A vindication of the army remonstrance* (1648), sig. A3v.

<sup>88</sup> See L. Solt, *Saints in arms: puritanism and democracy in Cromwell's army* (Stanford, 1959).

<sup>89</sup> B. Capp, *The fifth monarchy men* (London, 1972), pp. 183–5, deals only briefly with their views on toleration. He notes that some Fifth Monarchists (Vernon, Danvers, Simpson, Cary) wrote in

However, the tolerationist argument which fostered the Leveller movement was quite at odds with the millenarian argument which produced Fifth Monarchism. A society ruled by the saints was almost the opposite of the radical tolerationists' merely civil state with its equal rights for all citizens; the Fifth Monarchist desire to reinstitute the judicial laws of Moses ran counter to the tolerationists' specifically New Testament primitivism; and whereas tolerationists were adamantly opposed to the use of the sword to set up Christ's kingdom, militant Fifth Monarchists – such as Danvers – believed that it was a duty of the Christian to use the sword for this very purpose.

Such contradictions, however, could easily go unnoticed by the godly. However much they criticized the analogy between Protestant England and ancient Israel, it still exercised a powerful hold on their imaginations. Sectarians might lambast those who tried to turn the world into a church, but they themselves had no qualms about turning the New Model Army into a gathered congregation complete with prayer meetings and prophecies. Williams's conviction that the English nation was 'merely civil' had to live in tension with the continuing assumption that the nation was meant to be godly. Thomas Collier, a man who was particularly zealous in his critique of Judaizers, insisted that just as 'the Jews live in the land of Canaan was upheld by war', so too could the life of the people of God in England be upheld. Old Testament analogies were happily readmitted without so much as a question about how they were compatible with New Testament primitivism.<sup>90</sup>

To some extent the growth of Fifth Monarchism in the 1650s succeeded in scaring radical puritans away from theocratic millenarianism and back to a more secular and consensual view of politics. Many such figures in the 1650s were concerned publicly to repudiate the notion that dominion could be founded on grace or that violence against the ungodly could usher in the rule of the saints. Collier, for instance, rejected his earlier conviction that the saints would imitate the wars of Israel and usher in the millennium. He adopted a strongly quietist position in later works, one implacably opposed to Fifth Monarchism. 'The state of the saints... under the Gospel-ministration', he insisted, 'is clearly stated in the New Testament to be a suffering state, and that till Christ comes.' He still believed in a future millennium in which the saints would rule, but this would only be inaugurated after the Second Coming of Christ. In the meantime the church must eschew violence and the magistrate must rule only over 'the Bodies and Estates of men'.<sup>91</sup>

Collier had come full circle to his earlier position. But in the intervening period he had muddied the clear waters of the tolerationist position by comparing the saints to the Old Testament people of God and suggesting that

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favour of very wide degrees of toleration, but concludes that it is 'doubtful whether Fifth Monarchist toleration would have extended further than to the sects'.

<sup>90</sup> Collier, *A vindication*, pp. 15–18, 27–8.

<sup>91</sup> T. Collier, *The personal appearing and reign of Christs kingdom upon the earth* (1657), pp. 8–12; *The decision and clearing*, p. 2.

they could usher in the Apocalypse through violence. His example reminds us that the sectarian mentality was not always sectarian. If the sects usually thought of themselves as a suffering counter-culture, in the late 1640s and early 1650s they contemplated using the weapons of the world to make themselves the dominant establishment. The irony is that whilst sectarian leaders condemned the Levellers for spiritual backsliding, it was they themselves who had compromised their earlier commitment to being a marginal people in a society where all religions would enjoy toleration.

## V

The story of radical tolerationism, therefore, is not as straightforward as it may first appear. But besides the complications discussed above, several others have been suggested by revisionist historians.

William Lamont, for example, has highlighted the radical puritan belief in divine intolerance. Although Roger Williams calls for the toleration of the tares in this life, he looks forward to the day when the angels shall come ‘with their sharp and cutting sickles of eternal vengeance, shall down with them, and bundle them up for the everlasting burnings’. If this is an argument for toleration, Lamont asks, what would an argument against look like?<sup>92</sup>

In response to Lamont’s shrewd observation, it should be pointed out that a number of puritan tolerationists deliberately softened traditional Christian teaching about hell. John Goodwin wrote a tract which argued that sincere and decent pagans who had never heard of Christ would still be saved by his atonement, and Samuel Richardson and Thomas Collier anticipated the recent report of the Church of England’s doctrine commission by arguing that hell was not a place of everlasting torment, but a state of total non-being.<sup>93</sup> It is quite possible that the motive behind such theological revisionism on the part of some puritans was their own tolerationism; if cruelty towards those with misinformed consciences was so unjust, then God had better not be guilty of it. Humanitarian sensibilities fostered both liberal politics and liberal theology.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, we should be careful not to confuse theological and civil tolerance. Rousseau may have maintained that ‘it is impossible to live in peace with people one believes to be damned’,<sup>95</sup> but there can be little doubt that many religious believers did just that.<sup>96</sup> Both Williams and Helwys, for example, were genuinely appalled by the violence of persecution, and their works were passionate polemics against human cruelty. Yet they also believed that God would avenge this cruelty and punish the perpetrators, the supporters of the

<sup>92</sup> Lamont, ‘Pamphleteering’, pp. 81–2.

<sup>93</sup> Goodwin, *The pagans debt and dowry* (1651); Richardson, *A discourse of the torments of hell* (1660); Collier, *A general epistle*, p. 62. The report of the doctrine commission of the Church of England is *The mystery of salvation: the story of God’s gift* (London, 1996).

<sup>94</sup> J. Altholz, ‘The warfare of conscience with theology’, in *The mind and art of Victorian England* (Minneapolis, 1976), argues that the humanitarian sentiments of Victorian evangelicals led to a softening of their doctrines of divine punishment.

<sup>95</sup> See *The social contract*, trans. M. Cranston (Harmondsworth, 1968), pp. 186–7.

<sup>96</sup> As John Rawls acknowledges in *A theory of justice* (Oxford, 1973), p. 215.

Beast.<sup>97</sup> God's tolerance would one day run out, but that of the saints must not. Their God may have been no liberal, but they themselves had to be.

J. C. Davis argues, however, that the congregations to which tolerationist writers belonged were far from being liberal institutions. They were strongly disciplinarian, exercising a considerable degree of control over their members, and often less tolerant internally than the state church itself.<sup>98</sup> His observation is indisputable, but it must be remembered that sectarian congregations only disciplined those who voluntarily submitted to their regulations. One of their favourite texts was 1 Corinthians 5:12, where Paul – having recommended the excommunication of fornicators, drunkards, extortioners, and idolaters from the church – asks, ‘what have I to do to judge them also that are without?’ Sectarian writers aimed to follow Paul's example by censuring or excommunicating wayward members who had consented to the rules of their congregations, but tolerating those outside who did not live up to their standards. Their voluntaristic principle, which Davis does not emphasize, has often been viewed as an important feature of liberal societies. Political liberalism, after all, is certainly opposed to the enforcement of religion by the state, but on most accounts has nothing against the formation of voluntary associations with strict rules of membership.<sup>99</sup>

A final problem with the puritanism and liberty thesis has been noted by Lamont, Davis, and Conal Condren in their studies of seventeenth-century concepts of *liberty*. Lamont, for example, suggests that for puritan writers like Williams, the ultimate end was not freedom in any modern liberal sense, but godly discipline.<sup>100</sup> Davis and Condren agree. They suggest that historians have continually made the mistake of assuming that seventeenth-century people meant the same thing by ‘freedom’ as modern liberals do. In fact, the early modern notion of freedom implied not autonomy but submission to the will of God; freedom from inferior authorities like the state was proposed in order that one could fulfil one's obligations and submit to the higher authority of God alone.<sup>101</sup>

This is undoubtedly correct, but the claim that true freedom is found in service to God is quite compatible with the belief that the state must guarantee religious freedom (in the modern sense) for all its citizens, regardless of their faith. Thus the Second Vatican Council's *Declaration on religious freedom* (1965) reiterated the Catholic teaching that true freedom could only be found in submission to God and his truth, but also marked a turning point in Catholic history – for the first time, the church had officially committed itself to

<sup>97</sup> ‘Oh! how likely is the jealous Jehovah, the consuming fire, to end these present slaughters of the holy witnesses in a greater slaughter!’ wrote Williams in *The bloody tenent*, p. 8. Overton's Mr Persecution was also heading for everlasting torment in the lake of fire. See *The arraignment*, p. 46.

<sup>98</sup> Davis, ‘Religion and the struggle for freedom in the English revolution’, pp. 512–13, 525.

<sup>99</sup> See Rawls, *A theory of justice*, p. 212.

<sup>100</sup> Lamont, ‘Pamphleteering’, p. 81.

<sup>101</sup> J. C. Davis, ‘Religion and the struggle for freedom in the English revolution’; and Conal Condren, ‘Liberty of office and its defence in seventeenth-century political argument’, *History of Political Thought*, 18 (1997), pp. 460–82.

defending the religious liberties of non-Catholics in all circumstances, thus turning its back on the venerable Augustinian tradition of justifying religious coercion.<sup>102</sup> Similarly, puritan tolerationists may have argued for freedom from the religious authority of the state in order that individuals might submit to God's authority, but they were dogmatically committed to tolerating those who (in their eyes) abused that freedom and lived in rebellion against the divine will. Toleration for the ungodly was 'the will and command of God'.

Moreover, insofar as many modern liberals have been traditional theists, the revisionist line of argument causes liberalism to evaporate not just in the seventeenth century but in the nineteenth century too. What has traditionally been seen as the great age of liberalism largely vanishes from sight. Gladstone (the High Anglican), John Bright (the Quaker), and R. W. Dale (the Congregationalist) all turn out not to be liberals after all, since they always thought of personal liberty as a responsibility to others, particularly to God.<sup>103</sup> The same may well be true of a host of twentieth-century figures, including Martin Luther King and Jimmy Carter (Baptists both), who might usually be thought of as liberal and democratic. A definition of 'liberalism' which excludes large numbers of apparently liberal-democratic politicians and thinkers is, of course, widely adopted by political theorists and others today,<sup>104</sup> but why should we not continue to think in terms of a broader liberal tradition, which emerged in the early-modern period, and includes a wide range of families, from the strongly communitarian to the highly individualistic?<sup>105</sup> Both Annabel Patterson and David Wootton have been urging us to think along these lines, and their proposals seem eminently sensible.<sup>106</sup>

## VI

What can be said in conclusion concerning the puritanism and liberty thesis? To begin with we should admit that the revisionist case is clearly a strong one. In many respects the mentality of puritan tolerationists was a world away from that of modern secular liberals like John Rawls or Ronald Dworkin. We have seen that the kind of arguments puritans employed to defend religious toleration were deeply traditional, shaped by the conventional radical

<sup>102</sup> The *Declaration* is reprinted in D. G. Mullan, ed., *Religious pluralism in the West: an anthology* (Oxford, 1998), pp. 329–40.

<sup>103</sup> On the profoundly religious and communitarian liberalism of the Victorian period see J. P. Parry, *Democracy and religion: Gladstone and the Liberal party, 1867–1875* (Cambridge, 1986), and E. F. Biagini, *Liberty, retrenchment and reform: popular Liberalism in the age of Gladstone* (Cambridge, 1992).

<sup>104</sup> Most clearly in the liberal–communitarian debate, ably summarized in S. Mulhall and A. Swift, *Liberals and communitarians* (Oxford, 1992).

<sup>105</sup> This approach is taken in A. Ryan, 'Liberalism', in R. E. Goodin and P. Pettit, eds., *A companion to contemporary political philosophy* (Oxford, 1993), ch. 11.

<sup>106</sup> See A. Patterson, *Early modern liberalism* (Cambridge, 1997); and D. Wootton, ed., *John Locke: political writings* (London, 1993), pp. 7–16.

Protestant impulses of biblicism, primitivism, and restorationism. Whereas modern liberal theology has created a tolerant and non-judgemental God, these radical puritans (or most of them) still worshipped a God of wrath whose tolerance of unbelief would one day run out. In contrast to those liberals who are suspicious of any community which threatens personal autonomy, radical puritans were enthusiasts for disciplined congregations in which individuals could learn to submit to the will of God. Unlike modern liberals, who would argue that the state should tolerate a diversity of sexual as well as religious practices, puritan tolerationists only advocated freedom for all religions, were unclear about the protected status of atheism, and rarely criticized campaigns for the reformation of manners.<sup>107</sup> Finally, in their persistent use of millenarian and Old Testament rhetoric some of the writers we have discussed effectively undermined their segregation of state and church, and displayed a mentality far removed from that of liberal democrats.

Yet the illiberal tendencies of these early modern tolerationists should not surprise us. If the seventeenth-century pioneers of modern science were still fascinated by alchemy and apocalyptic speculation, it is little wonder that the pioneers of toleration fail to match the more radical liberalism of Rawls or Dworkin.<sup>108</sup> In their own context, radical puritan tolerationists were making quite outrageous claims, and were noticeably less reticent in their calls for liberty than the religious moderates often singled out for praise. The Erasmians to whom Blair Worden draws attention, for instance, actually offered far more limited defences of toleration. Charles Wolseley emphatically rejected toleration for Catholics and never suggested toleration for non-Christians.<sup>109</sup> Matthew Hale justified the prosecution of blasphemers, idolaters, atheists, Catholics, and radical Dissenters. ‘Christianity is parcel of the laws of England’, he famously declared, ‘and therefore to reproach the Christian religion is to speak in subversion of the law.’<sup>110</sup> As Richard Ashcraft has argued, the latitudinarians were often far from being the mild and tolerant men they have been made to seem by later historians.<sup>111</sup>

Nevertheless, as far as subsequent influence is concerned, sectarian tolerationists enjoyed less than mainstream Protestants who advocated toleration. Most of their writings were soon forgotten. Roger Williams has gained iconic status as one of the first American liberals, but despite the suggestion of some

<sup>107</sup> Though see Danvers, *Certain quaeries*, p. 2, which argues that magistrates have no ‘Gospel-rule of warrant’ for punishing ‘adultery, idolatry, blasphemy, Sabbath-breaking’.

<sup>108</sup> Isaac Newton is the classic example of an early modern scientist whose intellectual passions included disciplines now viewed as thoroughly unscientific. See the essays about him in J. E. Force and R. H. Popkin, eds., *The books of nature and scripture: recent essays on natural philosophy, theology and biblical criticism in the Netherlands of Spinoza’s time and the British Isles of Newton’s time* (Dordrecht, 1994).

<sup>109</sup> [Wolseley], *Liberty of conscience: the magistrates interest* (1668), p. 14.

<sup>110</sup> A. Cromartie, *Sir Matthew Hale, 1609–1676: law, religion and natural philosophy* (Cambridge, 1995), ch. 11.

<sup>111</sup> R. Ashcraft, ‘Latitudinarianism and toleration: historical myth versus political history’, in R. Kroll, R. Ashcraft, and P. Zagorin, eds., *Philosophy, science and religion in England 1640–1700* (Cambridge, 1992), ch. 7.

scholars that he was a key influence on Locke or the Founding Fathers, his actual importance to the history of American political thought is less significant.<sup>112</sup> The really influential figures in the rise of liberalism were more moderate and mainstream Protestants like Locke. When the eighteenth-century Dissenter, Isaac Watts, wished to defend toleration, he turned not to Williams or Goodwin or Vane, but to Locke's *Letter concerning toleration*.<sup>113</sup> The only radical puritan tolerationist to exercise great influence in the eighteenth century was Milton, who was less thoroughgoing in his position than many others.

However, although the vast majority of radical puritan tolerationists were nowhere near as influential as Locke or Milton, they were not completely forgotten. Williams's reputation was resurrected in eighteenth-century America by Baptists like Isaac Backus, a fervent campaigner for the civil rights of religious minorities. Indeed, after the American Revolution, two kinds of tolerationist – the enthusiastic sectarian, and the urbane rationalist – came together to form a potent alliance. In Virginia, Baptists like John Leland joined with Jefferson and Madison to campaign for religious liberty. Baptist and Quaker pressure enabled the Enlightenment men to push their bills for freedom of religion through state legislatures. In both England and America the pressure of the sects was a crucial factor in the emergence of religious liberty.<sup>114</sup>

In addition, the polemic of puritan tolerationists may well have had a role in promoting the humanitarian sentiment so characteristic of modern liberalism. Calvin had warned that the magistrate should not 'lapse into a most cruel "humanity"', allowing himself to be enervated by a superstitious attachment to clemency into a soft and dissolute indulgence'.<sup>115</sup> Puritan tolerationists, by contrast, incessantly appealed to humane sentiment against the 'cruelty' of religious coercion. Persecution, declared Williams, was 'opposite to the very tender Bowels of Humanity'.<sup>116</sup> The gulf between seventeenth-century

<sup>112</sup> Ironically, it is more likely that Locke was influenced by John Owen, whose tolerationism was so much more limited than that of Williams. See J. W. Baker, 'Church, state and toleration: John Locke and Calvin's heirs in England, 1644–89', in W. F. Graham, ed., *Later Calvinism: international perspectives* (Louisville, 1994), pp. 525–43.

<sup>113</sup> See I. Watts, 'A new essay on civil power in things sacred' (1738–9), in *Works*, vi (London, 1753), pp. 131–76. On the rise of political liberalism see H. Laski, *The rise of European liberalism* (London, 1936), and A. Arblaster, *The rise and decline of Western liberalism* (Oxford, 1984). Laski does give honourable mention to Lilburne, Overton, and Williams, but the emphasis is on Locke and other Enlightenment thinkers.

<sup>114</sup> This point is made very effectively by Miller, *The first liberty*, and by the articles by Edwin Gaustad, Rhys Isaac, John T. Noonan Jr, and David Little in M. D. Peterson and R. C. Vaughan, eds., *The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom* (Cambridge, 1988). Indeed, most studies on the rise of toleration acknowledge that both rationalist elites and sectarian enthusiasts contributed to the development of tolerationist theory. See, for example, Gardiner, *History of the great civil war*, 1, ch. 14; H. F. R. Smith, *The theory of religious liberty in the reigns of Charles II and James II* (Cambridge, 1911); Lyon, *The theory of religious liberty in England*; Jordan, *The development of religious toleration in England*; Lecler, *Toleration and the Reformation*; Henry Kamen, *The rise of toleration* (London, 1967).

<sup>115</sup> See H. Hopfl, ed., *Luther and Calvin on secular authority* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 62.

<sup>116</sup> *Queries of highest consideration*, p. 35.

puritanism and nineteenth-century nonconformity was not always as wide as some historians have suggested.<sup>117</sup>

The practical record of radical tolerationists, moreover, was often impressive. The charter of Williams's Rhode Island colony confirmed that no one in the colony would be molested 'for any differences in opinion in matter of religion'. In all his dealings with those of other faiths, whether Amerindian or Quaker, Williams never advocated religious coercion.<sup>118</sup> His friend, Henry Vane Jr, defended heterodox writers like John Biddle and John Fry, helped Williams to secure the charter for Rhode Island, and argued in parliament against forcing Irish Catholics to attend Protestant worship.<sup>119</sup> Other puritan tolerationists, as we have seen, supported the Leveller demands for toleration, agitated for the readmission of the Jews and the toleration of their worship, and protested against the restrictions on religious liberty in the 1650s.

Such action flowed from a principled commitment to the toleration of all religions. Puritan primitivism had driven these writers to the view that the church must always be a counter-culture characterized by gentleness towards those outside. In the late 1640s, some tolerationists undermined this view by embracing apocalyptic dreams of godly rule and the imminent end of religious pluralism. But in its purest form – as stated in *The bloody tenent* – the radical tolerationist argument pointed to many of the key elements of modern political liberalism: the separation of a private, voluntary church from an impartial, non-confessional state; a multi-faith society characterized by flourishing commerce and social co-operation; a profound respect for individual conscience; and a powerful humanitarian sensibility repelled by 'the bloody tenent of persecution'. The hotter sort of Protestants, by virtue of their primitivist zeal, had reached some remarkably liberal conclusions.

<sup>117</sup> See for example R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the rise of capitalism* (Harmondsworth, 1964), pp. 197–9; C. Hill, *A turbulent, seditious and factious people: John Bunyan and his church* (Oxford, 1988), p. 345; Lamont, *Puritanism and historical controversy*, pp. 6–7.

<sup>118</sup> See W. McLoughlin, *Rhode Island: a bicentennial history* (New York, 1978), pp. 1–46.

<sup>119</sup> See Rowe, *Sir Henry Vane the younger*, pp. 195–201.