

The Reverend Elisha Williams, the “celebrated Mr. Lock,” and the *Letter Concerning Toleration* in America

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Scholars of the American Enlightenment have tended to focus on the influence of John Locke’s Second Treatise, but more recently they have traced the impact of Locke’s other works. This article contributes to that effort by examining how Locke’s Letter Concerning Toleration influenced Reverend Elisha Williams’s important 1744 political pamphlet, The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants. Williams argued in favor of toleration against a Connecticut law designed to limit itinerant preaching. In a groundbreaking manner, he built his argument for toleration on the twin pillars of Scripture and Locke. Where scholars have tended to focus on Williams’s references to the Second Treatise, this article will provide a careful analysis of the sermon to show that its principal arguments are clearly modeled off of Locke’s Letter. It will also show that Williams did not simply repeat Locke’s ideas but adapted them to his own purposes.

One text that has not received enough attention in eighteenth-century American historiography is John Locke’s *Letter Concerning Toleration*. Historians of the American Revolution tend to focus on the connection between the *Letter* and Thomas Jefferson. The common view is that the author of the Virginia “Statute for Religious Freedom” was the American whose thinking most closely approached Locke’s own view of toleration, and the influence of the *Letter* on Jefferson’s thought has been fairly well documented.¹ But generally, Locke’s *Letter* is neglected in the classic histories of the American Enlightenment. In Henry May and David Lundberg’s famous survey of library holdings in colonial and revolutionary America, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* is not even listed.² Nor does it receive any attention in Bernard Bailyn’s *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, Gordon Wood’s *Creation of the American Republic*, or Henry May’s *Enlightenment in*

¹ Thomas Jefferson, “Notes on Locke and Shaftesbury,” in the *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 46 vols., ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950–), 1:544–51; Gerald Sandler, “Lockean Ideas in Thomas Jefferson’s ‘Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom,’” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 21, no. 1 (January-March 1960): 110–16; Sanford Kessler, “Locke’s Influence on Jefferson’s ‘Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom,’” *Journal of Church and State* 25, no. 2 (Spring 1983): 231–52; Vincent Philip Munoz, *God and the Founders: Madison, Washington, and Jefferson* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 82–97.

² Lundberg, David and Henry May. “The Enlightened Reader in America,” *American Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (Summer 1976): 262–93.

America. This is at least in part because these historians do not see Locke as an especially important figure in colonial and revolutionary American intellectual culture. But there is also the strong possibility that the *Letter* is simply ignored in favor of *The Two Treatises* and the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. The latter texts, after all, are the low-hanging fruit in Lockean reception history. As is well-known, the most famous statement of American political theory contains several lines practically plagiarized from the *Second Treatise*. More recent scholarship, such as Claire Arcenas’s reception history of Locke in American thought, has begun to meet the need for a more thoroughgoing history of the *Letter* in the colonial era.³ This article contributes to that worthy effort by examining closely the *Letter*’s influence on Reverend Elisha Williams’s 1744 political sermon, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants: A Seasonable Plea for the Liberty of Conscience, and the Right of Private Judgement, in Matters of Religion, Without Any Controul from Human Authority.”⁴ Williams, in a groundbreaking manner, builds his argument for toleration on the twin pillars of Scripture and John Locke. Scholars interested in exploring Williams’s use of Locke have tended to focus on his explicit references to the *Two Treatises*. However, a close reading of Williams’s sermon reveals arguments clearly derived from *A Letter Concerning Toleration*.

Delivered in the form of a pamphlet, and arguing against a recently passed Connecticut law designed to limit itinerant preaching, Williams’s “dazzling assault” was a work of “startling originality,” in which “Locke’s notions of toleration were fused with a brilliant presentation of his theory of government.”⁵ Scholars of the Great Awakening such as Geoffrey Bowden, Thomas Curry, Chris Grasso, and Nicholas Miller all acknowledge the importance of Williams’s sermon to the development of the American idea of religious liberty.⁶ Chris Beneke goes so far as to call the pamphlet “a foundational text in eighteenth-century writing

³ Claire Arcenas, *America’s Philosopher: John Locke in American Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

⁴ Historian John Coffey agrees with the need for further scholarly exploration of the “reception and use” of Locke’s *Letter* and other works arguing for religious toleration. John Coffey, “Milton, Locke, and the New History of Toleration,” *Modern Intellectual History* 5, iss. 3 (November 2008): 619–32.

⁵ John Dunn, *Political Obligations in Its Historical Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 73.

⁶ Geoffrey Bowden, “Piety and Property: Locke and the Development of American Protestantism,” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 37, no. 3 (Spring 2008): 273–87; Thomas Curry, *The First Freedoms: Church and State in America to the Passage of the First Amendment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Chris Grasso, *A Speaking Aristocracy: Transforming Public Discourse in Eighteenth Century Connecticut* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Nicholas Miller, *Dissenting Protestants and the Separation of Church and State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

THE REVEREND ELISHA WILLIAMS AND THE “CELEBRATED MR. LOCKE”

soon after its publication.”⁷ Michael Zuckert lauds it as “more richly detailed, more nuanced, and more insightful than that of any other of Locke’s clerical admirers in the eighteenth century.”⁸ However, insufficient attention is paid to the influence of *A Letter Concerning Toleration* on Williams’s sermon. This essay will show how various arguments in the “Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants” are clearly modeled off of those in the *Letter*, as well as the ways in which Williams adapts Locke’s ideas to his own purposes.

THE HISTORICITY OF THE CLAIM: LOCKEAN WRITINGS IN COLONIAL AMERICA

To the extent that most scholars engage with the connection between Williams and Locke, they focus on Williams’s use of the *Two Treatises of Government*, particularly the *Second Treatise*. This emphasis owes to the link between Williams and the *Second Treatise* being much stronger than the link between him and the *Letter Concerning Toleration*. Williams cites the *Second Treatise* twice in his pamphlet. He concludes the first part of his sermon by saying the theory of government he just outlined is only “a short sketch of what the celebrated Mr. Lock in his *Treatise of Government* has largely demonstrated.”⁹ Later, he refers the reader to “that author in his *Treatise of Government*” concerning the natural right of revolution against unjust governments.¹⁰ Williams’s references to Locke seem to presume a fairly common knowledge of his political philosophy as presented in the *Two Treatises*. At one point in the sermon, he says that in speaking of such ideas as the Lockean state of nature and social compact, “it is justly to be presumed *all are agreed* who understand the natural rights of mankind” [emphasis added].¹¹ A copy of the work, included as part of the massive *Works of John Locke, Esq., In Three Volumes*, reached Yale’s college library in 1733, during Williams’s tenure as rector.¹² He left the position in 1739, and while there is no evidence in Williams’s extant papers that proves it was this edition of the *Two Treatises* that he read, the *Second Treatise* was already well-known in the colonies by the time he authored

⁷ Chris Beneke, *Beyond Toleration: The Religious Origins of American Pluralism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 71.

⁸ Michael Zuckert, *The Natural Rights Republic* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 184–85.

⁹ Elisha Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” in *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805*, 2 vols., ed. Ellis Sandoz (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1998), 1:59.

¹⁰ Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 83.

¹¹ Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 59.

¹² Louis Shores, *Origins of the American College Library* (1934; repr., New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965), 261.

the pamphlet.¹³ Nothing else written by Locke is explicitly cited in the pamphlet, which could be an indication it is the only one of Locke’s works directly relevant to the argument of the essay.

The historical connection between Williams and the *Letter Concerning Toleration* is more tenuous. He does not explicitly cite that work, nor does it appear in the *Works of John Locke*.¹⁴ Nevertheless, it is quite possible for him to have read the *Letter*. As Mark Goldie notes, “by the end of the eighteenth century, Locke’s *Letter Concerning Toleration* had been published in twenty-six editions, as well as being included in nine editions of his *Works* and in *Ouevres diverses de Monsieur Jean Locke* (1710).”¹⁵ Most importantly, the first American edition was published in Boston in 1743, one year prior to the publication of Williams’s pamphlet.¹⁶ Goldie has enough confidence in the *Letter*’s accessibility to assert that “Locke’s arguments were appropriated in Elisha Williams’s *Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants*.”¹⁷ Arcenas shares Goldie’s confidence in drawing a connection between Locke’s *Letter* and Williams’s pamphlet. She uses the latter as an example to show Locke’s influence—especially through his *Letter*—in re-shaping American Protestantism during the First Great Awakening.¹⁸ To support her argument, she notes that, in addition to the 1743 American publication, several of Locke’s letters on toleration were available in the colonies as early as the 1690s.¹⁹ Zuckert says the two-pronged structure of Williams’s argument “parallels Locke’s discussion in the *Letter Concerning Toleration*. In that text Locke had first explicated the ‘jurisdiction of the civil magistrate,’ showing that it does not extend to

¹³ John Dunn, *Political Obligations in Its Historical Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 71, in his account of the reception of Locke’s *Two Treatises*, says that, with one exception, “We do not even know that copies of the *Two Treatises* reached the American colonies before 1724.” However, fresh research from Mark Goldie, “Empire, Property, and the New York Land Question,” *John Locke and Empire*, The Annual Carlyle Lectures, Oxford, January 19, 2021, demonstrates that as early as 1701, an anonymous pamphlet demanding the repeal of a law passed by the New York colonial assembly cancelling pre-1688 land grants cited arguments from the *Second Treatise*. The pamphlet was clearly aimed at Locke, who, as a member of the Board of Trade, advised the assembly to pass the law. Interestingly, the author attributed authorship of the *Two Treatises* to Locke, something Locke himself never avowed during his lifetime. This backdates the first citation of Locke in an American pamphlet by over two decades.

¹⁴ Although, “Part of a Fourth Letter on Toleration” is included in *The Works of John Locke, Esq., In Three Volumes* (London: W. Taylor, 1714), as well as numerous other letters from Locke to his Dutch friend Philipp Van Limborch, who was the original recipient of Locke’s first *Letter*. In the likely event Williams read the *Works*, he would have been aware that other letters on toleration existed.

¹⁵ Goldie, “Introduction,” in *A Letter Concerning Toleration and Other Writings*, ed. Goldie (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2010), xxii.

¹⁶ Arcenas, *America’s Philosopher*, 27.

¹⁷ Goldie, “Introduction,” xxii.

¹⁸ Arcenas, *America’s Philosopher* 27–28.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 183n107.

THE REVEREND ELISHA WILLIAMS AND THE “CELEBRATED MR. LOCK”

religious matters, and then ‘what a church is,’ showing both its immunities from the civil authorities and the limits of its powers.”²⁰ I agree with Goldie, Arcenas, and Zuckert’s assessment that the clear connection between many of the passages in “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants” and *A Letter Concerning Toleration* suggests Williams’s knowledge of the work and its influence on his argument for the natural right imperative of religious toleration.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Elisha Williams was born in western Massachusetts in 1694. A descendent of John Cotton and the scion of a prominent New England family, young Elisha began life destined for the ministry. In 1722, after enjoying brief stints as a lawyer and itinerant religious teacher, he settled down to pastor a Congregational church in Connecticut. Four years later, in 1726, he was appointed rector of Yale College. Though still in its infancy, Yale was shaken by scandal when the rector immediately preceding Williams, Timothy Cutler, “dramatically renounced Congregationalism and his chair at Yale to take orders in the Church of England.”²¹ Williams was brought in to restore Reformed orthodoxy. He did not disappoint, emphasizing Calvin’s core teachings in one of his opening sermons. However, as Nicholas Miller is quick to point out, “he did so, though, in a way that showed he was open to understanding these doctrines in the context of insights provided by contemporary thinkers like John Locke.”²² After retiring from that position in 1739, he was elected a member of Connecticut’s General Assembly in 1740 and served in that capacity for nine years. During his tenure, he also took posts as a judge on the Connecticut Superior Court and as justice of the peace for Hartford. He also ran for governor, served in the militia during King George’s War, and was even appointed commander-in-chief of the never-realized colonial expedition to Canada at the outset of the French and Indian War. Only a year before his death, he was appointed a delegate to the Albany Congress, and helped devise Benjamin Franklin’s famed Albany Plan of Union. All in all, Williams represented the archetype of a mid-eighteenth-century New England aristocrat. In addition to his training in law and theology, he was also expected to serve in intellectual, political, and military roles. In Williams’s New England, these different arts were

²⁰ Zuckert, *The Natural Rights Republic*, 187.

²¹ Grasso, *A Speaking Aristocracy*, 39.

²² Miller, *Dissenting Protestants and the Separation of Church and State*, 95.

PIETAS

all tied together quite closely. It is easy to see, therefore, how theological questions could quickly attain political importance. This is precisely what happened with the onset of the Great Awakening.

The dispute between the “Old Lights” and “New Lights” provides the immediate historical context for Williams’s sermon and helps to explain his invocation of Locke. Beginning in the 1730s, a religious revival spread throughout the American colonies. Thomas Curry summarized the phenomenon thus:

Declaiming that the religious convictions that in the previous century had fired Englishmen to colonize the New World had degenerated into a dull and stodgy orthodoxy, itinerant preachers—mostly Calvinist—traversed the colonies berating ‘dead’ and ‘unconverted’ ministers, attracting swarms of people, provoking excitement that frequently rose to hysteria, and inducing in countless numbers of their hearers an experience of religion, as opposed to an intellectual adherence to doctrine.²³

Although some of the religious conflict engendered by the Great Awakening fell along denominational lines—Baptists and Presbyterians saw their influence expand at the expense of the “main line” Congregational and Anglican churches—much of it happened within individual congregations. While these dissensions did not take on a political character in states with no established churches, such as Pennsylvania and New Jersey, which were founded during the growth of Nonconformist Protestantism in England, this was “not so in New England, where the existence of established churches brought civil authorities into the disputes that split congregations into ‘New Light’ supporters of the Awakening and ‘Old Light’ opponents of it.”²⁴ At the core of these disputes were not fundamental differences of doctrine, but rather, the role of enthusiasm in preaching the Gospel.²⁵ The itinerant New Light preachers were zealous and emotional, standing in stark contrast to the staid, more strictly intellectual preaching of the Old Light ministers. Interestingly, however, the leaders of the Great Awakening mixed enthusiasm with the rationalistic ideas and attitudes of the Enlightenment. Whereas seventeenth and early eighteenth-century preachers such as John Winthrop drew their understanding of theology and human society strictly from Holy Writ, the New Light preachers of the mid-eighteenth century sought to bolster their message of a

²³ Curry, *The First Freedoms*, 95–96.

²⁴ Curry, *The First Freedoms*, 96.

²⁵ A similar dispute was taking place in England, where John and Charles Wesley were preaching against “lukewarmness” in the Church of England and arguing for an increased emphasis on personal holiness over and against spiritually dead ritualism.

THE REVEREND ELISHA WILLIAMS AND THE “CELEBRATED MR. LOCK”

rejuvenated Christianity with interesting new ideas about nature. It is important to note, however, that the divide between the children of the Reformation and the fathers of the Enlightenment should not be overemphasized. Goldie remarks that Locke shared with the Reformers the desire to make religion “imminent in the secular world,” and that this desire was reflected in his *Letter Concerning Toleration*.²⁶ The intersection between Enlightenment philosophy and Reformation theology proved especially important in political sermons such as Williams’s, which sought to challenge Old Light notions about the relationship between church and state.

The Great Awakening’s challenge to the established religious order necessarily had political ramifications. In the Congregational Church, individual congregations (as the name implies) elected their ministers, making them far more “democratic” than Anglicans or Presbyterians. The New England colonies which Congregationalism dominated were founded by religious dissenters. Their political origins were therefore essentially religious in character, and their churches and governments subsequently grew up together. This meant that colonies like Connecticut possessed a kind of informal religious establishment. Congregationalism was not imposed from the top-down by a civil magistrate and a group of clerics. Rather, it was part and parcel with the colonists’ way of life. The colonial legislatures paid ministers’ salaries, chartered colleges for the training of preachers, and drew judicial and administrative boundaries such that the township and the parish were virtually identical. The lack of a formal religious establishment headed by a centralized clerisy had the curious effect of actually strengthening the involvement of the spiritual with the temporal power. Unlike in England, where clergy were disqualified from serving as judges or legislators, and who might cause much consternation when they overstepped their bounds by intervening too much in temporal matters, the line between spiritual and temporal for the Congregationalists was quite blurry, since ministers like Elisha Williams simultaneously served in a number of secular roles.

Because the political and the religious establishments were closely tied, the denunciations leveled by itinerant preachers against “lukewarmness” was interpreted by Connecticut’s leaders as threatening the colony’s political stability. In October 1741, the Old Lights

²⁶ Goldie, “Africans, Native Americans, Slavery, and Christian Evangelism,” *John Locke and Empire*, The Annual Carlyle Lectures, Oxford, February 23, 2021.

PIETAS

launched a counterattack, accusing New Light preachers of “ensoriousness and uncharitable judging; of invading other ministers’ pulpits; of causing schisms in existing churches; of encouraging unqualified lay exhorters; and above all of unseemly emotional excesses.”²⁷ With the financial support of the General Assembly, a general convention of Congregational ministers met and passed resolves against itinerant preaching. In response, the General Assembly passed a law in the spring of 1742 that “forbade any minister to preach at another parish without the express permission of the minister and a majority of the parishioners there, under pain of losing his public salary.”²⁸ Furthermore, it forbade ministerial associations to “advise or license candidates to preach in the jurisdiction of another” and levied significant fines upon laypersons who preached without the consent of their ministers and fellow parishioners.²⁹ With the passing of this law, Connecticut colonists were essentially cut off from revivalist preaching, and it was this specific violation of moral conscience that spurred Williams to publish “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants.”

Prior to 1742, Williams was not an active partisan in the debates spawned by the Great Awakening, but he vigorously opposed the new law. His brother Solomon was a noted leader of moderate New Lights, and Elisha, while not exactly a New Light himself, was nevertheless sympathetic to their cause. In 1743, this sympathy cost him his judgeship on the Superior Court, and two years later, his position as justice of the peace. In the face of this soft persecution, he published his pamphlet anonymously, referring to himself only as “a Gentleman in the Massachusetts-Bay.”³⁰ There are several reasons that can be inferred for his decision to mask his identity. First, identifying himself as being from his home colony of Massachusetts served the immediate end of self-preservation, protecting him as it did from political retribution by the Old Lights. Second, Williams was a high-profile character in Connecticut politics, and writing in his own name would have generated more controversy over the authorship of the pamphlet (and invited the charge that he was sore over losing his judgeship) than the argument of the pamphlet itself. Third, and most importantly, the anonymity universalizes his argument. His Connecticut audience is made to see that similar

²⁷ Curry, *The First Freedoms*, 96.

²⁸ Curry, *The First Freedoms*, 97.

²⁹ Richard Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765* (New York: Norton, 1970), 186.

³⁰ Sandoz, introduction to “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” in *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era*, 1:52.

THE REVEREND ELISHA WILLIAMS AND THE “CELEBRATED MR. LOCK”

questions about the relationship between the civil magistrate and religion are at play in other colonies, and indeed—as his use of Locke expressly indicates—in all human societies. The primary importance he places on the universal nature of the subject in question is evident in the structure of his argument. His immediate object is to criticize the 1742 law and advocate for its repeal, but the first roughly fifty pages are completely devoid of any allusions to the law. Instead, Williams first develops a coherent theory about the right to moral conscience drawn, in part, from Locke’s *Letter Concerning Toleration*. It is to this theory that we now turn.

THE ORIGINS AND ENDS OF GOVERNMENT, AND THE LIMITS OF CIVIL AUTHORITY

At the outset, Williams states his goal is to “answer your main enquiry concerning the extent of the civil magistrate’s power respecting religion; I suppose it is needful to look back to the end, and therefore to the original of it: By which means I suppose a just notion may be formed of what is properly their business or the object of their power; and so without any insuperable difficulty we may thence learn what is out of that compass.”³¹ The pamphlet, addressed to an anonymous inquirer, is intended to delineate the extent of temporal authority over spiritual matters. To answer that question, Williams says, it is necessary to deduce the end of temporal power. To discover the end, it is necessary to discover the origins.

Williams, a preacher, begins his argument for toleration by laying out a rational method of proceeding, which seems to bear greater resemblance to a philosophical treatise than a sermon. In fact, there is a total absence of Scriptural references in the opening of the pamphlet. The way to go about determining the relationship between the crook and the sword is not to engage in Biblical exegesis. This in and of itself is an extraordinary departure from Protestant divines like Luther, who, in his writings on the relationship between church and state, “derives the principles for the understanding and governance of the secular sphere, the Kingdom and the World, from Scripture.”³² Williams does the exact opposite, beginning his sermon with a reasonable enquiry into the origins of government.

³¹ Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 55.

³² Zuckert, *The Natural Rights Republic*, 189.

PIETAS

Compare Williams's method with Locke's, who begins the *Letter Concerning Toleration* by saying, "I esteem it above all things necessary to distinguish exactly the business of civil government from that of religion and to settle the just bounds that lie between the one and the other."³³ By making such a distinction, Locke aimed to expose the hypocrisy of those who advocated persecution of religious dissenters as a political and spiritual necessity. He says "those that have, or at least not pretend to have, on the one side, a concernment for the interest of men's souls, and, on the other side, a care of the commonwealth," are fundamentally at odds so long as it is believed that temporal power must be used for spiritual ends.³⁴ The object of the *Letter* is to pry the sword out of the hands of the church and give the state the sole monopoly on the use of force. In order to do this, Locke wants to "distinguish" the respective businesses of politics and religion, implying that their businesses are not one and the same, and that, in fact, there are "just" bounds separating them. The end of government is not the salvation of souls. Williams does not immediately draw such a clear-cut distinction, but his way of proceeding is remarkably similar to Locke's.

After raising questions about the origins and ends of government, Williams does not immediately proceed to answer them. Instead, he begins with an argument about the individual Christian believer. As he will repeat many times throughout the rest of the sermon, the core of the Protestant faith is "that the sacred scriptures are alone the rule of faith and practice to a Christian."³⁵ It follows, therefore, "that every Christian has a right of judging for himself what he is to believe and practice in religion according to that rule."³⁶ He calls this a "Christian right," and the better Christians understand this foundational right, "the more firm shall we be against all attempts upon our Christian liberty, and better practice that Christian charity towards such as are of different sentiments from us in religion that is so much recommended and inculcated in those sacred oracles."³⁷ Individual liberty is at the root of Williams's argument for toleration. Where Locke is primarily concerned with stopping religiously-motivated violence, Williams wants to guard each Christian's right to moral conscience. It is unclear exactly what are the "sacred oracles" to which he refers, but it is curious that he uses overtly classical language in reference to religious pluralism. Regardless,

³³ John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration and Other Writings*, ed. Goldie (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010), 12.

³⁴ Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 12.

³⁵ Williams, "The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants," 55.

³⁶ Williams, "The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants," 55.

³⁷ Williams, "The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants," 55.

THE REVEREND ELISHA WILLIAMS AND THE “CELEBRATED MR. LOCK”

toleration is not something that should be pursued as a matter of political prudence. Rather, it flows naturally from the recognition that all men are free from dependence upon any religious authority except God Himself. This resembles Locke’s claim that “everyone is orthodox unto himself,” thus refuting claims to creedal or apostolic authority.³⁸ Though Locke formulates the principle in stronger language, both men are agreed that the ultimate judge of what is orthodox is the individual believer.

On what grounds does Williams posit the aforesaid right of moral conscience? The right does not seem to be derived from nature, since it requires the individual to take his religious bearings from the Holy Bible. However, Williams does not show the right of moral conscience is explicitly supported by Scripture. Why, then, can he claim that every Christian has the right of determining what is orthodox? Because “reason teaches us that all men are naturally equal in respect of jurisdiction or dominion one over another.”³⁹ Man’s rational capacity comes from God, who, “having given man an understanding to direct his actions, has given him therewith a freedom of will and liberty of acting, as properly belonging thereto, within the bounds of that law he is under.”⁴⁰ The law to which Williams refers is the natural law, which is laid down by God and is discoverable by man not through divine revelation, but through his reason. The natural law teaches human equality, and because all men are equal by virtue of being born “free as we are born rational,” it follows that they have equal authority to interpret the Word of God.⁴¹

From here, Williams launches into explicitly Lockean accounts of the state of nature and property, both drawn from the *Second Treatise*. The freedom of will granted to man by his possession of reason is not “a liberty for every one to do what he pleases without any regard to any law.”⁴² No man is a law unto himself. However, natural freedom is freedom “from any *superior power on earth*, and not being under the will or legislative of man, and having only the law of nature (or in other words, of its Maker) for his rule” [emphasis in the original].⁴³ Because man is naturally free, he has total ownership over himself, and, therefore, the product of his labor. “It will therefore follow that when he removes any thing out of the

³⁸ Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 7.

³⁹ Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 56.

⁴⁰ Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 56.

⁴¹ Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 56.

⁴² Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 56.

⁴³ Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 56.

PIETAS

common state nature placed it in, it hath by this labour something annexed to it that excludes the common right of others; because this labour being the unquestionable property of the labourer, no man but he can have a right to what that is once joined to, at least where there is enough and as good left in common for others.”⁴⁴ His understanding of property practically comes straight out of the *Second Treatise*, and he directly references the “great Mr. Lock’s” observation that there are “three things wanting in this state [of nature]” to render men and their property safe: a normative law (legislative power), an impartial system of justice (judicial power), and the power of execution (executive power).⁴⁵ Property is insecure in the state of nature, owing to the existence of malevolent actors. In order to secure property, men abandon their role as interpreters and executors of the law of nature and form a social compact for their mutual protection.

Williams’s Lockean understanding of the origins of temporal power leads him to a Lockean conclusion about the ends of temporal power. Locke, in the *Letter Concerning Toleration*, says, “Civil interests I call life, liberty, health, and indolency of the body; and the possession of *outward* things, such as money, lands, houses, furniture, and the like. It is the duty of the civil magistrate, by the impartial execution of equal laws, to secure unto all the people in general and to every one of his subjects in particular the just possession of those things *belonging to this life*” [emphasis added].⁴⁶ Compare this to Williams, who says that “greater security therefore of life, liberty, money, lands, houses, family, and the like, which may be all comprehended under that of person and property, is the sole end of all civil government.”⁴⁷ Formed by popular consent for the purpose of protecting individual property, government only has power over a fairly narrow slice of human life. The magistrate can concern himself only with the material well-being of his citizens, not the well-being of their eternal souls. This lies in stark contrast to the ancient view, exemplified by John of Salisbury, who states in his *Policraticus* that “the prince is, then, as it were, a minister of the priestly power, and one who exercises that side of the sacred offices which seems unworthy of the hands of the priesthood. For every office existing under, and concerned with the execution

⁴⁴ Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 57.

⁴⁵ Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 57–58.

⁴⁶ Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 12.

⁴⁷ Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 58.

THE REVEREND ELISHA WILLIAMS AND THE “CELEBRATED MR. LOCK”

of, the sacred laws is really a religious office.”⁴⁸ Williams’s magistrate is still tasked with preserving virtue and punishing vice, but virtue and vice are redefined away from ensuring salvation and towards protecting property.

Having established from whence comes temporal authority, and to what end it should be applied, Williams next considers which natural rights are given up upon entering civil society. Not many, he says, “only as much as is necessary to secure those ends; the rest is certainly our own still.”⁴⁹ Those liberties which are given up are divided into two main groups. First, man in society gives up the legislative power; that is, “the power that every one has in a state of nature *to do whatever he judgeth fit*, for the preservation of his person and property and that of others also” [emphasis in original].⁵⁰ Second, as was previously noted, man gives up the executive power, which Williams terms “the power of punishing.”⁵¹ The judicial power is neither given up nor retained, since in the state of nature, the judicial power is bound up with the legislative power. The natural attachment between legislative and judicial is still seen in civil society. While English law provided for a separate court system, in many cases, the House of Lords and the colonial legislatures functioned as the highest courts of appeal. For Williams, the general powers of making and executing laws are given up upon forming a social compact.

Having explicated what kinds of liberties are given up, Williams then goes on to clarify what liberties are retained. Broadly, he says that individuals retain every natural liberty bearing no relation to the end of government. He especially emphasizes—in a way Locke does not—the right of every man to make free use of the Scriptures. However, the wrongness of a government prohibition against reading the Bible does not derive from the truth of the Bible or the responsibility of government to shepherd the souls of its people, but rather, because it violates the individual’s right of moral conscience. The right of moral conscience, or the “*right of judging for themselves in matters of religion*,” is the foundational natural right. He calls it the “original right of the humane nature,” and it is the only right he expressly says cannot be given up.⁵² An individual could only do so if he could willingly “destroy his rational

⁴⁸ John of Salisbury, “Politicraticus,” in *The Statesman’s Book of John of Salisbury*, trans. John Dickinson (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), 8.

⁴⁹ Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 59.

⁵⁰ Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 59.

⁵¹ Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 59.

⁵² Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 61.

PIETAS

and moral powers,” which is impossible.⁵³ Since the right of moral conscience is not given up when an individual enters civil society, and government exists only to secure the material well-being of its citizens, it follows that the civil magistrate “hath no power to make or ordain articles of faith, creeds, forms of worship or church government.”⁵⁴ In the *Second Treatise*, Locke dedicates himself to reaching a general understanding about human liberty and the legitimate bounds of government. Williams takes this general understanding and uses it to make a specific point about the right of moral conscience and the concomitant exclusion of the civil magistrate from religious matters.

Williams’s formulation of the right of moral conscience seems to be derived from a passage in Locke’s *Letter*. In it, Locke says,

the care of souls is not committed to the civil magistrate, any more than to other men. It is not committed unto him, I say, by God; because it appears not that God has ever given any such authority to one man over another as to compel anyone to his religion. Nor can any such power be vested in the magistrate by the consent of the people, because no man can so far abandon the care of his salvation as blindly to leave to the choice of any other, whether prince or subject, to prescribe to him what faith or worship he shall embrace.⁵⁵

Man’s salvation depends upon his reason and the use of his reason to understand the Scriptures. To voluntarily give up his power of reasoning in favor of blind obedience to another not only places his salvation in peril, Locke says it is not even truly possible. He understands the relationship between temporal and spiritual as a dichotomy between outward and inward. For Locke, the primary attribute of the civil magistrate is his ability to coerce. But Christianity, unlike the pagan religions, depends upon the sincerity of belief within the individual worshipper, not upon his outward signs of devotion. Thus, “the care of souls cannot belong to the civil magistrate, because his power consists only in outward force; but true and saving religion consists in the inward persuasion of the mind, without which nothing can be acceptable to God. And such is the nature of the understanding, that it cannot be compelled to the belief of anything by outward force.”⁵⁶ Williams does not dwell as much upon the inappropriateness of compulsion for religious belief, focusing instead on the explicitly Christian claim that “the sacred scriptures are alone the rule of faith and practice

⁵³ Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 62.

⁵⁴ Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 67.

⁵⁵ Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 13.

⁵⁶ Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 13.

THE REVEREND ELISHA WILLIAMS AND THE “CELEBRATED MR. LOCKE”

in religion to a Christian.”⁵⁷ But his argument for the right of moral conscience—and its corollary that the individual believer cannot surrender “his conscience in these matters to the controul of human laws”—seems to be strongly influenced by Locke’s argument.⁵⁸

TOLERATION AND LIMITS OF ECCLESIASTICAL AUTHORITY

After giving a common account of the origins and ends of civil government, the arguments of the “Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants” and the *Letter Concerning Toleration* diverge somewhat. Up to this point, Williams follows Locke in grounding his discussion of the legitimate use of temporal power in human reason. However, as he moves into discussing more fully the right of moral conscience, his argument “is based on the principles of Protestant Christianity; it appeals to the Bible, the authoritative text of Protestant Christianity, and it establishes religious freedom in the first instance for Protestants, although by extension for others as well.”⁵⁹ Williams is a preacher, not a philosopher. Explicit appeals to Scripture and Reformed theology suit his rhetorical context, and reflect his own fervent piety.

Williams shifts the focus of the argument for toleration away from condemning physical persecution and towards the liberty of conscience. There were similarities between both men’s experience of toleration. Much of Locke’s *Letter* comes out of his experience living in the Netherlands, a country with *de facto* religious toleration. Following Louis XIV’s revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685, he witnessed the persecution of the Huguenots and their mass emigration to the Netherlands. Williams’s ancestors, who emigrated to New England only half a century earlier, were likewise Calvinist religious refugees fleeing the persecution of monarchs who embodied religious and secular power. But Locke, being much closer to the wars of religion and the severe persecutions visited by various Christian sects on one another, emphasizes the hypocrisy of persecution in a way Williams does not. While he was undoubtedly familiar with the persecutions suffered by the Puritan fathers, Williams lived in the relatively more tolerant environment of colonial America. Even in New England, where the memory of the Salem Witch Trials and the exiles of Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson loom large in the modern mind, instances of religious persecution

⁵⁷ Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 86.

⁵⁸ Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 86.

⁵⁹ Zuckert, *The Natural Rights Republic*, 187.

PIETAS

were quite rare. So, while the same attitude towards persecution necessarily flows from Williams's argument, he does not emphasize it in the same way as Locke.

Because the right of moral conscience is unalienable, it follows that every Christian has the right—nay, the duty—to read the Scriptures and judge their meaning for himself. He is not so radical as to argue for the complete abolition of the distinction between preacher and layman—as the Quakers did—but he charges the laity with the task of cross-referencing their ministers' sermons against their own reading of Scripture and holding them to account if they interpret a passage wrongly. Neither civil nor religious leaders can command a Christian's obedience upon their authority alone. Williams does not mince his words. He asserts,

all imposers on men's consciences are guilty of rebellion against GOD and CHRIST, of manifest disobedience to and contempt of their authority and commands; so all they who submit their consciences to any such unjust usurp'd authority, besides the share which such persons necessarily have in the guilt of the usurpers, as countenancing and giving in to their illegal claim and supporting their wicked pretensions, they do likewise renounce subjection to the authority and laws of CHRIST. To submit our consciences to the guidance of any man or order of men, is not to reason and act according to our own understanding; but to take every thing for true, that our spiritual guide affirms to be so, and that merely upon his authority, without examining into, or seeing the truth and reasonableness of it.⁶⁰

Again, Williams does not ground his argument in a clear Scriptural injunction about not obeying any church doctrine not expressly instituted by Christ. Rather, to follow the teachings of any church, if done out of deference to authority, is to do violence to one's own God-given capacity for right reasoning. Nature teaches that only Christ's authority should be obeyed.

No church can stand in place of Christ, except to execute laws already laid down in Scripture. Williams says that every society, religious or civil, "ought to be subject only to its own proper legislature."⁶¹ For churches, that means the sole authority of Christ, expressed in the Scriptures and interpreted by individual believers. Just as in the case of the civil magistrates, ecclesiastical leaders cannot infringe upon their congregants' right to moral conscience. They cannot institute laws or doctrines "besides those he [Christ] has made and taught and enjoined.... What is taught by any established church, and not contained in

⁶⁰ Williams, "The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants," 65.

⁶¹ Williams, "The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants," 65.

THE REVEREND ELISHA WILLIAMS AND THE “CELEBRATED MR. LOCK”

scripture, is indeed the doctrine of that church, but not of CHRIST: For none can make laws to oblige the church of CHRIST but CHRIST himself.”⁶² These restrictions limit their authority even more than that of the civil government, which possesses limited executive and legislative power given up by citizens upon their coming into society. In the case of the church, executive and legislative authority remains with Christ and is exercised through his sheep. The shepherds are little more than teachers:

They are to open and explain their Lord’s will to others, or in a word to teach men Christ’s laws.... When they teach us the mind and will of CHRIST our common lord and master; we are to hearken with deference to them: but if they get out of that line, and teach (or decree, I care not what you call it) some thing that is not his will, something to be necessary for me to do in religion which CHRIST has not made so; no regard is due to them herein.⁶³

The church has some authority to make necessary provisions for laws already laid down by Christ. Williams gives the example of Sunday worship. “It is a law of CHRIST, that he be worshipped in public assembly on the first day of the week,” but it falls to the church to make provisions for the time and place Christians should worship.⁶⁴ But even then, the power to make these provisions “must lie with every distinct worshipping assembly.”⁶⁵ Williams—unsurprisingly, given his Puritan beliefs—concurs with Locke in his anti-episcopacy and understands each congregation as a social compact in miniature.

The example of the church’s authority to determine the time and place of worship on Sunday is not chosen at random. In the *Letter*, Locke asks,

‘If nothing belonging to divine worship be left to human discretion, how is it then that Churches themselves have the power of ordering anything about the time and place of worship and the like?’ To this I answer that in religious worship we must distinguish between what is part of worship itself and what is but a circumstance. That is a part of worship which is believed to be appointed by God and to be well-pleasing to Him, and therefore that is necessary. Circumstances are such things which, though in general they cannot be separated from worship, yet the particular instances or modifications of them are not determined, and therefore they are indifferent.⁶⁶

⁶² Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 65.

⁶³ Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 68.

⁶⁴ Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 69.

⁶⁵ Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 71.

⁶⁶ Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 36.

PIETAS

Williams defines Locke's concept of "worship" as the law of Christ, and agrees with Locke that "circumstances" are all those things not expressly found in the divine commands, but nevertheless necessary for putting into effect divine commands. Legitimate ecclesiastical authority is that which limits itself only to making rules concerning circumstances. When ecclesiastical leaders attempt to go beyond their authority and make rules concerning worship, congregants can invoke a kind of spiritual "right to revolution" against them. He may be drawing this principle from the *Second Treatise*, but it is more likely that he is looking to Locke's *Letter*. Locke says that if the temporal power concerns itself with "things that lie not within the verge of the magistrate's authority (as, for example, that the people, or any party amongst them, should be compelled to embrace a strange religion, and join in the worship and ceremonies of another Church), men are not in these cases obliged by that law, against their consciences."⁶⁷ Similar to Locke, Williams places ultimate spiritual and political authority here on earth in the hands of the individual believer.

Williams's suspicion of religious authority is certainly informed by his Puritanism, but also by Locke, who expressly repudiates religious appeals to tradition. Although nominally an Anglican, Locke attacks the episcopacy, insofar as it is used by bishops to legitimate their authority. To those who claim orthodoxy by virtue of apostolic succession, Locke demands, "show me the edict by which Christ has imposed that law upon his Church."⁶⁸ Christ's church is, like civil government, a social compact, defined as:

A voluntary society of men, joining themselves together of their own accord in order to the public worshipping of God in such manner as they judge acceptable to him, and effectual to the salvation of their souls.... It necessarily follows that the right of making its laws can belong to none but the society itself; or, at least (which is the same thing), to those whom the society by common consent has authorized thereunto.⁶⁹

Conspicuously absent in Locke's account, however, is the authority of Christ's laws over the church. Both he and Williams agree the church is a type of society. However, Williams is explicit that the authoritative governing body of the church is Christ alone, while Locke attributes authority to no higher power than the corporate members of the church.

⁶⁷ Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 48.

⁶⁸ Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 16.

⁶⁹ Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 15.

THE REVEREND ELISHA WILLIAMS AND THE “CELEBRATED MR. LOCKE”

Williams insists that individual Christians have the highest authority to interpret the Scriptures as led by their reason, meaning that the laws and doctrines enjoined by Christ upon his church are determined by the individual church members. In some ways, this is even more radically egalitarian than Locke’s view. For Locke, a church society might set up a governing body with authority to interpret the Scriptures, and bind the members of the church society to abide by the authoritative interpretations of said body. Locke would find such an arrangement perfectly acceptable, so long as no member of that church society proceeds to demand (under threat of force) that non-members acknowledge the interpretive authority of his church’s governing body. For Williams, however, it is contrary to the law of nature to bestow on anyone the authority to interpret Scripture on behalf of others, even if they give their consent. While Locke would probably condemn this rigid principle as an intolerant orthodoxy, Williams’s argument against religious authority is a modification of Locke’s own argument in the *Letter Concerning Toleration*.

DISESTABLISHMENT AS THE SOLUTION TO RELIGIOUS CONFLICT

Williams follows Locke in arguing for a diversity of religious sects over and against an established church. He seeks to refute the argument that a unity of religious sentiments (implying the need for the temporal power to enforce such unity) is necessary for the peace and good order of society. He makes his counterargument along three lines.

First, historical experience proves the impossibility of achieving unity in faith and practice. He gives the example of England, “where this method has been tried ever since the reformation, and as constantly found ineffectual for the accomplishing of this uniformity.”⁷⁰ The Church of England, under the Elizabethan Settlement, left some of the finer points of doctrine intentionally vague, in hopes of making itself agreeable to the various religious factions that comprised it. Instead, dissensions over the importance of such *adiaphora* (“things indifferent”) only increased, eventually boiling over into persecution and open religious warfare.

Second, unity in faith and practice is not required for the peace and stability of civil society. The authority to interpret the Scriptures rests with individual believers, and it is therefore inevitable that different understandings will arise. In a state where the government

⁷⁰ Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 91.

PIETAS

does not involve itself in the making of religious doctrines, these different understandings will not pose a threat to public order. To the argument that a multiplicity of sects will lead to chaos, as each group tries to usurp the power of the state to wield against their opponents, Williams counters that this can be avoided in a society where government acts as the impartial securer of each sects' right to moral conscience. "It is but a natural consequence," he says, "to suppose that in such case they all finding themselves equally safe, and protected in their rights by the civil power, they will all be equally obedient."⁷¹ A greater diversity of religious opinions in society, with no one group able to dominate the others by force, will cultivate greater toleration, and thus serve to protect the right to moral conscience for each individual Christian.

Third, his contention that the magistrate's mutual protection of all sects' right to moral conscience quells religious violence leads to him to identify the obvious corollary, which is that establishments of religion actually work against public order. The denial of Christian liberty to all groups but the established sect is to place them in a *de facto* "state of slavery."⁷² The gross consequences of such unjust abridgements of moral conscience are that "it necessarily tends to the misery of some, so it also promotes bigotry, pride, and ambition in such as are fond of such establishments: which have from time to time broken out in extravagancies and severities (upon good subjects) in men of authority and influence, and into rage and fury, hatred and obloquy, and such like wickednesses, in the impotent and commoner sort."⁷³ The factional struggles engendered by an established religion is a point especially emphasized by Locke at the end of his *Letter*. The violence that attends doctrinal schisms is not owing a multiplicity of sects, "but the refusal of toleration to those that are of different opinions (which might have been granted), that has produced the bustles and wars that have been in the Christian world upon account of religion."⁷⁴ An established religion does not further Christ's Kingdom on Earth. Rather, it undermines it by giving free play to

⁷¹ Williams, "The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants," 98-99. Williams's argument re-appeared two generations later. James Madison, in *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments*, in *James Madison: Writings*, ed. Jack N. Rakove (New York: Library of America, 1999), 33, argues that a just government "will be best supported by protecting every Citizen in the enjoyment of his Religion with the same equal hand which protects his person and his property; by neither invading the equal rights of any Sect, nor suffering any Sect to invade those of another."

⁷² Williams, "The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants," 95.

⁷³ Williams, "The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants," 95.

⁷⁴ Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 60.

THE REVEREND ELISHA WILLIAMS AND THE “CELEBRATED MR. LOCK”

human vices and passions, inevitably resulting in civil strife. The solution, for Locke and Williams, is for the civil magistrate not to interfere with the right to moral conscience, thus allowing individuals to worship God in accordance with their own reason.

There remains one final point to discuss concerning the limits of toleration. Locke formulates his limiting principle from the perspective of the church as an organization. Churches are voluntary associations with the end of worshipping God. They have the power to set down their own laws and doctrines. If some member of the church disputes those laws and doctrines and renders himself obnoxious to the general body of believers, “no church is bound, by the duty of toleration, to retain any such person in her bosom as, after admonition, continues obstinately to offend against the laws of society.”⁷⁵ The church may not physically persecute the dissenter, but it need not tolerate him. Williams is influenced by Locke’s definition of the church as a social compact, but he formulates his limiting principle from the perspective of the individual believer. The unalienable right to moral conscience means “that *every Christian has right to determine for himself what church to join himself to*; and every church has right to judge in what manner God is to be worshipped by them, and *what form of discipline ought to be observed by them*, and the right also of *electing their own officers*.”⁷⁶ Since a church is comprised of individual believers voluntarily associating with one another, if the majority offend the conscience of the minority, the minority is not bound to remain a part of the church. Williams makes this argument with clear reference to his particular circumstances. The way to solve the divide in the Congregationalist church is not for the civil power to favor one sect against the other, but to allow the New Lights and the Old Lights to go their separate ways.

CONCLUSION

The subsequent political history of Connecticut suggests that Williams’s pamphlet had little immediate effect on state politics. The 1742 law was not repealed. And although Williams’s argument for religious toleration logically leads to disestablishment, Connecticut continued to give political preference to the Congregationalists until the constitutional convention of 1818. When the Continental Congress called on the colonial legislatures to create their own

⁷⁵ Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 19.

⁷⁶ Williams, “The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants,” 99.

PIETAS

constitutions, Connecticut—sometimes referred to as the “Land of Steady Habits”—chose to retain its colonial charter from 1662, only striking out references to the king and adding a preamble.⁷⁷ With the rise of party politics in the 1790s, the Congregational church formed a *de facto* alliance with the Federalists against the Democratic-Republicans, a political alignment that came to be known as the “Standing Order.”⁷⁸ For over two decades, the alliance between Congregationalists and Federalists allowed the latter to dominate state politics. Meanwhile, dissenting Protestant groups joined the ranks of the Republicans, who soon made the cause of disestablishment a major plank in their platform, even renaming their state party the “Tolerationists.” After the disastrous Hartford Convention and Andrew Jackson’s heavily propagandized victory at the Battle of New Orleans, Federalism in Connecticut—already facing mounting pressure for reform—finally gave way in 1817 to a Republican-controlled state government. Led by Governor Oliver Wolcott, Jr., the reformers immediately called a constitutional convention, which met in Hartford in the autumn of 1818. The resulting constitution expressly forbade giving legal preference to any denomination. Although the proximate cause of Connecticut’s disestablishment was party politics, the more fundamental cause was a decisive shift in opinion towards understanding toleration as something incompatible with a religious establishment. As Zuckert notes, “after Williams’s pamphlet we begin to see the real dominance of Lockean theory.”⁷⁹ Whatever its immediate effect, the “Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants” helped shape the American conception of religious liberty.

Nothing on the intellectual scale of Williams’s sermon had hitherto been attempted in the colonies. It is remarkable for how forcefully it brings Locke’s ideas about government and toleration to America. Far from being merely a “mini-Locke,” Williams consciously adapted Locke’s theories to his Puritan sensibilities and to the fiery debates around the Great Awakening. But historians and political scientists have not interpreted the pamphlet as fully as they could. While the *Two Treatises* may be the most easily recognizable of Locke’s writings referenced in the pamphlet, I have attempted to explicate what most scholarship has

⁷⁷ For the use of the phrase “Land of Steady Habits,” see David Daggett, *Steady Habits Vindicated; or a Serious Remonstrance to the People of Connecticut, Against the Changing of Their Government* (Hartford, CT: Hudson and Goodwin, 1805).

⁷⁸ For an account of the “Standing Order” and its demise, see John Reardon, “Religious and Other Factors in the Defeat of the ‘Standing Order’ in Connecticut, 1800-1818,” *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 30, no. 2 (June 1961): 93-110.

⁷⁹ Zuckert, *The Natural Rights Republic*, 184.

THE REVEREND ELISHA WILLIAMS AND THE “CELEBRATED MR. LOCKE”

ignored and some scholarship has merely assumed: the “Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants” owes a great deal to the *Letter Concerning Toleration*. Williams clearly incorporated many of its arguments, both directly and indirectly, throughout his sermon. In some respects, he seems to rely even more heavily on the *Letter* than he does on the *Second Treatise*. Why, then, does Williams openly credit the *Second Treatise* while quietly basing his argument upon the *Letter*? As Dan Edelstein points out, Williams uses the *Second Treatise* to argue that the natural right of conscience remains inalienable after joining civil society, “yet proceeds to quote from the very chapter in which Locke describes those rights we must *give up* upon entering into civil society” [emphasis in original].⁸⁰ Rather than expending great effort to modify Locke’s argument in *Second Treatise* to support his own conclusions, it would be much easier for Williams to rely explicitly upon the *Letter*. Further scholarly investigation is required to reach an adequate explanation of why he does not, and this inquiry would help shed greater light on the reception of Lockean political theory in colonial America. With the present study, I have endeavored to provide a solid basis for that broader effort.

⁸⁰ Dan Edelstein, *On the Spirit of Rights* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 149.