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## Towards Civility as a Virtue:

### *James K. A. Smith's Creational Hermeneutics and Roger Williams's Civility*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article seeks to explore alternative concepts of civility. In this essay I will 1) consider the view that civility is a tool of social conformity that distorts or destroys true alterity. 2) argue that there is an alternative model of civility that offers a way to preserve true alterity within the public square. In order to do so, I intend to 1) outline James K. A. Smith's creational hermeneutics to clarify the concept of alterity. 2) Consider the concept of civility that gives rise to the view that civility is a tool of social conformity. And finally, 3) consider Teresa Bejan's reading of the view of civility held by Roger Williams and argue that this conception of alterity better preserves the alterity of differing parties within the public square. Finally, given the argument made, I suggest that this concept of civility is grounded in a distinct set of social virtues.

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Bruce Riley Ashford suggests that “civility is a lost virtue today.” He claims that “What we need is...the respect and decency of public civility.” And defines civility as “strength under control. It is the ability to resist our worst impulses, the capacity to honor people (1 Pet. 2:17) and live peaceably with them (Rom. 12:18) even when we find ourselves at odds.” He further claims that it involves empathy, curiosity, and listening—for the purpose of understanding, humility, and a fallibilism about our own opinions.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Riley Ashford, *Letters to an American Christian* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2018), 100–101.

However, civility has been a catchword among late twentieth and twenty-first century political theorists to refer to what Melanie White calls a “basic test of civic competence.”<sup>2</sup> She cites Michael Walzer, Benjamin Barber, and Will Kymlicka as illustrating three distinct ways in which civility might function.<sup>3</sup> As early as 1971, John Rawls defended a “duty of civility” which “imposes a due acceptance of the defects of institutions and a certain restraint in taking advantage of them.”<sup>4</sup>

Several recent thinkers have drawn on Roger Williams to articulate the proper approach to the public square. Among these, Martha Nussbaum reads Williams as offering a strong, very Rawlsian sense of liberty of conscience and toleration that Teresa Bejan connects with civility.<sup>5</sup> Os Guinness, on the other hand, presents a Reformed reading of Williams. There are some similarities between this view and Nussbaum’s, but they differ significantly about the implications for the role of religion in the public square.<sup>6</sup> James Calvin Davis argues that Williams offers a sense of civility that can “[find] public agreement on moral norms and values” because “Williams believed in the existence of ‘a common moral denominator based on certain shared notions of welfare and harm.’”<sup>7</sup> While these views are not identical they all presume that civility serves as some kind of basic test for admittance into the public square and that it

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<sup>2</sup> Melanie White, “An Ambivalent Civility,” *The Canadian Journal of Sociology* 31 (2006): 446.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Walzer, “Civility and Civic Virtue in Contemporary America,” *Social Research* 41 (1974): 593–611; Benjamin Barber, *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 190, 223; Will Kymlicka, *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism, and Citizenship* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 298–300. Each quoted in M. White, “An Ambivalent Civility,” 446.

<sup>4</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap University Press, 1971), 355.

<sup>5</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience: In Defense of America’s Tradition of Religious Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 1–72, 306–353. See 24, 51–59 esp. Teresa M. Bejan, “The Bond of Civility: Roger Williams on toleration and its limits,” *History of European Ideas* 37 (2011): 410.

<sup>6</sup> Os Guinness, *The Global Public Square: Religious Freedom and Making the World Safe for Diversity* (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 70, 85, 181, 185, 186, 190.

<sup>7</sup> James Calvin Davis, “A Return to Civility: Roger Williams and Public Discourse in America,” *Journal of Church and State* 43 (2001), 689–706. James Calvin Davis, *The Moral Theology of Roger Williams: Christian Conviction and Public Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 94. Davis quotes: David Little, “Roger Williams and the Separation of Church and State,” in *Religion and State: Essays in Honor of Leo Pfeffer*, ed. James E. Wood. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 1985), 3–23.

draws upon some universal human recognition of the importance of—as Barber puts it—“reciprocal empathy and mutual respect.”<sup>8</sup>

Melanie White argues that this concept of civility is not only deeply ambivalent—intended to still the passions of the barbarous—but also that it serves to limit some forms of dialogue in order to authorize others.<sup>9</sup> This risks a civility that requires conformity of belief in order to function—consistent with the concept of tolerance that Bejan argues is promoted by Thomas Hobbes.<sup>10</sup> However, in this sense civility becomes the enemy, rather than the ally, of multiculturalism insofar as it enforces agreement and sacrifices the true alterity—otherness or incommensurable difference—of distinct parties in order to create “a tolerant society.”<sup>11</sup> As such, if we are to recover the lost virtue of civility we need to clarify more precisely what a truly multicultural civility might look like. My purpose in this essay is to offer a step in this direction.

I will argue that there is an alternative concept of civility which offers a better way of preserving the true alterity of distinct parties within the public square. In order to do so, I will first clarify the alterity of distinct parties as a created good. I will argue that considering this, a surface level homogeneity precludes true witness which, in turn, artificially disrupts the work of the gospel. I will then draw on Teresa Bejan’s reading of Roger Williams to articulate alternative understandings of tolerance and civility that serve as a check and balance that allows for a relatively stable society that is capable of honoring the alterity of distinct parties. Finally, I will conclude by suggesting that underlying this check and balance relation is a set of social virtues that must be cultivated within the populace of the society in order for the check and balance to function appropriately.

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<sup>8</sup> Barber, *Strong Democracy*, 223.

<sup>9</sup> White, “An Ambivalent Civility,” 448, 457–459.

<sup>10</sup> Teresa Bejan, “Difference without Disagreement: Rethinking Hobbes on ‘Independence’ and Toleration,” *The Review of Politics* 78 (2016): 1–25.

<sup>11</sup> This work follows Smith’s use of alterity. That being said, the concept in play is closest to that of: Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence* (trans. Michael B. Smith; New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

## Alterity as a Created Good

In *The Fall of Interpretation*, James K. A. Smith argues that finitude is a fundamental aspect of God’s good creation.<sup>12</sup> For Smith, to be finite is to exist as a being located within space and time. Thus humans, as physical beings with spatio-temporal location and history, are finite *as created* rather than as fallen.<sup>13</sup> Smith’s argument reinterprets Augustine in light of the phenomenological tradition. He argues that he links “[Augustine’s] insights on the temporality of human be-ing and language with his affirmation of the *status* of interpretation as a ‘creational’ task—a task constitutive of finitude and thus not a ‘labor’ to be escaped or overcome.”<sup>14</sup>

Based on his conception of human finitude, Smith argues that there are five important aspects of human nature as *created* that many modern hermeneutics ignore: 1) Intersubjectivity, 2) Situationality, 3) Traditionality, 4) Undecidability, and 5) Incommensurability.<sup>15</sup> For Smith, the fact that humans are specifically located in space and time requires that they exist in relation to one another and to the world. This *intersubjective* relation grounds a basic distinction that is fundamental to created reality: I am not You and thus I am distinct from You. However, relatedness does not require finitude—the Triune God exists in relationship with Himself but is not finite. As such, the hermeneutical aspect of human nature is grounded not only in *intersubjective* relatedness, but also in *situatedness*. Humans are physically, cognitively, and historically distinct as well as logically and metaphysically distinct.<sup>16</sup>

Given these aspects of created human nature, Smith adds that humans are necessarily *traditioned*. He claims “as a finite creature I am part of a community, the inheritor of a way or ways of ‘seeing the world, part of

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<sup>12</sup> James K. A. Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012), 154–198. See especially, 159–164. In 154–159 he links this to Augustine.

<sup>13</sup> Smith notes that his own definition of finitude is somewhat different from Augustine’s. However, he rejects Augustine’s definition as a) nonsensical and b) vilifying embodiment, which is clearly an aspect of biblical creation: *Ibid.*, 153n42.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 159–174, 177–180.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 154–161.

an interpretive tradition.”<sup>17</sup> Because humans are historically located, they are inevitably located within some tradition of thought, belief, or imagination.<sup>18</sup> The most obvious objection is that it is possible for humans to be raised apart from any human contact, but in these cases there is consistently notable damage to the developmental possibilities for the individuals in question.<sup>19</sup> The argument, then, is not that humans cannot survive apart from traditions, but that they cannot thrive and fully develop *quā creatione humano* apart from traditions.

Given *situationality* and *traditionedness*, Smith argues that “there are multiple interpretive options in any situation” and claims that this ‘space of interpretation’ is both basic for understanding, but also allows misunderstanding.<sup>20</sup> This view grounds his claim for *undecidability* or fallibilism about our own interpretations, but he argues that this does not equate to indecision or apathy. That is, the claim of *undecidability* does not preclude conviction or reasoned decision but does require that the accuracy of the decision rests on a reality external to the decider. *Undecidability*, when combined with *traditionality*, grounds his claim of *incommensurability*: “there is a plurality of logics that precludes any demonstrative appeal to a ‘common reason.’”<sup>21</sup> Thus there is no reversibility or consensus between the sender and addressees of particular claims when they inhabit different language games.<sup>22</sup> He thus posits two limits for interpretation given these realities: 1) there is a reality that *is interpreted* by all interpretations and thus limits the plausibility of

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 162. See also: Carroll Guen, “Gadamer, Objectivity and the Ontology of Belonging,” *Dialogue* 28 (1989): 589–608. Smith follows her, especially 597, in understanding traditionality.

<sup>18</sup> For distinct, though not necessarily conflicting, accounts see: Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation*, 162–168. James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 63–71; James K. A. Smith, “Two Cheers for Worldview: A Response to Elmer John Thiessen,” *Journal of Education and Christian Belief* 14 (2010): 55–58.

<sup>19</sup> For a good introduction to this history of this topic see Michael Newton, *Savage Girls and Wild Boys: A History of Feral Children* (New York: Picador, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation*, 168.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 178.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. For a more thorough discussion of language games see: James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Relativism?: Community, Contingency, and Creaturehood* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2014), 39–72. Smith draws a similar idea from Jean-Francois Lyotard: James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 59–80.

interpretations. 2) There is a tradition of interpretation that allows for interpretation to function and thus sets limits on the kinds of interpretation possible within a given tradition.<sup>23</sup>

As such, in Smith's view alterity is a fundamental aspect of creatureliness. It is tempting to read his view as essential otherness, but it is not entirely clear that he would develop it in this way. Further, even assuming that he would, W. Norris Clarke points out that any real difference is dependent upon a deeper underlying unity.<sup>24</sup> While Smith seems to worry that this view collapses into a rejection of any actual alterity, there exists a strong tradition of thought that rejects this claim.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Problem of Homogeneity**

Smith argues that given his creational hermeneutics, allowing for alterity is essential to authentic interpretation.<sup>26</sup> As he acknowledges, this raises the specter of cultural relativism.<sup>27</sup> One possible response to such cultural relativism is simply to accept it as a given. J. P. Moreland claims that on the kind of view Smith defends "there is no such thing as objective reality, truth, value, reason, and so forth."<sup>28</sup> And indeed, one possible response to the incommensurable situatedness of created nature would be to assert

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<sup>23</sup> Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation*, 181 and 163 respectively. Incommensurability is a complex idea with many aspects and many counterarguments that I cannot address here. For one example in value theory see: Jonathan Crowe, *Natural Law and the Nature of the Law* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 66–68.

<sup>24</sup> W. Norris Clarke, *The One and the Many: A Contemporary Thomistic Metaphysics* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 74. See also: Martin Rhonheimer, *Natur Als Grundlage Der Moral: Eine Auseinandersetzung mit autonomer und teleologischer Ethik* (Innsbruck: Tyrolia-Verlag, 1987), 189–212; Martin Rhonheimer, "The Cognitive Structure of the Natural Law and the Truth of Subjectivity," in *The Perspective of the Acting Person: Essays in the Renewal of Thomistic Moral Philosophy*, ed. William Murphy (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of American Press, 2008), 158–194.

<sup>25</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping Post-Secular Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 185–230. Smith's argument is directed at the participatory metaphysic of John Milbank, which may indeed collapse into a rejection of actual alterity. However, see instead Edward Feser's discussion of real distinction: Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Books, 2014), 241–255.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation*, 187–188.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 174–175, 199.

<sup>28</sup> J. P. Moreland, *Kingdom Triangle: Recover the Christian Mind, Renovate the Soul, Restore the Spirit's Power* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 77.

that *all* interpretations of reality are equally valid.<sup>29</sup> On this view, a Christian believer who spends his or her time worshipping in church and working with the poor, a Confucian who saves his or her money to provide an extravagant funeral for his or her parents, and a worshipper of Huitzilopotchli who kidnaps his or her neighbor and sacrifices him or her in an act of worship are all simply acting out their equally interpretive beliefs about the world and should be accorded equal respect and approval in doing so. However, as Smith points out, there are very few people who would defend this claim.<sup>30</sup>

Instead, the most common modern response unflinchingly combines two apparently incompatible claims: 1) human beings have an inviolable human right to exercise their consciences freely in matters of religion and morality; and 2) the free exercise of the conscience must fall within an agreed upon societal standard of acceptability.<sup>31</sup> These two claims are generally unified by an appeal to a minimal standard of morality that is accessible through a reason or structure of rationality that is universal to all mankind. Thus, while it is true that the conscience should be exercised freely, what can legitimately be considered a demand of the conscience is determined by an appeal to rationality or a universal logic—or, following Pierre Bourdieu, a set of assumptions about the basic interrelations in the world—implicit in moral reasoning.<sup>32</sup>

For Nussbaum this would be fleshed out in Rawlsian terms. For Guinness, I suspect—though I have not read him articulate this position—that it would be fleshed out in something resembling a Reformed Natural

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<sup>29</sup> See: Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology* (University of Chicago Press, 1984), 170–74. Smith cites him as defending such a view: Smith, *The Fall of Interpretation*, 163.

<sup>30</sup> Smith, *Who's Afraid of Relativism?*, 15–19. However, for a reading of Roger Williams along these lines see: Jack L. Davis, "Roger Williams among the Narragansett Indians," *The New England Quarterly* 43 (1970): 593–604.

<sup>31</sup> See: Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience*, 1–34, 306–64; Guinness, *The Global Public Square*, 70, 85, 181, 185, 186, 190; Davis, *The Moral Theology of Roger Williams*, 93–102; Davis, "A Return to Civility: Roger Williams and Public Discourse in America," 689–706.

<sup>32</sup> As Perkins points out, "Religious is a tapestry of culture, confession, historical location, ritual practice, and narrative tradition" (Perkins, "Beyond Jacques Derrida and George Lindbeck: Toward a Particularity-Based Approach to Interreligious Communication," 345). Given her account, there may be no universal mode of reasoning, but this does not forestall the possibility of "cross-(linguistic) cultural dialogue" (345). See: Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford University Press, 1980).



Law theory<sup>33</sup> or a version of Principled Pluralism.<sup>34</sup> In either case, both positions assume a universal *way or method* of reasoning—as opposed to a universal faculty of reason—that utilizes universal assumptions and a universal logic to identify universal moral requirements. Smith’s claim—as I understand it—is that there may well be universal moral realities, but there is no universal moral language nor universal moral logic—in Bourdieu’s sense—that allows for a common standard of interpretation. On either account, the homogeneity approach falls prey to the critique of modernity offered by both Postmoderns and Postliberals.<sup>35</sup>

In fact, those who defend these combined claims differ on what they entail. Martha Nussbaum, for instance, condemns the use of religious rhetoric, beliefs, or practices in the public square while Guinness argues these same principles to defend the use of religious rhetoric, beliefs, and practices in the public square. Further, a number of authors, including Nussbaum and Guinness, draw on Roger Williams in order to make this argument.

One consequence to the argument as it stands, is that the conscience cannot radically err. While there may be significant differences in views of ultimate reality, the argument effectively requires that it is impossible for the conscience to fail to recognize the basic standards upon which such a social good would function and then command accordingly. As such, while the Christian and the Confucian differ on the proper way to use their time and money, and on the nature of ultimate reality that should be worshipped, both are within the auspices of social conscience and thus should be equally affirmed and accepted—at least at the social level.

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<sup>33</sup> For one example see: David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

<sup>34</sup> For two accessible introductions to principled pluralism see: Bruce Ashford and Chris Pappalardo, *One Nation Under God: A Christian Hope for American Politics* (Nashville: B&H, 2015), 14–64; James K. A. Smith, “The Reformed (Transformationist) View,” in *The Church and Politics*, ed. Amy E. Black (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 139–62.

<sup>35</sup> Two classic examples of such a critique that influences or arises out of Postmodernism are Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton University Press, 1981); Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed., trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (London: Pearson, 1973). One example of Postliberal critique is George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009). For a discussion of Smith and Lindbeck see: Yoon Shin, “James K. A. Smith and the Possibility of a Postmodern Christian Epistemology: A Constructive Proposal” (Ph.D. diss., University of Aberdeen, 2019), 155–193. For Smith’s discussion of Wittgenstein and Rorty see: Smith, *Who’s Afraid of Relativism?*, 39–114.

However, the worshipper of Huitzilopotchli could not be commanded by his or her conscience to act as he or she does and thus must be restricted from so acting.

There are two important consequences of this argument. First, the argument serves, on its face, to authorize a very strong acceptance of alterity even as it undercuts this alterity at a more fundamental level. Thus, in various forms, it results in a homogeneous society in which at least those beliefs that cannot be accounted as rational are excluded from the public square on the grounds of protecting what is—in reality—a very (increasingly) limited alterity.<sup>36</sup> Insofar as this view founds itself on a universal rationality it cannot accord those who are excluded any significant moral status.

Second, the argument necessitates the very view of conscience that Williams decries in the work of John Cotton. While both Cotton and Williams acknowledge that the conscience is, in some significant sense, a communication from God common to every individual that condemns sinful actions and affirms laudable actions, Cotton argues that the conscience is a direct voice of God's condemnation on sinners that could not lead the individual astray. Williams, on the other hand, argues that conscience involves a human interpretation of divine communication that could be in error.<sup>37</sup>

While many modern thinkers would reject the idea that conscience is the voice of God, the argument laid out above requires—in order to make the absolute freedom of conscience an inviolable right—that the

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<sup>36</sup> Steven D. Smith, *The Rise and Decline of American Religious Freedom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 111–38. For two Christian arguments that invoke a pre-secularist version of the argument against a contemporary secularist version see: Os Guinness, *The Global Public Square*. For D. A. Carson's Argument: D. A. Carson, *The Intolerance of Tolerance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). For the increasing limitation of true alterity, we might consider the first basic tenet of secularism identified by Brian Wiegelt as fundamental to the Liberal International Order: "that religion is essentially a source of conflict and that its influence in the public political sphere should be contained, or possibly eliminated." Brian D. Wiegelt, "Understanding the Impact of Secularism in the Liberal International Order," *The Journal of Church and State* 61 (2018): 106–23.

<sup>37</sup> James Calvin Davis (ed.), *On Religious Liberty: Selections from the Works of Roger Williams* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2008), 24–25, 97, 105–106, 268; Roger Williams, *The Bloudy Tenant of Persecution for the Cause of Conscience*, in *Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, vol. 5 (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963), 70–71, 81–96; Roger Williams, *George Fox Digg'd from His Burroughs*, in *Complete Writings of Roger Williams*, vol. 5 (New York: Russell and Russell, 1963), 324–325.

consciences of individuals unerringly and universally identify the same basic moral principles of civil conduct. Thus, the claim of the worshipper of Huitzilopochtli that he or she is following the demands of his or her conscience must be rejected as false. In fact, this individual must be irrationally acting against the demands of his or her conscience, just as Cotton argued was the case for heretics and non-Christians.

## Bejan on Civility and Tolerance

At this point, we are in a position to understand how this concept of civility both mandates a conformity of belief and becomes the enemy of the very multiculturalism that it was intended to protect. Where a true multiculturalism preserves, as much as possible, the alterity of distinct cultures, this concept of civility flattens and/or dismisses actual difference in the name of stability, peace, or perfect inclusiveness. However, while this argument relies on one reading of Williams, we have seen that it significantly distorts his view of conscience. Teresa Bejan offers a distinct reading of Williams that allows for a different analysis of civility.

Bejan argues that Williams's view of tolerance was entirely compatible with a strong evangelical impulse.<sup>38</sup> Specifically, for Williams, tolerance was primarily Lactantian: a matter of 'bearing with' or 'putting up with' some belief, behavior, or situation that he found false, problematic, repulsive, or morally wicked.<sup>39</sup> Bejan responds to Nussbaum's claim, that Williams never tried to convert any of the Narragansett Indians, by pointing to his own accounts of attempts at conversion in *A Key into the Language of America*.<sup>40</sup> Further, she argues that Williams's view of civility was not an 'imperializing discourse' of the kind that White assesses, nor a call to

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<sup>38</sup> Teresa M. Bejan, "Evangelical Toleration" *The Journal of Politics* 77 (2015): 1103–13.

<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Depalma Digeser, "Lactantius on Religious Liberty and His Influence on Constantine," in *Christianity and Freedom Volume 1: Historical Perspectives*, eds. Timothy Samuel Shah and Allen D. Hertzke (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 94.

<sup>40</sup> Nussbaum, *Liberty of Conscience*, 54; Roger Williams, *A Key into the Language of America* (Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 1936), 49, 138, 193. However, see especially the unnumbered pages in his 'To the Reader' in which he clearly and specifically describes attempts at conversion. Bejan, "Evangelical Toleration," 1107–8.

mutual respect or an unwillingness to disagree—a view that she traces to Thomas Hobbes.<sup>41</sup>

Bejan compares Williams's work among the Narragansett Indians with that of John Eliot. She argues that Eliot's strategy of 'civilizing' (Europeanizing or, in contemporary terms, colonizing) the Narragansett through reeducation failed to actually evangelize while equally distorting and destroying their own culture—it made the Indians European, but did not make them Christian. Williams's strategy of tolerance and civil (polite) discourse both allowed the Narragansett to be *Narragansett* and simultaneously allowed Williams to see that the Narragansett *were* civil but were not Christian, and thus to present the gospel in deeper and more meaningful ways.<sup>42</sup> Williams's strategy was not to colonize the Narragansett into a European mode of life, but to *convince* them of the truths and benefits that the Christian faith could bring to their own way of life.

On Bejan's reading, Williams's view of civility can be closely connected with etiquette. She claims that "The 'meer' civility belonging to man as man could serve as the *vinculum* of tolerant societies precisely because it was so common—not a ceiling but a floor."<sup>43</sup> Williams did view civility as a basic test of civic competence—as White worries. He argued that civility equipped one for public conversation while incivility was "punishable by the civil sword."<sup>44</sup> However, Bejan emphasizes that for Williams the standards of civility were not a matter of universally knowable reason, but of civil agreement: they were a minimal standard of behavior

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<sup>41</sup> Bejan, "The Bond of Civility," 409–20. Teresa M. Bejan, "Difference without Disagreement: Rethinking Hobbes on 'Independency' and Toleration," *The Review of Politics* 78 (2016): 1–25.

<sup>42</sup> Bejan, "The Bonds of Civility," 412–14.

<sup>43</sup> Teresa M. Bejan, *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 60–1. Quoted in Cory Higdon, "Roger Williams, Natural Law, and Religious Liberty," *The Journal of Church and State* 62 (2020): 16. I connect this to etiquette drawing on the Amy Olberding's discussion of Etiquette. Amy Olberding, "Etiquette: A Confucian Contribution to Moral Philosophy," *Ethics* 126 (2016): 422–46. There is a certain similarity here with Perkins reading of Derrida on hospitality. Perkins, "Beyond Jacques Derrida and George Lindbeck," 347–51. Perkins' discussion of the impossibility of hospitality and cultural-linguistic translation will be useful in understanding the challenge involved in this etiquette-based approach.

<sup>44</sup> Williams, *Bloudy Tenent*, 162–163.

that a society deemed necessary in order for its members to communicate with one another in a peaceable way.<sup>45</sup>

Cory Higdon, among others, would disagree on this point.<sup>46</sup> However, one way of addressing this disagreement is to distinguish between the ontic and epistemic aspects of the Natural Law. Martin Rhonheimer, for instance, emphasizes that natural law *properly speaking* is the human interpretation and application of eternal law performed by the operation of the reason.<sup>47</sup> That is, the eternal law provides the unchanging ontological ground, natural law provides a theoretical model by which it is interpreted, and human law is the application of this interpretation to a particular socio-cultural context. Here a ‘civil agreement’ may well involve the situational ‘working out’ of a common moral reality in a particular social and linguistic context. A further point that cannot be addressed here is how to cache out the concept of moral reality as this argument may be taken differently on different interpretations of the concept. As such, Williams found that the Narragansett were *civil* at a basic level even though their expressions of civility were quite different from English expressions of civility. This recognition allowed him to engage with the Narragansett *as Narragansett* and attempt to *convince* them of the truth of Christianity rather than attempting to make the Narragansett European in order to make them Christian. His disagreement with, and even disgust at, some of their practices did not prevent him from recognizing that those practices were both guided by reason and fundamentally human within their cultural context.

Bejan’s Williams will agree with Guinness or Nussbaum that in any particular civil society there are necessarily standards that disallow some practices. However, for Bejan’s Williams this does not violate an inviolable right to conscience precisely because the conscience can err. While an individual may have a moral duty to follow an erring conscience, the civil society has no requirement to allow that error to be acted out within its midst. However, for the sake of evangelism, Williams argues that Christian

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<sup>45</sup> Bejan, “The Bond of Civility,” 411–412.

<sup>46</sup> Cory Higdon, “Roger Williams, Natural Law, and Religious Liberty,” *The Journal of Church and State* 62 (2020): 1–24.

<sup>47</sup> Martin Rhonheimer, “Natural Law as a ‘Work of Reason’: Understanding the Metaphysics of Participated Theonomy,” *AJJ* 55 (2010): 41–77.

individuals within a Christian civil society (such as Massachusetts Colony) should tolerate beliefs and practices they find wicked and reprehensible precisely because a willingness to tolerate this alterity provided opportunity to present the gospel.<sup>48</sup>

Civility and toleration created, for Williams, a check and balance. The bonds of civil society—the etiquette and comportment required for peaceable conversation—did not forbid disagreement. They did not even forbid passionate disagreement or disgust but did provide a hard limit on the kinds of practices that could be tolerated. The worshipper of Huitzilopotchli would not be allowed to practice human sacrifice in Williams’s Rhode Island. However, this is not because he or she has failed to recognize the dictates of his or her conscience. He or she might truly feel the command of conscience to make the sacrifice, but in this case, we would conclude that his or her conscience has erred. We should show our reasons for this conclusion and consider them in comparison with the reasons of the worshipper of Huitzilopotchli. Instead, it is because he or she functions as a threat to civil society that his or her act of worship cannot be allowed. Similarly, evangelical tolerance functions to limit the demands of civility because, on Bejan’s reading, the tolerance of actual, even fundamental, difference is a requirement for true evangelism.

## Two Concerning Questions

The argument above raises two important questions that I cannot fully address here. First, should a Christian society allow evil or immoral practices because it presents an opportunity for evangelism? A brief response here might be: yes, so long at the practices 1) do not threaten the stability of the society and 2) do not require that basic human needs are denied or neglected.<sup>49</sup> As such, for instance, a Christian society might deny worshippers of Huizilopochtli the right to perform human sacrifices but

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<sup>48</sup> Bejan, “Evangelical Toleration,” 1108–9.

<sup>49</sup> Here I follow what might be called a ‘needs-based’ approach to moral grounding as opposed to a ‘rights-based’ approach. One example of a needs-based approach is David Wong’s Pluralistic Relativism. David Wong, *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism* (Oxford University Press, 2006). Wong’s relativism is limited and accepts moral realities grounded in basic human needs but does not accept that culturally specific moralities must address these needs in the same way so long as the needs are addressed effectively.

allow Hindus the right to build and worship at Ashrams and Muslims the right to engage in polygamous marriages.<sup>50</sup> This position assumes that the goal of evangelism does not justify any and all means of evangelism. Part of the argument made here is that true evangelism recognizes that the free will of the individual is the efficient cause of conversion. For a Hindu to *truly* be evangelized requires that they must have a politically plausible option to remain a Hindu. Exactly how ‘politically plausible’ is cashed out in this discussion will lead to varying interpretations of this position that cannot be addressed in depth.

A second question that cannot be fully addressed here is this: does this approach to civility and toleration amount to another version of colonialism? This might be raised concerning the ultimate rejection of the moral conscience of the worshipper of Huitzilopochtli, or it might be specifically pointed at the goal of evangelism. Further, readings of Williams in which a concept of universal rationality as normative is adopted—such as that of Nussbaum or Guinness—seem particularly prone to this objection. If Nussbaum or Guinness’s reading of Williams is more accurate to the author’s original position, then the argument here provides a significant critique and modification of Williams’s perspective. If Bejan’s reading of Williams is more accurate to the author’s original position then the discussion here is closer to a retrieval of Williams’s views than a critique. In either case, the goal here is not to analyze Williams’s work and evaluate which view is a more accurate interpretation of Williams. Rather the argument adopts and slightly modifies Bejan’s reading of Williams in order to articulate concepts of civility and tolerance that can function effectively in a multi-cultural society.

If the purpose of religious tolerance is, ultimately, evangelism, doesn’t this amount to a slightly less invasive attempt to impose the culture and history of the dominant population upon subordinate populations? This question could be addressed at a Christian government such as Williams’s own Rhode Island colony or, following the argument of

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<sup>50</sup> I have to thank Eddy Wu for raising this point here. Here we might consider, as an alternative point, Stephen Kim’s recent paper: Stephen Kim, “The First Commandment and the First Amendment: Islam as the Lynchpin of Religious Liberty,” presented at the 2020 Annual Conference of the Evangelical Theological Society.

Steven D. Smith, the secular establishment of the modern United States.<sup>51</sup> Three points could be raised by way of response.

1) On Bejan's account, Williams's view of tolerance does not preclude disagreement. This is an important point precisely because it allows for the tolerance of a real other. The goal of evangelism does not preclude this precisely because the goal of evangelism, on the model I describe here, is not cultural conversion but spiritual regeneration. The regeneration of the person may or may not be attended by changed beliefs, practices, or communities, but we should not assume that such regeneration *must* distort or destroy the culture of origin. On the understanding that a) true evangelism must allow a politically plausible option to reject belief and b) true evangelism is focused on the spiritual regeneration of the person as distinct from cultural conversion it seems plausible that evangelism can be understood in a non-colonizing way.

2) This implies a second important point, one with which Williams may well disagree: a Christianity that allows for true alterity must allow for a plurality of culturally informed theological perspectives. Narragansett Christianity, Dutch Reformed Christianity, Han Chinese Christianity, Nigerian Christianity, Italian Roman Catholic Christianity, and American Evangelical Christianity should not be expected to have identical theological beliefs or practices of worship. Exactly how this plurality is understood will have to be carefully considered and articulated. One danger of such an approach would be baptizing any and all beliefs and practices as Christian uncritically because they are culturally normative for the believer. In Aristotelian terms, this would be the excess of the virtue of theological pluralism and an overly restrictive orthodoxy would be the deficiency.

Finally, 3) one concern may be that, on the model suggested here, some individuals are still excluded from society. However, the alternative is to allow any and all religious practices—up to and including the kidnapping and killing of children—to be freely practiced within the society. Any society, in order to maintain its existence as a society, must have a structure of law that will necessarily require some behaviors and preclude

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<sup>51</sup> Smith, *The Rise and Decline of American Religious Freedom*, 111–38.



others.<sup>52</sup> The advantage of the model of civility that is offered here is that it recognizes that behaviors that are precluded by the society may still be rationally chosen following the dictates of an individual's conscience. The worshipper of Huitzilopotchli has *reasons* for believing and acting as he or she does that he or she finds convincing. We may be able to show good reasons to believe the worshipper of Huitzilopotchli is incorrect and his or her actions are immoral.<sup>53</sup> These reasons may give us justifiable cause to preclude such actions within our society. Our society will conclude that the conscience of the worshipper of Huitzilopotchli has led him or her astray. It will have good reasons for concluding this and I, for one, will agree. However, this does not mean that our society can or should serve as the final arbiter of moral reality. Further, the reasons given for believing that the worshipper of Huitzilopotchli is incorrect and his or her actions are immoral should not lead us to assume that the worshipper of Huitzilopotchli is irrational, bestial, or otherwise less than human.

### **Conclusion: The Virtue of Civility**

While Bejan's reading of Williams helps to clarify how an alternative understanding of civility can be seen as a matter of etiquette, James Calvin Davis is correct to note that Williams often described civility as "the cultivation and exhibition of certain shared virtues."<sup>54</sup> The etiquette of civility expressed the deeper cultivation of a certain kind of character that exemplified virtues such as gratitude, friendship, and helpfulness. While not interacting with Williams, Richard Avramenko and Michael Promisel helpfully connect tolerance to Aristotle's third unnamed virtue and argue that an Aristotelian approach to identifying excesses and deficiencies of the

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<sup>52</sup> This does not suggest that the structure of law in a society must be spelled out in a code of positive laws. Jonathan Crowe points out that there are a number of ways that societies can and do structure 'laws' without resorting to codes of positive law. Crowe, *Natural Law and the Nature of Law*, 116–134.

<sup>53</sup> Broadly speaking, I follow the trinity of Roy Bhaskar's Critical Realism here: ontological depth, epistemic relativism (fallibility), and judgmental rationality. Roy Bhaskar, *Enlightened Common Sense: The Philosophy of Critical Realism* (London: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>54</sup> Davis, *The Moral Theology of Roger Williams*, 107.

virtue can help to identify the proper limits of tolerance.<sup>55</sup> Their argument is compatible with Bejan’s reading of Williams in an important way.

Bejan argues that Williams’s approach to the Narragansett and others shows that his view of tolerance was not a matter of “mutual respect.”<sup>56</sup> In so far as respect can be understood as a mutual affirmation and appreciation, she is entirely correct. As she shows, Williams concepts of civility and tolerance did not prevent him from finding the beliefs and practices of the Narragansett Indians reprehensible and wicked. However, if we conceive of respect as a virtue that seeks to understand the otherness of one’s dialogue partner prior to rendering judgements, then we see this virtue in practice in Williams’s interactions with the Narragansett.<sup>57</sup>

Given this, civility seems to have functioned in Williams’s life not as a virtue, but as a set of nested virtues that dispose one to interact with others through standards of etiquette that befit the situation and society and to tolerate real, even deeply significant, differences between oneself and others for the purpose of engaging with them in a consideration of the truth and meaningfulness of the gospel. This approach to civility both acknowledges cultural differences between individuals and the importance of standards of etiquette in maintaining public discussion, but also recognizes and honors the reality of otherness in the dialogue partner and, rather than reducing it to a more familiar standard, honors that otherness by seeking to understand the other in him or herself prior to rendering judgment.

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<sup>55</sup> Richard Avramenko and Michael Promisel, “When Toleration Becomes a Vice: Naming Aristotle’s Third Unnamed Virtue,” *American Journal of Political Science* 62 (2018): 849–60. Following Perkins, we might add ‘attentiveness’ and ‘clarity’ as virtues of inter-cultural and inter-religious communication. Perkins, “Beyond Jacques Derrida and George Lindbeck,” 354.

<sup>56</sup> Bejan, “The Bonds of Civility,” 410–12.

<sup>57</sup> This is, in fact, what Jack L. Davis mistakenly identified as cultural relativism. Davis, “Roger Williams Among the Narragansett Indians,” 593–604.

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