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2018

Trigg, C. (2018). Islam, puritanism, and secular time. *American Literature*, 90(4), 815-839.
doi:10.1215/00029831-7208560

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/137036>

<https://doi.org/10.1215/00029831-7208560>

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Islam, Puritanism, and Secular Time

Key words: Roger Williams; Religious Toleration; American Exceptionalism; Secularism; Eschatology.

Islamism, Salafism, Jihadism, Wahhabism, Fundamentalism—commentators use a controversial multiplicity of names to refer to the radical Islamic ideologies of our time. Each of these terms comes loaded with a host of assumptions about the movement it describes: “Fundamentalism” implies that there are similarities between radical Islam and conservative Protestantism, but may also suggest that Islam is inherently more intolerant and “backward” than Christianity; “Islamism” is potentially useful insofar as it evokes a blend of religious and political motivations, yet it risks associating all Muslims with violent extremism; “Salafism” risks confusion with the Salafis of the late nineteenth century, who sought to “reform and modernise Muslim societies,” rather than revive earlier doctrines (Roy 2004, 233).¹ It is another ambiguous nomenclature, however, that articulates Western discomfort with Islam most clearly.

Although not as widely favored as some of the designations above, “Puritan Islam” and its cognates (Islamic Puritanism, puritanical Islam) have been used in different contexts by a significant number of scholars and political analysts. *Civil and Democratic Islam*, a 2003 report by conservative think tank the Rand Corporation, argued that United States policy should “confront and oppose” Muslim fundamentalists who “reject democratic values and contemporary Western culture” and want to create “an authoritarian, puritanical state” (Benard 2003, xii, x). In 2004, the Dutch Ministry of the Interior argued that the previous twenty years had witnessed “the ‘puritanisation’ of radical Islam” (Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom

Relations 2004, 24). Political radicals who sought to establish Islamic states had given way to neo-Salafists intent on “the return of all Muslims to the ‘purity’ of the early stages of Islam before it was ‘tarnished’ by ‘heretical influences from ... Shi’ism, Hinduism [and] Western thinking.” More recently, Bernard Haykel has compared the violence unleashed by ISIS to the bloodshed that accompanied the Reformation of Christianity in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Modern Salafis, he suggests, “can be [broadly] thought of as latter-day Muslim Calvinists who seek to reform Islam by imposing an uncompromising and ... historical version of the faith” (2015). Just as the “Age of Reason” emerged from the tumult of the European Reformation, Haykel argues, the present conflict in the Muslim world may ultimately produce a more tolerant and liberal consensus. Nader Hashemi shares this perspective. Drawing on Michael Walzer’s definition of Puritanism as “an *ideology of transition*” between traditional, hierarchical social structures and democratic modernity (2009, 48), Hashemi finds that Islamic fundamentalists of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries were and are responding to a similar situation that confronted English Puritans in the 1600s: the breakdown of the established political order and the rise of an increasingly well-educated middle class (46-66). He concludes that the proliferation of new religious forms in the Muslim world is central to the modernization of Islamic politics (63). Although the ideologies espoused by Islamist groups might seem regressive, the fact that they are able “to mobilize large numbers of people from heretofore marginalized sectors of society” marks them out as “protomodernizing agents.” Hashemi reminds those who would scoff at this claim that the development of modern democracy in the West was a long, troubled process to which Christian Puritanism made an important contribution (65-66).

Yet these comparisons between Christian Puritans and Muslim radicals are misleading insofar as they associate political religion with the West's past and Islam's present. For example, Hashemi observes that "by the early twentieth century ... it was assumed, mistakenly, that because religion's normative relationship with government had been largely resolved in the West, this must also be true universally" (2009, 174). "This assumption[.]" he continues, "has led to a deep structural bias in thinking about political development in non-Western societies, Muslim societies in particular." Hashemi is no doubt right that the Western form of secularism has been treated as a global standard, and that this has had a deleterious effect on both the West's attitudes towards Islamic peoples and the reputation of secularism amongst Muslims. But he is perhaps too quick to assume that the relationship between politics and religion in the West has been "resolved."² The prevailing opinion that most of the Muslim world is stuck in a theocratic past not only misrepresents the complexity and plurality of modern Islam but also overlooks the continuing influence of religious constructs in supposedly secular countries such as the United States. To redress this misprision, particular attention needs to be paid to the persistence of eschatological approaches to the question of religious diversity.

The rejection of other religions and cultural traditions preached by contemporary fundamentalists and neo-Nazis has an obviously apocalyptic drift. For centuries, the belief that the end of the world would be presaged by the fall of the Ottoman Empire was widespread amongst Protestant millenarians. Now the Christian far right revives these prophecies, equating the "War on Terror" with the battle of Armageddon.³ In response to this extremist anti-Muslim sentiment, and in light of the Trump White House's determination to restrict travel and emigration from certain largely Islamic countries, liberals and moderate conservatives insist that modern

Western democracy is premised on respect for and tolerance of minority religions. American commentators have noted that the United States carries this consideration further, guaranteeing all faiths equal rights under law. While it is couched in secular, constitutional rhetoric, this position has its own religious dimension. Advocates of tolerance accept that Muslims have their place in the nation's population, yet frequently exclude them from the symbolic community that gives the state its long-term identity and purpose. In this way, a Christian vision of millennial uniformity and purity is repurposed for our secular age. The American principle of total religious equality, we are told, will find its fulfillment in an anticipated, yet perpetually postponed, time when the more troubling aspects of Islamic difference will have been erased.

This essay will address the importance of Puritan minister and theologian Roger Williams (c.1603-1683) for the secular eschatology outlined above. Exiled from Massachusetts Bay, Williams founded the plantation of Providence (1636) without an established church. Unlike his rivals in Boston and Plymouth, he denied that there was any necessary connection between religious orthodoxy and civic morality. As a result, he insisted that Muslims, as well as Jews and polytheistic Pagans, could make loyal, peaceful citizens of majority-Christian polities. Williams was also a fervent millenarian. He expected that in a few short years Christ would return "in a flaming fire" that would "burne up millions of [the] ignorant and disobedient" (1644b). In the millennium that would follow this conflagration, all other religions, including Islam, would effectively cease to exist—their adherents would either convert to true, apostolic Christianity or be damned. Before the Second Coming, though, humanity should cultivate the civil order and peace necessary for spiritual truth to flourish. The best way to achieve this, Williams maintained, was to

extend religious liberty to all. This apparent willingness to prioritize political stability over his own theology has earned him a prominent place in the history of religion in America. Amidst rising tension concerning Islam's compatibility with Western society, advocates of tolerance and diversity have frequently cited his ideas. Martha Nussbaum, whose work I discuss below, argues that European politicians could learn from Williams's insistence that the state should prioritize the protection of individual conscience above conformity to the norm. Theologian Miroslav Volf, furthermore, has suggested that the Islamic world could produce its own Roger Williams soon (2015b). So while Williams may be invoked today as a symbol of religious diversity, this gesture is also suggestive of a countervailing faith in Western cultural superiority. The argument that the constitutions of Providence plantation and the colony of Rhode Island mark the beginning of modern multiculturalism not only reinscribes the exceptionalist myth of American preeminence in liberty and tolerance, but also reinforces the idea that Islam needs to follow the same path that Christian Puritanism travelled towards secularization.

I begin, accordingly, with a reconsideration of Williams's work on tolerance. Freedom of conscience, separation of church and state, and other aspects of modern secularism have long been associated with Williams in order to demonstrate the duration and durability of American religious liberty. This approach is anachronistic insofar as it takes his forbearance of Islam and other non-Protestant faiths out of time, establishing it as a permanent standard rather than a temporary measure. *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution* and Williams's other writings on the subject cannot be understood without reference to his millenarianism. Tracing the apocalyptic bearing of his thought allows me to chart new parallels with the twenty-first century's rhetoric of religious toleration. Williams was willing to live peacefully alongside followers of

“false” religions because he thought that this would hasten the coming of a Kingdom in which there would be only one way of worship. Many modern Americans, I will suggest, are similarly ready to respect some of the more traditional denominations of Islam on the assumption that those denominations will eventually give way to increasingly liberal and less literal forms of faith. The hope that Muslims will adopt a secular perspective on human history rests, ironically, on eschatological structures of thinking.

Secular Time

American secularism is usually described through spatial metaphors: the United States’ public square is (in principle) religiously neutral; the nation has constructed a “wall of separation” between Church and State. It was Roger Williams who coined the latter expression, describing the ideal configuration of “the Garden of the Church” and the “Wildernes of the World” (1644b, 45). Thanks to his foundation of the plantation of Providence, Williams is seen as an important figure in the secularization of American public space. And as an early advocate of religious toleration he can also be considered to have made a notable contribution to the secularization of American time. Perry Miller observes that Williams “exerted little or no direct influence on [the architects] of the Revolution and the Constitution” (1962, 254) but contends that “as a symbol [he] has become an integral element in the meaning of American democracy, along with Jefferson and Lincoln” (254-55). Miller’s argument is that the emergence of a “prophet of religious liberty” in the colonial pre-history of the nation meant that the ideals of religious pluralism and intellectual freedom were ingrained in “the American character” at an early stage, even if they did not receive comprehensive legislative protection until many years later (254). Legal scholar Martha Nussbaum,

one of Williams's most noteworthy contemporary readers, also stresses the earliness of his advocacy of tolerance. "It is an odd misconception of many Americans and Europeans[,] she observes, "that religious toleration is a value particularly associated with the European Enlightenment (2008, 355). In reality, Europe was a latecomer to the debate; moreover, the first great European theorist and practitioner of toleration, well before the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, was actually Roger Williams, an American." Miller and Nussbaum suggest that it was inevitable that a liberal, open, and religiously tolerant society would be established in the United States. Both claim that this cultural pluralism was first put into practice at Providence.⁴ In their view, then, Williams's work inaugurates the secularization of American history, the process by which the development of the secular state becomes more important than the preservation of church purity.

Although this thesis overstates Williams's significance for American politics,⁵ it may find some support in his writings. There, we find that his toleration of other religions is largely a question of giving non-Christians time. His narrow and discriminating ecclesiology required absolute purity from his spiritual charges, but he took a much broader view of the make-up of civil society. Churches were always to be judged with eternity in mind; congregations should therefore be small and exclusive, since only a small proportion of Christians were truly regenerate (with the rest having "no more of Christ then the name" [1645, 8]). Secular communities could be larger and more diverse because they were governed by immediate necessity. In theory, Williams insisted, an individual's beliefs about the eternal world should have no bearing on his or her political citizenship.

While this premise is taken entirely for granted today, it was far from obvious in Williams's time. Muslims, in particular, were deemed to be outside the bounds of

civil society. British prejudice towards Muslims hardened through the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Harried by Barbary Corsairs and menaced by the Ottoman Empire, the English and Scottish came to believe that the world's last days would witness the defeat of Islam as well as the fall of the Roman Catholic church. "Such an eschatology[.]" notes Nabil Matar, "turned Muslims into a people without legitimacy in this world and in the hereafter" (1998, 162). In New England, Williams's rival John Cotton implied that it was impossible to conceive of a Muslim making Massachusetts home. Christian states, he maintained, should not permit the practice of a "false *Religion*" liable to "poyson" the body of the church and disturb the civil peace (1647, 151). Williams, however, saw no reason why Muslims could not live peacefully amongst Christians. Though "*seducing teachers ... of the Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or Antichristian Religion*" might pose a spiritual threat to Christian souls, they were no danger to Christian society, as long as their lives were "free from *scandalous offences*" (1644a, 86). Where his peers held that Muslims' prospective damnation disqualified them from residence in a Christian state, Williams argued that the membership of any given community should be predicated on nothing more than one's public behavior in the present. The book of Revelation spoke of a "Lake of eternall fire and brimstone" in which "all not written in the Lambes book, and the Devill that deceived them" would be "eternally ... secured and tormented" (153). But neither its prophecies, nor "any other passage of the New Testament" mentioned an earthly "prison appointed by Christ Jesus for the Heretick, Blasphemer, [or] Idolater." These misguided men and women, Williams contended, should be allowed to follow the lights of their own consciences in the meantime. In sum, he makes citizenship a "civill," rather than sacred, virtue. Against Cotton's suggestion that only Protestants made "*peaceable and quiet Subjects, loving and helpfull neighbours, [and] faire and*

just dealers” (Cotton 1647, 87), Williams observed that good citizens could be found all around the world, under the “*Turkish Monarchy*” as well as in the “*Antichristian states*” (1652a, 98). “It is true,” he noted, “*idolatry brings judgement in Gods time*” (87). But until that doom, he added, “there is a present *civil state* of men combined to live together there in a *commonweale*, which Gods people are commanded to pray for.”

This separation of citizenship and religious belief seems to anticipate one of the key premises of modern secularism. In his landmark study *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor argues that one of the defining qualities of contemporary religious belief is its situation in what he calls an “immanent frame” of “instrumental rationality” and “secular time” (2007, 542). To be religious now is to live within two times, or at two different velocities: grounded in a daily routine defined and governed by material forces (physical constraints, economic necessity, biological needs), the believer must make a “leap of faith” to connect with transcendent eternity. In Martha Nussbaum’s account, the coordination of these twin speeds becomes a special virtue of American secularism. European countries, she argues, tend to be wary of religious minorities making public displays of devotion (2008, 348). Because Europe “has typically relied on ideas of blood, soil, and belonging to define nationhood,” symbols such as yarmulkes and headscarves that suggest a long-standing affiliation to a different cultural tradition have been treated with suspicion or even banned from certain public arenas (as in the case of French schools). In the United States, on the other hand, it is broadly understood that while different religious groups (and different kinds of atheist) may have different definitions of what constitutes a moral or political good, they will respect the neutrality of the public square. While both James Madison and John Rawls outline versions of this principle in their writings, Nussbaum claims that

Roger Williams was the first to articulate it. When he was formulating his code of civil behavior, she argues, Williams drew on general observations about human behavior, rather than his own Christian faith (43). In other words, he decided that his opinions about the nature of eternity had no bearing on his arguments about how humans ought to behave in secular, political time. His work therefore “lies at the beginning” of the modern liberal “tradition of thought about religious fairness” (58).

There are two significant problems with this interpretation of Williams’s thought. Firstly, it tends to overstate the idiosyncrasy of his position on religious tolerance. Historians now see the pluralistic society he established in Providence as part of a wider trend towards religious toleration across England’s empire. Evan Haefeli, for instance, finds that the royal endorsement of Rhode Island’s tolerant religious settlement was consistent with Charles II’s approach to religious liberty in a number of colonies around the world, including Carolina, Jamaica, Dunkirk, Tangiers, and Bombay (2015, 25-33). However progressive Williams’s civic philosophy might seem to us now, it was primarily put into practice to facilitate “an extension of English authority” (22). Saba Mahmood, meanwhile, argues that we need to be more attentive to the imbrication of secularism and imperialism. She decries the Western mindset that regards European or American secularisms as universal models that should be followed by—or imposed on—other societies (2016, 7-8). Acknowledging the colonial context of Williams’s theory and practice of toleration, then, offsets the widespread tendency to treat his thought as a timeless expression of American liberalism.

The other complication with the notion of Williams as a pioneer of secular modernity is that it overlooks the millennial trajectory of his ecumenism. As I will demonstrate now, Williams’s (largely hypothetical)⁶ willingness to receive Muslims,

Jews, and Catholics into his plantation at Providence was closely related to his eschatological beliefs. Retrospectively, Williams's tenet of toleration appears to be a substantial improvement on the persecutory policies of most early-modern states and colonies. But his pluralism has little to do with progress, as we understand it. Williams's pessimistic view of fallen human nature left him disinclined to look for signs of substantial improvement in the world around him. He knew that the accommodation of other religions would make a given polity more peaceful, but the stability of the secular world was not an end in itself for him. Rather than progress, toleration was a question of preparation, readying the way for the return of Christ. His defense of tolerance was secular, then, but not in the sense that it involved a complete separation of theology from arguments about the civil sphere. Instead, it was secular insofar as it pertained only to the human *saeculum*, the age of mankind. After the millennium, toleration would not be necessary (or even possible), as there would be no religions other than the true faith of God. Recognizing that Williams's toleration of Islam and other religions was subject to strict temporal restrictions, as we shall see, helps to bring the limitations of contemporary religious pluralism into sharper focus.

Temporary Toleration

The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution (1644) is usually considered to be the definitive statement of Williams's philosophy of religious freedom. Framed as a dialogue between Truth and Peace about the problems with John Cotton's political theology, this tract establishes that civil and ecclesiastical authorities must not have the power to compel citizens to adopt particular religious beliefs or practices. *The Bloudy Tenent* seems to be primarily concerned with space: both the conceptual space of the religiously neutral public sphere and the colonial territory within which Williams was

attempting to realize his ideals. But the book is equally invested in time, establishing the eschatological tenor of its argument from the very start.

In the prefatory remarks addressed “*To every Courteous Reader,*” Williams bemoans “the bloody irreligious and inhumane *oppressions* and *destructions*” committed by those who claim to be Christians. In response to these human outrages, he continues, “the *jealous Jehovah*, the consuming fire” will likely soon begin “the greater slaughter of ... holy Witnesses” predicted in Revelation 11. Only after God’s “flames are over” will the following arguments against persecution “*passee current*” amongst Christians. Writing in London in 1644, Williams is clearly referring to the upheavals caused by the Civil War.⁷ But his rhetoric also courts another interpretation. His model of toleration, he suggests, is at odds with the bloody course of human history. It will only find its fulfillment in the higher time of the coming millennium. At the beginning of the main body of the text, the dialogue between Truth and Peace, Truth makes this point more explicitly:

Patience (sweet *Peace*) these *Heavens* and *Earth* are growing *Old*, and shall be changed like a *Garment* ... They shall melt away, and be burnt up with all the *Works* that are therein; and the most high *Eternall Creatour*, shall gloriously create *New Heavens & New Earth*, wherein dwells *Righteousnesse* ... Our *kisses* then shall have their *endlesse* date of pure and sweetest joys ... till then both *Thou* and *I* must hope, and wait, and beare the furie of the *Dragons* wrath, whose *monstrous Lies* and *Furies* shall with himselfe be cast into the *lake* of *Fire*, the *second death* (15).

The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution was not merely a theoretical text, but an important component of William’s campaign for an official charter for Providence. Faced with a claim that the territory he had purchased from the Narrangansetts belonged to

Massachusetts, Williams set out the destabilizing political effects of the religious persecution practiced by his rivals in the Bay Colony.⁸ He also hoped that his pamphlet might help to persuade Parliament to adopt a more tolerant approach in its future government of England.⁹ Williams knew, however, that human agency could only achieve so much. Not until the fiery destruction of the old world and “all [its] *Works*” would civil peace and religious truth flourish together.

The expectation that this epochal event was imminent closely informed Williams’s attitude towards Native Americans, Jews, and Muslims. He did indeed argue that non-Christian peoples could build stable polities on the foundation of natural morality, as Martha Nussbaum and others have noted.¹⁰ But his accommodation of their religious practices and cultural differences was inextricably linked to his belief that many of them would eventually be gathered into Christ’s fold. Early in *The Bloudy Tenent*, Williams seizes on John Cotton’s concession that “in points of lesser moment, there ought to be a *Toleration* ... till *God* may be pleased to reveale his Truth to [the mistaken party]” (1644a, 37). Williams argues that this generosity ought to be expanded to embrace “*all men*,” including those whose errors seem insuperable: the “*Jewes*” who “*justifie* their *Fore-fathers*” in Christ’s killing, the “*Turkes*” who hold that he was a lesser prophet than “*Mahomet*,” the Catholics and other “*Antichristians*” who worship “*false Christ[s]*,” and the “*Pagans*, ... who have not yet heard of the *Father*, nor the *Son*” (37-38). When Christ returned, Williams believed, he would appoint apostles to evangelize the nations.¹¹ The catholicity of this millennial mission would surprise those inclined towards persecution in the present: “whereas he that is a *Briar*, that is, a *Jew*, a *Turke*, a *Pagan*, an *Antichristian*, today, may be (when the Word of the *Lord* runs freely) a member of *Jesus Christ* tomorrow, cut out of the wilde *Olive*, and planted into the true” (39). When dealing with non-

Christians, both church and state must therefore reckon with the higher time in which the true diversity of the elect would be revealed.

Williams called for toleration in the name of the world to come, but he also knew that during the millennium itself toleration would not be needed in the same degree. Though his descriptions of this new age are typically opaque, he consistently claimed that it would begin with the destruction of the Catholic Church.¹² The power of Islam would also be crushed; Williams promised in 1652 that God would “shortly break (and make all his *followers* tread on) the proudest *Necks* born up this day in the world, even the grandest *Seignories* of the *Turkish* and *Popish* Empires” (1652a). This defeat of the “two so mighty opposers of the Son of *God*” would open up the field for the conversion of millions of people: after the “downfall of the *Papacie*, ... “a numberles *Number*” of “*Converts* [from] the *Nations* of the world” would “come flowing unto *Christ Jesus*” (1652c, 3). Racial and cultural tolerance, then, would still be needed in the millennium. The toleration of other religions, however, would not be necessary any more, since only the true faith would remain. In the prefatory material to his tract against Quakerism, *George Fox Digg’d out of His Burrowes* (1676), Williams twice referred to the collapse of Catholicism and Islam in terms of the immolation of “the *Pope*” and “*Mahomet*.” He was not merely speaking symbolically—Williams favored a literal interpretation of the eschatological conflagration described in 2 Peter 3. When the day of the Lord dawned, the earth would be cleansed of all sinful men and women, as Jesus returned “*in flaming fire to burne up millions of ignorant and disobedient*” (1644b). There would then be “but *one*” type of person, “*honest and good*” of heart (1644a, 45) and living in a “world of uniformity” (Stern 2011, 613 n.147).

The uniform endpoint of Williams's program of toleration appears to contradict his present-day reputation as a champion of plurality. In certain respects, in fact, Williams seems as close to a figure such as Donald Trump as to Trump's opponents. Both Williams and Trump suggest that the presence of Muslims in America is bearable only because of a future victory over Islam. Williams, as we have seen, predicts the end of the Islamic religion and the conversion of many former Muslims to Christianity. Trump, for his part, forecasts a time of prosperity and security, in which the defeat of "Islamic radicalism" has somehow made America "rich[,] "great[,] and "safe" again (2016). He may insist that religious freedom is a fundamental principle of American politics, but during his first year in office his administration took several steps that made the country less forgiving of religious and cultural variation from the norm, including levying a travel ban against "most citizens" of six "predominantly Muslim" countries: Iran, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, and Chad (Liptak 2017).¹³ Williams, of course, rejected the presumption that non-Christians were likely to destabilize Christian states, and believed that civil governments had no right to intimidate their citizens into conformity. Yet his tolerance of Muslims, Catholics, and other non-Protestants shares its temporal configuration with the intolerance of the present-day popular Right. Trump's rhetoric on Islam makes a millennial promise in Williams's line, presenting a vision of harmonious homogeneity intended to reassure supporters that the vagaries of history will eventually be transcended, sectarian differences resolved.

Notwithstanding this surprising similarity with Williams, and despite the well-known limits of Puritan tolerance, Trump's critics on the left and the right have described his attitude as a betrayal of America's Nonconformist heritage. One ACLU executive suggested that Trump's executive order "dishonored" the large number of

“religious refugees” amongst the “earliest European settlers in America”—the “Pilgrims, Puritans, and Quakers” who “fled here[,] and eventually established communities of religious freedom and tolerance” (Cohen 2017). Responding to Trump’s original call for a Muslim ban during his campaign for the Republican presidential nomination, former vice president Dick Cheney observed that “religious freedom has been a very important part of our history and where we came from. A lot of people, my ancestors got here, because they were Puritans” (2015).¹⁴ A little over a year later, following Trump’s first executive order against Muslim immigration, the president of Roger Williams University in Bristol, Rhode Island, affirmed his institution’s commitment to its namesake’s ideas. “This university,” he noted, “is named for Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island, who helped enshrine freedom of religion as a bedrock principle for this nation. In the wake of the president’s executive order on immigration, we feel a special responsibility to declare our full support for all Roger Williams University faculty, students and staff—regardless of their religious beliefs, national origin or immigration status” (Farish 2017). Finally, in a playful piece for the *Providence Journal*, Mark Patinkin imagined receiving a phone call from a Roger Williams upset about the proposed travel ban. This version of Williams claimed to have encountered people “*exactly like Donald Trump*” in the seventeenth century: “*for me, Trump’s Muslim ban is déjà vu – an official voice saying certain faiths aren’t welcome. That’s certainly what they told me.*” “*I gave America its most distinctive concept,*” he continued: “*tolerance of all faiths ... You’ll be safer if you hold onto it*” (Patinkin 2015).

As these arguments indicate, the traditional exceptionalism that casts the United States as the world’s foremost defender of religious liberty still has currency, even in the Trump era. America, it claims, has always been a religiously diverse and

tolerant place. In most of the thirteen colonies there were many “dissenters” and “no secure majority” (Nussbaum 2012, 69). When these smaller societies came together to form a nation, the founders recognized this diversity in a constitution that did not merely offer minorities toleration, but “inherent equality and equal rights” (70). As a result, the United States has “*avoided the kind of catastrophic religious conflict that still tears nations apart*” (Patinkin 2015), and rejected the “concern for homogeneity” that drives European immigration and cultural policy (Nussbaum 2012, 136). Even the country’s conservative evangelicals recognize the value of respecting beliefs that they do not share. Miroslav Volf argues that the Christian Right of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are the “heirs” of Roger Williams, as well as “the theocratic John Winthrop” (2015a, 131). Because they are able, just as Williams was, to reconcile their “exclusivist faith” with “political pluralism” (133), American evangelicals should prove increasingly useful as globalization brings people of different beliefs and backgrounds together (133-34).

This exceptionalist narrative implies that the Trump administration will prove to be no more than a brief interlude in America’s long history of religious tolerance. But what if the provisional, temporary quality of American pluralism were the key to its longevity? Is the expectation that immigrants will assimilate implicit in the tolerance offered them? Have Americans, therefore, only embraced cultural and religious difference on the understanding that they would not need to do so for long? Roger Williams’s example suggests as much. For him, toleration was arguably less a question of genuine respect for other people’s perspectives than a conviction that anyone who mattered would come round to his way of thinking in due time. Williams’s temporary forbearance is not the only model of toleration that America has produced (others include ecumenism, deism, and pragmatism). But the fact

remains that American tolerance has often been implicitly or explicitly limited in duration. Thomas Jefferson, for example, was a vigorous advocate of political equality for adherents of all faiths, including Judaism and Islam (Spellberg 2013, 139-42). At the same time, he was convinced that the rationalist, anti-Trinitarian faith that he favored would soon become the *de facto* national religion.¹⁵ Today, a moderate conservative such as Republican Senator Ben Sasse vows to protect the right of Muslims “to freely worship” in what he deems to be “the most tolerant nation the world has ever seen” (Sasse 2015). In order to retain that right, however, Muslims must demonstrate their fidelity to the “American creed” (speaking in the aftermath of the San Bernandino shootings in 2015, Sasse told the Senate that the people wanted “a little less elite sermonizing about tolerance in our communities, and a little more articulation of our shared Constitutional principles”). On the international scene, moreover, the American governments of the past twenty years have funded projects that support the liberalization of Islam around the globe. The Muslim World Outreach program, created by the White House National Security Council in 2003, aimed to transform attitudes to religious authority in Islamic countries by fostering a higher scriptural criticism that stresses the historicity, rather than “divinity” of the Quran (Mahmood 2006, 334). The underlying principle of this policy, as Saba Mahmood observes, was that Islamic traditionalism cannot be permitted to go unchallenged any more—Western secularism is the only secure foundation of a modern state.

Williams rejected the assumption that each of these positions depends upon: that the toleration of or engagement with ideological differences can ultimately produce a greater cultural uniformity. As a political and religious leader, he found it difficult enough merely to preserve public order in the face of Rhode Island’s competing sects and opinions (Murphy 249-50). The temporary tolerance that he

championed was therefore oriented towards Christ's apocalyptic interruption of human history, rather than the linear progress of that history itself. Still, his latter-day counterparts, like him, weigh present diversity against prospective unity. And while they maintain that it will be human agency that achieves this unity, their descriptions of future victory are often millenarian in their certainty and fervency. "Th[e] fight [against militant Islam] will be decades long," Ben Sasse predicts, "and we will win it ... we will win it because of who we are – a people who believe in freedom, and a people who are willing to fight and even to die to preserve a free society for all Americans" (2015). This speech, which criticized demagogues for suggesting that "every Muslim is [potentially] guilty" of disloyalty, demonstrates nonetheless how close the rhetoric of temporary tolerance can come to Trump's populist nativism. Sasse may claim to speak "for all Americans," and in favor of religious diversity, but his valorization of "freedom," the sacred text of the Constitution, and the "inalienable rights" bestowed upon humanity by its "Creator" epitomizes the distinctly nationalistic, Protestant, and evangelical character of his version of secular pluralism.¹⁶ True Americans will prevail, he suggests, because amidst the fear and uncertainty of the present they are already living in a higher time of "ordered liberty."

Higher Time

Charles Taylor's account of secularization can help to explain why this kind of millennial thinking still appeals to many people. Taylor argues that the transformation of attitudes towards time was central to the development of modern secularity. While we imagine temporality in terms of a "uniform, univocal" and "horizontal flow" (2007, 59), our pre-modern forbears held that several different forms of "higher time" existed above the secular vector of everyday life. Protestantism's emphasis on lay

spirituality collapsed this multidimensional model of time: festivals and saint's days were no more holy than any other time of year; redeeming every moment of the day was the measure of true devotion (266). Once the sacred was diffused in this manner, it became possible to imagine a world with no spiritual dimension at all, where human happiness was the only metric that matters (266-67). Building on Benedict Anderson's work in *Imagined Communities*, Taylor suggests that the development of the modern concept of nationhood made an important contribution to this process. In pre-modern societies, kings and priests mediated their subjects' access to the higher time of eternity where the "order of things" unfolded (209). The modern citizen, however, lives in a "'direct-access' society." She perceives that she belongs to a variety of collectives (the nation-state, international markets, the world of fashion), without requiring the mediating influence of an authority figure (210-11). As Anderson observed, "simultaneity" is therefore a defining feature of citizenship of a modern state: the individual recognizes that she is performing the same tasks, the same daily rituals, at the same time as millions of other people, and that this ties her to them (2006, 22-36). Political and conceptual stability are now linked to this experience of collective simultaneity, to the changing course of history, rather than timeless eternity (Taylor 2007, 208). Yet Taylor concedes that modern people retain an appetite for higher time (714), as their enthusiasm for revolutions, festivals, and collective expressions of grief suggests (715). Human beings, he concludes, are unable to live entirely within a "pure secular time of simultaneity and succession" (714).¹⁷

Modern America's intermittent anxiety over the integration of Muslims reflects this lingering desire for moments of transcendence. In early-modern Christendom, the prospect of the apocalyptic destruction of Islam reassured

Europeans and Americans troubled by the political and military power of Muslim nations. While the majority of modern Americans still believe in the afterlife, millennial prophecies no longer possess the same unifying power (thanks, in part, to the religious diversity that Roger Williams is often assumed to have established). And so politicians present visions of an immanent (and imminent) end time, a moment in the not-too-distant future in which troublesome Muslim otherness will be permanently excluded from the fifty states. Then, they imply, the tolerance of middle America will be rewarded with its own redundancy. Paradoxically, this secularized religious rhetoric forms part of a larger narrative that holds that the West is more advanced than the Muslim world because it has outgrown the political exploitation of religious difference. In Taylor's theory of secular temporality, the moments of higher or "gathered" time that still punctuate twenty-first century lives remain peripheral to the "secular time of simultaneity and succession" that orders "the modern social imaginary" (2007, 714). Yet the ongoing controversy over Islam's relationship to the West suggests that a higher time of projected homogeneity is central to certain contemporary constructions of citizenship and nationhood.¹⁸

For this reason, any critique of American exceptionalism must look forwards as well as backwards. Michael Gomez, Denise Spellberg, Gordon Sayre, Thomas Kidd, and Peter Manseau, amongst others, have drawn attention to the fact that from its colonial beginnings the United States has been shaped by the contribution of Muslim Americans as well as by encounters with Muslim nations.¹⁹ This important work on the country's early years ought to be complemented by a willingness to frame its present in a new way. Conservatives demand that Muslims adjust to their vision of the American way of life—some are prepared to pass legislation designed to ensure that this happens. Liberals may be prepared to tolerate a greater degree of

cultural difference, but they still anticipate that Muslims and other people of faith will finally move beyond literal, supernaturalist, and “Puritan” approaches to religion. Both conservative and liberal positions depend upon the same two assumptions: there is an optimal form for the relationship between faith and citizenship, religion and politics, and the United States is closer than any other nation on earth to realizing this paradigm. In the current political climate, a less teleological acceptance of religious minorities is needed. To protect the diversity of American society, the expectation of ultimate homogeneity that is often attached to expressions of tolerance needs to be set aside. The belief that Western secularism constitutes the culmination of history should also be rejected, since it implies that those outside the Judeo-Christian tradition have nothing to offer posterity. As Saba Mahmood’s recent work on secularism in the Middle East suggests, this defense of “interfaith equality” may require an “*ethical*” rather than a political approach (2016, 213). The nation state, after all, is primarily concerned with the perpetuation of its own sovereignty. Its rhetorical and legislative interventions in the field of religion are therefore likely to “enshrine majoritarian religious and cultural norms in the nation’s identity and laws” (212), proleptically evoking what I have called the higher time of homogeneity. But if individual citizens resist the temptation to look to the state as the “arbiter of religious equality,” they may discover that Muslims and other minority groups can make legitimate contributions to society on their own terms. A more open and uncertain hereafter may thereby replace the future that Western secularism has written for the world.

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¹ Strindberg and Wörn provide a useful summary of the problems with the concept of “Islamic fundamentalism” (2011, 33-38), while Daniel Varisco makes a convincing case against the indiscriminate use of “Islamism” (2010, 33-47).

² It should be noted, too, that many scholars argue that the modern forms of radical Islam are largely a product of Western-led globalization and the concomitant deterritorialization of Muslim peoples. See, for instance, the important work of Olivier Roy, which shows how disconnection from location and traditional forms of devotion can lead some to search for a “universal” Islam that is “valid in any cultural context” (2004, 25).

³ See Kidd 2009, 144-64. Kidd notes that some twenty-first century authors outmatch the anti-Muslim sentiment of earlier millenarians by predicting that the Anti-Christ will be a Muslim leader (159-62).

⁴ Miller concedes that “later generations” have not always “understood” Williams’s work perfectly: “they ... have imagined that his premises were something other than the actual ones” (1962, 254). And yet, he argues, “as a figure and a reputation [Williams] was always there to remind Americans that no other conclusion than absolute religious freedom was feasible in this society.” Nussbaum, meanwhile, claims that Williams “already has hold of the whole family of principles that form ... the distinctive American approach to religious fairness” (2008, 68-69).

⁵ Andrew Murphy’s recent book on William Penn provides a helpful overview of the exaggeration of Williams’s impact on later theories and practices of toleration. For Murphy, several recent readings of Williams (including Martha Nussbaum’s) “suffer[] from the same sort of hagiography” as scholarly work on Penn: “an overly heroic vision of the individual’s life, an overly negative assessment of his critics, and a penchant for labeling one thinker as the ‘first’ or ‘best’ articulator of a widely held ideal like liberty of conscience” (2016, 246). While Williams was an important figure in seventeenth-century debates about toleration across the Atlantic world, “the pathways from [his and Penn’s era] ... to the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century constitutional developments in the American tradition are circuitous and, particularly in the case of Williams and Penn, extremely tenuous as a matter of the historical record” (255).

⁶ Although Cotton Mather would memorably claim that Rhode Island contained “every thing in the World but *Roman Catholicks*, and *Real Christians*” (1702, 7:20), the actual colony that took shape under Williams’s guidance fell short of the theoretical diversity described in his writings. By the time of Williams’s death in 1683, Newport was home to a small number of Jewish families, though the balance of evidence suggests that this community had only been permanently established in 1677 (Hoberman 2011, 46-50).

Some of Rhode Island’s comparatively large population of black slaves may have been practicing Muslims, but Williams’s writings make no comment on this possibility. Michael Gomez has argued that scholars have tended to underestimate the number of Muslim slaves in colonial America because contemporaneous “observers” were typically “ignorant of the Islamic faith” and “did not accurately record the variegated cultural expressions of African slaves” (1994, 672). Nevertheless, Denise Spellberg insists that “it is unlikely that Williams met” any Muslims in America, much less “welcomed ... [them] to his Rhode Island colony” (2015, 90). Since Williams *was* familiar with Islamic beliefs and practices, and claimed to have spoken to Muslims in England, it is likely that he would have recognized American Muslims had he encountered them.

⁷ This inference is supported by the following page, where Williams suggests that “these civill and *spirituall Wars*” ought to convince his reader of the virtues of tolerance.

⁸ Jonathan Beecher Field argues that the works that Williams published during his 1643-44 stay in London (including *The Bloudy Tenent* and *A Key into the Language of America*) should be read “as part of an integrated political campaign to preserve Providence Plantations from the Bay Colony’s territorial ambitions” (2009, 27).

⁹ The fact that Williams published *The Bloudy Tenent* just before he left London suggests that he anticipated that his tract would be poorly received: sure enough, “it was ordered [to be] burned by the public hangman on 9 August 1644” (Field 2009, 30). Yet as Jessica Stern has noted, Williams took care to position his work within the ongoing tolerationist debate in England by “reprinting parts of John Murton’s anonymously published tract, *A Most Humble Supplication of the King’s Majesty’s Loyal Subjects* (1620)” (2011, 602).

¹⁰ See Nussbaum 2008, 63-66, Davis 2004, 102-4, and Bejan 2011, 415. Bejan is rather more circumspect on this point than Davis or Nussbaum. Williams, she argues, employed natural law

negatively rather than positively. He was less interested in determining a “universal standard” of moral behavior than in proving that certain forms of incivility were “beyond the pale” in every society.

¹¹ Just as the original apostles were “immediately stirr’d up by *Christ Jesus*[.]” so these new evangelists would derive their “*Gifts, Calling, Work, and Wages*” directly from the returned Christ (Williams 1652b, 131).

¹² See, for instance, 1664a, 245-7; 1652c, 13; 1676, 263.

¹³ The executive order that first announced the ban (which, when enacted, would also restrict travel from North Korea and Venezuela) ironically claimed that its goal was to protect the United States from those “who engage in acts of bigotry or hatred” against “religions different from their own” (Trump 2017a). Other policy documents issued by the Trump White House have also signaled its intention to reshape American society to conform more closely to the worldview of the president’s white, evangelical base: an executive order “Promoting Free Speech and Religious Liberty” indicated that the administration would not enforce the so-called “Johnson Amendment” to the Internal Revenue Code, which bars tax-exempt organizations (including churches) from intervening in political campaigns (Trump 2017b); a memo issued to the Pentagon on August 25th 2017 “direct[ed] the U.S. military not to accept transgender men and women as recruits” (Mason).

¹⁴ Cheney’s follow-up to this remark—“there wasn’t anybody here then when they came”—is symptomatic of the frequent elision of Native Americans from the narrative of American-Puritan religious liberty.

¹⁵ In a June 1822 letter to Benjamin Waterhouse of Harvard Medical School, Jefferson (now famously) asserted that “there is not a young man now living in the US. who will not die an Unitarian.”

¹⁶ Sasse’s speech embodies the distinctively American synthesis of Protestantism and civil secularism described by Tracy Fessenden. She argues that the history of secularization in the United States is characterized by “the consolidation of a Protestant ideology that has grown more entrenched and controlling even as its manifestations have often become less visibly religious” (2007, 5).

A video uploaded to Sasse’s press-office Twitter account to celebrate Thanksgiving 2017 supports Fessenden’s point in a different way. There, an excerpt from a speech given by Sasse on the Senate floor in September 2016 plays over a montage of computer-animated images from Robert W. Weir’s painting *Embarkation of the Pilgrims* (1843), which hangs in the Capitol Rotunda. As Sasse extols the

beauty and profundity of American “religious liberty” (Sasse 2016), the film lingers over Weir’s depictions of Elizabeth Winslow, John Robinson, William Brewster, Susanna White, and Miles Standish. While the script declares, in relatively neutral, non-denominational language, that American constitutional freedoms derive from natural law rather than governmental authority, the images insist on the Nonconformist-Protestant lineage of those liberties. Sasse’s claim that “our country’s Founders believed that God created people with dignity and we have rights via nature” is juxtaposed in the video with Weir’s portrayal of Brewster, as if to suggest that the passengers on the Mayflower, rather than the delegates to the Continental Congress, were the country’s ultimate parents. Sasse’s sense of specifically Protestant character of the nation is also underlined by the film’s epigraph, a quotation from *The Bloudy Tenent* (misdated to 1664).

¹⁷ In his study of time in the nineteenth-century United States, Thomas M. Allen goes beyond Taylor and challenges Anderson’s argument that national chronology is necessarily empty, homogenous and sequential. America’s emerging identity, Allen maintains, was built on a multiplicity of temporal frames: Catherine Beecher insisted on the social and economic value of the punctual Christian home, imbuing mechanical clock time with a sacred meaning (2008, 135-37), while Emerson suggested that a greater awareness of the deep time of the natural world might shake modern Americans from their solipsistic individualism (215-16).

¹⁸ Not all of these constructions are centered around religious pluralism. “New Atheist” author Sam Harris has called for an end to religious tolerance on the grounds that even religious “moderates” pose a threat to secular society. He claims that believers are incapable of truly tolerating other people’s worldviews (“certainty about the next life,” he explains, “is simply incompatible with tolerance in this one” [2005, 13]); therefore, the tolerance that is afforded to religious people themselves should be withdrawn.

Despite his warnings about the dangers of eschatology, however, Harris’s own critiques of religion (and of Islam in particular) are stridently eschatological. In *The End of Faith*, he warned that our failure to destroy faith in the supernatural was potentially “pav[ing] the way to the Apocalypse” (2005, 224). A 2014 blog post entitled “Sleepwalking to Armageddon” wondered when the “delusion” that refuses to recognize the evils of religion would “be finally burned away ... by the clear light of reason.” His grim prophecies about the malign and growing influence of irrational belief are therefore tied up with an antithetical conviction that the “end of faith” is near. The incipient post-faith society that Harris

evokes throughout his work functions then as a form of higher time that promises to unify the divided human race. Like a millenarian, he claims that heralds of this coming age are already amongst us, developing a “science of good and evil” (2005, 171-72). “Two hundred years from now,” Harris writes, “when we are a thriving global civilization beginning to colonize space, *something* about us will have changed: it must have” (2005, 47). That something, he suggests, is the recognition that religious believers make bad citizens of their countries and of the planet as a whole.

¹⁹ See Gomez 1994; Spellberg 2013 and 2015; Sayre 2010; Kidd 2014 and 2009, 1-18; Manseau 2015, 3-56, 228-254.