

In spite of these shortcomings, this book delivers a redemptive view of time and eternity that will stimulate theological reflection. Specialists will find much to discuss and debate, while all will appreciate the moments of profound insight in the conclusion.

Southern Adventist University
Collegedale, Tennessee

JUD LAKE

Davis, James Calvin. *The Moral Theology of Roger Williams: Christian Conviction and Public Ethics*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004. 178 pp. Hardcover, \$24.95.

Roger Williams, in modern times, has been alienated from the Reformed tradition and fashioned into a secular libertarian fighting the Puritanical influences of colonial America. Although living a century prior to the Bill of Rights, he has been molded into a Jeffersonian democrat. It has been forgotten that this voice in the wilderness for religious liberty was a separatist who had a dogma as personal and vehement as any other New Englander of his time. As many already know, Williams did promulgate freedom of conscience. However, James Calvin Davis in *The Moral Theology of Roger Williams* points out that this political theory arose out of the same Reformed tradition that the Massachusetts brethren used to stifle liberties. Williams, and those influenced by him, saw himself more as a John Calvin than a James Madison. A restoration of this Reformed portrait is what Davis of Middlebury College, Vermont, exhumes for us. *The Moral Theology*, which began as a dissertation under ethicist James F. Childress, is an exploration of Williams's synthesis between private Christian conviction and public ethics.

How is it possible that a theological particularist could preach and live the values of a liberal universalist? *The Moral Theology* proposes an alternative found in the scant yet potent writings of Williams. Davis believes—after rummaging through the archaic English—that Williams saw in the Christian moral tradition, particularly Calvinism, “the theological resources necessary to explore bases of morality shared with people outside the faith community” (xiv).

The Moral Theology of Roger Williams is not a biography; nor is it intended to be chronological. Theological ethics is the focus of this work, and it is organized thus. Part 1 develops the narrative of Williams's association with the Puritans in the Old World and the reasons for his subsequent immigration to the New. The sectarian hostility characteristic of the reign of James I placed a separatist imprint upon young Roger. His separatism was not evident at first. In fact, Williams had the good fortune to serve under Sir Edward Coke, the foremost legal mind of England at the time, who would become an influence upon the early Federalists. Already at an early age, Williams was fusing morality and public ethics.

Davis briefly outlines the well-known story of Williams's eventual departure for his new home in the nascent New England colonies. However, this proponent of religious freedom was unable to be cordial to his fellow Puritans. He was intolerant toward the fallacies in religion and government that the Puritan leaders were committing in their settlements. After involuntarily (or at times out of his own volition) moving to a number of established colonies, he was forced to found Providence, Rhode Island.

Rhode Island would become a haven for separatists, dissenters, agnostics, and pagans alike. The liberties that Williams espoused arose out of his correspondence with John Cotton, the spokesman for religious compulsion, for which New England would become known. Anticipating James Madison's views against religious assessments, Williams outlined for Cotton that religious compulsion was counterproductive to civil peace as well as evidently contrary to the gospel. Drawing from the same Reformed

tradition as the Puritans he debated, he forcefully demurred that persecution brought the peace and unity Christianity sought. Instead, he referred cogently to Scripture, history, and Calvinist theologians to show that a marriage of church and state spawns instability. He proposed that belief could only be cultivated through logical persuasion, experience, and *divine* compulsion (he branded *human* compulsion as “soul rape”). These views were first and foremost drawn from a religious well, and only afterwards applied to a secular context. The political firebrand that he wasn’t is a caricature invented later. Although Williams considered himself primarily a Reformed theologian, does this necessarily mean that we have to view him as such? Davis believes that the subsequent political takeover and application of Williams’s views does not give us the right to see him as anything except a Reformed theologian.

Anyone viewing Williams through political spectacles or seeing a dichotomy between particularism and universalism will be challenged at how it is possible to even consider a person with strong religious convictions as engaging in public ethics. Although the practical applications are nondescript, Davis does give a fine presentation of the theoretical possibility of such a combination happening.

What was the theology that led Williams to theories of conscience and toleration? According to Davis, not only was he interpreting the Reformed texts differently than other Puritans, he was also applying a different hermeneutic to the Scriptures. His use of typology would be seen in his incarnational theology. In his debating with Cotton and the Quakers, one can see Williams’s christological perspective applied to public ethics. He believed the first advent of Christ to be a moment of cataclysmic consequences to the old covenant with Israel. His particular view of dispensational typology undercut the Puritan endeavors toward a “city on a hill.” The new Israel has a different relationship that does not incorporate civil government. The civil government’s position would be to prevent violence and protect liberties. The “holy commonwealth” of New England has, in Williams’s incarnational theology, no validity according to Scripture.

Is it possible for one man to see the theory, application, and preservation of civil liberties just from Scripture and tradition? Williams may have prided himself on his exegetical prowess (however polemical he could be), but Davis reminds us that he was undoubtedly influenced by his experience. This is the subject of part 2, which centers upon Williams’s anthropology. One notable relationship that led Williams to a belief in the freedom of conscience was with the Native Americans. He was not a prolific nor pithy writer, but his *A Key into the Language of America* would be the epitome of his ethical views. Throughout his life he served as a mediator between his friends, the Narragansett Indians, and the snobbish colonists. King Philip’s War between the English invaders and the Americans convinced this Reformed theologian that these pagan Americans were human beings capable of morality. Thus they were worthy of the same rights of conscience as Christians. The seeds for public conversation were sown. Davis shows that, in what would appear to be a grammar text, *A Key* contains the belief that the Native Americans were actually superior to the Europeans in morality.

It is almost unbelievable that a separatist, thrown out of settlements due to dogmatic views, would be able to accept and incorporate “pagans” into his worldview. The mystery that Davis poses is that if “separatism, then, breeds a spirit of intolerance, we might expect the extreme sectarian Williams to outdo his fellow Puritans” (52), yet Williams is an alternative to Christian particularists and strict universalists. The dogmatic right and libertarian left join hands in the person of Williams.

Williams saw natural law and reason as a basis for public conversation and cooperation. Pointing back to Calvin, he preached that the moral law (i.e., the Decalogue)

is written upon every heart. Citing Tertullian, he argued that religious persecution deprives individuals of the rights of conscience that are inherently universal. This becomes the basis for toleration, which leads to peaceful social coexistence. The tripod of Williams's argument is constructed of "Religion, Reason, and Experience" (68).

Politically, Davis presents Williams as a minimalist. Neither ecclesiological nor political leaders ought to have too much control over what nature has given man in the form of conscience. There is to be some legal intrusion, though, due to the existence of sin and the weakness of the will. However, one does not need to be religious to be moral. In fact, pointing to history, it is often the case that religious people are immoral. Williams argued that "Kingdoms and Governments in the World have long and long enjoyed civil peace and quiet," without "the very name of Jesus Christ amongst them" (97). Morality is already a part of man's nature and is accessible to all: Christian, Jew, Muslim, pagan, and others.

Not only is religious compulsion in opposition to the gospel and natural law, it is also against common civility—virtues such as justice and courtesy. The third and final section of Davis's book discusses how Williams's theology and anthropology then led him to his well-known views upon public discourse. Williams believed civility, not Christianity or religious compulsion, will preserve social peace. What surprised Williams most was that his brethren, formerly oppressed in England, would fight just as vehemently to deny that religious freedom to others in the New World. This transgressed the civil code of justice, in Williams's thinking. One can deny the gospel without destroying elements of private and philosophical discussion. Denying the code of civility, on the other hand, has social ramifications that can destroy peaceful coexistence. Williams's debates with the seventeenth-century Quakers (as opposed to later Quakers) revealed their lack of civility, especially courtesy. He was disgusted with them not so much because of their theology, but because of their rejection of common civility. This is why Williams is remembered as a Jeffersonian democrat today rather than a Reformed theologian. Williams, contrary to a modern view by sociologist Robert Bellah, was concerned with the public good over private interest. In spite of his own views of himself, his public ethics on civility would gain him the reputation of the early prophet of the First Amendment. Historians today see him as an espouser of secular liberties. But how would he have us see him? He would prefer to be remembered, as Davis loyally portrays him, as a Reformed theologian, who built a community of toleration and civility based upon Scripture and natural law.

How we remember him is not as important as how we apply him. Although promising to show "how Christians can do the same in a contemporary setting," *The Moral Theology* fails the reader in this area. Williams was, Davis reveals, a man who combined Christian conviction with public ethics. The application of civility is the practical example from Williams's life. Yet this civility was more prevalent among the Native Americans than the Christian Europeans. In stressing civility, it appears that Davis is undercutting Christian particularism. However, the practice of civility is a guide for the common man. Williams was not a plebeian; he was a political leader. How does a political leader meet such challenges? This is an area Davis does not address and is perhaps to be reserved for another context. *The Moral Theology* does outline the theoretical foundation for social cohesiveness in a pluralistic society and then encourages its vigorous pursuit today. Williams lived, and Davis shows, the divine maxim: "The world will know you are my disciples if you have love for one another."