

"Tolerating the Erroneous Conscience:  
Revisiting the New England Controversy between Roger Williams and John Cotton"

Anri Morimoto

Toleration lies at the core of modern liberalism. It is extensively applied today to race, culture, gender, sexual orientation and other issues of identity politics, but in its historical context the word "toleration" primarily meant allowing dissent in religious matters. The liberty of conscience provides the focal point for studying the emergence of the idea and practice of toleration. This article revisits the seventeenth-century controversy between Roger Williams and John Cotton in an effort to see the logics operative in both sides. New England is the locus of historical experiment whereby people motivated by religious dissention gathered to make their conviction a political reality. In their formative efforts, different visions emerged and clashed, testing their degrees of commitment to toleration. The questions they faced are relevant to any society that aspires to embrace constituents of diverse world-views and value-systems in peaceful cohabitation.

The Williams-Cotton controversy revolves around the toleration of "erroneous conscience." Both agree that none should be persecuted for conscience's sake, but Cotton makes a distinction between "conscience rightly informed" and "erroneous and blind conscience." He argues that the latter should be put under restraint and even punishment when the person, after admonitions, persists in the error. In Cotton's view, the person is "sinning against his or her own conscience." Conscience does not err, but the will contradicts and sins against it. Williams, however, believes that conscience can err but still holds authority over the person. One's will cannot go against, let alone manipulate, his or her own conscience. The person held captive to conscience, however erroneous it may be, should not therefore be penalized for following what he or she cannot resist. Behind these arguments lies a depositum of propositions regarding "erroneous conscience," first developed by theologians of medieval scholasticism and then transplanted into Puritan casuistic ethic. Cotton and Williams follow part of the tradition, both in their own manners and to their own avail.

Towards the end of their lives, the two had their own moments to learn from each other. Cotton, on the one hand, learned that coercion on conscience leads to hypocrisy. His response was that hypocrites were better than profane persons, for the former gives God part of his due. This almost cynical observation enables him to separate the inner person from the outer, and to maintain the freedom of the former while keeping control of the latter. In a developing community whose very sustenance was at stake, Cotton's position had obvious advantages for political stability. By circumventing the question whether or not the inner and outer persons were in harmony, Cotton nullified the question of "sinning against conscience" and rendered William's criticism of making hypocrites irrelevant.

William's moments to learn, on the other hand, came with a little twist. It was his turn to receive objections from dissidents in the colony he established afterwards. In dealing with complex religious objections and disputing with Quakers, Williams argued that their "deluded conscience" had to be punished to safeguard civil order. The champion of religious freedom now found himself deeply troubled by what he saw as "pretended conscience." Here lies the very essence of the problem. The liberty of conscience establishes individuals in their ultimate sphere, unapproachable by others. Respect for this liberty entails wide room for its errors, delusion, pretension, and even manipulation. The question for discernment is posed to all societies that claim to be liberal, whether in New England or in Japan, then or now.