

David Williams and the Margaret Street Chapel

James Dybikowski

Volume 8, 1989

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1012601ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1012601ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies / Société canadienne d'étude
du dix-huitième siècle

ISSN

0824-3298 (imprimé)

1927-8810 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Dybikowski, J. (1989). David Williams and the Margaret Street Chapel. *Man and Nature / L'homme et la nature*, 8, 99–106. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1012601ar>

11. David Williams and the Margaret Street Chapel

David Williams introduced his deistic liturgy on the universal principles of religion and morality in a public service held in a rented chapel in Margaret Street, London, on April 7, 1776.¹ Although Williams denied that he was a deist and remarked archly that his only regret was that he was unworthy of this 'noblest of all Apellations,' his chapel appears to have been the first in Europe to offer a public service on deistic principles.² Thomas Bentley, Josiah Wedgwood's London business partner and one of Williams' major supporters, describes the small congregation of about 100 that attended the first service as 'very attentive, but accidental.'³

In his sermon Williams insisted that he did not wish to create yet another sect.⁴ Sects divided their adherents from others whereas Williams' aim was to unite by eliminating anything from the service except those principles fundamental to religion and morality to which any rational person, whether Christian, Turk, Jew or Deist, could readily assent. He later added that the service need not even exclude Atheists so long as they were prepared to acknowledge beneficent principles in nature.⁵ The enlightened who were effectively precluded from attending existing religious services because they found them to be offensive to their understandings were especially invited to attend.

An anonymous observer who attended a service a few weeks later, however, counted no more than fifty in the congregation, primarily 'middling Tradesmen & others above this rank.'⁶ They would have included Bentley and his wife. Josiah Wedgwood provided badly needed financial support and attended whenever he had business in London. So likewise, at least at first, did other members of the club known to Wedgwood as the 'Wednesdays' from whose discussions the liturgy used at Margaret Street emerged.⁷ They included, among others, Thomas Day, the eccentric Rousseauian. Benjamin Franklin, another original member of the club, who exercised a powerful influence over the direction of Williams' intellectual development, was regularly kept informed of the chapel's fortunes. Also in attendance was a small contingent of German and French expatriates, generally Freemasons, who spread word of Williams' experiment on the Continent.⁸ There were a number of wealthy Jews, and the curious.⁹ Samuel

Badcock, who reviewed for the *Monthly Review* the published *Lectures on the Universal Principles and Duties of Religion and Morality* that Williams delivered at Margaret Street over the first two years of its existence, remarked in a letter: 'The thing is, this man's lectures are not adapted to catch the ignorant. He is above them: – and as to the wise, they are above him. – His Chapel is designed to take all the outcasts of all the Sects and all the Clubs in London. Lazy loiterers may sometimes visit out of mere curiosity. But few who may agree with him in principle will gladly attend on his Liturgy or Lectures.'¹⁰

The curious were drawn by a misguided attempt by Williams' supporters to attract public attention to the chapel. On May 4 Wedgwood wrote to Bentley that their friend Erasmus Darwin was contemplating 'some schemes for the furtherance of Mr. Wms. Ch. in Margaret St. He advises by all means to hire some Persons to abuse it in the Papers – To call upon the Government for immediate help, & advise the burning of them Parson & Congregation altogether. – To lay the disturbance in America & any other Public disasters which may happen at their door – & he offers his services if you should be at a loss for an abuser of this new Sect.'¹¹ Within a few weeks the correspondence of a similar though somewhat less scandalous 'abuser' who signed himself Clericus began to appear in the *Morning Chronicle* with replies from correspondents who signed themselves Palemon, Laicus and, significantly, Erasmus.¹² Thomas Day was the author of some of these jeux d'esprit under one or more pseudonyms. Much later Williams commented: 'Those letters were undoubtedly of service, but they diffused a suspicion and alarm concerning me which I was not disposed to encounter. On my expressing these apprehensions [Day] imagined I was jealous of the reputation of the letters as literary compositions.'¹³

When this colourful correspondence ended, Williams' notoriety was embellished in other public prints. In the late 1770's, his person, his chapel and his writings were a regular subject for public discussion.

Much of this attention was little more than scandal mongering: sometimes directed at Williams' congregation, sometimes at Williams himself; raking up his past and even coyly hinting at the impropriety of his present conduct and particularly his vulnerability to feminine charm. The most notorious of these attacks appeared as a series of newspaper letters from a 'Lady' who signed herself Sappho.¹⁴ She was the first to describe Williams publicly as the Priest of Nature: an epithet forced on him for some time to come. Her taunt was that his chapel was nothing more than a compensation for the disappointment of earlier passions. 'Your voice,' she mockingly says, 'both as a Speaker and Singer, has been so long employed in mellifluous and amorous Strains, that it will never serve you as a successful Orator, and you will never

find an Audience which will bear continual Melting, both by your Lectures and Your Music.”

An equally common angle of attack was to brand Williams as a corrosive sceptic and encourager of political sedition. One correspondent describes him as an ‘abettor of rebellion and republicanism.’¹⁵ Another says he ‘preaches nothing but politicks, and he furnishes fresh matter of seditious conversation for a thousand people every week.’¹⁶ When it became public knowledge that the Margaret Street chapel enjoyed the support of Benjamin Franklin, Rousseau, Voltaire and Frederik, King of Prussia, the argument in many a mind was settled. As Samuel Badcock noted not long before the chapel’s demise in midsummer 1780, the ‘Institution is very generally reprobated.’¹⁷ It was replaced in 1781 by a Philosophical Society functioning on the same principles as the chapel but to which admission was controlled.¹⁸ Even so, his reputation followed Williams. That same year a savage satire, *Orpheus, Priest of Nature*, was published and as late as the 1790’s the political caricaturist Gilray portrayed Williams as a hissing snake slithering over his atheistical lectures.¹⁹

Those ‘atheistical’ lectures delivered at Margaret Street developed a plan which the curious occasional hearer could not be expected to grasp. Central to it is a principle Williams states at the outset. ‘It is,’ he remarked, ‘of the utmost importance to real philosophy and morality to confine men to what they may know and to keep them within the limits of nature.’²⁰ Although Williams speaks of *confining* men to what they may know, one should not be misled by the authoritarian overtone of the metaphor. Far from contemplating any restriction to the intellectual liberty to express one’s beliefs, Williams strenuously defends the view that intellectual liberty ought to be unlimited. Like Mill much later, he argues that truth cannot be properly distinguished from falsehood if either is restricted. A commitment to knowledge is for him a commitment to an uncompromised intellectual liberty.²¹ He was particularly severe with the Dissenters for their apparent willingness to accept such compromises as the price for political recognition. Free inquiry rather than sectarian dogma was intended to serve as the bond of union at Margaret Street. Its demise, he later said, was caused by the failure of some of his supporters to stand firm by this commitment.²²

In accepting what may be known by us as a constraint, Williams thereby accepted a significant intellectual limitation on religious assertions. When he identified this constraint with the limits of nature, he went much farther. For he meant it to be understood that the experimental investigation of the natural world in the manner appropriate to science was the proper source of our religious knowledge, not

revelation. He readily conceded as a consequence of this position that very little could be known about God and his nature, not even God's distinctness from the natural world. Sectarian religion in refusing to acknowledge this limitation on our knowledge had served in his view as a perennial source of irresolvable and mischievous disputes tragic in their consequences for human well-being.

If natural religion is a sparse science, naturalistically based morality is not. In keeping with his ethical naturalism Williams elaborated in his lectures a rich virtue-based moral theory which owed much of its inspiration to the Greeks. His moral outlook seems generally Aristotelian (eg. he conceives virtue to be a mean and regards it as analysable as a disposition to produce the natural effects of the agent's powers and, thereby, happiness). But it is Socrates he singles out for his praise. Like Socrates, Williams is drawn to the rationalist idea that virtue is knowledge and he also thinks that moral truths in particular cannot come to be known on the strength of someone else's authority. Each agent must discover them for himself. Williams was quick to note the implications of this position for the theory of education. It was as an educator rather than as a preacher that he earned his keep and the account of education he developed is historically remarkable for its non-authoritarianism, its experimentalism and the pride of place political education and political economy in particular is given in its curriculum. Here again the Greeks served as his models though much of the substance of his educational writing assumed the form of a critical commentary on Rousseau in the context of the British debate on the *Emile*. At bottom Williams was sympathetic, but he devoted much effort to teasing out what was worth preserving from Rousseau's personal posturing and his cultivation of paradox and untested assertion.²³

None of this, however, explains why Williams decided to open a chapel in which the use of a liturgy and devotional music played a central part. To see why they did, we must consider the origin of his outlook on public worship.

According to the biographical tradition, while Williams served as minister of a dissenting congregation in Exeter during the 1760's, he persuaded it to adopt the liturgy introduced at the Octagon Chapel in Liverpool in 1763.²⁴ The Octagon Chapel was founded by Dissenters, including Williams' friend-to-be Thomas Bentley, on the basis of an ecumenical liturgy which it was hoped would draw together members of the established Church and Dissenters, though the Dissenting service generally centered not on a liturgy but on the minister's free prayer. Williams drew on this experience in his first book published in 1771, *The Philosopher*, where he gives an account of public worship. He makes an arresting observation: 'Hardly anything would be of greater benefit

to the community than a pious and rational liturgy.²⁵ The next year he tried to draw together the friends of such a liturgy through his *Essays on Public Worship* though he managed to antagonize a good number of them by gratuitously attacking other reform movements and, most notably, the Dissenters' petition to Parliament for the removal of the legal disabilities under which they suffered. Nevertheless the *Essays* managed to draw Williams to the attention of Benjamin Franklin and led to the establishment of the Wednesdays Club from whose discussions at Franklin's lodgings and various coffee houses the Margaret Street Chapel, cut adrift from Christian moorings, eventually emerged.²⁶

In *The Philosopher* Williams characterizes public worship as a rational entertainment. Judged from this perspective, the liturgy of the established church was a failure. In another work of the period Williams claimed that playhouses were nearly the only remaining schools of virtue: since 'Church men are indolent or timid; they take no steps towards obtaining a proper influence on the public morality. They continue the use of a long, heavy, confused service which they despise or sleep over.'²⁷ This service stubbornly required worshippers in an enlightened age to worship on the principles of a Calvin and in the words of a Cranmer.²⁸

For public worship to succeed, Williams claims, 'The people ought all to be engaged; and appear to each other to be so; it is then only the religious principle is strengthened by the social.'²⁹ The free prayer of the Dissenters, the main alternative to the established liturgy, entirely failed to produce this common consciousness.

The social purpose Williams saw public worship as properly serving is powerfully underscored by the context. For *The Philosopher* is essentially a work of political theory. The basic proposition Williams advances in it is that a constitutional power must be retained and exercised by the people as the sole legitimate source of political authority not only to keep political power within its appointed limits, but also to make certain that political institutions are improved in response to improvements in knowledge. The particular form advocated by Williams for the exercise of this constitutional power is a return to the ancient divisions of the British people into tythings, hundreds and counties with officers of the higher divisions elected from the lower. In common with other British radicals of the late eighteenth century, Williams believed an effective and regular means would always be in place for obtaining the people's will in this way. In his later political writings – writings attended to in France by Brissot and his circle, and in England by some of the '90's political radicals such as Joseph Gerald – Williams developed these ideas into a powerful conception of

political liberty, the central contribution of his mature political theory of the 1780's.³⁰ In *The Philosopher*, he sees a reformed public worship as the moral and educational support for such a reform.

This perspective is echoed in the preface to his *Lectures on the Universal Principles and Duties of Religion and Morality*. Concerning the principles on which the Margaret Street Chapel was based he says: 'The use which may be made of this discovery, by preachers and politicians, are [sic] too obvious to remain long unobserved There is no class of men, which contains, individually, so much influence, as that which holds those persons, who, under pretence of superior information, neglect the ecclesiastic usages which engage the people; and there is no class of men, in a collective idea of them, so totally insignificant and useless. They could not, as such, carry a single point against a Cornish borough, consisting of twelve burgesses, who occasionally assemble on the conditions of their annuities from some neighbouring lord. Let them be formed into congregations and assemblies; and let their treasurers or managers have a communication with each other; and then estimate of what consequence they may be.'³¹

The real significance of Margaret Street is not as a footnote to the history of deism and natural religion. It lies rather in the way it draws together rational religion, radical politics and enlightened educational theory. One main source for Williams' version of this amalgam is to be found in his view of the limits of human knowledge (excluding traditional religious dogma but encompassing a naturalist morality holding the status of its highest science), a view which nonetheless asserted its power and assumed its general accessibility. From this view he derived an uncompromising commitment to intellectual liberty and combined it with a powerful sense of how the communal pursuit of moral knowledge created and reenforced the social and political bonds that organically united a community. Although the chapel in Margaret Street failed, the body of political and educational theorising which followed is a direct offshoot of this experiment and constitutes Williams' major claim on our intellectual attention.

JAMES DYBIKOWSKI
University of British Columbia

Notes

- 1 For David Williams, cf. W. R. D. Jones, *David Williams: The Anvil and the Hammer* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1986). Cf. also the biographical entries by Professor David Williams, *Dictionary of Welsh Biography Down to 1940*, 1031-2; and Alexander Gordon, *Dictionary of National Biography*, 21: 390-3.
- 2 David Williams, *Lectures on the Universal Principles and Duties of Religion and Morality* (henceforth *Lectures*), (London: J. Dodsley, 1779), 1: 98.
- 3 Bentley's letter, dated 12 April 1776, is printed in James Boardman, *Bentleyana, or a Memoir of Thomas Bentley* (Liverpool: Wareing Webb, 1851), 18-9. For the size of the congregation, cf. 'Theological Intelligence,' *Morning Chronicle*, 9 April 1776.
- 4 David Williams, *A Sermon Preached at the Opening of a Chapel in Margaret Street, Cavendish Square* (London: T. Payne, 1776).
- 5 *Lectures*. Vol. I, iv.
- 6 Anonymous manuscript note in a bound volume of Williams' pamphlets possessed by the Royal Literary Fund.
- 7 For references to the Wednesdays by name, see Wedgwood Papers, University of Keele Library, E-18461-25, Wedgwood to Bentley, 18 May 1773; E-18472-25, Wedgwood to Bentley, 14 June 1773; E-18549-25, Wedgwood to Bentley, 25 July 1774.
- 8 David Williams, *Incidents in My own Life Which Have Been Thought To Be Of Some Importance*, ed. P. France (University of Sussex Library, 1980), pp. 16, 24.
- 9 G. F. A. Wendeborn, *Der Zustand des Staats der Religion, der Gelehrsamkeit der Kunst in Grossbritannien* (Berlin: C. Spener, 1785-8), 3: 367-73.
- 10 Griffiths's Papers, Bodleian Library, Add. Ms. C90, f. 21-4, Badcock to Ralph Griffiths, 3 October 1779.
- 11 E-18666-25, Wedgwood to Bentley, 4 May 1776.
- 12 *Morning Chronicle*, 30 May 1776 (Clericus); 4 June (Laicus); 5 June (Palemon); 8 June (Erasmus); 12 June (Clericus); 13 June (Erasmus); 27 June (Clericus); 29 June (Palemon); 3 July (Erasmus).
- 13 *Incidents in my Own Life*, 20.
- 14 *St. James's Chronicle*, 17-9 June 1777; 19-21 August; 20-3 September. Replies were published by Plato, 20-2 July and Crito, 28-30 August.
- 15 *London Packet*, 'Another Traveller,' 4-6 May 1778.
- 16 *London Packet*, 'On Deism,' 22-4 July 1778.
- 17 Griffiths's Papers, *London Packet*, 22-4 July 1778.
- 18 Cf. the advertisement for the Philosophical Society in the *London Courant, and Westminster Chronicle*, 3 March 1781. A copy of its *Constitution* is preserved in the British Library in Daniel Lyson's *Collectanea*, III, 175. Six black balls were sufficient to exclude. Later still, Williams was associated with the Liberal Society established through the efforts of his friend General Robert Melville and which appears to have been founded on essentially the same principles. Cf. *Plan for Sunday – Lectures to be given before a New Society Etc.*, (London: C. Buckton, 1785).

- 19 *Orpheus, Priest of Nature and Prophet of Infidelity* (London: J. Stockdale, 1781; 2nd ed., London: J. Debrett, 1782). J. Gilray, 'New Morality; -or- The Promis'd Installment of the High Priest of the Theophilanthopes, with the Homage of Leviathan and his Suite,' *Anti-Jacobin Review and Magazine* (1798), I, 115.
- 20 *Lectures*, 1:16.
- 21 *Lectures*, 1:110.
- 22 *Constitutions of a Philosophical Society*: '... some members of that Society having brought into Philosophy the Habit of attachment to Opinions, and the Disposition to Intolerance, contracted in their religious education, the Society hath with difficulty been preserved from becoming a Philosophical Sect; which would be as useless, and perhaps as injurious to knowledge, as any religious one.'
- 23 For an appreciation of the originality of Williams's contributions as an educational theorist, cf., *inter alia*, W. A. C. Stewart, *Progressives and Radicals in English Education, 1950-1970* (London: Macmillan, 1972), pp. 12-32: 'Williams made the first and indeed the only consistent attempt to apply the basic principles of *Emile* to the education of a group of boys in a classroom situation. As early as the 1770's he raised nearly every problem that later generations of school teachers have had to meet, and he was a most enterprising and successful experimentalist whose great strength was his use of psychological theory.'
- 24 Cf., for example, *Public Characters* (1798-9), p. 508.
- 25 [David Williams], *The Philosopher in Three Conversations* (London: T. Becket, 1771), 3rd conversation, p. 130.
- 26 Earlier Williams had put together *A Liturgy in the Principles of the Christian Religion* (London: G. Kearsley, 1774), which was intended as an improvement of the Octagon liturgy. In its preface Williams comments adversely on Lindsey's adaptations of Dr. Clarke's Book of Common Prayer which had recently been published.
- 27 [David Williams], *Letter to David Garrick, Esq. on his Conduct as Principal Manager and Actor at Drury Lane* (London: S. Bladon, 1772), pp. 35-6.
- 28 Williams' reformed service, though it removed Calvinism, altered the language of Cranmer and exchanged sermons on the hereafter for lectures on morality, fared little better, according to the weight of the evidence of his contemporaries. Thomas Holcroft, though intellectually sympathetic to Williams' objectives, found the service confused and unappealing (Thomas Holcroft, *The Life of Thomas Holcroft, Written by Himself*, ed. E. Colby (London: Constable, 1925), 2:197-99). Henri Grégoire, who knew Williams personally, commented that the chapel proved to be an unstable halfway house for many who attended on the route to atheism (Henri Grégoire, *Histoire des Sectes Religieuses* [Paris: Putey, 1814], 1:359-63). Williams himself also felt some discomfort that he had not succeeded in substituting a more imaginative form to that of the lecture as the principle vehicle for moral instruction.
- 29 *The Philosopher*, 3rd conversation, pp. 127-28.
- 30 Among the radicals who either knew Williams personally or commented on his political ideas were Granville Sharp, Major Cartwright and Thomas Paine.
- 31 *Lectures*, I: v.